

Psychological bases of anti-immigration attitudes among populist voters

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Abstract

The ascent of populism has been linked with economic and cultural disruptions of modernization. From this perspective, it could be implied that factors such as psychological insecurity and uncertainty are key in making voters gravitate toward the populist narrative. The present research aimed at highlighting the psychological determinants that uncertainties deriving from modernization processes may activate in populist voters. Specifically, we focused on immigration in Italy, investigating whether and how support for different populist parties relates to development of negative attitudes toward immigrants. Two samples of Italian adults (total $N = 1655$), who voted in the Italian general elections of March 4, 2018 took part in the research. Multigroup path analysis showed that assumption of anti-immigration stances through the joint mediating role of Dangerous World Belief and Right-Wing Authoritarianism was shared by different groups of populist voters. However, different populist voters differed in the strength of the path passing through Competitive Jungle World Belief and Social Dominance Orientation. Results underline the relevance of social worldviews and ideological attitudes in shaping the attitudes of the Italian populist electorate.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A growing literature has tackled the question of explaining the rise of populism and its connections with immigration phenomena (e.g., Diehl et al., 2019; Hochschild, 2016; Zaslove, 2004). Research focusing on populist voters often overlooks individual differences characterizing this electorate and the psychological dynamics that might explain their stances on a variety of issues (e.g., Ivaldi et al., 2017). Support for populist ideology and the empirically related expression of anti-immigration attitudes are often traced back to the economic and cultural changes that mark postmodern society (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2012; Ibsen, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016;

Rodrik, 2018), and to the globalization processes which have produced the so-called “losers of modernization” (Betz, 1994).

Previous research has provided valuable insights about the current varieties of populism. However, apart from recent exceptions (e.g., Fatke, 2019; Salvati et al., 2022; Van Hiel et al., 2021), scant emphasis has been posed on the psychological reactions—in terms of specific psychological variables—that lead people to resolve their concerns through adhering to populism and endorsing anti-immigration attitudes. The present research attempts to address this gap.

Populism has been conceptualized as a “thin-centered ideology,” lacking a central political core (Mudde, 2004, 2007). Because of this

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lack, populism often needs to lean on themes and issues belonging to traditional ideologies. Such a distinctive characteristic of the populist ideology suggests that support for it and the assumption of certain stances on various social issues might be explained by resorting to psychological factors that are key for endorsing classical ideologies. For instance, sensitivity of populist voters to the immigration issue might be explained through psychological dimensions that are traditionally posed as the underpinning of political ideologies and discriminatory attitudes toward outgroups. *Dangerous World Beliefs* (DWB) and *Competitive Jungle Beliefs* (CJB; Duckitt, 2001) represent prominent conceptual candidates to fill such a role. Belief in a dangerous world and belief in a competitive jungle world were found to be central antecedents of the ideological dimensions of *Social Dominance Orientation* (SDO) and *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (RWA; Duckitt et al., 2002; Duckitt, 2001), which in turn are relevant predictors of adherence to the ideologies of the classical left-right political spectrum (Conway et al., 2018; Duckitt, 2001) and of prejudice (Asbrock et al., 2010). The present research thus focused on how support for populist parties and movements is linked to the adoption of prejudicial attitudes toward immigrants through beliefs about the social world (i.e., DWB and CJB) and ideological attitudes (i.e., SDO and RWA).

1.1 | Populism and anti-immigration attitudes

As mentioned above, the *thin-centered* conceptualization of populism (Mudde, 2004, 2007) posits a void of typically populist policy tenets, underlining that populism needs to rely on classical ideologies. Political movements that clearly show such feature have risen to political prominence across the world, assuming different ideological shades. Populism represents a malleable ideology able to incarnate under left- and right-wing semblances (Ibsen, 2019). The shift toward a left- or right-leaning direction occurs as a function of which social issues become salient in a particular context. In countries that have been affected less drastically by the Great Recession (e.g., Northern Europe and North America), populism materializes in its ethnocentric right-wing variant. In countries that still struggle to recover from the financial crisis (e.g., Latin America and Southern Europe), populism materializes in its left-wing antielitist variant, focused on justice, social equality, and redistribution.

Italy represents a peculiar case in which both economic and identity-threat issues became salient. Economic hardship was felt acutely during the financial crisis and its aftermath (austerity) in the decade before 2018 (Corbetta et al., 2018). This favored the spread of antielitist sentiments against the so-called “old politics,” allowing hybrid populist movements (e.g., the Five Stars) to attract voters on a platform of redistribution and fight against political corruption. At the same time, a constant inflow of immigrants deftly framed as an identity threat has allowed the use of nationalism and ethnocentrism as viable political platforms (e.g., the populist right-wing).

