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ARTICLE

Legga and Five-star Movement voters: exploring the role of cultural, economic and political bewilderment

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ABSTRACT

We explore the motivations behind the electoral success of the Lega and the Five-star Movement at the 2018 Italian general election. In most of the literature on populism, the success of the new European populist parties is interpreted as stemming from the process of globalisation, which has produced the so-called ‘modernisation losers’: ‘cultural losers’ (people who are disorientated by changes in values, by new waves of migration and by the loss of national sovereignty to the European Union) and ‘economic losers’ (those for whom the globalisation process has meant economic hardship, downward social mobility and occupational uncertainty). It is these ‘modernisation losers’ who are claimed to have voted for the populist parties. To this two-fold theoretical hypothesis, we added another: the rise in populism can be explained by the democratic malaise, and particularly by the crisis of mainstream parties, which have steadily lost their function as a link between the people and politics. We analyse the role of these three antecedents of populism – labelled as cultural, economic and political – drawing on 2018 Italian National Election Studies (ITANES: see www.itanes.org/en) data. Votes for the Lega were motivated by ‘cultural populism’, while those for the Five-star Movement could be ascribed to ‘political populism’, stemming from citizens’ growing mistrust – generalised and latent in Western democracies – of political institutions, activated in Italy by favourable structural conditions and external circumstances.

KEYWORDS

Populism; vote; economic hardship; cultural disorientation; political discontentment

Introduction

The Five-star Movement (Movimento 5 stelle, M5s) and the Lega indisputably emerged victorious from the Italian general election of 4 March 2018 as the party exponents of a ‘mass rebellion’ against the traditional political establishment – an upheaval which, in terms of its magnitude, was unprecedented in Italian and European electoral history. In the aftermath of the vote, the historic impact of this electoral triumph was clearly reflected in the openings of the editorials of the two main Italian dailies (Corriere della sera and la Repubblica), which spoke of ‘the end of Italian politics as we have known it
in the last 25 years’ (Corriere della sera, 6.3.2018) and of a ‘political scenario that has been overturned by these epoch-making elections’ (la Repubblica, 6.3.2018).

This dramatic reading of the facts was endorsed by almost all commentators and political analysts. However, while the electoral numbers were unequivocal, what is far less evident is why 50% of voters (32.7% for the M5s, 17.3% for the Lega) were prompted to cast an ‘anti-system’ vote. Moreover, we cannot assume that the thrust of protest that led to this outcome was underpinned by the same motivations in the case of both parties. Indeed, scholars who have dealt with populism have often made distinctions between right-wing, left-wing and post-ideological populism (Kriesi 2014); between the populism of the silent majority and that of the new left (Mudde 2004); between the populism of identity and of protest (Taguieff 2002); and between populism generated by the demand for economic protection and that generated by the demand for physical protection (Ricolfi 2017).

The present article focuses on voters and, in particular, on the reasons behind the vote for the Lega and for the M5s; to this end, we have utilised data from the 2018 ITANES post-electoral survey (1,548 cases).

Cultural, economic and political populism

Both the M5s and the Lega are by common consent classified among the so-called ‘populist parties’ (e.g. Biorcio 2015; Tarchi 2015) that have, with mixed fortunes, been present on the European political stage in the last few decades. The most accredited interpretations of the success of populist parties in Western democracies (cf., among others, Oesch 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013; Inglehart and Norris 2016) are hinged on the process of modernisation. On the one hand, this process has brought about profound changes in the dominant culture, replacing old values with new ones; on the other, it has altered the economic balance of society, lifting a few segments of the population upward, while leaving many others behind. These changes have generated ‘modernisation losers’ (Betz 1994): ‘cultural losers’ and ‘economic losers’ (Bornschier and Kriesi 2013). This interpretation is consistent with a view of the political domain as one dominated by two dimensions: economic and cultural (Kriesi et al. 2006; Kriesi 2008).

