

Article

# Modern Forms of Populism and Social Policies: Personal Values, Populist Attitudes, and Ingroup Definitions in Support of Left-Wing and Right-Wing Welfare Policies in Italy

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**Abstract:** We analyzed the relationship between modern forms of populism and citizen support for exclusive welfare policies and proposals, and we focused on support for left-wing- and right-wing-oriented welfare policies enacted or proposed during the Lega Nord (LN)–Five Star Movement (FSM) government in Italy (2018–2019). In light of the theoretical perspective of political ideology as motivated by social cognition, we examined citizens' support for the two policies considering adherence to populist attitudes, agreement on the criteria useful to define ingroup membership, and personal values. We also took into account the role of cognitive sophistication in populism avoidance. A total of 785 Italian adults ( $F = 56.6$ ; mean age = 35.8) completed an online survey in the summer of 2019 based on the following: *support for populist policies and proposals, political ideologies and positioning, personal values, and ingroup boundaries*. We used correlation and regression analyses. The results highlight the relationships between populism and political conservatism. Populism was related to the vertical and horizontal borders defining the “people”; cognitive sophistication was not a relevant driver. We identified some facilitating factors that could promote adherence to and support for public policies inspired by the values of the right or of the left, without a true ideological connotation.



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**Keywords:** modern populism; policy support; exclusive welfare; personal values; political ideologies

## 1. Introduction

We aimed to analyze the relationship between modern populism and support for social policies using the generalized favor of Italian citizens towards the welfare measures issued by the 2018–2019 government as a case study. In that year, the government was led by the Five Star Movement (FSM) and the Lega Nord (LN). As is known (e.g., [Ivaldi et al. 2017](#); [Carlotti and Stella 2020](#)), both parties frame their political discourse in populist rhetoric, but differ in their foci on societal issues. LN shows a defined alt-right populist party profile: its main political goals are the defense of national sovereignty against the European Union (EU) and the disparities caused by immigration and multiculturalism. Due to their emphasis on the values of security, conformity and obedience, LN political discourse is framed in authoritarian–populist rhetoric ([Norris and Inglehart 2019](#)). The ideological frame of the FSM is more ambiguous, as the movement eludes the common classification of populist parties. [Norris and Inglehart \(2019\)](#) include the movement among political actors who share more liberal values than authoritarian–populist parties; however, others underline that it does not display either a (left- or right-wing) radical profile or a fully left-libertarian or anti-austerity profile ([Hobolt and Tilley 2016](#); see also [Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018](#)). Due to this difference, the policy indications on welfare issued by the LN–FSM government have stressed the contradictions between the authoritarian instincts of the right and the egalitarian instincts of the left. In a similar frame, it would have been reasonable to expect mutual critiques from the two parties' electorates. Nevertheless, the FSM–LN government enjoyed robust and generalized support. A public opinion poll run on a national sample after one year in charge reported that 52% of Italian voters approved

the work of the government; the approval rates among FSM and LN electors were 91% and 72%, respectively (<https://www.corriere.it>, accessed on 8 June 2019).

The noticeable favor of Italians towards the populist-driven management of the state could be assimilated into a well-known framework that attributes the current rise of populism to the feeling of insecurity experienced by the weakest and most backwards part of the western population (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Perceived insecurity is rooted in (although not limited to) both rising economic concerns and inequalities, and the increasing migration flows that are changing the ethnic composition of western societies, at least in laypeople's eyes (Caiani and Graziano 2019). However, since populism can be considered an ideology, albeit a 'thin' one (Mudde 2004), it calls into question the dimension of values. Personal values form the motivational basis of individuals' attitudes and behavior and reflect political orientation on the left–right political continuum (Schwartz 1992; Caprara et al. 2006). The 'thin' nature of populist ideology—expressed as the inability to provide complex arguments for confronting societal problems (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Mudde 2004)—makes the relationships between populism and individuals' value systems more ambiguous than those between personal values and 'thick' political ideologies such as conservatism or liberalism (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). In fact, while some authors claim that values are better predictors of populism than income levels (cf. Kaufmann 2018), others show that populism itself is the primary voting driver of populist parties (cf. Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018).

A further characteristic of populism is the juxtaposition between the "people" and the "elite", particularly salient in the Italian context we have considered. This juxtaposition is intended to assert the moral superiority of "the people" over the "elite" currently in power, and legitimizes the claim that power belongs to the people. Not surprisingly, one of the best arguments of populist leaders is the claim that the "people" (whom they represent) are the only legitimate source of political and moral authority in a democracy (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In addition to this legitimizing function, radical juxtaposition with "elites" serves to identify a common ingroup with which people who endorse populist offerings identify. However, both the notions of "people" and "elites" are loosely defined in populist rhetoric, and their meanings often vary depending on the context to which they refer (see Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).

Starting from the already discussed key evidence, we aimed to investigate whether the endorsement of populist ideology explained support for LN–FSM welfare policies better than personal values. Moreover, we addressed the representation of the "people" underlying populism by investigating its variations when left- or right-wing populist policies are at stake.

