THE NATURE OF ITALIAN POPULISM

Amedeo Varriale

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Abstract

The present study primarily focuses on the nature of the relationship between so-called "right-wing" populism and "left-wing" populism in Italy, given the country is the home of two widely discussed and somewhat contested party cases, the League (*Lega*, formerly known as *Lega Nord*) and the 5 Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle*). The two parties have served in government conjunctly for little more than a year between June 2018 and August/September 2019 and their political association became known as the "Yellow-Green Government", "Conte I", or "government of change" in academic, journalistic, and political circles already aware of their anti-establishment credentials. Overall, this contribution exists to disclose the ideological narratives that have mostly brought together (but also eventually separated) two populist parties living through a historic populist moment. In order to accomplish this objective, I have made use of a mixed methodology that binds together an assessment of electoral manifestos and a series of interviews carried out with ten politicians originating from the parties in question. By identifying *six themes* that recur in party literature (e.g. manifestos) and discourse (e.g. interviews) - through the use of Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) - I expose that the League-5SM coalition was able to materialise largely due to an ideological concurrence. In essence, the nature of the relationship between Matteo Salvini's League and the (then Luigi Di Maio's) 5 Star Movement in Italy could be traced back to the populism they equally promoted, which was interwoven with a plethora of common themes: *anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism,* and *direct democracy.* In other words, it appears that the temporary alliance between Italian right-wing populists and left-wing populists was made possible by turning ideology - directly related to those six themes - into policy.

Keywords: Populism, League, 5 Star Movement (5SM), Yellow-Green Government, Right-Wing Populism, Left-Wing Populism, Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

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Introduction: Why study Populism?

"History teaches us that man learns nothing from history"
- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Populism Today

It is undeniable that we are living through what the prominent scholar Chantal Mouffe (2016) calls a "populist moment". Populism is practically everywhere. It is almost as if not even one day can go by without the word being utilised (usually inaccurately – to the point that it may now even be meaningless, as stated by Yasmeen Serhan in *The Atlantic*[1]) in mainstream media, in new texts of academic authorship, and in the world of party politics. It should come as no surprise that the *Cambridge Dictionary* specifically selected *populism* as its "Word of the Year" only a few year ago, in 2017. After all - as the expert Benjamin Moffitt (2020: Chapter 1) reminds readers in his very own introduction to the study of the phenomenon - many of today's most popular (and perhaps most controversial) leaders that engage with anti-establishment appeals are described by pundits of all sorts as being "populist". Apart from the stupefying events of 2016, where two Anglo-Saxon countries with consolidated democracies and traditions of classical liberalism either elected a provocative magnate who promised to wage a war against elites (Donald J. Trump) or decided to suddenly withdraw their membership from a long-establishment political settlement (*Brexit*), populists can be found both in government and in opposition across continents (Rovira Kaltwasser and Hawkins, 2018a; Moffitt, 2020: Chapter 1).

In Europe we find divisive characters like Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Mateusz Morawiecki (Poland), and (perhaps) even Volodymyr Zelensky (Ukraine) in positions of power (for an account on *why* they are populist see Müller and Gazsi, 2022; Adekoya, 2017; Yanchenko and Zulianello, 2023; respectively). Instead, usually in opposition, we have important personalities like Marine Le Pen (France), Matteo Salvini (Italy), Geert Wilders[2] (Netherlands), and Santiago Abascal (Spain) (for an account on *why* they are populist see McDonnell and Werner, 2020; Mudde, 2017b; Rama et al.,2021; respectively). So as not to forget, in recent times there have also been several street-protest movements that emanate a populistic quality without even having a defined leadership hierarchy.

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[1] See Serhan (2020) at the following link: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/what-is-populism/607600/

[2] At the time of writing, this highly controversial (for his anti-Islam positions) Dutch politician is attempting to form a government majority after coming first in the 22 November, 2023 Dutch general elections.

Examples of such would be the *INDIGNADOS* (Spain), the *Gilet Jaunes* (France) and *Occupy Wall Street* (USA). At first glance, these movements appear clearly distinct from the *supposedly* "nationalist", "exclusionist", "xenophobic", "statist", "welfare chauvinist", "traditionalist" and "revisionist" *populist radical right* (see Mudde, 2007: 21) which commentators overfocus on. However, surprisingly they share a lot more with Trump, Le Pen, and the Brexiteers than one would believe. The Manichean ideology and moralist discourse aimed at political and financial elites to accuse them of wrongdoing is generally the same from populist right to populist left. Subsequently (and throughout) this contribution, the ideological similarities between sub-groups of populism will be explored in much greater depth.

Beyond Europe, in South America for instance, the populist uprising was recently led by Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil (see Ricci and Venturelli, 2023), and a progressively decaying *Chavista* legacy is continued by Nicolas Maduro's populist semi-dictatorship in Venezuela (see Oner, 2021). In Asia, it was instead the Filipino strongman Rodrigo Duterte who put himself on the front line to wage a war on drugs, banks, and political opponents in the name of who he considers to be "the good people" (see Heydarian , 2018). The same continent has also witnessed the rise of the ultra-nationalist Narendra Modi – who with the excuse of having a popular mandate tampers with India's checks and balances (see Schroeder, 2020). In other words, as the academic author Matthew Goodwin (2018) expressed unequivocally: "populism is here to stay". Goodwin's principal argument is not only that new populist parties are reshaping democracies "from below" (by giving disgruntled majorities a political voice again) but they are successful because they oppose liberal globalisation, immigration and today's consensus politics offering a fusion of cultural and economic protectionism in a time where political distrust, fear of loss of social and economic status, and volatility are at an all-time high (Goodwin, 2018: 2-3, 7). His conjecture also encapsulates the idea that "each national populist party has its own local particularities but there are common themes" (Goodwin, 2018: 2). Although this is a valid point, when it comes to populist themes, it is still puzzling to discern which ones holistically represent populism.

The Study of Populism since the 1968 Symposium

Populism is certainly on the rise, however it is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it has sporadically been at the centre of attention for intellectuals during the last century. When in 1968 the most prominent intellectuals involved in the studies of comparative politics, sociology, and political

ideologies, gathered at a seminar in the British capital with the intent to *define* populism (as the title of the conference unequivocally suggested) they all somewhat failed (Tarchi, 2019: 5). Either way, the ground-breaking seminal text *Populism : Its Meaning and National Characteristics* edited by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969) was a direct result of that important meeting. Out of the many present, among those were prestigious academics like Donald MacRae (1969), Kenneth Minogue (1969), Peter Wiles (1969), and Angus Stewart (1969), all of which disagreed on whether populism was better understood as an ideology, discursive framework, or a political syndrome. It was actually Sir Isaiah Berlin who correctly pointed out that the study of the phenomenon was suffering from a pressing problem he referred to as the "Cinderella complex" (Tarchi, 2019: 5). Whilst scholars at the London symposium found it relatively easy to ascribe a general set of traits to populism such as racialism, isolationism, to radical agrarianism, majoritarianism and plebisciatarianism, they also found it significantly more difficult to detect the perfect ideological core that fit in all of those "*-isms*" (Tarchi, 2019: 20). It became evident that something was missing. The symposium's theories ranged all the way from MacRae who insisted populism had a primitive rural spirit (that idealised the agrarian pre-industrial communities of the past) to Peter Worsley (1969) who refused to accept populism was an ideology and preferred to focus on its people-centric, anti-institutional aspect relating to its generic politico-cultural dimension (Tarchi, 2019: 19). Notwithstanding, these scholars continued to ponder on the perplexing issue without entirely agreeing on a solution as no single party, movement, or leader, of the past and present could be sincerely qualified as a "full-blown populist" who held all of those attributes simultaneously (Tarchi, 2019: 5). It is precisely for this reason that Berlin thought that the populist traits were like Cinderella's shoe, but it was the correct foot to fit the shoe that could not be found (Tarchi, 2019: 5). The foot, of course, represented the "essence of populism" (or something like the "cosmology of populism" that Loris Zanatta speaks of today) – a *populist party* or *populist movement* that would have a nucleus that would fit in all of those attributes and definitions at once.

Fortunately, today things look much brighter on this front. At least, even if they all theoretically contrast with one another, the three main contemporary approaches (*political*-strategic, *socio-cultural*, *ideational*) are listed in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017). For this contribution, an ideational approach will be embraced, as it is subjectively deemed the most perceptive and practical approach to discern populist qualities and the degree of their relevance in any political subject. Objectively, the ideational approach (initially developed by Cas Mudde) is also considered the most popular and reliable among contemporary scholars of populism. It is for this reason that even scholars who don't always explicitly or consistently refer to their approach as ideational

(sometimes Mudde himself doesn't, see also Müller, 2016) have essentially adopted Mudde's perspective accepting that what makes populism "populist" is "a set of ideas" (Mudde, 2017: 29). Apart from those political scientists who have borrowed the ideational/ideological framework openly and praised it (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; 2015; Hawkins, 2009; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) we also have those who have not called populism an ideology specifically but rather defined it as a "discourse" (e.g. Laclau, 2007; Howarth, 2005, Stavrakakis, 2004) or alternatively a "language" (e.g. Kazin, 1995), a "political frame" (e.g. Lee, 2006), a "political mentality" (Tarchi, 2015), or "political style" (e.g. Moffitt and Tomey, 2014).

Research Question and Hypothesis

Taking all of this into account, the fact that populism is such a recurring phenomenon historically means it should be studied and given regular attention *case-by-case*. In order to not only understand what the implications are for democracies worldwide, but to first of all decipher its principal characteristics as the ideology of our age. This contribution decidedly focuses on the second aspect. In this case, I observe what are typically considered (by scholarship) two "populist" parties from the Italian political sphere: the League (*Lega* in Italian) and the 5 Star Movement (5SM) (*Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italian). Throughout this contribution, I will occasionally refer to the League and its party members/representatives as "*leghisti*" and refer to the 5SM and its party members/representatives as"*grillini*" – given these are the most popular and preferred nicknames not only in Italian popular culture but in the news media and academic circles.

Some of the relevant literature produced on the two Italian parties by scholars such a Marco Tarchi (2015), Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto (2018) and many others, will be partially and sporadically discussed in the following chapters. That being said, the primary research question which I aim to answer throughout is "*What is the nature of the relationship between "right-wing" and "left-wing" populism in Italy that culminated in the governance of the League and 5 Star Movement in 2018?*". There is a secondary objective however that directly relates to the research question above. By relying on a relatively new methodological process where a theoretical framework based on observing populism through the lens of six (ideological) themes is correlated to a qualitative instrument, namely Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), that is adopted to measure and ultimately classify the *degree* of populism of the two Italian parties. Also, by assessing the nature of the relationship that exists between right-wing and left-wing versions of populism with a special focus on League and 5SM, it will be possible to shed some on light on whether populism can be

considered an ideology. The hypothesis is that "right-wing" and "left-wing" populists in Italy *do* share a number of ideological characteristics – and I attempt to show these characteristics or "themes" are overwhelmingly present in their party literature and discourse (e.g. in interviews), possibly resulting in a high degree of populism for both parties in question. The originality of my method resides in the fact that I systematically *identify* six of these core themes (*anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism*, *producerism*, *reformism*, *direct democracy*) in populist party literature and interviews with populist politicians.

Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the project is rather straightforward. After this introduction, I shall open with a chapter named "Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: Populism and its Themes" (Chapter I). As the title suggests, this first chapter aims to be a full account or *résumé* of ground-breaking theories surrounding the academic debate on populism but also outlines a theoretical framework by delving into the six major themes of populism and their relevance in (contemporary) academic literature concerning populism. A new minimal definition is also presented. Whilst the first part of the chapter is nothing less than a literature review where an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of past approaches (by leading academic specialists, e.g. Weyland, Ostiguy, Mudde) is provided, the second part essentially addresses the gap in the literature. The next chapter, which I simply called "Methodology: A Thematic Approach" (Chapter II) is entirely about a providing a methodology to the theoretical framework. There, the use of Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) as a method will be defended on the grounds that it can be combined with a form of subjective quantification that can ultimately produce sufficiently accurate and consistent results that unlike other methodologies won't delimit the understanding of populism to a simplistic and un-sophisticated "in or out" binary (in terms of whether an actor is populist or not). Needless to say, a review of the strengths and challenges of my mixed qualitative-method will also be made available in the chapter. The following Chapter III, "Mapping Italian Populism: Rationale and Generic Overview for Case Selection", begins by explaining why Italy and the two parties were specifically chosen as case studies and subsequently continues by providing a short history and generic overview of League and 5SM which is inextricably linked to the rationale. Essentially, in this chapter I refer to some of the previous work by scholars who have substantially examined League and 5SM party ideology to make the case that more lucid inquiries are needed. This section serves as a bridge between the more theoretical and methodological part of the thesis and the core of the

research where the empirical investigation takes place. In fact, it is in chapters IV and V that the reader will find the core message of this thesis, as this is where a complete TCA of populist manifestos and interviews with populist politicians from League and 5SM occurs. Finally, these chapters are followed by a conclusive section (Chapter VI). In the conclusive chapter, before engaging in thoughtful reflection in relation to future work, the main results are summarised in relation to what can be considered a "definitive" answer to the primary research question pertaining to the nature of the relationship between the two populist parties, and the nature of Italian populism *per se*. A final populist score is given to the League and 5SM parties based on the thematic investigation that occurred relying on party literature and interviews. Overall, by the end of this contribution, the reader should have a much better grasp on populism and its complex nature.

I. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: Populism and its Themes

"In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule"

- Friedrich W. Nietzsche

The Populism Puzzle

To state that populism is a much-contested subject in the social/political sciences at this point would likely be a banal over-simplification (Zanatta, 2016: 9). Albeit, it would not be implausible to say that scholars, journalists, pundits, and political analysts of miscellaneous nature are baffled when defining this phenomenon. Regrettably, this results in the term "populist" being over-used erroneously, especially in media narratives. On one hand, there is no consensus on a *fixed* definition of populism. Not only political scientists, but also economists, historians, and sociologists, are still being haunted by whether to treat populism as a simplistic ideology, a strategy to gain power, or a communicative style linked to a specific "way of doing politics" (adopted by certain rabble-rousing and provocative politicians of the likes of Bolsonaro or Trump) (Kaltwasser et al., 2017: 12-14). On the other hand, a leading expert in the field, Paul Taggart (2018a) seems to be convinced that regarding populism "actually now there is a quite a degree of convergence" (Taggart, 2018a).

In essence, what the British academic is referring to is the fact that what all populist parties (or leaders) have in common is the fact that they are propelled by a Manichean sentiment of protest *against* an establishment composed of political and corporate elites. Supposedly, national elites are conspiring with an internationalist clique to unjustly deprive ordinary citizens ("the people") of appropriate representation (Taggart, 2018a). Today, it would not be realistic to argue that the idea of an existing dichotomy between ordinary people and "extra-ordinary" elites is not at the centre of every populist's rhetoric or worldview. In some manner or another, anti-elitism is very much part of the populist *ethos*.

Beyond Anti-elitism?

As a consequence, anti-elitism - provided an ideational understanding of the phenomenon is embraced - directly relates to the idea of moral purity of "the people" and their "general will" being ignored by those in power (see Mudde, 2017). This is inevitably the first and perhaps most important theme present in populism. However, if we carefully observe populism and its narratives, its ideological apparatus appears to reflect more than just *anti-elitism*, since an antipathy towards

professional politics as a means to settle conflict (*unpolitics*), the commitment to restore a culturally homogenous national community within predefined borders (*sovereignism*), a predisposition towards the ethic of "hard work" and production (*producerism*), a natural inclination towards change and democratic reform rather than revolution (*reform*ism), and a strong desire to put people directly in charge of decision-making processes (*direct democracy*) are also part and parcel of the populist nucleus. In spite of this, even though scholars (as we shall see) have at some point in time (in one way or another) specified that these themes do matter in relation to populism, unfortunately they have always examined them separately and never in conjunction.

Where to begin

Taking everything into consideration, populism is still far too misinterpreted conceptually. Even though over the course of the last decade, especially since Trump's election and the unfolding of *Brexit*, a vast amount of scientific literature has been produced (see Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2018a: 2), few efforts have been made to study rightist and leftist forms of populism concomitantly in order to determine what defining elements they have in common (for exceptions see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012; Moschella and Rhodes, 2020; Tushnet, 2019; Scanni, 2022). Even fewer attempt to argue that the two forms resemble each other more than we would like to believe (for exceptions see Halikiopoulou et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2008). Notwithstanding, before embarking in a reconstruction of the concept through an alternative theoretical approach (which makes the core themes of populism essential for a full comprehension of its ideology and for the development of a new minimal definition) it would be both desirable and functional to target the existing ones beginning with a "tripartite distinction" of approaches.

In the <u>*Oxford Handbook of Populism*</u> (2017), a reasonable differentiation is made between the strategic, socio-cultural and ideational approaches given these approaches clearly do not overlap and put forward completely different hypotheses regarding what populism actually is (Taggart, 2022). The first insists populism is merely a *political strategy* (see Weyland, 2017), the second strictly treats it as a socio-cultural phenomenon which evokes it as a *discursive-performative* act (see Ostiguy, 2017), and the third argues populism should be understood as an ideology or a set of ideas (see Mudde, 2017). Hence, whilst they are all relevant, they need to be looked at independently.

As already stated in the introduction, as in this contribution it is recognised that populism maintains an ideological apparatus the approach adopted conceptually locates itself within the broader sphere

of the ideational one. However, it also presents a distinct analysis of its nature that goes beyond the notion that it is merely a thin-centred ideology and that its central aspects are *only* "the people", "the elite" and the "general will" as recently suggested by Cas Mudde (2017) and a few others (see also Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2018a). Before outlining what populism is or represents *ideologically*, and assess how this piece of work may contribute to further its study (hopefully filling some of the gaps left in this academic puzzle) I present an overview of the main contemporary approaches and critique them. To clarify, prior to comprehending what populism *is* one must first comprehend what it *is not*.

Political Strategy, Discursive-Performative Act, or Ideology?

Political Strategy: Kurt Weyland

In modern times, populism is often described as a "political strategy" (Weyland, 2017: 50). The main proponent of this approach, Kurt Weyland (2017) states that populism is nothing more than "*a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers*" (Weyland, 2017: 50). Moreover, Weyland (2001: 11) also claims that populists are political animals that only use economic and social policy as a means to an end. In essence, their "rational" aim is - above all - that of becoming significantly popular with the masses in order to rule over them. Other authors, from the same school of thought, such as Robert S. Jansen (2011), Robert R. Barr (2009), and Alan Ware (2002), are also convinced that populist leaders are "post-ideological" opportunists that aim to mobilise as many followers as possible in order to obtain, exercise, and sustain power, but it is Weyland who has consolidated the political-strategic approach academically (see Weyland, 2001; 2017).

Hence, from a *political-strategic* perspective, the ideological traits of populist parties and personalities are completely disregarded. Rather, "the outsider" or "maverick" (as Barr labels the populist leader) will use "anti-establishment appeals" and "plebiscitarian linkages" to consolidate themselves (Barr, 2009: 44). Similarly, Jansen (2011: 8-9) proposes that in order to be successful populist agents must carefully balance so-called "populist rhetoric" (which usually comes in antagonistic form) with "popular mobilisation". Historically, archetypical populists like Hugo Chavez (comparably to populists today) have been known to make preposterous (yet popular and appealing) promises with the sole of purpose of getting elected. This can be understood as being part of the populist rhetoric mentioned above. In other words, populists tend to make promises that

they know will be difficult to maintain (see Weyland, 2017: 60; see also Forthomme, 2019; Coronel, 2006). Notwithstanding, it is evident that contrary to ideational and discourse-centred notions the political-strategic approach focuses "*not* on what populists say but on what they actually do" (Weyland, 2017: 50). Furthermore, in open conflict with the other notions it completely dismisses the idea that populism is meant only for episodic protest and everlasting politics of opposition (Weyland, 2017: 50, 56).

While Weyland (2017: 50) takes a very similar stance to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017 : 17) when arguing that personalistic leaders strive to boost their popularity and attract masses by *direct*, *unmediated* and *uninstitutionalised* arrangements, unlike ideational thinkers he is intellectually less empathetic[3] towards populism as a whole. In fact, Weyland seems to be very sceptical about the sincerity of populist actors in developing policy related to welfare, immigration, taxation and so forth, given he views them mostly as "power-seeking actors" (see Weyland, 2017; see also Rueda, 2021: 171). If populists are overall strategy-oriented this means that in a time where citizens are disillusioned with traditional party politics, they could have an advantage over parties that are more rigidly ideological.

This leads us to one of the principal strengths of Weyland's thesis : the "ideological ghetto" (see Weyland, 2017: 63). Although throughout this contribution I will argue that populism has very specific ideological elements, it is also a degree of philosophical flexibility (in its narratives) that makes populism populist. Weyland precisely follows this line of reasoning, already proposed by the scholar Andrea Mammone (2009), that extreme-right and extreme-left parties are "inconsistently populist", as they put ideological purity ahead of vote maximisation. This makes sense if we observe the history of neo-fascist (and neo-Nazi[4]) parties in Western Europe. Unlike populists, they have not been particularly successful and have been constantly rejected as other parties of the centre

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[3] In academia, "methodological empathy" or the "empathetic approach" is a theoretical approach where the nature of statements and ideas (even if subjective) are taken seriously "because they dictate behaviour" (Griffin, 2011). Griffin (2011) justifies his technique by explaining that when investigating an ideology it is best to define and understand it "from within" – like for examples interviewing adherers to those ideologies and worldviews themselves (in his case he spoke to fascists to better comprehend fascism). The objective of such approach is to locate and understand the phenomenon historically. "In short, methodological empathy is only a strategy adopted to enter the affective, subjectvie world-view and value system of the protagonists" (Griffin, 2018) See also : https://niuews.kuleuven.be/en/content/2011/roger_griffin.html. This Griffin-styled approach is largely taken here as Italian populists are interviewed (in order to give League and 5SM a fair hearing) and their views are considered seriously and as defining elements of populism.

[4] I specifically use the word "neo" because contrastingly the 1920s and 1930s "old" fascists pursued coalitions with conservatives and liberals in both Italy and Germany (see Paxton, 2005: 87-110).

(liberals, conservatives, social democrats) have usually formed a *cordon sanitaire* against them – preventing alliances with them even more so than with populists. Unlike these more extremist movements (Jansen also suggests it is futile to conceive populism as a movement or regime-type), political-strategic approach scholars believe populism is best understood as a (non-ideological) political practice that relies on big numbers rather than predefined and absolutist dogmas.

Critique

The main contemporary critique of this enduring approach originates from the scholar Daniel Rueda (2021). Rueda refutes the idea that populism is merely a political strategy or demagogical shortcut to power. In fact, this thinker draws attention to the fact there are three problems that arise from Weyland's theory: respectively, *selective rationalism*, *leader-centrism*, and *normative bias* (Rueda, 2021: 167). First, in criticising Weyland's axioms Rueda stresses that the usage of 1950's *rational choice theory* - defended by political scientists Kenneth J. Arrow (1959), Anthony Downs (1957), Mancur Olson (1965) and others - is applied incorrectly. In summary, it cannot only be populists and no other political actors that behave as "rational beings" that supposedly pick options (in terms of policy-making promises) that best serve their interest in order to maximise (electoral) profit (Rueda, 2021: 169-171). Populists can be pragmatic, successful, and strategically give a voice to people by stressing the most on the importance of issues that have long been forgotten or excluded from the political agenda, but so can those who aren't populist. *Non-populists* like Chirac, Merkel, and Rutte, should be seen as rational actors too since they have enjoyed the popularity of the masses and had the privilege of leading entire nations for years. According to Weyland, populists are "power-seeking actors" but this can't be a key definitional element as it can hardly ever be methodologically proven to be true or false (Rueda, 2021: 171). Essentially, it is an "unfalsifiable hypothesis" (Rueda, 2021: 171). As Rueda correctly points out: "there is a fundamental epistemological issue: how can we know when a politician is a power-seeking actor or someone who wants to gain power in order to implement certain ideology-based policies?" (Rueda, 2021: 171).

Moving on to *leader-centrism* (and the personalistic charisma that Weyland gives so much importance to) it produces false positives (e.g., fascist and communist leaders are usually charismatic too, but Weyland excludes them from his framework *a priori*) (Rueda, 2021: 176, 180). In truth, even if other scholars (see Eatwell, 2002; McDonnell, 2015) have interestingly spoken of "coterie charisma" linking it to fascist politics, charisma is difficult to measure accurately. Not to

mention, not every populist leader is overwhelmingly charismatic (e.g. Alexis Tsipras, Gerard Batten) neither are populist parties necessarily personalist. For instance, the German *AFD*, UK Independence Party (post-Farage) and 5SM are not considered entirely top-down personalist organisations. In other cases, populist parties make use of functional Committees, Federal and local Councils (along with strict *organised* membership policies and procedures) where party policy-makers have a significant amount of autonomy (see Varriale, 2021b; McDonnell and Vampa, 2016: 113-118). Moreover, Weyland's leader-centrism idea does not help explain bottom-up (populist) spontaneous manifestations of the Occupy Wall Street, *Gilets Jaunes*, or *Indignados* type that do not have a real leadership.

Weyland is also accused of *normative bias* given the author wholeheartedly criticises the populists of the left in Latin America but is more lenient ("picking sides", see Rueda, 2021: 180) towards those of the right (e.g., Menem and Fujimori) as he says, "right-wing populism did not ruin democracy" whilst "left-wing populism has a more negative balance sheet" (Weyland, 2017 as cited in Rueda, 2021: 179). By saying this Weyland makes the opposite mistake that a handful of scholars in Europe make when they paint all of right-wing populism under the same brush, dismissing all of it as reactionary, xenophobic and exclusivist. It is never a good idea to overlook individual cases that can be entirely different one from the other. For instance, when it comes to comparing populism internationally clearly the Swiss People's Party is more anti-immigrant than *PODEMOS* in Spain but does not tamper with checks and balances as much as Orbán's *Fidesz*, hence objectively is not a significant threat to democracy. Also, by recognising the existence of "right-wing" and "left-wing" populism it is as if Weyland suddenly contradicts himself and admits that there is an important ideological element to populist parties.

If populism lacks any real ideological components, as most of the political-strategic side seem to be convinced of, why is it that it is occasionally possible to encounter elements belonging to far-right and far-left ideologies? As Andrea Pirro and Paul Taggart (2022) would point out, populists have on more than one occasion flirted with so-called "conspiracy theories". Populists question the medical evidence behind HIV vaccines and the existence of Covid-19, engage with deep-state myths about 9/11 and the most radical populists may repudiate that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust but unlike the extreme-right will hardly ever openly express anti-Semitism or touch upon this subject regularly (see Bergmann, 2018). These conspiracies do not appeal to the mainstream, they are not known to be successful strategies that bring in a large number of votes, if anything it makes populists appear as a less serious option, especially to moderates. So why is it that *some*

populists (even if rarely) still utilise them? A plausible explanation could come from Robert A. Huber and Christian H. Schimpf (2017) who argue that it has everything to do with the thick-centred host ideology, but this is something we shall return to when discussing the ideational approach.

Discursive-Performative Act: Pierre Ostiguy

A very distinct approach from Weyland's is taken instead by the founder of the *socio-cultural* approach Pierre Ostiguy (2017: 78). Ostiguy, who also criticises aspects of the ideational approach, concisely defined populism as "the (antagonistic, mobilizing) flaunting of the low" (Ostiguy, 2017: 73-75). From a socio-cultural perspective (possibly the most sophisticated and underused among the three) populism is essentially a political style applied by certain leaders, parties, and movements (Ostiguy, 2017; Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, 2020). By making the case that populism may well be fitted into an ordinal (rather than nominal) category - located within an *orthogonal* axis to the *left-right* dimension - Ostiguy provides an original interpretation of populism where *high* and *low* replace other divides such as the *authoritarian-libertarian* one (Ostiguy, 2017: 89). In Ostiguy's case, populism is neither an ideology nor entirely a political strategy, but is instead understood to be a "discursive-performative" act (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, 2020; Moffitt, 2020: 21-22, 26).

If we were to follow Ostiguy's suggestion and make use of "high and low" to observe populism on a graph, we would place "high" at the opposite end of "low" on the *y-axis*, so that they would be orthogonal to the right-left dimension on the *x-axis* (Ostiguy, 2017: 74-75). Accordingly, populism is a way of practicing politics performatively and discursively, it is precisely the "flaunting of the low" (Ostiguy, 2017: 73). Unlike anti-populist manifestations, which Ostiguy uncoincidentally locates on the "high", populists distinguish themselves in the political arena through specific *appeals* on the "low". Moreover, both "low" and "high" rely on two sub-dimensions which are - according to Ostiguy - the *socio-cultural and political-cultural* (Ostiguy, 2017: 77). In the former, emphasis is placed on the rhetoric that populists use to persuade their potential supporters that they truly represent "the people" (Ostiguy, 2017: 78). Hence, "manners" (or bad manners), "demeanours", "ways of speaking and dressing", "vocabulary" and "tastes displayed in public" become fundamental (Ostiguy, 2017: 78). In describing the latter, Ostiguy, provides meaning to the substantial distinctions that exist between populist and non-populist/anti-populist actors when it comes to the exertion of political authority and advocated modes of decision-making in the polity (Ostiguy, 2017: 81). Populist "appeals" (Ostiguy unequivocally adopts this term) are purposely

transgressive, *improper, antagonistic* as they are clearly meant to (negatively) shock their rivals on the "high" and (positively) send a message to those voters who identify with populist leaders on the "low" (Ostiguy, 2017: 76). For example, when Trump called the Mexicans illegally crossing the USA border potential "rapists" it was not simply a slip, he did so purposely. It was a studied rhetorical strategy and a perfect example of the *antagonistic* form of discourse that helps create a bond between him and the frustrated crowds of blue-collar Americans who feel immigrants are taking their jobs and wish to vote populist mainly on that basis (see Casares, 2018).

Comparably to the "low", Ostiguy (2017: 79) postulates that the "high" has a socio-cultural component as well. It manifests itself with non-populists presenting themselves to the public as well-behaved, proper, well-mannered, and "rational" suit-and-tie politicians who steadily use a more ethically oriented form of discourse (Ostiguy, 2017: 79). Examples of politicians who share those "high"-end socio-cultural characteristics are Lionel Jospin, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, David Cameron or even François Hollande (Ostiguy, 2017: 79). Others, such as Mario Monti, Mario Draghi and Sergio Mattarella, could be also added to the list in the specifically Italian context. In addition, when Ostiguy makes the case for the political-cultural component (intertwined with forms of political proceduralism and popular mobilisation) of both "high" and "low" populists and non-populists are also poles apart (Ostiguy, 2017: 80).

In fact, when in power, the former and the latter possess the opposite mannerism in terms of decision-making (Ostiguy, 2009: 9-10). On one hand, the impersonal politicians of the "high" prefer to make use of procedural normalcy and legalism, which is largely administrative and perhaps overly bureaucratic (Ostiguy, 2017: 80). On the other hand, populists of the "low" have no problem showing off their strength and authority in a sometimes personalist and hierarchical manner, as it allows them to be perceived as being closer to the people (Ostiguy, 2017: 80). Overall, populists are certainly less inclined to be caught-up in procedural formalities (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 415). They are known to use a firm grip to hold together their parties, have no issue vetoing inadequate parliamentary candidates, expelling ambitious internal competitors[5], calling out traitors, dismantling primaries, signing contracts with/for the people on live television[6], undermining (liberal) independent institutions (see Pappas, 2019: 70) and generally trespassing the formal procedures in place to show that they are in charge. Institutional mediation is essentially secondary

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[5] For the well-documented "Le Pen v. Mégret case, see Whitney, 1998; Webster, 1999; Taggart, 2000: 78, 87)

[6] Berlusconi (not populist, but with a populistic style) has famously signed his "contract with Italians" (note the resemblance with the League's and 5SM's "contract for a government of change" of eighteen years later) on Italian television in May 2001 (during his appearance at the current-affairs programme "*Porta a Porta*").

or unimportant to populists (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 415). As long as they can demonstrate to have *the people* (a reasonable amount of democratic popular support) on their side – their mandate is legitimate, and almost nothing else matters.

Critique

Scholars should appreciate the contributions *socio-cultural* notions have made to the field, but also have a duty to engage in an objective critique of them. Similarly to the previous approach discussed, Ostiguy's approach is not without problems. The main weakness with his approach relates to the applicability of the concept(s) of "high and low", which can be misleading. Although in its own way, the argument of the "low" is well-developed (and intellectually stimulating) given it is true many populists use informal, colloquial, direct, unfiltered, unmediated language and political mannerism to resonate with people (from all backgrounds, not just the poor, see Ostiguy, 2017: 78) disenchanted with the *status-quo*, and reflects the anti-elitist *ethos* of populism, are we sure that all populists can be found on the *low*?

It is potentially easy to place France's (certainly *not* populist) François Hollande on the "*high*-left" and America's Donald J. Trump (certainly populist) on the "*low*-right" (Ostiguy, 2017; 89). Even so, where would one locate someone like Silvio Berlusconi who has often made use of populist rhetoric but isn't exactly one himself (at least not by today's standards) given *il cavaliere* is ardently pro-European Union and defends globalisation wholeheartedly (Cramer, 2017). When in power, Berlusconi spoke of a "liberal revolution"[7] not a populist one (Raniolo, 2016: 61). Also, Ostiguy (2017, 89) himself confesses he wouldn't know whether to place ambiguous politicians like Umberto Bossi further down on the low or further to the right. Whilst it is true that in terms of discursive style and performative (sometimes even theatrical) way politics is conducted some populists like Santiago Abascal, Abdala Bucaram, Beppe Grillo, Ross Perot and Donald J. Trump can be effortlessly located on the "low" of this particular "Ostiguyian" spectrum, the same cannot be said or done for everyone. The ones mentioned above are *decidedly* populist because they score "low" on both sub-dimensions (socio-cultural and politico-cultural) and usually behave boldly, vulgarly, and with an almost folkloristic mannerism, as well as bypassing institutional norms to communicate popular messages to their supporters.

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[7] Even Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015: 17-33), who focused a whole book chapter on his second party - the so-called "People of Freedom" (*PDL* in Italian) - admitted that they had some difficulty in labelling him as a "populist in power" because of the evident liberal tradition that he identified himself with and manifested in party speeches and literature that coherently attacked taxation, the public sector, welfare spending, and limitations on private property

However, other "populists" like the Swiss Christopher Blocher, the Austrian Jorg Haider, the Dutch Pim Fortuyn and the Greek Alexis Tsipras are much harder to locate and legitimise as being part of the "low" (Varriale, 2021a: 63). This is because they either use a more institutional(-*ist*) and formalist style that is not entirely personalist (e.g. Swiss People's Party, US People's Party, Pim Fortuyn's List) or simply due to the fact their discursive patterns tend to be too articulate, elegant and polished to be on the *low*-populism (e.g. Haider and Tsipras) (Mudde, 2017: 40-41; Varriale, 2021a: 63). Both the Dutch and the Austrian populist were careful not to exaggerate with their use of language, even when making controversial statements (Varriale, 2021a: 63). For instance, Haider always appeared neat and tidy (see Varriale, 2021a: 63), he wore Italian well-tailored suits and enjoyed being seen driving expensive and fast cars that ordinary people could not even afford (see Zehndorfer, 2016). In essence, he didn't excessively "flaunt the low" (Varriale, 2021a: 63). Fortuyn, the Dutch academic and businessman who liked to occasionally shock the public with phrases such as "I do not hate Arab men – I even sleep with them" was still overall a well-spoken, stylish, middle-upper class eccentric (Moffitt, 2020; Kolbert, 2002). The Dutch populist gave great importance to aesthetics and openly self-identified as a homosexual – which could put him at odds with *white*, *straight*, *working class* majorities. Therefore, overall this approach may lead to generalisations or false equivalences.

Ideology: Cas Mudde

Apart from a political-strategy and a discursive-performative act, populism has also been described as an "ideology" (Mudde, 2017). Cas Mudde, who promotes the ideational approach (which so far is the one that is "winning"[8]) is probably today the most credible scholar to assess the nature of populism. The ideational approach is undoubtedly the newest, most popular, straightforward and useful analytical tool for any in-depth quantitative and qualitative (as well as supply-side and demand-side) study of populism (Tarchi, 2019: 22). Its pioneers, primarily Mudde (2017) but to some degree - also the Latin American scholar Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017; 2018a) and Kirk A. Hawkins (2018a) - have made significant contributions to the field by providing a definitional basis that has served the purpose of being a referential point for many scholars.

In the Oxford Handbook and elsewhere, Mudde defines populism as "*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people'*

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[8] See Taggart (2018) at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqgTwT2NCsQ

and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004: 543; *Ibid*, 2017: 29; 2018). In fact, by presenting populism as a not only *thin-centred* but also Manichean and monist ideology, one that makes an ideology out of anti-elitism, Mudde has created a binary that perhaps oversimplifies the phenomenon but at the same time makes it easier for scholarship to choose the appropriate party actors to put under scrutiny.

In essence, in order for populism to be understood as "a set of ideas" Mudde has put forward a sharp definition that exposes the primary elements at work; *ideology*, *the people*, *the elite*, *general will* (Mudde, 2017: 29). Starting with ideology, Mudde explains that his decision to use this "strong word that evokes emotional responses" (as put by Michael Freeden in 2003) is due to the fact that he adopts Diane Sainsbury's inclusivist and positivist view on ideologies. Sainsbury's (1980: 8) postulation that ideologies are "a body of normative and normative-related ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society" is certainly not the only definition available, however, it can be used to efficiently legitimise and untangle Mudde's own view on the nature of populism.

Even though, as established earlier, several other specialists have rejected the idea that populism is an ideology (Ostiguy, 2017, Weyland, 2017; see also Roberts, 2006; Tarchi, 2015a; Eklundh and Knott, 2020) Mudde defends his view by arguing that populism is not what Freeden (1998; 2003) would label as a "thick-ideology" or "macro-ideology". Accordingly, it is instead a "thin-centred ideology" (much like environmentalism and feminism) that needs a *host* for it to function (Mudde, 2017: 30). Essentially, the suggestion is that being somewhat "thin", more versatile and less complex, populism attaches itself to other "thick" 19th and 20th century ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, conservatism and fascism (Mudde, 2017: 30). To some extent, this makes sense for those who are convinced that populism holds somewhat of a dimmer view on how to delineate (in both the present and the future) the political and social world for its adherents. In the past, relatively successful parties like the late[9] *Front National* (a very French political creature founded by the charismatic *Vichy* nostalgic Jean-Marie Le Pen) have built electoral vehicles mixing populism with nationalism (or actual fascism, some would argue), whilst other less successful ones like *Die Linke* ("The Left") in Germany have intertwined an egalitarianist populism with socialism

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[9] Jean Marie Le Pen's early *Front National* (1970s and 1980s) was a considerably more extremist party that "put ideological radicalism ahead of popularity and mass appeal" (Weyland, 2017: 67). The esoteric and racialist agenda (inspired by the extreme-right *Ordreau Noveau*), the xenophobia, the palingenetic ultra-nationalism, and elitism of the early days made it a neo-fascist party and not a populist one (see also Genga, 2017).

(Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 54). Not to mention, in the homeland of Jacksonian and Madisonian populism, America, the Tea Party has partially integrated populist ideology with a social conservatism and economic liberalism/libertarianism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 12, 14).

It is difficult to deny that *people*, *elites* and the *general will*, are (in some way or another) important elements to the worldview constructed *ad hoc* by the many anti-establishment figures in politics. The veneration of the "common man" who is *authentic*, *moral*, *pure*, *virtuous*, *laborious* and furthermore relies on his great "common sense", is typically populist (Tarchi, 2019: 26). Populists actually praise common-sense as being an added value of the people (Salvini once called his rise to power the "revolution of common sense"[10]), as this perfectly functional to populists ambitions of power, and to their implementation of the "general will". Alternative, but also parallel, arguments state that "the people" is an "empty signifier" (as the late Ernesto Laclau stresses) and is to be filled by politicians to obtain mass support (Laclau, 2007). This can be done rather easily by populists from left and right when they make their claims in favour of an unconflicted, unified and monolithic (and potentially "imaginary", see Taggart, 2000: 95) community by defending "the united people", "common people", "ethnic people", "sovereign people", or "people of the nation" (Canovan, 1993; Mény and Surel, 2002). For instance, national-populists (sometimes referred to as "ethno-populists", see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: Chapter 4) such as the Bolivian Evo Morales and the "anti-Italian", Padanian, successionist Umberto Bossi discriminated against those who do not belong within the people's community on moral grounds *primarily*, and on ethnic, cultural (and occasionally religious) grounds *secondarily* (Tarchi, 2002: 126-130; Ramirez, 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Above all, Mudde wants his readers to understand that for populists *the people* are the last bearers of morality and believe that their struggle is against a shady and corrupt elite that is purposely destroying their nation and excluding them from the democratic process, therefore preventing the people from applying their "general will" (or *volonté générale*) (Mudde, 2017: 33-34). The general will being those supposed "common sense solutions" (Mudde, 2017: 33) or policies such as preventing immigration from "alien" communities, implementing important political decisions by plebiscites and referendums, reducing taxes for medium-small business, defending the idea of the nuclear family, defending local traditions and cultural practices, whilst at the same time promoting individual (economic but not *just* economic) freedom. Mudde's argument that a significant part of

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[10] See Salvini, Twitter, 27 September 2018.

the ideology functions around *the people vs the elite* binary and Manichean anti-elitist sentiment - regardless of whether it originates from right or left - certainly stands. Furthermore, the ideational approach has the strength of permitting us to appropriately distinguish between populist and non-populist actors worldwide (Mudde, 2017: 34-36).

In order to provide clear and complete picture, Mudde also postulates that only two philosophies are completely at odds with populist ideology – *elitism* and *pluralism* (Mudde, 2017: 34). For apparent reasons, an understanding of the state where people (considered to be no more than vulgar *plebs*) have a minimal role and are regarded as irrational beings driven by their lowest instincts and who are not capable of ruling themselves, is incompatible with populism. A populist society, at times promoted by radical intellectuals like Carl Schmitt (see Mercuri, 2021), is inherently a very different concept to the idea of the *polis* held by elitists such as Plato, Schumpeter, Ortega y Gasset, and envisioned recurringly throughout history (Mudde, 2017: 34). This even explains populism's critique of technocracy given technocrats are also driven by a sentiment of elitism when they expect society to be governed by a clique of technicians and experts from the scientific world (Rummens, 2017: 566-568). Similarly, populism is also not compatible with the pluralism and the liberalism of those "fathers of democracy" like Montesquieu who advocated for separation of powers, constitutionalism, and individualism.

It is not just *distinguishability* (that Mudde justifiably claims for himself) but also the *categorizability* (providing us with a lucid definition and taxonomy of the ideology, *travelability* (rendering the use of the approach applicable to different global regions) and *versatility* (producing a solid theoretical framework to study both populist parties/leaders and their electorates) that have made the ideational approach so reliable (Mudde, 2017: 34-41). It cannot be stressed enough how helpful the ideational approach has been in providing a generic comprehension of populistic and nationalistic parties with a majoritarian vocation in Western European countries like Britain, France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere. A fair use (of certain aspects) of this approach will certainly be made relevant throughout the body of this research, where among other things, I shall give specific examples that relate to the League's and 5SM's ideology and (ideological) positions on institutional constraints, immigration, individual rights, political representation, and so forth.

Critique

As already established, Mudde's approach is particularly influential. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore that it does still hold some minor limitations. First and foremost, the approach suffers the setback of sometimes producing "false positives" as Weyland (2017: 53) points out. Simply put, the method used to measure populism ideationally (both qualitatively by Mudde or quantitatively by Hawkins) does not always help in "delimiting populism's extension" (Weyland, 2017: 53). The excessive breadth of the ideational thesis may be problematic as anyone who uses the "us vs them" or criticises elites (something any classic civics textbook would actually recommend) risks being automatically labelled as a "populist" (Müller, 2017). In this case, Müller's theory that it is not merely criticising elites that makes one populist but also claiming to be the *only* defenders of democracy and representatives of the people, may help clarify the concept (Müller, 2017). After all, many diverse political actors engage with populistic *us vs them* rhetoric and criticise the establishment for strategic purposes.

Extreme-right and extreme-left parties ranging from Golden Dawn to the Spanish Communist Worker's Party borrow from the populist playbook, but that doesn't make them populists. Even centrists like Tony Blair (for an account that links him to populism, see Mair, 2002) have adopted the *us vs them* Manichean binary (where the "us" reflected the British *united people* in a more pluralist sense) to rhetorically attack opponents (e.g. "reactionary" conservatives, "old labour", liberal democrats) and dismiss them as "out of touch" with the people (Blair, 1999 as cited in Mair, 2002). Politicians like George W. Bush (see Hawkins, 2010: 81-82), Richard Nixon (see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 24), Silvio Berlusconi, Mark Rutte (see Mudde, 2019) and perhaps even Vladimir Zhirinovsky or the Hungarians from *Jobbik* (see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 68) could be *mistaken* for populists under the ideational lens (Seferiades, 2020: 241). However, they are either mainstream actors committed to cultural and economic globalisation (as in the first four cases mentioned) or full-scale anti-pluralist authoritarians (as in the last two cases mentioned).

If we take Bush for example, he did occasionally articulate himself as a populist, but he also lost the popular vote (considering the American electoral college), and his support for unfettered free trade, individualism, and American exceptionalism, certainly put him at odds with classical populism. Instead, considering *Jobbik*, this party has been navigating neo-fascist tropes since its inception (mainly antisemitism), it clearly goes beyond populism and is more extreme. By relying on a "degreeist" methodology (but *not* only *fuzzy sets*, or *holistic grading* applied by Hawkins, 2009) when dealing with populism, one can overcome the populist/not populist fixed binary to better comprehend and evaluate the so-called "mixed-types" (term borrowed by Weyland 2017: 65) that

political science struggles with (e.g. Haider, Mélenchon, Iglesias). This would prevent overgeneralisations, where all of a sudden it appears everyone's a populist, thus rendering the term "meaningless" – as Yasmeen Serhan (2020) warns. Taking all of this into account, I shall return to the concept of *degreeism* much later.

Second, Mudde's idea that in populist ideology the people are considered "pure" (see Mudde, 2017: 29-30) may lead scholars into misinterpretation, as it is very difficult to attribute this feature to movements that are not semi-nationalist populists of the right (or simply the extreme-right) (Ostiguy, 2017: 91). Actually, leaders like Hugo Chavez and Abdala Bucaram, who were always more on the populist left than the right, considered the "simple people" (e.g. "the plebs", see Ostiguy, 2017: 91; see also Ingram, 2017: 653) to be essential to their national projects merely on the grounds that they represented the *majority* of the populace. These majorities were not expected to be necessarily "pure" (neither in racial nor moral terms), industrious or particularly virtuous, but quite the opposite (Ostiguy, 2017: 91). As Ostiguy (2017: 91) points out: "the world of plebs, the *chusma*, the rabble, in Latin America is the world of petty thieves, of street smarts, *lazzaroni*, *patoteros*, *arrabeleros*". Instead, it is more logical to speak of popular "purity" in the populist imaginary when only focusing on the populist right – it may be functional when discussing Le Pen, Orbán, or Modi.

Finally, in the ideational text *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 5-6) insist on presenting populism as a thin-centred ideology. Comparably, Margaret Canovan (2005) hints that populist majorities are ideally expected to be a homogenous group that can be both *ethnos* and *demos*, depending on the host ideology it attaches itself to. For instance, if it is populism mixed with nationalism it will likely be more *ethnos* than *demos*, and *vice versa* if it is a populism with socialism. But what if populism isn't actually that "thin" of an ideology? What if populism is itself the *host* that effectively has established itself as the dominant ideology. In parties like the Sweden Democrats, or *PODEMOS*, respectively conservatism and socialism have evidently become secondary features compared to populism (see Schroeder, 2020: 19; Cevera-Marzal, 2023). In reality, there are credible scholars who have explored such a possibility.

For example, according to Marco Tarchi (2002), the old Northern League drafted "a program where liberalism and populism were mixed, but where the second element in the formula was always predominant" (Tarchi, 2002: 129). This means that accordingly these parties could be above all populist before anything else. If so, the *host* ideology (that Mudde speaks of) is like a body that is

infected by a parasite or virus[11] that spreads to the point of becoming a prevalent feature within, that then defines the functioning of the whole structure itself. Essentially, populism "the guest" takes over as "the host". Apart from Tarchi, more recently, the first major scholar to more explicitly push forward the idea that populism may actually be a full-fledged ("thick") ideology with its own distinct agenda that incorporates an exclusionist welfare chauvinism, and an economic nationalism embracing an isolationist and protectionist "my nation first" foreign policy and trade policy, is Ralph Schroeder (2020: 23). Until now, even if Schroeder confirms populism is an ideology, this is the author that has provided the most lucid critique of the thin-centred notion of Mudde's approach. I shall return to discuss specific aspects of Schroeder's work in the second part of the following section, as it is intellectually indirectly interlaced to my main argument, that populism is an ideology with core concepts and a relatively defined agenda.

Reconstructing a Concept: An Alternative Ideational Approach

A Populist Weltanschauung?

A recent book written by the political scientist Gianluca Passarelli and sociologist Dario Tuorto encapsulates the following relevant message:

"*Beyond empirical evidence and objective data, it shouldn't be forgotten, however, that an important part of political competition and of opportunity for success is today played on the ability of parties to build on a cultural hegemony, to provide a shared reassuring vision (a Weltanschauung) of the present, such as to intercept (if not direct) widespread perceptions on the economy, on quality of life, on sense of security and insecurity*" (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 22).

In summary, what Passarelli and Tuorto (2018) are suggesting is that in order to succeed in the political arena parties must have a clearly defined political identity (and/or "cultural hegemony") that provides a vision to its potential supporters. One of my principal arguments will be that both League and 5SM have managed to do so to a reasonable extent. As I will attempt to show subsequently, the prevalence of populist themes in their policy-making and discursive narratives indicates that they are full-blown populist parties that navigate the political world presenting themselves as such. In March 2018, 32.7 percent (10.697.994 votes, source: *Ministero dell'Interno*, 2018) of Italians eligible to vote identified the 5SM as the newcomer party that would not only bring a degree of systemic change but also provide answers to the pressing questions pertaining to the country's politics. Similarly, a lesser yet still relevant amount of voters (17 percent, 5.691.921 votes, source: *Ministero dell'Interno*, 2018) recognised in the League the ability to stress the

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[11] I am by no means suggesting that populism is negative *per se* but merely making an anaology and speculation.

failures of past (left-wing and technocratic) governments that ran the country's institutions and mishandled major issues such as immigration, the state's welfare budget, and Italy's relationship with the European Commission. In one way or another, by 2018, the League was also - like the 5SM - perceived as a party that criticised the establishment and called for democratic reform (Revelli and Telese, 2019).

It is self-evident that in order to comprehend populist ideology one must study populist parties. By now, it is clear to the reader that *this* is a study of two of the most popular (and arguably most successful[12]) populist parties in Europe. Their populism is not primarily defined by their *style[13]*, organisational[14] features, and electorate[15], but by their overall ideology (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; 2018a; 2018b). In fact, from a generic ideational perspective, which is preferable (as it is able to provide empirical measures), ideology is the predominant element to be observed when dealing with populist phenomena (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018a: 513). That is to say, considered in this context "the substance and prevalence of a party's ideology are of primary interest to the investigator" (Lawson, 1976: 15). Upon closer examination, League and 5SM both wholeheartedly embrace a "set of ideas" (ideology), and their politics is tied to a specific (and holistic) *weltanschauung* or worldview – for want of a better term (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 147). This particular worldview, *populism*, is discernible in the policies present in their manifestos, and in discursive patterns present in interviews with their party representatives.

After all, this is not the first time that these two Italian parties are assessed ideologically (see Woods, 2010; Tarchi, 2015; Bartoli, 2016). However, it is the first time they are observed simultaneously where direct empirical evidence is assembled from both external-oriented[16] party literature and interviews in order to draw a link between right-wing and left-wing populism, and argue that both share a common nature that is grounded in six (typically populist) core themes. Other scholars who have observed the League and 5SM conjunctly and concomitantly, have either developed succinct

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[12] League and 5SM are considered successfull given they are among the few populist parties to have ever been directly in power (without having to rely on "mainstream" parties as coalition partners) when it comes to contemporary Europe.

[13] Benjamin Moffitt (2016) theorises that populism cannot be understood as a single entity, but it is rather a political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted across diverse political and cultural contexts.

[14] When looking at protest parties in Sweden ("New Politics" and "New Populists") in a comparative perspective Taggart (1996: 29, 40) considers their *electorate* as a distinctive and definitional feature (equally important) alongside their ideology and organisation.

[15] When looking at protest parties in Sweden ("New Politics" and "New Populists") in a comparative perspective Taggart (1996: 29, 40) considers their ideology as a distinctive and definitional feature alongside their organisation and electorate.

[16] External-oriented party literature is more formal party literature aimed at those external to the organisation, such as the general public and potential voters (Mudde, 2000).

forms of analysis (see Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 151-157; Moschella and Rhodes, 2020; Chiarini, 2020) or have used completely different frameworks and methods (see Scanni, 2022).

The motivation behind a focus on core themes (or "core concepts"), originates from a morphological approach to the study of political ideologies (see Freeden, 1996: 77-82). Following Michael Freeden's (1996) lead, this contribution appreciates that "the general morphological structure consists of three types of concepts – *core*, adjacent, and peripheral. Only *core* concepts are "the enduring and indispensable ones; they are the concepts that provide an ideology with its essential identity, with the views that separate it from other perspectives" (Franks et al., 2018: 1). It is for this reason that I will be primarily investigating the League's and 5SM's core (not adjacent and peripheral) concepts to determine their populism. Overall, this is the most logical *modus operandi* when it comes to the study of ideology concerning political parties. To give an example, while defending his choice to study the 5SM's ideology, Riccardo Bartoli (2016: 25) argued that "identifying some of the core concepts that constitute the essential toolkit for understanding what the movement stands for and what it fights against". The same reasoning can be applied for the League, and this is precisely the task that will be pursued throughout.

Taking all of this into account, there are two main reasons why I describe the ideational approach embraced throughout this contribution as "alternative" to the original ideational approach. First, as hinted earlier, I am *at best* considerably sceptical about deeming populism a thin-centred ideology – as (essentially all) ideational scholars postulate (see Mudde, 2004; Fieschi, 2004; 2017; Stanley, 2008; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018a). At worse, I completely reject this proposition, as my entire theoretical framework will clearly demonstrate. To clarify, it is difficult for a thin-centred ideology to have so many core elements (six in total), even *if* they were all to stem from anti-elitism or anti-pluralism (as some[17] would argue).

Notwithstanding populism (unlike liberalism, communism, and fascism) does not possess key influential texts produced to guide its masses (although past written material by the thinker Alexander Herzen may be reconsidered) it may still be characterised as a thick ideology. It is above all the all-embracing set of ideas or beliefs that shape the foundation of an ideology, and these can be transmitted through various means beyond written texts. In fact, ideologies "no longer have defining texts" as Freeden (2017: 9) points out. Two important contemporary "textless" ideologies, feminism and ecologism, serve as examples (Freeden, 2017: 9). Hence, in the approach I observe, populism is no longer treated as a thin-centred ideology but as a "thick" (or full-fledged) one,

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[17] See Müller (2015); Boland, (2020); Galston (2020)

similarly[18] to other 20th and 19th century ideologies. As previously established, the conceptual framework adopted revolves around the "unpacking" of six core themes that are central to the politics of the two major populist parties in Italy – the League and the 5 Star Movement.

Originally, what inspired this partially "new" outlook is the proposition set forth by the sociologist Ralph Schroeder (2020) who explicitly dismisses the idea populism is a thin-centred ideology. Therefore, to some extent, this piece of work can be viewed in light of a continuation of his observations, but with an emphasis on two "new" cases from the Italian context to broaden the scope and empirical basis of his inquiry. In one of his more cautious and less critical statements Schroeder (2020: 13) shrewdly observes: "…it is at best an open question whether populism meets the criteria of a thick ideology, which should be whether it offers a comprehensive program of political change and whether it has staying power". When considering the criteria laid out by this sociologist today, especially after the events that took place at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, there is a lot less doubt on the second question, populism *does* indeed have "staying power" (Goodwin, 2017; 2018; Gultasli, 2021). In many countries in Europe, populists are either in power, or are (as outlined in the introduction) runners-up in the polls. However, for many scholars it is still the very first aspect - whether populism is or is not thin-centred - that is more complex, less clear-cut, and worth probing.

As I mentioned earlier, Schroeder supplied important evidence to endorse the view that the ideology of contemporary parties normally described as anti-establishment in North America, Sweden and India are quintessentially *populist* above all, meaning populism is ultimately an ideology within its own right (Schroeder, 2020: 13,28). Essentially, an ideology oscillating continuously between the right and left but ultimately aligning with neither completely. This means other ideologies (the host-ideologies other ideational scholars give greater importance to) manifesting alongside populism only play a minor role in their agendas. In fact, Shroeder argues that Trump's anti-war and isolationist foreign policy along with his protectionism in domestic policy, was nothing like that of the neo-conservative Republican party that came before him (Schroeder, 2020: 19-22). Accordingly, what drove his policy decisions was populism and *not* right-wing conservatism (Schroeder, 2020: 20).

Similarly, the populists often labelled as "radical-right" in India or Sweden, Modi's *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats) respectively, have expanded

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[18] Finchelstein (2019: 150) draws a direct and stark analogy between populism and other (20th and 19th century) ideologies. The historian argues populism *as an ideology* "amplifies short-term political participation, while at the same time minimizing it in the long run".

welfare and supported further state spending for infrastructure development and transport (Schroeder, 2020: 20-21). In Schroeder's opinion, as their politics have some left-wing components, they cannot be comfortably located on the Right of the spectrum (Schroeder, 2020: 20). I could not agree more with this view. Even if it is still not clear whether right-wing and left-wing variants of populism will *entirely* converge (although in Italy between 2018-2019 they certainly have to a great degree) as Schroeder posits populism "is an ideological alternative and not ephemeral" (Schroeder, 2020: 28). Unfortunately, both League and 5SM have not been exhaustively scrutinised under this lens before, hence are optimal cases to be newly placed under scrutiny (I will expand on this point in the "Rationale for Case Selection" chapter) to argue the case that populism is not as "thin" as it is portrayed to be.

The second reason I refer to my approach as approximately alternative to Mudde's (2004; 2017), Hawkins' and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2018a), is that I significantly redirect the study of populist ideology from their (definitional) core features. On one hand, the scholars who (usually alongside Mudde) developed the original ideational approach are correct in stating that many past "exclusionary" theories on *why* populism emerged (e.g. mass-society reaction to industrialisation/post-industrialisation, authoritarian anti-secular and anti-progressive backlash) and *what it is/represents* (e.g. import-substituting industrialisation, set of economic policies) are not wholly accurate (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019: 12-15). Recent research advancements have cast some doubts upon established theories, prompting a re-evaluation of their validity.

For example, a notable liberal scholar, Eric Kauffmann (in his major work *Whiteshift*) has empirically demonstrated (with opt-in surveys on *MTurk*) that the successes achieved by North American and European populists has resulted from this substantial fear of demographic change that Western societies are gradually witnessing (Kauffmann, 2019: 2-6). Kauffman argues that by 2050 the "white man" will hold minority status (in large metropolitan centres) in North America and New Zealand and Western Europe and Australia will follow suit subsequently (Ibid: 2). Therefore, "demography and culture, not economic and political developments, hold the key to understanding the populist moment" the author argues (Ibid: 7). This is still debatable. Notwithstanding, it is also certainly reasonable to concur with Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Hawkins (and hence disagree with past theorists Di Tella, 1965; Germani, 1978; Dornbusch and Edwards; 1991) that "populist *ideas* are the feature of these parties and movements" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018a: 2). In other words, that populism is defined by its ideology.

On the other hand, their position that *anti-elitism*, *people-centrism* and the *general will* are the only relevant core concepts in populist ideology is somewhat imperfect or incomplete. These concepts

may very well contribute to a generic conceptualisation of populism, but they are too easily blurred with one another. For instance, is there any real distinction between anti-elitism and people-centrism? A populist *weltanschauung* has many more elements (this will become evident from the remaining literature review below) that they simply ignore and fail to incorporate in their framework. In summary, it is difficult to disagree with the ideational scholars that "putting ideas at the centre of the definition is a crucial step towards understanding populism's causes" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018a: 2). *Which ideas however?* Could it be that (asides from anti-elitism) other important concepts like unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy, often cited in the relevant scientific literature, are inexplicably excluded from definitions of populism. Before it is too late, now these other concepts of populism (which in reality are the *main* ones) need to be attended.