Cultural populism

The first interpretation, placing at the centre the ‘cultural losers’, sees the success of populist parties as a reaction on the part of the more traditionalist sectors of society to the progressive shift in values that began in the 1970s, with the ‘silent revolution’ of ‘post-materialist’ values (environmentalism, gender equality, and so on). More recently, these social changes have been flanked by new ethical openings in the sphere of gay rights, homosexual civil unions, etc. The more traditionalist citizens have become culturally disoriented. This disorientation, however, could have remained at the fringe of society and been reabsorbed (as happened in the 1980s and 1990s) if it had not been raised to a critical level by the phenomenon of foreign immigration. Indeed, immigration has placed the population in direct contact with profoundly different habits and customs (in terms of religion, cuisine, dress, lifestyles, family relationships, etc.), which has generated sentiments of ‘external’ hostility towards the ‘foreign invader’ and of
‘internal’ insecurity, causing some sectors of the population to feel ‘strangers in their own homes’ (Hochschild 2016). Moreover, television footage of boat people, attacks perpetrated by Islamic terrorists against the heart of Western society, and the involvement of some foreigners in street crime have given rise to new hostilities and new fears.

**Economic populism**

While the ‘cultural’ explanation of the success of populist parties – which is keenly endorsed on the right of the political spectrum – is grounded in an interpretive approach of a ‘psychological’ nature (focussing on disorientation and fear), the hypothesis regarding economic losers – which is dear to the left – sees populism as the result of economic hardship. The steady increase in social inequality (Piketty 2014) – after the ‘glorious thirty’ years from 1945 to 1975 – and the severe crisis that first afflicted finance and then the entire economy after September 2008 led to radical transformations both in the structure of production and in the conditions of the working class. Manufacturing industries have declined, industrial production has been transferred abroad, automation has eliminated jobs, immigration has brought in competing labour, trade unions have been weakened, the sustainability of the welfare state has been undermined, governments have implemented policies of austerity, etc. All of these processes have created new conditions of economic insecurity and social deprivation: the threat of unemployment has grown; many small enterprises have gone bankrupt; it is difficult for young people to find a job, while existing jobs are increasingly being done under temporary contracts; downward social mobility has increased social marginalisation; the present is uncertain and future prospects non-existent. In such a setting, widespread resentment against the dominant elites and the political class readily emerges, providing fertile ground for populist appeals.

**Political populism**

In our view, a third explanation of the current populist upsurge needs to be added – an explanation that goes beyond the most contingent causes (the economic crisis, the immigration problem) and, at the same time, enters directly into the political sphere. We are referring to the crisis of political legitimacy that has hit the entire system of representation in the Western world, starting from the political parties.

According to Katz and Mair’s theory of the ‘cartel party’ (1995, 2009; see also Vassallo and Valbruzzi 2018), European political parties have lost their ability to represent society and its organised expressions, gradually becoming part of the state. The gap between ‘representation’ and ‘responsibility’, i.e. between the function of responsiveness to the demands of the people and that of government responsibility, has steadily widened, with a clear shift towards the latter (Mair 2009). In this light, the role traditionally played by the parties has weakened, both at the individual level (manifested by the decline in party identity, voter turnout, party membership, electoral stability, and even in trust in parties) and at the collective level (not only do the parties no longer have a social class of reference – a classe gardée – but bonds with all of their groups of reference have weakened). Moreover, relationships among the parties themselves have changed dramatically. As they are
no longer institutions that represent opposing interests and promote alternative policies, the parties tend no longer to oppose one another, but rather to collude (hence the term ‘cartel’) in order to share the resources that the state makes available to them through public funding and the sundry other benefits that the exercise of power confers, not to mention the opportunities for bribery and corruption.