## 2. Defining the Ingroup: Which People for Which Type of Populism?

One of the main differences between populism and other "thick-centered" ideologies (Mudde 2004) is that ideologies such as socialism, liberalism or conservatism refer to more structured and consistent political thought. These characteristic leads populism to provide schematic (perhaps simplistic) solutions to societal problems, and may also explain why populist discourse only reflects principles about who should govern, while saying nothing about what should be done (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Populist political actors generally overcome this problem by merging populist discourse with more structured ideologies whose "host" populism supplies it with more consistent and articulated narratives (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Broadly speaking, the intertwining of 'thin' and 'thick' leads to two different settings of populists' political and ideological agendas. Indeed, similar to left- and right-wing politics, left- and right-wing forms of populism address different social topics. In line with the left-wing ideological focus on social equity, left-wing populism often refers to equity in resource distribution while right-wing populism often looks at (and mixes) the issues of national sovereignty, migration, and criminality, consistent with the right-wing conservative, authoritarian, and security-oriented perspective.

As a fundamental tool for individuals to organize worldviews and to prioritize their positioning on political and non-political issues, ideologies likely play a role in the way the “we” and, consequently, the “others” are conceived. From the populist perspective, “we” and “them” translate into the notions of the “people” and the “elite”, whose antagonism defines the frame of political actions (Mudde 2004). We can think of the people–elite contraposition as a vertical low / upper antagonism. In fact, the people versus elite frame brings into play the hierarchical positioning of the two groups in society. While the “people” are subordinate to the “elite” regarding access to power, they are nonetheless the holders of greater morality, expressed using the trait of purity with which the “people” are often associated in populist discourse (De Cleen 2017; Mudde 2017). It should be noted that the reference to social hierarchies expressed by the vertical understanding of the people–elite opposition may be consistent with leftist ideological positioning (March 2011).

When populism is “housed” by right-wing ideologies such as conservatism (Mudde 2017), a national/ethnic dimension is added to the notion of the “people”. This dimension, consistent with right-wing cultural instincts (Taguieff 1995), can be approached as a horizontal in/out opposition between nationals and non-nationals, and highlights the close proximity between populism and nationalism, as well as how the two can be partially conflated. Both indeed “revolve around the sovereignty of ‘the people’” (De Cleen 2017, p. 342) and express their democratic political participation in the context of a national organization of political representation. These features favor a definition of the “people” at the nation-state level, which has two main consequences in political discourse. On the one hand, a nationalist border underscores the antagonism between a nationally defined “people” and non-national “elites” (De Cleen 2017), who are immoral by definition and constitute the global financial elite. On the other hand, the same in/out dimension opens the door to the acceptance of nationalist identity demands, such as claims in defense of the sovereignty of the nation-state against supranational political bodies (e.g., the EU) and/or to the exclusion of specific social groups (e.g., immigrants) from the national community.

### 3. Political Ideologies and the Personal Value System

Political psychology finds the origins of ideological differences in cognitive and affective individual functioning. Ideologies serve people both to organize and make sense of information about the political world. Importantly, they serve to rationalize a consistent vision of the present or of how people think things should be changed (Jost et al. 2009; see also Jost 2006; Jost et al. 2003). In these terms, ideologies can be treated as “an interrelated set of attitudes, values, and beliefs with cognitive, affective, and motivational properties” (Jost et al. 2009, p. 315) and, more abstractly, as reliable predictors of citizens’ general value orientation (Jost et al. 2009). Values refer to abstract, trans-situational goals, varying in importance and having a universal nature, as consistently confirmed by multi-year research (Schwartz 2012). Following Schwartz’s theory (1992), ten values (i.e., power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security) are arranged in a circular structure, holding each other in dynamic relationships. Each value holds a central goal, that is, an underlying motivation that contributes orienting behaviors (Vecchione et al. 2013), based on the fact that “actions in pursuit of any value have consequences that conflict with some values but are congruent with others” (Schwartz 2012, p. 8). The overall pattern of the relations of conflict and congruity among values expressed by the value circle can be summarized along two bipolar dimensions: openness to change versus conservatism, and self-transcendence versus self-enhancement. The former juxtaposes the values of self-direction and stimulation against those of security, conformity, and tradition. The dimension expressing the contrast between self-transcendence and self-enhancement juxtaposes the values of universalism and benevolence against those of power and achievement. As Piurko and colleagues note (Piurko et al. 2011), values serve as individual standards to separate the “good” from the “bad” and elicit positive or negative feelings when activated.