A Working Definition: Ideology and Six Themes

It is about time to provide a definition of populism that present and future scholars can work with efficiently. I shall make use of this section to ordinally untangle the new definition and explicate the reasoning behind the choice of wording, and this will hopefully also result in making the broader picture of my work much clearer. For obvious reasons, the core themes of populism tied to the definition I supply, will be linked to the existing academic literature on populism, in order to show that they are all relevant in pursuit of the authentic nature of populism. The idea of having a minimal "working definition" preceding empirical observations is not new to political science (see for example Mudde, 2007; see also Griffin, 2018).

Moreover, the reason I still refer to my definition below as *minimal* (rather than *maximal*) is that even if it provides a substantial, comprehensive and rather inclusive description of the core concepts (essential attributes necessary for identification) of the ideology at the same time I purposely refrain from comprising other adjacent and peripheral concepts that may or may not be more loosely associated to populism. In past publications, taking a much more generic approach, I have defined populism differently (see Varriale, 2021a). However, I have remained convinced that as a concept populist itself rests principally on the following elements: *Ideology*, *Anti-Elitism*, *Unpolitics*, *Sovereignism*, *Producerism*, *Reformism* and *Direct Democracy*.

Therefore, I propose that *populism* should be defined as:

An anti-elitist ideology that also encompasses unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy.

Ideology

Populism is an ideology. By *ideology*, one should refer to the concept rationale implemented by either Michael Freeden (2003; 2006), Clifford Geerts (1994) or Diane Sainsbury (1980). Beginning with Freeden, the emeritus professor describes ideologies as something that "map the political and social world for us" but also as a "*Weltanschauung* or set of social practices" (Freeden, 2003: 2,4). He also stipulates that an ideology is a "wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes decontested meanings to a range of mutually defining political concepts" (Freeden, 2003: 32). Freeden's definitions are certainly useful, however Geertz's ones are more complete as it offers some real insight on how and in what circumstances populism is able to develop as an ideology. This anthropologist expects ideology to be viewed as "a form of cognitive mapping which emerges into being at the point where traditional or taken-for-granted values and motives break down or come under challenge" (Geertz, 1994). To a considerable extent, Geertz's view is compatible with that of scholars who have argued that the first wave of new populist parties in the late 80s and early 90s had much to do with the decline of the post-war settlement (see Taggart, 1996: 13-45). To some degree, the most recent wave of populism (post-recession and post-refugee crisis) in Europe has emerged as a response to a crisis of political representation in a liberal-democratic setting (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Sciortino, 2019).

Uncoincidentally, Mudde (2021: 577) has also called populism an "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism". Thus, at least abiding by Geertz's standards, populism is assuredly an ideology. In fact, when Mudde (2017: 30) postulates that populism "offers few specific views on political institutional or socio-economic issues" his argument is not particularly convincing. This is because there clearly is an institutionalised form of populism (populist parties that have been in power like the 5SM, the FPÖ, and ANEL-Independent Greeks serve as primary examples) that has brought into parliament those individuals they consider as part of the "virtuous people" (e.g. builders, skilled labourers, young women, entrepreneurs without university degrees) and have acted accordingly to their anti-elitist ideology (Varriale, 2021b). In some countries, this has meant cutting the expenses of accordingly "corrupt" parliaments, using plebiscites to build on consensus, and in some cases passing laws that make social and economic life (purposely) more difficult for foreigners (for an account of populist regimes in South America, see Finchelstein, 2019).

Even if they cannot or will not deal with wider issues related to the financialisaton of society ("profit-based economy"), or pursue vehemently anti-capitalist agendas and make drastic changes to

the modes of production (see Seferiades, 2020: 252) this does not make them less serious or necessarily less ideological contestants. For example, populists in power are known to forcefully expand welfare programs (and this stems from ideological elements such as anti-elitism and reformism) much to the displeasure of pro-market centre-right and centre-left opponents (or allies in some cases, for the Austrian and Italian case, see d'Albergo and Moini, 2019: 49). This is usually only done with the purpose of pleasing native working class and middle class majorities, not immigrants or foreigners. Benjamin Moffitt (2020) has found that when in government, populists not just of the left but also of the right, have an impact by promoting diverse policies of general economic redistribution (Moffitt, 2020). There may very well exist an economy of populism, which means that populist parties feel strongly about certain socio-economic issues more than others, not just promoting chauvinistic welfarism for native citizens but also supporting minimal taxation for "those who produce" (another core theme of populism, *producerism*, will be discussed shortly). Hence, Mudde's view that populism offers limited (ideological) answers to the economy and how institutions should function, is - to say the least - highly contestable.

It is very much desirable to observe populism through an ideological lens. Following an inclusivist lead, Sainsbury (1980: 8) explains that ideology "is a body of normative and normative-related ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purpose of society". Therefore, from this perspective, it is almost impossible to not consider populism a full-fledged ideology, given populism is well-suited as a normative body that maps the social and political world by making the case for a vertical re-shuffle, through *inverse inegalitarianism*[19], of structures and hierarchies of power. It is true that not all populism is articulated (ideationally) in a sophisticated manner by its proponents, nor do all populists have the same discal answers to a country's problems, but today *all* populists request that common people have greater access to democratic institutions and involvement in their decision-making processes. It is also true that it is not always clear who these "common people" are exactly, because populists so flexibly work around this terminology (for the "empty-signifier" outlook, see Laclau, 2007) and even attempt to expand their electorates. However, at the same time, their idea to take power away from certain inter-governmental and extra-governmental independent bodies (while strengthening the executive branch) is at the heart of their agenda and is inspired by a majoritarian creed of national-popular renewal.

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[19] It is unclear who originally came up with this term in academia, but its meaning is instead quite certain. *Inverse Inegalitarianism* is in a way very populist because in contrast to regular inegalitarianism (which is essentially the elitism enforced by thinkers like Robert Michels, José Ortega y Gasset, Joseph Alois Schumpeter) populists also promote inequality and conflict between groups (the elites and the popular classes/the people) but their inegalitarianism is inversed or reversed to suit "the people". Popular majorities at the top of the hierarchy in society and elite minorities at the bottom.

Polymorphous Populism

Populism is an ideology, and one with a polymorphous character for that matter. Others before have made similar claims, arguing that populism is in fact "chameleonic" (Taggart, 2000, Wilkoń, 2016) or "versatile" (Gutierrez, 2020; Serhan, 2020). Being polymorphous, populism occurs in different forms, and this often confuses scholars. In the study of biology, plants, or animals having alternative phonotypes in the same population of species are considered polymorphous. This is only the case where there are two or more different forms or morphs (see Ford, 1965). Interestingly, even if we are discussing an abstract idea entirely unrelated to biology, it is as if populism has something in common with such species from the natural world. Once it has been accepted that populism can morph and come in different forms, scholars will be able to better comprehend how populism can be rural, agrarian, urban, conservative, authoritarian, libertarian, liberal-progressive, free-marketeer, protectionist, "rightist", "leftist", nationalist (possibly even trans-nationalist), secular, or even religious, depending on the context (Taggart, 2002: 68). It was the anthropologist Jean Comaroff (2011) who distinctively wrote that "populism in some form is a necessary condition of all antiestablishment movements, past and present, progressive or conservative" (Comaroff, 2011: 100-101, 103).

Thus, different populisms (at different times in history) may occur in different forms. For instance, when the Keynesian state was showing its weaker side (in some cases trade unions essentially held governments hostage and dictated agenda) in the 1980s and 1990s it was not uncommon to have politicians like Thatcher, Reagan and Menem embrace a "populistic style" and concomitantly ideologically worship deregulation, privatisation and the free market. Unlike Menem, Thatcher and Reagan were *not* populist, or at most they were to a very minimal extent. However, they did maintain a certain popular style that led them to make people-centric "pseudo-populist appeals" (see Woodward, 2009; Fry, 1998). Reagan was charismatic and spoke like "the people", whereas Thatcher was the grocer's daughter, and came from the people. The latter even coined the term "popular capitalism" (see Franklin, 2018; Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2015: 12). In essence, their politics was reliant on courting and pleasing the middle-lower class by making use of populistic and nationalistic slogans.

Today, things are slightly different, as contemporary populists are less market-oriented, more opposed to freedom of movement, and significantly protectionist, with both rightist and leftist populists heavily criticising globalised capitalism and technocracy. Today's Grillo, Salvini, Le Pen

and Trump are nothing like yesterday's Thatcher, Reagan, Menem, and Wachtmeister. The former not only articulate themselves differently to the latter but also have different policies to them. However, similarly to their less radical (and "minimally populist") precursors they strongly believe in the existence of a morally righteous popular community, complain about the political establishment, and are not particularly fond of immigrants and intellectuals. What they all have in common is they practice a form of moralisation of politics. After all, it was Thatcher who famously said politics is a "struggle between good and evil", something that sounds both Manichean and populist.

Variants of Populism

Populism comes in three main variants: *national-populism, liberal-populism,* and *social-populism* (see Canovan, 1981; Germani, 2019). More generically, we could refer to the first two as sub-groups "right-wing populism" and the third as "left-wing populism". Both Canovan (1981) and Germani (2019) provide more categorisations, however the three mentioned above are the ones that matter most, as they ideologically represent most populist parties on the political scene. National-populism is a very conservative and nationalist-oriented populism that is often confused with fascist extreme-right politics (Germani, 2019: 59). However, national-populists cannot be classified as "extremist" on the basis they do not wish to get rid of democracy altogether. They are undeniably illiberal, but still committed to the functions of electoral democracy. Figures like Orbán and Le Pen conflate people-centric appeals with anti-immigration policy. They are mainly concerned about the so-called "Islamification of Europe" and wish to halt immigrant immigration as they claim it represents a threat to the cultural norms and demographics of their nation-states (see Kauffman, 2017). Also, they tend to want to either leave the Euro or the European Union altogether.

Liberal-populists are instead less concerned about immigration, and are also less supportive of market restrictions and protectionism than other right-wing populists. They view free-market capitalism - along with liberalism and civil rights - as positive defining features of Western civilisation (Capezzone, 2018; Davies, 2018). Liberal-populists (e.g. Swiss People's Party, GERB, ANEL, *CUIDADANOS*, CDS-*Partido Popular*) criticise immigration from a predominantly economic and cultural standpoint arguing that excessive immigration form developing countries brings wages down, stirs racial tensions, and allows entry to people belonging to cultures that do not value Western liberalism, freedom of speech, and gender equality.

In their view, EU elites have failed to make Europe economically competitive, and fear that some of the Union's more protectionist measures disadvantage European nations that are not able to trade freely with the rest of the world (Capezzone, 2021). For instance, concerning liberal-populism, parties like the British UKIP are somewhat of a mixed-case. Some UKIP representatives and supporters are - as Taggart (2017: 260) points out - economically "libertarian, free-trading" and do not feel immigration is a main issue, while others, like Farage himself, have identified immigration as a great threat to Britain. With Farage in charge UKIP resembled more of a national-populist party (see Malu, 2019: 191-232) than a liberal-populist one. Overall, liberal-populists (sometimes referred to as *neo-liberal populists*[20] in Latin America and Eastern Europe) are a lot more cautious than national-populists and social-populists in expanding welfare rights, criticising banks, and adopting redistribution policies. They also appear to be less averse towards technocratic forms of government (if *La Republique En Marche!* and *CUIDADANOS* are considered, this becomes evident) (see Bickerton, 2021). This is because even if populism is always the predominant ideological feature, liberal-populists tend to combine populism with liberalism, just like national-populists conflate populism with conservatism, and social-populists with socialism or social democracy.

Moreover, in Greece, Spain, Germany, and elsewhere, we find the so-called "populists of the left" or social-populists, who are not particularly anti-immigrant (although they are less pro-immigration than centre-Left parties) but still attack the EU and international financial institutions for holding too much power that is used to the disadvantage of ordinary people from the working class. At the same time, they also tend to accuse states for doing too little to tackle gender inequality and climate change (Damiani, 2016). The 5SM, *SYRIZA*, *PODEMOS* and *Die Linke* are appropriate examples of this type of left-wing populism. Notwithstanding, all populists, regardless of whether they are located closer to the right or the left, ideologically engage with the themes of anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy. These themes, which are part of my definition of populism, will be respectively discussed below. Uncoincidentally, *none* of these themes are exclusive to either a right-wing or left-wing political standpoint or cultural repertoire. They are distinctively populist, rather than right or left.

Anti-elitism

Anti-elitism is often integral to populism. This simply means it is difficult that any form of populist ideology, discourse, or narrative would manifest itself without anti-elitism. In other words, it is usually understood to be a common and essential component (Edinger et al., 2019). In fact, some

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[20] See Weyland (1999: 379-401)

scholars would argue that anti-elitism is the core tenet of the ideology – which is why in both Mudde's (2004; 2017; 2018) and Hawkins' and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2019) definition the principal idea presented is that populists pit a virtuous community of people against a nasty and corrupt elite. More specifically, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser define populism as "*a moral discourse that only exalts popular sovereignty, but understands the political field as a cosmic struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite'* " (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019: 3). This is very similar to Mudde's definition, with the exception that populism is considered a discourse rather than an ideology. Notwithstanding, anti-elitism is still the central element in both ideational interpretations. Similarly, the authors Bart Bonikowski and Yueran Zhang (2023: 6) refer to populism as "*a form of political claims-making predicated on a moral opposition between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the only legitimate source of political power*". Hence, like the other two definitions, theirs includes this morally rooted anti-elitism as a main feature too.

The understanding (or definition) given in this contribution to the concept of *anti-elitism* itself is basically that provided by three scholars in two different texts (see Rydgren, 2007; Akkerman and De Lange, 2012) with the only difference that anti-elitism is treated as a theme of populism rather than strictly "communicative strategy" as they postulate. A theme that is adopted (not just by "radical right" populists but by the populist left too) "to convey an image that they stand in opposition to established political parties as the true representative of the common man, even in cases when they entered power" (*Ibid*, as cited in Vaughan and Heft, 2022: 78). This takes us back to Jan-Werner Müller's work (2015; 2016), where the author proposes that populist anti-elitism (though he includes *anti-pluralism* too in his rationale) is permeated with a sense of moralist Manicheanism – meaning that populists feel they are always on the right side of history. According to populists, politics is simply a struggle between good and evil (see Orces, 2009: 1; Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 426). Whilst the people are always "good" the elite(s) are always necessarily "evil" as they use their great power, resources, and influence to conspire against the people of the nation (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Essentially, following a populistic mindset "the elite is always up to something" (Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 423- 443).

It is for this reason that authors have also deeply observed the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories to discover that citizens with conspiracy beliefs (especially those related to government malfeasance, malevolent global conspiracies, and control of information) are likely to also manifest populist/anti-elitist attitudes (see Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017). Taggart (2018b) himself linked populist politics to these beliefs arguing that "this stems from the propensity

to see the elite as corrupt and conspiratorial and as unrepresentative of the people" (Taggart, 2018b: 85). Alongside his colleague Andrea L. Pirro (2022), Taggart also revealed how anti-elitist conspiracies related to ethnic substitution, *Q*-anon, and US plots, have been central to the politics of populists across the spectrum, such as Orbán, Trump, and Chávez respectively. Therefore, it is apparent how fundamental anti-elitism (irrespective of whether it is conspiratorial or not) is to the overall populist narrative.

However, while anti-elitism is certainly a core concept in populism it is unlikely to present itself alone as a defining element. This is why some scholars prefer to view populist ideology as a mixture of anti-elitism and other closely linked (but supposedly independent) core concepts such as people-centrism and popular sovereignty (see Fernandez et al., 2018: 57-76 or Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011: 1272-1283). For this study, I instead use an alternative framework and treat popular sovereignty as a separate concept and as part of the broader populist *leitmotif* of *Sovereignism* which will be discussed later. Furthermore, I also consider people-centrism and anti-elitism to be essentially the same thing. They should not be separated as they are strictly interlaced given the populists that criticise elites do so from a perspective of *inverse inegalitarianism*. In other words, the critique of elites is accompanied by ideas deriving from a forceful people-centrism, meaning that whilst elites can only harm society (as they are corrupted by politics) the people can only do good for it. In an ideal society "the people" should replace the elites at the top of the social pyramid. In order for this to occur, for this allegedly people-centric government and society to be conceived, elites need to first be discredited, blamed and/or inherently detached from the people (Ernst et al., 2017; 2019).

In lieu, Müller (2015: 13) reminds us that in the populist mindset only populist parties or leaders themselves - but no one else - represent the *will of the people* (for instance – *SYRIZA* claimed that "authentic Greek people" would only vote their "No" in the 2013 referendum). This is allegedly what makes them anti-pluralist. Though it is arguable whether they are only *always* anti-pluralist theoretically (due to their "we are the 100 per cent logic"[21]) or in practice too. Müller himself admits that both Orbán (in 2002) and López Obrador (in 2006) even after sponsoring large rallies to protest the election result - that rejected them - eventually accepted democratic defeat (Müller, 2015: 8-9). With hindsight, Trump too can be added to this equation (Nicholas, 2021). Nevertheless,

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[21] Populists frequently believe that they represent the overwhelming majority of the population, even when they do not win elections (in that case they may resort to conspiracy theories to explain their loss). One important example is provided by Müller (2015: 13) who reminds us Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan refused to acknowledge the protestors against him at Gezi Park claiming they did not represent anyone.

populists strongly believe almost all political decisions should be made by the people. Anti-elitism itself is intrinsically connected to people-centrism, the two are perhaps interchangeable and certainly not mutually exclusive.

We can infer from populist narratives that elites range all the way from (economically and politically influential) supra-national organisations to national actors, parties, and institutions. At a supra-national level, among those elites that populists dislike we find organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United Nations (UN), the European Central Bank (ECB) and all the other parallel institutions associated to both the *Washington Consensus* and the European Union (EU) (d'Albergo and Moini, 2019: 52). At a national level, the attacks are instead primarily directed towards the politicians from "establishment parties" that sit in parliament and allegedly push forward policies at the detriment (given their interests are supposedly in line with those of the powerful mentioned above) of the ordinary folk (Vaughan and Heft 2022: 16). Occasionally, the media and intellectuals are also targeted as enemies of the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). However, the scholars Michael Vaughan and Annett Heft (2022) argue we must distinguish between distinct types of anti-elitism since in their study of "radical right" populists they find that it can be geared either towards *specific* materially-powerful elites (e.g. individual career-politicians) or be in fact a much more *general* discursive-ideological construction. Interestingly, what they concluded in their study (which only covers right-wing populists) is that if on one hand it is the populist parties in opposition that display greater amounts of anti-elitism related to both forms mentioned above, on the other hand *all* parties are more likely to be anti-elitist towards specific political elites rather than economic elites or the media and other actors (Vaughan and Heft, 2022: 90-93).

Moreover, there are others like Bonikowski and Zhang (2023; see also March, 2017) who postulate the anti-elitism of the populist Right slightly differs from that of the populist Left (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; 6-7). While the former tend to discursively condemn "liberal elites" (mainly for promoting "progressive" policies anathema to the customs and traditions of the majority) the latter tend to condemn "corporate elites" (as they use their overwhelming wealth and power to influence state policy) (see Taggart, 2018a). However, in reality the situation is more complex. For instance, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser - who have been studying the phenomenon for a long time - more generically argue that *most* populists define the elite principally on the basis of power (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Meaning they include in this "out-group"[22] (since the "in-group" would be the

virtuous people within the *heartland*[23]) those who hold important positions in the world of politics, finance, the media, and the arts (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This argument is coherent if one also considers than in other work it has been proved that right-wing and left-wing populists take quite similar stances on a number of issues (see Clark et al., 2008: 511-534).

Firstly, both rightist and leftist populism is by nature significantly interventionist (and somewhat authoritarian) when it comes to their (anti-elitist) economic positions, they tend to favour state intervention in most financial matters (Taggart 2000: 116-117, as cited in Clarke et al., 2008: 525-526). Secondly, in both cases there is a propensity to discern a sense of crisis linked to an ideological aversion towards globalisation (Taggart 2000: 117, as cited in Clarke et al., 2008: 526) and it is the political class is blamed for embracing it systemically. In light of this, it is more reasonable to argue that both right-wing and left-wing variants of populism are hostile towards the same (or very similar) set of elites but prioritise their attacks on certain elites rather than others – and do so for distinct reasons.

Indubitably, the so-called "radical right populists" in places like Britain, France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe accuse the political class/parties for not handling matters properly just like the populists of the left. However, the major distinction between the two lies in the manner in which the anti-elitist critique is constructed. For instance, when left-wing populists complain that the establishment has failed to deal with the issue of "mass immigration" unlike the populist Right they do so from an (almost) entirely socio-economic perspective (see Kopyciok and Silver, 2021). Essentially, they are more likely to stress that there are not enough resources in the host nation to accommodate more people and that immigration without integration in the legal system may place the newcomers at risk, making them more vulnerable to modern slavery and human trafficking (see Bilefsky, 2015; Rieger, 2020). Overall, the stance of left-wing populists on immigration is understood to be somewhat awkward or inconsistent (Conti, 2015). Even though occasionally right-

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[22] For an account of the "in-group/out-group" concepts and nativism in general see Rooduijn *et al*., (2021: 248-265).

[23] According to Taggart (2018) the *heartland* is the populist "version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination" where a morally pure and virtuous community of hard-working people reside (that Taggart insists populists evoke) but it is not necessarily a racial one (Taggart, 2018 as cited in Varriale, 2021: 240). It is actually quite distinct from the *heimat* (natural homeland) evoked by Hitler, *patria* by Mussolini or *patrie* of General Phillippe Petain. For this reason, Taggart often draws an analogy between the heartland and "the shire" – a fictional, monolithic community of Hobbits in J.R.R Tolkien's masterpiece *Lord of the Rings* (Taggart 2002; 2018). Also, "we see it in the political discourse as the resort to "Middle America" or "Middle England" as imagined constituencies characterised by moderation, diligence and 'ordinariness'" (Taggart, 2002: 67).

wing populists (e.g. BNP[24], UKIP, AFD, *Rassemblement National*) may rely on the same set of arguments, this sub-group tends to denounce immigration for reasons involving ethnic or cultural identity (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017: 196; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Their critique of the phenomenon is obviously tied to their critique of national and international elites whom they accuse of tolerating (or even actively promoting) immigration to accommodate the interests for cheap labour of big business and multinationals (see Mudde, 2007). Nevertheless, as March (2017: 20) confirms in his empirical investigation regarding the right and left populist cases : "relative to the right-wing populists, these parties' (the left-wing populists) anti-elitism is much more focused on economic issues".

Understandably, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) argue there is a slight difference between the anti-elitism of populists in power and those in opposition (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). For evident reasons, in a democratic state, those in power cannot attack the political class as much (apart from the occasional antagonism directed towards the opposition) given once elected they become the political class themselves. Thus, they decide to link the elite to economic power and foreign influence (either other competing nation-states, international organisations, or influential individuals like George Soros, etc.) and this is a particularly useful strategy if they fail to deliver on promises (possibly related to immigration, welfare or EU reform/withdrawal) they made before being elected (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

In line with what has been postulated earlier, populist arguments are somewhat conspiratorial in those cases. Hence, even with populists in charge the interests of the people and nation may be still undermined as shadowy forces from the "deep-state"[25] (or from abroad) continue to operate against them. Uncoincidentally, such arguments have been put forward in countries as distinct and distant from each other as Greece and Venezuela who both held populist governments. However, it is also true that in a typical populist narrative usually "the political elite are in cahoots with the economic elite (or "corporate elite"), and putting *special interests* above the *general interests* of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This means that the differences between the two are purposely somewhat blurred by both right-wing and left-wing populists.

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[24] The British National Party (BNP) is mostly associated to neo-fascism or the extreme-right, although it is also true that at one point of its history under Nick Griffin's leadership it became so influenced by the French *nouvelle droite* ("new right") intellectual movement that Griffin himself asked his party's membership to "modernise" themselves (drop the Nazi imagery, short haircuts, and leather *Doc Martens* boots) and pursue a more populist agenda to win elections (Malu, 2017: 153, 176).

[25] For instance, as a populist Trump has often mentioned the deep state and referred to it as a primary enemy – see Moynihan (2023).

Anti-elitism may very well drive some of populist policy-making in government, or proposals when in opposition. If some populists want to reduce the number of elected officials in parliament, others aim to abolish whole branches of institutions (e.g. UKIP's positioning against the British House of Lords) and often favour the direct (and popular) election of presidents. Not to mention, anti-elitist proposals to heavily tax big corporations (but not small and medium business) have also been popular amongst populists of both left and right in certain countries (see Cattani, 2016). Overall, generic anti-elitists statements originating from figures such as Marine Le Pen when she says it is time to "free French people from an arrogant elite" (see Acton, 2017) and "replace the totalitarian EU" (see Levy-Abegnoli, 2016) or Maduro when he blames "local elites" and "imperialists" for "sabotaging the country" (see *BBC News*, 28 January 2019) are not just meant to stir masses of supporters but may also lead to a drastic change in institutional assets (Pappas, 2019: 70-84). This has certainly occurred in the second case, as the Venezuelan leader dissolved the country's National Assembly (see Oner 2021). Throughout the empirical analysis presented from Chapter IV onwards, it will become clear how Italian populist actors have also let their ideological anti-elitism influence some of their political proposals. Ultimately, since anti-elitism is such a consistent and salient theme in populist narratives worldwide (perhaps even more so after the stock exchange crisis of 2008[26]) it cannot be excluded from any minimal definition or comprehensive thematic mapping of the phenomenon.

Unpolitics

Another recurring theme in populist ideology is that of "unpolitics". As maintained by Taggart (who coined the term) unpolitics is the "repudiation of politics as the process for resolving conflict" (Taggart, 2018b: 3). What is meant by this is that populist parties and politicians approach politics with an attitude of scepticism and hostility towards the practice itself. Hence, populism is somewhat "unpolitical" (Taggart, 2018b). However, this does not mean populists are "apolitical" (Taggart, 2018b: 3) as they engage with politics by competing in elections, fielding candidates, and making ideological statements which are sometimes even derived from other ideologies.

Historically, populists have not necessarily been "anti-political" either (Taggart, 2018b: 3) as they recognised the importance of political competition (especially short-term and strategically) and political engagement to "take politics back to the people" (see Canovan, 2002; 2005). It would be

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[26] See Raffaele Sciortino (2019) for an in-depth account on how the two relate to each other.

more appropriate to assume, as Taggart (2018b: 3) suggests that there is a parallel between their unpolitics and their "reluctantly political" behavioural patterns. Their involvement in politics is essentially legitimised on the grounds that there is an ongoing crisis within the *polis* (Taggart, 2018b: 3). Thus, politics is merely a temporary measure to alleviate crisis, but this can only be done by returning the focus of politics (essentially "repoliticising"[27]) the hot-topics that ordinary citizens feel strongly about, such as ethical norms, customs and traditions, national identity and the reduction of inequalities (this last one not just on the populist left, but on the populist right too, as Moffitt reminds us[28]). Consequently, this may result in policy-making particularly driven towards more specific issues such as immigration, taxes, welfare, state security and anti-terrorism[29] and proposing *alternative* solutions usually unwelcomed by traditional parties and elites.

Populists view their simplistic solutions to complex issues as embedded with common-sense (Germani et al., 2021) meanwhile their opponents consider them authoritarian, demagogic, immoral, irrational, and democratically dubious overall (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 27; Moffitt, 2020). Also, the predilection that populists have for unpolitics over politics (Taggart, 2018b: 8) and their understanding of elites as not being inherently corrupt but rather corrupted by political association (Taggart, 2018b: 8) in most countries leads them to propose a reduction of politician's salaries, the cutting down of the costs of politics, as well as the general limitation of procedural processes. Fundamentally, this where the tension between a populist (unpolitical) majoritarian "radical democracy"[30] and representative democracy resides (Taggart, 2018b: 8-9). In an ideal populist society not only are politicians are constantly supervised and "kept in check" by the citizenry (with unpolitical procedures such as the parliamentary *Recall*, which reflects the polar opposite of the

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[27] Populists present themselves as agents of re-politicisation and this is *not* in conflict with their "unpolitics" as for them politics should not be eliminated from society but *always* reflect popular will and be deprived of its elitist projections. In their view, popular will should not be greatly obstructed by constitutional checks and balances. In essence, they are against professional representative politics but not their own (populist) politics.

[28] See the text *Populism* by Benjamin Moffitt (2020).

[29] Whereas the subject of fighting religious terrorism is something that most global parties - irrespective of where they stand politically - have been discussing regularly since the events of *9/11* (or even earlier in countries like Italy that have suffered waves of domestic terror in the 1970s) it is a *fact* that populist parties take a unique stance on the matter. The majority of populists on the right view the state's struggle against terrorism as something interconnected to a much greater civilisational struggle (or "clash" as Samuel Huntingon once contended). Quite disparately from mainstream and centrist actors, these populists believe there is an ongoing struggle not only taking place between "the people" and "the elite" but also between the Christian world (the West, "Christendom") and the rest of the globe which is mainly drawn towards the Islamic creed (see Brubaker, 2017: 1191-1226).

[30] "Radical democracy" is essentially also a term most Marxist, and neo-Marxist or post-Marxist scholars comfortably interchange with the word "populism" (Moffitt, 2020: 100).

elitist view) but politics is somehow kept at a minimum, and only resorted to in times of emergency or crisis (Wood, 2022; Taggart 2018b: 3). In essence, as long as there is no soaring inequality, the economy is stable, and traditional norms are respected, the common people remain disinterested with the political as they just want to "get on with their own lives"[31] (Varriale, 2020: 241). This may be a valid explanation as to why many populist figures originate from outside the world of politics (rather than outside "the establishment") like Trump, Perot or even Iglesias Turrión.

Notwithstanding, and bizarrely, it has often been the case that populism is directly associated to the concept of *anti-politics* rather than (Taggart's) *unpolitics* (see Canovan, 2005; Mete 2010; Kajsiu, 2021; Wood, 2022). For instance, Canovan (2005: 79) famously argued that "in its current incarnations populism does not express the essence of the political but instead of anti-politics". These may be tempting arguments, especially where anti-politics is defined as something that appears in two different forms by the author(s) Nick Clark *et al.*, (2018). In summary, Clark and colleagues argue that anti-politics is either the citizens' sentiment of "negativity towards the activities and institutions of formal politics" or an attempt to "replace the communicative rationality of politics with another rationality from another societal subsystem" (Clark et al., 2018 as cited in Kajsiu 2021: 7). When conceptualised as such, anti-politics and unpolitics are essentially almost identical, and all populists are anti-political.

However, the situation becomes more complex if one considers clear distinctions made by other scholars such as Blendi Kajsiu (2021). Kajsiu insists there are *Anti-political discourses* that "reject politics *per se*, as conflict, partisanship, compromise and factionalism" (this is similar to Taggart's *leitmotif*) and *Anti-politics discourses* that "reject existing political institutions, the political system or the political class in general, but not necessarily politics *per se*" (Kajsiu, 2021: 7). This author further explains that in reality populists only do the latter. Hence, they accordingly use anti-politics (discursively) but are not anti-political in the sense that they reject politics as a whole (Kajsiu, 2021: 7). Unfortunately, this is an ambivalent stance that is hard to prove or disprove empirically.

Considering the academic literature above, the difference between unpolitics and anti-politics is certainly blurred. However, what is certain is that populism (and presumably the symptomatic unpolitics it derives) "has its roots in a primal anti-political reaction of the ruled against the rulers" (Taggart, 2002: 74). In a favourable light, regardless of whether Taggart's conceptualisation is the

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[31] This phrase was adapted by the British MP Jacob Reese-Mogg once accuse of being a populist by *The Economist* writers (see *The Economist*, 1 February 2018; see also Varriale, 2020: 241)

most appropriate or not (it certainly appears to be), unpolitics can be used as a theme to better comprehend contemporary populism. Unpolitics, both in its *positive* (the virtues of the best "people" in society are celebrated) and *negative* (impulsive resentment that leads people to embrace the most authoritarian, reactionary, and "beast-like qualities"[32]) manifestations (Taggart 2018b: 3) is not the rejection of all that is political *per se* (as this sentiment corresponds to anti-politics) but rather a scepticism towards political professionalism. Accordingly, establishment politicians are useless, they won't do anything to redeem the people and the nation. In fact, populists consider establishment parties to be "anti-own people" selling out their own national interests to those of others (e.g. asylum-seekers, foreign nations, high finance) (Mudde, 1996: 269, 271).

Right-wing populist parties - Mudde (1996) refers to them as "anti-party parties" in his early work - are particularly unpolitical. An example Mudde provides from old *Vlaams Blok* party literature is especially useful as Belgian populists refer to their opponents (the establishment parties; *VU-VVD*, *Agalev* and *ROSSEM*) as "political profiteers" who perform "political banditry" (Mudde, 1996: 270). Naturally, unpolitics also drives many populist anti-party parties in Europe to be opposed to public funding for rival parties (see Renzi, 2020 – in his book as an "anti-populist" he criticises the 5SM's position on the matter). They also attack organisations that are not directly political but parallel to the world of politics, such as the mainstream media, but are more likely to refrain from doing so when it does not benefit them. For example, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) attacks all media outlets except the populist-sympathising (during Jörg Haider's leadership) tabloid *Die Kronen Zeitung* (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In summary, unpolitics, anti-politics and anti-partyism are all conceptually adjacent. In this contribution however, *only* unpolitics will be used normatively as a key theme for the ideational approach embraced, given Taggart's concept already broadly incorporates the other two. Ultimately, "simply asserting the general will is not enough to fully describe the populist sense of politics. And I would argue it goes deeper than this – it misses the unpolitics of populism" (Taggart, 2018b: 2).

Sovereignism

The historian Aristotle Kallis (2018) conceptualises sovereignism as "the belief in uncontested primacy of national-level politics and the call to recover at this precise level (institutionally as well as territorially) power that has slipped away to more distant and diffuse layers of governance"

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[32] The prestigious author Gustave Le Bon warned against the "beast-like qualities" of the populace in his 1895 masterpiece *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*).

(Kallis, 2018: 299). Also, two Italian authors introduce a *special issue* of an academic journal by arguing that "Sovereignism is one of the recurrent, and core, themes of populism. Sovereignty claims pre-exist populism" (Basile and Mazzoleni as cited in Verzichelli, 2020: 259). The same authors insist that "while sovereignism might exist without populism, there is no populist discourse that does not include sovereignist claims" (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 156). Although (unlike myself) Basile and Mazzoleni (2020) prefer referring to populism as a type discourse rather than a concrete ideology both of their clams are accurate.

It is undeniable that there is an inextricable link between a sovereignist worldview and a populist one. In such worldview, a nation (within a specific territory) has the ability to control or decide upon its own fate when it comes to the welfare of its own citizens (Grimm, 2015: 9). Despite their minor or major differences, the overwhelming majority of parties considered to be "populist" by scholarship place an emphasis on popular, economic, and territorial sovereignty. In essence, what draws together contemporary populists - ranging all the way from the more socialistic populists to the more conservative ones - is their attachment to the Westphalian model involving mutually exclusive territories which is practically reflected by their shared slogan : "take back control"[33] (see Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020; Kallis, 2018; Freeden, 2017).

The idea of taking back control by regaining not only complete territorial authority over a nation-state's borders but also political, legislative, and economic independence (in terms of decision-making) from supra-national institutions (e.g. EU, IMF, World Bank, WTO) is at the heart of the agenda of heterogeneous populist parties which adopt a sovereignist stance (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 151). Today, proposals that are explicitly sovereignist include strict border controls (through the construction of new protective barriers, like Trump's or Orbán's "Wall") (Kallis, 2018: 296), but also calls to leave the Eurozone or the rejection of its fiscal regulations, anti-migrant laws, and the return to a traditional statist approach where every country prints its own money and has freedom of manoeuvre regarding its own budget expenses, economic plans, and trade agreements. Essentially, a sovereign state is one that is entirely independent in terms of both domestic and foreign policy.

According to one author, populist-sovereignism is essentially the ideological opposite of "globalism" (see Spannaus, 2019: 13). In fact, Andrew Spannaus (2019) theorises that globalism is "the ideology which considers nation-states to be obsolete, and thus advocates the elimination of barriers between countries, based on the notion that national interests should give way to a globally shared set of

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[33] This was also the slogan of the popular (and populist) *Vote Leave* campaign during *Brexit*.

values" (Spannaus, 2019: 13). Moreover, sovereignism can be observed and understood from both a *supply-side* perspective and a *demand-side* perspective (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 159). In regard to the former, Basile and Mazzoleni (2020: 159) postulate that in the populist-sovereignist re-elaboration anti-establishment actors accuse elites of impeding popular sovereignty, by selling out the people's rights and political authority in terms of decision-making processes to supra-national powers and rendering the influence of popular majorities secondary to those of minorities (not just elites, but immigrants as well). In regard to the latter, the two authors instead argue that sovereignism is best understood as a latent or explicit demand in favour of national independence (economic, political and cultural) (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 159). This would be the re-emergence of the nation-state and "re-bordering orientations" (and direct democracy) during a time of perceived crisis or a *zeitgeist* of uncertainty brought about by extreme globalisation (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 159; Spannaus, 2019: 9-23; Mudde, 2004).

It is no coincidence that political scientists Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018) argue that the rise in demand for what they call "national-populism" stems from a general sense of malaise among voters related to "four D's": *distrust*, *deprivation*, *destruction*, and *de-alignment*. Fundamentally, *distrust* for political elites who underachieve and do not keep their promises, *deprivation* brought by disastrous post-recession economic circumstances, and perceived societal *destruction* by white majorities who feel they are incurring a disadvantage from immigration (e.g. "hyper-ethnic change") and ultimately the *de-alignment* of traditional parties which are not able to distinguish their political offer from one another anymore and fail to represent their electorates (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). When those all occur concomitantly, the electoral turnout for populist parties that express sovereignist policies such as "re-bordering" (De Genova, 2018) and cutting ties with other nations (by offering an anti-globalist economic alternative to free trade) will likely be higher. Furthermore, findings by experts Oscar Mazzoleni and Gilles Ivaldi (2020: 304-326) have proven that there is a strong association between economically and culturally sovereignist values (anti-immigrant positions in the latter case) among voters and support for right-wing populist parties in European countries such as France and Switzerland.

To briefly reiterate Basile's and Mazzoleni's argument (as cited in Verzichelli, 2020: 259), historically sovereignism may have proceeded populism. Especially given throughout the last few centuries (mainly after the Thirty Years' War and major American and French revolutions) several modern states have been built around the concept of national-popular sovereignty and republican-democratic principles where (temporary and ever-changing) popular majorities are in charge of

electing their own leaders and governments, within their nations (for a complete account, see Kelly, 2017). Therefore, if sovereignism is as Stephan De Spiegeleire *et al.* (2017: 33) argues "the fundamental idea that each state should hold exclusive control over its territory and internal affairs, to the exclusion of external influence" than this means that this concept is no different to the idea of Westphalian (Peace of Westphalia, 1648) sovereignty itself. However, Eurosceptic actors present in the contemporary political arena are also directly reformulating sovereignism "populistically" to suit the present era. For example, their tendency to politicise spatial control over territory and appropriate themselves of a temporal trajectory to make pro-(*autochthonous*)people (but also potentially anti-migrant) claims such as "we were here first" (see Freeden, 2017: 4) is typical of the modern age. An age where we are witnessing a populist *zeitgeist* – as Mudde (2004) defines it. It is evident that populism thrives in times where the centrality, power, and influence of the nation-state is gradually being eroded and replaced with supra-national bodies and where there is an increase in inequality, decrease in purchasing power, and decrease of living standards for the population at large (Spannaus, 2019: 18, 19).

However, the temptation to blur populist sovereignism with the return of nationalism must be resisted. The two may partially overlap but are *not* the same thing. Compared to populist sovereignism, nationalism (both in its inclusive/civic and exclusive/ethnic forms) as an ideology places its emphasis on the "nation" in a more generic sense (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2022: 306), underlining the importance of belonging to a community (*Volksgemeinschaft*[34] in German) with common values and traditions as well as a shared destiny. Sovereignism is instead more specific as a concept (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2022: 306). It aims to empower both the people and the nation-state as political subjects in order to defend the interests of the people (primarily) within a nation (secondarily) against external global menaces (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2020: 306). Therefore, for sovereignists (who are usually also populists) territory serves the purpose of being first and foremost a "decision space" (see Maier, 2016) where important legislative and political decisions are taken by a popularly-elected democratic government, rather than functioning as a spiritual ancestral homeland (or *heimat*) of a particular ethnic community.

The best distinction between the two concepts was provided by De Spiegeleire and his colleagues who explained that "whereas nationalism primarily relates to the 'the nation' of the 'nation-state', sovereignism primarily relates to 'the state' of the 'nation-state' " (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 37).

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[34] In his earlier work Mudde (2000) has examined the both internal-oriented and external-oriented party literature of the German extreme-right (*Republikaner* and *Deutsche Volks Union*) where this term is often used

Sovereignism is decidedly more common in populism, while nationalism is more likely to openly manifest itself *vis-à-vis* more markedly authoritarian, statist and political (I made the point above that populism is somewhat "unpolitical") ideologies like Fascism and National Socialism. Also, sovereignism needs to be understood as a *defensive*[35] (rather than *offensive*) reaction towards something (in this case globalisation, international organisations, or other external threats in the populist "panegyric redemption"[36] narrative). Even if not entirely isolationist (see De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 36, 96) sovereignism certainly isn't expansionist, unlike nationalism which is known to have led to the great wars of history due to its imperialist fervour.

Other respectable scholars, like Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017), have also very clearly differentiated between populism and nationalism. Their sharp conceptual distinction consists in positioning nationalism on a *horizontal* axis and populism on a *vertical* one (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017: 312). According to them, populism is necessarily articulated vertically (down/up membership) because it juxtaposes "the (good) people – as the underdog" (unfortunately at the bottom, the powerless *silent majorities*) to "the (corrupt) elite/establishment" (at the top). In lieu, nationalism is much more horizontal (in/out membership) as it focuses on the contrast or conflict between the "citizens/people of the nation" and the external other(s) who are non-members of the nation and do not belong (e.g. foreigners and other nations) (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017: 312). However, this specific argument has been contested by an equally respectable scholar – Roger Brubaker (2020) who refuses to view populism as conceptually unidimensional and instead prefers to consider it multi-dimensional. From his point of view, populism does not solely rely on the "people vs. elite" ideological and discursive articulation as (supposedly) its appeals are made to the people not just as "the plebs" but also as "sovereign demos" and "bounded community" (Brubaker, 2020: 44).

Taking all of this into account, whilst a more detailed investigation on the demarcations between populism and nationalism does not fall within the scope of this work, the relationship sovereignism and populism is certainly worth looking at more in depth. To begin with, a relevant point that needs to made is that distinct scholars have touched upon the diverse forms of sovereignty/sovereignism. For instance, De Spiegeleire and his colleagues believe there are three types of so-called "New

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[35] It is mainly *defensive* because the political class across Europe have often refused to acknowledge or minimised the problems related to globalisation. As the (somewhat EU-critical) intellectual Andrew Spannaus (2019: 12) puts it: "the desire for a stable job, worries about a loss of cultural values or the transfer of power from politicians to financial markets, have often been classified as elements of a futile quest to turn back time".

[36] Terminology used by Kallis (2018: 296).

Sovereignism": *domestic sovereignty*, *juridical sovereignty*, and *popular sovereignty* (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 33-36). The first simply means that a ruling power or government holds complete control over a specifically claimed territory within a recognised state (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 33). This includes the ability to protect its borders from external forces, as well as generate laws and ensure they are enforced (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 33). The second is actually more externally-oriented because it usually requires other states to recognise the legitimacy of a state and government ("mutual recognition") to have effective power over its own exclusive jurisdictional domain (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 33). Hence, states are viewed as independent political decision-making and law-making actors that not only select their own government but also (usually) agree from refraining meddling in each other's internal matters (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 33). Ultimately, the third is a concept that derives from social contract philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 34). Popular sovereignty (a cornerstone of modern democracy) is nothing more than the idea that the legitimacy of rule originates from a consenting majority of people who are ultimately the source of authority (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017: 34). As they are sovereign, they decide who to be governed by and for how long. Populists fully adhere to this interpretation (see Schmidtke, 2023; Girard, 2021).

In similar fashion, Reinhard Heinisch, Annika Werner and Fabian Habersack (2020) distinguish among three equally relevant variants of sovereignism espoused by populist parties (although they also show that in Austria non-populist parties may still strategically embrace sovereignist claims). Accordingly, they discuss *national*, *economic*, and *popular* sovereignty (Heinisch et al., 2020: 165). Firstly, national sovereignty is entirely about defending national borders against external threats that may negatively affect the internal homogenous community of people (Heinisch et al., 2020: 165-166). Secondly, economic sovereignty is instead strictly tied into the idea that *all* economic policies should be aimed at improving the welfare of the (working class and lower middle class) people of the nation, who are to be *always* prioritised over elites and foreigners/immigrants (Heinisch et al., 2020: 166). International trade agreements and globalisation are rejected in the name of economic protectionism (or economic nationalism). This is why populists like Trump have pledged to "bring American jobs back" by reshoring manufacturing (see Scott, 2020). Populists in France, Austria, Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe generally make very similar promises (Heinisch et al., 2020; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2022). Thirdly, the view that Heinisch and his research associates hold on popular sovereignty is identical to that of De Spiegeleire *et al.* (2017) described above: *the people are the only legitimate source that can exert political authority and power*. In their recent study, these scholars have interestingly shown that "sovereign claims are central to right-populists parties

like the FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party), yet they are not exclusive to them…conservative parties like the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) may also adopt sovereignist claims" (Heinisch et al., 2020: 180). They further explain that whilst right-wing populists strongly manifest all three types of sovereignism (in this case "national", "economic", "popular") the more traditional conservative parties (in Austria, but likely elsewhere too if the same method is applied) are still rather elitist actors therefore may adopt national and economic sovereignty stances but refrain from incorporating popular sovereignty in their politics (Heinisch et al., 2020: 179-180).

Most scholars agree that sovereignism is a multi-dimensional concept, mainly with a national (or "cultural"), popular (or "political") and economic dimension (Verzichelli, 2020: 259). Luca Verzichelli (2020) goes so far as arguing that there are in fact four dimensions and not three, such as "national sovereignty", "cultural sovereignty", "illiberal-personalised sovereignty" and "economic sovereignty" (Verzichelli, 2020: 267). Notwithstanding, I consider this argument slightly far-fetched and prefer to unambiguously rename the three dimensions or forms of populist-sovereignism *popular, economic* and *territorial* sovereignism. It is apparent that populist parties (especially those on the right, but some of the left too) will rely on the first (popular sovereignism) to argue against the decisional powers and cultural-political influence of trans-national elites and institutions, on the second (economic sovereignism) to defend the economic interests of the people and the nation-state by adopting protectionism to better compete in external markets, and on the third (territorial sovereignism) to safeguard national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities that they perceive as under threat from mass immigration.

It would be a mistake however to assume that only the populists of the right (who are inclined to be more nationalist) are sovereignist "in the name of the people"[37]. In fact, as Martti Koskenniemi (2011: 61) suggests: "sovereignty articulates the hope of experiencing the thrill of having one's life in one's own hands". Ideologically, this view may conform to the populist left ideologically just as much as to the populist right. In fact, it is no secret that the (modern) anti-globalisation movement originated on the left (see Saval, 2017). The radical (populist) left began to oppose "turbo-capitalism" (see Luttwak, 1998) and the unregulated economic and political power (international trade agreements and mass deregulation of financial markets) of multinational corporations before the more recent wave of right-wing populism (for an account of OWS and anti-globalist movements, see Klein, 2011; see also Hayduk, 2002).

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[37] This is a reference made to Marine Le Pen's famous slogan.

Left-wing populists have long adapted their critique of neo-liberal economics, globalisation, free trade, and inequality to fit a sovereignist narrative. In Spain, *PODEMOS* has worked in conjunction with the Socialist Party to prevent migrants from entering illegally via sea-route. Clearly, this is an example of territorial sovereignism (see Summers, 2002). In Greece, *SYRIZA* was first known as the party to fervently reject the *troika*'s approach to solve the country's economic problems (see Keen, 2015; Flassbeck and Lapavitsas, 2015). In France, Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* has always openly manifested hostility towards EU encroachment in the country's internal affairs, especially relating to fiscal and budget policy (see Bonansinga, 2022; Mortimer, 2022). The leader of the party raised awareness among his voters that the EU leaders were in fact "tyrants" and called the EU a "dictatorship" that threatens the sovereignty and liberal-democratic identity of France (Bonansinga, 2022: 7). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that in a contribution focusing on the British case Baldini, Bressanelli and Gianfreda (2020) prove that both Right and Left engage with sovereignism by promising to restore democracy at the domestic level and warning voters about the perils of a binding European integration.

The examples made above serve the purpose of postulating that whereas claims to recover (popular, territorial, and economic) sovereignty are more common among right-wing populists than left-wing populists, both groups of populists are similar enough to each other to focus on the same issues. Namely border control, protectionism, welfare redistribution, and direct-democratic practices, all understood (from an ideologically populist perspective) to be necessary in making *people* sovereign again. As Kallis (2018) correctly suggests: "however different their performances of sovereignty, the two projects converge on the reinvention of the border - symbolic and physical - of the existing nation-states as the marker of redeemed sovereignty." Ultimately, sovereignism is and will likely always remain a core theme in populist ideology.

Producerism

Mudde once wrote that populist radical-right parties believe that "the economy should serve the nation and should be controlled by it" (Mudde, 2007: 186-187). However, structured in this manner his statement appears more appropriate for referring to ultra-authoritarian, statist, and crypto-fascist organisations belonging to the extreme-right party family[38]. It would be more accurate to state that

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[38] Refer to either Mudde (2000) or Carter (2005) for in-depth studies that also aim to classify the so-called "extreme-right". The issue with both works is that their classifications are too broad, and it is somewhat awkward to include within this party family both parties that are clearly illiberal and *undemocratic* (neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties) with parties that are neo-liberal (or sometimes illiberal) and *democratic* ("neo-liberal populist parties", is the label Carter

the right-wing populist parties of today - which cannot be considered anti-democratic or entirely authoritarian (see Taggart, 2018b: 3) - believe the economy should serve "*the people*" (rather than "the nation" as Mudde states) and the national economy should be controlled by *them*. Populists simply want a people-centric (hence anti-elitist) government to push forward people-centric policies. Such a government that protects its people, is understood by populists to be one that pursues the (primarily economic) interests of the lower middle classes (the *petty bourgeoisie*, such as artisans, other craftsmen, tradesmen, shopkeepers, landowning farmers, and smaller scale entrepreneurs) and the working class (such as manual labourers and factory workers).

Beyond Mudde - who doesn't give primary relevance to economic aspects of populism - many other scholars have looked at populist party ideology through a more socio-economic lens (see Otjes et al., 2018; Harteveld, 2016; Ivaldi, 2015; Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991; Sachs 1989). In any event, populists generally believe society is not only divided between the *morally* pure people and corrupt elites, but also between "producers" and "parasites" (Kilgore, 2015). Therefore, to better comprehend populism it is certainly helpful to consider producerism a core theme of the ideology and carefully examine this particular theme using a framework that incorporates both cultural and economic aspects.

This can be done by relying on the conceptual framework developed by Gilles Ivaldi and Oscar Mazzoleni (2019) who observe the producerism within populist ideology by moving beyond the left-right dimension. Accordingly, producerism is defined as "the idea that the 'producers' of the nation's wealth should enjoy the economic fruits of their own labours" (Breitzer, 2014: 145 as cited in Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). For populists, this means that it is working citizens belonging to the primary and secondary sectors of the economy who produce tangible wealth (in the form of goods and assets) that should be at the top of the social pyramid rather than "unworthy" and "useless" elites (namely aristocrats, artists, bankers, intellectuals, politicians) or the unemployed poor who regularly claim state benefits (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6).

For evident reasons, this outlook intersects with any populist message insofar as it evokes the idea that ordinary people from lower class backgrounds (the typical populist constituencies) are particularly virtuous (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). They are hardworking, rational, honest, disciplined, and perhaps even God-fearing (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). The producers or "the

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uses). Extreme-right and Populism should not be so easily conflated (for an account of relevant differences, see Tarchi, 2015).

workers" are not only seen as morally superior but they are also considered economically superior as they vastly contribute to the economic well-being of the nation (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). They stand in opposition to the parasites who are the immoral "non-workers" (as for instance Tea Party activists refer to their enemies) undeserving of government assistance (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 12).

It is also for this reason that some scholars (especially those investigating right-wing populism) have referred to populist referred to populist parties as the new "working class parties"[39] (see Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Arzheimer 2012; Kitschelt 2007) in a "post-industrial" societal setting (see Ignazi, 1994) who hold partially pro-welfare and protectionist anti-market views (Rathgeb, 2021: 636). Ivaldi and Mazzoleni (2019: 6) share the view that producerism is constructed discursively and ideologically in such manner that it excludes both those at the very top and very bottom of society (as both are considered "unproductive" classes). As already stated, at the top, the parasitic elements are elites such as aristocrats, bankers, intellectuals, and career politicians who are seen as negative figures because they are not only corrupted by their practices but allegedly do not even do any "real work" (to serve the interests of the people and the nation). At the bottom, the ones demonised for not regularly contributing to the productive economy are usually Native Americans (in the US case only), immigrants, and the "undeserving" poor who are essentially unemployed welfare recipients (or welfare "scroungers" as populists put it) (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). However, in post-recession times this last group is usually exempt from populist critiques, for purely electoral purposes (Rathgeb, 2021).

Philip Rathgeb (2021) has also discussed the theme of producerism in relation to populist ideology. In his work, Rathgeb suggests that right-leaning populist parties are ideologically attached to the "makers"/(employers and employees, "producers" essentially) and "takers" (immigrants and elites, "parasites" essentially) dichotomy (Rathgeb, 2021: 635). Hence, their socio-economic policy largely derives from this Manichean mode of thought (Rathgeb, 2021: 635). Conservatives and populists alike are known to use this narrative during their campaigns, and it is for this reason that in scholarly literature, producerism is mainly associated to right-wing populism (Rathgeb, 2021; see also Berlet and Lyons, 2021; Abts et al., 2021; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019). It is no coincidence that figures like Romney and Trump have both resorted to adopting producerism in their politics. In fact, the latter has explicitly complained in his book *Crippled America* (2015) that Americans "don't

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[39] For example, IPSOS data displayed in an article by the *Corriere Della Sera* (one of Italy's most sought after newspapers) clearly shows that 27.8 percent of League voters in Italy are manual labourers – this is a higher share compared to other national parties (see Di Vico, 2021).

make anything anymore" (*The Economist*, 11 October 2012; Datoc, 2015, Trump 2015). Also, what resulted from Rathgeb's investigation is that parties like the staunchly populist Austrian FPÖ will do as much as possible (when in government) to defend social insurance rights of those whom they consider labour market "insiders" (Rathgeb, 2021: 639. For example, when it comes to the petty *bourgeoisie* or core workforce, they will strive to lower their taxes (through flat taxation and exemptions for families who have birthed more children), allow them to retire earlier, and even reward them with a series of welfare benefits relating to pensions and childcare (Rathgeb, 2021). At the same time, the producerist mentality will lead them to completely disregard the social needs of labour market "outsiders" like temporary workers, immigrants and younger people in precarious positions (Rathgeb, 2021: 639).

In light of these findings, Rathgeb has acutely described the positions of right-wing populists as a "peculiar mix of socio-economic policy choices" (Rathgeb, 2021: 653). Even if their positions do certainly involve some economic redistribution and state-directed welfarism, they are neither particularly "inclusionary" nor entirely "left-wing" socialist as they still involve union disempowerment, retrenchment of progressive taxation, and the exclusion of non-citizens from welfare programs (Rathgeb, 2021: 642, 653). Taking this into account, it is the case that most European countries deny foreigners full access to the welfare system (see Lafleur and Vintila, 2022).

Similarly to the rightist populists in Austria, Marine Le Pen's party in France has called for tax cuts (mostly for small and medium businesses, as they are "the producers" in rural areas) and pursued a welfarist agenda built around the concept of "solidarism"[40] (see Smout, 1989) that excludes those who aren't French citizens (Rathgeb, 2021: 654). In scholarly literature, this is primarily described as "welfare chauvinism" (see Careja et al., 2016; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Abts and Kochuyt, 2013). Le Pen has openly stated that even if she "has nothing against foreigners" free education would never be provided to children of illegal immigrants (*The Guardian*, 8 December, 2016). Furthermore, she asserted that social housing would always prioritise those with French nationality (Otjes et al., 2018: 11).

On a related note, in Scandinavia, typically populist parties like the Danish People's Party, have been the pioneers of welfare chauvinism since they have been the first to argue that welfare should *only* be provided to native citizens (see Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, 2014). Unsurprisingly, a minority of scholars link this political approach embedded with interventionist exclusion when it

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[40] For the form of "solidarism" instead promoted by the Flemish *Vlaams Blok* refer to Marc Swyngedouw (2000). This author describes solidarism for this party to be "a sort of third way a sort of third way between the exploitative capitalism of liberal economies and coercive communist systems" (Swyngedouw, 2000: 136).

comes to welfare provisions, pensions, and education (or the economy in general) and taken by European right-wing populists to *authoritarianism* and *nativism* (see Ennser-Jedenastic, 2016; Ivaldi 2016; Afonso and Papadopoulos, 2015). However, it would be more correct to assume that for populists it is specifically producerism, the idea that there are "worthy" makers and "unworthy" takers that plays the greater role in terms of (principally economic) policy-making. This is not to say that producerism itself is not especially nativist and somewhat authoritarian, given the non-productive out-groups are not only ignored in terms of rights and excluded from society but sometimes even punished by legal means, when populists are in power (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016)

Returning to Ivaldi and Mazzoleni (2019: 2-3), it is also important to stress that producerism cuts across cultural and economic dimensions and is a multifaceted phenomenon. First and foremost, what all populist parties with a producerist mentality share is that they articulate the idea that there is a "true" community of hardworking producers who share common interests and values (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). They also share an identity, and especially – a common economic destiny (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6). Second, producerism works around the idea that the heartland (where the small entrepreneur, local family businesses, and the "little man" generally reside) is going through a particular kind of crisis which is creating uncertainty and putting the economic wellbeing of people at risk (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 6-7). Third, producerism engages with the idea that the productive and deserving people, essentially the "backbone of the country" (as American conservative politician Ted Cruz once referred to an Iowa farmer[41]) or "lifeblood of the economy" are *currently* being unfairly squeezed by the unproductive ones from both above (elites, bankers, monopolists, and politicians) and below (illegal immigrants, cheap labour) (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 7, 19). Last but not least, producerism embraces a nostalgic element, one which may intersect with redemptive narratives of national rejuvenation[42] where an idealised past ("the good old days") is juxtaposed to the current era of decadence (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019: 7-8) induced by modern globalised, borderless, and "anti-national" capitalism. Theoretically, this last element can be present in even more extreme and outwardly fascist doctrines. After all, the whole romanticisation of the popular-agrarian work ethic derives from right-wing (and extreme-right) political culture and tradition. In truth, one of the first thinkers to promote "the nation of producers" in their writings was the Italian fascist ideologue Giovanni Gentile (Rapisarda, 2015).

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[41] See the exchange between Ted Cruz and an angry farmer where the former concedes the latter represents the "backbone of the country" at (The Liberty Daily, 2016) the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi5IZ9StVUI.

[42] The old *Front National* and the British Union of Fascists (BUF) belonging to populistic fascist Sir Oswald Mosley serve as appropriate examples for this concept.

Congruent with the studies mentioned above, producerism has also been observed in the work of Koen Abts and colleagues (2021) as one of the primary elements associated to the welfare agenda of the populist right. These scholars simply postulate that the pro-(exclusionary) welfare of certain parties in Western Europe (e.g. the old French *Front National* and the Dutch Freedom Party among others) is determined by an economic combination of producerism with welfare *Chauvinism* and *Populism* (Abts et al., 2021: 21, 26-28). Their most relevant contribution to the sub-field (and to study of producerism as a theme) would be that of the "deservingness criteria" (e.g. *control*, *attitude*, and *reciprocity*).