Thus, the parties have increasingly become a part of the state (instead of being a part of society) and, at the same time, the differences among them have faded; consequently, voters are denied the possibility to choose between genuine political alternatives. The ensuing frustration fuels the rhetoric of the populist movements, which depict themselves as the only real opposition to the system, and offer to bridge the gap between the people and the institutions (Katz and Mair 2009; Kriesi 2014).

The present study: method and measures

The cultural losers

Based on the literature, we focus on three features characterising the cultural disorientation stemming from the perception of a threat to one’s own way of life: a) anti-immigrant attitudes; b) anti-European attitudes; and c) defence of traditional values. Anti-immigrant attitudes stem from an extension of the boundaries of the enemies of the people: hostility against both the corrupt political and the corrupt social elites in the populism generated by cultural disorientation broadens to encompass all those who are ‘different’. We assessed participants’ attitudes toward immigrants via the following items, the first two taken from the European Social Survey (ESS), and the third from the 2013 ITANES post-electoral survey:

- **Would you say it is generally bad or good for Italy’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?** (11-point scale)
- **Would you say it is generally bad or good for Italy’s culture that people come to live here from other countries?** (11-point scale)
- **Some people say that we receive too many immigrants. Others say that we can receive many more. Where would you place your opinion?** (7-point scale)

In addition, we also used the answer ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?’

The second feature of cultural disorientation is a strong anti-European sentiment. Globalisation has required individual nations to cede part of their sovereignty to supranational institutions, which are perceived as being even more remote from the people than national institutions. Moreover, the loosening of political borders has undermined the bases of collective identity, prompting an opposite reaction; that is to say, an attempt to re-establish this identity in the form of common ethnic belonging. Mistrust of remote institutions and the defence of ethnicity-based collective identity have engendered an anti-European ‘sovereignism’. We assessed participants’ attitudes toward the European Union (EU) using two Eurobarometer items:
Generally speaking, do you think that Italy’s membership of the EU is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad? (a good thing; a bad thing; neither good nor bad)

Generally speaking, do you think that having the Euro is a good or a bad thing for your country? (a good thing; a bad thing; neither good nor bad)

A third feature of the cultural losers of modernisation is the fear that traditional values are being threatened; this fear is manifested both by defence of the values and traditions underlying Western culture and by a sense of bewilderment and hostility toward any change in social habits. In order to detect this state of mind empirically, we constructed a ‘scale of threat to traditional values’ by means of the following 4-category Likert items (very true; somewhat true; a little true; not true at all):

- Today in Italy, traditions are under attack as never before
- The changes we see in society are an improvement rather than an attack on tradition
- I often feel like a stranger in my own country
- We need to give up some traditions in order to adapt ourselves better to the times we live in
- The changes we see in society are threatening our very culture
- We need to give more importance to innovation rather than tradition

The economic losers

Contrary to what happens in standard Italian research (cf. Pellegrata and Visconti 2018; Maraffi 2018; Comodo and Forni 2018) we focused on economic hardship in terms of perceived, rather than objective, deprivation, since the subjective reality of individuals is more significant to them than their objective reality (Runciman 1966) and perception is the true driving force of attitudes and behaviours. We explored four facets of respondents’ perceptions of the economic status of themselves and their families. The first concerned economic difficulty, as assessed via one ESS item:

- Which of the following descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays? (4-point scale: living comfortably on present income; coping on present income; finding it difficult on present income; finding it very difficult on present income)

The second facet refers to self-placement on the social scale of poverty-wealth. We took the following item from the 2010 Life in Transition Survey, which measured perceived mobility in terms of socio-economic position in comparison with other people in society:

- Imagine a ten-step ladder on which the poorest 10% of the people in your region stand on the bottom step, and the richest 10% stand on the top step. On which of the ten steps is your household today? (10-step scale, from 1 = Poorest 10% to 10 = Richest 10%)
The third facet deals with the consequences of the recent economic crisis, which has impoverished many families. Indeed, this impoverishment has affected a high percentage of families in Europe, and Italy is among the countries hardest hit (OECD). The following item was utilised to measure this sense of impoverishment:

- **How has the financial situation of you and your household changed over the last three years?** (5-point scale: a lot better; better; the same; a little worse; a lot worse; DK)

The last facet concerns the sensation of being ‘poorer than one’s own parents’. Indeed, a major source of frustration among the new middle-class generations, when faced with the modest prospects that society offers, is the comparison between the social position of their families of origin and that of their own families (e.g. Naravan et al. 2018). We used the following item:

- **How do you expect the financial position of your household (or your future household) to change in comparison with that of your birth family?** (5-point scale: a lot better; better; the same; a little worse; a lot worse; DK)

In addition, the answer ‘unemployment’ to the question ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?’ was selected as an indicator of exposure to economic hardship.

**Political discontentment**

Two aspects of discontentment with the political system were investigated. The first was the degree of trust in three political institutions (Parliament, the political parties, and the President of the Republic), via three 11-category items:

- **How far do you personally trust each of these institutions:**
  
  - Parliament
  - Political parties
  - President of the Republic

The second aspect refers to the political class. According to the cartel party thesis, the critical weakness of today’s democratic systems lies in the political parties’ failure to function as a link between people and politics. Indeed, ‘the politicians’ are, thanks to their presumed corruption, incompetence, and personal interests, the first targets of the criticism expressed by populist rhetoric against the ‘dominant elites’. To explore this theme, we used the following three items:

- **Elected officials talk too much and take too little action** (agree/disagree 1–5 point Likert scale)
- **I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a professional politician** (agree/disagree 1–5 point Likert scale)
Some people say that most politicians in Italy today are corrupt. Others say that only a minority of politicians are corrupt. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (1–5 point scale)

As in the previous cases, we also asked the question ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?’, with the answer ‘corruption’ being selected as an indicator.

Sample

We conducted this study within the framework of the ITANES research on the political attitudes and the voting behaviour of Italians at the 2018 general election. We interviewed a quota panel composed of 1,548 people, stratified by gender, age, and area of residence. Participants were interviewed twice using, on both occasions, Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The first interview was carried out about a month before the election, and the second one in the 30 days after the election.

Results

Cultural disorientation

Table 1 shows the percentages of ‘culturally disoriented’ people by vote. In addition to M5s and Lega voters, the table also shows the percentages for centre-left and centre-right voters. Lega voters are more likely than other voters to feel culturally disoriented, with important differences for each of the three analysed dimensions.

In terms of the first dimension, nearly one third of Lega voters think that immigration is the most important problem facing Italy at the moment, compared to one sixth of centre-right voters generally and one tenth of those who voted for the M5s. As expected, this orientation of Lega voters is rooted in open hostility towards immigrants: 82.9% of them tend to believe that Italy receives too many immigrants (M5s 47.9%) and about one in two think that they constitute a threat to Italy’s economy and culture. The gap between the Lega and the M5s is so large that Lega percentages are almost always twice or more the size of those for the M5s.

The second dimension of cultural disorientation concerns attitudes toward Europe and the Euro. Table 1 shows a pattern similar to that already found for immigration: Lega voters express the highest levels of hostility towards Europe and the Euro. However, the distance between the Lega and the M5s is now narrower (about 10 percent points), so that the proportion of M5s voters with a negative attitude is larger than the corresponding proportion among those who voted for the centre right.

The percentages on the third dimension, perceived threat to tradition, show the same picture. Again, Lega voters show the highest levels of traditionalism, whereas M5s voters report levels that are much lower, and lower also than those for centre-right voters. For example, about 50% of Lega and centre-right voters think that traditions are under attack as never before, while among M5s voters the percentage is less than half this. At the same time, Lega voters are almost twice as likely as M5s voters to feel like strangers in their own country. The gap becomes wider still when tradition is opposed
Overall, clear differences between Lega and M5s voters emerge, indicating that cultural disorientation is prevalent only among Lega voters; in contrast, M5s voters do not fall into the ‘cultural losers’ category.