From a psychological angle, values have great significance in understanding political behavior. Following research (e.g., [Pioro et al. 2011](#); [Schwartz et al. 2010](#); [Vecchione et al. 2013](#)), individuals express their values in this domain by formulating specific attitudes and evaluations that mirror their “core” political values, such as, for example, egalitarianism or limited government. This implies that individuals use values as pivots for organizing and prioritizing their positioning on specific political issues, for communicating about politics, and for political decision making and justification. For these reasons, scholars consider values to be particularly informative in explaining voters’ political choices, as they differentiate between left-wing and right-wing orientations. Research in the field has consistently shown that left-wing people tend to systematically endorse the values of universalism and benevolence, while right-wing people are oriented by the values of power, security, tradition, and conformity ([Caprara et al. 2006](#); [Pioro et al. 2011](#)). In terms of motivational goals, both benevolence and universalism are defined by an emphasis on voluntary concern for others’ welfare. However, if benevolence aims to preserve and enhance the welfare of the “in-group”, universalism refers to “understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of *all* people and for nature”. In terms of the right-wing perspective, values of security serve both individual and group interests and concern safety, harmony, and general stability. Tradition refers to subordination to abstract objects such as religion or cultural customs; conformity too refers to subordination, but relates it to persons living in individuals’ microsystems. Finally, power values’ defining goals refer to “social status and prestige and to the control or dominance over people and resources” and stress “the attainment or preservation of a dominant position within the more general social system” ([Schwartz 2012](#), pp. 6–7).

The generalized consensus enjoyed in Italy by the FSM–LN government somehow challenged the idea of consistency between individuals’ value systems and their core political values. Although the government-implemented policies of the FSM–LN coalition were inspired by opposite “hosting” ideological frames, the inconsistency between values did not result in tensions between voters and their political representatives. Some cues to explain the apparent paradox come from a recent experimental study that has deepened knowledge on the issue of inconsistency in value appeal in the context of right-wing populist communication. Based on the consideration that “value appeals are (more) persuasive when they resonate with the audience’s value predispositions” ([Wirz 2018](#), p. 64), we highlighted the role of cognitive sophistication ([Barker 2005](#)) in value framing. [Wirz \(2018\)](#) found that people with high cognitive sophistication are likely to detect an inconsistency between their own personal values and the values expressed in populist political communication. However, low cognitive sophistication hinders one from recognizing the inconsistency between value appeals and the source of one’s own value reputation; that is, the values to which the source mostly refers to in political communication. As a result, people with low sophistication feel consistently stuck between their own values and those expressed in communication, thus increasing the persuasiveness of the message. Other cues for understanding electors’ support for the FSM–LN government actions come from cross-national research involving nine European countries. The research focused on the effect of populist attitudes and of individuals’ positioning on specific left-wing (economic) and right-wing (authoritarian and anti-immigrant) issues regarding support for populist parties ([Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018](#)). The findings revealed that populist attitudes moderate the effect of specific issue positions in terms of support for left- versus right-wing populist parties among people who do not fall towards the extreme poles of the issue positioning scale used by the researchers.

Given all of the above reported evidence, it seems reasonable to suppose that low cognitive sophistication may contribute to creating a condition conducive to populist attitudes on policy consideration so that “strong populist attitudes may encourage some voters to support a populist party whose issue positions are incongruous with their own policy-related preferences” ([Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018](#), p. 69).

#### 4. The Current Study

*The study context.* We addressed Italian citizens' attitudes towards two flagship policies of the FSM–LN government: the first policy concerned socioeconomic welfare initiatives such as the introduction, sponsored by the FSM, of the income support scheme for the less well-off—the *Reddito di cittadinanza* (RDC; citizen income)—and the relaxation of standards for retirement age (*Quota 100*), sponsored by the LN. In terms of focusing on societal issues, the RDC is in line with a left-wing redistributive perspective aimed at promoting social equity and combating poverty. In contrast, Quota 100 targets categories of workers whose rights are already guaranteed, consistent with the right-wing interest in protecting existing privileges, even at the expense of other weaker social categories. Despite the government's claims about the effectiveness of the measures for redistributive purposes, economists argue that both would likely produce negative effects on the Italian economic balance without affecting the real problems of the Italian labor market (for an exhaustive analysis, see [Giugliano 2019](#)).

The second flagship policy we examined was conducted through a violent institutional campaign against immigrants and immigration implemented by the government. Although the FSM–LN government has never explicitly proposed reforming the Italian welfare system in exclusive terms, at the national level this policy approach has resulted in the restrictive reform of the laws that regulate the national reception system for immigrants and refugees, hindering their access to the national welfare system (DL 113/2018; DL 53/2019). At the local level, it led to the compression of the rights of immigrants and refugees to access local welfare. Exemplary in this sense was the decision of the municipality of Lodi in 2018—governed by an LN majority—to use bureaucratic loopholes to exclude immigrant families from access to subsidized rates for their children's school canteens and school buses.

*The study's rationale.* As discussed, the literature supports a well-defined relationship between individuals' left- or right-wing political orientation and the prevalence of specific values in their personal value systems. On the one hand, left-wing people seem to be driven by universalism and benevolence; on the other hand, right-wing supporters carry out the motivational goals implied by power, security, tradition, and conformity ([Norris and Inglehart 2019](#)). A similar differentiation could be expected in people holding populist attitudes. Nevertheless, [Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel's \(2018\)](#) results suggest that populist attitudes *per se* represent a relevant driver for supporting populist policies, beyond both individuals' values and parties' ideological frames. In these terms, we expected that populist attitudes would be more important drivers than personal values for supporting populist policies (Hypothesis 1 [H1]).