In summary, only "responsible" and "virtuous" citizens who contribute (with the heavy burden of taxes) are deserving of the state's financial support (Abts et al., 2021: 30). Apparently, when it comes to state welfare, populists distinguish between the *deserving* and *undeserving* poor (Abts et al., 2021: 30-31). Specifically, the *deserving* poor are those who are old and can no longer work (but have worked legitimately as "producers" their whole lives) or who cannot do so due to disability (there is no reason for populists to exclude disabled citizens from the virtuous people) whilst the *undeserving* poor are those who are able to work but do not, due to their laziness and cultural inferiority (Abts et al., 2021). From a populist perspective, the second group (or better, "out group") does not hold the work ethic that (autochthonous) citizens naturally should hold, hence are discriminated as "inferior" and undeserving of support (Abts et al., 2021).

It is relatively unclear whether immigrants who are in the country *legally* and who pay taxes (thus are technically "active" and "productive", see Shinkel, 2010) are considered virtuous and responsible enough to be entitled to welfare. However, it is more likely they are not, because as Abts and his associates remind us – the concept of welfare producerism necessarily interacts with welfare chauvinism, which excludes non-citizens from receiving public funds *a priori* (Abts et al., 2020: 22). Immigrants are essentially "perceived as a burden on the welfare state" (Abts et al., 2020: 30). Where chauvinism and producerism are combined through a *culturalisation of producerism* "non-natives are considered as 'culturally' inclined to cheat the system and being unproductive" (Abts et al., 2020: 23; Abts and Kochuyt, 2012: 242-245). Similarly, political and corporate elites, who live among the people yet are not part of the people (this is clearly where populism and nationalism diverge, as discussed earlier), are seen as those who exploit them and prevent them from realising a harmonious, egalitarian, and virtuous community of workers/producers (Abromeit, 2015: 236).

Furthermore, the historian John Abromeit (2015) has highlighted one of the most important characteristics of what he calls "populist-producerist ideology" (and the division between producers

and parasites) is "the striking combination of modern, liberal, bourgeois economic principles with the classical republican political ideas" (Abromeit, 2015: 236). What Abromeit implies is that while the former celebrates production as the highest value in community life and as a means in itself, the latter relies on a pronounced Manichean moralism which inevitably paves the way for a distinction between a *virtuous* and *authentic* (or autochthonous) majority and an *immoral* and *decadent* minority (Abromeit, 2015: 236-237).

As Abromeit is a historian, he also locates producerist-populist ideology historically and links it to the philosophies of pre-modern thinkers of great renown, such as Abbe Sieyès, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Georges Sorel (Abromeit 2015: 237-254). For instance, Sieyes was widely known for his condemnation of the "dangerous" and "parasitic" French aristocracy that according to him only exploited the "productive labours" of the Third Estate (Abromeit, 2015: 237). Accordingly, the petty bourgeoisie, the *sans-culottes*, and the working class, prior to the revolution represented the "real nation" (or the "real people") unlike the wealthy within the non-productive sphere of circulation (Abromeit, 2015: 238). In Sieyès' view (and those who adhered to this concomitantly Jacobin and *bourgeois* proto-populist school of thought), not only aristocrats, but also wholesalers, merchants, and bankers had to be eliminated (Abromeit, 2015: 238). Abromeit also reminds us that Proudhon (as a committed populist-socialist or social-populist) distinguished between the productive and parasitic members of the French *bourgeoisie* (Abromeit, 2015: 239). According to this intellectual, similarly to right and left populists today, finance and banking, not industry, were the enemy (Abromeit, 2015: 239). Instead, the father of revolutionary national-syndicalism and godfather[43] of fascism, Sorel, spoke of "*productive* and *parasitic* capital" (Abromeit, 2015: 244). Making a clear distinction between the two, he continuously blamed politicians, big industrialists, and the world of finance for corrupting the soul of the nation (Abromeit, 2015: 242-254). Regardless, what both old and new producerist populists have in common is that they abide by the view (originally advanced by the 18th century *sans-culottes*) that elite-minorities - a small number of individuals who dispose of great wealth compared to the ordinary man - *cannot* ever be truly representative of the nation. This explains why *all* populists hold an extremely majoritarian outlook of society (see Urbinati, 2017).

To return to a previous point, whilst it is true that this theme is more consistently articulated by the populist right there have been (and likely still are) in European and American movements of the populist left that ideologically engage with the "producer ethic" (term applied by Saxton, 1990:

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[43] I used the term "godfather of fascism" as the title of "father of fascism" would likely go to Benito Mussolini. Although well-known historians like Nolte (1966) and Sternhell (1997) have argued that the origins of fascism can be traced back to late 19th century France (due to the *Action Française*) rather than 20th century Italy.

312). Leftist populists usually focus their efforts on policies that aim to reduce taxes for smaller (local and autochthonous) businesses, bolster cooperatives, or boost national production and industry – although generally this last idea has more to do with productivism rather than producerism (for accounts of left populism, see Grigoris, 2017; Damiani, 2016; Otjes and Louwerse, 2015; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

Historically, as there have been right-wing populists with a deep-rooted belief in producerism like Thomas Jefferson (known as the "first populist President"), the French *Poujadiste*'s or the Tea Party, there have also been phenomena like Andrew Jackson, the US People's Party, and the Russian Narodniks. Essentially, this latter group all romanticised the popular-agrarian tradition and weren't traceable to the (populist) right in any way, shape, or form. They were clearly leftist populists. In a critique of this glorification of producers, the author Michael Kazin (1995) (who has gone so far as calling producerism a "civil religion") states that the problem with this idea is that it stains a nation and people with an unchallenged set of strong prejudices (Kazin, 1995: 35). One can agree or disagree with Kazin based on how the producerist message is structured (and who is included in or excluded from it), what is certain however, is that producerism is an increasingly relevant component of populist ideology.

Reformism

Few are the scholars that associate the doctrine of reformism with populism. In fact, even fewer consider reformism as a core theme of populist ideology. The majority of experts have either ignored the possibility of a "populist reformism" altogether when discussing populism and its inclination towards (medium to large scale) political change (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Tugal, 2021) or actually stress the distinction between populism's *allegedly* "radical" and "revolutionary" vocation and the more moderate creed of democratic reform(-*ism*) (see Venizelos and Stavrakakis, 2023). Two popular authors, have argued of late that "populist strategy cannot be reduced to reformism, but can even inform a vernacular revolutionary politics, which can also be explicitly socialist…evidence does not allow an exclusive association of populism with reformism" (Venizelos and Stavrakakis, 2023: 298).

In some countries, political analysts and politicians themselves have gone as far as drawing a line of demarcation between the antithetical ideational positioning of "the reformists" and those of "the populists" (Thompson, 2010; Renzi, 2020; Tonini, 2020; Sabella, 2022). This logic presupposes that the *populists* are the revolutionary (and undemocratic) anti-pluralists and the *reformists* are the

pluralists who are necessarily also anti-populist. In other words, politically, the latter support what populists of today would certainly not support. Further immigration and integration, complete freedom of movement and trade, no limitations to press freedom, fewer restrictions on individual rights, and a fully secular state with a particular attention to the rule of law and minorities, serve as primary examples (for an account of "anti-populism", see Moffitt, 2018; 2020).

On the other hand, it is curious that throughout history some populist parties have deliberately adopted the term "reform" to describe themselves. It is apparent that they have done so not only to argue for drastic - yet inherently democratic (within the boundaries of democracy and the law) - change but also to distance themselves from more extreme and revolutionary transformations. Exceedingly political, statist, and totalitarian ideologies like communism (especially in the exhaustive form it took under Stalin) and fascism cannot ever be considered reformist as they aim to revolutionise society entirely each in accordance to its own dogma and pursue the physical annihilation of elements (groups or individuals) they consider as *abject* (Finchelstein, 2019: 31-97). Contrastingly, modern populism, has a peculiar emancipatory potential. Sometimes, by relying on a leader who surrounds himself with a new populist "elite" (that does not originate from the world of politics and finance) it greatly encourages social reform by experimenting with forms of state capitalism (Finchelstein, 2019: 151). Examples of political parties that are or have been both *populist* and *reformist* (uncoincidentally adopting the latter term in their name) would be Reform UK, the Reform Party of the USA and the Reform Party of Canada.

But what is actually meant by the term "reformism"? Reformism, according to André Gorz (1987), is understood to be the perspective that gradual changes *via* already existing institutions can ultimately lead to fundamental systemic change within society's political and economic structures (Gorz, 1987). At least theoretically, populism is an ideology that is all about *change*, and it is for this reason that it is "self-consciously reformist" (see Taggart, 2012) in character. Populists aim to differentiate themselves from other mainstream political actors who are (usually in times of socio-economic crisis and distrust of institutions) viewed by voters as defenders of the *status quo* and (negatively) as "candidates of continuity" (rather than of positive change) (Spannaus, 2019).

For instance, Anika Gauja (2017) has essentially argued that populism's appeal resides in the fact that (unlike "the mainstream") its leaders and parties have managed to articulate or sell economic reform "in terms of the immediate challenges and life experiences of individuals and communities" (Gauja, 2017). Thus, when they do not attempt to perilously alter institutional assets and modify constitutions (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Galston, 2018; Pappas 2019), populists will certainly plan to make significant changes to existing state structures. Such changes range all the

way from modifications to welfare and healthcare expenditure to changes to the public funding for parties (and/or newspapers) and to the cost(s) of parliament, or even tax reform. As previously asserted, these changes may be more sudden or gradual, but in most cases they remain within the framework of democratic politics (Taggart, 2012).

To supply a specific example, this time pertaining to Britain, the right-wing populists from Reform UK recently presented themselves to voters with a radically reformist agenda in three key areas : the *economy*, *public services* and *institutions* (*The Week*, 1 October, 2021). In the first, they claimed to want to eliminate income tax for six million people by raising the minimum threshold (*The Week*, 1 October, 2021). This is a classically populist measure, favouring the financially worse-off. In the second, they pledged for *zero* waiting list for the national health service, another typically populist (and usually unachievable) measure (*The Week*, 1 October, 2021). In the third, they promised to abolish state funding for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and essentially banish the House of Lords (*The Week*, 1 October, 2021). On occasion, populist parties even overtly refuse to form coalitions with other non-populist parties that do not intend to adopt structural reforms – like in the case of the Portuguese party *Chega!* (see CHEGA TV, 20 October, 2022).

However, unlike *revolutionary socialism*, populism's aim is not to overthrow democracy altogether and to enter a "dictatorship of the proletariat" phase that functions as a transition period until an officially communist (and anti-capitalist) economy is created. In fact, in countries as distinct from each other as the United States, Argentina, France and Italy modern and pre-modern populism has been *interclassist* by definition. Mobilising farmers, manual labourers and factory workers from the urban working class, as much as middle class entrepreneurs and the private sector's *petite bourgeoisie* (Taggart, 2000). There is no "class struggle" in populist ideology but a "caste struggle"[44] at most (Tarchi, 2015: 351; Zazzara, 2018), where ordinary people initially disinterested with politics (e.g. the *silent majority*) decide to get involved (through medium to large-scale non-violent protest) as an emergency measure (in times of crisis) against politicians and other elites. Often, but not always, they do so by relying on a gifted (and *sometimes* "charismatic"[45]) leader in terms of decision-making. As Taggart bluntly puts it: "populism requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people" (Taggart, 2000: 1).

In essence, populism is reformist since it "makes a point of not challenging the fundamental rules of the political game" (Taggart, 2012). Nevertheless, prominent authors like Federico Finchelstein

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[44] The leaders of PODEMOS (Errejón. Iglesias) often argued that Spanish politics reflected this type of struggle; "democracy versus caste" (*democracia versus casta*) (Finchelstein, 2019: 135).

[45] For an account on the *alleged* relationship between populism and charisma, see Eatwell (2002) or McDonnell (2016).

(2019), who hold a slightly negative view of populism, have hinted that the ideology itself (its way of understanding the political) reflects something "between democracy and dictatorship" (Finchelstein, 2019: 175-246). However, it is unexpectedly his commentary on fascism that may help us better understand the reformist (thus anti-revolutionary) vein of populism. On fascism, Finchelstein wrote that it

"*was essentially revolutionary in that it created a new political order, but it was less revolutionary in its relationship with capitalism. In fact, it never threatened it. Fascists wanted to reform capitalism in nationalist terms that took social reform away from the left. They put forward a way of ruling society with massive popular support but without seriously questioning conservative social and economic privileges and political dominance*" (Finchelstein, 2019: 44).

If we were to replace the word "fascism" with "populism" his argument would still be cogent. All things considered, it must be acknowledged that there is (or has been) a "reformist populism" or "populist reformism" that manifested itself - especially in the United States at first - by setting forth a political agenda that was radically alternative to that of classical (and "elitist") liberalism. In the American case, a rise in inequalities accompanied by the failures of institutions at a local and federal level to adequately represent constituents gave birth to popular bottom-up protests of farmers and other rural workers in the mid-western and southern states (see Taggart, 2000: 25-45). Eventually, this resulted not only in the birth of the American populist movement (and consequently the People's Party) as an organised political body but also in the spread of a set of ideas (combining anti-elitist populism with democratic reformism) that went as far as influencing the Democratic Party to choose a vehemently populist candidate for the presidency – William J. Bryan in 1896 (see Tonini, 2020).

Although the American populists were not as revolutionary as the Narodnik's or *Narodnaja Volja* in late 19th century Russia who followed Alexander Herzen's teachings, they still did pressure the incumbent government to adopt serious radical reforms. These included calls for a shorter work-week, nationalisation of the railway network, more public ownership, direct election of senators, progressive taxation and also restrictions on immigration. Overall, their agenda encompassed the reformism of progressive democrats intertwined with a more agrarian radicalism of the populists, ultimately conceiving a truly spontaneous bottom-up movement incorporating large sections of the lower and lower-middle classes. Essentially, the People's Party reflected a populist - democratic yet mildly illiberal - reformism (Tonini, 2020). For influential historians like Eric Hobsbawm (1994: 133, 135), populism was integral to the radical left-wing tradition, especially American populism given both the People's Party and (much later) Louisiana's Huey Long mainly made their egalitarianist appeals to the poor. Accordingly, it was successful, demagogic and dangerous – all at the same time (Hobsbawm 1994: 133, 135; Finchelstein, 2019: 155).

One notable scholar who has no problem linking reformism to populism is Paul Taggart (2018b). As a matter of fact, Taggart indicates that reformism is certainly a characteristic of populism, but possibly also one of its greatest strengths: "populisms power is in being with the realms of reformism and stopping short of revolution…as soon as it steps outside those boundaries it comes to be authoritarian, revolutionary but most decidedly not populism" (Taggart, 2018b: 3). Populists are *not* anti-system, but rather anti-establishment. A major populist complaint is that it is the system, the establishment, the corrupt politicians, that do not follow the rules of the political game and fail to represent the people. Furthermore, the direct democracy features of populism are reformist *per se* in the sense that they aim to reform the state in order to allow people to be vertically integrated in the structures of organised (democratic) society. In essence, populists want their representatives to be more responsive towards their needs. As I mentioned before, there are times populists may scorn at the idea of coalition-building with traditional parties (e.g. conservatives, liberals, social-democrats, socialists), but they tend to adopt such radical stances only before and during elections, rather than after (see Capaul and Ewert, 2021). However, given they concomitantly believe that institutions can be reformed from within once they become involved, sometimes this justifies their role in negotiations with mainstream centre-Right and centre-Left parties and their support for - generally temporary - coalition governments where populists themselves are not the only protagonists (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2006).

Whilst leading scholars like Taggart may find that the reformist traits and lack of totalitarian/dictatorial ambition of populism is *possibly* one of the few (if not the only) "positive" elements of an ideology that still "has the potential to damage European democracy" (Taggart, 2012), other more ideologically predisposed intellectuals have been very critical of populism's reformist orientation. For instance, left-leaning author Seraphim Seferiades (2020) is not only highly critical of the ideational approach itself (due to its failure to delimit the boundaries of populism) but also dismisses the idea that populism is genuinely anti-elite or anti-establishment (Seferiades, 2020: 244-249).

From a semi-historical perspective, Seferiades argues that throughout history populism has mostly been reformist and conservatively anti-revolutionary, characterising segments of the *class-collaborationist* political Left (as well as the Right) that remain convinced the "time is not ripe for socialism" or for real revolution (Seferiades, 2020: 247, 252). In his view, Populists of left and right may rhetorically praise the "innocuous people" and antagonistically articulate their desire to emancipate the people from a corrupt elite, but in practice they do almost nothing to promote real

change (Seferiades, 2020: 252). From a Marxist perspective, real change entails a "democratic deepening at the level of production" (Seferiades, 2020: 252).

According to Seferiades, populism is nothing more than a strategy; one that functions successfully due to its "deceptive invocations of the popular" (Seferiades, 2020: 224, 252). In other words, overall, populism is in itself "forged", "inauthentic" and "deceptive" (Seferiades, 2020: 252). The idea is that while claiming to want to empower ordinary citizens, workers, peasants, artisans, and others from the lower classes, populists do everything they can to *not* alienate the *bourgeoisie* (Seferiades, 2020: 251). Although he positively recognises that leftist populists like *SYRIZA, PODEMOS* or *France Insoumise* are not as xenophobic as their right-wing counterparts, he negatively accuses them of taking the same reformist approach (Seferiades, 2020: 236, 239). Accordingly, the populist left in Greece and elsewhere has successfully managed to pit *a worthy people* against a symmetrically *wrongdoing elite* yet has seriously failed in delivering policies that are in the economic interest of the *subaltern classes* (Seferiades, 2020: 240). In reality, Seferiades argues, they have actually undermined them (Seferiades, 2020: 249).

Moreover, from Seferiades' standpoint, given populism is a form of "new reformism" that is class-collaborationist by definition, and harbours the bizarre political aim of "undoing domination without clashing with the dominant" many contemporary populist parties associated to the "radical left" should be disassociated from this label as there is nothing inherently radical about them (Seferiades, 2020: 249). Instead, they supposedly merely embrace a *softer* version of neo-liberalism (an ideology that derives from the Right and *not* the Left). For Seferiades, these deceptive invocations of the popular, have existed among factions of the left that have been infiltrated by *bourgeoise* elements, contaminating "real socialism" ever since the German Social Democratic Party's *Burgfriedenspolitik*[46] ("policy of truce") phase prior to WWI (Seferiades, 2020: 249-250). He continues to argue that post-Stalinist (left-wing) parties like PRC (Italy), PT (Brazil), SP (Netherlands), *PASOK* (Greece), and *Die Linke* (Germany) have acted similarly, abandoning authentic socialist values in the name of reformism. All things considered, to Seferiades, populism is merely a synonym for reformism (Seferiades, 2020: 235-236; Venizelos and Stavrakakis, 2022: 8). Notwithstanding, more cautiously, throughout this thesis it is argued that the latter is ultimately a core theme of the former.

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[46] Essentially, this is when the German *SPD* began adopting populistic and nationalistic stances, such as favouring the war in the name of patriotic duty, impeding trade union strikes, suppressing the more radical (socialist) figures in the party, and limiting other freedoms (Seferiades, 2020: 249).

Direct Democracy

There is no reason to doubt that direct democracy is an important theme (or core concept) ingrained in populist ideology. In fact, as the Italian sociologists Emiliana De Blasio and Michele Sorice (2018) recognise it is "a quality that is common to the many different populisms" (both right-leaning and left-leaning ones) and is also understood to function "as a tool to empower citizens" (De Blasio and Sorice, 2018: 1). For instance, most schemes that involve direct democracy (referendums/plebiscites and the *popular initiative*) serve the purpose of "invoking the living voice of the people and their spontaneous action" (Canovan, 1999: 13) in order to make citizens (especially the "common people" of the *polis*) feel less alienated from political decision-making processes and institutions. The idea populists have is to make democracy more expressive of popular demands. Their aim is to re-structure the democratic system in such manner that people can voice those popular grievances and perspectives that are likely to be systematically disregarded by governments, mainstream parties, and mainstream media (Canovan, 1999: 2). Understandably, the two above-mentioned sociologists go as far as arguing that "populism itself is sometimes portrayed as almost synonymous with direct democracy" (De Blasio and Sorice, 2018: 1).

But how exactly do we define *direct democracy*? According to Canovan, who provides an accurate description, direct democracy is nothing more than "political decision making by referendum and popular initiative" (Canovan, 1999: 2). Her definition suits the one provided earlier by De Blasio and Sorice and is interestingly also supported by populists themselves who claim to be ardent supporters of direct democracy (as well as the only "true democrats") with the sole purpose of "voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments" (Canovan, 1999: 2). Their attacks on political elites from the mainstream parties are supposedly justified on the basis that those elites purposely ignore to work in the interest of the people. Hence, direct democracy is one of the few (if not the only) instrument available to make the opinions of *silent majorities* count again. In addition, in one of her texts on populist theory, Canovan rightly suggests that Switzerland is understood to be the "undisputed homeland" of direct democracy (Canovan, 2005: 109). Unsurprisingly, many of the European populists mention Switzerland as an inspiring model to follow. Among those, a primary example would be the Austrians from the FPÖ, who have pledged to move in that direction if they were to obtain power (Bedock et al., 2022: 4-5; *Reuters*, December 17, 2017).

In some of her work, Canovan appears to provide a relatively positive account of populism linking its commitment to (somewhat inclusionary) direct democracy practices and popular participation to

a wider array of democratic politics (see Canovan, 1999: 2-16; Canovan, 2019: 159-170). Especially by highlighting populism's role in being the "shadow of democracy" (Arditi, 2019) and occasionally allowing the diffusion of a stimulating and redemptive form of politics (Canovan, 2019: 159-170; Canovan, 1999: 8-14). In essence, manifestations of populism are not only necessary to keep powerful elites in check (e.g. by making use of transparent procedures) but also allow the *demos* to proclaim its desires and hopes for a better future through active exertions of popular sovereignty, including instances of direct democracy use (Canovan, 1999). People need politics to make them feel a certain way, but especially to make them hope that their lives will improve (regardless of whether this means paying less tax, better mortgage deals, more job opportunities, or less foreign competition) or else it becomes a mere administrative task and loses its valour and sustainability (Canovan, 1999). In the populist mindset, the *authentic people* need to be redeemed. When representative politics fails to do what it is supposed to do - appropriately represent its own citizens/electors/constituents - populists step in (De la Torre, 2015). Their political offer is based on a narrative of re-politicisation of the issues that the plain people from lower class majorities care about the most – such as lower taxation, immigration, defence of tradition, welfare, and law and order (d'Albergo and Moini, 2019: 46-47, 51-53).

To reiterate, populists are the ones who promise to return to give attention to those issues in the name of the people, often by relying on direct democracy, and calling for referendums on such matters. This is not to say that all parties that focus on issues related to taxation, immigration, welfare and state security today are populist. However, it is very likely that the parties or leaders who antagonistically frame debate surrounding these issues blaming the establishment for not dealing with them appropriately (in order to pursue their own "corrupt interests") are indeed populist. It is certainly populistic to wish to re-claim a voice for a silent majority that has either been temporarily *voluntarily* silent (given the "the people" are too busy with their daily lives and working hard to put food on the table to become involved with politics) or *involuntarily* silenced by a corrupt oligarchy that is not representative of the popular majority (Taggart, 2000: 93).

All this has much to do with what Michael Oakeshott (2007) calls "politics of faith" and the "politics of scepticism". Simply put, the two styles of politics have always been in conflict since the beginning of history (Oakeshott as cited in Canovan, 1999: 8-9). The first, *politics of faith*, which is typically populist, expects all that is political to represent or strive for a perfect world, intrinsically it contains elements of salvation (either religious, secular or mixed[47] as is often the case with

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[47] See Varriale (2021c: 24-26). In an article for the magazine *The Mallard* it is explained how conservative national-populists (in Britain, Germany and Italy) articulate neo-traditionalist messages with symbolic gestures loosely based around the tropes of "identity", "redemption" and "morality".

populism) and redemption. When the English populists from *Britain First* group strolled through a Muslim-majority area of Luton town carrying a massive Christian cross they were performing an ethno-symbolic populist ritual of redemption as they saw their territorial presence as a way of demonstrating "we were here first!" (Varriale 2021b: 24; Freeden, 2017: 4). The goal was to show that the indigenous English population is no longer silent and wishes to somewhat reclaim its majority status (Varriale, 2021b). *Politics of faith* are what populist leaders prefer using because they serve the purpose of building a bridge between them and the multitude (or "the crowd" as the famous Gustave Le Bon would call it).

When discussing Oakeshott's classifications, Canovan reminds us that "enthusiasm" (the accompanying motivation to join a like-minded group of people that wish to meet redemption through popular revolt or referendum voting) and "power" (be that the rhetorical and decisional power associated to a charismatic populist headman) are the two elements that are certainly required to stir the masses of disillusioned voters (Canovan, 1999: 8-9). The second, *politics of scepticism*, is instead "suspicious of both power and enthusiasm" as Canovan (1999: 8-9) postulates. It is this type of understanding of politics that creates an admittance for technocratic liberalism and an anti-populist (and not quite popular) democratic proceduralism. Constitutionalism, checks and balances, and institutions are essential to maintain politics of scepticism alive and serve as a bulwark against the spectre of a "populist democracy" that is redemptive, majoritarian, informal and direct (see Mair, 2002). Notwithstanding, in other work, Canovan (2005) has appeared more sceptical about drawing an inherently positive connection between referendums (and direct democracy in general) and the so-called *will of the sovereign people* who populists claim to defend. In one instance, she argues "there is no necessary equivalence between the authoritative outcome of a referendum and a verdict by the sovereign people" (Canovan, 2005: 110). In other terms, the result of a direct democracy procedure (often a referendum or a plebiscite) may sometimes reflect clear majorities, but also skewed majorities.

Taking this into account, it is important to highlight the fact that populism is *not* incompatible with democracy altogether. As Canovan herself stated before, populism "should not be dismissed as a pathological form of politics of no interest to the political theorist, for its democratic pretensions raise important issues" (Canovan, 1999:2). Rather than it being undemocratic *per se*, it is at odds with the most liberal, constitutionalist and (perhaps) progressive aspects of modern liberal-democracy. There is somewhat of a consensus in scholarship and enough evidence for us to consider populism an "illiberal but democratic response to undemocratic liberalism" (Mudde, 2021: 581). Not only Mudde and Canovan, but other major specialists, such as Ernesto Laclau (1977;

2007), Chantal Mouffe (2018) and Takis S. Pappas (2019), have on several occasion highlighted that populism does in fact hold at least *some* democratic credentials and credibility (see also Finchelstein, 2019).

More inclusive forms of populism can be a useful corrective to democracy especially in regimes that are "competitively authoritarian" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) or full-scale authoritarian where popular majorities do not have a voice and are not able to express themselves through free elections and freedom of speech or of association (*Apartheid* or the Polish People's Republic are suitable examples). In fact, unlike totalitarians on the extreme-right and extreme-left, populists do not do away with electoral participation, but instead expand it for the populace (Finchelstein, 2019: 99-174). Their support for direct democracy in the form of recalls, referendums and plebiscites are a primary example of this. The counter-argument, originating from other scholars such as Müller (2015) and Stefan Rummens (2017) would be that populism is actually more un-democratic than it is democratic. Especially due to its anti-pluralism (see Müller, 2015; 2016), intolerance for institutional checks and balances, its aim to create fixed, homogenous, and unchanging majorities, disregarding political, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and at the same time its demonising of adversaries from a moralistic perspective (Rummens, 2017).

However, the most logical way to observe and finally comprehend populism's relationship with democracy overall is to adhere to the so-called "two-pillar model" put forward (in slightly different ways) by Peter Mair (2002) or William A. Galston (2018). In essence, populism is not contrary to the popular/electoral aspects of democracy and to the idea that "the people are sovereign" and should decide whom to be ruled by (thus expand elections and referendums instead of eliminating them) but it is undeniably hostile to the more liberal aspects of democracy such as the rule of law (or constitutionalism) and individual/minority rights (Galston, 2018). According to Mair (2002), democracy is ultimately held together by a balance between the *popular pillar* (the sovereign role of the *demos*; free elections, free association, free speech) and the *constitutional pillar* ("checks and balances"). Populists often only show regard for the former pillar. This also explains why they are so attached to the concept of direct democracy, procedures such as referendums are much more likely to convey the will of the majority of the population than that of minorities.

Furthermore, as one author correctly points out "direct democracy is presented as a modernisation of representative democracy" (Debras, 2022: 7). Evidently, populists see it as an opportunity to obtain legislative legitimacy for some of the more radical policies they wish to pursue. For instance, populist representatives like the FPÖ's Herbert Kickl have openly stated that controversial and divisive issues (in recent Austrian politics) such as those related to immigration and labour market

reform "must be resolved by more direct democracy and referendums" (Kickl, 12 April, 2017 as cited in Debras, 2002: 8). Also, he once complained that "Austrians have never been asked whether they want this massive immigration" (Kickl, 12 April, 2017 as cited in Debras, 2022: 8).

It has been established that populist parties are usually considerably critical about representative democracy and its functions (Moffitt, 2020). Their pledge, is to (supposedly) give more political power to the people. It is for this specific reason that they have made democratic reform (and the promotion of direct democracy) a central aspect of their platform (Bedock et al., 2022). Accordingly, direct democracy is understood to be a reasonable alternative to liberal representative democracy because the latter is susceptible to clientelism, corruption and *particracy*. It should come as no surprise that party literature of parties such as the now defunct *Vlaams Blok* (an originally neo-fascist party that became populist during the 90s) contains statements such as the following: "Democracy should lead to the situation in which the whole (ethnic) community can control and sanction the government" (Verreycken, 1991: 115 as cited in Mudde, 2000: 113). Populist endorsement of direct democracy usually also involves an endorsement of decision-making instruments such as the (positive) popular initiative, the veto initiative, the obligatory referendum, the top-down referendum, and the consultative referendum (Bedock et al, 2022: 5). When it comes to the populist right and referendums, one cannot disagree with Mudde when he says that "virtually all populist radical right parties call for its introduction or increased use" (Mudde, 2007: 152).

Valuable research like the one conducted by Sergiu Gherghina and Jean-Benoit Pilet (2021) has empirically tested Mudde's assertion and essentially demonstrated that there is *at least* some support for direct democracy among - right and left - populist parties (Gherghina and Pilet, 2021: 7-9). In fact, almost half (45%) of the populist manifestos they scrutinised advocated for direct democracy (Bedock et al., 2022: 5). According to another investigation, conducted by Volker Best (2020), the link is stronger with populist right parties as more than three-quarters of them openly promote direct democracy (Bedock et al., 2022: 5; Best, 2020: 203-251). Nevertheless, overall Gherghina's and Pilet's study is the most relevant one, due to its accuracy and scope. The two scholars have principally concluded that even if not all populist's support increased use of referendums, there is enough evidence to suggest that populists parties are more likely to support this type of direct democracy compared to their non-populist counterparts (Gherghina and Pilet, 2021: 4-7). Based on this, we can assume that direct democracy is a core element of populist ideology. After all, as Gherghina and Pilet admit themselves, unlike non-populists, "it is true that no populist parties stand clearly against referendums" (Gherghina and Pilet: 2021: 4).

Taking everything into account, whilst referendums are certainly the major aspect of direct democracy, they are not the *only* one. In fact, Steffen Mohrenberg (2018) and two research colleagues remind us (taking the lead from Canovan who preceded them) that the popular initiative and plebiscites (smaller scale referendums essentially) are also part of the repertoire of direct democracy (Mohrenberg et al., 2019: 2). Therefore, the fact a minority of populists are not inclined to call for referendums does not equate to them being opposed to other forms of direct democracy in any way. If we also consider popular initiative(s) (mainly the recall) and plebiscites than the relationship between right and left populism and direct democracy becomes much more conspicuous. Not to mention, Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg (2018), have demonstrated there is a clear link between individuals with pronounced populist attitudes and support for direct democracy (Mohrenberg et al., 2018: 21). In subsequent chapters, I will attempt to show that direct democracy is unequivocally promoted by the Italian populists from the League and 5SM. However, for clarity purposes, I will first refer to some international cases below.

Populists tend to promote forms of direct democracy irrespective of whether they locate themselves on the right or left (although they rarely do, as they often boast about being "neither left nor right"[48]) of the spectrum. Considering the populist right, it is understood that rather successful parties like the FPÖ have recently exhibited their political "blackmail potential" towards their coalition partners by making it clear that direct democracy expansion would be the prerequisite for their participation in any national government (Bedock et al., 2022: 5). Even in the past, with Haider in charge, the same party constantly brought up the issue of introducing binding popular initiatives and advocated referendums for almost every EU treaty (Bedock et al., 2022: 5). Almost identically, Jean Marie Le Pen's *Front National* populists have been long-standing supporters of citizen's popular initiatives and local referendum initiatives from the 1970s onwards (Bedock et al., 2022: 5). Instead, in the Netherlands, there is no question that the personalist Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders favours consultative referendums on a number of issues (Bedock et al., 2022: 6). Another smaller (but still vehemently populist) Dutch party on the right, the Forum for Democracy, has followed the PVVs' lead on the matter (Bedock et al., 2022: 6). Essentially, both aim to rely on direct democracy to "give power back to the citizens" (Bedock et al., 2022: 5). In neighbouring Germany, it is instead the AFD populists who are the most outspoken about direct democracy and have called for the introduction of the "Swiss Model" repeatedly (Bedock et al., 2022: 5).

Considering the populist left, it is evident that organisations like *PODEMOS*, *SYRIZA* and the Greek *Indignados* all look favourably upon direct democracy too (Rico Motos, 2019; Vittori, 2018; Smith,

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[48] For example, the French Front National has consistently embraced the slogan "*Ni droite, Ni gauche*" under Marine Le Pen – see Guillou for *Le Monde*, 12 November 2022 and Sternhell (2012).

2015; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013). They might be less vocal than the populist right on the matter, but in Spain *PODEMOS* has openly supported a referendum on Catalonian independence ("let the people decide" was Iglesias's idea) and *SYRIZA* is mostly known for having forwarded the issue of EU bailout terms to the populace in 2015 (Smith, 2015). Ultimately, scholars like Bedock, Best, Otjes and Weisskircher (2022) have conjunctly shown that populist parties are usually ineffective in influencing mainstream parties in power to adopt direct democracy to the extent they desire (Bedock et al., 2022). Sometimes, they even fail to do so themselves due to institutional constraints. Notwithstanding, direct democracy is overall an important aspect of populist ideology, which is why (as shown in the lines above) a substantial number of academic specialists have focus their attention on this theme.

II. Methodology: A Thematic Approach

"First, have a definite, clear practical ideal; a goal; an objective. Second, have the necessary means to achieve your ends; wisdom, money, materials, and methods. Third, adjust all your means to that end".

- Aristotle

Methodology: An Introduction

There will hardly ever be any disagreement in respect to methodology being a key aspect of a research project. Overall, writing a chapter on methodology is also the most difficult part of a doctoral thesis. Whether one's focus is on political science, history, classic literature, or psychology producing a solid methodological framework to link to a theoretical framework can be a mind-boggling, time-consuming and hazardous task. An intellectually honest and driven researcher, one that has already consumed the relevant literature on methodology such as that by distinguished experts like John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018), Layna Mosley (2013), Branislav Radeljic (2010), Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (2009) and Tom Wengraf (2001) will clearly state in his/her work that no method (including their very own) is flawless. A quest to pursue scientific excellence can be courageous and noble but it is also somewhat delusional, even for the most optimistic and rigorous scholar. This is especially true for what concerns the hectic world of politics, its constant swerves, open-ended debates, esoteric agendas, and philosophical abstractions. After all, the political world is a reality, but a reality that is "socially made", as L. Mosley (2013: 9) puts it.

That being said, unlike a reasonable portion of scholars in the field, I perhaps take an epistemologically more *interpretivist*[49] (rather than *positivist*[50]) approach in my *synthesis* which principally entails a qualitative Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) for the inspecting of populist *themes* (or electoral pledges, depending on one's personal viewpoint) present in *both* party

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[49] Epistemologically, interpretivists "treat the world as socially made; knowledge is impossible to separate from historical context and power relationships" (L. Mosley, 2013: 9). An interpretivist feels that not all social sciences are principally about "cause and effect" and that it is more desirable to understand a phenomenon by focusing on *causal understanding* (e.g. how a 5SM MP legitimises his anti-elitist ideals or how a League MP would justify the agreement made with a party that is a lot more left-wing on socio-economic issues and on *some* ethical issues). For the most "radical" of interpretivists (not myself) positionality and bias cannot be overcome and there are no objective-absolute truths. Hence, they are less concerned with quantitative evaluation and a falsifiable hypothesis (L. Mosley: 9-12).

[50] Positivists are understood to be the polar opposite of interpretivists but just like populism and anti-populism have been blurred before (e.g. the Italian cases of Berlusconi's *FI!* and *PDL*) *positivism* and *interpretivism* are largely blurred in social sciences as well (L. Mosley, 2013: 9-12). It is true that strictly positivist scholars will always come up with a falsifiable hypothesis that can be tested empirically and are dedicated to the "discovery of truths", but L. Mosley also suggests that an individual scholar's position in relation to the positivist-interpretivist spectrum can (and perhaps should) be more flexible in practice than in theory (L. Mosley, 2013: 9). This is very much the case with this contribution, I maintain a certain degree of flexibility when I aim to prove (through a scientific theoretical framework) that the two Italian parties under evaluation are indeed populist but even if/when I reach that conclusion, I make sure to clearly state that other inferences can be reached by using other methods.

manifestos and in interviews with party (mostly "elite") representatives. In turn, as stated at least once before, a set of numerical values originating from the TCA analysis - involving a calculation and (subjective) quantification of the number of themes present in each manifesto and interview - will appear in the conclusion of the thesis and also be made available in the appendices. These values are nothing more than the numeric representation of the overall *degree* of ideological populism manifested by the two Italian parties and are not only displayed quantitatively but (even more importantly) qualitatively as well, as they are ultimately dependent on a *qualitative* measurement made possibly only by Thematic Content Analysis.

Essentially, the displaying of numeric values should be understood as merely an extra tool *entirely* pertinent to the observations made in the TCA (located in the main body of this academic work) and are only justifiable methodologically in connection to the primary empirical exercise. In brief, the full methodology entails the identification of populist themes (or leitmotifs) contained in party literature (in this case electoral manifestos) and politician interviews. Once the themes are identified and applied to simple gradational scheme (that only *resembles* Ragin's fuzzy-sets/fsQCA) they can be used to assess how "populist" or "not populist" a party is. The specifics of the procedure will be presented in full throughout the third and fourth sections of this chapter since a generic "methodological literature review" should be prioritised.

On Measuring Populism

The Quantitative and the Qualitative

Notable populism scholars, namely Marits J. Meijers and Andrej Zaslove (2021: 372), posit that in contemporary times "we still lack a complete set of data to measure populism precisely" (Meijers Zaslove and Zaslove, 2021: 372). Notwithstanding, several scholars have ventured into mathematical and non-mathematical systems to measure populism in context before. Normally, it is "populist attitudes" (see Wuttke et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018) or "populist discourse" (see Aslanidis, 2018) that are measured. Nonetheless, *ideology* which is in itself a collection of attitudes tied to a greater belief-system, can reasonably be measured too. This approach has been welcomed, endorsed, and observed by other scholarly work such as that by Zoran Pavlovic and Bojan Todosijevic (2018) presented at a recent European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference. Other academics, even those who have not employed a fully thematic approach, have certainly successfully developed empirical procedures (sometimes qualitative, other times more quantitative, but also hybrids) that are unequivocally of particular interest. Regardless of

whether or not their methods resemble mine, they are worthy of mention. Among those who have attempted to measure populism, by either using thematic analysis (TCA alone or accompanied by gradational/degreeist techniques, that aim to classify populism by *degree*) or entirely distinct methods we find experts such as Taggart (2000), Hawkins (2009; 2017, alongside Rovira Kaltwasser); Van Kessel (2011; 2015), Pauwels (2011), Akkerman et al., (2014), Kurth and Glasbergen (2017), Popping (2018) and Norris (2020).

Takis S. Pappas (2016), a scholar highly critical of degreeist methodology (given Sartorians[51] like himself believe *essentialist* characteristics are too difficult to "pin down" and measure), nonetheless provides an appropriate definition of "degreeism" itself : a "way to treat populism as a continuous (more – or – less) rather than dichotomous (either – or) concept" (Pappas, 2016: 9). However, others find that applying a gradational metric (e.g. fuzzy sets, holistic grading) to populism is extremely useful if the final objective is to decipher populism in different cases of parties or individual leaders (Weyland, 2017: 65-67). For example, we know that leading specialists in the sub-field like Kirk A. Hawkins (2009) have rigorously (and profitably) made use of holistic grading to determine the degree of populist ideology present in the *communication* (choice of wording in written material and speeches) of Latin American leaders.

Another expert, Stijn Van Kessel - who similarly to Kurt Weyland (2017) prefers to adopt Ragin's famous fuzzy sets within the boundaries of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) has set out to explore why some populist parties in Europe have performed better than others over time (see Van Kessel, 2011; 2015). His investigation distantly resembles one undertaken by Elisabeth Carter (2005) in which the author raises awareness to the fact that populist success often depends on factors such as *party ideology*, *party organisation and leadership*, *party competition*, and the *institutional environment*. What marks the real difference between the two studies is that Kessel, unlike Carter (who includes populist parties under the umbrella term "extreme-right"), *does* rely on fuzzy set scores (therefore accepts degreeism) to identify different populist actors across the continent. He also completely disregards specific ideological factors (Kessel, 2011: 68-88).

A Dictionary Based Approach: Teun Pauwels

In one other academic piece, Teun Pauwels (2011), sets out to measure the degree of populism in external and internal party literature of *only* Flemish parties (Pauwels, 2011: 97). Curiously, he

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[51] Those are scholars who generally prefer to follow the conceptual leads of the Professor *emeritus* Giovanni Sartori. I suspect that Pappas (along with Mattia Zulianello, 2018 and Daniel Rueda, 2021) is one of them.

adopts a methodology which is similar to my own as it involves a form of textual analysis and quantification of populist words that are then categorised into ideas/ideologies based on a so-called *dictionary based approach* (Pauwels, 2011: 103). For instance, words in text he directly acknowledges as indicators of "populism" (rather than other ideologies like "neo-liberalism" or "conservatism" based on a dictionary definition) are "elite", "corruption", "arrogant", "betray" "particracy" and so on (Pauwels, 2011: 105). Although Pauwels' method is more quantitative than mine and he uses a software program instead of hand-coding he also considers populism a "matter of degree" and refuses to embrace a Sartorian "either-or" logic for this concept (Pauwels, 2011: 98, 101). For this reason, he finds that populism *must* attach itself to another ideology and the results of his investigation determine that the *Vlaams Blok* and List Dedecker are indeed significantly populist parties (unlike others like the N-VA which are only "moderately populist") but they also (partially) manifest other ideologies (Pauwels, 2011: 110, 114). For example, while the *Vlaams Blok* is an example of a "radical right" and "nativist" form of populism the List Dedecker party reflects a version of populism that is much more (neo)liberal (Pauwels, 2011: 114).

Overall, both strengths and weaknesses can be observed in Pauwel's approach. His methodology is certainly promising because when it comes coding because by using a software like *Yoshikoder* he overcomes the limitations of hand-coding which is often considered time-consuming and somewhat unreliable due to excess subjectivity of the individual scholar (Pauwels, 2011: 105, 114). Nevertheless, too much emphasis is given to one particular dictionary, the use of another dictionary will most likely provide different results. As the author himself recognises: *quantitative text analysis* "does not interpret text units, one should also be aware that the method either overestimates or underestimates the degree of populism" (Pauwels, 2011: 114). It may occur that some "populist" words are presented within the text in a non-populist (or even anti-populist) manner but the dictionary may still identify them as being populist (Pauwels, 2011: 114). Not to mention, some populist words may not even be detected by the dictionary as they aren't incorporated as such in the first place, hence bringing the level of validity of the results further down (Pauwels, 2011: 114).

Taking all of this into account, Pauwels' method to measure populism would be considered sufficiently reliable to most scholars and worthy of mention. After all, one can agree with Pauwels that populism usually presents itself alongside another ideology (see Pauwels, 2011: 100). It has been established that there are more "right-wing" national-populists and liberal-populists (although Pauwels more specifically refers to them as "neoliberal") and more "left-wing" social-populists. Although, if a party can be classified as "populist" that means that it is populism and not any other ideology that dominates its political agenda.

Global Party Survey ("GPS"): Pippa Norris

Another impressive contribution that is certainly influential in the sub-field of "measuring populism" is that presented by the Harvard scholar Pippa Norris (2020). Since *systematic*, *valid*, and *rigorous* work that intends to measure populism at a transnational level is rare in academia Norris and her research assistants came up with the Global Party Survey (or "GPS Survey") to address this issue (Norris, 2020: 697). In fact, Norris stresses that "the GPS provides new estimates of the ideological values and issue positions of all types of political parties around the globe, develops innovative measures for how far parties deploy populist rhetoric, and confirms the robustness of the new ideological and populist estimates when compared against previous expert surveys" (Norris, 2020: 697). Therefore, the GPS is a form of expert surveying utilised to measure populism worldwide. No less than 1861 experts were employed to draw estimates of populism for 1043 parties in 163 countries (Norris, 2020: 697, 701). In essence, this study was designed to provide accurate and reliable results (Norris, 2020: 697, 703, 707).

Using *Qualtrics* as a platform for the questionnaire to be provided to experts, Norris included 21 *core* items (among those *anti-elite* and *anti-corruption* rhetoric was borrowed from the older CHES Survey) to be measured using a ten-point continuous scale in order for them to identify the party's (current) position regarding both Left-Right *economic* values and Liberal-Conservative *social* values (Norris, 2020: 701). Conveniently, what is predominantly under scrutiny is the rhetoric used by each party in leadership speeches, rallies, press releases, party platforms and campaign communications (Norris, 2020: 702). Moreover, pluralism (and its rhetoric) is essentially regarded as the complete opposite (or "antithetical" as Norris specifically suggests) of populism (and its rhetoric) (Norris, 2020, 702). Mainly, on this ten-point scale - where *0* equals a party that strongly favors *pluralist* rhetoric and *10* equals a party that strongly favors *populist* rhetoric - that party positions on issues ranging all the way from immigration and women's rights to welfare and taxation are assessed and classified (for a fully graphic account see Norris 2020: 706-708).

The greatest contribution supplied by Norris's GPS Survey is perhaps that (even if they share anti-elitism and other themes) there are very distinct types of populism out there (this is what I argued populism is "polymorphous") and while many are usually classified as "right-wing" radicals or extremists those populists ("extremist" or not) may be in part differentiated across a multidimensional issue space (Norris, 2020: 713-714). Norris argues populists can be "Progressives" and "Laissez-faire Libertarians" as well as "Authoritarian Right" or "Nativist Left" (Norris, 2020: 714). Parties like Spain's *VOX*, *Fidesz*, the Slovak National Party, the Swiss People's Party and *SYRIZA* and *PODEMOS* all share important similarities (mainly the harsh critique towards the

status quo) yet also differ significantly under other aspects (Norris, 2020: 713). To cite one aspect, Norris shows that there can be populists of the right who hold free-market (economic) values but also somewhat "right-wing" (or better, "culturally conservative") populist parties who do not adhere to neoliberalism and prefer more left-wing economic policies (e.g. *Jobbik*, Slovak National Party) (Norris, 2020: 713). Of course, then there are also those who endorse both more or less leftist progressive/liberal social values and leftist economics (e.g. *SYRIZA* and *PODEMOS*) (Norris, 2020: 713). All things considered, scholars must recognise the great importance and value of the GPS Survey and draw inspiration from it for future detailed studies. Above all, for those entertaining a degreeist approach and granular measure, this methodology "provides greater precision than simple binary party classifications or typologies" (Norris, 2020: 714).

Measuring "Populist Attitudes?": Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove

Besides Pauwels (2011) and Norris (2020) there is also relevant literature produced conjunctly by the three scholars Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove (2014) that focuses on the measurement of populism. In this case however, it is "political attitudes" in voters and not parties that is observed (Akkerman, et al., 2014). Their work clearly demonstrates that "it is possible to measure populist attitudes at the individual level in a theoretically consistent and empirically robust manner" (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014: 1343-1344). Just like Norris (2020) these three scholars differentiate between populism and pluralism, since they point out (and devise a measurement technique) that there can be *populist attitudes* but also *pluralist attitudes* among the voting citizenry (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1325). Pluralist attitudes are not considered populist at all (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1329). Furthermore, they include a third element : *elitist attitudes* (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1331-1332). Elitist attitudes are also unlikely to be populist, because as Mudde (2017) stated in another contribution, "there are two clear opposites of populism: elitism and pluralism" (Mudde, 2017: 54). It should come as no surprise that most of the leaders or parties today that are categorised as not-populist or "anti-populist" (see Moffit, 2018; 4-9; 2020) tend to be both more pluralist and more elitist compared to populists. Examples of those can be found in Germany (Angela Merkel or Olaf Scholtz), France (Emmanuel Macron), Italy (Matteo Renzi) and elsewhere in Europe (Moffit, 2020). In any event, returning to the publication by Akkerman and colleagues, the scholars assess attitudes in voters *exclusively* in the Dutch context (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1324).

In summary, by relying on a professional research agency (MWM2) they attempted to survey 981 people of which no more than *586* were able to be used for valid data analysis (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1330). They asked potential voters whether "*politicians should lead rather than follow the people*", if "*politics is a struggle between good and evil*" or if "*elected officials talk too much and take too little action*" and many more questions (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1331). Interestingly, they discover that Dutch populist voters have a *significantly* higher predilection for the Party for Freedom (often regarded as "populist" by scholarship) and the Dutch Socialist Party (less often regarded as "populist" today compared to the past) (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1344-1345). In addition, some other findings by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove are also interesting and worthy of mention. For instance, they find an important *positive* correlation between citizens who hold what can be understood as populist attitudes and the ambition to vote for populists (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1344). Accordingly, this is true for both right-leaning (Party for Freedom-PVV) and left-leaning populists (Dutch Socialist Party-SP) (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1344). Concomitantly however, the three scholars observe that while *populist* attitudes are quite similar among PVV and SP voters, they differ when it comes to *pluralism* (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1344-1345).

Naturally, scholarship (especially liberal-oriented academic work) has been advancing the idea that right-wing populists are more exclusionist and less tolerant compared to left-wing populists for many years (see Müller, 2015; Lucardie and Voerman, 2012; Filc, 2010). Thus, if one follows their lead it should come as no surprise that they are *supposedly* less pluralist. Nonetheless, somewhat unexpectedly, Akkerman and his two colleagues have also drawn the conclusion that both supporters of the rightist populists from the PVV and the supporters of the more leftist SP populists score high on the populism and elitism scale simultaneously (Akkerman et al., 2014: 1345-1346). Hence, this particular finding is in conflict with the proposition that elitism and populism are necessarily (always) opposites. In any case, like the other works mentioned above, the study by Akkerman *et al*., clearly shows that populism can be measured - not just in party literature or leader's speeches but also among the citizenry - alongside elitism and pluralism.

By surveying the citizenry, Akkerman *et al*., (2014) chose to focus on a more "demand-side" aspect of populism whilst others (see for example Taggart, 2000) prefer to observe populism from a "supply-side" perspective meaning they believe this ideology should be observed through an approach that focuses on capturing the logic or meaning behind the narratives of rational (political) actors from the top-down. It is for this specific reason - and I certainly shall return to this point later - that a methodology that entails external-oriented party literature analysis as well as structured interviews with "elite representatives" of the two Italian parties is pursued. Almost all scholars who have used fsQCA, more generic qualitative comparative analysis, holistic grading, expert surveys,

interviews, or other (more degreeist) methods pertinent to more subjective qualifications have certainly contributed immensely to populism studies given they have provided us with further tools for empirical investigation. However, for evident reasons any degreeist understanding of populism that involves quantification provides little or no insight on populism if it isn't matched with a respectable theoretical framework of *qualitative* capacity. It is for this reason that others in the academy have selected procedures such as *Thematic Content Analysis*, prioritising it as an empirical instrument above anything else.

Towards a Thematic Method

In one instance, Taggart (2000) endeavored to find thematic commonality among different cases[52] of populism in distinct continents by reporting on their beliefs, value-structures, political styles, and other socio-cultural aspects (Taggart, 2000). His was a quintessential thematic analysis in all but name (see his seminal text *Populism* first published in 2000). Taggart, who very methodically analyses transnational populism, may have been the one of first in the 21st century to study *populism as a belief*[53] and identify populist themes such as "hostility to representative politics", "a shared idealised heartland", "a lack of transcendent core values" as well as a "a reaction to a sense of extreme crisis" and its "chameleonic attributes" but certainly hasn't been the last (see also Taggart, 2002: 66-70).

Another example involves Kurth and Glasberger (2017), the two scholars who have exclusively made use of TCA to observe important issues like culture and religion and their relationship with populism and tolerance embedded within the "Islam-debates" occurring in the Netherlands. Other efforts of this kind, dedicated to the qualification and followed by a quantification of populism, would be the ones provided by Ezgi Elçi (2019) who chooses Erdogan's newly populist Turkey as a case study, or even the work by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011b). The latter two scholars of comparative research have chosen important countries such as the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands for their analysis, but have also not been able to exclude the Italian case given it presents one of the most transparent examples of populism since the arrival of the 5 Star Movement.

Dissimilarly from the work considered above, the TCA performed on manifestos and interviews for *this* project is (at the very least) slightly distinct for two reasons. First, the methodological

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[52] The cases that Taggart (2000) discusses are those pertinent to populist parties in the United States, Russia Latin America and Western Europe.

[53] In their important contribution, Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan (2021) unequivocally refer to the ideational approach(es) throughout by using an alternative name for it which would be "populism as a belief".

procedure voluntarily simplified for clarity purposes ("only" six themes are analysed and computer-based/software-related procedures are excluded) to avoid the setbacks associated to convoluted, overused and overestimated methods. Second, from a largely interpretivist perspective, this project's bedrock is that of evaluating themes and narratives to better comprehend populist ideology – but any result(s) derived does not intend to supply academia with *definitive* answers, but rather to contribute to further debate in the future. For interpretivists, finding closure on the subject-matter is not always an absolute priority. It cannot be stressed enough that "if we must take populism seriously as an ideology that accompanies other ideologies such as liberal democracy, or think about populism as a fuzzy concepts, we need to take the actual opinions of populists more seriously" (Barker, 2021: 232). TCA allows us to take populist opinionated narratives very seriously, and consequently may reveal its morphology which regardless of whether it is "*thick*-centred" (as seemingly Schroeder believes it to be) or "*thin*-centred" (as Cas Mudde, Ben Stanley, and others assume) is still worth probing.

TCA and Populism

What is TCA?

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) serves the purpose of first presenting and then interpreting qualitative data. Rosemarie Anderson (1997; 2007), who originally endorsed the use of this term academically, more simply states that TCA is in fact "a descriptive presentation of qualitative data". Specific research objectives aside, the main rationale for using this method is that it allows scholars to *identify* "common *themes* in the text provided for analysis" (Anderson, 2007: 1). Fundamentally, TCA can illustrate the thematic content present in party documents and interview transcripts (as will be clearly demonstrate throughout following chapters) and many other texts (Anderson, 2007: 1). Hopefully, those that accept the inference(s) I draw on populism are articulate and coherent will also comprehend that those have only been made possible by a correctly implanted TCA methodology. Although the distinctions between *Thematic Analysis* and *Content Analysis* are evidently blurred (see Vaismoradi et al., 2013: 398-405), as it often occurs in political science, they are essentially the same procedures under a different name.

Only to add to the confusion, populism experts like Matthew E. Bergman (2021) alternatively adopt the term *Thematic Textual Analysis* (instead of the former two) when discussing its importance in relation to methodologies. It is not clear whether Bergman conceptualises textual analysis as a part or a process within TCA, or simply understands it to be a sub-variant of it. Notwithstanding, he

explicitly praises textual analysis as such – given it can classify " the intensity of populist presence in words, clauses, paragraphs, or entire texts" (Bergman, 2021: 236-247). In similar fashion, another expert, Paris Aslanidis (2018), infers that through "text analysis" populist claims can be measured in both manifestos and interviews. This is exactly what I use. Given this is not the time and place to engage in a debate on where exactly the boundary lies among the three types of analysis, I shall limit myself to state that so-called "TCA" (term introduced by Anderson but also acknowledged by Green and Thorogood, 2004) is the most suited method for a maximal breadth work on populism that revolves around theme-usage.

What is a Theme?

TCA is all about themes. Theorists Majtaba Vaismoradi and Sherill Snelgrove (2019) advance the idea that a "theme" can be defined as "the subjective meaning and cultural-contextual message of data" (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019: 3). The same scholars, influenced by earlier works on themes (see Erlingsson and Brisiewicz, 2013), also give an alternative definition to the term and suggest that a theme may very well be a "read thread of underlying meanings, within which similar pieces of data can be tied together and within which the researcher may answer the question *Why*?" (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019: 3). Theme (or "leitmotif", or sometimes "category") development can be complex in any form of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and requires a scholar to give great importance to specific *codes* and generic ideas that transpire from a text or a conversation/interview with a politician.

Examples of populist codes I found while collecting data from manifesto texts and interviews would be words or expressions like "will of *the people*", "political class is out of touch…", "*status quo* no longer sustainable", "break with the past", "putting the people first". It is safe to assume that the overwhelming majority of populist material whether in form of text or speech contains this type of language. Of course, it depends how these *codes* are constructed specifically and to what populist ideas they are associated to in party literature or in an interview, for them to be subsequently linked to a theme.

For instance, the declaration "putting the people first" (whether uttered by a party representative or present within a text in written form) can be coded as an example of the populist theme of *anti-elitism*. However, it can also be traced to other themes such as *unpolitics* (if anticipating a following statement against politicians or parties) or *sovereignism* (if subsequently linked to the idea of popular sovereignty) or even *direct democracy* (if what follows the statement is a strong support for

direct elections and plebisciatarianism). Substantially, "putting the people first" can be a code for *anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism* or *direct democracy*, but it also may be a code for each one of those themes simultaneously, depending on how it is utilised. Therefore, there will inevitably always be a degree of subjectivity in the decision-making of a scholar to consider a code as a sample of one theme or another, but this can be significantly moderated (in terms of methodological validity) by justifying most of the hand-coding with detailed discussion pertinent to populist ideology and including specific instances in an appendices section. Thereby, the remaining codes used for my "radiography" of populism are made available in the appendices of this work, which is found at the very end (see Table A1 which shows how I legitimised my coding and themes in relation to the final results). In summary, both codes and more general ideas manifested through choice of wording usually hold a high degree of "travelability" (Mudde's conceptual reference explained in the first chapter) and if related to the same phenomenon (e.g. populism) can then be transformed in an actual *theme* (e.g. anti-elitism, sovereignism, direct democracy, etc.). These themes are used to comprehend the narratives that surround the nature of populist ideology.

As Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon (2005) rightly argue : "*Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings*" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). The purpose of this project is not merely to count words or phrases to trace them back to a specific theme or view of populism, but is instead to identify themes and discover how many of them are present simultaneously in a piece of party literature or in an interview with a populist representative to discover the exact degree of ideological (populist) content. There is no better way to assess the nature of (right-wing and left-wing) populism altogether.

That being said, there are three ways to approach qualitative content (such as themes) in TCA analysis: *conventional*, *directed* and *summative*. In this piece of work, I make use of a sporadic combination of the last two. Conventional TCA is not only too eclectic, but it is better suited for a study design where the main aim is to *only* describe a phenomenon. It is usually appropriate "when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279). In one instance, vastly unrelated to political science, it was used to investigate the emotional reactions of hospice patients. After all, vast amounts of (academic) literature have already been produced when it comes to investigating populist ideology and even less experienced scholars that are newly approaching this political singularity already have a basic idea that we are dealing with another form of anti-establishment reaction that has been consistently present throughout human history. Populism is most certainly *not* under-investigated therefore does not necessitate conventional thematic content analysis. It can however benefit from a *directed* content analysis

approach, especially when it comes to identifying recurring themes, considering its main goal is to "validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281). A directed content analysis is well suited for my theoretical framework, an all-encompassing and empathetic study of populism where the focal point is *ideology* (yet not entirely dismissing secondary elements of discursive performance). In short, a directed TCA is particularly enlightening as it specifically aids in detecting the relationship between codes and themes which *may* vary in ideological usage depending on the variables (in this case the variables would be the parties) in question.

While directed content analysis is particularly useful for an analytical reading of populist manifestos, a *summative* one has also been of great assistance, especially during interviews with Italian politicians. Generally, summative TCA demands a counting of words in text and comparing determined word with others in the same piece of literature in order to identify keywords or content that can be directly interpreted as a theme in underlying context (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1283-1285). Forasmuch as, a summative TCA is an adequate fit for interviews considering interview analysis itself is nothing more than an analysis of content (in written or spoken form) intertwined with discursive analysis (Bryman, 2008: 499). The words, phrases, and attitudes of several political representatives have undoubtedly been essential for the development of an understanding of contextual use of populist (ideological) content.