Copious research has shown that anti-immigration attitudes can be traced to natives' economic (e.g., Facchini & Mayda, 2009;

Hanson et al., 2007) and identity (e.g., Brown, 2011; Louis et al., 2010) concerns. Immigration may represent a convenient issue to exploit as a means to boost political gains. It may be framed as a threat to the usages and customs of a nation, or it may be portrayed as the cause of a potential drop in economic resources available for natives. Consistent with this, Ivaldi et al. (2017) described how the Populist Right-Wing advanced an ethnocultural exclusionist conception of the people, rooted in a nativist and nationalist ideology (e.g., “Italians first”). On the other hand, the Five Star Movement, though not relying explicitly on cultural and identity motives, opportunistically embraced the public opinion's fear of immigration to compete with the Populist Right-Wing (Gerbaudo & Screti, 2017). The Five Star Movement added to the narrative the topic of bad management of migratory flows by the European Union (a quintessential elite) as the biggest failure of traditional national parties (i.e., “old politics”). These narratives were used to speak to specific portions of the population with characteristics congruent to the electoral prototypes of the two parties. The Italian populist right-wing pressed traditional conservative issues as reducing taxation, along with a strong emphasis on security and immigration control. This message resonated particularly in the rich Northern Italian regions and among small-business owners and trades people (Faggian et al., 2021). The five-star movement, on the other hand, has been followed above all in the less economically thriving regions of southern Italy. It has made its themes typically associated with a left-wing ideology by proposing a redistribution of wealth or social support systems such as basic income. Its message has resonated among the young educated unemployed in Southern Italy (Faggian et al., 2021). For these reasons, the five-star movement has been likened to other left-wing populist movements such as the Spanish Podemos or the Greek Syriza (e.g., Font et al., 2021). Despite this apparent socialist semblance, the five-star movement has repeatedly highlighted some ideological contradictions, sometimes veering toward right-wing positioning on issues like immigration control.

1.2 | Psychological bases of traditional political ideologies and prejudice

Immigration undoubtedly has represented an issue on which the Populist Right-Wing and the Five Star Movement based their political narratives and gained support among Italian voters. However, the psychological motives that lead populist voters to be sensitive to the immigration phenomenon remain unexplained.

Over the last few decades, some variables have been persuasively connected with enhanced prejudice and convincingly framed as the psychological basis of the assumption of traditional ideological stances. Specifically, SDO (Pratto et al., 1994) and RWA (Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1996) have been proven as stable ideological orientations that characterize people's general views of intra- and intergroup relationships (Asbrock et al., 2010; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt et al., 2002). They have been shown also as relevant dimensions associated with left- and right-wing voting behaviors (e.g., Conway & McFarland, 2019; Conway et al., 2018; Crowson & Brandes, 2017), as well as

with adhesion to conservative rather than liberal political orientations (Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002; Wilson & Sibley, 2013).

Duckitt (2001) proposed that ideological orientations derive from particular worldviews held by individuals. According to Duckitt, social worldviews may in turn be stimulated by contextual factors that—or are perceived to—characterize society, leading people to attribute unpleasant characteristics to intergroup interactions. They can be viewed as threatening the established society and consequently lead to believing that the world is a dangerous place (i.e., DWB). Belief in a dangerous world activates the need for control and security that is expressed in authoritarian and conservative attitudes and values. It is oriented to the defense of conventions and punishment of those who threaten them (i.e., RWA). On the other hand, intergroup interactions may be perceived as ungovernable and unregulated. People may see the world as a lawless place, where only the strong rule—the belief in a competitive jungle world (CJB). The view of intergroup interactions as competitive and ruthless may elicit the need to defend and maintain order and social stability through power and dominance, and through attitudes glorifying inequality (i.e., SDO).

It could therefore be reasoned that the psychological uncertainties deriving from cultural-norm modifications and economic changes could make these worldviews salient and lead individuals to adopt ideological attitudes aimed at reducing such insecurities. The political response to these processes could in turn be found in the populist narrative and in the related firm adoption of hostile attitudes toward minority groups (i.e., immigrants).