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Populist attitudes would be more important drivers than personal values for supporting populist policies.*

In a similar vein, following [Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel \(2018\)](#), if support for populist political parties is grounded in the fact that issues are approached in a populist way, rather than in their consistency with individuals' value priorities, we can also expect variation in the relevance of the oppositions—although based on which “people” are defined—according to what the most effective means are for justifying agreement with a specific populist policy. In the present study, we considered the “people–elite” antagonism both at the national (the Italian political elite) and supranational levels (i.e., the European financial elite), consistent with current populist discourse in Italy. We identified the nationalist in/out border in the agreement on the amendment made to the national law on citizenship (The Italian law on citizenship is still based on a blood-right approach, which hinders non-Italian naturalization. The possibility to amend the rule to be more inclusive has been discussed for decades in Italy, without results thus far; its approval would be particularly relevant for the integration of second-generation youths born and educated in Italy).



Specifically, with respect to the populist representation of the people, we expected the following:

**Hypothesis 2a (H2a).** *Consistent with left-wing reference to social class, support for left-wing populist policies is predicted by a down/up opposition between the “people” and the elite.*

**Hypothesis 2b (H2b).** *Consistent with a right-wing focus on ethno-national dimensions, support for right-wing populist policies is predicted by both down/up and in/out oppositions.*

Finally, following Wirz’s results (2018) on the effects of low cognitive sophistication on value framing, we hypothesised that education might influence support for both left- and right-wing populist policies. In this respect, considering the established relationships between individuals’ educational level and their degree of cognitive sophistication (Barker 2005; Wirz 2018), we expected that:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Support for both left- and right-wing populist policies is greater among people with less (rather than more) education.*

## 5. Method

*Participants.* The participants were 785 Italian adults ( $F = 56.6\%$ ; mean age = 35.8 years, range: 18–76,  $SD = 14.1$ ). The majority had a secondary school education level (43.6%); 39% had a university diploma; 9.4% had a Ph.D. or master’s degree; and 8% had a compulsory education level.

### 5.1. Procedure

We released an online survey in the summer of 2019 after the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Torino (approval n. 256377; 27 June 2019). All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated. We conducted the study in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

The questionnaire was anonymous and aimed at broader research on support for populist parties and policies in Italy, targeting adult Italian citizens with the right to vote. In the first phase, we invited participants via e-mail or social media contacts, using snowball sampling by means of participants’ suggestions of other available people. The full questionnaire took approximately 20 min to complete.

### 5.2. Measures

For the current research, we measured support for populist policies and proposals, ingroup boundaries, and political ideologies and positioning.

*Support for left-wing policies.* Two questions investigated the degree of approval of the two welfare measures: *Reddito di cittadinanza* (Income) and *Quota 100* (Retirement). Participants had to indicate their answer from the three proposed options: (a) “a negative action for the country”, (b) “a marginal and not truly incisive action”, and (c) “a positive action for the country”.

*Support for right-wing policies.* We created four items to assess agreement with exclusive welfare. The participants rated the following items on a 4-point Likert (1 = completely disagree; 4 = completely agree): “Favor Italian citizens in accessing public rankings (e.g., public housing, nursery school)”, “Favor Italian citizens in the search for work”, “Exclude foreign citizens from accessing income support measures (e.g., exemption from health insurance, basic income)”, and “Limit the access of foreign citizens to the national health system”. The four items showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ); we computed a mean score of exclusive welfare, where lower values indicate low support for nationalistic welfare policies.

*The people vs. the elite.* We investigated the opposition between the people and the elite in relation to both national and supranational elites. Two questions assessed participants’ level of trust with respect to national and supranational elites. Specifically, participants

rated, on a 5-point Likert scale, their level of trust (1 = complete lack of trust; 5 = complete trust) in the Italian parliament (the people vs. the national-elite) and in the European Central Bank (the people vs. the supranational elite).

*National vs. non-national.* We examined the nationalist boundary using one question about the norms granting citizenship to foreigners. Participants answered the following question: *Granting Italian citizenship to people who come from foreign countries is a recurring theme in the Italian political discourse. Below, we propose some possible alternatives for granting Italian citizenship to foreign citizens. Indicate the alternative closest to your opinion.* Participants had to choose their preferred option among the five presented: *Italian citizenship should only be granted to: "anyone asking"; "children born in Italy, disregarding their parents' nationality"; "those who have completed their compulsory education in Italy, even if they were born abroad to foreign parents"; "those who have lived and worked regularly and permanently in Italy for more than 5 years (this option corresponds to the current rule for granting Italian citizenship to EU citizens; for non-EU citizens, a 10-year period of regular and continuous residency is required), who know our language and our culture"; and "nobody".*

*Populistic attitudes.* The populism scale (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016) was used to assess the individual level of populistic attitudes ("the opinions of ordinary people are worth more than those of experts and politicians"; "politicians should listen more closely to the problems people have"; "ministers should spend less time behind their desks and more among ordinary people"; and "people who have studied for a long time and have many diplomas do not truly know what makes the world go round"). Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("total disagreement") to 5 ("total agreement"). The items have good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ); we computed a mean score, where lower values correspond to lower populist attitudes.