Although, one must also know how to distinguish between *latent* and *manifest* content. The former involves interpreting what is "hidden deep within the text" which means that the role of the researcher automatically becomes that of discovering the "implied meaning of participants experience" (Kleinheksel et al. 2020). Instead, the latter, concerns any content or data that is "easily observable both to the researchers and the coders who assist in their analysis, without the need to discern intent or identify deeper meaning" (Kleinheksel et al 2020). If scholars choose to observe manifest content rather than latent content this means that in their analysis they will only be "describing what is occurring on the surface, what is literally present, and (as) 'staying close to the text'" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Given this project is dedicated to a theoretical exploration of the nature of Italian populism and includes not just analysis of text (e.g. manifestos) but also interviews with human-subjects who exhibit sentiment and provide subjective meaning to ideas and "lived experience", the detailed observation of latent content is inevitably of greater importance. What motivated this decision is the interpretivist and predominantly qualitative nature of my approach to research which can be summarised in the following quote by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) :

"Analysing for the appearance of a particular word or content[54] in textual material is referred to as manifest content analysis. If the analysis stopped at this point, the analysis would be quantitative, focusing on counting the frequency of specific words or content… a summative approach to qualitative content analysis goes beyond mere word count to include latent content analysis" (2005, p.1283).

Why Manifestos?

In political science, when it comes to methodology we know that manifesto analysis has long been a dominant practice (see Petry, 1988, 1995; Budge et al., 1987; Mair, 1986; Thomson, 1999, Gherghina and Pilet, 2021). For example, the work produced by Ian Budge (2002) and his wide-reaching team of experts cannot but be mentioned as the most influential and inspiring asset to contemporary scholarship (for a summary refer to Budge, 2002). Budge and other leading experts working on the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) funded by the German *Wissenchaftzentrum Berlin* (WZB) since 1989 (when it officially rebranded from the MRG[55]) have developed an entirely original method to *collect*, *code*, and *analyse* party manifestos and/or election programmes (Budge, 2002: 60). Since their first seminal contribution (see Budge et al.,1987) that produced data from a wide-range of countries (19 at first), Budge and colleagues have showed that there is "no such thing" as an end to political ideologies brought about the rise of the *new politics* (Greens, new populists, "new right", etc.) movements (Budge, 2002: 60). Above all, they argued that the majority of parties around the globe (even the less ideological and supposedly "more pragmatic" American and German ones) still found themselves defined by the Left-Right division or cleavage (Budge, 2002: 60).

Another important contribution was apparently demonstrating through *manifesto estimates* that (left-right division notwithstanding) "you can see where the party is coming from and where it is heading to instead of having to assume that it is eternally fixed to one position as a member of a socialist, Christian democratic, liberal or conservative 'family'" (Budge, 2002: 61). Without going into excessive detail, the methodology itself usually involved a 3-step procedure (curiously my quantification method also involves 3-steps) and started with locating so-called "(quasi)-sentences" and coding/counting them until they were placed in political categories (e.g. *Social Justice*, *Nationalisation*, *Traditional Morality*, etc.) to then give them a percentage score and ultimately group them as either "left" or "right" to ultimately determine the party's ideological character (Budge, 2002: 61-63). However, the real reason the CMP has been effectively so successful and

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[54] Essentially, they mean "thematic" content.

[55] MRG is an abbreviation for "Manifestos Research Group".

academically validated is that it newly brought high level of empirical sophistication, reliability, and objectivity to political science (Budge, 2002).

Today, it is important to highlight how fruitful past projects like the CMP (that inspired many more, see Bakker et al., 2015) that made manifesto analysis a core aspect of political party research are - in terms of method and type of data they generate - fundamental to comprehend any content analysis. This is regardless of whether it can be considered *thematic* (content analysis) or not. Needless to say, even if I do not directly link the basis of my research and method to theirs, I consider the CMP to be an intellectual starting point for anyone who wishes to embark on the content analysis of manifestos. Additionally, it may also help those who wish to bring speeches and statements into the picture. In fact, categories like Budge's ones can be applied with no difficulty to the discursive content produced by interviewed party elites. In some way, I have done so, because although I use different categories (understood as "themes") from those listed in Budge (2002) (as I am simply observing populism *as an ideology* and purposely working with a more limited data-set) I still use an inductively derived form of coding and (identically to CMP members, see Budge, 2002: 63) hand-code myself. I justify the choice of relying on only hand-coding for the same reasons Mudde (2000) does in his early work. In fact, even though a human-coder obviously introduces a level of subjectivity to its findings, this is not necessarily a liability or a failing (Mudde, 2000: 22).

Furthermore, both authors Robert E. Stake (1995) and John Gerring (1998) state that subjectivity is an "essential element of understanding" rather than something to be removed entirely. Computerised methods may be of higher caliber in regard to reliability (especially due to "completed measurement" and "future replaceability") but certainly aren't when it comes to validity (Mudde, 2000: 23). Unlike human-coding, computerised coding methods are "bound to the categories chosen on forehand and cannot interpret the context of these categories, and therefore may be inferior in regard to validity. Also…the machine is far less flexible and less able to learn during the process" (Mudde, 2000: 23). Codes should not be viewed as organising principles that are set in stone. Scholars as human-coders may create their own codes, by identification and (systematic, organised) selection (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 32, also cited in Mudde, 2000: 23). Moreover, a minor similarity between the CMP and my work could reside in the fact that great attention is given to the mapping "policy preferences" (see Budge, 2002: 60) or "policy areas" (see Budge, 2002: 61) in relation to political ideology (in my case: populism). Notwithstanding, the scrutiny of manifestos for the purpose of developing thematic data content is essential to the work of a political scientist. Manifestos analysis matters simply because (in politics) manifestos still very much matter. As the deputy director of the *Institute for Government* think-tank, Emma Norris (2019), argues:

"*The publication of party manifestos is a big moment in a general election campaign. Parties set out their plans for running the country. Policies are explained. Slogans are restated. Manifestos are a 'party's contract with the electorate' – outlining competing visions and policies that make up their respective programmes for government*" (Norris, 2019).

Drawing on this perspective, it is discernible that manifestos not only highly influence the diversified electorate (e.g. the working-class, business leaders, reporters, diplomats, charities) but they are also understood to be a fundamental aspect to the world of political science research itself (Eder et al., 2017: 75). This should come as no surprise, as ever since Anthony Downs (1957) and Duncan Black (1958) formulated the theory of so-called "spatial competition" between actors in the political arena, the academy has begun to dedicate vast amounts of scientific literature to evaluate policy positions of parties deriving from manifestos (Eder et al., 2017: 75).

In summary, there are two principal reasons that make manifestos play such an *essential* role in the thematic exploration(s) of populism *as an ideology*. First, the contents of manifestos shape not just the short-term goals of a party during a campaign but also the (potentially) long-term goals while in office. Hence, they are extremely to scholars since it is in manifestos themselves that the party's "signature policies" or "valence issues" (those that bring consensus among party representatives and voters) transpire. Although sometimes what emerges from these party documents are only notional/ideological manifestations that are still to take concrete form and become actual policies. Second, a manifesto gives a largely definite political identity to a party or movement. For example, without the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) drafted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels individuals would have never had a real understanding of what the ideology stood for, its implications, its rationalisations, its strengths, and its weaknesses. Populists are successful today due to what they propose through external party literature and propagandistic slogans and speeches. It would be impossible for any scholar to conduct a serious study on the matter without visiting these types of sources.

Which Parties, Which Manifestos?

For the March 4, 2018, Italian general election, three different manifestos were presented to the electorate by three main competing forces. The *centre-Right* coalition (composed by the League, FI!, FdI and one smaller party[56]) which was understood to be (internally) the most ideologically heterogenous among the three poles actually formally presented a common manifesto for the

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[56] This smaller party was the centrist Noi Con l'Italia (NCI).

election (Cavallaro et al., 2018: 57). However, even if that manifesto is representative of some of Salvini's League's views (notably the *Flat Tax* and re-nogotiation of EU treaties) I shall not be analysing it, as it is ideologically/thematically on the input by the other (more liberal and conservative) parties in the coalition making it not valid to measure the League's populist particularities. Hence, I excluded it to include the League's personal manifesto obtainable through their website instead. This manifesto is known as *Elezioni 2018* : *Programma di Governo – Salvini Premier* ("2018 Election: Government Program - Salvini Prime Minister") and is likely to fully reflect the League's populist positions.

Directly competing with the centre-Right (but also with the centre-Left) there was the free-standing and anti-establishment 5SM. This party was by March 2018 expected to become the frontrunner after the grand result achieved in the previous (2013) election. The *grillini'*s straightforward and succinct 20-point program was simply named *Programma Elettorale Movimento Cinque Stelle* ("5SM's Electoral Program: Luigi Di Maio's Political Leadership"). Interestingly, in their document from 2018 the 5SM decided to place emphasis on the centrality of the "post-Grillo" (in reality Grillo still made decisions from the backseat) leadership of Di Maio. Notwithstanding, under Di Maio the party appeared to be quite divided on several issues and generally unstable.

Last but not least, the (ideologically similar) parties composing the *centre-Left* bloc, dominated by the long-standing Democratic Party (PD) (a direct product of historical combinations between Christian Democrats and the Communists), surprisingly did not officially present the same manifesto but instead - even if still running united - all stuck to their own literature. The Democratic Party decided to call their manifesto *Piu' Forte, Piu' Giusta. L'Italia* ("Stronger, fairer. Italy"). The name itself unquestionably highlights the centrality of progressive-liberal themes such as social justice and economic redistribution in the part's agenda.

The manifestos of the League and the 5SM mentioned above have been chosen unproblematically for analytical purposes given they are essentially the only manifestos they presented for the elections as *individual* parties. Furthermore, I have also decided to add the *post-electoral* "contract of government" (*contratto di governo*) programme signed by the two party leaders (Salvini and Di Maio) forming the new "Yellow-Green" (this media nickname was provided due to the political colours of the two parties) government at the time (June 2018). This was not only done to make things more compelling. I also find the government contract manifesto between League and 5SM particularly useful to find out whether when left and right populism are combined more populist themes (and policies evidently) are produced, possibly resulting in a higher degree of populism altogether. Ultimately, for clarity purposes, in the next chapter a brief analysis of the Democratic

Party's manifesto is also provided alongside the others. A short(-*er*) assessment of the Democratic Party's positions is analytically relevant, in order to demonstrate how a non-populist - and actually significantly anti-populist - party has completely divergent views on policy to the League and 5SM given it clearly lacks populist themes.

Why Interviews?

It is undeniable that interviews are ideal for scholars who intend to upon up a "dialogical process" (see Barker, 2021). This process allows populists to forthrightly articulate their views on *legitimacy*[57], *inclusivity*[58]and *governance*[59] (Barker, 2021: 228-229). Additionally, it is likely to be the most successfully objective empirical method as it normally refrains from imposing external definitional standards (Barker, 2021: 228-229). For this original contribution, contact was made with ten interviewees[60] predominantly through email. It has to be noted that gaining access to these populist policy-makers was a particularly difficult task and the (relatively) *small-n* design which overall makes up sample of ten participants certainly reflects this. There is good reason to believe that - being highly ideologically-driven populist actors - League and 5SM politicians are often highly sceptical (when not openly hostile) towards academics in general as they are considered as being part of the *intelligentsia*. Therefore, scholars investigating Italian populism risk being rebuffed as members of an overprivileged caste or elite. For evident reasons, populists cannot be entirely blamed for holding such a pessimistic view since the majority of academics, commentators, pundits and miscellaneous analysts scapegoat almost all of them as being "irrational", "resentful", "xenophobic" and "undemocratic" demagogues (see Panarari, 2019). In Italy, attacks by public intellectuals have been prevalent and brutal throughout the years, and coverage of the League's and

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[57] In regard to "legitimacy", one of the paramount questions that needs to be posed to populist MP's or politicians in general should be whether their regime is based on popular sovereignty, and/or a form of deliberative democracy. If not, then populism would be unconstitutional, and reside outside of the border of democratic politics (Barker, 2021: 228). Unlikely.

[58] By "inclusivity" what is meant is whether populism theorises "the people" inclusively or exclusively. If in a political project non-native born immigrants are excluded from the people why is this so? (Barker, 2021:228). Are left populists really more inclusive and tolerant than those populists on the right? Those are all important questions.

[59] In regard to "governance" do populists leaders and constituents want authoritarianism? Are they always opposed to the liberal aspects of democracy? Or are there constitutional arrangements that they are willing to accept? Ultimately, are they or are they not in favour of the separation of powers? (see an article in The Economist, 6 November 2021, about howsupposedly British PM Johnson disdains checks and balances).

[60] The complete list is the following: Gianluigi Paragone MP (ex-5SM); Claudio Borghi MP (League); Luca De Biasio (League); Anonymous politician (5SM); Devid Porrello (5SM); Alvise Maniero MP (ex-5SM); Alessandro Panza MEP (League); Mauro Coltorti MP (5SM); Silvia Covolo MP (League); Roberto Ciambetti (League).

5SM's politics has been mostly negative. Unfortunately, the descriptive word "populist" was used with barely any ideological connotation and instead of being adopted to stimulate debate it became a term for wide-ranging defamatory usage (Bos and Brants, 2014: 706).

As a result, Salvini and the *leghisti* began using the term "*professoroni*" sarcastically and provocatively to refer to what they deemed arrogant and wealthy professors who opposed their politics (*askanews*, 11 October, 2018). Similarly, for a long time of its political life cycle 5SM members refused to give statements to the media or other "outsiders" (such as academics and journalists), their leader Grillo use to prohibit them from doing so as he believed the whole intellectual community was *detached* from the reality of ordinary people (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2018: 355). Notwithstanding, I succeeded in interviewing *five* League representatives and *five* 5SM representatives. The emails of the politicians I chose to speak to were found on the two official websites of the Italian Parliament (https://www.camera.it/leg 18/1 and https://www.senato.it/home). On rare occasion, the first contact with members of the two parties was made from a private social media account after joining the online League and 5SM closed Facebook groups ("*Lega Nel Mondo*" and "*Movimento Cinque Stelle – Unica Speranza*").

After a response, the politicians themselves or members of their staff would inform me through a phone call or a text message regarding the time and location of the interview meeting. A substantial number of interviewees were given the opportunity to answer questions directly by Email, Phone or a Skype videochat. This was due to the strict restrictions and social distancing norms related to preventing the spread of the infectious Covid-19 virus (the fieldwork was mainly conducted from the spring of 2020 to early 2022). These unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances have affected nearly the entirety of the time frame of data collection. Furthermore, it is likely that Covid-19 has demotivated a larger number of politicians from meeting in person, or in the worst cases, to grant me an interview at all. Ultimately, nine out of ten of respondents were interviewed online.

Taking this into account, a "learning by doing model" proposed by interview-expert Layna Mosley (2013) served as an inspiration to carefully select the political informants for the project (see L. Mosley, 2013: 1). On the whole, my methodology entailed a selection of interviewees which was *non-random*. In fact, a *purposive* or ("*judgemental*") *sampling* was used to save both precious time and financial resources. The purposive method requires sound judgment, those interview requests were primarily sent to the politicians who were most popular on the (Italian) media and television. The figures I aimed to interviewed were in some way the most outspoken and contentious populist characters. I felt that certain politicians with certain visible personality traits (e.g. Borghi A. MP, Maniero MP, Paragone MP) were less inhibited and would contribute with more intellectual

honesty to stipulate the nature of their choices and to disclose how those were influenced by their populist ethic.

Naturally, I also requested participation from less popular characters who were further down in the hierarchy of the two political organisations. In one instance, I interviewed a local council candidate (I shall refer to him throughout as "Anonymous 5SM) from the 5SM-dominated Southern region of the country. Their contribution was equally valid and interesting, as they tend to reflect the views of individuals who are closer to the grassroots of the party. Their insights on how to organise electoral blocs territorially as well as their unfiltered populist dialogues are of incommensurable importance. For example, Anonymous 5SM campaigned ardently for direct democracy and the reduction of parliamentarians in the southern Italy. Overall, interviewing lower rank politicians provided me the opportunity to reflect and elucidate on the working-class populist protest vote in Italian localities. My intention was to interview those who had either partially influential or decisive political positions, and if they did not at a local/regional or national level then they certainly did at an international level – like in the case of the Vice-Coordinator (former by 2022) of the *Lega Nel Mondo - Argentina* ("League in the World – Argentina") Luca De Biasio. This activist-politician is essentially in charge of raising awareness for Salvini's party in all of South America, but especially in Argentina where one finds the greatest number of Italians, or immigrants of Italian origin. Some *snowball sampling* was also used and was quite useful when talking to Members of Parliament that had accepted and enjoyed participating. Those informants invited me to contact some of their "less busy" colleagues from the Chamber and the Senate. Collecting data was quite straightforward as I relied on a Sony ICD-PX370 Mono Digital Voice Recorder (that exempted me from having to take notes on a piece of paper) or made use of the greatly functional and professional *voiceX* application available for download on Google Play Store.

I concluded that given this is a project that primarily aims to investigate the ideological nature of populism, a maximum of ten participants (five from each party) were sufficient. When it comes to interviews, and academic research in general, it is best to choose "quality over quantity" (see Hanak, 2020). For all informants, I have utilised *structured interviews* given most of my respondents were Members of the Italian Parliament that travel with frequency and do not have time for unstructured or semi-structured long discussions. Many of them would warn me *a priori* that they would not be available for more than half-hour of interviewing. In no way did I attempt to influence respondents' answers, as interview-experts such as Radeljic (2015) advise against doing so. Moreover, although it is accepted that *semi-structured* interviews may lead to finer results (see Wengraf, 2001: 5) with structured ones scholars are still able to obtain large amounts of useful information that can be coded and transformed into a full chapter of a thesis.

The fact that structured interviews can be replicated as a fixed set of questions makes it easier for them to be quantified and in turn this results in simpler reliability testing too (McLeod, 2014). Experienced interviewers like Radeljic also suggest that "having a similar set of questions and repeating them to different respondents is another necessity" (Radeljic, 2015: 4). However, the real purpose of having a set of questions that both parties (the interviewer and the interviewee) is to provide a basic structure to the interview in order to not waste anyone's time. For the interviews, I prepared a set of seven to ten questions (depending on the informant's rank in the political party) and I was able to discuss crucial topics with respondents at length. Among those, the relationship between elites and the populace, the party's idea of national identity and popular sovereignty, and even the populist view of how Italian democracy should function.

How to Measure the Degree of Populism using TCA

Re-visiting Degreeism

From an ideational perspective, populism is understood to be above all a *set of ideas* (Mudde, 2017; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2018a). It has also been previously established that populism can be metaphorically compared to a parasite that "infects" a party's "thick" host ideology and consequently affects an entire *polis* (a state, regime, or society). However, if doesn't manifest as such it may also function as a weak ideology with a "thin" core that works as an intermediary between ideologies. Cases like Merine Le Pen's recent ideological assortment of "ethno-socialism"[61] (to use one author's dubious term, see Genga, 2017) would be a primary example of this populist infiltration and intermediation. Populism can bring together nativism (or nationalism) and socialism and it has done so not only in places like France and Western Europe but has actually even succeeded spreading amongst leftist movements in South America. There, Evo Morales and his *Movimiento al Socialismo* has managed to ride the wave of popular discontent and instill a semi-authoritarian regime that still held some democratic aspects. It is simply on those grounds, by even just minimally observing these diverse cases, that so-called *degreeism* becomes not only a scientific reality (to this day it is an accepted theory applied to measure populism empirically) but a real-world circumstance. In fact, it should come as no mystery that some parties are known to be more populist than others. More specifically, some *populist* parties are more populist than other *populist*

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[61] The Italian scholar Nicola Genga (2017) dubiously uses the term "ethno-socialism" (while at the same time contradicting himself by making the case that Marine Le Pen is a moderate centre-right republican) and "patrimonial populism" (also adopted before by Dominique Reynié, 2011) to describe her new *Front National* (re-named *Rassemblement National* in June 2018).

parties (see Meijers and Zaslove, 2021). As already stated, degreeism is a "way to treat populism as a continuous (more - or - less) rather dichotomous (either – or) concept" (Pappas, 2016: 9).

Nonetheless, paradoxically, by applying degreeism one is able to deduce whether a party is overall populist or not. This is merely because by adopting (gradational) parameters that recall those used originally by Charles Ragin (2000; 2009) for the social sciences - but methodically reproduced by populism scholars (namely Weyland, del Rocio-Flores Hinojosa, Capaul and Ewert, and Van Kessel) - one is able to discard those parties that score low on populist ideology on that same scale. In other words, there can be different degrees of populism, depending directly on how many of the six themes are exhibited in a party's manifesto and discourse (interviews exemplify "discursive populism" here) but if a political actor does not meet the minimum requirement (as will be explained below) and surpass a specific threshold then even if an amount of populism is still present this is not enough to consider it as part of the populist party family hence automatically falls into the *non-populist* category. Hence, although my method *cannot* be considered as an fsQCA analysis overall (as truth tables are not produced), there is one aspect of my subjective quantification that resembles Ragin's sets. This would be - as already mentioned - the grading scale (which will be outlined below) and the numerical values (in form of "populist score") provided to the actors after the measurement takes place. However, these values are only a numerical representation of a purely qualitative category.

Calibration

In order to assess how much populist ideology is manifested in a party's manifesto or (discursive) statements made by a politician during an interview an adequate calibration is crucial (see Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). "Calibration should, however, never happen in an arbitrary way and must be based on theoretically and substantively informed choices" (van Kessel, 2014: 75). The choices made in this contribution to measure the "degree of membership" to the populist party family of League and 5SM are not only logical but also theoretically consistent and informed. It is themes taken from the scholarly literature on populism that are utilised to measure the degree of populist ideology displayed by the parties. Without complete attention given to recurring themes in the manifesto and interviews a measurement of populism would not even be possible. In the quantification model used for parties such as League and 5SM the gradation(-*al*) parameters of populism should be understood as the following:

Not populist (value "0" or 0%[62]), Barely Populist (value "0.3" or 30%), Considerably Populist (value "0.7" or 70%), Full-Blown Populist (value "1" or 100%).

To recapitulate, the adoption of identical (or very similar) numerical values displayed above (and originally inspired by Ragin's theories) has been widely accepted in academia by those whose aim has been that of measuring populist ideology directly or anything closely associated (see van Kessel, 2015; Weyland, 2017; Capaul and Ewert, 2021; Hinojosa, 2021). On the this scale, *0* signifies a party's *non-membership* to populism, value *0.33* signifies that a party is closer to non-membership ("more out than in"), value *0.67* signifies that a party is closer to *membership* ("more in than out"), and finally value *1* stands for a party's *full-membership* to populism (for an account of fsQCA as a method see Ragin, 2009: 29-31).

Alternatively to original fsQCA and Ragin (2009: 29-31) and to Weyland (2017: 92-95), but identically to Capaul and Ewert (2021: 787), I use 0.3 and not 0.33 for "closer to non-membership" and 0.7 not 0.67 for "closer to membership" on my four-point scale. For clarity purposes it makes more sense to do so in relation to the so-called *cut-off value* ("neither in-nor out" in relation to populism) and the values close to it which risk causing confusion (see Ragin, 2009: 36). The reason it is best to avoid the *0.5* cut-off value (or "crossover point" if one prefers) is because as Capaul and Ewert (2021: 787) discuss "this value represents total ambivalence, including it would prohibit making any meaningful statements". This would especially be a problem if scholars are attempting to find out whether a party (or leader) belongs to the populist party family overall, depending on the degree of populist ideology present. By avoiding this situation of complete ambivalence the whole estimation of populism through the four-point scale technique becomes more robust.

When in a party manifesto or in an interview with a party-affiliated politician it becomes apparent that none of the populist themes are manifested then it also becomes apparent that the political actor under scrutiny is simply a *0*, and "not populist". Whereas if one (minimum requirement) or two but less than three (e.g. 1-2 themes) are found than this actor deserves to at least be acknowledged as a 0.3 and that is "barely populist". As a consequence, when at least three (minimum requirement) but less than five (e.g. 3-4) themes are present than the actor is even more populist and can be considered to be a 0.7 and that is "considerably populist". However, only actors who manifest five (minimum requirement) or more themes (e.g., 5-6) however can be unquestionably labelled as "full-blown populist" with a score of 1.

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[62] The percentages are nothing more than a nominal differentiation given to values in a very similar scale provided by del Rocio Flores Hinojosa (2021: 395-396) in her own fsQCA.

Notwithstanding all of these precise calibrating features - one might argue - it is still relatively unclear whether a political subject that could potentially manifest as much as 5 themes but is (also) only missing anti-elitism could still be categorised as a "full-blown populist". One option would be to conform to the academic theories of most ideational scholars who understand populism (at its highest form of expression) to be necessarily and intrinsically an *anti-elitist* position, in that case the subject in question would in fact score *0* (and not be populist) regardless of the fact they exhibit five of the six themes. If one follows this logic or school of thought, then anti-elitism is always a *necessary condition* for populism. Thereby, accordingly, a party that is un-political, sovereignist, producerist and reformist and that might even support direct democracy is still not a populist party without a clear anti-elitist stance. From this perspective, the characteristics just described might very well make the party a reactionary, ultra-nationalist, right-wing force, but without performing a strong critique of the *status quo* and expressing dissatisfaction with elites/the establishment it can hardly ever be populist. Here, I shall *not* take this approach.

Another option, is instead to treat anti-elitism as equally important to other themes. With this in mind, a subject that displays *at least* five themes (out of six) will always be "full-blown populist" irrespective of whether anti-elitism is present among these five or whether it is the only one absent. Although this contribution does not wish to expand on this scientific dilemma the methodological system I adopt here functions in such way that anti-elitism is (for once) considered as a core concept equal to the others (unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism, direct democracy). In any case, it would be exceptionally rare for a political subject to manifest all five of the themes (or most of them) without anti-elitism too. The ideological manifestation of a fully-fledged (or "full-blown" – as one of my categories suggests) populism usually not only relies on a narrative that comprises all of these themes concomitantly but also on a close interlacing among them. In view of the gradational scheme proposed above, all the formulas and results (pertaining to the manifesto and interview analysis of League and 5SM) for this study are present in the Appendices section of this piece of work.

Since we are dealing with relatively complex data (3 manifestos are analysed and measured) and the answers of no less than ten party respondents are taken into consideration, the final scores are given using a simplified calculation of *averages*. There are *raw scores* and *final scores*. The raw scores are the ones given separately (before an average is calculated) based on the procedure described above to the League's 2018 manifesto, the 5SM 2018 manifesto, and their coalition ("yellow-green") manifesto later that same year and to every individual representative/interviewee from these parties. While the final scores are the scores that derive from combining the *average* "programmatic populism" from the manifestos with the *average* "discursive populism" from interviews. A *final*

(populist) score is easily found by adding the set values ("mean") of the manifestos ("average of manifestos") to the set values ("average of interviews") and dividing by two (since this is ultimately a synthesis between the two methods of manifesto and interview analysis). It is self-explanatory how the raw *average of the manifestos[63]* and *average of the interviews[64]* are found to perform the final operation. This is a simple mathematical operation. After all, averages have been acknowledged by Van Kessel (2015: 80) who incorporates a similar scale in his analysis of populism too. As already stated, the full formula - like the paths to the outcome(s) - is found in the appendices. Every step of the procedure is shown with a great deal of transparency.

Needless to say, the League and 5SM will each have their own final score and the formula is therefore applied twice, once for each party. It is rather important to note however that overall the calculation is a *3-step process* where firstly raw scores[65] are calculated, secondly they are transformed into an average for both manifestos and interviews *independently*, and thirdly a *final* party score is fabricated by incorporating the two. The final score can in a way be a considered a "big average" or an "average of the averages" (formula: average of manifestos + average of interviews/2 = final score). Given there are two parties of which the degree of populism is assessed independently for each of them, and it is for this reason that there are two (not one) final scores. In simple words, the final score(s) is an average that is the result of previous (raw score) averages. For instance, if the League's average populist score of interviews is by these standards "0.9322" ("0.9") resulting from all of its political representatives manifesting 5-6 ("1" on the scale) themes discursively except one which manifests 3-4 (so "0.7" on a fuzzy set) then automatically the value "1" is assumed as an average instead of "0.9" because the latter is rounded up to the greater value on the basis that it is closer to membership "1" rather than "partial membership" "0.7" which also means that one is dealing with populism at its apex (e.g. "full-blown populism").

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[63] Obtainable by taking the raw scores for each party adding them and dividing by the number of how many there are. There are two in the case of manifestos, so they are divided by two and the result of this calculation is the *average of manifestos.* Obviously, the two parties have two separate averages here to then be considered for the subsequent calculation.

[64] Obtainable by taking the raw score for each interview (adding them and then dividing by the amount there are) and then separating the raw scores from the League's and 5 Star Movement's politicians/policy-makers. There are five informants on each side (League or 5SM) hence the addition is completed they will be divided by five and this will produce the expected result. Obviously, a separate arithmetic operation is carried out for the two parties which have different fuzzy averages. This may appear confusing to a reader at first but is really simpler than it sounds. There are several interviews (10 in total), so the presence of themes (from 1 to 6) is assessed or counted individually for every politician.

[65] Raw scores of manifestos are the individual scores of the individual manifestos (League's, 5 Movement's, and League-5star "yellow-green" coalition manifesto) taken *separately*.

Strengths and Possible Challenges

Validity

As one author who compares qualitative and quantitative methods cogently postulates, "there is no best approach between both research methodologies due to existing strengths and weaknesses among both types of research methodologies" (Choy, 2014: 99). Like every methodology existing within the universe of social science, the thematic approach holds its own strengths and weaknesses. However, considering that the majority of its weaknesses can be mitigated with little effort, those "weaknesses" merely become possible "challenges". Consequently, this results in a higher degree of what Radeljic calls "methodological soundness" (Radeljic, 2015: 4).

One strength regarding the methodology I embrace is that it yields a high level of *validity*. According to Joseph Maxwell (1992; 2013) there are five categories of (qualitative) research validity that should be respected : *descriptive, interpretative, theoretical, generalisability and evaluative validity.* By descriptive validity (or "credibility", see Glaser and Strauss, 1967) what is meant is that information is gathered thoughtfully and general findings are presented accurately (Maxwell, 1992). For example, in order to maintain a high standard, for this project all original transcripts of interviews were maintained (during the initial research phase) and stored safely in a secured device. Recording all interview exchanges by using a Sony ICD-PX370 or voiceX application facilitated the maintenance of a high-level of factual accuracy. Alternatively, in the rare cases respondents did not wish to be recorded, they voluntarily presented their answers through a Microsoft Word document that could be stored and returned to at any time.

Similarly to descriptive validity, interpretative validity is also essential. This type of validity relates to the subjectivity of participants (e.g. the meaning they attribute to things/events, personal views, or body language) and how the subjectivity is then used interpretively by a researcher to construct more objective data (Maxwell, 1992; Thomson, 2011: 79). If an author is not able to interpret his/her own data ideas may be dispersed along the way. In worse case scenarios, this renders most of the data useless. To avoid this, I have matched my data (and methodology overall) systematically to my theoretical framework, the six populist themes repeatedly found in academic literature. This means that any idea, statement, policy or generic behavioural pattern (present in manifesto and interviews) is directly associated to anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism or direct democracy.

Moving on to theoretical validity, Maxwell (1992) reminds scholars that it is something that "goes beyond concrete description and interpretation and explicitly addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to, or develops during, the study" (Maxwell, 1992: 50). This type of validity concerns the ability of a researcher to give accurate and discernible explanations within a specific context by presenting plausible evidence. It is desirable to have most if not all pieces (e.g. patterns, concepts, categories, properties and dimensions) of the "populist puzzle" to fit together (see Thomson, 2011: 79). For instance, if a pattern surfaces from interviews where right-wing populists attack immigration policies of previous centre-Left governments (even if the case has already been made that populists strongly oppose immigration due to an embedded sovereignism) as the author of the research I am still responsible in providing (new) evidence gathered directly from the data to support the proposition that populists are anti-immigration.

Furthermore, Generalisability is just as important as theoretical validity. This is an alternative term for what Mudde (2017) designates as "travelability" in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (see Mudde, 2017: 38). In substance, this is the capacity of a certain conceptual framework to be applied universally (Auerbach and Silverman, 2003, Maxwell, 1992). Uncoincidentally, one of the most prominent political scientists of all times, Giovanni Sartori (1970) has convincingly asserted that a so-called "travelling problem" may arise in anything involving comparative politics (Sartori, 1970: 1033). One challenge that may present itself when putting forward a new conceptual framework is that idiosyncratic characteristics of a specific case study (a party, a leader or a movement) and any findings related, may only be applicable to that which is equivalent or extremely similar (Sartori, 1970: 1033; Thomson 2011: 79). As Mudde explains, unfortunately "some studies define populism so specifically that the concept applies only to one case" (Mudde, 2017: 38).

In this contribution, respecting generalisability has not been a problem since grounded theory developed by past theoretical explorations of the six themes by leading experts in the academy (refer to the literature review in Chapter I) give us a sense that the reformulation of those themes are likely *not* restricted to only Italian populism. It is not far-fetched to assume that a TCA involving party literature and statements from representatives of other populist parties worldwide - all the way from Russia to the Americas - would produce very similar results when it comes to the manifestations of those themes in their political narratives. In other words, parties like the *Rassemblement National*, FPÖ, Vox, *Die Linke*, *SYRIZA* and *PODEMOS* are likely to display analogous political-behavioural patterns and rhetorically/ideologically navigate the same themes as the League and 5SM in Italy. Of course, slight variations between left and right populism certainly do exist and will be explored (empirically) later in the contribution. However, national contexts and historical time differences are automatically relegated to secondary importance when dealing with

an ideology that aims to be the bulwark against a contemporary liberal-democracy[66] highly influenced by both neo-liberalism and technocracy. To attempt to provide "empirical universals" in the social sciences is by all means not strictly necessary, it can however be an important added value (Sartori, 1970: 1035).

What Maxwell calls evaluative validity is instead simply the assessment of the personal evaluations of the researcher (Maxwell, 1992). If a researcher declares that populist electorates are irritated at the high levels of immigration originating from the developing world *solely* for economy-related motives but there is no real data in their study to defend this claim then it is possible that one is dealing with a highly subjective evaluation. I have tried to avoid this (as much as possible) mainly by steering clear from gross generalisations on populism and observing its Italian variant by interpreting hard-evidence collected from manifesto and interview data.

Further Strengths

Further strengths unrelated to validity specifically, concern the rewarding instrument used for this inquiry on populism. A TCA dedicated to the identification of common themes to assess some of the similarities (and differences) between rightist and leftist variants of Italian populism, which also incorporates a more quantitative procedure that "discriminates" among distinct degrees of populism based directly on the occurrence of these themes, contributes positively by answering some of the unanswered questions in the contested sub-field. Complex (and controversial) "barely populist" and "*mixed* cases" in other countries such as the Dutch Socialist Party, *Chasse, Peche, Nature et Traditions* (CPNT) would more comfortably be explored by scholarship if they had at their disposal a largely thematic (synthesis) approach like this one. In the past, specialists Meijers and Zaslove (2021: 372) had manifested frustration at the fact that "we lack data that measures populism in political parties in a valid and precise manner", this is no longer the case.

Overall, a thematic approach is not just useful in pushing scholars to measure the degree and influence of populist ideology more objectively, but also more likely to bring forward new studies that will include those cases that are generally more difficult to interpret alone and hence often discriminated against or ostracised from the party family. When carried out appropriately, through the identification of themes, this method can help ascertain *how* and *why* actors are populist, not

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[66] An accurate description of such is granted by Taggart (2000) : "New populist parties are protest parties. Part of the new populist critique of contemporary politics focuses on the overrepresentation of minorities. Believing the state to be in hock to either organized interests or a liberal elite consensus, new populism attacks contemporary representative politics as dysfunctional" (Taggart, 2000: 110).

populist, or only partially populist. This aim itself is already more rationalist than those of other contributions, especially those that utilise arbitrary, empirically dubious, unprecise and unreliable criterions. Negative examples would be the methods that only measure politician's sporadic appeals to "the people" (in a surreal attempt to judge them as "sincere" or not) or overfocus on very abstract concepts like charismatic leadership.

Another strength of this particular methodology would be that it mitigates the fact that the degree of populism in manifestos is understood to be usually somewhat lower. It is for this precise reason that interviews are added to the process as a whole. In fact, as John Brewer and Albert Hunter (2006) point out: "each new set of data increases our confidence that the research results reflect reality rather than methodological error" (Brewer and Hunter, 2006: 4). Essentially, there is good reason to believe that empirical evidence originating from two sources is more persuasive and validating than evidence from only one. It is no coincidence that the most respected journals, such as the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* and the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* have approved mixed methods (not just combinations between the qualitative and quantitative, but also mixed within the same research families). By including interviews as a supplementary primary source, I was able to draw on the same thematic maps that were present in the manifestos and embrace them as an added value. This allowed me to obtain further proof that they are a reality within populist ideology.

Challenges

No methodology is flawless. For instance, even "Large-N" studies like the *Chapel Hill Survey* (CHES) presented by Jonathan Polk et al., (2017) have been criticised (shortly after publication) for not being able to "capture the full scope of the ideational approach to populism" (see Meijers and Zaslove, 2021: 375). This might mislead scholars into believing that "small-n" projects like this one hold even more limitations. It is true that relying on informants that are politicians (hence an "elite" group of policy-makers) presents the challenge that they may express a great deal of subjectivity during interviews and also makes the research vulnerable to the critique that such interviews reflect an "institutionalised populism" that is *supposedly* artificial and entirely distinct from that of grassroot voters (e.g. "street populism"). However, considering things from a different perspective, Large-N contributions suffer even greater limitations, especially when it comes to reliability and validity. In worst cases, Meijers and Zaslove (2021) concur :

"*Most large-N application of populism rely on classification 'by fiat' based on literature reviews or country specialists, as Hawkins and Castanho Silva (2018) note. Such approaches suffer from reliability and validity problems as they are based on heterogenous set of studies applying varying conceptions of populism*" (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021: 373).

Moreover, methods like TCA can present challenges when associated to interview analysis. With interviews, many things could go wrong (see Alshenqeeti, 2014: 39-44). Respondents sometimes exaggerate their experiences and might even lie to benefit themselves (Alshenqeeti, 2014: 39-44). Dramatisation or its opposite such as giving the interviewer a very brief response to "cut them short" and avoid delicate topics inevitably introduces a serious challenge. This may even negatively affect the reliability of the data. Additionally, problematic challenges do not only arise from the interviewee's standpoint as an interviewer may (consciously or sub-consciously) attempt to seek specific answers to support some of their preconceived notions on the subject of research (Alshenqeeti, 2014: 39-44). In this study, to avoid the challenges discussed above the informants are chosen from diverse ranks of the parties and the interviews are structured in such manner that they are broad(-*er*) in scope, allow plenty of time for response and ultimately give the option of maximum discretion or privacy to the politicians who engage.

Methodology: Final Thoughts

At the beginning of the chapter I have revealed how by taking a stance that is more interpretivist than positivist epistemologically one can thematically investigate populism. The "double-synthesis" incorporated in this volume which merges *manifesto* analysis with *interview* analysis as well as an entirely qualitative TCA with a quantitative operationalisation seeks to supply the research with a robust empiricism to enhance its overall structure. Nevertheless, as I have hinted before, the aim of this exercise is not to find an everlasting closure on the topic (as if that was even possible). There will (and rightly so) always be new techniques that emerge in scholarship with the purpose of evaluating this complex phenomenon we call "populism". Methodologies, and theoretical frameworks, need to be constantly re-visited and updated to produce the best and most objective results.

When it comes to "academic populism" (for this unusual term see Boyte, 2021: 64) scholars do not just feel pressured to position themselves on the theoretical approach-spectrum in order to classify themselves as either *ideational* or not, but also have to pick a side on methodology. This can be challenging, as methods are prone to constant change and critique. For instance, scholars may still struggle with Thematic Content Analysis, which is a disputed methodology (even if disputes are

mostly nominal) and one that is rarely designated coherently or applied universally. If anything, throughout the chapter I have (hopefully) demonstrated that it is possible to move beyond the TCA debate (e.g. Thematic Analysis vs. Content Analysis vs. Textual Analysis) and just adapt the procedure as one best sees fit, and as a means to an end.

In summary, there are many methodological divisions within the interdisciplinary scholarship on populism (Ron and Nadesan, 2021: 11). Given it is not realistically feasible to discuss them all in a single chapter, I only referred to the predominant methods, stressing their similarities but also touching upon the minoritarian characteristics which make them distinct from one another. At this stage, it may appear evident to the reader how complex the nature of the academic debate on populism is. A debate where on occasion the frontier between theory and methodology becomes blurred. Considering all of this, even if not all theoretical approaches are ideational and not all methodologies rely on configurations that mix the qualitative with the quantitative, or manifesto analysis with interview analysis, most methods *can* and *should* be thematic. It is the theoretically ideational but methodologically thematic approach to populism that allows for the most unprejudiced observation of populist narratives – those being "sense-making and sense-giving devices that structure information" (Bonansinga, 2022: 4). Narratives - which are unquestionably tied to themes - need to be concretely assessed in their essence before being assessed of their moral integrity. In other words, we cannot know whether populism is a threat to democracy and liberalism if first we don't set out to define what populism actually is. In any case, manifesto and interview analysis certainly allow for a complete assessment to take place.

III. Mapping Italian Populism: Rationale and Generic Overview for Case Selection

"the politics of the future will be the art of stirring the masses"

- Napoléon Bonaparte

Rationale

The main aim of this chapter is to defend the decision to select the Italian League and the 5SM as case studies for this in-depth investigation concerning the ideology that drives contemporary populism. First and foremost, in the examination of populism within the scope of this study, the selection of Italy as the subject of investigation along with the deliberate choice to observe the politics of the League and 5SM, was made with thoughtful consideration. It was not arbitrary in nature. References and generic analytical commentary to the work of other prevailing scholars who have concentrated their efforts on the two parties will be included in the chapter. More importantly, the rationale for case selection will be carried out in the hope that other scholars (future readers of this thesis) will comprehend that League and 5SM are particularly interesting cases that are - in some way - paradoxically both *typical* and *atypical* when it comes to Western European populism.

Typical because like all populists they vehemently repudiate the *status-quo* of politics, positioning themselves on the fringe of the political spectrum, and compared to the centre-Right and centre-Left parties they electorally compete with they offer *alternative* solutions on issues that range all the way from domestic policy (e.g. immigration, welfare spending) to foreign policy. At the same time, they are also atypical because not only have other parties not attempted to exclude them from governmental coalition-building processes (as it occurs in other countries where the centrist parties form a *cordon sanitaire* against the populists) allowing them to occasionally participate in ruling the country, but have consistently oscillated between more "moderate" and radical stances over the years. Perhaps, someday, other scholars will voluntarily upgrade (or update) their own work in relation to the League and the 5SM as these two parties - even if their core ideology (populism itself) remains the same – are prone to minor but certainly relevant attitudinal shifts. Smaller and gradual changes relating to their main political message or political posturing for example may affect not only their electorates, and the response of their political competitors, but the institutions in which they may in the future be involved in again. Given the League and 5SM have been two of the most successful populist parties in Europe, as long as they exist there will always need to be more scholarly attention that needs to be dedicated to them.

Why Italy, Why League and 5SM?

That being said, there are exactly *three* main reasons I chose Italy and its two most relevant populist parties for this research. First, Italy is often referred to in scholarship (even more so than the USA and Switzerland) as the "laboratory", "promised land" or even "paradise" of populism (see De Rosa and Quattromanni 2019; Cremonesi et al., 2019; Tarchi 2002, 2015; Zonova, 2019). The reason for this is Italy has long been the home of popular anti-establishment *outsiders* possibly all the way from the 17th century's rebellious "chief of the people" Masaniello, through the fascist epoch with Mussolini, to the *Bribesville* scandal. Incidentally, in the early 1990s the Italian *Bribesville* served as a golden opportunity to both rising populist and non-populist anti-establishment figures like Bossi, Berlusconi (and Renzi with his call for "*rottamazione*"[67] much later) scandal which shook voters in the early 90s (Tarchi, 2002: 121). Although a psychological attitude of hostility originating from the popular classes (or Antonio Gramsci's "subaltern groups") and directed towards well-established elites has shaped politics in the boot long before the eruption of the *Bribesville*[68], this event certainly contributed in expanding the populist *zeitgeist* in the country that we find today. It is not necessary to give a detailed account of the old and new Italian populisms involving historical figures such as Guglielmo Giannini, Achille Lauro, Francesco Cossiga, Antonio Di Pietro, and social movements such as the *Girotondi* ("turnarounds") and *Sardine* ("sardines") to stress that the country serves as a quintessential laboratory for the examination of populist phenomena. Thereby, constituting an ideal subject for scholarly investigation.

Furthermore, Italy is also the political home to the major *right-left* populist experiment. This takes us to the second reason the two Italian parties were chosen. For the first time in Europe, if we exclude the peculiar Greek case where left-wing populist SYRIZA and right-wing populist ANEL (Independent Greeks) chose to rule together (but not as equals, ANEL was merely a junior partner) we had two populist parties engaging with populism from *supposedly* opposite sides of the spectrum come together to rule. In the older Greek case, circumstantially similar to the Italian one, SYRIZA and ANEL joined forces to pursue an illiberal and Eurosceptic common agenda deriving from an anti-establishment rhetoric tainted with "nationalist populism" (see Petsinis, 2017; see also

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[67] In Italian popular political culture this is the "scrapping" or "getting rid of" the old political class (advocated by former Democratic Party and *centre*-Left politician Matteo Renzi).

[68] *Bribesville*, also known in popular culture as "Clean Hands" (from the Italian "*Mani Pulite*") was a nationwide scandal that erupted in Italy after an investigation of the District Attorney of Milan that starting from February 1992 gradually uncovered a deeply corrupt system of bribery and illicit accords that took place between politicians, businessmen and public officials and that had bonded them in illegality for decades. Eventually, *Bribesville* led to the downfall of the Italian so-called "First Republic" and the demise of the mass-parties that ran parliament for half a century such as the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Communists.

Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Thereby, once again, Italy especially (given League and 5SM governed on an equal footing) offers an optimal setting for investigating populism and potential ideological commonalities between its right-wing and left-wing manifestations. Not to mention, both Italy and the League and 5SM are perfect as a case study to empirically test whether populism can function as a "thick" form of ideology – apart from Schroeder's work already mentioned, other scholars have also attempted to observe such possible scenarios (see for example Neuner and Wratil, 2022).

Surprisingly, even if many English-writing scholars have studied the League and 5SM (though *rarely* conjunctly by comparing and contrasting the two) they have mostly ignored the possibility that the cornerstone for their accord could be directly traced to an overtly ideological (rather than "post-ideological" as some assume) apparatus embracing specific populist themes – leading to specific policies *leghisti* and *grillini* agree upon. Even in cases where there has been academic attention between the two parties it is usually provided in the form of brief journal articles where limitations of space force the authors to be excessively succinct (see Moschella and Rhodes, 2020; see also Maglione, 2021). This has prevented authors from expanding on the link between generic populist ideology/themes and the similarity in ideas developed (both discursively and programmatically as I assess here) between the two parties. In other cases, this has also led authors to neglect the ideological affinity between right and left populism altogether, or worse, dismiss it as irrelevant or inexistent (see for example de Candia, 2018).

Another limitation of certain studies (and a further reason to investigate these Italian parties more today) is that it appears that some scholars adopt a "selective extraction" of only certain negligible aspects of League and 5SM ideology (see for example Maglione, 2021). This is usually done with the intent to push forward the proposition that either right and left populism are significantly distinct (and thereby that any interaction between the two is purely political-strategic and *not* ideological) or that they are genuinely similar, but only to a minimal extent (see Gianfreda and Carlotti, 2018; see also Piccolino et al., 2022). In most cases, this is a fallacy, as populism is an all-embracing political phenomenon, an ideological alternative to democratic liberalism, with a tendency to impact the functioning of representative democracy once it "contaminates" a political body or system (Crum and Oleart, 2023). Especially, it is already evident that League and 5SM share more than just sporadic *positive* appeals to the people accompanied by a hostility towards politicians (both national and EU elites), the mainstream media and the corporate world, deriving from their anti-establishment form of politics. Their ideological resemblance and consistency in supporting forms of protectionism or economic nationalism, restoration of the hard border, and

advocacy for the supremacy of popular sovereignty over the state (to incidentally return to Shil's definition), the rule of law, and liberal institutions through direct-democratic practices leaves little room to doubt that right and left populism are in fact two sides of the same coin.

So far, the primary aspects of populism on which the League-5SM ideological affinity depends have been disregarded. This is why - today more than ever - the development of new theoretical frameworks is of incommensurable importance when studying not only the relationship between these two Italian parties but the similarities between right-wing and left-wing populism as a whole. This is also why it is desirable to take an ideational/ideological approach that uncompromisingly and equally considers all themes associated with the two variants of populism. Nonetheless, somehow in academia it is as if this is still considered as a matter of negligible significance. In fact, the overwhelming majority of scholars prefer to separate the League and 5SM from an interdependent analysis of right and left populism and focus on either one or the other (Lanzone and Woods, 2015; Conti and Memoli, 2015; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2022).

Moreover, even in the studies where attention is rightly and meticulously given to populist themes, the analysis remains somewhat disorganised – in the sense that core elements of (left and right) populism provided by the authors are mentioned in a manner that is still too broad in scope (see for example Tarchi, 2015). Unfortunately, this may leave the reader with a merely generic idea of what those recurring populist themes are. In essence, even where a comprehensible (and even sophisticated, like in Tarchi's case) overview of the set of ideas that League and 5SM engage with, the overall analysis is not sufficiently focused. Authors examining populism should be constantly attempting to break down broader and abstract political concepts into more definite theoretical frameworks, so that ideological themes or leitmotifs - in the true sense of the word - are observed - for what they are.

Certainly, listing the themes that should be investigated within populist ideology or narratives by giving *specific* and *unchanging* names (once again: *anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism*, *producerism*, *reformism*, and *direct democracy*) even if other scholars might find those contentious would be a good start for future work. In this contribution, at least the six themes serve the purpose of allowing a thorough and unambiguous analysis of party manifestos and interviews to occur. One that prevents League and 5SM to necessarily be dismissed as phenomena that have nothing to do with each other, or worse, to have them associated to political cultures or ideologies that are distant from them (non-Italian-writing scholars have made this error before). For example, the League underwent a major political transformation recently (somewhere between 2013 and 2017 with Matteo Salvini's ascent) but is simply not extreme enough to be located as a party of the far-right

(as some - refer to the second part of the next section - want us to believe) or as an entirely nationalist force given it still has a very relevant regional base in the north of the country. Likewise, the 5SM is neither a typically left-wing or centre-Left social-democratic party nor a centrist organisation. However, a simple "radical left" label wouldn't be entirely accurate either due to its *mixed* positions on some social and ethical issues, not to mention the economy – where it lacks a pure form of anti-*bourgeoise* anti-capitalism.

Therefore, the ultimate reason to study League and 5SM is that the parties are too often ideologically misunderstood. In order for the reader to fully comprehend the logical grounds behind the choice of having these particular parties as the object of study, let us take a strictly analytical, orderly, and detailed inspection of what has been said (or incorrectly assumed) and *not* been said about them in academic literature. This will occur in the next two sections of this chapter, whilst the following chapter will be entirely reserved to manifesto analysis in order to locate populist themes in primary literature published by the League and 5SM.

League: Extreme-Right or Right-Wing Populist?

League: A Short History

To begin with the League (*Lega* in Italian), it use to be formerly known as Northern League (*Lega Nord* in Italian) and was founded by the Senator ("*senatur*" in Lombard dialect) Umberto Bossi as a political project in the Lombard city of Bergamo in the winter of 1989. *De facto*, the name of the party was only changed recently, in 2017, when Salvini himself decided to drop the "Northern" from the official name (and electoral logo/symbol) in order to run his next general election campaign in 2018 throughout the whole of the Italian peninsula (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 649-650). Before Salvini's decidedly more nationalist (but also ironically somewhat more "inclusive") political operation that began with his appointment as party Federal Secretary in December 2013 (he was reconfirmed in May 2017) the League was completely absent in the southern Italian regions such as Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania and Sicily (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 649-650). This was due to the fact that the old (Northern) League led by Bossi (with help and inspiration from figures like Gianfranco Miglio and Giacomo Stucchi) was meant to be a political home - and by all means a populist, ethno-regionalist, localist, and independentist party - for all of those northern Italians who did not recognise themselves in the value of the "*Risorgimento*" and unification of Italy that took place in 1860 (Wilkoń, 2016).

Bossi's Northern League involved the coalescence of minor leagues and regionalist movements loosely scattered around the northern regions of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, and potentially even Tuscany and Umbria – both located well south of the River Po (Wilkoń, 2016; Boria, 2016: 64). The reason the river was relevant was that for the *leghisti* it represented the border of Padania (the Po Valley) where supposedly the Padanian "northern peoples" lived. The idea surrounding the myth of Padania was that it reflected a sense of belonging and solidarity amongst the communities residing in the peninsular north that were allegedly distantly biologically related to the Celtic and Germanic tribes that use to inhabit those specific regions in ancient times (Coleman, 2003).

Above all, the Northern League was ideologically motivated by anti-Italianism. In the sense that it wished to initially gain federalist autonomy from the centralised Italian state and consequently achieve a full secession with the hope of constructing a new (northern) ethno-culturally homogenous state. This was essentially how it interpreted what became known in Italian political culture as the "northern question" (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001). At the heart of its message, there was a propensity for a "moderate" form of ethno-centrism (xenophobic, yet rarely explicitly racist) and intolerance towards southern Italians as well as new migrants coming from the Balkans. Academics Hans Georg Betz and Carol Johnson (2004) - generally referring to extreme-right parties - have described this as a type of "selective exclusion" (Betz and Johnson, 2004, as cited in McDonnell, 2006: 129).

Throughout its political life-cycle, the Northern League often revised its outdated ethno-nationalist thesis to suit more a more particularistic agenda which included support for fiscal federalism and opposition towards a large centralised state, excessive bureaucracy, and taxation (Wilkoń, 2016), in order to appear more paleo-conservative or libertarian and less extreme to its potential electoral allies on the *centre*-Right. However, due to both political-strategic and ideological motives over the course of the 90s and early 2000s Bossi's party kept dropping in and out of the right-wing big-tent coalition formed by Berlusconi's *FI*! and Gianfranco Fini's (now dissolved) *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance). Curiously, the early Northern League (unlike Salvini's party today) was populistic yet also considerably pro-European, as it mostly supported the European's Union integration processes. However, its Europeanism was strategic rather than ideological, insofar as it recognised in the EU's northern-central member's dispositions an opportunity to be treated as an autonomous macro-region, culturally, politically, and economically distinct from the rest of Italy. With support from nations like Germany, France and Austria the *leghisti* believed they would be able to eventually detach themselves from Rome (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 632-634). In any

case, the positive attitude of the party towards the EU began to gradually change after 1998 when the Union officially refused to recognise *Padania* as an independent state.

Bossi's party might not have always been a Eurosceptic party it was always an anti-immigration party (Passalacqua, 2002). Not being able to pursue the northern question and secession from Italy openly when in government alongside FI! and National Alliance (from 1994-1995, then 2001-2006, and 2008-2011) it focused on opposing further immigration into the country. In fact, one of its main contributions was the relatively moderate *Bossi-Fini Law* (2002) which aimed to regulate (both legal and illegal) immigration. Whereas up to 2013 the League had performed relatively well (considering it was a smaller niche party) the disastrous four percent that resulted from the electoral contest that same year would mark the end of the Bossi era. Bossi's physical condition and his involvement in a serious scandal relating to his immediate family also played a role in tacking him down from the leadership position within the party.

Bossi's departure left an open space for younger (yet already experienced) *leghista* Matteo Salvini – a former official journalist and city-councillor of Milan. Salvini's sole purpose was that of redeeming his party from the miserable four percent achieved in national elections (Puccciarelli, 2019: 116-117). Salvini's success in the 2013 party primaries (where he defeated Bossi while he had attempted a comeback) was due to him being politically dynamic, ideologically flexible, and incredibly popular among the grassroots and youth wing of the party. Starting off as a simple city councillor and the head of the "Padanian Communists" faction, Salvini soon became not only leader of the party but the widely known controversial MEP who organised *Pontida* rallies (the party's annual celebration) and protests against gypsy camps, crime, immigration, and the Euro currency. His political abilities allowed him to make a rapid ascent to the higher ranks of the organisation (Pucciarelli, 2019: 116-117).

Furthermore, Salvini perfectly embodied the "salvific" newcomer who when on television said all the right things at the right time. Sometimes even repositioning himself, but always making sure the party would be able to win votes from a wide range of Italians – the young, the old, the rightists and the leftists, and from atheists as well as devout Catholics. With his strong presence on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and his unapologetic attacks on other unpopular politicians (even those within his own party) and parties Salvini won the confidence of not only Veneto's entrepreneurs and Lombard professionals, but also that of Apulian farmers, Sicilian fishermen, Campanian housewives and so forth (Ugolini, 2019). He campaigned on a vast number of issues and not just federalism, hence for the first time by 2015 the League became a truly national (if not nationalist) party. By 2018, the "new" League had participated in two major (and massive) rallies

alongside the rest of the Italian Right in Bologna's *Piazza Maggiore* (November 2015) and Rome's *Piazza De Popolo* (2015) and Salvini was seen as the unquestioned leader of the now populist and much less *liberal*-conservative (post-Berlusconian) coalition. In essence, Salvini had managed to create something of a cult of personality around him, and a new political brand associated to his name (Raniolo, 2016). It was exclusively under his leadership that the League leaped back into national politics and substantially expanded its political "hunting ground" beyond the regional(-*ist*) horizon. It was thanks to Salvini's leadership and some external factors too (namely the 2015-2016 "refugee crisis"[69]) that the League achieved the greatest result of its political history in the 4 March 2018 general election (*circa* 17%).

League: Generic Overview

We are sometimes told that the League is a purely ultra-conservative and anti-immigrant "extreme-right" or "far-right" party (see for example Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; Passarelli 2019; Passarelli 2013; Mudde 2014; 2000) which shares political attitudes of "cultural closure" with the right-wing parties from the *VISEGRAD* group (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 25). This erroneous label is typically attributed by thinkers who have begun to study the League since Matteo Salvini's ascent to the leadership position in late 2013 (see for example Galbo, 2020; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018; Caporale, 2016). According to the Italian academics Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto (2018) the League's "positions are more right-wing today than in the past, it is today anchored to the Right" (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 17). These claims are contentious to say the least.

Firstly, because the League's undisputed chief (Salvini) has stressed that "on ethical issues may anyone hold whatever views they like" and that the party's approach to controversial topics like abortion is to leave the individual with freedom of choice[70] (Petti, 2015). Not to mention, it is a party that also holds a considerably liberal-libertarian faction (Caruso, *Il Foglio*, 16 January 2024) – it is a fact Veneto's *leghisti* led by governor Luca Zaia have attempted to pass pro-*euthanasia* laws (Olivo, 2024). Secondly, because it was never in the League's agenda to halt *all* immigration but only tackle illegal immigration via Mediterranean sea-route (as I will also show later through a thematic analysis of its manifesto). On occasion, this is a position that is close to that of centre-right and *liberal*-right parties in Western Europe, including the German Christian Democrats (CDU), and French Republicans (*Les Républicains*) (see Murray, 2018). Thirdly, because its overall

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[69] Andrea Rea et al. (2019) described the crisis of immigration in Europe as a "refugee reception crisis" in a book series written alongside other academics for the University of Brussels in Belgium.

[70] Ethical issues were in fact left out of the League/5SM government contract.

commitment to a capitalist (and not corporatist) economy (I will explore this in more detail subsequently) - where aspects of *laissez faire* notions such as private ownership, deregulation, detaxation, minimal state intervention, and individual freedom, cohabit (but also ultimately subjugate) with economic *dirigisme*, namely protectionism and Antitrust Laws - is not typical of fascism neither today nor in the past. Lastly, the party's ideological attachment to direct democracy (the expansion of voting to more issues and popular initiative) and propensity to fairly compete in elections (by non-violent means) but also withdraw from government once it loses them, clearly shows at least some adherence to democracy and pluralism.