**Economic hardship**

Table 2 shows the number of people who perceive more economic hardship by vote. About one-third of M5s and one-fifth of Lega voters regard unemployment as the most important issue facing Italy at present. On the whole, compared to other centre-left and centre-right voters, both M5s and Lega voters perceive greater economic hardship for each measured dimension: income, economic self-placement, crisis consequences and intergenerational mobility. Additionally, there is no clear difference between Lega and M5s voters: Lega voters report the highest percentages on three indicators, while M5s voters report the highest on the other two indicators.

More specifically, on perceived low income, M5s and Lega voters are not very distant from centre-right voters, but they are far from centre-left ones. In contrast, on the other
three dimensions, M5s and Lega voters are similar and more distant from centre-left and centre-right voters.

Therefore, while the previous results confirm that the Lega vote is related to cultural disorientation, these data do not support the view that the M5s vote is specifically motivated by economic hardship.

**Political discontentment**

Table 3 shows the percentages for single items of political discontentment by vote. Nearly one fifth of M5s voters view corruption as the most important issue facing Italy today, more than three times the proportion of Lega voters with the same view. However, the gap between Lega and M5s voters becomes narrower when political
distrust is analysed: relative to other voters, Lega and M5s voters report by far the highest levels of mistrust of Parliament, the political parties and the President of the Republic. This result runs in the expected direction, but it shows that neither is this attitude able to explain more specifically the M5s vote.

However, while Lega and M5s voters are similar regarding political distrust, they tend clearly to have a different attitude towards politicians: M5s voters have the highest proportions with a negative attitude on all three items analysed. On the whole, the interpretive approach based on political discontentment as a distinctive feature of the M5s vote can be partially accepted.

In the next section we synthesise the analyses of these data comparing three composite indexes of cultural disorientation, economic hardship and political discontentment, in order to evaluate more specifically the distinctive features of the Lega and the M5s vote.

**Comparing the cultural, economic, and political explanations**

In order to synthesise the results presented so far, we constructed a cultural, an economic and a political index of bewilderment. The cultural dimension was constructed in two steps. First, after reverse-coding the positively worded questions so that higher values indicated greater disorientation, we calculated three different indexes: attitude towards immigrants (mean of three items, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$); attitude towards Europe and the Euro (mean of two items, $\alpha = 0.85$), and perceived threats to tradition (mean of six items, $\alpha = 0.67$). Second, after the scores for each index had been normalised on a 0–1 scale, we calculated the cultural index as the average across the three indexes ($\alpha = 0.68$). A similar procedure was followed in constructing the political index. First, we calculated two different indexes: mistrust of political institutions (mean of three items, $\alpha = 0.85$), and attitude toward politicians (mean of three items, $\alpha = 0.61$); second, we normalised them on a 0–1 scale and calculated the political index as the average across the two indexes ($\alpha = 0.59$). Lastly, for the economic index, we calculated the mean of the four indicators previously presented ($\alpha = 0.75$), after the scores had been normalised (0–1 scale).

Table 4 shows the mean values of the three indexes by vote. On the cultural index, an ANOVA shows a very significant relationship between populism and vote ($F (3, 988) = 198.37, p < 0.001$), giving a clear indication that Lega scores are largely higher than those for the three other groups. On the economic index, the relationship appears

| Table 4. Mean scores (and standard deviations) on the indexes (0–1 scale) of cultural disorientation, economic hardship and political discontentment, by vote. |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------|-----------|
| Centre left | M5s | Centre right | Lega | $F$ ($\eta^2$) |
| Cultural disorientation index | 0.34 (0.16) | 0.59 (0.20) | 0.62 (0.18) | 0.73 (0.16) | 198.37*** (0.376) |
| Economic hardship index | 0.52 (0.16) | 0.60 (0.17) | 0.56 (0.17) | 0.58 (0.19) | 14.41*** (0.042) |
| Political discontentment index | 0.54 (0.17) | 0.74 (0.16) | 0.65 (0.15) | 0.69 (0.18) | 81.62*** (0.199) |
| (N) | (309) | (429) | (106) | (148) |

Note: *** = $p < 0.001$. 