*Political orientation.* Participants indicated their position on the far-left/far-right political axis (far left: 4.2% left: 25.1% center-left: 16.6%, center: 3.8%, center-right: 8.2%, right: 6.6%, far-right: 1%). Six percent chose the "I don't want to answer" option, and 28.5% chose "I do not place myself on the continuum". We calculated two different variables: a continuous variable of left/right political orientation (other = missing) and a dummy variable of political placement (=0) versus no placement (=1).

*Personal values.* We assessed individuals' endorsement of the five values related to political positioning (tradition, conformity, security, power, and universalism) using 11 items from the 21-item version of the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ-21; Davidov et al. 2008; Cieciuch and Davidov 2012). Respondents rated, on a 6-point Likert scale, how much they felt similar to the person described in the statements ("How much is this person like you?"; 1 = "not like me at all" to 6 = "very much like me"). We measured each value (except for universalism) using two items: *Tradition:* Tradition is important to her/him. She/He tries to follow the customs handed down by her/his religion or her/his family; it is important to her/him to be humble and modest. She/He tries not to draw attention to herself/himself. *Conformity:* She/He believes that people should do what they are told. She/He thinks people should follow the rules at all times, even when no one is watching; it is important to her/him to always behave properly. She/He wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong. *Security:* It is important to her/him to live in secure surroundings. She/He avoids anything that might endanger her/his safety. It is important to her/him that the government ensures her/his safety against all threats. She/He wants the state to be strong so it can defend its citizens. *Power:* It is important to her/him to be rich. She/He wants to have a lot of money and expensive things; it is important to her/him to get respect from others. She/He wants people to do what she/he says). We assessed the value of universalism using three items: She/he thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally; she/he believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life, and it is important to her/him to listen to people who are different from her/him. Even when she/he disagrees with them, she/he still wants to understand them; she/he strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to

her/him. We computed five mean scores, one for each assessed value (tradition, conformity, security, power, and universalism). Lower scores signal a low endorsement of the value.

*Socio-demographics.* We asked the participants to indicate their sex, age, and education level.

### 5.3. Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using correlations, hierarchical linear regression, and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). We employed hierarchical linear regression to predict support for exclusive welfare by means of a sequential procedure of estimation, which permitted us to demonstrate the (statistical) marginal utility of each set of predictors; that is, their additional contribution in terms of the residual explained variance of the dependent variable when the impact of previous regressors had already been considered. We included the following sets of independent variables in four areas: *demographics* (age and education level recoded into a dummy where 0 = compulsory or secondary school education and 1 = university education or higher), *ingroup boundaries* (the people vs. the national elite; the people vs. the supranational elite; nationals vs. non-nationals), *populism* (populist attitudes), and *personal values* (tradition, conformity, security, power, and universalism).

We used the MANOVA model to concurrently predict support for the two welfare policies about income and retirement as a function of the same IVs already used in the linear regression, now treated as dichotomous variables to implement model specification.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Correlation Results

The two dependent variables—i.e., income and retirement—were positively related ( $r = 0.20^{**}$ ), as were retirement and exclusive welfare ( $r = 0.21^{**}$ ); income and exclusive welfare were unrelated. The negative relation between exclusive welfare and participants' cognitive sophistication, assessed through education level ( $r = -0.16^{**}$ ), further confirmed the negative association between cognitive sophistication and holding prejudiced attitudes (Barker 2005; Coenders and Scheepers 2003). Additionally, exclusive welfare was positively related to age ( $r = 0.21^{**}$ ).

Table 1 shows the correlational values among the DVs (income, retirement, and exclusive welfare) and the main variables in the study. Agreement on all three DVs was linked to a lack of trust in supranational elites and an endorsement of populism, a picture that harks back to the fundamentals of populist discourse. When looking at the relationships by considering the opposing political orientations that inspired the three DVs (social equity: income; defense of the privileged: retirement and exclusive welfare), different patterns emerged. Aside from the association between low trust in supranational political elites and populism, support for citizens' income was positively associated with the values of power and universalism. Power and universalism are opposites in the circular value structure because they relate to conflicting motivational goals. The former refers to social status and prestige, control, or dominance over people and resources; the defining goal of universalism calls into question understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the well-being of all people and nature (Schwartz 2012).

**Table 1.** Policy support and exclusive well-being: A correlation analysis.

	PSE	PNE	NNI	POP	TR	CF	SE	PO	UN
Income	−0.91 *	0.03	0.04	0.11 **	0.02	−0.06	0.02	0.11 *	0.07 *
Retirement	−0.21 **	−0.14 **	−0.12 **	0.23 **	0.09 *	0.06	0.19 **	−0.05	−0.05
Exclusive welfare	−0.24 **	−0.19 **	−0.38 **	0.46 **	0.18 **	0.18 **	0.47 **	0.13 **	−0.27 **

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Note: PSE: the people vs. supranational elites; PNE: the people vs. national elites; NNI: non-national inclusion; POP: populist attitudes; TR: tradition; CF conformity; SE: security; PO: power; UN: universalism.