In the words of the historian Federico Finchelstein : "fascism is never a democracy, while populism undermines democracy, but doesn't remove it" (Finchelstein as cited in Merelli, 2016). Even more importantly, "it is precisely the primacy of violence in fascism and its absence in populism that, as we will see, presents the starkest contrast between fascists and populists" (Finchelstein, 2019: 45). Therefore, as a discernibly non-violent organisation that intends to reform democracy and its institutions from within (despite of its ambiguous positions taken *vis-à-vis* constitutionalism[71] and minority rights), the League can hardly be considered an extreme-right party. Instead, it is a lot more likely to fall within the right-wing populism spectrum.

Even though Passarelli and Tuorto (2018: 24) may be correct when they point out to the fact that since the advent of the new millennium the party has (to some degree) "radicalised" its agenda (especially when it comes to the EU and illegal immigration) it is still too distant from anti-democratic and extremist positions to be associated with the far-right. In fact, as the long-standing Italian scholar Piero Ignazi (2000) - who specialises in the "post-industrial extreme right" - has recognised before, the League holds a clear "anti-fascist *imprinting*" (Ignazi, 2000: 255). Essentially, the League today is incorrectly and incautiously associated to extreme-right ideology mainly due to the "ideological shift" (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 663) from ethno-regionalism to nationalism that occurred under Salvini's watch (see Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 9). Salvini undeniably gave a more "Le Penist accent" (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 631) to the party and is rarely ever still looked at as being part of the context of Western European regionalist parties (see *Telos* 1991-1992: 903-998 for a *résumé* of the regionalist League(s) instead) or one that reflects an "extremism of the centre" – as Ignazi (2003) postulated when discussing the Northern League's old electorate (see Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). However, as Passarelli and Tuorto admit (unknowingly backed by research presented by Albertazzi et al,. in 2018), perhaps slightly contradicting themselves, even if the League is different today it also "shows a *great continuity* with what it has

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[71] Salvini's most innapropriate - technically anti-constitutional - statement in this regard was "voglio i pieni poteri" ("I want full powers") (see Pollicino and Vigevani, 2019).

been in the past" (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018: 16). More specifically, this appears to be the same organisation that in the early 1990s had its former leader Umberto Bossi exclaim during a party conference that "the *leghisti* are the (only) ones who continue the struggle of liberation started by the *partigiani*/anti-fascist liberators and betrayed by partocracy" (*nextquotidiano.it*, 4 March 2015).

Not just Ignazi (1992; 2003), but others too (see for example Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001) have shed some doubt on whether the (Northern) League can be considered a party belonging to the extreme-right family, usually concluding that it is more of a "borderline" or mixed case. Similarly, Taggart (1996) excludes the League from the list of neo-fascist parties and places the party alongside "New Populist Parties" such as the -much more moderate - Danish Progress Party and the Swiss Ticino League (Taggart, 1996: 42). For the record, the League has never shared the typically full-fledged anti-capitalist and ultra-statist positions of the smaller Italian (but also European) neofascist parties[72] – namely *CasaPound* and *Forza Nuova* (New Force) that take on the tradition of Mussolini's revolutionary socialism and that of the post-war MSI (Italian Social Movement) (for fascism and post-fascism in Italy, see Ignazi 2019: 211-223). To this day, the League is a fundamentally pro-business (even if anti-*high finance* and protectionist) pro-small state party (Tarchi, 2015). It also likes to parade itself as an "anti-tax party" (Moschella and Rhodes, 2020: 10) – when in fact the majority of extreme-right parties prefer to almost completely ignore issues pertinent to the economy to focus on culture and race[73]. It is for this reason that Lorenzo Cattani (2016) has referred to it - along with Marine Le Pen's new National Front - as a "liberal-protectionist" paradox (Cattani, 2016; 2017). The party appears to lack the anti-system, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian disposition of neo-fascist parties hence it is very difficult to classify it as "extreme-right".

Notwithstanding, Passarelli and Tuorto remain convinced of the League's extremist credentials. In some of his individual work, Passarelli (2019) recalls how in the last couple of decades the League "changed its public policies with reference to the issues most often emphasized by extreme right parties, notably, immigration, the European Union, religion, and civil rights" and also making the case - by presenting accurate data - that its sympathisers and voters have clearly shifted to the right

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[72] At a European level, (excluding the mentioned Italian cases), this party family currently must include the current Espana 2000 (E-2000), Golden Dawn, National Democratic Party Germany ("Die Heimat" since 2023), and the Portuguese *Ergue-Te*. Whilst examples of recently defunct extreme-right or neo-fascist parties would be *Frente Nacional* in Spain, Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in Portugal and the Centre Party (CP'86) in the Netherlands (see Table 2.4 in Taggart, 1996: 42)

[73] To be precise, the most orthodox (and extreme) "far-right" in Nazi Germany prioritised politics of race much more than culture. The phrase "when I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun" conceived by Nazi era playwright Hanns Johst was particularly admired and often quoted by NSDAP hierarchs – especially Herman Goring and Joseph Goebbels.

on those particular issues (Passarelli, 2019: 233; see also Passarelli, 2013). As the title of his latest text - written alongside his colleague Tuorto (2018) - suggests the League is an "extreme right party in government"[74] (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). Moreover, in a more recent piece written for the _Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics_ Passarelli overtly includes _racism_ as a core feature of the populist framework setting it alongside political and institutional distrust, anti-system attitudes, and attacks on the political elite (Passarelli, 2019: 224). This point is also very disputable, and self-evidently far-fetched given the overwhelming majority of past scholars (unlike journalists) have refrained from speaking of overt racism when discussing populism. Let alone considering it a definitional feature that holds the same importance of anti-elite or anti-political sentiment.

More cautiously, other experts like Mudde or Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have categorised "xenophobia" and/or "exclusionism" as a core element of the ideology and discourse of parties they have studied and generally defined as either "radical right", "extreme-right", or "(national)populist" (Mudde, 2000; 2007; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Especially in the second case, to avoid confusion, the two British scholars distinguish between "blatant racism" (present in extreme-right ideology) and xenophobia (present _sometimes_ in populist ideology) (see Shaw, 2018 for a critique of this approach). The former is defined as "the erroneous and dangerous belief that the world is divided into hierarchically ordered races, to anti-Semitism which plays more on conspiracy theory, and to violence and aggressive attitudes towards others based on their ethnicity" (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Shaw 2018). Whereas, in relation to the former concept, the latter is defined as something that occurs "where the disparagement and fear of different cultural groups is not linked to this form of systematic thinking" (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Shaw 2018). According to this criterion, parties like the League - but others too in France, Britain, and Germany - would be xenophobic _at most_ but not inherently or systematically racist. Thus, once again, not easily classifiable as extreme-right.

Whilst it is true that the League has taken on issues such as Euroscepticism, anti-immigration (placing an emphasis on the autochthonous community), and displayed an intolerance towards banks and the corporate world (as I will further show in the empirical chapters) that is emblematic of right-wing extremism it is exceptionally difficult (essentially impossible) to find anything openly racist in the electoral programs of the party or discourse of its representatives. As already mentioned, there are to this day other parties in Italy like _Forza Nuova_ and _CasaPound_ that openly present themselves as those who uphold the legacy (which they consider positive) of fascism in Italy and they can be without any doubt labelled as "extreme-right" (_In Onda_, La7, 28 October 2012;

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[74] Obviously, it was published in the year 2018, exactly in the midst of an operational League/5SM government.

see also Broder, 2023). However, to provide this label haphazardly for the League would be exaggerated and incorrect, especially because it means downplaying its populism that has since its inception (in the late 1980s) been the principal element within its ideological repertoire (Tarchi, 2002: 129).

Overall, although clearly displaying a nativist *forma mentis* (Galbo, 2020), the League is *not* extreme-right or even strictly "right-wing" because it has always pledged to overcome and "go beyond" the traditional *left-right* cleavage (as even Passarelli himself acknowledges, see Passarelli 2019: 228). Confusingly, the same scholar states that the League has been "broadening its political appeal thanks to its populist themes" (Passarelli, 2019) something that (usually more unsuccessful) extreme-right/neo-fascist parties very rarely do, as we know they tend to remain in what Weyland calls the "ideological ghetto" (Weyland, 2017: 63). Passarelli and Tuorto (2018) posit there has been a "tactical abandonment" of the northern question, and this is true (although to a lesser degree than they suggest) but also a further reason to view the League as an opportunistic, chameleonic, and somewhat philosophically flexible populist party rather than an extreme-right one (see Wilkoń, 2016). It has already been proven that the extreme-right puts ideological purity, the exaltation of a "*new man*", the forging of a new *state* and new *nation* (originating from its millenarian *weltanschauung*) before any kind of short-term political goal (see Eatwell, 2010; see also Weyland, 2017: 63-65).

A corrective to this idea that the League is an extreme-right party *possibly* (yet involuntarily) comes from the work of Daniele Albertazzi *et al*., (2018). The three authors (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone) of this relatively recent academic piece have used a mixed methodology that incorporates an analysis of social media posts (on *Facebook*) with structured interviews (involving important party representatives such as Molinari, Vinci, Grimoldi and Rixi) in order to find out more about the political character of the contemporary League (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 652-653). The three main discoveries these scholars have made are that regionalism (although still relevant to the *leghisti*) is no longer the focal point of the party's politics, the EU (and its technocrats, bureaucrats, and politicians) have replaced the Italian state (and the capital Rome) as the principal "enemy of the people", and also that latent fractures between Salvini (who decided the Northern League should "go national") and his regional representatives "could have profound implications in the future" (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 645). However, the most important aspect of their research relates to the idea that the modern League under Salvini is no longer an outwardly *regionalist populist party* (see McDonnell, 2006) as it was in Bossi's time, but even if it has adopted a much more nationalist stance (inextricably linked to right-wing populism) thanks to its "Janus-faced character" it manages to still maintain some regionalist federalism in its political DNA (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 650, 657).

Therefore, whilst it may very well be a conservatively-oriented (right-wing) populist party it *cannot* be associated with the extreme right but *at most* with the populist radical-right – in fact Mudde includes it in this last group (see Mudde, 2007: 32, 306).

Albertazzi and his research associates highlight that - notwithstanding Salvini's strategy to go national - the party's "elites" are clearly structured and rooted in the North and they not only recognise the regionalist dimension but also "identify with it" (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 657). From the interviews conducted by Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, it transpires that party officials (Molinari and other regional administrators) have had to often remind youngsters (with extreme views) that would attempt to join the party that the League is something different from a "right-wing anti-immigrant party" and if their only priority was the expulsion of immigrants and to install some neo-authoritarian Mussolini-like state they had come to the wrong place (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 658). Ultimately, the League has temporarily cast aside the regionalist/federalist cause to prioritise contemporary pressing issues like mass immigration and the problems with (globalised) free trade (uncoincidentally Salvini is known to support protectionism) but this does not signify that the party has completely abandoned its devotion to the *ceti produttivi* of the North, and to the people of the North altogether.

Accordingly, currently the League has two "contrasting yet coexisting" souls, one showing its allegiance to the Italian nation (and its people/native Italians) *as a whole* and the other to the "productive" citizens of the northern regions in particular (Albertazzi et al., 2018: 659). The fact that today's League is (to some degree) an ideologically divided party - but with federalism still in its constitution - is alone enough for it not to be categorised as extreme right. Not to mention, the typically capitalist, crypto-libertarian and individualist "protestant entrepreneurial spirit" (Weber as cited in Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017; Huysseune, 2010: 66) of the *leghisti* is somewhat at odds with the mildly anti-capitalist, corporatist and exclusively ultra-authoritarian conception of society of the extreme-right movement(s). The themes discussed earlier (which shall be subsequently identified in party programs and interviews of the League) anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy are representative of populism and *not* of fascism.

On another note, Marco Brunazzo and Mark Gilbert (2017) equate the new (post-Bossi, post-2013) League to a "populist insurgency" (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 624). They also interchangeably use the term "right-wing insurgency" which is different from right-wing extremism but relatable to other *supposed* right-wing insurgencies like the French National Front (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 625). At a definitional level, this is problematic not due to the word "insurgency" *per se* but because of the historical connotation that this specific term carries. It is for this reason, that another scholar,

professor Marco Tarchi (2015), more cautiously ideologically groups the League among populist protest parties (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). However, Tarchi's contribution will be discussed subsequently. Beforehand, it needs to be stressed that the main issue with the definition provided by the first two scholars is that the term (*insurgency*) which they borrowed from the Italian intellectual Nicola Matteucci (1926-2006) was initially used to refer to left-wing revolutionaries (Matteucci, 2008). These were predominantly students from peasant and working class backgrounds (rather than experienced politicians or intellectuals) who ran social-protest movements in the 1968 (university revolts) context and might be inappropriate for an institutionalised party like the League (see Matteucci, 2008; see also Strazzieri, 2021). A party that has been in and out of government several times over the last three decades (see Albertazzi et al., 2011). Overall, the League is not a bottom-up movement (whilst the *sessantottini* Matteucci referred to largely were) like other popular protest organisations at a global level (e.g. Occupy Wall Street, the *Indignados*, Black Bloc, *etc*.) but a full-fledged populist party with a neatly-defined hierarchy where one man (in this case the Federal Secretary, Salvini) holds ultimate decision-making authority (for an analysis of the party's organisation, see McDonnell and Vampa, 2016).

Despite all of this, in terms of organisation, the League has almost never been identified as an entirely personalist party as much as Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*! for example (see Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VII). In fact, both under Bossi and Salvini (and self-evidently during Roberto Maroni's brief time in charge too) the League's leadership position has been held by men who have merely served the purpose of being (temporarily) *primus inter pares* (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). This means that distinctly from the position a usually charismatic (yet *not* always charismatic, see Ansell and Fish, 1999) party chief holds within a personalist party in the case of the League leadership is both temporary and replaceable. This means it is more likely that the party's existence does not come to an end when a specific leadership timeline terminates.

More importantly though, Brunazzo's and Gilbert's understanding of right-wing insurgencies is that they put forward simplistic solutions (often articulated in a vulgar and aggressive manner, *supposedly* like radical leftists in the late 1960s) to complex problems (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 638). Their view of the League is that of a party that holds a superficial view of the political world that when in fact what is required is instead a "true and authentic politics" alongside a "sense of realism and of history" (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 638). Potentially, they are arguing that this party is more anti-political than political (more *against* something rather than *for* something) and that their exclusionary stances on immigration are not grounded in reality. Considering immigration is an inevitable and global phenomenon that has always existed throughout the history of mankind.

One can also object to this specific view though, underlining that the League has always articulated its political message (for better or worse) in a rather articulate and precise manner.

Surprisingly, even if populism may appear as insincere and incoherent or even as pure demagogy[75] at times (see Delsol, 2019), it can also give birth to concrete policies and proposals (especially in times of high unemployment, low GDP growth, scarcity of resources, and institutional unaccountability) and draw support from large portions of the electorate (Spannaus, 2019: 7; Varriale, 2020: 256; Schroeder, 2020). For instance, when being part of a government a majority, the League managed to put into effect policies that - even though controversial - were largely consistent with its populist mindset, such as the *Bossi-Fini* Law[76] (see Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI) and *Law n.94/2009* that tackled illegal immigration. Unlike distinctively right-wing parties and movements (especially extreme-right ones) the party has never been against immigration *per se* (or immigrants individually) but in favour of a controlled legal immigration which occurs under the supervision of a European Union in charge of redistribution procedures studied to alleviate the phenomenon for southern European countries located by the Mediterranean sea (La7attualità, *PiazzaPulita*, 24 September, 2018).

In fact, to dismiss (as Brunazzo and Gilbert appear to do) a party that has been competing in general elections for three decades on a party platform that included issues as diverse from each other as immigration, taxes, fiscal federalism, religion in schools, industrial privatisation, the legalisation of drugs, capital punishment and terrorism as one of "intoxicating quick solutions" (see Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 638) or one that is "making policy on the hoof" (see Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017: 626) is overbold. It is also not concretely helpful if we are to study party ideology objectively. After all, under Salvini the League appears to still be the "programmatic party" - one that decides to vote alongside both Right and Left in parliament, depending on whether the policies proposed align with the party's values - that Cento Bull and Gilbert (2001) spoke of in the early 2000s.

Although today the League is certainly a more solid ally of the *centre*-Right than the *centre*-Left (it led the former coalition post-Berlusconi and pre-Meloni's rise) it is also the party that brought populist ideology to the Right (see Raniolo, 2016). Without the League the *centre*-Right coalition would have been much less Eurosceptic, more classically liberal ("*liberale*" in Italian), less anti-

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[75] In her work Chantal Delsol (2019) reminds us in her work about the nature of populism and its relationship with "the common idiot" where she reflects on Ancient Greek populism and claims that the demagogue was usually a popular leader of a mob camouflaged as a politician (Delsol, 2008, as cited in Tarchi, 2019: 97-127). The historical examples Delsol gives (Delsol, 2019: 101) would ring a bell to any classicist. She mentions Gyges of Lydia, Cypselos of Corinth, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, and Pericles (Delsol, 2019: 101).

[76] This law was suppose to regulate illegal immigration yet became generally judged as slow-paced, incoherent, dysfunctional, and ultimately useless and unsuccessfull (Grignetti, 2013; Bulli and Soare, 2018: 135-137).

immigration (Berlusconi viewed the phenomenon more favourably in light of his links with big business/multinationals) and less socio-economically communitarian. In fact, the League is so pragmatic and programmatic that even Brunazzo and Gilbert themselves are able to discern the strong points of its agenda (they looked at the 2013 manifesto whilst I later assess the 2018 one) such as ending/overcoming austerity, turn the ECB role into more of a *pis aller* option based on the American Federal Reserve model and introduce direct democracy to choose the EU Commission President, as well as many other very specific policies (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017: 634). Such a solid and cogent agenda (regardless of whether it is radical or not) is to be taken more seriously than that of sporadic and leaderless movements belonging to the sub-group of "street populism"[77]. Definitions matter and the League is actually a populist party *not* a populist insurgency.

The term "insurgency" though not as inappropriate as "extreme-right" (considering the *leghisti* do actually aim to reflect a revolt against the international elite and *status quo*) still leaves much room for confusion when dealing with this right-wing populist party known in Italy as "*la Lega*" (the League). It is unwise to apply Matteucci's pre-modern terminology to contemporary times. Unlike Brunazzo and Gilbert, the other scholar mentioned above, Tarchi (2015), refrains from using the word "right-wing" too openly when discussing both Bossi's and Salvini's League. According to him, notwithstanding the party's conservatism on *most* (though *not all*) social issues, and a mix of left and right economic policies, the League is first and foremost a populist party (Tarchi, 2002: 129; 2015: Chapter VI).

More specifically, Tarchi argues that instead of being traceable to the ultra-Right, *leghismo* is the "idealtypical incarnation of populism" (interestingly he holds a similar view of the 5SM) and acknowledges that the (Northern) League has been the first populist mass-party since Guglielmo Giannini's Common Man's Front[78] (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). Tarchi (like Ignazi before him) makes sure to state that the League is necessarily very different from radical or extreme parties on the Right (many witnessed a revival from the 1970s onwards) due to its critique of politics *per se* but also because it unapologetically denounces the parties of both left and right that serve the interests of the rich instead of "the people" (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). As Tarchi reminds us, unlike a leftist force, the League has never argued in favour of "class struggle" but self-proclaims itself as an *interclass* organisation, that aims to defend ordinary people (organically, as *a whole* of a nation) from elites with vested interests (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). At the same time, unlike a

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[77] For an account of "street populism" see Hamdaoui (2021: 493-510).

[78] This is a reference to Neapolitan journalist Guglielmo Giannini, a convinced libertarian and staunch atlanticist, but also the founder of the first truly populist political party Italy: The Common Man's Front ("*Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*" – FUQ).

rightist force, it is suspicious of globalisation, unfettered freedom of movement and trade, big business capitalism, and aims to mobilise the lower classes through referendums and other forms of direct democracy (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI; Cattani, 2016; see also Scanni, 2022). Unlike both, especially the more centrist moderates on Left and Right, it sporadically distrusts the - supposedly elitist - political culture of parliamentarianism within liberal democracy and some (non-economic aspects) of Western liberalism in general. This is probably the only real attribute it shares with the extreme-right.

Overall, according to Tarchi (2015), the League is a party which primarily expresses an ideological synthesis - inspired or accompanied by a popular a sentiment among Italian middle classes - between populism and liberalism (perhaps what he really means is *right-wing liberalism* or *right-liberalism*[79]) (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). Throughout the years, this ideological connotation has led the League to anchor its political message to a particular set of themes that have been especially relevant in the Italian context. Tarchi lists those "themes" in a somewhat sporadic manner and (much like I do later in this volume) relates them to policies that the League currently supports or has supported in the past (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). For example, historically the League has promoted a complete liberalisation of enterprise, a regionalisation of the system of pensions and welfare, criticised the state of welfare and union power, and been in favour of substituting national taxes with local taxes as well as privatising all state industry (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI).

Uncoincidentally, a parallel is drawn by Tarchi between the (Northern) League and the (*neo*)liberal wave of ideas identifiable starting with Ronald Reagan (for some reason this author omits a mention of Margaret Thatcher) to the point where he directly links the party's old economic positions to those of so-called "Reaganomics" (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). However, understandably, given the piece was written between 2014 and 2015 as Salvini's leadership phase was only beginning to develop, not much is said about the League's turn to much less economically liberal (and less mainstream) ideas. Such as the adoption of protectionism and tariffs, some industrial nationalisations, and the sporadic (very recent) flirtation with a moderate neo-Keynesianism (but still predominantly remaining in the *laissez faire* economic camp). This is a further reason to study the new League in the contemporary age, a party that seems to have left behind (for the most part) the classical liberalism of the early days – or at least having it play a decidedly minor role. Expectedly, the study of parties and ideology often requires a constant upgrading and updating.

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[79] This is essentially a slightly more conservative form of liberalism. If we consider it ideologically, it may be defined as a variant of liberalism that combines some liberal values and policies with other conservative positions. In other words, right-liberalism represents the rightist wing or faction of the greater liberal movement (Gallagher et al., 2011: 221).

After all, as Tarchi himself recognises, the League has (more than once) modified its ideological apparatus throughout the years, first from regionalist/federalist to independentist/secessionist and then on to a nationalist populist one of *partially* right-wing conservative orientation (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). This is a party that manages to "mix rebellion with traditionalism" and "protest with identity" (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). Therefore, in the *leghisti*'s view it is as if *the people* are both *ethnos* (an ethno-culturally homogenous population with collective interests) and *demos* (a *silent majority* that tends to shy away from politics but still reflects the core of democracy) (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). Ideological shifts notwithstanding, Tarchi is right to emphasize the fact that as a populist party the League has been consistent in representing from within institutions those who are primarily outside of them (the "common people") and also that the repositioning from the old regionalist League to the nationalist populist one should be recognised but not overstated or exaggerated (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI). The big claim he makes is that even if the League is now closer than ever to the new populist party family (he uses the term "neo-populist"[80] without expanding on it however) it has never completely abandoned the *nazionalismo Padano* (Padanian/Northern Italian nationalism) of the early days (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter VI).

In any case, as the overview of the existing academic literature on the League has clearly demonstrated, much attention has been given to the League's ideology. However, even if several leitmotifs of the *leghista* ideology have been supplied by distinct scholars, not enough in-depth empirical work is available where *very specific* themes (manifested on a regular basis in such way that they can be *explicitly* discerned as the core of the party's ideology) are identified in contemporary party programs or speeches/discourse. Analysis of the League's populist themes remains somewhat generic and the different labels attached to the party – such as "far-right" (Newth, 2022); "extreme right" (Passarelli, 2013), "populist radical right" (Zulianello, 2021: 228) "ultra-Right" (Madron, 2014), "right-wing populist insurgency" (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017) are usually unhelpful. This is because they overestimate the right-wing characteristics of the party and downplay the purely populist, people-centric, and anti-establishment characteristics traceable not just to anti-elitism but also unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy. Especially, this can be an issue when right-wing politics are predominantly associated to hierarchical values, free trade, establishment elitism, and social conservatism (see Bobbio 2009, for a complete account of right-wing ideas).

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[80] Taggart (1995) has used this (or a very similar) expression before in his contribution "New populist parties in Western Europe" which is particularly important as he presents a table where he clearly *differentiates* between "neo"populist and "neofascist" parties in several countries.

The League is not typically right-wing in this sense, as it is anti-elitist, sometimes opposes free trade, and is only socially conservative to a moderate extent. As the analysis taking place in the empirical chapters will show, although I refer to the party as "right-wing" populist (as the *leghisti*'s populism is somewhat closer to the Right than the Left) the definitional catch-word is *populist* rather than *right-wing*. This is a survey of populist parties and not of centre-Right or extreme-right parties, and the League is above all populist before anything else.

5 Star Movement: An example of "left-wing populism"?

5 Star Movement: A Short History

Moving on from the League to the 5 Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italian), the 5SM was formally brought to life by former comedian Beppe Grillo alongside the salient technology-sector entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio on September 9, 2009 (Mejstrik, 2016). However, the original idea of building a protest movement from scratch through the internet was actually developed somewhere between 2005 and 2009 (Mosca, 2015; 2019; Mejstrik 2016). In the early autumn of 2009, Grillo for the first time explicitly stated that he was putting forward a new movement (although "apparatus" was the word he originally used to describe the enterprise) with a revolutionary programme for Italy (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 44, 54). Once the movement had been baptised, with its main founder (Grillo himself) announcing in October of that same year that it would run for the next regional elections, its ideological mission statement was officially provided too (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 54). The focus was on the "5 Stars" aspect, and uncoincidentally for a post-1968, post-materialist, progressive, libertarian (but also populist) new left force, those five stars became known as *public water*, *sustainable transport*, *sustainable development*, *technology* and *environment*(*-alism*) (Tarchi, 2015; Varriale, 2021: 4).

What is certain is that Grillo's (and partially Casaleggio's) political invention would not have been able to be fully developed if it weren't for a mixture of internal and external factors such as the inevitable de-alignment of the bipolar party model after the fall of Berlusconi's fourth government (in late 2011), the astounding social delegitimization (through a series of public scandals) of the Italian political elite, and the great window of opportunity (especially for "bottom-up" protest movements) brought about by the recent economic crisis (Tarchi, 2015). Repeated scandals, involving the financing of parties (e.g. Bossi's Northern League and Di Pietro's Italy of Values party) along with the unpopular austerity policies pushed forward by an even more unpopular

(Italian populists called it "illegitimate") technical government such as Mario Monti's resulted in the end of the *fragmented bipolarism*[81] present in the country's political sphere (Mejstrik, 2016).

Grillo's ruthless electoral vehicle has been referred to in so many distinct ways; a "virtual party", a "leaderist movement with a leaderless organisation", a "meta-organisation", a "catch-all anti-party party" or simply as a "movement-party" (De Rosa, 2013; Tronconi, 2015; Lanfrey, 2011; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2015; Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016). The genesis of the 5SM can be traced back to Grillo's blog (*beppegrillo.it*) that began to take overtly politically populist tones in September 2007 when he pushed his fans (mostly web-followers) to "take to the streets" against the corrupt political establishment in what became known as the "*Vaffa***** Day*" or in short "V-Day" (meaning "F**k off Day" in Italian) that took place on the eight day of that month in the city of Bologna (Mejstrik, 2016). On that initial occasion, the protests were directed towards the common enemy of ordinary Italians: *the political* (*ruling*) *class* (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013: 433). The second V-Day had an even greater showing than the first one (40-50 thousand supporters and activists) and took place the following April in Turin (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013: 433).

It was specifically aimed at *the news media*. In a very similar manner to his then competitor (but later ally in June 2018) Salvini, Grillo was excellent at identifying scapegoats that his most fervid militants could collectively mobilise against (Tronconi, 2018: 163-180). In essence, ever since its inception, the 5SM chose to direct its offensive against the political/parliamentary elite(s) and the mainstream media (Tronconi, 2018: 163-180; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013: 433). More specifically, in the particularist (and blatantly populist) worldview of the *grillini* the "caste of politicians" and the "caste of journalists" was conspiring to destroy the Italian nation and deprive every citizens of their most basic, individual, and universal rights (Tronconi, 2018). Furthermore, *Meetups*[82] organised through the web permitted Grillo and Casaleggio to first vet and then pick their most trusted men to represent the 5SM first locally and then nationally (Tronconi, 2015: 52-56; Mouffe, 2012). With this process, sympathisers of the 5SM would quickly become militant members and councillors of the 5SM all over Italy given they would respect the rules by staying

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[81] This is the interpretation the scholar Roberto D'Alimonte (2005) gives to the Italian system in that period. Regardless of the electoral law (PR, Mixed, or Majoritarian) Italy switched from "polarised pluralism" (a series of medium-large competing parties not just the Christian Democracy Party) of the First Republic to "fragmented bipolarism" during the course of the Second Republic meaning there were two large blocs (centre-right and centre-left) and smaller parties aligned themselves with either one or the other pre-electorally or post-electorally.

[82] "*Meetup* is a social networking site that allows you to find and join groups related to your own personal interests" (see https://edu.gcfglobal.org).

loyal to the values imposed by the founding fathers of the organisation through the Florence Charter[83] ("*Carta di Firenze*") (Mejstrik, 2016). In other words, they had to "toe the party line".

Just before the 2013 general election, essentially the first nation-wide (non-local and non-administrative) election in which the 5SM competed, the party released their rudimentary electoral program directly from their *Rousseau platform*[84] and Grillo's blog which contained seven of their priority policies (Tronconi, 2015: 52-56). Among those seven, there was the cancellation of the EU's fiscal compact, the adoption of new "Eurobonds", the call for a formal political-economic alliance with other Mediterranean countries (possibly to replace the EU), investment and innovation within the technology sector and industry, abolition of the balanced budget laws, more funding for national agriculture, and ultimately a referendum on the Euro currency (Caruso, 2016). Notwithstanding, some of the proposals that came later, such as the new "Citizen's Income" put the 5SM at odds with most of the establishment parties – as they feared taxes and debt would have to be raised significantly for such a financial operation. Eventually this also brought upon the 5SM a negative reception from international markets as well as Italy's foreign allies in the old continent who became worried about the party's "anti-European" (and anti-Atlanticist, anti-NATO, anti-Israel) positions.

The 5SM's behaviour in the political arena was to say the least peculiar. Until 2014, apart from excluding any form of cooperation with other parties, Grillo strictly prohibited his politicians (MPs and local and/or regional Councillors) to give interviews on national television or appear on any mainstream media outlets (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 150-167). On one occasion, hard-nosed 5SM MP Alessandro Di Battista even declared: "the moment the 5SM will collaborate with any of the parties that have contributed to the destruction of Italy will also be the moment of my departure from the Movement" (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 166). Essentially, moderates on the centre-Right and centre-Left both detested and feared the *grillini* and their leader Grillo who made continuous controversial (yet apparently also humorous) statements such as demanding that hypothetical foreign terrorists would attack the building where the President resided or to "open up Parliament like a can of tuna" (Tarchi, 2014). To be sure, the fact that the 5SM was so loosely

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[83] In the Florence Charter (8 March 2009) - written right after Grillo met with his early Tuscan supporters - twelve points of political objectives were highlighted and some of those included the request for faster Technological innovation (e.g. free Wi-fi nationally) and incentives for renewable energy (Giacobini, 2019). This document heavily influenced the ideas of what would then officially become the 5SM later that year (Giacobini, 2019).

[84] *Rousseau* is the name of the web-platform (created by Casaleggio and Grillo) to allow the 5SM to experiment with web-populism upon the ideals of direct democracy. Candidates for local/administrative, regional, and national/political elections are more often than not chosen online (Stockman and Scalia, 2020). This approach was partly inspired by Germany's Pirate Party that also used the web to put forward ideas and candidates.

structured and opaquely organised didn't help with its reputation amongst part of the public and political mainstream. Grillo was the only one who legally owned the symbol of the "movement-party", and he was also the only one who could veto electoral candidates that were chosen by members on his online blog (Diamanti, 2019: 4-15). Also, the 5SM (but mostly Grillo himself) heavily relied on the funding and media communication of external advisors provided by Casaleggio's firm, the *Casaleggio Associati* (Vespa, 2018: 163-165). Not to mention, it is suspected (but so far has not been proved beyond doubt) that at some point in time the party accepted funds from the Venezuelan semi-autocrat Hugo Chávez who embodied a similar socialist populism to that of the 5SM (Manzo, 2021).

By mid-2018, the 5SM became the first party rather than the first "movement" in Italy. The *grillini* no longer exclaim their intention to "open up parliament like a can of tuna" (although some may argue they already have[85]) but rather have become Parliament itself, as up until the summer of 2022 they enjoyed a comfortable majority in both houses (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate). In essence, the 5SM is now a fully institutionalised political force that has even shared its powers and influence in a governmental coalition with the mainstream ("elite"-)party *par excellence*, the Democratic Party – which has been at the centre stage nationally for the last dozen years. Supra-nationally, the 5SM has sat in the EU Parliament with independent/non-aligned MEPs after a short-lived but convenient political marriage with the British populists of UKIP with whom it had previously formed the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group (Savati, 2016). The 5 Star Movement is now somewhat of a "5 Star Party", a party that lately obtained as much as *circa* 32% of the vote in the 2018 General Election.

5 Star Movement: Generic Overview

It must be noted that the contrasting designations given to the 5SM and its ideology (as protean and eclectic as it may be) have certainly brought some confusion to scholars who are newly approaching this "movement-party" to observe its characteristics. As a matter of fact, few scholars have identified the 5SM as a "left-wing populist" party, but even if somewhat discretely, one of them that has is certainly Marco Tarchi (see also Gualmini, 2013; Brancaccio and Fruncillo, 2019; Varriale, 2021b). Others have instead deliberately chosen to argue that the 5SM represents something quite distinct, perhaps a rare political phenomenon. On one hand, we have those who insist that the 5SM is *neither* left nor right, but actually a centrist populist actor (see Mosca and Tronconi, 2019). On

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[85] See Varriale (2021b).

the other hand, there are scholars who associate the 5SM to positions that are particularly sovereignist (and even exclusionary) such as Davide Vittori (2017) who sets apart the *grillini* from left-wing populism (this author argues that the 5SM is ideologically dissimilar from *PODEMOS* in Spain) and hints that the party is closer to the right than the left on many issues. Similarly, never explicitly stating the 5SM is "right-wing", Antonio Benasaglio Berlucchi (2022) put forward the hypothesis (which he also tests empirically) that Grillo's party is a new home for Italian voters with exclusionary attitudes – especially towards foreigners and illegal migrants.

Moreover, let us not forget there are groups of other scholars who prefer to refrain from locating the 5SM on the classical *left-right* spectrum and are purposely more vague in their classifications of the party. Astutely, Custodi and Padoan (2023) but also Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013) and Caruso (2017), adopt a more neutral stance, and decide to describe the 5SM as simply *post-ideological* and (in the former's words: "with no clear ideological connotation", (see Custodi and Padoan, 2023: 414). The intellectuals Pierangelo Isernia *et al*., (2018) do something similar to those mentioned in the lines above, and decide to refer to the 5SM as "trans ideological", a party that relies on a sort of ideological/political syncretism. Intentionally, they use the metaphor of the custard slice pastry (known as *Millefoglie* in Italy and *Mille-feuille* in France) when discussing the 5SM in an opinion piece for the academically-relevant magazine *Il Mulino* (Isernia et al., 2018). Instead, for Corbetta and Gualmini (2013) we are dealing with a "strange (political) animal" and a curious case of "web-populism" (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 197).

Another author, Joe Galbo (2020) would essentially agree with Corbetta and Gualmini, but prefers to call it "cyber-populism" (Galbo, 2020: 51). Last but not least, even more interestingly, two distinguished scholars Chris Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2018) decide to place the 5SM in a whole new group or family of political parties which they argue is becoming more and more relevant in contemporary times. Accordingly, the 5SM is a perfect example of "techno-populism" – one that expresses an ideological synthesis between anti-establishment populism and technocracy and is not "far-right" or "far-left" but can be actually likened to parties abroad like Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche!* (France) and Albert Rivera's *Ciudadanos* (Spain) (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 145). Most, but not all of the works (only the ones I consider most relevant) mentioned in the lines above will be discussed throughout the next paragraphs in the context of establishing a rationale for further study regarding the ideological connotation of the 5SM.

Commencing with Tarchi's assessment of the 5SM, this political force is accordingly one that reflects a populism "*allo stato puro*" (populism at its purest state or form) (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). Tarchi's precise analysis of the 5SM leaves us little room to doubt that this is a party that aims

to *speak for* and represent the ordinary people of Italy both *in* and *out* of parliament (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). Firstly, Tarchi provides a brief summary of the main factors that contributed to the explosion of populism in contemporary Italy (that went hand in hand with the rise of Grillo and the 5SM) such as the endemic scandals at every level of the political pyramid and both sides of the spectrum, the continuous waste of public resources/funds, occurring concomitantly to the Great Recession and crisis of the last fifteen years (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). After all, there is a great deal of consensus regarding the fact that - as Finchelstein (2019) suggests - "populism thrives in crisis, instability, and polarization" (Finchelstein, 2019: xxii: in *Preface*). Secondly, but also more importantly, Tarchi posits that the 5SM is indeed "populist" because it displays every single characteristic of populism as an ideology (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). However, similarly to Mudde, he speaks of a weak ideology, and prefers to follow the framework adopted by Juan J. Linz (2000) and treat it as a "political mentality" (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX; see also Linz, 2000).

Grillo, by developing the 5 Star Movement paradoxically supplied (middle and working class) disenchanted Italians with a political outlet to take on an (originally) anti-political sentiment of protest. According to Tarchi, the 5SM is certainly populist because it makes *appeals to the people*, makes use of *anti-political* and *anti-elite rhetoric*, and *rejects institutional mediation* (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). Also, he cautiously makes the argument that it is not only the frustrated and economically destitute working class that has electorally opted for the 5SM but actually the middle class (particularly the *petite bourgeoisie*) that constitutes "the backbone of the Movement" (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). In this regard, he takes a middle-line between scholars like Corbetta and Gualmini (2013) who in an earlier academic study of the 5SM (published before the "Citizen's Income" welfarist policy) have argued that the supporters of the 5SM tend to originate from medium-large urban centres, are relatively young, tend to be qualified at an educational level, and have higher incomes than the average citizen and others (for example, see Diamanti, 2017) who claim the 5SM is predominantly the party of the young and manual labourers (the working class) (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 95-104). The scholar Ilvo Diamanti (2017) recognises the 5SM has benefited greatly from unemployment and economic problems afflicting Southern Italians, which is why they have been particularly successful in the region (Diamanti, 2017). After all, between 2017-2018 the 5SM came up with the Citizen's Income (welfare/*workfare*) proposal which contributed immensely to a boost of support among the lower classes.

Notwithstanding the fact that 5SM sympathisers all may have different ideas to those of Grillo (there is proof some of his views on immigration are distinct from those of party members[86] online)

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[86] Refer to Gagliardi and Marini (2018)

it is still reasonable to consider - as Tarchi hints - this party as a typically Italian example of "left-wing" or social-populism (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). Even if Tarchi draws an analogy between the *grillini* and Pierre Poujade's lower-middle class (popular and populist) revolts in 1950s France (although the *Poujadistes* were slightly more right-leaning) he also admits that the origins of the 5SM are in fact traceable to radical leftist "new politics" (for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see Taggart, 1996) movements that considerably impacted the second half of the 20th century (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). In fact, the 5SM has a lot in common with the left-wing socially-progressive and libertarian (usually also "green" and environment-friendly) forces of the last decades if one looks at its main programmatic themes. The "5stars" in the party name and logo stand for (in no particular order) *Public Water*, *Sustainable Transport*, *Sustainable Development*, *Connectivity* (or Technology) and *Environment* (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX).

These tropes (which are then meant to be transformed into signature policies) put forward by Grillo's party as early as 2009 all clearly belong prevalently to the territory of the post-war, post-communist, and post-materialist Left (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). This is not the traditional extreme-left that orthodoxly embraced the Marxist-Leninist dogma and was principally interested in mobilising workers to take over the state through an authoritarian attempt of "class struggle". Modern and pre-modern radical left (populist) movements are less Marxist and less statist, but increasingly liberal, feminist, environmentalist, and cosmopolitan (see Damiani, 2016: 13). In fact, in his work on the far-left Luke March (2008) makes important distinctions in regards to the sub-types within the family of leftist parties. It is likely that by using March's framework - based on its anti-elite/anti-establishment (but also ideologically eclectic) socially conscious and progressive positions - the 5SM would fit in either the category of *Social populist parties*[87] or that of *Populist socialist parties*[88] (March, 2008: 3-4).

It is no coincidence that domestically the *grillini* have supported (and effectively helped mobilise) all of the spontaneous bottom-up popular protest movements that can be associated with radical left ideology – *No TAV*, *No Dal Molin*, *No Nucleare*, *No Gronda*, etc (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). In an old article for the *European Centre for Populism Studies* (ECPS) I took Tarchi's argument one step further and argued that far too often scholars misrepresent the 5SM or underestimate the left-wing narratives within its populism (see Varriale, 2021b). By relying on a methodological apparatus

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[87] "*Social populist parties* have the closest resemblance to classical populist movements (for example in Latin America), with a dominant personalist leadership, relatively weak organisation and essentially incoherent ideology, fusing left-wing and right-wing themes behind an anti-establishment appeal" (March, 2008: 4).

[88] "*Populist socialist parties* have a similar democratic socialist ideological core, but this is overlaid with a stronger anti-elite, anti-establishment appeal, greater ideological eclecticism and emphasis on identity rather than class concerns (especially regionalism, nationalism, or law-and-order issues) (March, 2008: 3).

which is entirely qualitative and assesses the nature of the 5SM by closely observing its generic ideology, discourse, organisational model, domestic and foreign policy I had concluded that the 5SM is undoubtedly a left-wing or social(-*ist*) populist - fully institutionalised - party (Varriale, 2021b: 17-18). The attitudes of the 5SM in respect to welfare, environmental protection, women's rights, big business, the role of the state, war (they are "anti-war" in terms of foreign policy and favour blocking the sale of weapons abroad), NATO and the USA, reflect a more leftist perspective than a rightist one (Varriale, 2021: 6-12).

In the same article, I also illustrated that while there are elements in Grillo's discourse that can be considered "right-wing" (especially in his rants against citizenship for foreigners/the *Ius Soli*) there are also moments where the 5SM founder sounds like a progressive-socialist as he calls for more female involvement in politics and praises the "anti-capitalism" of the web (Varriale, 2021b: 7-8). At an organisational level, the horizontal and stratarchical features of the party - though not entirely bottom-up given the decision-making roles of Grillo and Casaleggio - are less typically populist (given populist parties are highly centralised, see Taggart, 2000: 100-103) and more representative of the "*movimentismo*" of the radical left in Western Europe and the Americas (see Bordignon and Cecccarini, 2013: 438; Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 205).

I agree with the above-mentioned scholars who (somewhat) associate the 5SM to a populistic left. However, as already stated, there are others who postulate the 5SM is neither left-populist nor right-populist, but actually an example of ideologically "centrist populism" (see Mosca and Tronconi, 2019) that even has an electoral base of supporters who are supposedly "centrist extremists" (see Diamanti, 2017). While the specific political beliefs and policy-preferences of 5SM voters falls beyond the scope of my research (hence won't be discussed in depth, although I concur with Gualmini that rightist voters joined the 5SM after leftists ones; see Gualmini, 2013) as I will gradually demonstrate in the empirical chapters analysis the idea that the 5SM is a centrist (populist) force similar to those in Central-Eastern Europe (as Mosca and Tronconi conject) is simply inaccurate.

Even though the alternative term to "centrist populism" such as "anti-establishment reform parties" (AERPs) that some scholars also aim to validate (see Mosca and Tronconi 2019: 1262; Hanley and Sikk, 2016) may appear appropriate for the 5SM, given Grillo's invention is both *anti-establishment* and *reformist*[89], the indirect association of the 5SM to parties like New Era party in Latvia, GERB in Bulgaria or Public Affairs party in the Czech Republic is still illogical. Above all, because populist parties in Central-Eastern Europe are much more neo-liberal economically than the 5SM

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[89] I will purposely link this theme to the 5SM in the manifesto and interview analysis in the following chapters.

(see Weyland, 1999). Even if similarly to the 5SM they might moderately embrace elements of direct democracy and horizontal popular engagement, accompanied by a soft or harsh critique of elites, the majority of their political positions are economically (e.g. free trade) and socio-culturally rightist (e.g. anti-immigration, family values, etc.). At most, theirs is an example of liberal-populism, and this type of populism is very rare in Western Europe (though there are exceptions, like the Spanish *Ciudadanos*) and in Italy the closest thing to it would have probably been Berlusconi's early *Forza Italia!* (Forward Italy!) for those who consider him populist.

Ideologically, the 5SM may take from both the Right and the Left, but this does not make it centrist in any way, shape, or form. In the Western World, centrist parties are understood to be parties that take moderate stances on all issues from welfare and education all the way to military spending and immigration. As the thematic analysis later will show, the 5SM is anything *but* moderate on these issues, and takes a relatively hardline position on (or at least more hardline than centre-Left parties, though less so than the populist right) on all these issues. In essence, conservative when it comes to (*anti*-)immigration but much more socialistic when it comes to their positioning on egalitarianism, welfare, education and (*anti*-)military spending positions (for a complete account, see De Luca, 2018). It is true that like so-called AERPs the 5SM mixes elements from left and right but in terms of ideas and policy this does not result in anything that can be truly considered centrist. In fact, the main reason new young voters, former abstentionists, and those that use to be generally disillusioned with politics gave their vote to the 5SM is that the *grillini* present themselves as a direct *alternative* to the traditional "centrist" parties – namely the Democratic Party and Forward Italy! (Schultheis, 2018). To cite one example, the Citizen's Income was considered "revolutionary" in many ways and for unemployed Italians as something very positive, at least from a leftist standpoint (*HuffPost*, 20 October, 2021; Zacchetti, 2021). Another example would be the drastic reduction of MPs in Parliament (I shall discuss this later), this is neither a typically liberal nor centrist policy to carry forward. Nor is a consultative referendum to leave the common *Euro* currency something any centrist force in Italy (like Pier Ferdinando Casini's UDC or Berlusconi's *Forza Italia!*) or abroad would propose.

As Gualmini (2013) observed before in an article for the sought-after Italian newspaper *La Stampa* the 5SM "is a force born out of the radical left", one that belongs to that "silent revolution characterised by the struggle for transversal values, 'post-ideological' and post-materialist ones such as civil rights, equal opportunity, peace-making, sustainable/joint development and ecology" (Gualmini, 2013: 1). The same scholar reminds us that the party leadership is not new to the embracing of *some* leftist political culture, starting from the fact that Grillo himself tried (unsuccessfully) to run as a candidate to the Democratic Party's primaries in 2009 (Gualmini, 2013:

1). He also regularly attended the (anti-fascist and socialist) *Festa de l'Unità* event(s) sponsored by the Italian Communists (PCI) and in the past even publicly supported Romano Prodi's left-wing government (Gualmini, 2013: 1).

Unlike Tarchi, Gualmini, and myself, the scholar Vittori (2017) makes a connection (even if indirectly) between the 5SM and a new form of (more or less) right-wing sovereignist[90] politics. Though not directly tracing this "new populism" to the politics of the extreme-right like Finchelstein does in his recent book *From Fascism to Populism in History* (2019), Vittori draws attention to the inherently sovereignist (hence potentially or partially "right-wing") elements of the 5SM's politics (Vittori, 2017: 156). Especially, national group homogeneity, anti-EU measures like abolition of the Fiscal Compact, critique of the mass immigration phenomenon, anti-globalisation and anti-supranational integration stances and positive references to the self-determination of the people (Vittori, 2017: 156).

In other words, although Vittori doesn't specifically or explicitly argue the 5SM is an expression of right-wing populism , those are the positions of the 5SM that fit best with what in academia is commonly described as "radical-right wing populism" (see Betz, 1993; Mudde, 2007; Spannaus, 2019). In fact, it is understood that many of these sovereignist positions made the mid-2018 alliance between *leghisti* and *grillini* a realistic possibility (see Panebianco, 2020; Spannaus, 2019: 11, 38-41; Sciorilli Borrelli, 2018). Those would be all the political and ideological stances of the 5SM that are closest to those of the League (Panebianco, 2020). In any case, as I have argued before (and later I will do so further) that sovereignism is a classically populist theme that is transversal to the populist right and populist left, I am not in complete disagreement with Vittori's analysis. Nonetheless, an overfocus (as stimulating as it may be) on the 5SM's somewhat "right-wing" sovereignist - yet *not* nationalist, as Vittori posits - positions inevitably leads to an only a partial picture and understanding of the party's nature.

Another author, Benasaglio Berlucchi (2022), instead prefers to assess the 5SM's political nature by directly observing the value positioning (essentially attitudes) of the *grillini* voters (Benasaglio Berlucchi, 2022: 811). Interestingly, after analysing survey data, he concludes that the 5SM - notwithstanding its opening to the Left by forming a coalition with the Democratic Party after the League - has recently become a "valid option" for voters who hold exclusionary attitudes (similar to the far-right, although they themselves do not identify with the Right) rather than socially-liberal ones (Benasaglio Berlucchi, 2022: 811, 823). Benasaglio Berlucchi bases his investigation on two

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[90] Specifically, Vittori (2017) uses the alternative term "sovereignitist" which carries an *identical* meaning to "sovereignist".

very substantive issues (especially when it comes to populist ideology) which are *immigration* and *minority rights* (Benasaglio Berlucchi, 2022: 811). While his quantitative methodology appears both flawless and complex (see Berlucchi, 2022: 814-818) and there is growing agreement in academia that the 5SM and Democratic Party share almost no ideological affinity (instead League and 5SM *do* share several themes, as I argue throughout) it might remain somewhat speculative to argue that the 5SM significantly resonates with many intolerant voters who are not left-libertarian populists but locate themselves - even though Berlucchi doesn't openly state this - closer to the far-right or populist right. In 2013, Corbetta and Gualmini (for more succinct analysis results, see *only* Gualmini, 2013) concluded that 5SM voters coming from the Right were a minority (39%) compared to those originating from the Left (46 %) (Gualmini, 2013: 1). Even if by now, after the 5SM's two coalition experiences these statistics might have changed, there is still reason to believe the 5SM remains a party significantly attached to social-populist ideological credentials and policy-making. Therefore, it is difficult to fully accept Berlucchi's argument that the *grillini* are particularly anti-immigrant and anti-minorities.

Events like the 5SM's membership vote, that it took place online in 2014, in favour of repealing the criminalisation of illegal immigration and in support of gay civil unions (further displayed by the presence of its representatives at the gay pride) certainly leaves many observers dubious about the association (regardless of whether it is "proven" empirically) between the 5SM and forms of exclusionism (see Gagliardi and Marini, 2018). It is a possibility that some of the questions in Benasaglio Berlucchi's (2022: 815) surveys such as "*the will of the majority should always prevail…*" or "*minorities should adapt to the customs and traditions of Italy*" leave too much room for interpretation to those answering. After all, it all depends on how one defines "exclusionary attitudes" and an authentic and reliable definition should desist from being too broad to including views that express moderate (non-racist and non-xenophobic) scepticism or negativity towards uncontrolled and illegal (but *not* legal) immigration, the EU project, or even towards the reliability of politicians. Especially, during a *populist zeitgeist* where anti-elite and anti-open borders sentiment is widespread. In any case, overall, Benasaglio Berlucchi's contribution is extremely relevant and useful. If anything, it shows that there may be *some* openness to exclusionary attitudes within a left-wing populist force, especially if one compares the 5SM to the decidedly pro-immigrant and pro-minority traditional Left represented in the Italy by the Democratic Party.

A clear and rather complete picture is painted by Corbetta and Gualmini (2013) in the book they co-author where they explicitly present the 5SM as "*il partito di Grillo*" ("Grillo's Party", for English speakers). According to the two writers (who do believe the 5SM originates on the radical Left) what makes this party a populist party are a series of themes it embraces and engages with in a

typical populistic manner (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 199). The 5SM's attachment to the concept of the (*pure*, *good*, and/or *sovereign*) people and its Manichean understanding of society which also includes a threatening "non-people" or "anti-people" (if we are to use Finchelstein's terminology) represented mainly by corrupt politicians, the media, and financial institutions supposedly non-aligned with public interest (like the EU for example) reflects populist ideology (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 199-203). At the same time, the *grillini*'s (partial but still relevant) identification with a "charismatic" and "prophetic" leader like Grillo (and for some Casaleggio), its provocative and politically incorrect mannerism (the authors use the Italian word "*stile*"/style) with which it forces its narratives in the political arena, the hyper-simplification of complexity (e.g. impatience with checks and balances) and strategic mobilisation through the web also validates the 5SM's belonging within the populist party family (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 204-209).

Moreover, even if the use of the term "web populism" that Corbetta and Gualmini apply to the 5SM might be slightly exaggerated (given there are many other[91] aspects of the party's programme that have little to do with pro-technology stances) the authors are right in arguing the *grillini*'s veneration for the web is more than just strategic (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 197, 208-209). Actually, the web is a tool for mobilising supporters across the country but it is also ideologically perceived as the only source available for democratic and egalitarian decision-making (direct democracy) that will allow the people of the nation to be finally emancipated from politicians and representative institutions (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 208-209). On the web, every citizen's opinion is worth the same ("*uno vale uno*" as Grillo famously states) and political decisions can be made based on a majoritarian hyper-democratic (rather than liberal-democratic) ideal (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; see also Pirrone, 2014).

Thus, according to the 5SM, representative democracy is no longer necessary, neither are parties, politicians, or elites (Casaleggio and Grillo, 2011: 55). It is for this reason that the two authors (correctly) also bring attention to the fact that this futuristic ideological tendency and veneration of technology (and of the web in particular) is unconvential for populist actors (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 205). Throughout history, it has been much more common for populists to look nostalgically to the past ("the good old days" when everything was not so politicised or corrupt and "the trains ran on time"[92]) and *the heartland* (see Taggart, 2000: 91-99) rather than to a utopian future – as the

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[91] Such as their welfare, immigration, anti-tax and anti-trade union policies (for a complete account refer especially to the manifesto analysis in chapter IV).

[92] This is however a phrase typically used by nostalgics of the twenty-year period of Mussolini's fascist rule in Italy (see Dudley, 2016). One might argue there is a loose link between this way of thinking, nostalgia, utopia, the *heartland*, and (more generically) certain elements of populism or the (crypto-authoritarian) mindset of certain populist voters.

5SM does. As Paul Taggart (2003) explains in his work, a populist *heartland* is quite distinct from a utopia (Taggart, 2003: 6-7; for an example of "left wing heartlands" see Varriale, 2020).

Notwithstanding the great quality of Corbetta's and Gualmini's work, one minor critique can be made. When discussing the 5SM's devotion to the concept of a morally virtuous community of *the people* when using the framework[93] first adopted by Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2000) they overfocus on the fact that in the *grillini*'s narratives the idea is that *the people* are considered as "sovereign" *only* (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013: 202). It is undeniable that Grillo and his supporters emphasise that citizens are a *sovereign community* (see Grillo, *beppegrillo.it*, 10 June, 2011) that deserves to be fully represented (this is the purpose the 5SM serves, and what justifies Grillo's retirement from comedy and involvement in politics) and prioritised in terms of policy-making. Supposedly, they believe this can be done by taking away power from the EU and (both national and international) political institutions (Tarchi, 2015: Chapter IX). However, emphasis on the first element ("*the people*" as *sovereign*) when studying the 5SM may lead to disregarding the other two elements such as "*the people*" as a (social) *class* and "*the people*" as a *nation.* It is a fact that the 5SM not only shows ideological affinity to the concept that the people are sovereign but (as most populists do) also to the other two concepts. In fact, as leftist populists the 5SM are only partially interclassist, when it comes to viewing the people as a unified social class they clearly have a preference for the lower strata of society; those who are disadvantaged and less wealthy, the unemployed, manual labourers, medium-small local businesses and (somewhat like the League) defend those more suited for the *old economy*[94] who have become the "losers of globalisation". As already mentioned, in the South of the country, they have clearly shown to be the party preferred by the poor (Vicinanza, 2022). This is why the 5SM generally opposes big business (with the exception of the Silicon Valley technology "giants" of the *net economy*, see Caruso, 2019: 33-34), multinationals and much of globalised corporate capitalism.

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[93] According to scholars Mény and Surel (2000) there are *three* relvant meanings that can be given to the concept of "the people" in populist ideology. The first is "the people *as a sovereign community*" meant to be in charge of major state decisions and able to always closely monitor the activity of elites and representatives (that can be withdrawn from their positions through recalls and other direct democracy practices (Mény and Surel, as cited in Tarchi, 2019: 24). The second is "the people *as a (social) class*" and this understanding relates to the idea that ordinary people have been purposely left-behind from decision-making processes (by the corrupt elites) and therefore need to unite against financial speculators, big business/banks and political parties to get their country back (Mény and Surel, as cited in Tarchi, 2019: 24). The third (and last) is "the people *as a nation*" and in this sense the people are simply a cohesive group as they share the same ties in terms of geography/location, ethnicity, culture, and history, this differentiates them from "others" (foreigners, foreign powers as well as elites and "traitors" in their own nation) (Mény and Surel, as cited in Tarchi, 2019: 24).

[94] Some examples of *old economy* industries are agriculture, steel, coal-mining, and manufacturing – all industries that have not experienced overwhelming changes with the advent of new technology.

Nonetheless, it is also most certainly true - as Loris Caruso (2017: 6) postulates - that the 5SM harshly criticises particular aspects of the *old economy* (and oil-based economy). Especially, when it comes to practices that could damage the environment, like fossil fuels usage and large infrastructure developments near green areas. Here, a parallel can be drawn between the 5SM and other European green and ecologist parties. It is no coincidence that the political scientist Paolo Natale (2022) has unequivocally stated that the 5SM is above all a "green and left-wing" party (see his interview on *ItaliaOggi*; Ricciardi, 2022). Perhaps, the *grillini* can even be (cautiously) compared to parties like the UK Liberal Democrats due to specific stances in favour of environmental protection that can be associated to political *NYMBISM* ("not in my back yard" policies). Interestingly, this can be seen as a *major* distinction between generic left-wing populism and the right-wing populism showcased globally by figures like Trump (and a few others) who have defended controversial old economy aspects like coal mines, fossil fuels, and often denied the existence of climate change (Lavelle, 2020; Stone, 2020; Worland, 2019).

That being said, when it comes to the concept that *the people* are a *nation*, in open disagreement with Corbetta and Gualmini, I would argue that under this aspect not only are the 5SM's positions under-researched but as leftist populists (and unlike social-democrats or Marxist-Leninists) the *grillini* are more nationalist than internationalist (for how the 5SM incorporates nationalism in their discourse, see Custodi and Padoan, 2023: 415). Their general stances (which will be examined in more detail later) in favour of border control, integration of immigrants, and preservation of the national economy (e.g. "Made in Italy" products) show that they clearly have an understanding of *the people* as a *nation* aswell. In consideration of all factors, it was Grillo who use to say "the borders are sacred, politicians desecrated them" (Grillo, *beppegrillo.it*, 15 October, 2007; Tarchi, 2014).

In fact, when it comes to objective scientific inquiry of the 5SM, on one hand it should not completely disregard the leftist (and inclusionary rather than exclusionary) message within the *grillini*'s populism but on the other hand should also recognise the relevance of economic nationalism in the party's politics. However, it is not just some of the anti-*Euro* stances and Grillo's defence of phenomena like *Brexit* and Trump (see Caruso, 2017: 7) and the *grillini*'s will to regain economic/monetary sovereignty for Italy that makes the 5SM less of a purely socialist-democratic force and more of a populist left one. Rather, it is their adherence to a peculiar form of (non-competitive) state-assisted capitalism. More importantly though, according to one scholar, the 5SM's capitalism is a digital one (Caruso, 2017: 1). For Caruso (2017), who authored several academic material on the 5SM, the party's ideology specifically reflects a peculiar "mixture of digital capitalism and populism" (Caruso, 2017: 16).

What is at the same time interesting and relevant about Caruso's complex analysis is that highlights all of the programmatic elements that make the 5SM a party of ideological syncretism (Caruso, 2017: 8). In his own words, "programmatic syncretism is typical of populist formations" (Caruso, 2017: 8). The author also makes links between the 5SM supposedly "revolutionary" (although in reality it is much more reformist than revolutionary, as I will outline in the TCA) ambitions and the proto-populist but also staunchly leftist politics of the 1871 Paris Commune (Caruso, 2017: 8). Esssentially, the Parisians' main aim was to eliminate the separation between legislative and executive powers (Caruso, 2017: 8-9). This idea is certainly not absent in the discourse of the *grillini*, especially when they speak about putting more (direct and unmediated) power in the hands of the people or in the hands of a popularly-appointed judiciary to supervise politicians and punish them severely when they fall short or face corruption charges (Caruso, 2017: 8-9; see also Broder, 2019 who calls it "judicial populism").