1.3 | Research hypotheses

Drawing on this reasoning, we aimed mainly at investigating whether the dual process outlined by Duckitt (2001) could account for the psychological dynamics characterizing the Italian populist electorate. We aimed to explore if social worldviews and ideological attitudes may represent the psychological underpinnings of the association of the Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing voting with anti-immigration attitudes. We anticipated that populist (vs. nonpopulist) voters could show enhanced levels of the competitive jungle world belief and dangerous world belief. These were expected to favor, respectively, the adherence to ideological attitudes based on dominance relationships (i.e., SDO) and susceptibility to the traditional norms and conventions (i.e., RWA), which in turn should positively affect the rise of hostile sentiments toward immigration. Specifically, we would anticipate that:

Hypothesis 1. (H1): *Populist voting was positively associated with CJB and DWB.*

Hypothesis 2. (H2): *CJB and DWB related positively and respectively to SDO and RWA.*

Hypothesis 3. (H3): *RWA and SDO were positively associated with anti-immigration.*

Hypothesis 4. (H4): *Populist voting was indirectly associated with anti-immigration attitudes through the joint mediating role of DWB with RWA and of CJB with SDO.*

We thus investigated the relationship between populist voting and anti-immigration attitudes, focusing on how it could operate through different social worldviews and ideological attitudes.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

The predicted associations were examined for two distinct convenience samples of Italian participants. The decision to use two independent samples was made to increase the robustness of the results and confidence in their generalizability across a relatively short, though significant, time-gap. The size of both samples was established according to a power analysis specifically designed for mediational effects. The analysis was performed by means of an R application written by Schoemann et al. (2017), which entails a Monte Carlo simulation approach. We estimated statistical power for a serial mediation model, by setting a high power threshold of 0.90 and conservative effect sizes (i.e., expected correlation of 0.15) among predictors, mediators and criterion (Cohen, 1988). Following Schoemann et al. (2017), we also opted for a large total number of power analysis replications (5000) and wide coefficient draws per replication (20,000). A sample size of around 700 participants was needed to achieve a statistical power of .90.

Sample A consisted of 774 Italian participants (418 female, $M_{age} = 38.4$, standard deviation [SD] $_{age} = 13.9$) recruited by psychology students who were instructed to enroll nonstudent adult participants in exchange for extra course credits (i.e., snowball sampling). 78.8% of the sample was indeed represented by nonstudent adults involved in various occupations: 68.5% employed, 5.1% retired or houseworker, 3.2% unemployed. The remaining 22.2% were students. As for educational level, 4.4% had a lower secondary school diploma, 45.2% a high school diploma, 39.5% a degree, while 9.4% had a postgraduate qualification (for a detailed description of the Sample A data, see Pellegrini et al., 2019). Importantly for our research purposes, the data were collected in a period immediately following the Italian general elections of March 4, 2018, when the first government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had not yet been formed.

Sample B was recruited with the same data collection procedure and answered the same questionnaire as Sample A. These data were collected about 10 months after the general elections of March 4, 2018, during the month of January 2019, while Italy was governed by the populist coalition formed by the Five Star Movement and the League. Sample B consisted of 881 participants (476 female, $M_{age} = 46$, $SD_{age} = 17.2$), of which 79.5% were nonstudent adults who varied in terms of employment conditions (59.1% employed, 16.3% retired or houseworker, 4.3% unemployed). The educational

level was distributed as follows: 9.6% had a lower secondary school diploma, 46.7% a high school diploma, 38.7% a university degree, and 5.7% a postgraduate qualification.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Self-reported vote

Participants were asked to indicate for which party (e.g., Democratic Party, Five Star Movement, and League) they voted in the Italian general elections of March 4, 2018. In Sample A, the self-reported vote was distributed as follows: 23.3% Five Star Movement, 24.4% Populist Right-Wing Coalition, 19.9% Democratic Party, 12.3% other left-wing parties, and 12.8% abstained. In Sample B, 27.8% of participants declared to have voted for the Five Star Movement, 14.6% for the Populist Right-Wing Coalition, 32.7% for the Democratic Party, 12.7% for other left-wing parties, while the remaining 12.8% abstained. Because of analysis purposes, the reported voting behavior was coded into dummy variables opposing populist (i.e., Five Star Movement or Populist Right-Wing = 1) and nonpopulist voters (i.e., the remaining voters and abstained = 0)¹. We considered this variable as indicating belongingness to specific electorate clusters. We were thus able to investigate the distinctive psychological processes that linked these electoral clusters to anti-immigration stances.

2.2.2 | Social worldviews

Participants answered two distinct 10-item scales of beliefs in a dangerous world and beliefs in a competitive jungle world (DWB, CJB; Duckitt, 2001). A high score on DWB reflects the extent to which participants deem that the social world is a dangerous and threatening place, where the values and lifestyle of good and respectable people are threatened by bad people. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale and then averaged to obtain an overall score (Sample A: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.0$, $\alpha = .82$; Sample B: $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = .83$). A high score on the CJB scale indicates instead the view of the world as a place characterized by a ruthless and amoral struggle for resources and power. Items were again rated on a 7-point Likert scale and averaged to get a whole score (Sample A: $M = 2.51$, $SD = 0.98$, $\alpha = .85$; Sample B: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .83$).