Agreement on the two right-wing policies was associated with a negative relationship with the three variables defining group boundaries; those who approved of retirement



and exclusive welfare also showed low trust in the national and supranational elites, and a negative attitude towards changing the rules for granting citizenship. In addition, support for both policies was positively associated with the values of tradition and security, consistent with Norris and Inglehart's (2019) description of authoritarian populism. Indeed, security refers to stability and safety in society, and responds to the need to avoid risks of instability and disorder (often attributed to immigrants); tradition entails subordination to abstract objects, such as cultural customs and ideas, and responds to the need to defend conventional customs from novelty. In particular, the relationship pattern was stronger for support for exclusive welfare, rather than for support for retirement.

Finally, participants' political orientations, lack of political orientation, and populist attitudes were correlated with their personal values (see Table 2). The correlation table verifies the well-known patterns of relationships positively linking the values of tradition, conformity, security, and power to the right-wing political orientation; consistently, we found a negative relationship between the values of universalism and a right-wing political orientation. A similar pattern of relations emerged among personal values and populist attitudes. In fact, populism was positively tied to tradition, conformity, and security, and negatively related to universalism and power. This structure is consistent with authoritarianism, as described by Norris and Inglehart (2019), and supports the idea that a basic understanding of populism tends to be associated with values of conservatism. Finally, in the pattern of relations among personal values and a lack of political placement, only one significant relationship appeared, namely, to security, which seems to recall the authoritarian–populist rhetoric of the “politics of fear” (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

**Table 2.** Policy support and personal values: a correlation analysis.

	TR	CF	SE	PO	UN
Right-wing (=1) orientation	0.18 **	0.24 **	0.44 **	0.20 **	−0.41 **
No political placement (=1)	0.00	−0.00	0.10 **	−0.06	−0.04
Populist attitudes	0.32 **	0.16 **	0.39 **	−0.13 **	−0.03

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Note: TR: tradition; CF conformity; SE: security; PO: power; UN: universalism.

## 6.2. Regression Results

The hierarchical linear regression on support for exclusive welfare was informative: all steps were significant, and the final amount of explained variance was 45% ( $R^2 = 0.45$ ;  $F_{(11, 773)} = 58.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Each set of predictors inserted into the sequence of estimation added a contribution in terms of  $R^2$  change, especially when we entered the ingroup boundaries (PSE, PNE, NNI; Step 2) and personal values (TR, CF, SE, PO, UN; Step 4) into the model (see Table 3).

In the estimation sequence, the IVs were fully significant until Step 2. After we entered populist attitudes into the model, the significance of the two people versus elite variables (PSE and PNE) disappeared, suggesting that populism already implies a down/up antagonism between social actors. The final step underscores the contribution of personal values. Consistent with an authoritarian–dominant approach, security and power positively contributed to support for the exclusion of migrants from the national welfare system (Beta = 0.28 and 0.11, respectively). In line with the concern for others it expresses, universalism reduced the agreement with exclusive welfare.

Based on H1, we expected populism to predict support for exclusive welfare more than personal values. Unlike our expectations, security was the best predictor of support for exclusive welfare, but populist attitudes followed at a short distance. Moreover, the significance of universalism, even if it goes in the direction of reducing support, emphasizes the relevance of values in orienting individuals' attitudes towards specific policy actions.

As predicted in H2b, agreement with the exclusion of migrants from national welfare was predicted by a representation of “the people” consistent with the focus on the ethno-national dimension expressed by current right-wing political thought. In fact, support for exclusive welfare was predicted by disagreement with more inclusive citizenship

rules, which refers to the national versus non-national ingroup boundary. Unexpectedly, a people–elite opposition also emerged, with the slight influence of a lack of trust in European financial elites on support for exclusive welfare. Regarding this, it should be noted that opposition to the supranational elites also contains a reference to the in/out opposition. Finally, the results gave initial support to H3, which investigated the role of cognitive sophistication in the agreement of both left- and right-wing oriented populist policies. As expected, the possession of (at least) an academic qualification reduced support for exclusive welfare.

**Table 3.** Hierarchical linear regression. Support for exclusive welfare.

Model	R <sup>2</sup>	St. Error	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	df	VI	Beta	t
1	0.069	0.81	0.069	28.85 **	2;782	(Constant)		21.78
						Academic degree	−0.15 **	−4.42
						Age	0.21 **	6.00
2	0.233	0.73	0.16	55.67 **	3;779	(Constant)		23.37
						Academic degree	−0.13 **	−4.10
						Age	0.17 **	5.28
						PSE	−0.13 **	−3.82
						PNE	−0.08 *	−2.41
3	0.321	0.69	0.09	100.12 **	1;778	NNI	−0.34 **	−10.65
						(Constant)		10.28
						Academic degree	−0.10 **	−3.24
						Age	0.09 *	2.93
						PSE	−0.06	−1.86
						PNE	−0.04	−1.33
4	0.453	0.62	0.13	37.59 **	0.453	NNI	−0.29 **	−9.50
						POP	0.33 **	10.01
						(Constant)		7.71
						Academic degree	−0.08 *	−3.04
						Age	0.10 *	3.41
						PSE	−0.08 *	−2.49
						PNE	−0.04	−1.26
						NNI	−0.19 **	−6.87
						POP	0.24 **	7.47
						TR	0.03	0.90
SE	0.28 **	8.33						
PO	0.11 **	3.60						
CO	−0.01	−0.20						
UN	−0.21 **	−7.40						

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Note: PSE: the people vs. supranational elites; PNE: the people vs. national elites; NNI: non-national inclusion; POP: populist attitudes; TR: tradition; CF conformity; SE: security; PO: power; UN: universalism.