Furthermore, Caruso's commentary associates the 5SM to broader aspects of Marxism, especially highlighting the idea that similarly to Engels the 5SM promotes the idea that politics should simply become "the administration of things" – and like both Lenin and Gramsci there is a will to blur the distinction between *political society* and *civil society*. However, Caruso points out that the 5SM rearticulates this vision for the modern era and its demands (Caruso, 2017: 10-15). This alone explains the *grillini*'s passion for the ITC sector model, technicisation and the "end of politics" where apolitical (or politically neutral) and unbiased elected expert-representatives chosen by *the people* (and from among the people) use the web as a principal resource to engage in horizontal and cooperative communication to eliminate (partisan, ideological, political) conflict in an ideally harmonious and homogenous society (Caruso, 2017: 11, 15-16). Essentially, even though he prioritises the existence of populism and digital capitalism within the 5SM's ideological apparatus Caruso contends that a mixture of ideologies inspire the *grillini*, all the way from a progressive revolutionary socialism to a libertarian digital capitalism through an egalitarian and hyper-democratic form of (leftist) populism (Caruso, 2017).

Somewhat similarly to Caruso, Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2018) also understand the 5SM as post-ideological, even though they do not consider this actor an "anti-system" one in the substantive or relational sense (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 134-135). Most importantly, the populist radicalism of the 5SM does not mean that it is a force that opposes the democratic order (or form of government) or that it necessarily presents itself as an extremist anti-systemic alternative to the capitalist mode of production and distribution (as most extreme-right fascists and left-wing communists do) (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 134). The main contribution of Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti is that they locate the 5SM's "ideology" within a

broader (and new) party family which is that of *techno-populism* (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 132, 143-145). Accordingly, in terms of "public discourse", "formal policy statements", "legislative behaviour" and "coalition tactics", the 5SM reflects the politics of a techno-populist actor (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 133). In fact, whilst some past scholars have assumed that populism and technocracy must be ideological opposites, as many old and new populists reject the bureaucratic procedures and policies undertaken by the EU and other supra-national institutions controlled by (mostly unelected) technocrats, others have argued that "populism is not necessarily opposed to technocratic measures" (see Mudde 2004: 547). To be sure, it has also been stated that populism and technocracy are "mirror images of each other" (see Müller, 2014: 490).

The main idea behind those statements made by renowned scholars is that populists may tolerate (or actually openly support) technocracy if it serves the purpose of ridding democracy from establishment politicians and parties (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 139; Mudde, 2004: 547). Furthermore, what populists and technocrats apparently have in common is that if the latter believe there is *only one* correct policy solution the former are convinced there is *only one* authentic popular will (or *volonté générale*) (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 139; Müller, 2014: 490). In other words, both appear to be sceptical of *political mediation* and *procedural legitimacy* (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017: 415). In the words of Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti : "the most evidently 'technocratic' aspect of the Movement's ideology lies in the role it assigns to technology in the solution of political problems" (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 140). They take a similar position to Fabio Bordignon (2016) who wrote an article about the 5SM's technocratic side and argued that there is in fact another side to the *grillini*'s populism: "the idea that technocrats, experts, and professionals can replace professional politicians" (Bordignon, 2016).

Even Taggart (2002), has expressed before that populists have often championed the role of independent specialists as an alternative to professional politicians in their politics (Taggart, 2002: 69). Evidently, the easiest way to defend the view that the 5SM is "techno-populist" is to point out to the fact that at least at a local level (though some argue nationally too when in power, see D'Albergo and Moini, 2019: 55-56) the party's elected representatives have resorted to using several non-partisan technocrats in their cabinet to push forward policy (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 140). Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti also mention that the 5SM's *competence-based-approach* (though competence has to derive from the people, and the best for the job are found through web-vetting) fits perfectly with a technocratic view of the world – essentially that there are "right" and "wrong" solutions to *all* political problems (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 140). Supposedly, for the *grillini* (especially if we analyse Grillo's statements) finding these right solutions is a matter of competence rather than ideology. Of course, the 5SM's "web

utopianism" may also be traced back to a technocratic worldview (see Musso and Maccaferri, 2018). Undeniably the 5SM has a strong desire to transform most citizens into experts and emancipate them from elite politicians. In summary, it is through the use of new technologies that (some) populists see an opportunity in "cutting out traditional mechanisms of 'mediation' between citizens and their representatives" (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018: 143; see also Mietzner, 2015: 23).

To conclude this section, it needs to be stressed that - as there is still substantial disagreement regarding its ideology - there is no better time for a new empirical study on the 5SM's nature. Albeit, any new research will have to begin from the conceptual basis that this *party* (it is no longer a "Movement" given it competes in every election since 2012-2013) is of the populist (radical) left. This is because regardless of the in manner with which it frames the six "classically populist" themes themes, rhetorically (by shaping discursive narratives) or politically (policy-wise, by developing policy), this will almost always be done by involving a degree of left-libertarianism and (democratic) progressive socialism. Even if *minoritarian* compared to the overall populist outlook that (in one way or the other) consistently returns to the *people vs. elite* dichotomy, the radically left-wing aspects of the 5SM's ideology should still be relevant to anyone objectively inspecting this party.

Rationale and Generic Overview: Final Thoughts

This chapter has presented a rationale for case selection, discussing the importance of having both Italy and the League and 5SM as case studies. In summary, Italy - being considered a "laboratory of populism" by many scholars is ideal for in-depth research of this phenomenon. Even more so from an ideological perspective as it helps us understand what policies and discursive narratives populist parties embrace consistently and ultimately obtain a good sense of what elements are constitutive of the core nucleus of populism. It has also been argued that it is often the case that League and 5SM are still ideologically misconceived with scholarship largely disagreeing on whether we are dealing with subjects that are an essential representation of populism (as a "new" ideology within its own right) or simply radical parties on the far-right (in the case of the League), centre, or far-left (in the case of the 5SM) periphery of the political spectrum that only marginally manifest populistic elements. Overall, as shown, there are scholars who are not entirely convinced the two parties are more populist than they are ultra-conservative "right-wing", "left-wing", or something entirely distinct (e.g. 5SM as "techno-populist", "centrist-populist", or purely "sovereignist").

With this in mind, a comprehensive empirical assessment of the parties' positions will take place in the following two chapters, first observing an analysis of party literature and then one of party discourse through one-to-one interviews with party representatives. Such analysis, will be carried forward with the purpose of determining what exactly makes League and 5SM *primarily populist* rather than surveying the secondary right-wing/conservative or left-wing/socialist elements of their ideological politics. Not per chance, throughout the chapter the argument that existing ideological similarities between League and 5SM require a closer inspection has been made thoroughly. Particularly given it is likely that examining the two phenomena ("right-wing" and "left-wing" populism) in conjunction will help determine what aspects of populism are most fundamental and most distinct when compared to other ideologies. That is, other ideologies that it is potentially and partially intertwined with. As the League-5SM alliance has been the first large-scale *left-right* populist experiment, it is only reasonable to examine the themes (and/or policies) upon which they established shared political consensus to shed more on the nature of this complex phenomenon *per se*.

With scholars focusing on the "extremist" and "right-wing" or "nationalist" features of the League and the "centrist-(*populist*)", "radical left/left-wing", "post-ideological" or "digital capitalist" characteristics of the 5SM by broadly placing the two parties broadly in either one party family or the other is now time to prioritise the populistic features of the parties. In the subsequent chapter, this will be done instead of focusing all attention on whether they are more tilted towards the right or the left. Thanks to existing scholarly literature (e.g. Tarchi, 2014; 2015; Gualmini, 2013; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2018) we already have a good sense of how the League is somewhat conservative on certain issues, and why the 5SM holds some opinions that are more socialist-progressive-libertarian. However, we know less about how they make these stances interact with *populism* – which is ultimately at the core of their message, and is the *primary* rather than secondary ingredient of their potent political cocktail. In the appendices a table (Table 4) is displayed showing the League's and 5SM's electoral achievements or highlights in the Italian general elections and European (EU) elections they both competed in since 1992 and 2013 respectively.

IV. "Programmatic Populism": A Thematic Content Analysis of League and 5SM Manifestos

"The material well-being of the people first and everything else afterwards"

- W.H. Mallock

Manifesto Analysis: An Introduction

Within this chapter an orderly manifesto analysis of the official documents presented by the League and the 5SM immediately prior the 4 March 2018 Italian general election will finally take place. This will be an attempt to *identify* and *discuss* the six populist themes in populist party literature beginning with the first theme anti-elitism and ranging all the way to direct democracy – which will be the last theme to be observed. Also, in order to obtain a finer understanding of the trajectory of themes within populist ideology (how they are directly turned into policy by these parties) and the populist phenomenon itself, an analysis of the joint manifesto drafted by League and 5SM for their post-electoral ("Yellow-Green") coalition will take place. Overall, this set of data will provide us with an appropriate idea of how right-wing and left-wing forms of populism interact based on policy proposals that directly originate from the *core themes* that they have in common. It will ultimately allow us to determine the *degree* of populism of the two parties (which is considered separately) and is briefly discussed in the conclusive chapter (chapter VI).

The exact calculation of the final results pertaining to the degree of ideological populism of the two parties overall is contingent on this manifesto analysis as much as it is contingent on the interview material presented in the subsequent chapter (for all the steps in the calculation and quantification process, consult the section "Formulas: Degree of Populism" in the Appendices). More importantly, it should be noted that the "Discussion" section included towards the end of this chapter will offer further analysis on what could be referred to as the "programmatic relationship" between League and 5SM. First, the manifesto analysis takes into account the League's manifesto, second it considers the 5SM's manifesto and ultimately focuses on the "Yellow-Green" (League and 5SM together) political programme. In summary, the six themes - which consolidated my theoretical framework and definition of populism - are identified throughout.

<u>League</u>

The League is not simply a "right-wing party" (if we abide by the definition[95] provided by the intellectual Norberto Bobbio originally in 1976) but a right-wing *populist* party. This means that populism itself is a strong determinant for the policy proposals present in its latest electoral program (2018). In essence, it is *not* right-wing conservatism or post-Reaganite and post-Thatcherite right-wing liberalism but *populism* that plays the most important role in developing the *leghisti*'s fundamental ideas in their "*Elezioni 2018*: *Programma Di Governo – Salvini Premier*" manifesto. Those fundamental ideas (which are in fact official League policies) would be the oppostion to the EU's *Bolkenstein*[96] directive, the revision of EU treaties, the inclusionary stance towards Russia, criminalisation of international NGO activity related to immigration, the numeric reduction of MPs, the deregulation in favour of small and medium business and, last but not least, the elimination of the quorum for referendums. There are many more "signature policies" such as the *Flat Tax*, obligatory military draft for the youth, *Green Economy* (re-interpreted to suit traditional values), and the pro-family financial rewards, but all of those are not exactly products of the League's populism as much as they are instead of their *conservatism* (their supposed host-ideology).

Hence, in this "*Salvini-Premier*" ("Salvini-Prime Minister") manifesto the typically populist policies coexist with conservative policies, even if at times they most certainly overlap and are difficult to distinguish from one another. The especially populist ones can be understood to be all of those that are likely to be considered by the party, its supporters, and the general public as the most pressing issues of our time. For example, taxation, immigration, the European Union, labour regulation, federalism, security, foreign policy, and bank reform. More attention will be given to the policies revolving around these issues throughout the Thematic Content Analysis as they can be traceable to the *six themes*.

The party's stance on issues pertaining to environment, energy, the digital revolution, public administration, and perhaps even healthcare are important yet somewhat secondary to an ideologically (right-wing) populist party so won't be discussed in as much detail. It is not a

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[95] Bobbio argues that if "the left considers the key inequalities between people to be artificial and negative, which should be overcome by an active state, whereas the right believes that inequalities between people are natural and positive, and should be either defended or left alone by the state" (Bobbio as cited in Mudde, 2019: 11; see Bobbio, 2009). As Salvini's League appears very dedicated to fight national and international elites in the name of the ordinary people and pursues certain policies aimed at improving the lifestyles and wages of the lower classes it is not a traditional right-wing party.

[96] This is an EU law that was meant to establish a single-market for services for all member-states within the bloc.

coincidence that Salvini's agenda explicitly states (on page 10) that the party is wholeheartedly dedicated to the "recuperation of monetary/economic sovereignty, territorial sovereignty and legislative sovereignty" as this is first and foremost a populist manifesto. We are clearly dealing with an agenda that has a people-centric and anti-elitist nucleus.

Starting with *anti-elitism* as a theme, within this program we find the proposal to directly elect the President of the Republic (recent *Demos* studies[97] show there is overwhelming consensus for Presidentialism and historically the Italian Right has always favoured it) with a popular vote – this would signify the introduction of a system similar to the American and French one. Such an idea is also influenced by the populist idolisation of direct democracy. Another example of anti-elitism would certainly be the instigation of the famous "*vincolo di mandato*" - through the reform of constitutional *article 67* - which would not permit "self-interested" and "unreliable" politicians to switch parties during their parliamentary legislative mandates without facing a *Recall* by constituents. Such anti-elitist positions are truly at odds with the philosophical principles of the traditional Right and are instead particularly populistic. For instance, Edmund Burke, a key figure in pre-modern conservative political thought, has always spoken favourably about the "individual conscience" of an elected representative – sticking out for his or her personal freedom of choice regardless of formal affiliation, and the right to reconsider ones positions when necessary (see Burke, 1774; Burke and Canavan, 1999).

Other examples of anti-elitism in this League's programme can be found if we pay attention to all of their policies related to the regulation of banks where the aim is supposedly that of taking politics back to the people. The first way to achieve this goal is by taking power away from the financial world. Banks are a "necessary evil" to populists just as much as the state is a necessary evil to conservatives and some classical liberals (e.g. Thomas Paine's famous phrase). In Salvini's agenda the reform of the second *Basel Protocols* is a *sine qua non* (page 29). This entails a reconfiguration of internal measurement procedures involving a bank's leverage-capital coefficient and other aspects with the purpose of reducing the risk that it will suffer a crisis and affect its clientele ("the people") (page 29). The League also proposes reforming the system of surveillance and control of credit/finance institutes and the Bank of Italy (page 29). This whole positioning is built on a sense

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[97] *Demos* surveying has shown that an astonishing 77% of Italians support the idea of a directly elected President of the Republic. See Ilvo Diamanti's (2021) article for *la Repubblica* at :
https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/12/13/news/italia_presidenzialista_l_elezione_diretta_piace_al_74_per_cento-329969088/.

of distrust or scepticism towards the Bank of Italy and *Consob*[98] hence the League intends to clearly redefine the competences and roles of each of those institutions (page 29).

While the reform of the first is meant guarantee the stability and proper functioning of the whole financial system that of the second will make sure to protect savers (savers are identified with "the people" in other words) and ensure transparency on financial markets. The proposal to strictly separate between investment banks and business/commercial banks (page 29) is also in line with this type of thinking. Of course, this also easily explains the 5SM and League's political move (while in government, 2018-2019) to reimburse citizens scammed by banks. Not to mention, it is known that the Italian populist right has at times been quite critical of the state overspending public money to bail-out already failing banks (see nicolaporro.it, 20 December 2019). It may appear as a simplification and a logical fallacy, but for populists sometimes when banks (and high-finance elites) lose the people win. When financial institutions (especially banks) come under control of the state (led of course by a populist government) the idea is that people are finally redeemed. Thus, self-evidently this aspect is tied to anti-elitism itself.

Unpolitics is also present in the League's program and in some measure overlaps with the anti-elitism described above (e.g. the *Recall*). The "un-political" message transpires from the critique of the state and its representatives (career politicians, public servants, etc.) in the League's day to day discourse hence is also encased in the party's program. The League's strong stance against corruption through the "*certezza della pena*" ("certainty of punishment") policy makes the party appear a lot more justicialist and tough on crime then it actually is – making it appear ideologically closer to the left populists of the 5SM, at least under this aspect. The League states in its program (page 33) that they intend to reverse the previous centre-left's (Democratic Party) "*svuotacarceri*" policy that made it possible for many (minor) offenders to be released from jail. This particular policy-reversal and the anti-corruption measures Salvini's party promotes should not be taken for granted as a stereotypical right-wing "tough on crime" security measures as they go beyond that. Such policy proposals need to be understood within the context of a natural ideological inclination towards unpolitics given it is known that in Italy it is mostly career politicians that fall under mismanagement and corruption charges.

The *leghisti* have also made it very clear that they intend to fight the compromised politicised currents[99] within the judiciary by strictly separating the careers between judicial officers and public

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[98] *Consob* ("*Commissione Nazionale per le Società e la Borsa*") is simply an Italian state authority that deals with day today regulation of the country's securities market such as the national stock exchange (known as "*Borsa Italiana*").

ministers to guarantee the independence of judges and a fairer system. The controversies and scandals involving the *Consigli Superiori della Magistratura*[100] (CSM) within the judiciary have throughout the years provoked distrust within the populace for elites working within what are supposed to be politically neutral institutions that instead regularly collude and interfere with parties. This alone explains the League's positions in this regard. Ultimately, the highlighting (page 21) that parliament must legislate with "few", "simple" and "clear" laws and absolutely not choose the head of the executive is another demonstration of how much the *leghisti* look down upon this institution. It is apparent that they do not trust that parliament always knows what is best for the populace. This is understandable in a country that recently has had technocratic and semi-technocratic governments and has suffered highly negative economic consequences (e.g. austerity). All in all, the League is the kind of (populist) party that wants democratically elected governments to consult the populace before taking major decisions rather than just parliament and professional politicians. In a way, unpolitics equals direct democracy.

Apart from *anti-elitism* and *unpolitics* a TCA of this program shows strong manifestations of *sovereignism*. This is because a right-wing populist party will always have more nationalist inclinations (hence Eatwell's and Goodwin's term "national-populist") than a regular centre-Right (conservative or classic liberal) formation (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Not all conservative parties want to leave the EU or re-consideraspects of its integration. In fact, most do not. Today, surprisingly the majority of right-wing populists do not either (Dunin-Wasowicz, 2019). However, all populist parties are   deeply critical of EU institutions and claim they are dedicated to their immediate reform. The Leaguewants to return to a pre-Maastricht Europe (page 9), revise treaties and expects more autonomy (under territorial, economic and legislative aspects) from the Union. The EU is deprecatingly described as a "huge supra-national entity" (page 9) that lacks democratic legitimacy and is self-defeatingly overly bureaucratic.

The *leghisti* state that the only way they will remain part of the EU is if they can re-negotiate the norms of *all*of its treaties. This stance is obviously quite difficult to interpret – given currently this aim is (for the mostpart) realistically unachievable - and obviously lies somewhere between hard and soft Euroscepticism. Nonetheless, sovereignism is paramount in the League's agenda. The party states (on page 10 of the program) that they support the "supremacy of the rights of the member-states upon those of the Union". Simply put, this means no more authoritarian *diktats* coming from the EU Council and Commission, it means giving member-states exclusive political competence on

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[99] See Sallusti Palamara (2021) for more information on how elite judges illegally cooperate withpolitical parties in Italy.

[100] "Higher Judiciary Councils" (my translation)

their own commercial activities, abrogation of Schengen and Dublin agreements, and the re-configuration the internal market to boost economic growth, development and innovation. To the *leghisti*, sovereignism also means taking advantage of the high standard of industrial and agro-industrial produce that exists in Europe (page 10) and use it to compete against products from Asian, American and African markets.

The League has considerably more faith in the EU Parliament - which is elected with a popular vote - than the Commission and Council and demand that they have at least partial legislative power and initiative (page 10). From this we can deduce that for those Italian populists the real problem is not the cooperation between a unified Europe *per se* but the vast number of unelected elites (in the Council and Commission superstructures) that run it. This also explains the coalescences of populists fronts created at a European level, such as the alliances between the French Front National and the League ("Europe of Nations and Freedom") or AFD, UKIP and the 5SM ("Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy") as well as other meta-political projects funded by Steve Bannon and the Belgian millionaire Mischaël Modrikamen (De La Baume and Sciorilli Borrelli, 2018; Lewis and Rankin 2018).

The *sovereignism* is also found in all of the policies regarding the protection of *Made in Italy* products, strict border control (including strict checks on NGO's), and the so-called "Marshall Plan" (this last one is not present in *this* manifesto but still is part of the League's agenda and that of its centre-right allies) (page 6-8). This plan entails that European nations (through the EU) will have to invest in Africa and increase humanitarian aid to prevent further mass migration from the continent. Whether it is through investment in developing countries, economic protectionism or the closure of borders, the League is - as a both *populist* and *right-wing* party - dedicated to putting some distance between Italy and the rest of the world. This can be understood as a form of modern isolationism re-discovered and re-interpreted by parties of the new populist right – among those not just Salvini's League but also Marine Le Pen's FN (and then RN), Trump's "new" Republican Party, and to a lesser extent (and for slightly different reasons) the post-Brexit British Conservatives.

Another way for populists to attempt to reinterpret the people's *volonté générale* (and therefore redeem the nation) through *sovereignism* is to re-focus foreign policy in a way that it is more people-centric and anti-elitist. A people-centric and anti-elitist foreign policy means making a nation more isolationist, more self-identifying and self-interested, less expansionist and less expensive. This is especially true for right-wing populist parties (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017: 395), and as we know the League certainly falls in this category. "National Interest – As a Cardinal Principle" reads the title of a big paragraph in the manifesto (page 22). It is self-evident that the

leghisti believe that the foreign policy agenda needs to be reflective of the national interest (which according to populist ideology will *always* be in line with that of the *popular majority*) and this position leads them to include in the program ideas they feel will contrast with those of the mainstream parties and establishment.

There is no better example of this than their approach towards relations with Russia, which completely differs from that of the liberal centre-Right and progressive centre-Left. In a hypothetical League-run Italy, Russia is no longer considered an enemy of European democracy, an obstacle to NATO and a danger to the West (page 22). On the contrary, Moscow is understood to be a "third Rome" (it is still unclear to what extent Right populists are influenced by Russian intellectuals like Alexander Dugin) and a nation that is on the front line to uphold what are understood to be the socially conservative values of the West (Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, YouTube, 26 February 2019). It is for this reason, that the twenty-second page of the program includes a harsh critique of the politics of the past governments (especially Renzi's and Gentiloni's centre-Left) that tried to gradually distance Italy from Russia and instead tie it to American liberal elites (such as the Clintons) (page 22).

Moreover, the League wants a foreign policy that is cooperative towards countries like Israel (unlike neofascists they view Israel favourably) and Egypt because they use more authoritativeness to fight Islamist extremism – whom the *leghisti* obviously consider a primary menace to Europe. The containment of the jihadist threat is used to legitimise anti-immigration policy and opposition towards interventionist humanitarian missions as well as new wars. Populists do not believe in the "exportation of democracy" (page 22) simply because they feel the general public or the majority of the population is not interested in such things and prefers politicians to deal with national matters. This intrinsically isolationist attitude towardsforeign policy, is not only prevalent amongst populist and extreme-right parties in Europe, but has now been appropriated as a strategy by recent American governments – not just Trump but also the centre-Left Joe Biden has made the case for a retreat to domestic matters (Carafano, 2021). The recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and so far cautious approach towards the Ukraine situation (the USA provides weapons but did not support "boots on the ground" involvement) are a demonstration that perhaps now elites are starting to adopt a semi-isolationist (and perhaps even semi-populist) politics.

Another theme there is evidence of in this manifesto is *producerism*. Working class and lower middle class Italians represent the League's electoral base thus it makes sense for this party to include policies that those segments of the population appreciate. The hope is that by supporting the "Minimum Salary" ("*salario minimo*") the *leghisti* will attract all of those former leftist voters from

the lower classes. To some extent, it also gives the populist right a chance to make gains amongst the youth who they aim to politically court in two other ways. First, by claiming that internships in the private sector cannot be free anymore and second by abolishing the Fornero Law so younger people can have a better chance of entering the job market. Even though such politics may boost the ideal of work and its ethic (a classic populist leitmotif) and create new labour opportunities for Italians, those cannot be considered real producerist policies.

The real producerism of the League instead becomes evident in the parts of the program where they mention significant decreases of taxation and increasein business deregulation. Not the *Flat Tax* which is a conservative rather than populist policy but League signature policies such as the abolishment of the "*studi di settore*" and the introduction of the "*pace fiscale*" ("Fiscal Peace"). The former policy is nothing more than the regulation allowing the revenue authorities to pre-determine income of autonomous entrepreneurs and how much they ought to be taxed. The *leghisti* do not like this as they see it as a "nanny-state" intrusion against private workers who (especially in times of crisis) are made to pay more than they should. The latter policy is best understood as a second chance the *leghisti* want to give to all those businessmen who were laid off work (as they could not afford to stay in business anymore or had legal proceedings against them by authorities) in order for them to become "active in society once again". By "active" they really mean "productive". Populist parties often view those who don't "produce" as social outcasts (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019).

An attachment to the values of producerism is also what has led the *leghisti* to want to rediscuss agriculture norms relative to the EU (to give Italian producers more freedom) and argue for the "defence of *Italian* fisherman" from unfair competition created by the single European market and its excess regulation (page 55). If these fisherman cannot fish with liberty in their own seas (having to abide to outrageous rules) than for the *leghisti* this is proof that Italy is being kept hostage by an ultra-bureaucratic "monster" (Salvini, 11 November 2018) in Brussels (and Strasbourg) that devalues the hard work of and takes away their dignity and *raison d'être*; labour. In this case, the producerism also overlaps with *sovereignism* because the main argument is that due to the EU the country is flooded by poor quality cheap products from other parts of the world which will limit or obstacle the financial gain of these nationals.

Salvini and his League essentially view EU elites as individuals that come together to conspire against the Italian market and destabilise it (la Repubblica, 6 February 2017). Italy has a "centenary tradition of fishing", as the *leghisti* put it (page 25-28), like with farming (Ibid), and this is enough of a reason for a conservative, nationalist, and populist party to defend the rights of these workers. The party is also convinced that the abolishing of the limit in cash payments, the abolishing of the

IMU[101], and a more general deregulation of the practices of agencies/offices dealing with authorisation of businesses activity is a good idea to initiate economic revitalisation (page 54). The people-centric producerism inherent to populist parties is what leads them to pursue policies that will have as a main goal the avoidance of economic loss for first and second sector workers at the hand of an overregulated and ultra-bureaucratic "foreign" entity (the EU). After all, parties like the League have no choice but to staunchly defend their electorate, as they are those whom they believe should replace corporate and political elites at the top of the societal pyramid.

Several examples of *reformism* can also be identified in this party program. The main things the League wants to reform (democratically) are issue pertinent to the EU, justice, family, welfare, taxes, environment and territory. Unlike traditional *status quo* conservatives, the *leghisti* envision big changes for the country. The foremost reform proposed by the League uncoincidentally involves the relationship Italy has with the European Union. For example, the pre-Maastricht EU that Salvini and his parliamentarians ideate is a bloc of relatively free trade among Western European nations (e.g. France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Austria) that does not entail a political union nor Council and Commission decision-making practices (page 9). This nostalgic vision (looking to the past rather than the future, without wanting to conserve the present) and the return to a *status quo-ante* (as commentator Francesco Giubilei (2018) suggests) is common in parties that blend a radical conservatism with populism (La7, 2 November 2018).

The democratic reform of the EU which does not involve leaving the bloc altogether (as the *leghisti* admit with great ambiguity on page 9 of the program) also involves a complete restructure of the laws determined by the Nice Charter/Treaty which allows certain national and international (EU) judges to ignore or modify laws voted in the Italian parliament. Ideally, the League wants the Italian Parliament to be supreme and not dependent on EU legislation, just like it wants the EU Parliament itself to become more important than the other European un-elected bodies. The justice reforms put forward have as a focal policy the above-mentioned separation of judges' careers but extend well beyond that and sometimes it is not clear whether those reforms are products of the party's conservatism or populism. A mixture of the two results in Salvini's political group to take a tough position on criminal activity in order to be perceived by Italians as the "law and order" party – much like the British Conservatives under Thatcher, Sarkozy's UMP (he was the one to instil a new Ministry to protect French identity and fight immigration) and the American GOP of the last few decades.

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[101] IMU ('Imposta Municipale Propria') is a tax that certain Italians have been paying since 2014 on luxury homes and other properties such as second homes, laboratories, and shops.

Salvini's League program calls for an end to a penalty discount for all cases relating to violent crimes involving attacks on minors, women, and general aggravated murders (page 32). Remaining on the topic of crime and anti-social behaviour, the program also states that a forceful closure of all camps in which the "gypsy"/nomadic Rom community reside is necessary, as those have become a big social problem for the country lately (page 17) (see Stasolla, 2020). In addition, it demands a reform on self-defence/private property laws (known to Italians as "*legittima difesa*") to give more freedom to victims of house-intrusion/theft to "shoot-and-kill" perpetrators and one of the most controversial and illiberal policies of the last few years: castration ("*blocco androgenico*") for those who commit violent crimes of sexual nature (page 17).

Curiously, in the program we also find certain reformist motions that appear less conservative and rather belong to a more liberal or libertarian Right such as the abrogation of the Mancino Law and Merlin Law (page 17) but those need to be acknowledged in light of the *leghisti*'s attachment to the past and natural inclination towards preservation (on the ethical-issue dimension). The scrapping of the former would allow radical conservatives (including sympathisers of Mussolini's old regime) complete freedom of speech and not be criminally charged for expressing themselves favourably or promoting anything to do with fascism. Whilst the scrapping of the latter essentially legalises prostitution (modelled on laws from other European countries) and is perhaps a way for the Italian Right to show its commitment to the re-establishment of old cultural standards which were considered acceptable up to the late 1950s. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically - given its position on prostitution - the League also wants to be seen as the party that safeguards the nuclear (heterosexual) family. It achieves this by announcing it will introduce an expansion of state funds to further promote births (in a country with exceptionally low birth rates) as well as making pre-school (or *kindergarten*) free for young children and eliminating taxes completely on products for infants (page 52). The "battle for births", as British-born author Nicholas Farrell (2018) recalls in his detailed work on Mussolini, is distinctive of political enterprises that belong to the large and diverse family of the authoritarian-Right, and was consistently practiced in 20th century dictatorships – not only in Italy, but also Spain and Germany (see Forcucci, 2010 and Fischer, 2022).

Regarding welfare, the League's most significant proposal (excluding the "Citizen's Income" which was a 5SM signature policy that the League was forced to accept while in power) is the formation of a new school to form senior management in the national health sector (page 42). The *leghisti* are not classic conservatives, hence they are much more sceptical about privatisation of key industries and wish to preserve the publicly-funded healthcare model (page 42). Regarding taxes, the *Flat Tax* remains the most important proposal (page 3) but is not itself something that can be understood as

being directly populist unless it is understood as a measure to boost the value structure of medium-small entrepreneurship and the producerist mentality of a mercantilist and business-oriented conservative middle class. Last but not least, the reforms pertinent to environment (the "green economy", "circular economy", and "urban regeneration" are the cardinal ones worthy of mention) and territory once again perfectly blend a semi-nationalistic conservatism with a semi-nationalistic populism. Ever since Bossi, the League has always been a party that makes attachment to *territory* one of its strong points. In a 2018 speech, a few months after the authorship of this electoral program and just before "winning" the election, Salvini stated "*from today onwards there will begin a process of ten years of construction, of beauty, of labour and honesty that I will bring from my heart, in the name of autonomy, of federalism, of the scents of the beauties reflected by the 8.000 towns that compose this country*" (Salvini, 2018 as cited in Varriale 2020: 249).

It is understood that under some aspects – as shown by not only the speech but the program as well - Salvini persists with the political legacy and tradition of Umberto Bossi providing the idea of cultural regionalism and localism with a populistic aesthetic from which attachment to territory emerges. The 2018 "Salvini-PM" manifesto contains proposals that are very similar to the old League when it comes to the idea of territory. In other words, the League under Salvini - as it was with Bossi – continues to be the party to champion fiscal federalism and autonomy for Italian regions (modelled on countries like the USA, Germany, Switzerland and Austria) through state reform and changes to the constitution (page 20). In the program it is stated that the party supports the "logic of Federalism" that "takes into account the peculiarities and specificities of distinct territories and makes space for the positive energy and propulsive thrust expressed from local communities" (page 20).

The last theme to be discussed - given it is consistently present in the League's programme - is *direct democracy*. In fact, in Salvini's manifesto the word "democracy" appears eight times, and the term "democratic" is mentioned four other times. Whereas mention of "direct democracy" ("*democrazia diretta*" in Italian) altogether itself is more rare (it only occurs once, see page 20) many positive references or praises are made to this process itself in what can be considered a more implicit manner. In simpler terms, throughout the programme, there are no points made that would lead readers (or potential voters) to believe the League embraces direct democracy on the whole and as a replacement for the more modern representative version of liberal democracy.

As postulated before, what is meant by direct democracy when intellectuals or political commentators refer to it is political decision-making made by using procedural instruments such as referenda and popular initiatives (once again, see Canovan, 1999: 2). What transpires from their

manifesto is that the *leghisti* certainly believe that these direct-democratic tools are essential to voice popular grievances or concerns and concomitantly create the conditions for the government to be more responsive and representative. This in turn is more likely to boost popular consensus for the populist party in a position of power. For instance, the League overtly states it wishes to "strengthen institutions of direct democracy" (referendums and popular initiative laws) in order to create a new balance of powers, especially given direct democracy is conceived as a "corrective to the possible distortions of representative democracy" (page 20).

Essentially, even if to the *leghisti* direct democracy clearly is not a substitute for representative democracy they believe there are instances where it can function as a more suitable institutional alternative. Also, it is clearly expressed that under the League's rule - with regard to certain decisional areas or limited practices - the state will be run by depending on direct-democratic methods (page 20). Accordingly, as mentioned in an earlier segment – "parliament should make laws ("few", "simple", and "clear") but "*not* choose the Head of the Executive"… "what is needed is a strong Head of the Executive *directly* chosen by *the people*" (page 20). What is meant here is that the *leghisti* want to change the law and Italian constitution to make it so that the Prime Minister is elected directly by voters instead of having to be confirmed by the two branches of Parliament and the President of the Republic (page 20). Thereby, just as the League wants a directly elected President of the Republic (this came under the theme *anti-elitism* in previous segments, but also counts as a *direct democracy* policy) and the *Recall*/"Mandate Constraint" (this too was listed under *anti-elitism* but is also part of *direct democracy*) they also want someone to lead the executive that can in some way bypass parliament (supposedly a vessel for corrupt party elites) and be more responsive to citizens unequivocally. When necessary, these populists want a powerful executive. In addition, it comes as no surprise that for a party like the League with a strong regional identity, another proposal is that of having local/administrative government regularly go through direct democracy exercises – the President of the regional provinces should be elected by citizen-vote too.

Ultimately referendums without *quorum* are strongly recommended by the League (page 20) in order create the circumstances for a consistent application of direct democracy. This supposedly makes it easier for those in power to pursue policy on issues related to finance, foreign policy, taxes, immigration, domestic security and other matters, that aligns with the *volonté générale* of the populace. The classic *leghista* position is that the will of the popular majority needs to become the top priority in a democratic society. Once democracy becomes majoritarian again populism will have fulfilled its redemptive purpose; *taking politics back to the people* (as we know Canovan has argued before).

5 Star Movement

The manifesto produced by the 5SM for the 2018 election is by far one of the most forthright and concise documents any scholar surveying the Italian political sphere will ever come across. The ideas, policies, and themes encapsulated in this piece of literature - which intentionally carries the name of the then political leader of the *movement-party* Luigi Di Maio - are unequivocally those of a populist party with a subtly leftist and socialist inclination. Overall, the program contains 20 focal points that are all traceable to the same Manichean theory that espouses an ongoing societal struggle between the will of the people (the majority) and that of the elites (the establishment minority). Proposals such as the immediate scrapping of 400 "useless laws", the Citizen's Income, productive investment, state security, anti-immigration, and the fight against corruption will all be analysed in the next few paragraphs by considering the party's positioning within the context of populist themes – starting with *anti-elitism* and ending with *direct democracy*. Also, the theme of *producerism* has been purposely left out as it is not relevant enough to the party in question. Anyhow, as it occurred with the League's (decisively more "rightist" and conservative) program, here in the 5SM's one many of the themes overlap with each other too.

Anti-elitism is certainly present in this manifesto or programme given in the 20 points one finds policies that highlight the inefficiency of the current state of affairs, especially the costliness and malfunction that Italian political elites have brought upon the general population. There is no doubt that this program is a symbol of protest towards the ruling elite. Most importantly, the *grillini* are dedicated to scrap what they view as an excessive number of laws (a "jungle of laws" as they define it, my translation) that create an unrewarding ultra-bureaucratic structure that damages both businesses and citizens. Apparently politicians are to blame for this, and this first point of the manifesto already sets the tone for a very anti-elitist but also "un-political" agenda. The anti-elitist approach/narrative generates a forceful populist justicialism which also leads the *grillini* to request a serious modification of state laws. To avoid confusion, it must be said that the justicialism and tough "law and order" stances discussed below *do* fall under the anti-elitism repertoire categorically because the new measures proposed are at large aimed at state elites. In Italy, it is not rare for corrupt entities from the public sector, in particular politicians and civil servants, to face charges of embezzlement or fraud and collusions with other external corrupt entities such as those from the corporate world or organised crime (e.g. the Sicilian, Neapolitan, or Apulian mafia). Criminal allegations against elite figures from politics and the world of parties are so common that the 5SM has thrived constructing its own political identity as the moral force (put together *by* and *for* "the people") that would put an end to all of this.

Not only do they want to reform the "*prescrizione*" in order to prevent criminals (especially the "*mafiosi*" infiltrated in the local and national political structure) to get charges dropped easy (in the case trials take too long to reach a conclusion) but they also want a "*daspo*"[102] for the corrupt, more undercover agents on the streets, and de-regularisation of privacy laws ("point 14", page 2). The last policy would allow governments to go through little trouble to justify the wire-tapping of suspects homes, telephones or cars however it is all of these propositions together that indicate the 5SM has a semi-authoritarian mentality. Even if experts have rightly substantiated the claim that the party is born out of a radically progressive and partially libertarian "new" left, the fact remains that under some aspects ideologically they are not that distant from more extreme forms of leftism – and this is because the distrust they have for elites is incredibly high. In socialist/communist dictatorships like the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR) practices such as wiretapping and spying (not only on the general population but on state elites too) were just as common (if not more) than in Nazi Germany.

In any case, the 5SM expects justice to be "rapid, fair, and efficient" ("point 15", page 2) and the way to achieve this for the party is to reduce the length of trials and include the so-called "Certainty of Punishment" ("*certezza della pena*") for offenders. The anti-elitism of the 5SM is not too distinct from that of the League actually. This form of toughness towards criminal subjects (internal and external to the state structure) creates the circumstances for the 5SM to be *sometimes* confused by international academia as a far-right party when in reality the old left - before the birth of European social democracy - made securitisation and "law and order" one of its priorities. In fact, a self-proclaimed Marxist-Gramscian author with significant visibility on Italian media, Federico Rampini, has occasionally made this argument before (La 7, PiazzaPulita, 28 March 2019). Either way, if the 5SM's strong anti-elitist *ethos* has led its principal figureheads (Casaleggio, Grillo, Di Battista and early on even the "moderate" Di Maio) to initially make anti-systemic proclamations calling for a complete renewal of the Italian "*classe dirigente*" (the establishment, the "ruling class" essentially) the League was never truly an anti-system party but one that wished to replace today's state elites with their own "elites" deriving from the private sector and the Northern *petit bourgeoisie*.

It is also a priority for the 5SM to protect the savings of its citizens. A typically populist anti-bank resentment has driven the *grillini* to insert proposals in the program ("point 12", page 2) such as the compensation "scammed savers" (note they use same language and same idea of the *leghisti*) among the citizenry, creation of a new national prosecuting institution for this kind of crime, and introduction of the *Glass-Steagall Act* to control and prevent financial speculation. Those should all

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[102] DASPO is the legal prohibition to attend a sporting event or be in the surroundings of infrastructure where sporting activities take place

be understood as policies thematically pertaining to the idea of redemption, as they are all meant to provide the state with people-centric and anti-elitist credentials. The overall plan is to give *the people* compensation by having the state punish those elites held accountable. As the writer Douglas Murray (who specialises in mass-movements) would - in this case too - point out, "they speak of justice but mean revenge" (Murray, 2022).

This idea of "revenge" against financial elites and political parties directly leads us to the theme of *Unpolitics* – which is undeniably a crucial part of this political programme. Given for a big chunk of its history the 5SM has proudly displayed its "anti-political" credentials (where anti-politics has meant being anti-party-*ist* – wishing to overcome the party system) even this late manifesto could not leave out some of that old sentiment. There is a residue of it. By 2018, the 5SM was not anti-system or anti-political, yet it was certainly "un-political" and sceptical of the procedural processes that come with the conflict-resolution and bipartisan mediation of day to day politics. The Italian state is seen as overly bureaucratic and malfunctioning, hence the 5SM proposes cutting down on 400 laws (made in the parliamentary melting pot of parties) that destroy democracy. Indeed, this example was given in the earlier section because it is tainted with unpolitics as much as anti-elitism. An overwhelming number of useless, incoherent, and overcomplicated laws reflect an outdated and closed system put forward by an elite that obstructs social mobility (especially that of the youth and the poor).

The most un-political statements of the program are those that come under "point 5" (page 1) and involve the "Cutting down of the waste and cost of politics: 50 billion return to the citizenry". As populists often support redistributive policies (as stated before – we learn that in Moffitt's latest (2020) text *Populism*) and this sort of sporadic "Robin Hood Politics"[103] complex, it is only natural that they would claim to want to put an end to all the mishandling (in terms of public funds, failed infrastructure projects, and spending review) of "the caste". Above all, this specific point of the program is dedicated to simply re-structuring everything so that (optimistically) once certain privileges are stripped away from politicians then "ordinary people" have everything to gain from such a manoeuvre. There is a predominantly financial logic behind all this. The 5SM wants to put an end to the "*pensioni d'oro*" – "golden pensions" (the exceedingly high pensions given to ex politicians) and "*vitalizi*" – "annuities", and all kinds of remaining "caste privileges" as they believe this money if not spent on welfare may have better use if left in the pockets of the citizenry which will eventually voluntarily be pumped into the economy.

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[103] See Michael Watts (1996: 122-131).

Sovereignism is not exclusive to the right-wing *leghisti* as a seemingly softer and more concise version of it finds space in the eight point of the 5SM program. The small section dedicated to "Stopping the Business of Immigration" states that the party aims to bring the repatriation of illegal immigrants into "immediate effect" ("point 8", page 1). This kind of strong language is rarely found in the agendas of European centre-left (to left) wing parties, and will be most likely absent (nine times out of ten) in any social democratic or liberal-socialist party text. A simple explanation for this is that the 5SM is not a regular social democratic centre-left or socialist left party (neither is it extreme-left for that matter) but is instead a political force with an incredibly populist vocation in which sovereignism plays a major sub-ideological role. If an ideology is made up of *core*, *adjacent* and *peripheral c*oncepts (Freeden, 1996, Neill, 2021: 12) then in the case of the 5SM social-democracy would be more of the latter two whilst an economic and cultural-political (popular and territorial sovereignty) sovereignism would be more of the former.

Further, the 5SM promises to defend Italian cultural heritage and safeguard Italian products that are "threatened by international treaties", and although they do not specify which ones there should be no confusion that this is an indirect attack on the EU and its policies. They aim to "defend Italy" by working on a web portal named *Italia.it* which will serve as a platform for e-commerce to promote *Made in Italy* products around the world. These suggestions that are perhaps purposely made available at the very end of the program in "point 20" (page 3) make the 5SM appear as a somewhat of conservatively-oriented party (Grillo did ambiguously claim in a 2014 press conference that they were "the conservatives"[104]) but in reality this is only part of a populist sovereignist posturing.

In light of the aforementioned factors, it is evident that the *grillini* give less attention to these issues than the *leghisti*. A left-wing "workfarist" or labour-focused dimension is clearly given to the idea of anti-immigration though, as shown in a bullet-point present in the program ("point 8", page 1). Based on a model already put to use elsewhere in Europe, the party calls for the creation of 10.000 new jobs in local commissions to evaluate whether a migrant is allowed to stay and request asylum in the country or not. The impression one gets is that in this program - signed off by Di Maio, which with time became known as a moderate in parliament - the 5SM wants to cut short on the topic of immigration. This is not only because it is today a controversial and divisive subject but also because the strategy is to be seen as a party that will use a rigid approach against illegal migration if

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[104] See the script of the press conference as reported by the newspaper *Il Mattino* on 20 February 2014 and made available at: https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/politica/renzi_grillo_scontro_testo_consultazioni_diretta_streaming-301230.html

necessary (given "the people" request such measures) but without becoming the Italian "anti-immigration party" *par excellence* –as that role is reserved to the rightists from the League and FdI.

Reformism is a theme overwhelmingly present in this program. For a party like the 5SM that has risen from the ashes to make substantial change its main objective institutional reformism cannot but come as a natural predisposition. First of all, we have the welfare reforms. Populism and socialism combined in the 5SM political cocktail explain the desire invest in the state to boost employment. For instance, the two billions that this party wants to apply for a reform of the "Employment Centres" ("*Centri per l'Impiego*") in such way that they serve the citizenry, helping them find appropriate jobs. Furthermore, the 5SM's very own "Citizen's Income" is sold to the public as not only a great example of a civilised and modern society (values that are dear to democratic socialists) where no one is left behind to live in conditions of extreme deprivation but also as something realistically feasible. The party has unilaterally argued that people who are not able to find work (especially amongst the youth) should be looked after by the state only insofar as they demonstrate that they are actively looking for a job and cooperating with the employment centres. This is also known as the *Flex Security* model (long adopted in countries like Denmark) and is defended by the 5SM on the grounds that it maintains flexibility on the job market while also guaranteeing social security and rights to unemployed workers who are obliged to demonstrate they are doing their best to find an occupation. Another staunchly leftist welfare reform would be that of augmenting resources for public healthcare while at the same time reducing waiting lists for medical exams. This is something most left-wing parties that are not even necessarily populist suggest all over Europe – "Health(-*care*) takes care of you" is the catch-phrase used as "point 18" (page 3) of the program.

Instead, more moderately leftist (but also populist) reforms that the *grillini* have in mind involve taxation. Especially those that aim to completely abolish taxes on incomes below 10,000 euros. This is a way of guaranteeing that the 5SM positions itself as the social-justice "party of the people". Or better, the party of the *poor* people. It is something that has worked very well for them in the past. Also, we find a variant of leftist, egalitarian, people-centric and pro-social populism in their proposals to drastically lower the tax wedge and the *Irap*[105] by using what they call a "shock maneuver" ("*manovra choc*"). This is basically radical state intervention and it is in the populist playbook as a people-centric idea because this lowering of taxes is only meant for small to medium-small businesses. In fact, even if they do not say it in the program, the 5SM's general view is that taxes should always only be high for big capitalist enterprises. *The leghisti* seem to agree with the

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[105] *Irap* is a regional tax for all businesses that carry out "productive activities", it was introduced in 1997.

5SM on such based on their own past pledges and remarks (Cattani, 2016). Notwithstanding, the left-wing populists we are dealing with here also particularly interested in abolishing the Fornero Law permanently (as the reader will have already noted by now) and replacing it with "Quote 41" ("*Quota 41*") – this is a very pro-individual labourer proposal because it means that regardless of the age one can retire once they have worked (and contributed by paying taxes) for 41 years. This would be a remarkable reform, and the 5SM states in the program (but specifies elsewhere) that for female retirees further changes can be applied to make the whole retirement system benefit them even more.

The last two reforms that demand attention in this section would be the so-called *Green Economy* reforms and the ones related to schools and/or education. With the Green ones, the 5SM (like the League too nowadays) want to demonstrate to the public that they are a responsible party projected towards the future that is interested in maintaining a stable and healthy ecosystem. After all, this is the party that had "Environment" as one of their main five points/"5 stars" upon conception. With a fully developed *Green Economy* the 5SM pledges to create 17,000 new job positions for every billion invested in renewable energy, to leave petroleum behind by 2050, and make a million of electric cars available to Italians ("point 16", page 3).

Finally, the education reforms need to be seen in light of the 5SM's anti-establishment spirit as they mainly aim to "overcome" (this is the word they use on "point 19", page 3) or demolish the practices/policies of their centre-left predecessors. Renzi's Democratic Party had come up with plans to slightly deregulate education giving the chance to local institutions to be more autonomous from the state in terms of decision-making (the so-called "*Buona Scuola*" in Italy). The 5SM is as statist as the old left in most cases, hence disagrees with Renzi's liberal politics, and takes on the traditionalist left-wing tradition that consists of centralised state-planning for schools too. In addition, they strongly support more public spending on education and state mediation (where possible) against job precariousness which very much distinguishes them from the centre-right and recent centre-left who both take a *laissez faire* approach on many pressing issues.

Above all, what has always distinguished the 5SM from other parties (even from the right-wing radical reformists of the League) has been their will to present themselves philosophically and programmatically - as an organisation that is completely rejectionist of the *status quo* and the current Italian party system. Their proposals to thoroughly reform justice, welfare, taxation, banking, and the state, speak volumes of their anti-establishment nature. However, it comes as a great surprise that in their 2018 programme (unlike their previous one from 2013) not even one explicit written reference to significantly change the EU or revise its treaties (as 5SM politicians often

suggest during campaigns) appears. Nor is there any reference or policy that can be associated to the theme of *direct democracy* which was instead a key aspect in past programmes drafted by the *grillini*.

Yellow-Green Government (League and 5SM)

Anti-elitism is clearly discernible as a recurring theme in the Yellow-Green government's programme. So is the leitmotif of *Unpolitics*. In fact, in this manifesto the two are exceptionally correlated and therefore need to be examined together. In any case, neither in theory nor in practice does this present a methodological conflict as of course both themes are still part of the same whole – *populism*. Appropriate examples of both anti-elitism and unpolitics turned into official policy by League and 5SM would be - for example - the proposed cuts to the costs of politics, costs of institutions, and to the "Golden Pensions" of parliamentarians. As shown in earlier paragraphs, both of those parties strongly support unmediated politics which above all means making professional politics and decision-making practices - especially in parliament - more cost-efficient (in other words, "less expensive"), less time-consuming and increasingly stable. More specifically, they wish to "eliminate excess and privileges" of the political caste ("point 26", page 48). As the League and 5SM are both equally hostile towards political elites it makes perfect sense for them to suggest that there should be a complete revision and potential abolition of the social security privileges (such as the "*vitalizi*" pensions) that senators, deputies, and regional councilors enjoy ("point 26", page 48). In order to decrease systemic inequalities (uncoincidentally League and 5SM speak of "social equity" in their program) populists propose that politicians do not have a treatment that is disproportionately different - in terms of social security - as that of ordinary citizens. Hence, just like the other manifestos analysed above, this one too has an intrinsic people-centrism at the heart of it.

Furthermore, under the "Institutional Reform, Autonomy and Direct Democracy" banner ("point 20", page 35) - which contains several proposals related to anti-elitism and unpolitics - League and 5SM advance a significant reduction of the number of MPs - they want no more than 400 representatives in the Chamber and 200 in the Senate. They justify this decision by explaining that law-making will be easier once such a reform takes place and that other states in Europe function more appropriately without as many MPs as Italy. A reduction will also supposedly lessen the expenses and resources used to fund MPs' lavish lifestyles. Once again, populists very much support a strong executive, quick-decision making, and a simplification of institutional processes.

Also, the less amount of taxpayer money is used on certain aspects of the state the better. Indeed, there may be a controversy since populists governments - at least in some areas of the globe - are known for their overspending on social services (e.g. redistributive welfarism) but the main takeaway here should only be that they most certainly do not want this money to be used for parliament and its politicians. Moreover, the "*vincolo di mandato*" or "Mandate Constraint" and potential *Recall* is present in this program just as it was in the parties' individual programs but this time is justified on the basis that it can be modelled closely to that of Portuguese and Spanish constitutional systems ("point 20", page 35). Both of these countries have serious anti-defection regulation to prevent MPs from switching parties/groups and retain their seats without a popular consultation/vote.

There is no doubt the *Recall* is a form of direct democracy and direct democracy is in turn a form of anti-elitism. Another example of populistic direct-democratic practices in the program can be traced to the incentivisation of the "abrogative Referendum" ("point 20", page 35-36). As populists, League and 5SM believe it is a good idea to give the citizenry ("the people") a chance to actively participate in the sphere of the *polis* by voting to abolish laws or executive orders put in place by state elites throughout the years. They make sure to state in the program that this is not anti-constitutional (in fact most referendums are constitutional) and that this best applied by scrapping the referendum *quorum* as it often happens that when not enough of the citizenry casts their vote the referendum becomes invalid. Given in recent times abstention rates have recently been astoundingly high in Italy (Calella, 2021) this can be sold as a good idea by the populist formations. Currently, with the *quorum* in place if not more than half of the population (51%) votes than the result of the referendum is automatically nullified. For evident reasons, League and 5SM would like to change this.

In any case, if we take their proposals related to banks, it is evident that they are all meant to be put in place to give renewed hope and better the life of those segments of society of which populist parties see themselves as being the defendants or guardians of. In this area too, there are elements of anti-elitism. *Leghisti* and *grillini* demand a tighter supervision of banking by a publicly-controlled organism kept under the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Economic Development ("point 5", page 14). Furthermore, the populists want banks (especially smaller ones rooted in local communities) to regularly come up with initiatives that will support small and medium businesses (both are electorally fundamental to both League and 5SM) ("point 5", page 14). Of course, as stated in the program, those funding initiatives need to fall "in line with the public and national interest" ("point 5, page 14).

Moving on to the issue of anti-crime measures ("law and order"), but returning to the theme of unpolitics, a populist unpolitics interwoven with justicialism can be observed on "point 12"- page 23 where the two parties speak of "Certainty of Punishment". Essentially, League and 5SM have agreed that the liberal-*ist* angle on law and order taken by past centre-left governments needs to be re-visited completely. They propose a complete U-turn on anything that in the past has involved slowing-down of trials and (voluntary) decrease in incarcerations sentencing.

Sovereignism also plays a decisive role in this "all-populist" manifesto. It can be said that without engaging with sovereignism as a cultural and economic societal ideal it is very difficult that a party can be considered as populist at all. A *populism* without sovereignism is unlikely if not impossible (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2020: 156), just like a *socialism* without the idea of egalitarianism would be unjustifiable. Even on foreign policy, the populists take a sovereignist (not so much nationalist) less aggressive (or "non-aggression") approach, meaning that the crimes against humanity, acts of military hostility and forceful expansion of other nations are treated as occurrences of secondary relevance. A non-interventionist (see Stefanoni, 2018) and semi-isolationist (even if the two parties do not intend to formally withdraw Italy from the NATO-alliance) is preferred to what the media usually defines as a "hawkish"-interventionist neo-conservative/neo-liberal one (see also *la Repubblica*, 18 April, 2017). They tend to postulate that time and resources used for military conflict in faraway lands are put to better use domestically to focus on political measures that directly benefit the autochthonous population in a short-term time-span. Wars abroad, by the side of the USA, are usually opposed by populist parties as they distract from the ongoing struggle at home against the establishment.

Opposing wars is also a way of opposing elite economic and territorial interests. Moreover, old enemies (Italian fascists and populistic nationalists fought Russians in WW2) are now potentially new friends (see Grosso, 2018; Foschini and Lauria, 2022). The Russian state is understood to be a force for good in the world by League and 5SM and Putin as someone who has redeemed his own people, mainly by taking the country on the centre-stage again after the collapse of the Soviet Union and providing Russians with a renewed sense of national identity (Grillo, *Journal du Dimanche*, 2017; Salvini, *Ansa*, 2018). League and 5SM propose that even if America remains the "privileged partner" Italy works closely with Russia to gain access to new trade deals and markets but also cooperates to resolve conflict in contested areas (Syria, Libya, Yemen) ("point 10", page 18).

Beyond the specifics of foreign policy and alliances, the Yellow-Green government is straightforward and transparent insofar as they expect Italy to *return* to be a sovereign nation. Generally, this to them means untangling the country from the EU's bureaucratic regulation, heavily

controlling its border (although in this manifesto due to the 5SM the stance on freedom of movement is more ambiguous) against (usually non-EU) immigration, and using economic protectionism to shield the domestic market from unfair competition and displacement of labour. In essence, according to the two parties, the current non-reformed and liberal-led financier European Union is the root of all evils.

For instance, at the very beginning of the program ("point 3", page 9) it is expounded that the Italian agricultural sector is one of the most promising of the whole economy but is struggling to survive due to unrestrained competition from other global markets. Past government are blamed for ignoring the needs of those involved in this laborious sector to instead pursue other financial interests tied to the EU. Those would be the interests of large multinationals, banks and the other corporate elites. The populist's response to this is to reform the EU's (CAP[106]) to make it more "Italy-friendly" mainly by funding agricultural initiative, work on rural development, preserve landscape, defend hydrogeological assets and provide more internal security (from non-EU competition) to the food market. In order for *Made in Italy* production to thrive, it is also a priority to adopt a more appropriate and transparent labeling system at the EU level to guarantee a better safety-net to consumers. A complete reform of the Italian AGEA[107] and SIAN[108] is also well-considered to gradually achieve this.

The same attention given to agriculture in the program is given to fishing. As established in earlier sections, fishermen are understood to be victims of EU bureaucratic norms, particularly due to the "fishing stops" and no-fishing zones that are allegedly not based on objective criterion. Up to this point, and with the examples given above, it is evident that the preservation of what they call "national interest" - through protection of the domestic market, its human resources, and the nation's cultural identity - is an absolute priority for the populists when in government. League and 5SM are without any doubt more inclined to practice "in-ward looking"[109] rather than "out-ward looking" politics as in this program sovereignism (if not nationalism) trumps globalism.

In this populist party text, it appears that sovereignism is interconnected to the populist value (and theme) of *producerism* because bureaucracy is (in the populistic frame of mind) an enemy to the development of primary-sector popular labour. In other terms, it is a real obstacle to work,

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[106] Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

[107] "*Agenzia per le erogazioni in agricoltura*" ("Agency for Agriculture Supply", my translation)

[108] "*Sistema informativo agricolo nazionale*" ("National Agricultural Information System", my translation)

[109] See Shahrukh Wani (2018).

production and growth, and it is principally the European Union that has flooded the market with norms/rules that are understood to be impossible to abide to. The EU is not only viewed as a menace to Italy's European ethnic, cultural, and religious identity by giving the opportunity to different peoples to circulate freely across borders but also as an organism that has overly liberalised financial regulation for the tertiary sector (e.g. services, banks) when prioritising bankers, real estate, and big business is something abhorrent to populists. When in the program it is illustrated that agriculture in mountainous slope regions will be given more attention to and facilitated by the Yellow-Green government as it "represents an indispensable activity for local economy, for the management and protection of territory and landscape as well as protection and enhancement of unique *production*, of high qualitative and traditional value that defines the country" ("point 3", page 10) this clearly should be understood as a praise to localist producerism.

Moreover, to make Italy financially sovereign again, League and 5SM propose government action aimed at a reduction of public debt not through taxation and austerity intervention - as national and supra-national (EU) elites have done before - but through expansionist state politics to boost GDP growth (we know this has caused great conflict between the Yellow-Green government and the EU commission between 2018 and 2019 as the former was convinced the way forward was to ignore the *fiscal deficit* rules of the *Fiscal Compact*). Thus, for the populists, a renegotiation of EU treaties is absolutely necessary to give Italy more freedom on state spending.

The conjunct hostility that League and 5SM have towards the Union becomes obvious in the section dedicated to its reform ("point 29", page 53). The goals can be summarised in two points: First, there is the desire to make the EU more independent in a multipolar world, more competitive and less reliable on imports and trade from outside the bloc (China for example). This would be a sort of *European Sovereigni*sm and is sometimes in open contradiction with aspects of the "national sovereignism" the League has promoted in the past. Second, there is the plan to overcome the current situation where a couple of member-states have supremacy over Europe and speak for the Union internationally when in reality they are carrying out their own interests and ignoring those of others - this is clearly an implicit reference to Germany and France whom both *leghisti* and *grillini* have a problem with.