2.2.3 | Ideological attitudes

As measures of ideological attitudes, participants were asked to answer 10 items of the RWA scale (Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1996) and eight items of the SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994). RWA taps the tendency to submit to the authorities, to adhere to the conventions and norms of society, and to be hostile toward those who do not adhere to them (Sample A: $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .85$; Sample B:

$M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .86$). SDO gauges the adherence to an ideological attitude based on support for the social hierarchy and the desire that one's group is superior to the outgroup (Sample A: $M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.10$, $\alpha = .87$; Sample B: $M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = .86$). Participants provided their answers for both measures on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 7 ("totally agree"). Responses to each item were averaged to obtain an overall score whose high values corresponded to high SDO or RWA levels.

2.2.4 | Anti-Immigration attitudes

Participants rated one item taken from the American National Election Study (2016). It asked participants to select one of four response options about the policies that the government should adopt about immigration, ranging from permissive ("Allow irregular immigrants to stay in Italy and apply for citizenship, without penalties") to restrictive political actions ("Make irregular immigration a crime, and expel legal immigrants to their countries of origin"). The average score of the item was equal to 2.45 ($SD = 0.93$) and 2.27 ($SD = 0.78$), respectively for Sample A and Sample B.

3 | RESULTS

The main aim of our research was to investigate whether the Duckitt (2001) dual-process model could weave the psychological dynamics delineating the Italian populist voters. Thus, we tested a multiple serial mediation model where voters of the Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing (vs. abstainers and voters of nonpopulist parties) could develop negative attitudes toward immigration through two parallel paths: on the one hand, passing through the dangerous world belief and then RWA; on the other hand, through the CJB and then through SDO. We therefore dummy coded the Five Star Movement, Populist Right-Wing, nonpopulist groups of electors, and abstainers with two variables: the first, opposing Five Star Movement voters (coded 1) to all other electors (coded 0), and the second, opposing the Populist Right-Wing electors (coded 1) to all other participants (coded 0). By keeping constant the non-populist group coding across the two dummy variables, we were able to obtain a straight comparison between the Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing groups of voters with voters of nonpopulist parties. Differently put, the mutual partialization of the two variables' associations allowed us to interpret the unique paths that characterized the Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing participants as opposed to the nonpopulist participants.

We first examined zero-order associations among the measured variables (Table 1). They highlighted a positive relationship of the two voting dummies with the DWB, and only of the Populist Right-Wing dummy with the CJB. Consistently with the Duckitt model, DWB and CJB were respectively associated with RWA and SDO, which in turn related positively with anti-immigration attitudes. Analysis of zero-order association thus provided initial support to our expectations,

TABLE 1 Intercorrelations of Five Star Movement (5SM) and Populist Right-Wing (PRW) dummies, Dangerous World Belief (DWB), Competitive Jungle Belief (CJB), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), and Anti-Immigration Attitudes (Anti-Imm)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. 5SM	–	-.25**	.10**	-.03	-.08*	.09**	.08*
2. PRW	-.31**	–	.17**	.12**	.18**	.36**	.25**
3. DWB	.19**	.16**	–	.15**	.03	.48**	.29**
4. CJB	-.03	.13**	.08*	–	.53**	.25**	.19**
5. SDO	-.05	.21**	.04	.54**	–	.30**	.23**
6. RWA	.06	.35**	.46**	.25**	.23**	–	.43**
7. Anti-Imm.	.09*	.17**	.22**	.20**	.19**	.32*	–

Note: Sample A (N = 774) below the diagonal and Sample B (N = 881) above the diagonal.

*p < .05; **p < .01.