### 6.3. MANOVA Results

Overall, multivariate analyses indicated that income and retirement were significantly predicted by the following variables: age, the people versus national elites (PNE), non-national inclusion (NNI), populism (POP), and security (SE) (Age (Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F_{(3772)} = 4.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), PNE (Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F_{(3772)} = 5.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), NNI (Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F_{(3772)} = 3.69$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), POP (Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F_{(3772)} = 5.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), SE (Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F_{(3772)} = 4.60$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )).

*Univariate effects.* A limited number of univariate effects for the two independent variables appeared. The univariate effects related to income were participants' age, populism (POP), and conformity (CO). Retirement showed the following univariate effects: the people versus supranational elites (PSE), the people versus national elites (PNE), populism (POP), and security (SE) (Income: age ( $F_{(3773)} = 8.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ), POP ( $F_{(3773)} = 7.46$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ) and CO ( $F_{(3773)} = 5.03$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ). Retirement: PSE ( $F_{(3773)} = 5.27$ ;

$p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ), PNE ( $F_{(3773)} = 7.48$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ), POP ( $F_{(3770)} = 5.26$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ) and SE ( $F_{(3773)} = 8.93$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ )).

Table 4 depicts the parameter estimates for the two DVs. The results revealed that populism predicted support for populist policies beyond their left- or right-wing orientations. In detail, high populist attitudes were the best predictors of income, which is a policy designed to increase social inclusion and is mostly targeted at younger generations, as demonstrated by the direct effect of age. Support for income was also predicted by low conformity. Following Schwartz (2012), conformity derives from the requirement that individuals constrain inclinations that could undermine the smooth functioning of the group. From a conformity perspective, the idea of income support for people in need can threaten the regular functioning of the group because it legitimizes, in a sense, the idea that people can live decently without working. Not surprisingly, low conformity predicted a left-oriented disposition, underlining the differences that exist between left- and right-wing populism (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

**Table 4.** MANOVA: Parameter estimates.

	Income		Retirement	
	B	Std. Error	B	Std. Error
Academic degree	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.05
Age	−0.16 *	0.06	−0.03	0.06
PSE	−0.06	0.06	−0.12 *	0.05
PNE	−0.07	0.06	−0.16 *	0.06
NNI	0.10	0.05	−0.08	0.05
POP	0.16 *	0.05	0.13 *	0.06
TR	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06
SE	0.06	0.06	0.17 *	0.06
PO	−0.06	0.05	−0.09	0.05
CO	−0.13 *	0.06	0.01	0.06
UN	−0.03	0.05	−0.01	0.05

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Note: PSE: the people vs. supranational elites; PNE: the people vs. national elites; NNI: non-national inclusion; POP: populist attitudes; TR: tradition; CF conformity; SE: security; PO: power; UN: universalism.

Support for retirement displays a different pattern. In political terms, retirement is a right-oriented policy that aims to protect the existing privileges of selected groups. As a political message, however, this measure responds to people's need for security about the quality of their future. Agreement with this theme was predicted by security values, low trust in national and supranational elites, and high populism. This structure seems to relate to a situation of widespread economic and social uncertainty, to which both national and supranational ruling classes were not responding effectively. Indeed, economic and social uncertainty can drive people to primarily serve their own interests, even at the expense of the community, thus supporting 'selfish' dispositions. Moreover, as we noted before, a lack of trust in supranational elites encompasses both the people versus elite and the national versus non-national oppositions, in line with right-wing nationalism. Cognitive sophistication did not play a role in predicting support for either DV since academic degree was never significant.

Overall, the model explained 4% of the variance in income ( $R^2 = 0.04$ ;  $R^2_{adj.} = 0.02$ ) and 8% of retirement ( $R^2 = 0.08$ ;  $R^2_{adj.} = 0.07$ ).

Taken together, the results from the hierarchical linear regression and MANOVA show that populist attitudes are important predictors of support for both left- and right-wing populist policies, but in the present study, they did not prevail over values; H1 was not fully supported. Moreover, different values were involved in support for left- and right-wing policies: low conformity for left-wing policies and high security for right-wing policies. H2a and H2b found only partial support. The people versus elites opposition, primarily supranational, attained significance only as a predictor of right-wing policies, and national

versus non-national antagonism emerged only in relation to support for exclusive welfare. The relevance of the in/out boundary highlighted by these findings recalls the intertwining of current populism and nationalist discourses of right-wing populism. Finally, cognitive sophistication, assessed through educational attainment, played a role only in preventing support for exclusive welfare; thus, H3 was not supported.