Those goals can be carried out in many ways but accordingly the parties wish to focus on the strengthening of economic and social cohesion among member states with the hope of creating a truly economic union (this sounds more like an 5SM rather than League policy). The following are the most relevant ideas: make the ECB function as the other main central Banks in the world, "affirm European *identity* on the international scene", establish a "strict cooperation in the sectors

of justice and internal affairs", eliminate the phenomenon of social dumping, eliminate any regulation that harms small industry, fighting counterfeit "Made by Italy" (rather than "Made in Italy" production, re-visit the EU balance budget to make it align with League-5SM projects, and re-define the *Growth and Stability Pact*, *Fiscal Compact*, *European Stability Mechanism*, *Bolkenstein Directive*, as well as *Ceta*, *MESChina* and *TTIP* to prevent them from injuring the interests of Italian citizens ("the people") who deserve a fair and sustainable competition from the internal market. Accordingly, a strengthening of the EU parliament's decision-making is also mandatory in the near future, as it will give populists (once they increase their number of seats through regular European elections) a chance to oversee and counter-balance the Commission and Council to prevent an allegedly un-popular and elitist approach to law-making.

The programmatic sovereignism of League and 5SM is also demonstrable though an analysis of the position the two parties have on the issue of immigration and its reform. Immigration is deemed as "unsustainable" for the country ("point 13", page 26) and the attention given to this topic is justified on the basis that Italy is already suffering economically. Its scarcity of state resources makes it impossible to welcome more migrants in a safe and orderly fashion. Furthermore, the argument supplied that there are profiting criminal businesses with links to NGOs and other actors that deal with providing access for migrants to Italian shores purposely turns the issue primarily into one of security and legality rather than culture, ethnicity and demographics. The strategy that League and 5SM have in mind is that of avoiding being portrayed as authoritarian and xenophobic parties that tackle immigration for purely racial reasons (most of the migrants coming in since 2015 through sea-routes originate from non-white countries in North Africa and the sub-Saharan region) hence turn the debate into one of security (e.g. potential terrorist infiltration among Muslim migrants) and legality. With hindsight, League and 5SM have successfully *securitised* the topic of migration. At least, this would likely be the reading that scholars like Barry Buzan (1983) and others belonging to the Copenhagen School of thought in international relations would give in this circumstance.

In one way or the other, the populists' plan to redistribute migrants that come to Italy with help from the EU (other member-states are accused of ignoring Italy's demands), scrap the Dublin Treaty which makes Italy the "country of first arrival" (binding it in such way that it must accept all migrants once they set foot on Italian land), re-visit the Schengen agreement to crack down on a large portion of freedom of movement, put an end to EU interventionist missions in the Mediterranean that supposedly harm Italy, and ensure that there is more transparency in the public-fund management of migrant reception. Overall, the manifesto focuses principally on *illegal* (rather than legal) immigration and there appears to be a moderation in this context which is likely to have

been heavily influenced by the *grillini*. Unlike the *leghisti*, the 5SM is less receptive to the cultural conservatism and identitarian preservationism which has made the League (especially in the past) an "anti-immigrant party" *tout court*.

The legal reforms meant for the immigration system inevitably take the discussion back to the theme of populist *Reformism*. There are far too many policies in this manifesto that aim to democratically re-structure the state and its institutions (without necessarily changing systemic arrangements) in order to make them fall in line with populist (anti-elitist, people-centric, majoritarian) ideology. Not all of them can be visited in a simple TCA, hence only the ones that stand-out as *particularly* populist will be visited and briefly assessed. The whole section in the program dedicated to the "Institutional Reforms" ("point 20", page 35) concerning regional autonomy and direct democracy will not be further discussed in this segment as they were already inspected with enough detail above – as with some subjectivity I have decided to include most of them in the TCA paragraphs that deal with thematic anti-elitism and unpolitics. Moreover, the "Citizen's Income" which is also present in the manifesto and acclaimed by the two parties by being widely-discussed has also been excluded from the lines below as this policy has been given ample scrutiny in previous sections. Regardless, at this point it is already abundantly clear to the reader, how and why such a significant policy - adopted by the 5SM - in their very first 2018 text (the one *excluding* the League) is definitely an element of centrality to a "new" progressivist, welfarist, statist, nationalist, left-wing populism devised by Grillo's party. Hence, the next paragraph will divert its focus to other reforms that can be considered particularly populist.

For instance, the reform of the mechanisms involved in dealing with EU funds pre-assigned to Italy is a typically populistic reform. It is a way of rendering the whole system more transparent and augmenting the chances that money coming from abroad is invested appropriately to help those sectors that populists feel they have a responsibility towards (individual workers, small-scale and local entrepreneurs, families) instead of being dispersed by high-end bureaucrats and political elites often accused of using the money for their parties and personal gain. Furthermore, like in the previous individual League and 5SM programmes, we find a series of proposals related to self-defence. The specifics of those detailed proposals are not relevant to this analysis as long as it is stated that any reform regarding the extension of self-defence for any individual in his/her own home contained in this program was put forward by Salvini's League (and accepted by their coalition partners) for almost entirely ideological motives.

Even if it is indeed true that home burglary or breaking-and-entering is a common criminal occurence in Italy and 2014-2015 *Censis* survey statistics (see Natrella, 2015) point out to a sharp

increase over the last few years however the sentiment that moves this proposal has more to do with ideology than political pragmatism. Being a party inclined towards a radical conservatism (influenced at times by more by the Anglo-Saxon right than the Latin variation of it) and right-wing libertarianism the League holds the view that private property is sacred (as much as family, borders and territory) and its defence from intruders at any cost - even if that means shooting to kill with a legally-owned firearm - is not only desirable but a *quasi*-moral obligation. A populistic mindset also becomes part of this equation if we consider that parties such as the League who are culturally closer to the right than the left believe that the threat to local communities and private properties is mainly coming from economically destitute migrants rather than nationals.

As conveyed by the TCA analysis, the Yellow-Green manifesto touches upon several populist leitmotifs. It comes as no surprise - that in a manifesto conceived by right-wing and left-wing populists together - this includes *direct democracy*. In fact, in the "contract for the government of change" there is an entire section dedicated to this form of democratic practice ("point 19", page 23-25). League and 5SM unequivocally named this part of the document as "Institutional Reforms, Autonomy, and Direct Democracy" ("*Riforme Istituzionali, Autonomia, E Democrazia Diretta*"). As we know, direct democracy mainly reflects the idea that the *silent majority* of the populace will be finally given a chance to "speak-up" (with attention brought to the issues they care most about) as populists wrestle institutional power away from elites. In the most extreme cases, the hope for *redemption* morphs into a dangerous promise to create circumstances for violent revolts and popular self-government (a concept known as *ochlocracy*). However, given League and 5SM are parties that appear to play by the institutional rules and have always stopped short of overcoming representative democracy on the large-scale (notwithstanding wanting to make *some* constitutional changes, e.g. both want the anti-constitutional "*vincolo di mandato*" for politicians) their message of popular redemption is best understood theoretically than practically. Even so, it is certainly the case that the ideological populism that has led characters like Salvini to make statements such as "Italy needs a clean-up on a mass-level" (see *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 18 February, 2017) and those like Grillo to exclaim the 5SM "will open up Parliament like a can of tuna" (Grillo, Twitter, 2013b) has also inspired the parties to put forward proposals that are at odds with a liberal understanding of the *polis*. In essence, *populism* objectively belongs to a distinct political family to that of *liberalism*. The antagonistic/oppositional politics they propose today are a direct alternative to those of liberals and neo-liberals whom they understand to be defenders of an outdated *status quo* (see for example Paragone MP's interview, this volume) that needs to be overpowered and updated if not completely disintegrated.

Concerning the Yellow-Green manifesto, the policy ideas that can confidently be associated to the core theme of direct democracy are six in total. Interestingly, a greater number is present when compared to the League's and 5SM's individual programmes from 2018 (as explained before, the latter actually completely lacks direct democracy proposals). First, the League and 5SM intend to strengthen the *abrogation referendum* which is already included in the Italian Republic's constitutional order (article 75) and concomitantly remove its participation *quorum* which structurally weakens the potential for citizen involvement given (currently) more than half of eligible voters will have to vote in a referendum for its outcome to be formally accepted. Hence, for populists, this is a way to incentivise the "active participation" of citizens in politics. Second, they aim to introduce a *propositive/proactive referendum* too, so that (populist) politicians have the legal means to transform proposals directly collectively formulated by the citizenry in new laws ("point 19", page 23). Third, the Italian populists request a compulsory, consistent and formal parliamentary pronouncement on bills suggested through the *popular initiative*. Fourth, given populists tend to be distrustful of "big money" and "extra-ordinary" organisations directly or indirectly traceable to influential parties, politicians or the world of finance, *leghisti* and *grillini* advance vague proposals of state intervention to tackle their supposedly opaque day to day operations ("point 19", page 23). It needs to be noted that as they say themselves, they aim to do this with the sole purpose of "improving the relationship between citizens ("the people") and institutions" ("point 19", page 23). Fifth, since they believe it is paramount to "bring public decisions closer to the people" they also believe a way to do this (and improve the current state of affairs) is to transfer administrative functions from the state to the regions and subsequently (if necessary) from the regions to the municipalities based on a principle of political subsidiarity ("point 19", page 24). This proposal is clearly included in the joint programme upon request of the *leghisti*, the right-wing populists still have regionalism in their ideological DNA and appear to have not given up on their pursuit of full federalism. Sixth, League and 5SM suggest introducing a form of "digital citizenship" ("point 19", page 24) – making internet accessible to all citizens in the country in order for them to be as informed as possible and with the hope that this will further incentivise them to vote in a country where the abstention rate has become dangerously high. It is likely that this policy is more philosophically aligned with the 5SM's politics than the League's, since Grillo (alongside Casaleggio in the early days of the Movement) has always been a staunch supporter of the "digital-utopia" (Natale and Ballatore, 2014) and/or the so-called *Californian Ideology*[110].

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[110] This is the utopic idea inspired by West Coast Americans Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron that the internet will emancipate millions and millions of people (see Natale and Ballatore, 2014; see also Chester, 2018).

All in all, the Yellow-Green manifesto is an uncompromisingly populist manifesto, that needs to be understood as an alternative to the mainstream (I shall expand on this "alternativeness" point in the *Discussion* section) with themes such as anti-elitism and sovereignism at the forefront. However, in a way it is also a political text formulated out of compromise. The compromise is that between two anti-establishment forces that theoretically should be on opposite ends of the spectrum as they give slightly different interpretations to populist ideology. Conclusively, the policies discussed above are a direct product of a new *left-right* populist melting pot.

Discussion of Manifestos

The Thematic Content Analysis that took place throughout this chapter has shed some light on how precisely populist ideology can make its way in the programmatic profile of two institutionalised actors competing in the Italian electoral arena. As discussed above, the manifestos (or programmes) devised by League and 5SM are permeated with populist themes that recur time and time again in the party literature. As the majority of policies present in the "*Elezioni 2018: Programma di Governo – Salvini Premier*", "*Programma Elettorale MoVimento Cinque Stelle*", and the "*Contratto Per Il Governo Del Cambiamento*" are influenced by an anti-elitist sentiment of popular repossession of the political, there is little room for doubt surrounding the nature of the two parties. However, it goes without saying that there needs to be a synopsis regarding the similarities (and marginal differences) that exist between the two variants of populism put forward by the *leghisti*'s (national-populism) and the *grillini*'s (social-populism). In addition, a discreet explication of how the populist policies of the parties under scrutiny are in conflict with those of direct competitors with an anti-populist background such as the Democratic Party is certainly desirable. Thus, even if a formal and in-depth TCA of the party's policies purposely did not occur in the paragraphs above, some references to their 2018 manifesto "*Più forte, più giusta. L'Italia*" ("Stronger, fairer. Italy") - as well as their general political outlook - shall be made for explanatory purposes.

First and foremost, it must be noted that the national-populism of the League and the social-populism are theoretically diverse, in the sense that even if the themes they engage with are the same they are sometimes formulated differently [111] (and this will become more clear in the

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[111] As shown in the manifesto analysis the narrative(s) surrounding the 5SM's text are not identical to those of the League, not only is their Euroscepticism significantly more moderate than that of their populist allies on the right by 2018, but their people-centric appeals are embedded with a form of socialistic egalitarianism and progressivism that lacks an identitarian cultural grounding (e.g. "the people" as an *ethnos*) which is instead typical of the League's

subsequent chapter treating interviews) but the result is usually either the same or somewhat similar in terms of policy. In rarer occasions, the policies may also substantially differ. When they are similar or the *exact* same it is because it is the populist themes that have inspired or given way to the policies (e.g. scrapping the "Fornero Law", "Certainty of Punishment", fight illegal immigration, "Mandate Constraint", reduction of MPs, referendums). Those would be cases of *ideology* turned into *policy*. Instead, in the rarer cases where there have been elements in the manifestos above that point to a complete disjuncture between League and 5SM (e.g. the extent of permissible regional autonomy and TAP) this is likely to have occurred due to an overtaking of the parties' *host ideology* on *populism*.

The parties are above all populist, but this does not mean that their conservatism (supposed "host ideology" of the League) and progressive socialism (supposed "host ideology" of the 5SM) cannot sometimes have a role driving parts of their agenda. Clearly though, the end product of the "Yellow-Green" government's manifesto - the *Contratto Per Il Governo Del Cambiamento* - indicated that at that moment (2018) at least in theory[112] populism had overcome the host-ideologies as if it was only populism and the conscious decision to pursue populist policy-making that allowed the two forces to join together and put forward the same electoral program. As I have hinted earlier in this contribution, it may be entirely possible that populism itself is the host-ideology. Fundamentally, it would have been *impossible* to form a coalition government and give birth to an agenda with both strictly socially and economically conservative policies and socially and economically liberal/progressive ones. Evidently, what occurred instead is that League and 5SM voluntarily decided to cast aside their (at that time *minor*) attitudinal discrepancies - in fact host-ideologies were given secondary relevance when they signed their political contract - in order to pursue the defining element that brings them together; *populism*.

If we take the most noteworthy issues affecting and afflicting Italian politics at the time (2018) into consideration, such as the European Union, fiscal policy, banking rules, state bureaucracy, trade, illegal immigration, and foreign policy both League and 5SM appear to be on the same page (Politi, 2018). When it comes to fiscal policy they believe public debt needs to be tackled through a revival of internal demand and expansionist measures that increase state spending but also by lowering taxes ("point 8", page 17). In terms of banking rules, they both oppose multi-billion euro bailouts and the new "bail-in" requirements the EU has advanced and are inclined to move towards the

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discourse and ideology. The interview analysis and discussion in the subsequent chapter will expand on this and provide a more elaborate argument on the matter.

[112] I say "in theory" as in practice other considerations would have to be made since the coalition broke-down and the 5SM joined the Democratic Party to form a fully left-wing government.

nationalisation of weaker banks to apply tighter control (Politi, 2018). They also want to rid Italy and the EU of excess bureaucracy as accordingly it damages individuals, families, and their business prospects ("point 11", page 19-21). On trade, protectionism leads the way (e.g. subsidies for Italian farmers) and their populist ideology shaped by anti-globalism leads them to be sceptical about foreign investment too (Politi, 2018). That same creed also makes them staunch opponents of mass migration, especially its illegal variant, which they understand to be interlinked to organised crime and ideologically-charged NGOs, funded by liberal-globalist billionaires like George Soros and other elites. Whilst on foreign policy clearly both *leghisti* and *grillini* adopt an ambiguous mixed-loyalty stance as they question certain aspects of Atlanticism (NATO-interventionism above all) and oppose sanctions on Russia ("point 10", page 18) whom - as an increasingly relevant partner on trade and on the "war on terror" - they view in a favorable light.

Moving on to the second (and concluding) point of this discussion, the League and 5SM manifesto(s) are completely alternative to that of the centre-left Democratic Party. The dichotomy at play here would be the one between populism and anti-populism but also the one between nationalism and internationalism or globalism and anti-globalism. Some would go so far as saying the sharp contrast that exists between *populist* and *anti-populist* parties is entirely dependent on the *anti-liberalism-liberalism* binary (see Adinolfi, 2020). In this case, the former would be the anti-liberal democrats or illiberal-democrats – meaning that the people as a community is and will always be the primary source of any legitimation, even more so than the rule of law (Shils, 1996: 98). The latter would be the liberal-democrats – who in their politics regularly emphasise upon the fundamentality of the rule of law, liberal constitutionalism and the centrality of the individual in society. Although this is certainly a contentious dichotomy, since - as discussed in Chapter I - there are indeed groups who have more liberal views on the economy, on the role of the state and on individual rights, yet still pursue a form of politics that has a strong anti-elitist component which results in the reduction of powers of politicians in parliament and a harsh critique of the *status quo*. In fact, American news agencies like the Washington Examiner (see Carney, 2013) have promulgated the idea of a "viable" and "necessary" libertarian populism (which is really no different from *liberal populism* I spoke of before).

What is certain is that populist policies - like the "Citizen's Income", the revision of EU treaties, lowering of the retirement age, expansion of self-defence laws, flat taxation, openness to Russia, introduction of the "Mandate Constraint", and hardline approach on crime and illegal immigration - pursued by League and 5SM are a world apart from those expressed in the Democratic Party's 2018 manifesto. First, the Democratic Party has always shown intolerance towards what Italians call

"*assistenzialismo*" (welfarism) and as an alternative to the populist "Citizen's Income" (which is actually more similar to "workfare" than welfare) they instead prefer other measures such as the "Minimum Salary", an 80 Euro bonus for certain public and private workers, and some other labour reforms of neoliberal orientation (Democratic Party synthesis programme, 2018, page 3). Second, they do *not* ponder on the revision of EU treaties (with the exception of the Dublin one that makes Italy a hub for illegal entry of migrants) and claim to want to increase European integration/federalism until a "United States of Europe" is finally formed (Democratic Party synthesis programme, 2018, page 13). Third, they do not seem interested in lowering the retirement age – neoliberal centre-right and centre-left parties in Europe are usually opposed to such thing. In fact, the Democratic Party was one of the main parties to vote for Monti's Fornero Law in 2011 (Maltoni, 2015). Fourth, the "Salvinian" stance on the expansion of self-defence legislation is regarded by the Democratic Party as something "fascistic" or generally just as a bad idea put forward to sweep votes from the poor, angry and desperate in typical populist fashion. A Democratic Party representative, Alessandra Moretti MEP, went as far as saying that "you can't make laws based on emotional impulses and a popular sentiment coming from the gut" (la7.it, 5 March 2019). Fifth, the *Flat Tax* is wholeheartedly rejected in the Democratic Party's 2018 manifesto and dismissed as a "Robin Hood in reverse" policy that is not only expensive (apparently 60 billion) but primarily benefits the rich (supposedly 40% of its benefits to 5% of the richest contributors) (Democratic Party programme 2018, page 3). Sixth, the centre-left Democratic Party isn't and can never be an ally to Putin's Russia. Putin is understood to be nothing less than a danger to mankind, due to his expansionist, nationalistic and ultra-conservative militaristic political projects that threaten the peace in Europe and the world by challenging the NATO-alliance. It should come to no surprise that an essentially almost centrist actor like the Democratic Party would today unambiguously condemn Putin's invasion of Ukraine (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 22 February 2022). Per contra, the same degree of commitment to Atlanticism on foreign policy is not found in populist ideology. On one hand, the populists condemned the forced entry of Putin's troops on Ukrainian territory but on the other hand opposed a military resolution to the conflict with Western-NATO expansion and intervention (Cremonesi, 2022; De Cicco, 2022). Seventh, they have no intention of revisiting constitutional norms to introduce a "Mandate Constraint". Eight, they are undeniably "softer" on crime than the populists as the Democratic Party once favoured emptying prisons ("*legge svuotacarceri*") (tg24.sky.it, 9 February 2012).

Besides all of this, their whole approach towards immigration is a proudly left-wing progressive and solidaristic one where the phenomenon itself is viewed as overwhelmingly positive (Democratic Party programme, 2018, page 26). In fact, their plans to "control immigration" and redistribute

migrants through member-states by overcoming the Dublin Treaty is based on a *realpolitik* approach rather than ideology. The Democratic Party knows it would suffer large electoral losses if it did not propose to solve the problems tied to illegal immigration in one way or the other. For years, they have disproportionately ceded ground on this issue to the League (and its right-wing allies; FI! and FdI) and 5SM, this resulted in a catastrophic showing for them in the 2018 election.

To conclude this segment, this Thematic Content Analysis demonstrated that through their manifesto League and 5SM have presented themes and policies to the public that are unequivocally driven by and imbedded with an anti-elitist *ethos* as well as unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism and direct democracy (hyper-democratic ideals). Additionally, a rapid but methodical analysis also demonstrated that the Democratic Party puts forward policies that might not be as popular (as the populist ones) but are understood - by a large portion of moderate voters - to be preservationist (of the *status quo*), responsible, and far-sighted (especially economically). A more complete TCA of the Democratic Party manifesto was not possible here yet the paragraphs above should be enough to provide the reader with a generic idea of how populism and anti-populism regularly clash in the arena of ideas and policies.

V. "Discursive Populism": A Thematic Content Analysis of Interviews with League and 5SM Politicians

"Thus is the Body-politic more than ever worshipped and tended; but the Soul-politic less than ever"

- Thomas Carlyle

Interview Analysis: An Introduction

This is a chapter dedicated to the evaluation of populist ideology present in the discursive narratives of ten representatives or politicians who belong to either the League or 5SM. The purpose of discussing a number of issues ranging from the set of policies that the two parties agreed upon, their relationship with the EU, the leadership of their respective parties, their international affiliations and their view of concepts such as democracy (and populism itself) with the interviewees is that of exploring whether the two parties engage with the same set of themes and as consequence draw conclusions about whether they (right-wing and left-wing populists) share substantial similarities. As explained earlier, the hypothetical idea developed before approaching these formal conversations was that League and 5SM *do* indeed have a lot in common when it comes to *ideology* and this is a reflection of the fact that both manifestations of populism, whether situated slightly more to the right or left, exhibit a shared ideological core. This core is characterised not merely by anti-establishment sentiments or so-called anti-elitism but by their attachment to a series of themes – namely *anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism*, *producerism*, *reformism* and *direct democracy*.

Taking this into account, the political representatives I spoke to from the League are: Claudio Borghi (a Member of Parliament); Luca De Biasio (a representative of the party in an affiliated organisation abroad); Silvia Covolo (a Member of Parliament); Alessandro Panza (a Member of the European Parliament); Roberto Ciambetti (a Regional Council representative). Considering the 5 Star Movement I instead interviewed: Gianluigi Paragone (a Member of Parliament); "Anonymous 5SM" (a candidate for local/municipal elections); Devid Porrello (a Regional Council representative); Alvise Maniero (a Member of Parliament); Mauro Coltorti (a Member of Parliament). The manner in which the interview material is presented is rather straightforward. In essence, every sub-section of this chapter contains consistent references to statements (shown in quotations) made by the politicians I interviewed, as I could not include every single point they made during the formal conversation I only included the most relevant arguments that can directly be associated to the six populist themes and populist ideology overall. Other important phrases and

words they used (which I had to exclude from the principal analysis in this chapter) that were effectively data "codes" for the six themes and thus traceable to populist ideology are listed ordinally in the Appencides Table A2.

Much of the insight attained from the interviews alone relates to the idea that the League's and the 5SM's positions are (surprisingly) not always aligned on important political issues. One could also note that the policies suggested by the interviewees sometimes differ too. However, there is a *significant* overlap in terms of the themes they explore or touch upon in their narratives. In simpler terms, the populist narratives constructed are significantly reliant on the core definitional concepts of populism (anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism and so forth) but they are *sometimes* articulated differently and this may lead to slightly different political outcomes too. To be sure, from a populist viewpoint, during interviews *leghisti* and *grillini* appear to highlight the same problems but may propose distinct solutions to these problems.

As expected, from the interview analysis, League and 5SM appear ideologically slightly more distinct when compared to the manifesto analysis where they policies they put forward resemble each other to a greater extent making it possible to draw a closer link between the right-wing and left-wing variants of populism. Notwithstanding, what brings them together (on the issues they agree upon) is still their overall ideological attachment to the six main core elements of populism. A more in-depth discussion is due to take place in the Discussion section at the end of the chapter and in the following chapter dedicated to more precise conclusion(s) and reflections.

Anti-elitism: "Putting the people first"

The refusal to acknowledge one of the requisites of liberal-democratic representative politics where politicians *may* but also *may not* derive from a nation's working populace or "organic community" - concept already formed by Ferdinand Tönnies originally in 1887 - is typically populist (see Tönnies, 2014). In a strictly populist vision, parliaments can exist, but they must *directly* represent the people. Elections can occur, but they must *always* reflect *popular will* (or better, whims). Political cultures such as the liberal or Marxist ones are usually depicted as decadent and outdated by populists. This makes the host-ideology "attachment theory" - promoted by Mudde and others - intellectually shaky, at least to some degree. Populism's distaste for elitist institutions is at odds with the philosophy of the traditional right, in both its authoritarian (e.g. Spain's Franco, Portugal's Salazar) and more liberal variations (e.g. France's Chirac, the USA's George H.W. Bush). It has also been discussed how - minimal similarities notwithstanding - populism is a different creature from the *extreme-right*

(e.g. Romania's Codreanu) and the *extreme-left* (e.g. China's Mao Zedong). Populism is something else, it is the critique of old politics, old ideologies, and of the men that have severely ruined the *gemeinschaft* and inefficiently run the *gesellschaft* (here I use Tönnies's 2014 terminology again) - as any populist in a Germanophonic country would posit. The critique of established political cultures by populists all over the globe - epitomised by their "neither left nor right"[113] electoral catch-phrase - derives from the fact that those have given an elitist dimension to politics leaving behind *the common man* in a post-industrial age creating a huge gap between the "winners" and "losers" in a neoliberal world order (Lamp, 2020).

"*Unfortunately, the neoliberal model, is the only one that resists to -isms (e.g. populism), it is powerful, and tends disaggregate states*" 5SM Senator Gianluigi Paragone tells me, somewhat emotionally, as I interview him in a secluded room of Palazzo Madama (Paragone, 7 November 2019).

This theme of anti-elitism and the sharp division between *the neo-liberals* (who allegedly defend their "own interests" and those of the upper classes) and the populists who want a government *of the people, by the people*, *for the people* (inspired by a purely proto-populist Madisonian ideal) is clearly a recurring one in populist discourse.

Claudio Borghi MP, who is not in the same party as Paragone, still shares the same understanding of today's struggle. When asked what being a populist really means for him, he tells me

"*The term 'populism' indicates a movement with representatives that make themselves the spokesmen of the needs of the people, of national values, and are those that have a direct relationship with citizens that is unmediated. Hence, I believe that the error is made by those* (I assume he is mainly referring to the Italian media, political, and corporate elites) *who give a negative connotation to the word 'populist'; this shows how superficial the prevalent narrative is, elevating the term to a defamatory meaning*" (Borghi, 11 November 2019).

This time, in purely Laclauian fashion, populists from the League and 5SM are *reconstruing the political frontier* (Laclau, 2007). Given populism is always Manichean, and the struggle between the people and the elite is a perpetual one, anyone who omits this central (ideological) element of populism cannot ever comprehend or come to terms with the phenomenon. Senator Paragone is very clear in stating that anti-elitism is a fundamental part of the populist program because it is not only what voters want and expect, hence making it automatically a political reality, but mainly is the

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[113] Usage in France of this catch-phrase (and idea in general) by Marine Le Pen is all too common (see Invernizzi and Bickerton, *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2016, or Genga, 2017).

primary issue that today can serve the purpose of generating a populist hegemony in the social and political sphere (Paragone, 7 November 2019). In his own words:

"*I believe that if the cleavage right and left has consumed itself, those of north and south or high and low certainly have not. High and low not in geographic terms but in the sense of 'people vs elites'*" (Paragone, 7 November 2019).

Paragone here stresses the importance of maintaining a populist movement/party in a country that represents the views of ordinary people (those on the "low") no matter what. With such a mindset, the (by now already "ex") 5SM Senator would perfectly fit the Ostiguyian framework discussed earlier in this work (Ostiguy, 2017). Voluntarily and uncoincidentally the 5SM to which he belonged to at the time of the interview occupies the "low", orthogonal to right and left. According to Paragone, in agreement with crypto-populist intellectuals like Alain De Benoist (2017) the *left vs right* dichotomy has consumed itself and is no longer important or fit for purpose (De Benoist, 2017: 54-98). Supposedly, real populists should reside on the philosophical and socio-cultural "low". However, Paragone is performatively not at all a typical populist. He is far from a post-modern vulgar figure; he tends not to use foul language like Trump or Grillo and is not particularly theatrical in his gestures either. On the contrary, more like a Haider than a Grillo, appears to be calm and collected, demonstrates to be well-read and coherent in his anti-elitist critique and judgement.

Certainly, the theme of anti-elitism is overwhelmingly present in my conversation with him. The idea that career politicians, technical bureaucrats, and financial elites, have failed Italians is simply core to his understanding of politics itself. Anti-elitism is the 5SM and the 5SM is anti-elitism because (as he purports) the system "*continued to generate inequality*" (Paragone, 7 November 2019). Like his younger 5SM colleague from the Chamber of Deputies, Alvise Maniero MP, who today has "*difficulty recognising right and left*" and does not "*see a left that unconditionally helps the less privileged classes*" Paragone views anti-elitism not as a means to an end but as an end in itself (Maniero, 11 January 2021; Paragone 7 November 2019). This may well be an oversimplification of the political, elites exist and people exist but people are the *majority* hence according to this narrative it would only be democratic to let them rule themselves. Ironically, while these populists consider themselves to be the only democratically legitimate force, their commitment to an oversimplified *majoritarianism*[114], may degenerate into *ochlocracy*. A first stage of ochlocracy was very briefly witnessed by astonished Western spectators when Trump's "mob army" of 2,000-2,500 bashed into the U.S Capitol Hill building on January 6, 2021 as a form of violent protest. In essence, when the most radical populisms go far beyond giving a voice to the

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[114] This may well be a sub-theme of "Direct Democracy".

unrepresented there is always the risk that (even if briefly) *ochlocracy* sediments as a goal itself. In this event, it makes it so that - as Emilia Palonen (2020) argues - "the democratic ethos of populism loses itself, potentially turning into something else that is certainly neither pluralist nor democratic" (Palonen, 2020: 55-69).

Borghi A. MP, who does not at all give the impression of someone who promotes any form of anarchic ochlocracy but rather appears to be centre-right career-economist with a sharply defined vision, declares

"*The League today is with Salvini the party most present in the squares, the streets, and peripheric territories to talk and involve ordinary people just like old Communist Party did* " (Borghi, 11 November 2019).

An interesting point is made here, beginning from the fact that as Maroni has done several times before him, Borghi (unlike others on the *classic Right*[115]) brags about the people-centric "down – to – earth" credentials of this working-man[116] party that - to some degree - is today the Salvinian League. The comparison linking Salvini's successes to the once even more successful Italian Communists gives further evidence that the theme of anti-elitism is incessant, and that neo-populism today is all about acquiring working class and lower-middle class votes along with those of well-to-do entrepreneurs. Being an inter-classist party - or (populist) "diverse alliance" as Eatwell and Goodwin (2018: 16-24) would note - present on the territory has always been considered a noble cause in Western European politics however it is still unclear what role those ordinary citizens not on high incomes that do not vote for the League have? Are they still part of *the people*? Or are they not because they are letting themselves be fooled by the mainstream "elite-parties" ("*partito ZTL*"[117] in Italian) whom they still vote for? A closing answer to this difficult question did not exactly come to light during my interviews and will most likely not emerge any time soon.

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[115] Formations of the so-called "Classic Right" would be conventional liberal-conservative parties like Forward Italy! or the French *Les Republicains* and the British Conservative and Unionist Party. All are economically free-marketeer ("fiscally conservative" as the Americans would say) and mildly socially liberal but still more conservative than the centre-left.

[116] See Mila Spicola (2019)

[117] In this case "*ZTL*" stands for "Zona Traffico Limitato" – "Limited Traffic Zone" and this is merely a smear that populists use against their opponents from establishment parties whom they consider to be parties just for the rich. In other words, accordingly (to this presumably narrow-view) the rich who vote for establishment parties reside in Limited Traffic Zones which are only found in the urban centres of big Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Naples, etc).

The remnants of the dissatisfaction with the Italian *status quo* that has existed ever since the establishment of the republic (or even before if we consider the success of the first populists like the Common Man's Front /FUQ as early as 1944) seem to have resulted in a somewhat disorganised, sometimes vindicative (yet also necessary) disgruntled anti-elitism. An anti-elitism obviously revived by populist programmes dedicated to putting the citizen at the centre through the direct democracy practices which we are all familiar with. The 5SM's obsessive-compulsive *Rousseau*-platform voting and request for referendums *without quorum* and the League's devotion to the policy of a directly elected President (as well as Presidentialism itself) are likely to be not only manifestations of the ideological theme of *anti-elitism* but also of that of *direct democracy*. Democracy is redeemed once it is made popular/populist again. It happens more often than not than in populist TCA's that two themes overlap with each other. This last concept will be further discussed later.

Anyhow, the statements of Devid Porrello, who is currently the 5SM's Vice-President for the Lazio Regional Council, render this idea of anti-elitism and its importance in Italian politics even further:

"*Being populist means putting the people first, putting the citizens at the centre…unfortunately they don't understand* " (Porrello, 21 December, 2020).

By "they" (a word that creates a clear demarcation - once again - between the two homogenous yet antagonistic entities; *people* and *elites*) one can only assume that Porrello is talking about EU officials, "recycled" politicians from the Democratic Party, FI! and other old parties, the Italian media, *Confindustria*, the industrial complex, the Bank of Italy, the ECB, and also the wealthy Italian families such as the Agnelli's and De Benedetti's. Fundamentally, all of the institutions and institutional figures who have been sceptical and attacked some of the 5SM's anti-elitist/populist positions (see la7.it, *PiazzaPulita*, 24 September 2020). Elite groups are viewed as those who collude with big banks (or at least bail them out when they risk crashing), those who let national businesses offshore to foreign lands while letting in cheap labour from the "third world", those who impose restrictions on speech to safeguard ethnic and sexual minorities, those who provide welfare for immigrants and raise taxes while cutting public services, and those who ignore the *volonté générale* in popular referendums (e.g. France 2005 and Ireland 2008). Such behaviour is unacceptable to populists.

The "will of the people" is juxtaposed to that of the will of "*those with money and power*" in Luca De Biasio's (National Vice-Coordinator of the "League in the World" organisation) discourse as well. The two are never complementary, and mutually exclude one another. Whilst on one hand

there may be (and should be according to Jan-Werner Müller[118] along with any classic civics textbook) a moderately constructed critique of elites (especially rhetorically, but this is different from full-fledged anti-elitism) without necessarily populist features, on the other hand an anti-elitism rhetorically constructued in a way that depicts all (or almost all) elites as *necessarily* malign cannot but be a purely populist anti-elitism. One of the reflections made by De Biasio serves as a perfect example of this:

"*Di Maio has said many things…their (5SM) vote for Von Der Leyen we couldn't believe, but now we understand that they just say one thing and do another. It was not a vote for* (popular) *sovereignty in any way. They betrayed the principle of sovereignty itself. We got used to their betrayals. It was 'the straw that broke the camel's back'…the government could not go forward; the break was inevitable I think, even if it was disappointing for us having to take that decision. But today I am every day surer of it – as I see how much the 5SM changed, losing all the characteristics that brought them close to the League*" (De Biasio 20 August 2020).

When the League's partners (the 5SM) helped elect (in the EU Parliament 2019 vote for EU Commissioner) an establishment figure entrenched in the system like the German politician Ursula Von Der Leyen the core principle of anti-elitism was abandoned, hence one of the two parties (the more philosophically flexible and by 2019 "less radical" one) became viewed as a "traitor" by the more hard-line one (the League) that sees itself as staying loyal to its original cause. This shows how crucial the anti-elitism element is, as soon as the 5SM temporarily abandoned it by behaving like an institutionalised, semi-Europhile, mainstream party by not voting the same way as their partners in the EU parliament then it is as if they completely and immediately lose their populist credentials and are viewed as siding with the enemy. After all, according to De Biasio - who used the expression "the straw that broke the camel's back" and spoke of "betrayal" regarding this particular 5SM manoeuvre - voting in favour of a careerist from Merkel's CDU party (one that invited migrants into Europe and refused to help Italy in handling them, and also infiltrated into Italy's domestic affairs by allegedly pushing public opinion against PM Berlusconi in 2011) really had to be a turning point. Retrospectively, it can be said (as De Biasio hinted too in our conversation) that it was not really the *Flat Tax*, the TAP disagreements, nor even Salvini's jittery relationship with 5SM ministers, but actually this (suddenly) pro-elite and pro-establishment 5SM vote that caused the eventual split.

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[118] See Müller (2017) at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahtvsNU2bkk.

Unpolitics: "Political class left through the door…returned through the window"

Hearing anti-political and "un-political" statements is a common occurrence for a scholar interviewing politicians from populist parties. All of the interviewees, from both League and 5SM, have at some point resorted to rhetorical devices and patterns that include *unpolitics* when engaging in conversation. Nonetheless, for practical purposes only a couple of the most important cases of discursive unpolitics will be discussed below, starting from the following statement from Borghi MP:

"…*the vote of protest doesn't actually exist. What exists, rather, is a 'vote for change' coming from voters who seek valid alternatives to a status quo that is no longer sustainable. The League has made itself the spokesperson of forgotten promises made by a political class out of touch with the electorate, that has put itself at the service of big lobbies and the European superstructure, and this has had an impact on our economy…*" (Borghi, 11 November 2019).

From this statement deriving from one of the most notable League parliamentarians, one can get a good sense of the typical populist Manicheanism. This is not to say that Borghi's point is not valid, one can hardly disagree that the Italian political class has been known to fail to represent its electorates for at least the last twenty years, which is the reason abstention figures have soared so much. However, it is interesting to note where the whole negativity towards the political class derives from and the fact that Borghi rejects the "vote of protest" narrative most of the national (e.g. *Il Foglio*, *La Stampa*, *Il Manifesto*, *Corriere Della Sera*, etc.) and international (e.g. *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *The Spectator*, *The Guardian*, etc.) media has put forward. The distinction between "vote of protest" and "vote for change" is one that is difficult to make, as those who revolt, protest, and reject a systemic politics will inevitably also request/expect "change". Let us not linger on this aspect of Borghi's commentary too much but rather examine the rest of his (very un-political) affirmation.

The elites coming from the Democratic Party and the centre-left in general are understood to be hostage of "Big lobbies" and the European superstructure are of course the main enemy, but why? Simple: the policies (especially the economic ones) they push forward are in conflict with those wanted by the League's "*ceti produttivi*" ("producer class"). So, in essence, Borghi's view of what he calls "the electorate" is somewhat more narrow or specific than one would think. It is the middle class that he is mainly concerned about and Salvini and his party have been complaining about almost everything related to the EU-conceived approach to the economy, one that harms small and medium business. In a conservative-populist worldview, social stability requires a productive "elite"

and for Borghi and other *leghisti* the EU (as a superstructure, with its elites that are not producers but in fact bureaucrats, technical experts, and career politicians) is the major obstacle to this stability. They somewhat keep in line with the right-wing populistic tradition of which the British economist W.H. Mallock was in some way theoretically a founding father of. After all it was Mallock who first proposed a 19th century rightist alternative to socialist class-centrism and people-centrism and famously asserted that "the material well-being of *the people* first, and everything else afterwards" (Mallock 1884: 702).

When Borghi also speaks of "stale politics that lacked incisive and healthy actions for the country" he is referring to Italian politicians not fighting all those EU bureaucracy norms that damage the "productive" lower-middle and middle class, such as the absurd directed guidelines on the growth and selling of certain food products (e.g. Eggs, bananas, cucumbers, turnips, and *some* vegetables). Those may appear as a secondary detail but are instead of primary importance to producers not just in the northern but southern part of the country too. Moreover, not specifically Borghi but the *leghisti*'s attack on the Europhile political class is made on the basis that sanctions against Russia are a mistake that will damage country's own import-export economy (Ricciardi, 2022). For the *leghisti*, the EU is usually also to blame for giving life to the Dublin Treaty that principally exposes countries like Italy and Greece (at the heart of the Meditterrenean Route) to mass immigration as they are countries of migrant first arrival (see Allegranti, 2018). In any case, Borghi's unpolitics is not too dissimilar from that of Senator Mauro Coltorti from the 5SM. Coltorti argues that

"*Those who vote 5SM are people tired with false promises and politics that have brought to a deterioration of social welfare with huge problems that witness injustice, ill deals and favouritism/clientelism from traditional parties. Also, they are people who are disappointed with environmental conditions and the increasing cost of services (like water, light, and gas)*" (Coltorti, 25 May 2021).

This is a very interesting description of the view that Coltorti MP has of his party's electorate, not only is the people-centrism self-evident but it also becomes evident that the people-centrism of the 5SM slightly diverges from that of the League. He mentions the "traditional parties" that let down the population, but he also somehow "forgets" to mention the EU. On one hand, in the earlier days, the 5SM's messages had always been overwhelmingly anti-EU, the party criticised the bloc for functioning as a hub for big capitalists and raged against the financialisaton of society. On the party's blog, the EU's *Fiscal Compact* had been labelled as a big hoax that kept Italy hostage and damaged its economy up until at least 2014. On the other hand, today this same party's political platform (which began with the first "V-day" in 2007) cannot be understood as being as an entirely

Eurosceptic one. Even the earlier 5SM however - the one that had not yet embraced the EU and decided to remain within - was only sporadically anti-European, just like it was sporadically anti-American, pro-Russia and pro-China. The *raison d'être* of the party was not Euroscepticism but rather that of first combatting and then reforming the decadent and inefficient Italian political class by taking over Parliament. The League instead, unlike the 5SM, has been part of that very Italian political class for much longer (keeping "a foot in and a foot out"[119] since 1994) hence focuses most of its populistic antagonism towards the EU. For the League, the Italian political class does not matter as much, they are simply puppets and hostages (sometimes even against their own will) of more powerful European elites that sit in Brussels and Strasbourg. Even Bossi's early 90s flirt with the EU to obtain more autonomy from Rome was short-lived after all. It is a whole different story for the 5SM, since the party alleges that national politicians have been directly responsible for Italy's collapse throughout the years and thus deserve condemnation for not being able to divert course (the argument being that they continue to be reliant on European loans and fiscal regulations).

In one way or the other, Coltorti's words highlight the left-wing ideological strand of the 5SM. He voluntarily or involuntarily mentions issues that give off the perception the party may be close to socialism, or at least belong to the new left. Although, the 5SM is perhaps not as post-materialist as other new left formations in Europe and the Americas. That being said, "social justice" or "injustice" (something the League would hardly ever mention explicitly with this name), "environmental conditions" and "cost of services" are typically left-wing foundational issues. Even if environment takes up a big part of the League's programme (by 2018) - the party allegedly supports a *circular* and *green economy* - it cannot be said that it has ever been a top priority for Salvini's group historically.

If Borghi will take great pleasure in attacking multinationals, big European lobbies, and the EU superstructure as a whole, the 5SM's Senator Coltorti takes a more cautious approach against Europe whom he merely warns should not impose more austerity as it could lead to more extreme forms of nationalism. Coltorti MP underlines "*the evolution of globalisation has rendered evident the difficulties in affronting global competition separately*" in what can by itself be understood as a timidly pro-EU "stance of inevitability" (Coltorti, 25 May 2021). The 5SM is known for lately

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[119] This is essentially another way of referring to the proudly adopted "*Lega di lotta e di governo*" ("League of struggle and of government" or "fighting and in government" – as Albertazzi et al. (2011) have translated) slogan that has been a way for the League to distinguish itself in the arena as a populist party that can be in opposition as an alternative to centre-right and centre-left parties (watching over them and ready to "attack" when needed) as well as a responsible party of government (on occasion) to push forward popular policies. It is not merely a slogan but a political strategy for the League.

taking a more fatalistic stance, this may be a left-wing populist reformulation of the 1980s *TINA* ("there is no alternative") promoted by the liberal (centre-right Thatcherites but also centre-left) parties. Essentially, given globalisation has gone too far, and EU integration is well under way a return to the pre-Maastricht Europe (which the League actively promotes) is not realistically feasible. The 5SM now wants a reformed, more solidaristic, communitarian, environment-friendly, and communitarian Europe.

The League instead sees a unified Europe as a bloc of ethnically and culturally homogenous nations that even if separated by language have the same interest which is that of halting immigration from the geographical south and east. They are in fact inspired by the tougher line taken from the *Visegrad* countries. Ultimately, the League's unpolitics materialise from a cultural and economic standpoint. The norms that Italian and European politicians have put in place are destroying the national economy according to Borghi MP because they "*legislate or act exclusively to favour 'the powerful*" (I assume he means the political elite) (Borghi, 11 November 2019). Moreover, he tells me Italy is paying "*the consequences for submitting to the suffocating and mad constraints of the EU*" (Borghi, 11 November 2019). Thus, the EU is damaging Italy not just with their nonchalance towards immigration (*cultural standpoin*t) but also with their anti-business super regulation (*economic standpoint*). This may be mistaken to be the opposite of what more moderate 5SM MPs like Coltorti argue, as the *grillini* accuse the EU of thinking too much about the interests of business owners and of the world of finance. Be that as it may, the reality is that both parties are pro-business and pro-entrepreneurship when it comes to enterprises owned by low- and medium-income citizens. It is true however that the 5SM is more concerned with Italian poor people and the unemployed and interprets most of its struggles post-racially and post-culturally, while the League's patrimonial-populism and conservatism leads the party to defend the economic freedoms of Italy's "ceti produttivi". However, where the populism of the right and of the left aligns is on their opposition towards a politicised over-focus on the finance sector of the economy.

In terms of party family, one could deduce that the League is a *national-populist* party (as anti-immigration and defence of culture and tradition is prioritised) with a somewhat liberalist anti-state approach to economics. Although they - unlike most from the *liberal-populist* family - believe that there's a limit to the free market, which explains the party's call for more protection(*-ism*) for Italy's products. The 5SM is instead decidedly not national-populist but *social-populist* because it is objectively more "socially conscious" than the League, wanting to expand welfare rights, nationalise some key industries, protect the environment, and up to an extent also promote a range of socially progressive values. Perhaps, the irony is that the "Europeanists" (or "Europhiles"), who

are anti-populists, accuse populists of "incompetence" (mainly for their economic positions) but populists - just like Borghi MP and Coltorti MP - accuse their accusers of even more incompetence. What the League and 5SM have in common - as demonstrated by Borghi's and Coltorti's statements above - is that they are both convinced that politicians will not solve any form of conflict nor find any resolution to Italy's problems, but *the people* (represented by a truly populist party) very well may. By stepping into the political arena and making use of their common-sense and real-world experience and laborious skills on economic as well as cultural matters, the hope is that things will get better.

Sovereignism: "Sovereignty is the past, present, and future of Europe"

"*With hindsight, I don't think that with the League there were actually any themes in common. The intent of that[120] political force was to reach certain electoral objectives by taking credit for the work undertaken by 5SM MPs and exalting its own paternalism*" (Anonymous 5SM, 1 October 2020).

This critique of the League's behavioural pattern during the time of the coalition government was provided to me by a 5SM regional candidate who wishes to remain anonymous. As it can be noted, it transpires from this statement of the interview session that the *grillini* were not entirely satisfied with how the League acted while power, and apparently this was not merely due to a few disagreements on policy (such as TAP, certain aspects of judiciary reform and the UN's *global compact*).

In truth, while after this "populist experiment" in government Salvini's party accused his ex-allies of not keeping their promises and letting the League have its way on the agenda, the *grillini* instead felt the leghisti were just manipulating them to achieve their own goals and then drop out of the coalition with the hope of achieving a quick path to new elections. Anonymous 5SM sees the League as a not serious party that treats politics as if it was "*tifo da stadio*" (a typically Italian expression to signify pure football cheerleading style) and as an organisation led by a leader "*that has the sole ambition of incrementing his own electoral popularity*" (Anonymous 5SM, 1 October 2020). From Anonymous 5SM's point of view, the League took credit of the 5SM's welfarist agenda and its discreet achievements regarding employment (Anonymous 5SM, 1 October 2020). It also pretended to be a loyal ally (Salvini's compliments to 5SM figureheads have been consistent at

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[120] Here, Anonymous 5SM is referring to the League.

the start of the coalition) but as soon as "the captain" altered his stance the League MPs could do nothing to stop him from putting an end to the alliance.

Anonymous 5SM could be correct in his analysis, but only partially, as it can easily be proved *false* that League and 5SM did not have any themes in common. For example, anti-elitism (which also took shape in the form of EU-criticism) was something they both had in common. I have also shown how rhetorically unpolitics plays an important role in the national-populist and social-populist narrative. In any case, *sovereignism* is certainly also a major theme they share. Even if Anonymous 5SM (who curiously admits originating from the Italian right) seems to partially reject crypto-rightist sovereignist politics - he instead argues the 5SM want more EU cooperation on economic, fiscal and judicial matters - his other colleagues that I spoke to have revealed to be quite attached to the concept of *popular*, *economic*, and *territorial* sovereignism.

Alvise Maniero MP is a young, provocative, and knowledgeable Deputee of the 5SM in the lower-house of Parliament. During his long conversation with me, this politician touched on many different issues, and his rhetorical elegance and intellectual sophistication allowed me to better comprehend the electoral potential (or even charm) of modern populism. By talking to him, two things immediately became clearer. The first is that the 5SM - even lying somewhere on the "radical populist left" - can never be treated as ideologically equally distant from the Democratic Party and the League. It is clearly a party that is EU-critical (and was extremely Eurosceptic in the past) and is also clearly a party that has brought the middle and lower classes into parliament (those classes have been "*the bastion for the restitution of rights and duties to citizens*" according Maniero's party fellow Anonymous 5SM) and hence will always manifest national-popular views. Indeed, the 5SM is EU-critical and national-popular, but more importantly, the 5SM is a mildly patriotic party. Their liberal and civic form of nationalism (uncoincidentally today still inspired by the great Frenchman *Rousseau*) is a substantial part of their political platform and for this reason it can be assumed that they are closer to the "right-wing" League (I put this in quotations as the party is more populist than right-wing) under this aspect than to the centre-left encapsulated by the Democratic Party. A discreet amount of liberal nationalism or civic patriotism is to a large extent what made the alliance between League and 5SM possible, bringing under the same tent anti-establishment figures such as Paragone MP, Borghi MP, Maniero MP, and others like Covolo MP and Panza MEP which will be given attention to in subsequent segments.

"*Sovereignism is the past, present and future of Europe because that's how it is in Germany and France. For instance, Germany does whatever it wants. It claims from a legal point that it can act without having to recognise the normative hierarchy of the ECB (to the point where it disputes it*

decisions) or abide by its rules. There has been a legal judgement from the European Court of Justice (just after the judgements of Karlsruhe[121] on quantitative easing) that has shown Germany moulded the parameters of the EU's fiscal policy to suit its own on parameters, those of its own banks, its own financial institutions, and general economy. They, along with the Dutch, systematically ignore the surplus that exists in relation to commercial balance, as they export something like 8 percent..." (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

Maneiro MP giggles as he says this, and cares to highlight that what he says is backed by statistical evidence. "*Thank God it is public (the data), you can go check yourself what is the commercial parameter for the Bundes or the Dutch. The rule is six percent, and they don't even get sanctioned for breaking it*" (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

The point this 5SM MP is trying to make is evident. Germany and some other member-states do not follow their own European Union rules (Maniero, 11 January 2021). The populists believe this is not fair to Italy, and basically question why they are not able to do the same thing to benefit their country's economy. In fact, Maniero (who being an MP also speaks for his party) insists that the 5SM's sovereignist positions are mostly a defensive reaction and if it was not for these economic tensions and "dog eat dog" competition within the EU (Germany and other member-states are held accountable) we would instead be speaking of "*true Europeanism*" (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

"*A true Europeanist would say that Italy should participate to the experiment of the EU only if it's a place that guarantees peace, prosperity, social justice, and a common economic policy and doesn't sacrifice some countries for others. LIMES[122] foresees the breakup of the EU by 2023... of course we had a pandemic, but this is still a concrete take on the matter…*" (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

Since Maniero speaks of a possible EU break-up in the near future (something his former allies from the League, and Le Pen's French populists possibly still yearn for) he views a return to sovereignism in the form of economic (rather than cultural) nationalism as a possibility for Italy (Maniero, 11 January 2021). While in conversation with him, I get the suspicion that he himself does not really the believe the EU is reformable and that he is a closet EU-rejectionist but cannot say so as openly as he would like. In a way, he echoes the words of his old boss Di Maio who had said convincingly that "sovereignism is the future of Europe" (Lombardo, 2019). In any case, Maniero's populism and sovereignism are clearly exhibited as a defensive rather than offensive

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[121] On 5 May 2020, the German Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe (BVerfG in German) inquired the conditions under which the ECB brought forward a Public Sector Purchase Programme (PSPP) - essentially Quantitative Easing. This put the Germans somewhat at odds with the Court of Justice of the European Union.

[122] LIMES is an extremely popular Italian magazine treating current affairs (mainly geo-politics) that has existed since 1993.

stance, they are a response, a reaction, or a backlash towards something that appears to no longer be functional. The most contentious (and presumably most interesting) aspect of our conversation is the part where this MP tells me a brief story relating to a past work experience. Maniero reminisces how when meeting with his German "colleagues" (he had a role in various commissions and delegations relating to banking, finance, and the EU Council) he and another League MP (the post-Keynesian and anti- austerity economist Alberto Bagnai) confronted the Germans with the fact that they were not respecting surplus/export regulation (hence accordingly had no right to challenge Italy on its fiscal deficit/GDP relational figures). As he recalls, as a result of their complaint the Germans all laughed and dismissed their point, telling Maniero and the other Italian politicians present that there was no way Germany could ever instruct its highly productive and competitive industries to stop producing and not sell their surplus product. Therefore, "*This not favourable to our economy, they are sovereign, they are sovereignists*" Maniero reminds me (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

It is the internecine ultra-competitive struggle between distinct EU countries with dissimilar markets that Maniero complains about (Maniero, 11 January 2021). Obviously, the EU's "elitist bureaucrats" that come up with all these regulations in the first place are the main problem for the 5SM MP (Maniero, 11 January 2021). Sovereignism is merely a response to those (elites) who in one way or the other are "anti-Italian". This following passage I have translated should shed some more light on the theme of sovereignism:

"*Of course, there are several that limit us and strangle our country* (he is referring to powerful external forces/elites)…*for example when we are in dire need of public investment but we are bound by a set of rules and we can't do so or when we are in dire need of supporting the productivity and capacity of consumption of families not only for mandatory social motives but also for purely economic ones (bound to domestic demand which is the 'flywheel' also for production demand together with public investment and the role of the state) but we still cannot do so because of a whole systemic organisation of rules that that prevents us from acting (ever since the European fiscal apparatus has been put in place thirty years ago from Maastricht Italy has been constrained by convergence and unable to do anything) then at that point I will have to identify an enemy that is lethal for the country. If you have to spend and invest but you have a system of rules that says you need to cut and restrict - for instance the Recovery Fund is presented by the press like a cart full of money (209 billion) but is instead - if you read on the decision taken by the EU Council on 23 July - something constructed to have us respect norms at any given cost (there are country-specific references too) in order to obtain the mythical Recovery Fund money. The recommendations the Commission makes to specific countries are ones where they tell you to reform pensions (which*

means cutting them), cut nominal expense by six percent, and cut, cut, cut, cut because in fact they are all austerity measures" (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

Maniero uses the strong word "*strangle*" to describe what is happening to Italy by the hand of its perennial opponents in Brussels and Strasbourg. He is not only the most Eurosceptic of the ten MPs I have interviewed for this project but also the one with the most cogent anti-EU narrative. His populism is almost entirely economic (Maniero, 11 January 2021). Therefore, so is his nationalistic sovereignism. Some of the abstractions he mentions that would be ideal for Europe such as "peace", "prosperity", "social justice" - similarly to his Senate colleague MP Coltorti - have a staunchly left-wing, socialist (and social-populist) undertone to them (Maniero, 11 January 2021). By addressing "*true Europeanism*" he makes it clear he does not despise Europe but wants a Europe that works for everyone (Maniero, 11 January 2021). His sovereignism and anti-globalist logic has nothing to do with immigration but has all to do with being sceptical of foreign influence and especially of foreign elites pursuing the interests of more affluent and influential countries.

What strikes the most, is the tone of missed opportunity that Maniero has during the interview, he protests about EU parameters but also admits that (this was just before Conte's appointment as party leader) the 5SM is "*completely off-route, we don't even have a political leader, we have Vito Crimi MP ad interim for a year, but he is also the leader of the Guarantee Committee, so it is conditional*" (Maniero, 11 January 2021). Maniero sounds like he wants the party to return to its historic electoral highs (e.g. 2013, 2018) and almost explicitly points out that this can only be achieved by bringing back the party to its original more radical and perhaps even anti-systemic stances. The distrust for Europe, and the will to re-negotiate Italy's position within Europe is overarching, and most leghisti would agree with him. Under some aspects, Maniero could very well be a League politician rather than an 5SM one. Either way, Maniero's words furtherly reflect the fact that populism is usually about state-spending and redistribution, even more so when it is a *social-populism* of the left that puts public investment before low taxation and balanced budgets.

Maniero, being an old school *grillino*, is clearly a big fan of state investment. The 5SM might very well be a big-tent party where distinct views cohabit and compete with each other, but what essentially all *grillini* will agree on is that Keynesian economics are a necessity. Then again, whilst it is known he would like to be freed by EU *diktats* and have the Italian state spend more, the full-extent of his statist interventionism remains somewhat still vague. More importantly though, Maniero, much like all the others from his party but the *leghisti* aswell (let us think of Borghi and Panza alone) are not content with being told by supra-national institutions what their fiscal policy should be, even if ultimately they differ ideationally on what role the state should have. For instance,

the *leghisti* prefer "liberal-protectionist" (low taxes and deregulation for smaller business, but higher taxation for multinationals with the occasional protectionism in times of crisis) and counter-cyclical economic policy and are less statist than the 5SM, however both agree that it shoul not be the EU to decide on Italy's economy but a popularly elected sovereign government by itself. Yet, in parliament, apart from minor intra-party defections, both parties have not always voted against the accepting European money[123] (e.g. *NRRP[124]*) so unless they return to their old fully Eurosceptic positions then it is useless, not credible, and likely even hypocritical to complain about processes and standards Italy voluntarily signed up to.

If the 5SM's sovereignism is predominantly *popular* and *economic*, with a taint of territorial sovereignism too (as the 5SM occasionally opposed the left's liberal immigration practices) the League's is all of those things but with an added value - *cultural sovereignism*. We could also say that blending all of those factors (a sovereignism that is popular, economic, and territorial) is what makes the League's sovereignism *cultural* overall. A party that has always been about territory - especially in the past when Bossi in some way re-appropriated the "*Blut und Boden*" slogan of national socialism (rather than Italian fascism) but de-contextualising it and in a way "de-radicalising" it by not extending its design to totalitarian statism but rather mixing it with anti-statist popular libertarianism - cannot but be culturally attached to the idea of *nation*. That is if *nation* is understood as a "changing, evolving, modern construct that is brought into being by nationalism, and not the other way around" – if we stick to the late Eric Hobsbawm's (2013) definiton. The nation is in a way living and dynamic organism (those are also the words that the League's Veneto Regional Council President, Roberto Ciambetti, uses to describe his party) that can be subject to change (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). While in Bossi's Northern League the nation was identified with the myth of *Padania* Salvini's "national League" believes in a large, united, federal (with an emphasis on regional identity, local traditions and economies) and sovereign Italian nation-state.

In conversation with the renown leghista Roberto Ciambetti, I was able to extract the type of sovereignist sub-ideology we are dealing with when it comes to right-wing Italian populism. Ciambetti supplies me with his very own interpretation of the word/idea of sovereignism, whom he traces back to definitions given by the long-standing Italian (since the 16th century) intellectual institution *Accademia della Crusca* (Academy of the Crusca) (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). First, he correlates this ideal to a political position that re-claims the *national sovereignty* of single states,

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[123] It must be noted though that 13 5SM representatives in the Italian lower house of Parliament voted against the European Stability Mechanism in December 2020. To no surprise, Maniero MP was among those.

[124] National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

which contrasts with globalist ideologies where supra-national organism such as the EU need to regularly be consulted before pursuing national matters (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). Second, he refers to sovereignism as a political position that restores *popular sovereignty* – therefore respecting any electoral result regardless of the opinions of unelected bodies (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022).