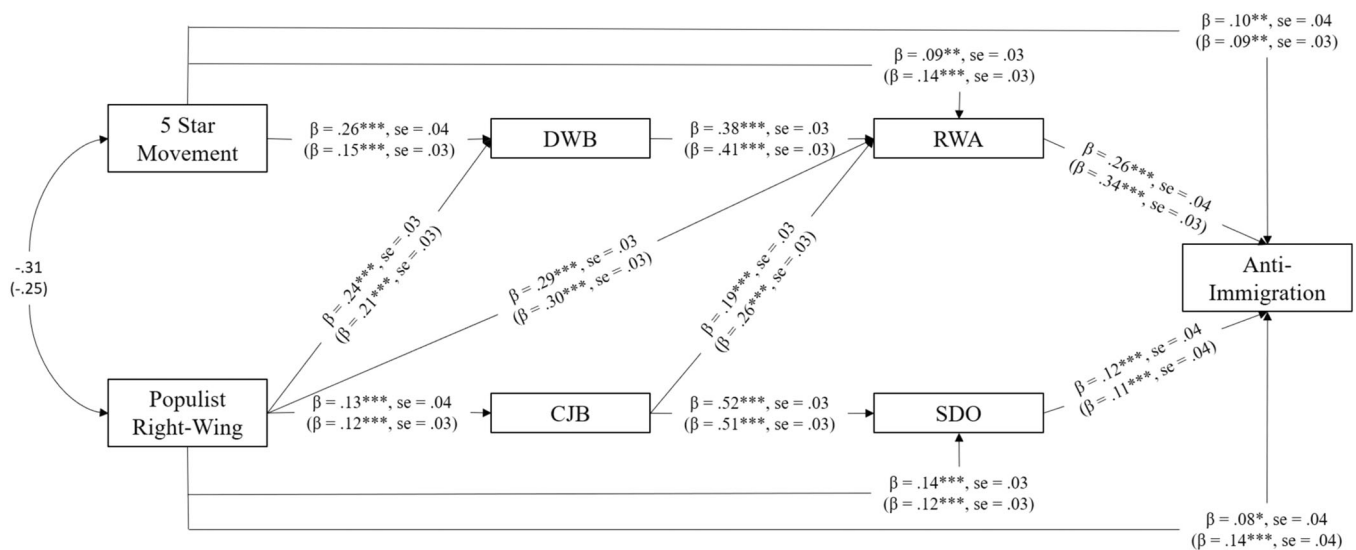


FIGURE 1 Path analysis model. Note: Figure shows standardized parameters. Sample B in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. CJB, Competitive Jungle Belief; DWB, Dangerous World Belief; RWA, Right-Wing Authoritarianism; SDO, Social Dominance Orientation

suggesting that they could be profitably probed by means of a path analysis model.

As depicted in Figure 1, the model thus specified the two dummy variables opposing Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing voters to the nonpopulist participants as the exogenous variables, DWB and CJB as first step mediators, RWA and SDO as second step mediators; anti-immigration attitudes were modeled as the final criterion.

The model was tested by a robust maximum likelihood method, with the Huber–White correction. We used this correction since we were also interested in testing indirect associations, which are conventionally not normally distributed. Analysis was conducted with lavaan (Rosseel, 2012), an R package for Structural Equation Modeling, by using the RStudio graphical interface (2020).

The proposed model was performed simultaneously across the two research samples by means of a multigroup path analysis.

We initially set free to vary the effect among variables, obtaining a specific baseline model on which to examine any differences between the samples. Figure 1 summarizes the standardized parameter estimates for Samples A and B. The free model fitted very well ($\chi^2[10] = 30.39, p = .001$; Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 0.99; Tucker–Lewis Index [TLI] = 0.95; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual [SRMR] = 0.018; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = 0.050, 90% confidence interval [CI] = 0.031–0.071). We then imposed equality constraints on all regression coefficients to gauge if the structural relations in the specified model could be considered invariant in magnitude across Samples A and B. This model fitted the data nicely ($\chi^2[23] = 55.91, p < .001$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.032; RMSEA = 0.041, 90% CI = 0.027–0.071). However, as can be seen in Table 2, an omnibus difference test between the two models showed that they differed significantly in terms of overall fit, and hence the coefficients could not be

TABLE 2 Omnibus test of nested multigroup models

	χ^2	<i>df</i>	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	<i>p</i>
Model 1 Unconstrained	30.394	10	0.95	0.99	.018	.050 (.031, .071)	-	-	-	-
Model 2 Full Constraints	55.914	23	0.97	0.98	.032	.041 (.027, .055)	1 versus 2	24.26	13	.02
Model 3 Full-5SM_DWB	48.543	22	0.97	0.99	.030	.038 (.024, .053)	1 versus 3	17.21	12	.14

Note: Sample A ($N = 774$); Sample B ($N = 881$). Model 3 left free to vary the coefficient and standard error of the path between the Five Star Movement dummy (5SM) and Dangerous World Belief (DWB).