## 7. Conclusions

We focused on the relationship between modern forms of populism and social policies by studying support for the two flagship policies of the 2018–2019 Italian government, led by the FSM and the LN. Specifically, we addressed the government's major provisions to revitalize the labor market by introducing relaxed standards for the retirement age and an income support scheme for the less well-off, namely, *Quota 100* and *Reddito di cittadinanza*. Moreover, we addressed support for excluding migrants from access to social welfare. These all represent clear examples of populist policies inspired by the left-wing rhetoric of reducing inequality, and by the right-wing discourse on welfare improvement and expansion to the exclusion of immigrants and refugees. In light of the theoretical perspective of political ideology as motivated by social cognition (Jost and Amodio 2012), we analyzed citizens' support for the two policies in light of adherence to populist attitudes, agreement on the criteria useful to define ingroup membership, and personal values. Finally, a specific hypothesis regarded the role of cognitive sophistication in avoiding populism; that is, that less educated people are less able to recognize the inconsistencies between their own values and those at the base of the populist political offer, resulting in a greater likelihood of populism (Wirz 2018).

Following Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018), we expected that the adoption of populist attitudes would be the strongest predictor of policy support, overcoming individuals' ideological frame as expressed through adherence to specific values. The empirical evidence partially disconfirmed this hypothesis. Even if the effect of populism was significant and consistent, the influence of personal values on policy appreciation seemed to be equally effective. Indeed, as the final goals and underlying principles that guide the perception, categorization, and interpretation of social reality, personal values can constitute the framework of attitudes (Schwartz 2012). This means that the individual disposition to accept (or refuse) populist arguments and beliefs depends on value orientations that, in turn, are related to left- or right-wing political ideologies. In other words, populism alone is unable to absorb the drive to pursue a better social status, or a more equal society, supporting the idea of populism as a 'thin' ideology needing a 'thick' host to spread its effects (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). We found this to be particularly true in support for right-wing policies, where the prevalence of values was in line with the work of Kaufmann (2018), who found that conservative values and a predisposition towards authoritarianism are the motivational forces that explain support for populist actors and actions.

The role of values related to authoritarianism and conservatism emerged in relation to support for exclusive welfare. The predictive power of security and power evokes the "politics of fear" typical of right-wing populist rhetoric. The politics of fear is specifically aimed at protecting an imaginary ingroup, the "tribe", that is distinguished from the outgroup by the presence of specific boundaries (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 8) expressed through low trust in supranational elites and the refusal to include immigrants as co-citizens. Security and power also refer to social dominance; that is, individual variability in the support for inequality between social groups (SDO; Sidanius and Pratto 2001). As Obradović and colleagues note (Obradović et al. 2020, p. 126), "The particular potency of the populist distinction between "us" and "them" lies in how it intersects with notions of hierarchy". Social dominance is related to a right-wing political orientation (e.g., Wilson and Sibley 2013; Miglietta et al. 2018; Miglietta et al. 2014). Recent research suggests that high levels of SDO indicate an increasing group status threat, and predicted electoral support for Trump in the 2016 US elections (Mutz 2018).

Similar observations can be made with respect to support for Quota 100, predicted by the fundamental distrust of the ruling elites, both national and supranational. In this case, the relevance of security, alone among the values involved, implies that support probably exists for “selfish” more than ideological reasons.

A different frame emerged from support for the left-wing oriented welfare policy (i.e., national basic income). In this case, the support came from high populist attitudes and low conformity, but interestingly, any other value or identity marker (such as ingroup boundaries) that might refer to a left- or right-wing ideological orientation was absent. Overall, this finding signals that ideologically vague people are more prone to populism (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018).

In sum, our work contributes to the debate on the current widespread exclusivist welfare policies in Europe by revealing the dynamics that underlie support for populist policies. Our empirical evidence supports the conception of populism as a “thin” ideology that relies on “thicker” systems of thought. This is especially true in the case of right-wing populism, whereas left-wing populism shows a vaguer ideological structure. In our study, right-wing populist policies and approaches to social welfare were supported by people holding a value system driven by social dominance and security motives, and defining ingroup borders mainly with respect to in/out nationalistic opposition. Our results also highlight the strict relationship between endorsing populism and supporting left-wing populist policies. Although the current study posited a predictive role of populism in the support for *Reddito di cittadinanza*, the relation between the two is probably bidirectional. Support for left-wing populist policies also relies on being young (likely because such policies meet the needs of youth), and on a low endorsement of conformity. In this framework, individuals’ education level showed a significant effect but only with regard to support for an exclusive approach to welfare, but the data supported the idea of greater susceptibility to right-wing authoritarian populism among less educated people.

Our study has some limitations. The validity of the results is partially limited because the study is cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal: the participants gave their self-report on a single occasion; hence, we do not know what their political positions were before the interview or what their opinion was with respect to previous policies. In addition, the sampling procedure was not accidental or stratified, so participants eventually self-selected on the basis of their availability and interest in being part of the research. This means that the results cannot be considered representative of the adult population to whom the survey was addressed. However, the findings provide a significant snapshot of some public opinion dynamics in relation to welfare policies formulated by populist governments.

The study points to some facilitating factors that could promote adherence to and support for public policies inspired by the values of the right or of the left, without a true ideological connotation in neither proposals nor their implementations. The results could be useful in anticipating potential support for current modern populist parties and their initiatives.

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