288 P. CORBETTA ET AL.
to be far weaker (F (3, 988) = 14.41, p < 0.001). This result is evident if we look at the mean scores by vote: M5s, Lega and centre-right voters are not distinguishable from each other. In contrast, on the political index the mean scores distinguish the M5s voters from the others (F (3, 988) = 81.62, p < 0.001).

Consequently, our previous empirical evidence is confirmed and the evaluation of these composite indexes provides further support for the idea that Lega voters are clearly distinguishable from others for their higher cultural disorientation, while M5s voters are not characterised by perceived economic hardship (or by cultural disorientation), but by higher political discontentment.

Additionally, to evaluate the explanatory power of the three competing interpretations, we used logistic regression, regressing the Lega vote and the M5s vote on the three indexes. Table 5 shows the results of these analyses. On the whole, the multivariate findings uphold the bivariate results, providing additional evidence. First, as expected, the Lega vote appears largely to be explained by cultural disorientation; furthermore, the economic index does not affect the Lega vote and the effect of the political index remains significant, but the regression coefficient assumes a negative value (that is, as economic hardship increases, the Lega vote decreases). Second, the M5s vote is totally explained by the political discontentment index, while the effects of cultural disorientation and economic hardship are not significant.

### Table 5. Multivariate logistic regression of Lega vote and M5s vote on cultural, economic and political indexes (coefficients, standard errors and significance levels).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lega vote Coef. (SE)</th>
<th>M5s vote Coef. (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−3.80 (0.46)***</td>
<td>−3.44 (0.33)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural disorientation index</td>
<td>6.30 (0.60)***</td>
<td>0.35 (0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic hardship index</td>
<td>−0.86 (0.58)</td>
<td>0.56 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political discontentment index</td>
<td>−2.02 (0.61)**</td>
<td>3.94 (0.46)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke’s R2</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(992)</td>
<td>(992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** = p < 0.001; ** = p < 0.01.

Conclusions: the ‘society of distrust’, the ‘democracy of rejection’²

In our study of the motivations behind voting for the Lega and the M5s, we were initially guided by the hypothesis that it was driven by the process of ‘modernisation’, which has generated winners and losers, and that it is precisely these ‘losers’ who have fed the populist vote. This hypothesis found satisfactory empirical confirmation in the case of the Lega, which belongs to the vast family of right-wing populist parties in Europe and whose success can be mainly ascribed to cultural disorientation in the face of modernisation processes.

By contrast, we did not find empirical confirmation of the widely endorsed thesis (especially in left-wing political discourse) according to which the vote for the M5s is to be attributed to the so-called economic ‘losers’ – i.e. those who have suffered the actual or perceived consequences of a process of modernisation which, in recent years, has been manifested in terms of ‘globalisation’ and, especially since 2008, of a ‘Great Recession’. Then again, it must be acknowledged that the growth of parties or movements with a populist appeal is a long-standing phenomenon, which in Europe dates back to long before the advent of the recent recession.³
Thus, alongside the two initial explanations, we put forward a third one. The surge in support for the M5s, more than to cultural or economic factors, should be attributed to political factors. Its main motivations would appear to be the malfunctioning of democracy and voters’ dissatisfaction with, if not downright hostility towards, the party system and the political class. When tested empirically, this explanation proved to be corroborated by the data. Indeed, among seven indicators of political discontentment, five saw M5s voters in first place. Moreover, multivariate analysis, which considered cultural disorientation, economic hardship and political discontentment jointly, clearly revealed that voting for the Lega was driven by the first of these factors, while the M5s vote was driven by the third.