Abbreviations: CFI, Comparative Fit Index; *df*, degree of freedom; RMSEA, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; TLI, Tucker-Lewis Index.

considered fully invariant across samples. Some coefficients appeared to be slightly different across the two samples. Specifically, the relationship between the Five Star Movement and DWB was slightly higher in Sample A ($\beta = .26$) than in Sample B ($\beta = .15$). Thus, we decided to again fit the model, removing the constraint on this pair of coefficients. The model fit was highly satisfactory ($\chi^2[22] = 48.54$, $p = .001$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.030; RMSEA = 0.038, 90% CI = 0.024–0.53). The omnibus hierarchical difference test between this latter model and the baseline unconstrained model resulted nonsignificant. Hence, coefficients could be considered equivalent across the two samples, except for the abovementioned (small) difference in a coefficient pair. We thus reported and discussed standardized beta coefficients common to both samples, except for the association between the Five Star Movement dummy and DWB, and for estimated indirect effects.²

Turning to the associations, support for the Five Star Movement was found to be related to the belief in a dangerous and threatening world. As previously made explicit, this relationship was significantly higher in sample A, albeit slightly ($\beta = .26$, $SE = 0.037$, $z = 7.17$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.192–0.336), than in sample B ($\beta = .15$, $SE = 0.031$, $z = 4.67$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.085–0.209). To obtain the most parsimonious model possible, we decided not to relate the Five Star Movement dummy to the belief in a competitive jungle world. This decision was also supported by the results of correlation analyses, which highlighted the lack of a significant link between these variables in both samples. Support for the Five Star Movement was unrelated to SDO, but directly associated with RWA ($\beta = .11$, $SE = 0.021$, $z = 5.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.071–0.153) without mediation of DWB.

Support for the Populist Right-Wing coalition turned instead associated with both social worldviews. The Populist Right-Wing dummy related positively with the dangerous world belief both in Sample A and Sample B ($\beta = .22$, $SE = 0.024$, $z = 9.36$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.176–0.269). Similarly, it was also related to CJB in both samples ($\beta = .12$, $SE = 0.026$, $z = 4.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.074–0.175). The dummy was also associated with RWA ($\beta = .29$, $SE = 0.020$, $z = 14.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.249–0.329) and SDO ($\beta = .12$, $SE = .022$, $z = 5.66$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.081–0.167) without the effects being mediated by DWB and CJB, respectively. The corresponding associations with DWB and CJB were invariant across the two samples.

As expected, social worldviews showed in turn to be associated with ideological attitudes. In particular, DWB was positively related

to RWA in both samples ($\beta = .39$, $SE = 0.021$, $z = 18.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.353–0.434). The association between DWB and SDO was not tested in the path model because such association is also excluded from the more parsimonious version of Duckitt's dual process model, and since they were not related in correlation analyses. Instead, CJB was positively associated with both RWA ($\beta = .17$, $SE = 0.020$, $z = 8.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.129–0.207) and SDO ($\beta = .51$, $SE = 0.022$, $z = 23.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.466–0.551). Recall that these associations held invariant in both samples.

Finally, we found anti-immigration attitudes to be positively associated with both ideological attitudes. The rise of hostile attitudes toward immigration related positively to RWA ($\beta = .31$, $SE = .026$, $z = 11.93$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.262–0.364), and with SDO ($\beta = .11$, $SE = .025$, $z = 4.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.063–0.162) in both samples. Moreover, although equivalent across Samples A and B, direct associations of anti-immigration attitudes with voting for both the Five Star Movement ($\beta = .10$, $SE = 0.024$, $z = 3.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.048–0.142) and Populist Right-Wing ($\beta = .11$, $SE = 0.028$, $z = 3.81$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.052–0.161) were detected.

Overall, these patterns of associations suggested that the presence of indirect relationships, though partially mediated, could be probed profitably. We indeed tested and found serial mediation paths for the Five Star Movement voters, which involve the sequential association of DWB and RWA on anti-immigration attitudes (Sample A: $\beta = .026$, $SE = .006$, $z = 4.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.015–0.038; Sample B: $\beta = .021$, $SE = 0.005$, $z = 4.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.011–0.030). For Populist Right-Wing voters instead, we tested two serial mediation paths: one involving the sequential association of CJB and SDO and another on the serial association of DWB and RWA. The Populist Right-Wing dummy resulted indirectly related to the adoption of anti-immigration attitudes through the mediators DWB and RWA (Sample A: $\beta = .024$, $SE = 0.006$, $z = 4.41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.014–0.035; Sample B: $\beta = .030$, $SE = 0.006$, $z = 5.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = 0.018–0.041). Similarly, indirect relationships were found from Populist Right-Wing voting through CJB and SDO (Sample A: $\beta = .008$, $SE = 0.003$, $z = 2.33$, $p = .02$, 95% CI = 0.001–0.014; Sample B: $\beta = .007$, $SE = .003$, $z = 2.26$, $p = .02$, 95% CI = 0.001–0.012).