At this point, we need to go into the complex issue of people’s growing mistrust of political institutions more deeply. Pierre Rosanvallon opens his brilliant essay on ‘counter-democracy’ with the following words: ‘The democratic ideal now reigns unchallenged, but regimes claiming to be democratic come in for vigorous criticism almost everywhere. In this paradox resides the major political problem of our time’ (2008, 1). He then goes on to denounce the lack of a structured political opposition, whose role has in large part been undermined by the decline of political parties… [which] continue to compete for power and to be the focal point of certain expectations, but they no longer shape people’s visions of the future and no longer reflect the key cleavages of public opinion… Today, critical sovereignty survives only in a relatively impoverished form; it has become narrowly negative and even at times regressive. As democracy has weakened, politics has come to be dominated by negativism and intransigence (2008, 170, 172).

In this setting of a democracy weakened by the lack of a structured opposition, the opposition vote easily becomes populist, i.e. bereft of a traditional political container, and mainly a vote ‘against’. According to Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels (2017, 268), ‘Populist attitudes… constitute a pre-existing set of beliefs that can be activated in certain contexts’. In other words, populism draws upon the deeply-rooted original values of democracy, which citizens have internalised and perceive as being betrayed, and which are activated in particular societal conditions, thereby mutating from latent dispositions to current attitudes.

But what are the political and social conditions that trigger the activation of populist beliefs? Certainly there are structural conditions that can favour the electoral success of populist parties (e.g. a proportional electoral system, immigration, the bureaucratisation of the traditional parties). Another condition is that of systematic malfeasance by traditional politicians, in the forms both of overt corruption and of collusion among political elites, whereby the interests of the people are kept off the political agenda. Finally, the political success of populist movements depends on the presence of leaders who are able to act as ‘political entrepreneurs’ of their demands, under the dual profile of the rhetoric framework and the organisational framework. Indeed, it takes a charismatic leader to mobilise voters and to transform their latent populist demands into enthusiastic participation. Moreover, since populism has the nature of a movement, which by definition is not organisationally structured, its leadership must not only be authoritative, but also at least somewhat authoritarian, to be politically effective.
All these circumstances arose in Italy in a single extraordinary concurrence: a proportional electoral system without significant exclusion criteria; a dramatic immigration crisis in a previously rather ethno-culturally homogeneous country; a perceived high level of corruption and its recurrent reporting in the mass media; the disappearance of the traditional parties that had structured politics for over 50 years (the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats) and the insufficient social penetration of the parties that replaced them; the significant and on-going impact of the economic crisis; and finally – an absolutely decisive factor – the emergence of two charismatic leaders, Beppe Grillo (without whom the M5s would simply not have existed) and Matteo Salvini (under Maroni’s leadership at the 2013 election, the Lega won only 4% of the votes cast). These factors created the conditions for populism to shift from a potential state to a current reality.

Notes

1. Centre left: Democratic Party (Partito Democratico), Free and Equal (Liberi e Uguali) and More Europe (Più Europa). Centre right: Go Italy (Forza Italia) and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia).
3. The new wave of populist movements and parties first began to gather force in the 1970s (with anti-tax movements in Denmark and Norway, and the Front National in France). It then grew in the 1980s (with the Flemish Vlaams Blok in Belgium, the Lega Lombarda in Italy, and the transformation of the SVP in Switzerland and the FPÖ in Austria into radical populist parties) and continued in the 1990s (with the consolidation of the above-mentioned parties and the emergence of new ones, such as New Democracy in Sweden and the Pim Fortuyn List in Holland) and in the early 2000s (with the UK Independence Party and the PVV in Holland). All of this occurred before the so-called Great Recession, which is conventionally assumed to have begun in September 2008 (with the failure of Lehman Brothers).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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