These indirect associations indicated that for voters of the Five Star Movement, anti-immigration attitudes were conveyed by concerns related to the view of the world as a dangerous and threatening place which, in turn, favored the adoption of an

ideological attitude based on traditional norms and conventions. This pattern was likewise relevant for the Populist Right-Wing coalition voters. The overlap of both groups of populist voters was also corroborated by nonsignificant differences about contrasted indirect effects for both groups of voters across the two samples. Moreover, the specific pattern of indirect associations for each distinct group of electors was non-significantly different across Samples A and B.

However, the Five Star Movement and Populist Right-Wing voting showed different relationships with immigration concerns through CJB and SDO: this pathway was significant only for Populist Right-Wing voting (in both samples).

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research investigated whether support for populist parties and movements could be associated with social worldviews and ideological attitudes which, in turn, would have led to negative attitudes toward immigration. Despite the multiplicity of studies on the possible connection between populism and the emergence of anti-immigration attitudes, scant emphasis was paid to the exploration of the psychological mechanisms characterizing populist voters. Most research has focused on the anti-immigration populist narrative (e.g., Ivaldi et al., 2017), while others have investigated the role of the media discourse in conveying populist positions on immigration (e.g., Diehl et al., 2019). However, only few scholars have examined the psychological dispositions which make populist voters sensitive to the immigration issue.

Pursuing this aim, we tested a multigroup path analysis model where the association between support for populist parties and anti-immigration attitudes was mediated by the joint role of DWB and RWA and by the joint role of CJB and SDO. We found that the Five Star Movement support and Populist Right-Wing support were both positively associated with increased DWB levels. These results indicated that both groups of populist voters (compared to non-populist) shared stronger beliefs concerning the world's dangerousness. Populist voters are often represented as the "cultural losers" of modernization processes (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2012). They are framed as people disoriented by changes in values, new waves of migration, and the loss of national sovereignty toward the super-national entities, such as the European Union (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Rapid changes can always be framed as deviance from a hallowed tradition and as a threat to society as we knew it. In particular, changes due to increasing migratory flows could prompt populist voters for motivational goals guided by threat-control reasons. As intergroup situational dynamics are perceived as threatening unwanted change, identity-threat could in turn translate into an ideological stance aimed at reducing the pace of change—thus, the DWB association with RWA. In turn, such an array of threat-control motivation and ideological aversion to change transpired into hostile attitudes toward immigration. Immigrants embody several characteristics that natives may view with discomfort, such as different worldviews, moral standards, and religious beliefs

(Rustenbach, 2010). Immigrants represent a target that, given the cultural distance, can easily be framed as threatening and therefore become objects of hostile attitudes to reject this threat (Salvati et al., 2020).

Both groups of populist voters shared threat-control motives, eventually breeding anti-immigration attitudes. However, the two groups differed as far as the path passing to CJBs and SDO was concerned. Analysis revealed a positive and significant association of CJB only with the Right-Wing Populist voting. Instead, the Five Star Movement vote was unrelated to perception of the social world as a ruthless jungle. The path from voting to anti-immigration attitudes passing through CJB and SDO thus materialized only for right-wing populist supporters. As an alternative to the "cultural losers" perspective, populist voters are referred to further as "economic losers" (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2012)—those for whom the globalization process has meant economic hardship, downward social mobility, and employment uncertainty. This perspective is commonly used to frame leftist variants of populism oriented toward redistribution (Rodrik, 2018, 2018). However, our results underlined other motives deriving from uncertainty about managing resources. Perception of scarcity of resources could activate a competitive and unregulated view of their management that elicits a dominant response aimed at restoring power hierarchies in society, and in turn translates to discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants.

To summarize, besides threat-control motivations, for right-wing populist voters appeared to be also salient concerns related to economic uncertainty proposed by the perspective of "economic losers" (or by those who perceived themselves at risk of becoming so) about the rise of populism. This result may open an interesting starting point and a new perspective from which to look at the outcomes of economic processes of globalization. It might suggest that psychological insecurity deriving from economic uncertainty may give rise to motivation aimed not only at restoring social equity; instead, it may be proposed that this insecurity may also elicit motivational goals aimed at the oppression of others and the corroboration of status quo power hierarchies in the distribution of resources. Deprivations in the economic sphere of individuals' lives may represent a key element in shaping their anti-immigration attitudes (Pellegrini et al., 2021). Consistently, we found that the view of intergroup interactions as competitive and ruthless resonated with a dominance-enhancing response aimed at restoring hierarchies in society by discriminating against perceived competing groups (i.e., immigrants).

5 | APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

In the last few decades, the Italian context was characterized by an extraordinary combination of factors that created a platform for populism to become a central political reality. A concentration of relevant sociopolitical transformations has occurred. For instance, the fading of traditional parties which historically led the country after the World War II because of pervasive corruption, the mass arrival of

refugees in a country previously quite homogeneous both ethnically and culturally, and in some cases, recurrent corruption scandals that plagued the somewhat new political parties that have dominated Italian politics since the middle 1990s (Corbetta et al., 2018). The combination of these factors may have emphasized the deficiencies of the political and institutional systems, which were unable to respond to uncertainties and insecurities deriving from the cultural and economic turmoil of the 21st century.

Consistently, our results highlight that endorsement of populism—and its correlates (e.g., anti-immigration)—find their psychological roots in deep concerns related to the perceived social context. Support for populist parties appeared as a political response aligned to specific ideological preferences due to pervading concerns on the functioning of the polity and of citizens' social world. Populism and anti-immigration attitudes emerged as viable solutions to the uneasiness experienced in front of individuals perceived as threatening in cultural and economic terms.

Thus, from an applied perspective, what populist voters seem to crave fervently are institutional responses to economic and identity issues representing the triggers of their concerns. Our results could provide an indication on how to manage social system in which populism thrives. On the one hand, it would be desirable to implement policies aimed at reducing—or preventing—economic inequalities to tackle the disorientation and anomie associated with them. On the other hand, strategies aimed at alleviating the cultural disorientation resulting from the modernization processes might be implemented. Under this light, the immigration issue would represent an important opportunity for reformed institutions. Virtuous immigration policies may favor an overturning of the perspective capable to assuaging concerns of identity and economic nature. These policies could accentuate the enrichment arising from the contact based on mutual respect and valorization between ethnic groups with different cultural roots. Similarly, the economic positive implications that the presence of immigrant population has for the host country could be emphasized. Thus, placing immigration in a framework of cultural and economic enrichment might represent a first step toward a reconciliation between the “malfunctioning” institutions and the “betrayed” citizens.

6 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present research may provide interesting insights into the widely supported theses for the explanation of right and left-wing variants of populism. One may speculate that our findings corroborate the idea that support for right-wing populist parties is attributable to identity-threat motives in face of cultural disorientation. We might somehow speculate that their success can also be traced back to economic concerns, or at least to the uneasiness deriving from the competitive and unregulated perception of resource management. It appears that the explanation relating to economic losers can be considered as a double-edged

sword. On the one hand, it may give rise to the demand for a fair redistribution of resources. However, and in our research this seems to be the case, it may inspire motivational goals based on the hierarchical redistribution of resources as a function of dominance relationships. Future research might usefully focus its efforts on investigating this second evidence.

Another speculative conclusion could be found in results that emerged about the Five Star Movement voters. Although this movement is described as a hybrid populist movement (Diamanti, 2014b), it has often been associated with issues and themes shared by the classical left-wing ideologies. Voting for the Five Star Movement has been often attributed to the so-called “economic losers.” However, we found an identity-concern associated with an authoritarian ideological attitude characterizing these voters. At the same time, they appeared as not associated with concern about a competitive and unregulated social world and to ideological attitudes aimed to cope with it. Consistent with findings of Corbetta et al. (2018), this could indirectly indicate that voting for the Five Star Movement is not actually the outcome of real or perceived economic deprivation, which is commonly attributed to left-wing variants of populism. Instead, it could align more closely with forms of alienation independent from the strictly economic- and resource-focused sphere. Future research could help to clarify the ambiguous nature of this movement, and of somewhat similar phenomena, such as Spain's Podemos, and Greece's Syriza.

Finally, the present research suggests that populism can pick freely from the rich menu provided by classical ideologies, and specifically draws from values and orientations based on power and hierarchies, on rejection of diversity, and denial of pluralism. Ironically, these tenets are at odds with most democratic values, the very same values that populist voters perceive as fundamental and betrayed by traditional parties. Nevertheless, hierarchy-enhancing and authority-binding values seem to favor endorsement of populist parties.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was not funded by any grant. Open Access Funding provided by Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DISCLOSURE

No competing financial interests exist.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Despite a lack of empirical evidence on linkages between political abstentionism and populism, sharing of political cynicism features could be argued. For this reason, the model was replicated excluding abstainers. Emerged results were analogous to those of the reported model.
- ² Indirect effects are separately reported for Samples A and B, since they are not considered in the model's fit estimation. Equality assumptions between indirect effects were tested by contrasting the related coefficients.

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How to cite this article: Pellegrini, V., Salvati, M., De Cristofaro, V., Giacomantonio, M., & Leone, L. (2022). Psychological bases of anti-immigration attitudes among populist voters. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12871>