All in all, Ciambetti, just like any other League spokesman, possibly supports a populist sovereignism because by having more administrative-political independence from the European Union regional councillors and leaders can also gradually obtain more autonomy and de-centralisation from the Italian state. Such a political pursuit, is sometimes more in line with the older Northern League rather than Salvini's new League. As this interviewee is from the Veneto region in the Italian north (where he occupies an important party position) he is perhaps more loyal to Regional Governor Zaia's party faction and certainly dedicated to the protection of local and *regional* day-to-day administrative interests rather than someone who belongs to Salvini's "magic circle of trust". After all, Salvini appears to be more occupied with a perpetual *national* electoral campaign (door-to-door and on social media) to fully nationalise the League and bring it from Milan to Palermo through Florence, Rome and Naples.

Ciambetti mentions the Italian anti-left and anti-elite theorist Luca Ricolfi but at the same time the Mexican leftist essayist Paco Ignacio Taibo II as inspirers to the League's sovereignist (but above all populist) doctrine. He opposes the EU on the grounds that not only it has an overly bureaucratic setting but also because it is "*submitted to the will of financial elites*" and lacks that "*vital breath*" which to him are brought by "*tradition*", "*culture*", "*sentiment*" and "*religious faith*" (he explicitly mentions *Christianity*) which should be the unifying traits that make Europe (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). Hence, it is evident that the League's sovereignism (somewhat different to the 5SM's one apparent in Maniero's discourse) takes a socially conservative twist and being the League a party of *territory* - with a "*rooting in the Northern regions…Lombardy, Veneto and Friuli*" according to Ciambetti - regardless of who it is led by (Bossi, Maroni, Salvini) this sub-ideology will always be intertwined with that of romantic nationalism (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). Not so much "*Blut und Boden*" (as mentioned earlier Bossi's League was more ethno-centric) but rather "*Volk und Boden*" ("people and territory").

The current League can be summarised as a party that engages with a populist-sovereignist discourse and doctrine and that approaches the politics of the res publica with a people-centric producerist mentality. In fact, during our interview, Ciambetti has also explained (socio-economically) why in his view the League differentiates itself from other parties like the Democratic Party and 5SM: " '*leghismo' is widespread in areas characterised by an economic*

fabric of small and medium enterprises that is interlaced with the agricultural economy, a territory that has strong social values and concrete solidarity, decidedly anchored to the traditions of which the League serves the needs and aspirations" (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022).

Producerism: "There are entrepreneurs that have created great businesses without having ever obtained a degree or belonging to the upper class"

As already established in prior segments of this contribution, populists have a *producerist* mentality. They tend to distinguish not only between *the elite* and *the people*, where the first is a "small and illegitimately powerful group" and the second is "large and powerless" (De Cleen et al., 2020:152) but also between working people and the unemployed, *the producers* and *the un-productive* (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019 :1-28). While there are populisms, particularly on the left - as we have seen throughout Latin American history (but lately also in Europe) - that sell their political message to the marginalised and disgruntled unemployed, the reality is that populists also balance this message of "social justice" with one of *semi-dirigiste* capitalism (Cattani, 2016). The producerist message, when ideologically convenient or electorally viable may result in a purely dialectic - as populists will rarely ever push forward policy that will financially harm vulnerable groups, quite the opposite - form of hostility towards state-benefits recipients.

In Italy, this is all too common, since the League, encapsulates the narrative where the grand "producers" (especially in the richer Northern provinces) are hard-working taxpayers for which the inefficient (at best) or corrupt (at worst) state does little or nothing. While none of the politicians I have interviewed from the League or from the 5SM have used derogatory, or exclusivist language a moderately reformulated type of producerism could be found at the base of their monologic communication.

"*We agreed on fiscal reduction with the 5SM too, lowering taxes and all that has always been a priority for us leghisti, cutting the red tape, our system is a killer for those entrepreneurs and businesses that wish to be competitive, they just cannot do it*" (De Biasio, 20 August 2020).

Those are the words of the League's coordinator in Argentina, De Biasio. "Cutting the red tape" is an idiom that most liberal-conservatives and right-wing populists would use to describe their deregulatory approach towards excessive state norms or bureaucracy. As Albertazzi's and McDonnell's 2015 study - concerning liberal-populists like the Swiss SVP or simply liberals (centre-right "*liberali*" in Italian) with populist attitudes like the PDL alliance and old *Lega Nord* -

has shown the political right tends to focus on economic deregulation/liberalisation and actually often speaks of "cutting the red tape" in their party programs. All things considered, the difference between liberal-conservatives and populists of the right seems to be that the latter in their adversity towards state regulation will use more inimical language to express their dissent. Apart from the fact you will never hear characters from the European "high-right" (well-educated, conservative, and elitist) like Ursula Von Der Leyen or Valéry Giscard d'Estaing long before her, speak of a criminal or "killer state" as De Biasio (in all legitimacy of opinion) calls it, some right-wing populists may else include in their agendas policies that are more markedly anti-taxation. The League's *Flat Tax* but also animosity towards taxation of entrepreneurial businesses in general are an example of this.

This is where producerism comes in after all, the entrepreneurs who own small and medium businesses are viewed as "good", "honest" and "hard-working" people who should not be chased down from the state and forced to pay a large part of their earnings to keep food on the table for the "lazy", the "work-shy", and the "welfare scroungers". After all, it was De Biasio's party head Salvini who envisioning a post-EU, low-tax and business-friendly (but still ethno-culturally homogenous) future Italy asked the country to become the "motor of the European renaissance" and called for the EU to "look to the future, reduce foolish bureaucracy and save itself" (Salvini, RTL 102.5, Twitter, 10 January 2019; YouTube, 21 May 2019 as cited in Maccaferri and Newth, 2022: 13). This futuristic vision of Salvini is somewhat still paradoxically attached to a nostalgic idea of a mythologised (pre-Maastricht Treaty) past. In the *leghisti*'s view, the small and medium business owners - to whom Salvini has promised (in 2019) "VAT in Italy will not rise by a single cent" - and the artisans, farmers, and fishermen in the Northern Italian heartland have supposedly not always been victims of the oppressive centralised-statist system (Redazione ANSA, 15 May 2019; Maccaferri and Newth 2022: 13). It is modernity and modern (globalised) turbo-capitalist society supported by liberal, social democratic and socialist elites that is to blame. At this point, however, a reader may be asking himself whether there is no difference between the traditional Right and right-wing populists and whether they are both free-market capitalists? Fortunately, my conversation with De Biasio provides an answer to this question. In fact, he tells me

"*I always say – in the last century, capitalism (or at least how it was conceived) use to be a producerist and productivist capitalism. It used to be national. Now, it has transformed itself in a form of financial(-ised) capitalism*" (De Biasio, 20 August 2020).

From this statement, one can already deduce what type of capitalism the *leghisti* support. It is a national-capitalism (rather than national-socialism or socialist-nationalism) that populist parties occupying the political space of the so-called "radical right" (a space that exists between right-wing

moderates and right-wing extremists) that the League aspires to. That means a homogenous society of Italian producers, deregulation, low-taxation, *laissez faire* economics but only until the state must intervene (*dirigisme*) to protect smaller business against the monopolies of the big and powerful (e.g. "*anti-trust*"/*competition laws* were Bossi's favourites).

Protectionism can only be justified on the basis of the "Italians first" approach that Salvini has taken, such as when "alien products" from "alien markets" interfere with cost of production, general prices, and exacerbates unfair competition. The economic program of the national-populists from the League must obviously be understood in the context that it is dependent on the whims of its support-base and the generic *zeitgeist* of the country. If there is a recession, then the response is to lower taxes for Italian smaller corporations (*not* larger enterprises) but at the same time avoid cutting public services exorbitantly as those who favour austerity would. During and shortly after the crisis, and with the infiltration of cheaper foreign products, the leghisti have become even more inclined to support protectionist measures (Cattani, 2016). It is likely that when things are looking brighter economically, the producerist message turns into a full-scale capitalist (*laissez faire*) one. In fact, in wealthier northern-European countries rightist populists in fact tend to not favour state intervention at all. What distinguishes the League's populistic producerist message from other parties on the conservative right that are not populist at all or less populist - like Meloni's FdI - is that the latter always promote a mixed economy (not mainly during a crisis for strategic purposes) and as they have only recently evolved from being a neo-fascist party they may even still be advocates of a typically Italian "destra sociale" ("social-*ist* right") and a Mussolinean "*stato sociale*" (a partially social-*ist* state). To be sure, much more recently[125], the leader of Brothers of Italy (FdI) party, Giorgia Meloni, explicitly highlighted that with *certain* populist parties (for some reason she cited the Germans from the AFD as a specific example) "there are insormountable differences" (*Il Foglio*, 5 January 2024). In any case, returning to the League's above-mentioned "support-base", the *leghista* MEP Alessandro Panza shares a definitely biased (yet relevant) view of them that can be traced back to the idea of rural entrepreneurship and producerism:

"*With the League's electorate one has the perception of dealing with an interlocutor that speaks a language that is comprehensible and pragmatic, without falling into the 'qualunquismo' of anti-politics and rhetoric*" (Panza, 11 May 2021).

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[125] Please note: the first passage written about Meloni's party (FdI) was included in this thesis in the first/early version, thus the conceptual logic of the statement I made needs to be understood within the sphere of the Italian political context before she became Prime Minister officially in the late October of 2022. Only after becoming Italian Prime Minister did Meloni considerably divert her political and economic positions to mainstream fully right-wing and fully capitalist/liberal ones. However, some authors argue this was a much more gradual change (see Andriola, 2020).

Panza here wants to convey a favourable impression of the League's supporters. I get the impression he wants to sell the idea that the leghisti are not merely angered, disengaged, and decadent *populists* (he uses the word "*qualunquismo*" which in Italian is essentially the same) but hard-working people from the lower classes and financially stable middle-class individuals with an entrepreneurial spirit. The goal of this statement is to cast away the stereotype of the "*lumpenproletariat*" populist voter. He claims the *leghisti* are "pragmatic" and speak comprehensibly (Panza, 11 May 2021), presenting them as the common-sense working voters that Salvini requires to have his "revolution of common sense" take shape. In essence, people/citizens who just want to pay lower taxes, keep producing solid Italian/Northern products and proceed with their daily affairs.

The truth is likely to lie half-way, given several years of research and statistical evidence have pointed out that right-wing populist electorates are usually mixed (see Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Giacobini 2019; Di Vico, 2021). Globally, they are composed of both frustrated and angered "have-nots" (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 1) completely disengaged from mainstream parties, and the "have's" who are neither destitute nor desperate but just have the ambition to keep their middle class social position secured in a time of economic insecurity and cultural instability (e.g. changing values) (Goodwin, 2023). All things considered, Panza would agree with his party colleague De Biasio who shows to have a similar perception of this "positive (entrepreneurial) populism": "*There are entrepreneurs who have created great businesses without having ever obtained a degree or belonging to the upper class*" (De Biasio, 20 August 2020). Case in point, De Biasio has a very clear view of what type of producer-oriented anti-finance (if the League was an American party one would define it as pro-*High street* and anti-*Wall Street*) populist economy he wants:

"*Today, financial institutions or some individuals, can just press a button and decide to bring down a whole business with great 'nonchalance', or even a corporation with hundred years of history in which its labourers have poured sweat to create, build, and take forward, and this in a way reflects the contemporary failure of globalised capitalism. Remember Lehman Brothers? That failure represents the loss of connection between a capitalist economy and a producerist community. The Bilderberg Group want this. It's in their interest. This is a globalist form of capitalism that has no interest in people and their identities. Identities give people strength and culture, but they don't want that, they just want to create a basic system where we have to accept their 'diktats' and conform to their society*" (De Biasio, 20 August 2020).

There is no doubt that De Biasio - born and raised as an independentist and in the Veneto region before moving to work for his party in Argentina - is a steadfast anti-elitist and anti-establishment

populist. His words, his style, and his overall character are those of a "man of a street", a *leghista* "*duro e puro*" ("pure heart") that knows what he wants and knows how to articulate it with confidence and genuineness. There are certainly elements of his narrative and vision that are more ambiguous and less transparent though. For instance, when he mentions the Bilderberg Group unfortunately our conversation does not allow us to go into specifics about what he means and how exactly those elites are conspiring against common men like him and other League supporters. However, this is not the key point of our interview, given what is much more important in this section is to focus on the producerist rather than anti-elitist element of his narrative. The two are of course closely connected (as EU elites with their "*diktats*" are always the first to be blamed for turning capitalism into pure financial technocratic-authoritarianism) but what is certainly evident more than anything is that De Biasio, like Panza or Borghi and many other League members are not in any way anti-capitalists in the strict sense of the term. As right-wing populists, they support capitalism, they just critique the borderless/rootless, speculative, darker side of it that can be traced to the current era of "profit fetishism in the age of finance capital" as the sociologist Dan Krier (2009), from Iowa State University, would call it.

Accordingly, this is the type of inhumane capitalism and market economy that has very little to do with human capital and production of tangible wealth or goods. Not by chance, he mentions the popular investment bank that failed in 2008, Lehman Brothers. *History*, *sweated labour*, and *people*, are also three things De Biasio mentions to me that reflect the real soul of producerist populism. They also might remind the more knowledgeable that they are essentially the same things that Sir Oswald Mosley (notorious British Fascist but also 6th Baronet) brought attention to when inciting his crowds who before being black-shirts were factory workers, miners, farmers, and small tradesmen. If populism and fascism have something in common, it is their aversion to modern capitalism. This trait of similarity has been present ever since Joseph ("Joe") Chamberlain's times, since in the mid-to-late 19th century the British statesman was already speaking in favour of a more authoritarian state capitalism that included protectionist measures on trade and gradual autarky (see Malu 2017:19-27; Zebel 1967:131-157).

Perhaps, being a party originating from the left, the 5SM is even more averse to modern capitalism than the League. Having said that, it was neither possible nor realistic to find any trace of perceptible producerist messages in interviews with its political representatives. As I have noted before, left-wing populists principally focus on other issues like environmentalism, healthcare, women's rights, and social justice and not all of these parties detain a morphology that allows them to celebrate a producerist community pitting it against "the parasites" and "leeches". To conclude

this TCA section, I shall leave the reader with one more quote from League MEP Panza which perfectly embodies the pro-small business, people-centric, current Eurosceptic populist spirit:

"*We need to return to a concept of European community, where states, or better, macro-regional areas, find an agreement on specific competences to be more responsive towards the global market, the EU cannot expect to legislate on everything as this results in a bureaucratic clog that slows down decision-making and complicates the life of citizens and businesses.*" (Panza, 11 May 2021).

Reformism: "There are those who want to destroy the whole system, but we believe it only needs to be modified."

In accordance with anticipated outcomes, the reformist vein of the two populist parties has revealed itself during the interviews. Both League and 5SM are parties that work within a democratic framework (even if they might challenge the most liberal aspects of the Italian constitution) and their commitment to change is a natural inclination to do with the "substantive core concepts" (as Edmund Neill, 2021:12 calls them) of their ideology. As such, radical reform is not the same as radical revolution (Nielsen, 1971: 271-295). Among the aspects that require change League and 5SM politicians include four things: *Immigration*, *Taxation*, *Welfare*, and the *European Union*. Interestingly, one League MP - Silvia Covolo - even admitted that the populist coalition was never a purely strategic move to fill positions of power but rather an occurrence where "*both parties took great responsibility in accepting the request by the 'Head of State'* (President of the Republic) *to form a government and avoid an anticipated vote just after the 2018 election...this was about converging on some of the urgent reforms for the country*" (Covolo, 18 October, 2021). Starting with immigration reform, we already know how much attention the populists gave to this (sometimes divisive) key issue. Hence, best to start directly with a quote from an interview session with a League representative:

"*We agreed with the 5SM that it was necessary to block illegal immigration but permit legal immigration which is possible in Italy and is currently being disfavoured by those who enter illegally through our seaports. Here in Argentina, we are helping Argentine fourth generation migrants - who speak Italian fluently (they don't just have citizenship but actually speak Italian), worked in Italian-Argentinian associations, love our country, and were brought up living and breathing 'Italianess' - to return to Italy*" (De Biasio, 20 August 2020).

Apparently, it can be seen through a serious reading of the quotation above, that the populists have a reformist and non-extremist position on immigration. The *leghista* De Biasio draws a parallel

between a positive, fair, and legal form of immigration and a negative, unfair and illegal one. De Biasio, who and lives in Argentina and works there to establish networks between the League and Argentines of Italian origin, manifests a typical national-populist or conservative-populist view on the matter. The parameters for exclusion regarding those who enter the country *via* non-permitted sea-routes (unwelcomed as they are part of an "out-group") are based on cultural background and language rather than ethnicity (which appears to not be a relevant factor here). Argentine-born Italians are necessarily welcomed as being part of the populist "in-group" given they are not only ethnically Italian but more importantly share the same language, culture, and potentially religion as the nation-state that would be hosting them. As such, populistically speaking, it makes sense for De Biasio and his party to support controlled legal immigration if those coming in are viewed as being part of the homogenous "in-group" of people. In other words, here fourth-generation Argentine-Italians in Argentina are perceived as fully Italian (but not for motives to do purely with ethnicity) and therefore should be given a chance to enter legally whilst economic migrants from elsewhere are not Italian and they have no place in the country.

This particular viewpoint can be classified as not being "extremist" if compared to that of extreme-right parties who want closed borders for all and have *zero tolerance* for almost any form of immigration. Nonetheless, one may argue that even if ethnicity does not transpire (at least evidently) as a pertinent element for immigration reform and populist policy-making when assessing entry (in contrast to *language* and the *legality* factors) the mere fact that culture (which likely includes religion even if De Biasio does not mention it) and language are instead particularly relevant may put populism at odds with the maximalist, universalistic, and individualistic axioms of liberal ideology – which is at the heart of the philosophical programming of the moderate right and moderate left. On the other hand, it does not put populists at odds with democracy itself as the sovereignty principle (understood to be inherently democratic itself) entails that any government of any nation is entitled to decide who is allowed within its borders (Rampini, La7 Attualità, *PiazzaPulita* 2017).

The politically-opportunistic "marriage of convenience" theory that Italian media (see Boldi, 2019) and scholarship have put forward (see Angelucci et al., 2019; for a critique see also Georgiadou and Mavroupoulou, 2020) about the populist coalition reveals itself to be just short of surreal when confronted with the actual views of those who were at the centre-stage of that strange event. The League's MP Covolo assures me about the thematic convergence between her right-wing populist party and the socialistic populists from the 5SM:

"*I remember a great emphasis on the Flat Tax*[126]*, the scrapping of the Fornero Law*[127] *in terms of pensions, and the struggle against illegal immigration. I believe that on the Flat Tax for autonomous workers (with revenue limit at 65.000 euros) and on 'quota 100'*[128] *we were perfectly in tune, at least during the Conte I*[129]*"* (Covolo, 11 October 2021).

Covolo's list regarding taxes and welfare gives us an idea of how close the two parties actually were on the most relevant topics affecting the country. In truth, the League's and 5SM's differences in approach towards other things such as environment and judiciary reform appear minor when confronted with the generic reformist outlook concerning the immediate economy and state distribution of resources. If by "immediate economy" and "state distribution", we mean taxation, pension schemes, and welfare provisions then in mid-2018 both populist of the right and of the left shared a mutual perspective. We already knew that one of the League's primary concerns (apart from immigration) was lowering taxes and introducing a non-progressive *Flat Tax*.

The 5SM, which was never as economically "liberal" as the League, was also convinced that the call to lower taxes (even if at odds with other components of their welfarist agenda) was a good electoral-strategic move to consolidate power. Eventually this led them to accept a large part of the League's *Flat Tax* proposal (two fixed rates at *15%* and *20%*) even if it eventually was not fully approved in time. In regard to the infamous "Fornero Law" both parties happily repealed and replaced it with their populistic "*Quota 100*". The main ideological driving force against the older pension scheme was that it basically obstacled the creation of young entrepreneurship in a country where youth unemployment was already high. Populists have always been highly sceptical of ultra-capitalist policies that required people to work until a very old age making it harder for them to enjoy the benefits of their hard-sweated labour. Obviously, this behavioural approach too can be considered part of the people-centric populist repertoire.

Similarly, the League knew that a reform of welfare benefits that took shape as the "*Reddito di Cittadinanza*" was a necessary evil in a country that had far too many people unemployed and

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[126] A *Flat Tax* is a non-progressive form of taxation with a fixed-rate taxable amount. It is supported by Salvini (who proposes two rates –"*aliquote fisse*"- instead) and most of the centre-right alliance.

[127] This law was set up by Elsa Fornero (one of Mario Monti's associates) as part of the "Save Italy" reform package in late 2011. It raises the retirement age to 66. Populists have strongly disputed it.

[128] "Quota 100" is the populist's alternative to the Fornero Law, League and 5SM want public-sector Italians to be able to retire by the age of 62 (instead of 66) if they have been paying taxes for 38 years.

[129] A name given (usually by the media, but now also in academia) to the first Giuseppe Conte led government (June 2018- September 2019) where he was appointed as PM by Salvini and Di Maio. Conte, an 5SM affiliate, after replacing the League also governed alongside the Democratic Party - this became known as "Conte II" - and remained in power until February 2021.

where there had been an increase of those living in conditions of extreme poverty. Given it was technically "workfare" rather than just "welfare" oriented - meaning that those who obtained the "Citizen's Income" were obliged by the scheme to look for work – Salvini's party helped the 5SM follow through with it in the hope that it would not be perceived as a complete "degeneracy of welfarism" ("*assistenzialismo*" in Italian) or "dependency culture" measure by their centre-right allies (FI! and FdI). In any case, they did not have much choice on the matter; if the 2018 populist coalition was going to be successful in terms of formalisation and operationalisation both parties would have to make concessions to each other. Covolo MP also acknowledges that League and 5SM got along because of their anti-financial world stances; "*we were both in harmony when it came to helping out those savers who were scammed by banks, we introduced a new institution – Fondo Indennizzi Risparmiatori*[130]" ("The Savers Indemnity Fund") (Covolo, 11 October 2021).

However, it was apparently on the reform of the European Union and its institutions that the populists got along the mos. In truth, the League and 5SM have slightly different opinions on the possible future direction of the EU. The first, intend to renegotiate the main treaties to return to a pre-Maastricht economic community, the second hope for a parallel integration process that is more horizontal, egalitarian and solidaristic (less market-focused) towards its citizens. Nonetheless, in 2018 it was easy for the populists to align their interests for reform and work together to re-negotiate with the EU over its budget-spending plans. The main populist argument when fighting the EU over deficit rules was of course that other countries like Germany, France and Spain have all breached the eurozone related norms with little to no consequences (basically Maniero's argument earlier).

That being said, as the interviews confirmed, the struggle of "populist Italy" vs the "elitist/neo-liberal EU" over the *DEF*[131] (fiscal deficit/GDP) was not enough for the relationship with the European Union to be damaged forever. Throughout the years, Salvini has changed his mind more than once on the EU question. So have the *grillini*. Both parties once in charge never delivered on their EU-referendum promise. The leader of the *leghisti* went from saying "the EU is not reformable; we must leave now!" (Salvini, 9-10 December 2014) to adopting a more pragmatic *realpolitik* strategy and promising that "if the alliance between us and the 5SM is formalised than it will be necessary to re-negotiate EU-treaties" (Salvini as cited in Adinolfi 2019: 115, 124). Hence, what were once purely revolutionary stances became merely reformist with time. Evidently, De Biasio is

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[130] An institution set up by the populists to help reimburse all Italian citizens who have been subjected unjustly by banks to a Compulsory Administrative Liquidation (my translation from Liquidazione Coatta Amministrativa).

[131] *Documento Economia e Finanza*/Economy and Finance Document (DEF)

being honest when he tells me "*there are those who want to destroy the whole system, but we believe it only needs to be modified* " (De Biasio, 20 August 2020).

Populist reformism maintains a strong character though, one that still antagonises and delegitimises its rivals. For instance, during a meeting with Marine Le Pen at the *Ugl*[132] in Rome Salvini loudly exclaimed that "We (the populists) are Europe, the Anti-Europeans are Juncker and Moscovici" (Adinolfi, 2019: 128; *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 8 October 2018). Ultimately, the hope is that the populists can obtain an absolute majority in the EU Parliament (through EU elections every four years) and as a result be represented in the most important decision-making organisms such as the European Commission and Council or even the ECB perhaps. This would be the only way for them to push forward policies that will be in touch with popular feeling. Cutting down bureaucracy for average businesses, cutting down on immigration, re-distribute migrants by scrapping the Dublin Treaty in almost its entirety, and give the EU Parliament more legislative power whilst taking power away from the (mostly un-elected) Council and Commission – those are all populist priorities at the EU-level.

The reformist vision of a "Europe of the Peoples" and the sudden change of heart - meaning that they do not wish to leave the bloc anymore - can be summarised by the quotes of two MPs that have given me their view on the matter, one belonging to the League and the other to the 5SM:

"*I think Europe has changed a lot more than we have, just think of austerity politics, they did nothing but prove to people that the League had been right for years in saying that with this kind of policy one could simply not obtain growth. Any repentance* (by the EU) *cannot but be viewed positively. The League has always promoted the idea of a "Europe of the Peoples" as a foundation with which this Union* (the EU) *can be reborn and re-strengthened to compete at a global level* " (Panza, League, 11 May 2021).

"*We need to reconsider European policy that must become one of solidarity and support. It also needs to be expansive and divert course from the politics of 'balanced budget' that repress the best tendencies within a country*" (Coltorti, 5SM, 25 May 2021).

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[132] *Ugl* stands for "*Unione Generale Del Lavoro*" and is a right-wing trade union based in Rome. It is the heir to the older *CISNAL* (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Nazionali Lavoratori) which was affiliated to the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI).

Direct Democracy: "We risk creating a society where the citizen gradually disappears"

Direct democracy needs to primarily be understood as a "politics of faith" (that Oakeshott juxtaposes to "politics of scepticism", see Oakeshott, 1996) and the populace's request for radical change and renewal of the structures of governance. In the words of Sir Oswald Mosley (a fascist with populistic tendencies) and a self-proclaimed defender of the interests of the "popular classes"- the revolution required going "through and again but beyond the failure of men and of parties" (Mosley Records, 2022, YouTube). In other words, the working classes (especially those who worked nation-wide to manufacture English steel and iron) were to rise against the evils of traditional parties (kept hostage by the will of big capitalists and international finance) to defeat "particracy" once and for all and establish a direct/referendum democracy (see The Vindex, 2020; see Massacra, 2020).

To begin with, some of the conversations I had with politicians from League and 5SM highlighted the aspect of populism that concerns their particularistic (and of course majoritarian) view of democracy. In fact, League MP Silvia Covolo (11 October 2021) candidly tells me that to her (and supposedly to most *leghisti*) *democracy* simply means "*representing the needs of those who expressed themselves with a vote when they cannot participate directly through a referendum…I think our idea of democracy is 'representative' and 'participatory' when possible*" meaning that after all it is the electoral processes and voting aspect or citizen participation that mainly concerns the right-wing populists rather than other elements such as the rule of law and minority rights. Hence, for populists, the vote of a majoritarian segment of the population - reflecting their general will – is what matters the most and *must* be *directly* implemented by politicians in parliament. Accordingly, this is where representative and "participatory" democracy (direct democracy in other words) align or merge together. However, this outlook is much more direct-democratic rather than representative as it does not take into account that instruments such as referendums may only be a partial reflection of a populace's interests and result to be in conflict with or infringe the rule of law especially when it could lead to a potential discrimination against minority groups and their constitutional rights. Such a scenario especially occurs in referendums where there is *en masse* abstention of one segment of the populace in cases where they *voluntarily* (as an act of protest towards the referendum itself) or *involuntarily* (through coercion, bribes, or intimidation) decide to not participate in an important vote (for an exhaustive critique of certain referenda see Canovan, 2005: 110-113).

Interestingly, another important League representative - Roberto Ciambetti - instead draws a link between direct democracy and the interests of regional minority groups who wish to be more autonomous in terms of administrative and political decision-making in their peripheric territories (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). In a typical traditional *leghista* fashion Ciambetti blends direct democracy with the values of federalism – which (as already mentioned) has been a classic position of the party ever since its inception. More importantly, he wishes to emphasise on the difference between a *populist* and *popular* party like the League that believes in pursuing certain aspects of direct democracy and other (traditional) parties that are supposedly not as close to their voters and do not regularly pursue direct contact with them through local political activism. Ciambetti convincingly explains that "*Ours is not a 'living room' or virtual movement, nor is it an instrument at the service of elites or power groups, but rather one that lives in the people and in the territory of which it expresses needs, sentiments and aspirations including self-government*" (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022). As anticipated, during the interview he also confirms that he *does* believe in representative democracy, however like his colleague from parliament Covolo MP his ideal appears much closer to that of a partyless and direct democracy (especially as he mentions autonomous "self-government", which accordingly could be possibly functional at a small-scale local level) (Ciambetti, 2 August 2022).

Today, a significant part of the *raison d'être* of populist ideology itself is that of denouncing the elite professionalisation, bureaucratisation, cartelisation, technocratisation of political organs and society. Even if populism might appear vague, and certainly is at times, populists actually know what they want. We have already established - and have obtained further proof through interviews - that what they crave is a different version of democracy. One that is much older and essentially ancient (considering the existence of direct democracy in 6th century BC Athens), institutionally less mediated, more direct and transparent in terms of representation, and that maximises citizenship value through constant electoral practices (Pappas, 2016). The concept of popular redemption combined with the disintegration of professional parties is at the heart of the project of *populist democracy* (Mair 2002: 91). Whether it is brought about by a "saviour-leader" (the charismatic figures we already know of, who feel they can bypass parliament) who monopolises the concept *general/popular will* (and uses it against opponents) or by spontaneous protest-movements lacking formal political ties or a hierarchy is of secondary relevance. The foremost consideration is for it to be *majoritarian* (Urbinati, 2017: 579). This means that a huge portion of the population in a recognised territory recognises its numeric bearing and political weight and voluntarily attempts to form a potentially un-replaceable majority.

As already discussed, all this carries great risks and is at odds with liberal-democratic constitutionalism. Albeit, as I spoke to the Italian representatives of these two populist parties I did not get the impression I was dealing with dangerous authoritarians or sympathisers of anarchic ochlocracy. Rather, I perceived individuals (some articulate and sharp, others less) that fell under the spell of a public *zeitgeist* of renewal. Although symbolic imagery and myths aren't typical of populism - as they would be instead for more nationalist ideologies like fascism (in some cases Anthony D. Smith spoke of "ethno-symbolism", see Smith, 2009) - in this case some were present. Since populism is about popular redemption, all of them were tied to this particular idea. For instance, when discussing the 5SM and its international links, Paragone tells me

"*I don't' know if we are still inspired by other movements, but we for sure cannot deny that there is a sort of sentiment that works regardless of attachment to specific movements. 'Movementism' can be represented by the character of 'the Joker' for example or 'La Casa de Papel'. There are agents of social control that formally or informally embed and synthesise the will for redemption*" (Paragone, 7 November 2019).

The argument Paragone MP makes here is a sophisticated one. "Movementism" (translating from the Italian word "*movimentismo*") is a synonym for "street-populism" (see Hamdaoui, 2021) or protest-populism. Paragone is essentially referring to spontaneous bottom-up, informally organised, street conglomerates like *Occupy Wall Street*, the *Indignados*, the *Gilet Jaunes* or the Sardines Movement (*le Sardine*). The role those populist movements played in post-recession times is self-evident and at this point it is also self-explanatory that parties like the 5SM (and the League to a lesser degree) share a socio-cultural pedigree with them. Thus, best to focus on the second part of Paragone's statement. Amusingly, he relates populism to fictional entities like "*the Joker*" (from the Bat-Man series) or the Spanish television hit "*La Casa de Papel*" ("Money Heist" in English) because both of them represent a circumstances where the "left-behind" have pursued a revolt against an oppressive establishment.

Joker is a villain, but after all he is a villain only insofar as he uses to once be an ordinary man (a failed comedian for that matter, which might explain why Grillo once provocatively wore a *Joker* mask) who has turned to the world of crime once the system failed him (Boot, 2019). Whilst the group of robbers from "*La Casa de Papel*" who introduce themselves within the Royal Mint of Spain in popular culture can be considered as poor victims of themselves, who take hostages but also familiarise with them and do not harm them collectively. They print their own money in the Royal Mint, and also offer it to the hostages at one point, so technically they are not stealing from anyone but just getting back at the State that has not given them enough opportunities and is to

blame for people's poverty and degradation (Imperatore, 2019; Pagello 2020). Those are of course excuses to anyone with common-sense and a moral compass. However, it is true that once narratives of collectivist national-popular rebellion meet circumstances of economic deprivation and societal disaffection it makes for a powerful political cocktail. Paragone also uncoincidentally mentions "*agents of social control*" and "*redemption*" itself in trying to give shape to a populist narrative which is accordingly legitimised by the fact that political elites have completely lost their sense of reason and are emotionally detached from the problems of the austerity-hit populace. Hence, in this view, the populace has a good excuse to manifest its disgust and revolt against the system.

In the populist narrative, globalisation is usually to blame for economic inequality, uncontrolled immigration, unemployment and low birth rates. Although, populists may admit (especially left-leaning ones from the 5SM) that there are positive aspects and driving forces behind the idea of socio-cultural internationalism or so-called "inclusive globalisation" (Parenti, 2022 as cited in Minotti, 2022). It is rather economic globalisation with embedded capitalist values they have a problem with. Paragone attacks globalisation on the premise that it takes away civil rights from people and deconstructs the very *identity* of a popular collective. In extreme forms, critics of globalisation have argued that if it continues at this pace society will only be a collection of atomised, unrooted and unstable individuals such as those depicted in Michel Houellebecq's (1994; 1998; 2015; 2019) novels. He goes on to say that

"*This is what occurs exactly with globalisation, think of Kaplan's book Humans Need Not Apply and Artificial Intelligence, we risk creating a society where the citizen gradually disappears and obviously once the people lose their collective structure they won't have a will and be able to redeem themselves, they won't find meaning without their 'identitarian' elements of commonality, there just wouldn't be a people anymore*" (Paragone, 7 November 2019).

The whole statement is filled with populist motifs, words like "redeem", "identitarian", and "commonality" should all resonate to an attentive interviewer. *Identity* is at the centre of populist discourse, because not only does cultural, ethnic, religious, and class identity matter to populists (to different extents depending on the specific case), but it defines a community within a temporal and territorial space (Freeden, 2017: 4). *Commonality* is also certainly important, the features that community has in common internally allows that same community to distinguish itself from everything that is external and unknown, therefore potentially dangerous. The predominant theme remains that of direct democracy though (and redemption more generically) as it is evident that

Paragone wants to appeal to a communitarian spirit that was lost somewhere along the way during globalisation and de-politicisation but especially "de-popularisation" processes.

Paragone's fear is that gradually people will not matter anymore if policy is left to corporate and political-mainstream elites. The argument stands theoretically, as lately the state of affairs led by the impulses of those elite groups has undervalued certain aspects of democracy putting jobs and general welfare at risk by pushing for automation (Jerry Kaplan's books that Paragone mentions discuss this in-depth), offshoring of business, and encouraging practices that bring down wages such as the introduction of cheap labour and modern slavery through mass migration. Redeeming the people for Paragone means above all redeeming the "popular pillar" of democracy which in turn means giving middle- and low-income citizens a say on their lives again.

In the course of my talk with him I also found out that Paragone who was actually a Northern League mactivist/journalist in his youth - but has no trouble defining himself a "socialist" (see La7 Attualità, PiazzaPulita, 14 October 2019) - has no trouble with the identificatory "populist" label either (Paragone, 7 November 2019). He confesses that he doesn't get offended from this terminology that is often used from adversaries to denigrate those from the 5SM or League that hold strong Eurosceptic, protectionist, and anti-globalist views (Paraogone, 7 November 2019). "*It is just labelling, who has time for that anyways*" he tells me, insisting that "*You can put a label on a wine (Chianti, Barolo, etc) but if the wine isn't good it just isn't good regardless of the label*" (Paragone, 7 November 2019). This could be interpreted in such way that whether a movement is referred to "populist" or "populistic" it doesn't really matter, the ideas and policies at the core of the political agenda of the movement matter though. This is a similar view to those shared by neo-Marxist scholars mentioned in earlier segments (see Eklundh and Knott, 2020). It is the view of those who believe that populism is an *empty-signifier* at the end of the day. One that can be incorporated voluntarily or given to involuntarily (generally by the media or neoliberal opponents) but essentially it is not the populism *per se* that matters but rather the values it attaches itself to (Palonen, 2020: 60; Eklundh and Knott, 2020: 112). Implications are very different when populism is appropriated by ultra-authoritarian, xenophobic ethno-nationalists and when it is instead claimed by those who want to expand the rights of the common citizenry as well as those of ethnic and sexual minorities or cut the red tape.

Another politician, with the same anti-elitist predisposition and attachment to popular and economic sovereignty of Paragone, but who originates from the right instead of the left would be (once again) Borghi MP. This man concentrates almost all his criticism on the EU (I say "almost" as he reserved some for his former 5SM allies who "betrayed" the cause) as he answers my questions and wishes

that a renewed sovereign Italy could take matters in its own hands again. In his view, the populist conglomerate was set up to re-structure Italian democracy, and to move the country in a direction of "*change through governmental action*" (Borghi, 11 November 2019). At the core of this mindset there is of course the idea that the League can redeem the people and bring them right back into the democratic process so they can make everyday life decisions on "work", "pensions", "taxes" and "immigration" after years of austerity, a stagnant economy, unemployment and waste of state resources (Borghi, 11 November 2019). Borghi also tells me what he thinks now (in hindsight) of his considerably more leftist former allies:

"*The only affinity we once had with the 5SM (I use the past-tense because the 5SM today is no longer the party we launched a project with in 2018 but only a shipwreck) was the will to spark a revolution, at both a national and European level, notwithstanding the differences on many political themes. As we have always brough to attention last year, there would be nothing insurmountable if the awareness on both sides would have remained that only those two parties (with a soul that represents a break with the past) could have led the country in a different direction*" (Borghi, 11 November 2019).

There are a number of things that can be said about this heavily-charged statement. First of all, it is evident that like his colleague (the Argentina-based *leghista* De Biasio) Borghi blames the end of the *right-left* populist experiment entirely on the 5SM. Ironically, as already stated – it was Salvini that suddenly dropped Di Maio and the other 5SM partners only three weeks before the reduction of MPs vote was to be held in the two chambers of Parliament (Di Maio, 2021: 123). The reduction went through anyways but with League and 5SM already politically divorced. Either way, Borghi calls the current 5SM a "shipwreck" and is right to the extent that Grillo's, Di Maio's (until 2022) and Conte's party is experiencing a never-ending phase of infighting and squabbles. He also later admits (like De Biasio does and most of the other *leghisti* too) that the 5SM's vote in favour of Ursula Von Der Leyen in the EU Parliament was a "low blow" to Salvini's MPs and MEPs. The League expected the 5SM to vote for a much more populist and Eurosceptic candidate but certainly not for a woman that worked in Merkel's cabinet and is a pro-immigrant (she use to say the threat to Europe does not come from migrants but from "nationalists and populists") centrist semi-progressive liberal. Borghi seems disappointed by the fact that the 5SM turned its back on its populist vision for Italy and Europe but perhaps should have expected an early break-up given he was sceptical about the differences between the two parties namely on TAP[133], ILVA[134], TAV[135],

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[133] Trans-Adriatic-Pipeline (TAP). League and 5SM have disagreed on implementation.

"*prescrizione*"[136], Global Compact[137], and Federalism[138] (Borghi, 11 November 2019; Adinolfi 2019: 150-156).

The "*break with the past*", the "revolution" and the "*different direction*" Borghi MP is talking about is not difficult to unravel. Whoever steps into an interview with someone like Borghi or Paragone already should know that they are considerable supporters of economic sovereignty, the latter is openly a nostalgic of the old Italian currency – the background picture of his Twitter profile provocatively displays an image of his face on a *Lira* banknote (see @borghi_claudio, Twitter). In fact, his adversaries from the anti-populist left and right accuse him and his party to scare off future financial investors because of his anti-Euro positions (La7.it, *PiazzaPulita*, 6 June 2019). The radical reform (Borghi calls it "revolution"), which holds its own redemptorist populist vision, has been advocated by the League especially between 2014 and 2017 and it involves a process which is completely at odds with EU membership. There is no doubt the "less moderate" wing of the League (although Borghi denies there are different internal factions admitting only divergent individual positions) composed not by soft *Eurosceptics* and *Atlanticists* - like Giancarlo Giorgetti MP and Guglielmo Picchi MP - but by highly intellectual economists like Borghi and Bagnai, has long argued in favour of monetary sovereignty. The old plan of the League was that of re-nationalising the Bank of Italy and basically re-create pre-1981 circumstances where the state would be able to issue currency on its own accord and devalue it in order to favour export and compete with its European neighbours, namely France and Germany (Adinolfi, 2019: 117). A solution that elicits scepticism from pro-EU types given they argue it did not work out in 20th century Weimar Germany nor in current Venezuela (Adinolfi, 2019: 117).

Taking everything into account, the positions of the League's economists are more sophisticated than those of their leader who once simply dismissed the Euro as a "fake currency" (see

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[134] ILVA S.p.A is a large Italian steel company that still operates today. The positions taken by League and 5SM inrelation to ILVA have differed throughout the years.

[135] TAV is the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway project. The League has always supported it. The 5SM instead tends to oppose it.

[136] 'Prescrizione' means that after a considerable amount of time passes without a verdict on a criminal offence that same offence cannot be punishable by law anymore. The justicialist 5SM has adopted a firm position against this clause whilst the League hasn't.

[137] The United Nation's Global Compact is a pact that aims to encourage corporations worldwide to foster "sustainable"and "socially responsible" policies. The League believes Italy should refuse the Compact on the grounds that it favoursmass migration. The grillini - unlike the leghisti - approve of it.

[138] The League wants fiscal and political federalism (and more autonomy) for the Northern regions of Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna but this does not at all convince the statist and centralist 5SM – a party that has its more loyal constituencies in the Southern part of the country.

LiberoQuotidiano.it, 22 December 2013) - referring to the fact that the parameters established for Italian entrance have always been wrong (Adinolfi, 2019: 116). If Italy leaves the Euro one day, Italian populists are likely to celebrate as globalisation would bear the brunt and to them this would signify that the first step towards popular redemption and a true democracy is taken. A true democracy would be one where people's interests are put afore those of the elite but especially one where the average citizen is emancipated by making his/her own important decisions through referendums and plebiscites. In fact, the 5SM still openly promotes a *participatory democracy* - Senator Coltorti tells me - which means an almost complete re-configuration of the system of popular representation (Coltorti, 25 May 2021).

The idea seems to be that of a society where people apparently represent themselves and this would be no different from direct democracy. Coltorti clarifies to me that participation and decision-making must be extended to as many people as possible (Coltorti, 25 May 2021). The most shocking (but also incredibly honest) statement he makes as a populist ideologue is when he says that up until now direct/participatory democracy has "*only involved those with 5SM membership but it is evident that it can be extended to all citizens*" (Coltorti, 25 May 2021). Admittedly, some of the statements made by the politicians I have interviewed are undoubtedly quite generic but "pressuring" them to provide more detail (even when this is realistically feasible) on how exactly they intend to carry forward certain policies has often led nowhere useful.

It must be said, however, that the *leghisti* and *grillini* have given me a firm enough idea of what their masterplan is. In essence, in the grand scheme of things we find their attempt to change Italy's position and relationship with Europe but treat their continued involvement as an *ultimatum* given they do not intend to "die trying". The general impression they convey is that if this last effort does not work then they will abandon further attempts. Ultimately, before *Italexit* (which is actually now also the name of a new Eurosceptic party launched by Paragone) becomes a concrete proposal again, essayists like Gabriele Adinolfi who are neither hostile to the populist ascent nor fully convinced that the problem is Europe and its integration itself, will inevitably pose a rhetorical question to all of us: isn't *Italexit* unthinkable for a nation that does not have geographic ties like the *Commonwealth* and lacks primary resources? (Adinolfi, 2019).

Discussion of Interviews

A discussion regarding the existing thematic pattern between the "discursive populism" of League and 5SM can only occur with the premise that the two are obviously different parties, with a

different history, a distinct leadership-style and a separate voter-base. The more "right-wing" leghisti and the more "left-wing" grillini have certainly shared a similar set of objectives during an experimental and extremely delicate phase of their political lifeline (2018-2019) but remain independent and competing actors in the electoral arena today. Yet, given this project takes a predominantly ideational stance on a contemporary phenomenon - that goes beyond the Right vs Left debate - and dedicates its methodological framework to the deciphering of a possible common ideological profile between two parties that are mainly looked at conjointly and treated as two distant relatives from the same political family. At this particular point, it would not be necessary to reiterate on how a strong *ethos* of anti-elitism and anti-establishment practices, closes the ideological gap between rightist and leftist populists in Italy and Europe. What is necessary instead is to make some potentially conclusive points on the nature of the relationship between League and 5SM based on the developments of the interviews made and the Thematic Content Analysis that has resulted from them and found its placein the section above. I shall make four points in total, and will expand on them step-by-step.

First, "the reconstruction of the political frontier" (which according to Laclau, 2007, is *populism* itself) has anti-elitism and the other five *themes* as a focal point and therefore is the same between parties and most of the time occurs irrespective of their left-right derivatives. However, this does not mean that the message does not vary at all from left to right. It only means that this variation is marginal. In the interviews, somewhat distinctively from the manifestos (where the parties appear more similar) the ideological starting point is the ending one may be different – depending on the observer's outlook. Another way of putting it would be recognising that the League and 5SM identify the same problems at a national and European level (e.g. excessive bureaucracy, EU unaccountability, low public spending, institutional corruption, mass immigration, austerity and high taxation, etc.) but propose relatively different solutions. For example, the *leghisti* want a re-negotiation/scrapping of treaties, flat taxation and a pre-Maastricht Europe whilst the *grillini* prefer more public spending along with a more inclusive social-Europe. Overall though, the Italian state needs to be reformed, policy-making needs to pass through national Parliament but have people-centric interests at heart, and the European Union needs leave more economic freedom to sovereign nations.

That is the main message both League and 5SM want to send out. It is undeniably a populist and Euro-critical message and can be condensed in one of Salvini's statements from 2021: "we dream of a Europe that does few things but does them well, without using blackmail" (agenzia Nova, 14 October 2018). It is a simplistic but at the same time pragmatic suggestion, and therefore it

resonates with ordinary Italians that have become more sceptical of the EU ever since the recession has affected their economic condition. Based on the interviews (and perhaps the manifestos too), it seems that the majority of the 5SM group in Parliament would ambiguously agree. In this agreement, there is a potential contradiction though, whilst the *leghisti* have been coherent about the fact they want to reduce the EU's powers some *grillini* have claimed the exact opposite. Whereas Paragone (who now runs the *Italexit* party) and Maniero appear closer to the League in his critique of Europe and globalisation, those like Anonymous 5SM, Porrello, Coltorti and many others I *have not* spoken to from the 5SM insist that the real problem with Europe is not only that its interests are not aligned with those of the people (and here they agree with Salvini's party) but that the bloc is not working together enough on common policy. For example, on fiscal, judicial and environmental matters. The contradiction can be explained by the fact that the 5SM are a less cohesive group (with different caucuses[139]) than the League and is currently still struggling to give itself a clear and structured political identity - after all this is what Maniero MP has confessed to me when he said "*look, we are completely off-route we don't even have a political leader at the moment*"[140] (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

It is also true though that such a view would only be a contradiction if we do not distinguish between "theory" (idealism) and "practice" (reality). The 5SM has been disenchanted with the European Union for most of its life-cycle not because it repudiated the idea of the EU *per se* (as many *leghisti* naturally still do) but because they were convinced that Italy was not getting the appropriate treatment from the Germans and the system was rigged in its disfavour. In other words, the 5SM appreciates the hypothetical idea of having a social democratic Union that works together to improve working conditions and social rights but decides to engage in a defensive sovereignism and Euroscepticism every time it experiences resistance from Brussels and Strasbourg – in the past this resulted in temporary alliances with purer Eurosceptics both nationally (League) and internationally (UKIP). It also resulted in squabbles with the EU over budget spending, and immigration policy. That is not to say that the League does not have its own "contradictions" - I use this word rather than "divisions" because in the end the *Salviniani* within the party always have

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[139] The 5SM has always suffered from its internal divisions. In fact, the party has caucuses that are quite distinct from each other in terms of ideology and strategic way forward. In an old article I have listed the many factions that (to some degree) compete within the 5SM : (1) the institutionalists; (2) the rebels; (3) the futurist techno-populists; (4) the environmentalists; (5) the loyalists (see Varriale, 2021b: 14).

[140] This statement made in the January of 2021 when Crimi MP had been chosen to temporarily lead the 5SM (only ad interim given he was at the same time a member of the Guarantee Committee). Crimi was not seen as a unifying personality within the 5SM and his temporary rule was not even viewed as real leadership. It is for this reason that Maniero complains about him not calling (as required by the party's regulation) for an election on the Rousseau platform (which he considers "a positive example of direct democracy and transparency on the web") implicitly suggesting that Crimi was purposely delaying the process for personal gain (Maniero, 11 January 2011).

their way. In fact, far less Eurosceptic and more centrist League regional governors like Luca Zaia but mainly Massimiliano Fedriga (whom I have not had the pleasure of interviewing) have argued - just like 5SM - that Europe needs to be stronger not weaker, and its institutions need to work for an increase in integration in order to finally achieve a common industrial policy to compete globally (Il Foglio, 28 May 2022).

All in all, the populism of the 5SM is not all that different from the League's one, we just have a social-populism that is critical of how EU institutions runs things but open to negotiation on further integration and a national-populism that (at least until very recently) has been vehemently opposes most of the post-Maastricht settlements. Any critical long-term and in-depth observation of the behavioural patterns of the two parties will result in the finding that both parties are indeed Eurosceptic but to different degrees. One of the parties, the 5SM, is more hopeful that the EU can change for the better whilst the other, the League, is less hopeful and more resentful about the EU's state of affairs in general. Ultimately, both are unhappy with Europe as it is though and urgently demand significant reform.

Second, from the interviews it transpires that when the parties joined in coalition they may have not underestimated their differences but rather overestimated the possibility of commitment to purely populist values. Eventually though, *realpolitik* forced its way at the detriment of *ideology* for at least one of the parties. The eventual split - that occurred in August 2019 - was caused by a "betrayal" of populist values by the 5SM. At the heart of this betrayal was of course the vote in favour Von Der Leyen in the Euro-Parliament. This is something complicated to assess objectively though, because of the rumour is (and the justification some *leghisti* gave to the official media) that the League decided to break-up the partnership based on the fact the 5SM was not going to give them a free pass on certain policies (e.g. Flat Tax, TAV). Hence, if this would be the case - instead of the explanation given by Borghi and De Biasio in my interviews - it would mean that the 5SM stayed loyal to its initial left-wing populism *weltanschauung* which included a commitment to anti-TAP, anti-TAV and anti-capitalist positions (incompatible with the League's somewhat more capitalist approach to the economy potentially dictated by its *secondary* ideology, conservative-liberalism). Unfortunately, I myself have no conclusive answer to this.

The most logical assessment though would be the fact that neither party truly sacrificed or fully "moderated" (as Capaul and Ewert frame this circumstance in their own investigation of populists in government) its populism. Rather, the 5SM was plunging in consensus polls and becoming a weight for the League (Custodero, *la Repubblica*, 9 July 2019). A power-hungry and in that moment highly popular and successful Salvini wanted to rule alone (Cimmarusti and Gagliardi, 2019). That

being said, there is also no denying that the gradual 5SM's re-rapprochement to EU elites (e.g. Von Der Leyen vote, talks with EU Parliament's Greens and Liberals) meant the leghisti questioned their commitment to "the government of (populist) change".

Third, the Thematic Content Analysis is in its own way a demonstration that populism is flexible but not necessarily that "thin-centred" of an ideology. Lest we forget, one of Freeden's definitions where he argues that an *ideology* can be at the same time "sophisticated" and "flexible" in its "systematisation of ideas" (Freeden 1996: 124-127). After all, the interviews have presented a great degree of highly ideological material. Talks with Borghi, Coltorti, Paragone, Panza and the others have been extremely revelatory. Do left-wing and right-wing populists want the same thing? Possibly, but they have a different idea of how their goals are to be achieved. And, the "host-ideologies" which are in reality *secondary* "guest" ideologies (right-wing liberal-conservatism for the League, left-wing socialism for the 5SM) do play a role in deciphering the parties' populism into actual policy proposals. Especially, the ones relative to welfare and taxes such as the *Flat Tax* and the "Citizen's Income" but the driving force is always anti-elitism and the other five themes. This would be the rejection of elite decision-making structures, and the possibility of people-induced and people-centric change. It is a fact that populist parties want a lot more *change* than parties that are *not* populist (excluding anti-systemic fascist and communist forces).

I do not wish to completely dismiss or downplay the "thin-centred ideology" view but only encourage more work from future scholars that takes an alternatively ideational view on the matter considering the fact that there are "thick(-*er*)" elements to the populist narrative. Currently, populists in Europe are pursuing agendas that (with commonalities between populist right and populist left) have a lot more to them then just gaining economic and legislative independence from the EU. In Italy, France, and Britain, populists (regardless of their "host-ideology") are generating policies like lowering the retirement age, protectionist economic solutions, expansion of individual self-defence, and the de-involvement from military conflict (that "isn't in the national interest" – as UKIP's programme puts it, but Salvini agrees), distinctive of them. Although in countries like France where national-populists like Le Pen reach the final round of elections against centrists like Macron social-populists scorn at the idea of voting for Le Pen just as much (if not more) as voting for her opponent it is also true that about one-third of leftist-populist voters still choose the anti-establishment option. The same would be likely to happen in Italy if the electoral system was a two-round presidentialist run-off.

The interviews have also shown the relevance of "thick-populism" given politicians as different from each other as Porrello (5SM) and Panza (League) have both spoken of a democracy

(specifically "participatory" and "direct" according to the former) where "*power belongs to the people*" and where "*democracy is the expression of power that every peoples exercises in the forms and limits of the institutions at hand*" (Panza, 11 May 2021). Those may appear like regular declarations attributing a popular-republican standard to the meaning of democracy but are instead particularly and peculiarly populist because they recognise in popular sovereignty the essence of democracy. Politicians from both parties have also equally discussed making Europe freer[141] from its financial institutions (complaining of Italy's inability to spend more without facing EU disciplinary action), more equal and supportive of the middle-lower classes, as well as more competitive externally. Therefore, the "thickness" of populism should not be underestimated.

Fourth, from the interviews it becomes evident that - for both parties - there has been a shift from *hard Eurosceptcism* to *soft*(-*er*) *Euroscepticism*. As already hinted in previous paragraphs, both League and 5SM are soft-Eurosceptics but with the former engaging in a harder form of soft-Euroscepticism that is much more pessimistic (the *leghisti*'s conservative inclinations may play a role here) about further integration. Nonetheless, the withdrawal from the Euro and *Italexit* project has apparently been entirely abandoned by the parties in question. This is important because it *could* mean that the parties are very gradually becoming less populist and moving towards the centre. Although, "less populist" does not in any way mean that they are no longer populist. It is also too early to speak of a "moderation" since if we use the parameters and understanding that Capaul and Ewert give to this concept we must recognise that both parties still make use of adversary "provocation" and "blame-shifting" (Capaul and Ewert, 2021: 778). Simply put, they have shown interest in taking the path to moderation but haven't arrived there yet (in fact Salvini and the 5SM still want to appease Putin, and strongly antagonise their adversaries). Their only "moderation" is exclusively attributable to their Euroscepticism but *not* to other aspects of their populism. Moderate parties are not populist parties, but all of those groupings (like the Democratic Party, FI!, and *Italia Viva*) that tend to be anti-populist and occupy the political/electoral that ranges from centre-right to centre-left but not beyond. Furthermore, it is only the political representatives of the populist parties that are currently re-positioning themselves on EU-related issues rather than their voters.

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[141] If the 5SM expects all European member-states to be on the same page financially (and have a common policy on other non-financial matters too) this does not mean that they don't expect to also be freed from the shackles of European bureaucracy. Their critique is almost entirely based on the fact that they think stronger states with stronger economies like Germany and France are binding Italy to rules that are not appropriate for its circumstances. They want a common policy, but they have been against this particular and "current common policy". They request more freedom of manoeuvre for both Europe and Italy. So if Europe doesn't change, continues to impose austerity then yes, Sovereignism becomes "very likely" (as Coltorti MP puts it in my interview, see Table A1 in Appendices) and the 5SM will have to adapt and potentially openly support it as a populist party most follow the urges of the people.

The political U-turns on the EU mainly concern the more centrist (and liberal) wings of the organisations - like for instance the one represented by Giorgetti, Zaia and Fedriga in the League and the one led by Di Maio in the 5SM (until his break with them in June 2022). Indeed, League and 5SM have harder Eurosceptic (and populist) factions and a softer Eurosceptic (and populist) factions. In the 5SM the soft-Eurosceptics are the majority, whilst in the League it is still unclear which faction leads. If before the hard Eurosceptics appeared to be in front now they seem to be facing difficulties and are becoming a minority as Salvini switched the party line to Euro-criticalism or a "reluctant Europeanism". It may have been the League's close ties with wealthy businesses in the industrial regions of Lombardy and Piedmont (who themselves are interconnected to German markets and production chains) that heavily influenced this shift by letting Salvini know that their support would be dependent on him dropping the *anti-Euro*[142] blueprint. Salvini appears to have made this concession in exchange for their monetary and electoral support, but still continues to oppose austerity and some free trade agreements such as the *CETA*[143]. Authors have related the League's shift on the EU (but the same remark can be made of the 5SM) to Lenin's famous pronouncement of abandoning the "childhood illness" of Communism to embrace realism – an indispensable condition for any revolutionary prospect (Adinolfi, 2019: 119). Still, because populism is so flexible in nature no one really knows what the future reserves for those two parties on what platform they will present themselves at the next election(s) or whether their voter-base will change. I have not asked each individual League and 5SM representative whether they would still consider leaving the EU or the single market, but anyways almost every one of them has either voluntarily told me explicitly or inferred that a large-scale reform is desirable and may be possible (even if the *leghisti* - as I said - appear less hopeful). The reform would begin with the stripping away of powers from its two un-elected structures that effectively hold no popular mandate.

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[142] The League organised the "No-Euro Day" meeting on 23 November 2013, all of the major Italian Eurosceptics were present: Salvini, Borghi, Bagnai and Rinaldi. It used to be a real policy of the party in Salvini's initial takeover phase.

[143] Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)

VI. Conclusion(s) and Reflections: Capturing the Nature (and Degree) of Italian Populism

"Revolutionaries do make not revolutions. The revolutionaries are those who know when power is lying in the street and then they can pick it up"

- Hannah Arendt

Conclusion(s)

After presenting an exhaustive literature review, a theoretical framework (accompanied by a new definition), and an original methodology followed by a rationale for Italy and its populist cases, this contribution focused on a thematic content analysis of party manifestos and politician interviews. During the empirical process, it became evident that Italian right-wing and left-wing populists share important characteristics that go beyond their anti-establishment (and anti-elite) message. Clearly, the "common denominator" between League and 5 Star Movement is their political reliance on themes that constitute the core values or nucleus of populist ideology itself – *anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism*, *producerism*, *reformism* and *direct democracy*. In terms of quantity (we now understand this as "degreeism") this resulted in an exceptionally high degree/level of populism for both parties, meaning the League and the 5SM can ultimately be classified as "full-blown" populist parties.

Notwithstanding, as both the manifesto and interview analysis in chapter's IV and V clearly demonstrated, even if the League's and 5SM's populism is ultimately composed of the same core concepts their policies and narratives do not always fully correspond. In fact, findings provided by the TCA analysis showed that so-called *right-wing populism* (or "national-populism") and *left-wing populism* ("social-populism") tend to (at least partially) express the six themes in a distinct manner. For obvious reasons, the only moment in which their populist policies intertwine and conform entirely with each other has been during their time shared in power. It was the manifesto devised (and formally endorsed by the leaders of both parties in June 2018) for their post-electoral alliance which became famously known as the "*contratto di governo*" (government contract) that resulted in the most ideologically populist of political agendas. After all, it was the very first time in the country's history "*left-right*" populists governed conjunctly.

Therefore, if we are to observe the two parties separately, even where the League and 5SM reflect identical themes, when it comes to specific policies and narratives they happen to be constructed and expressed in a subtly diverse manner. For instance, if the League's manifesto or one of its political representatives (in an interview) rhetorically expresses anti-elitism this does not

necessarily mean that in terms of policy-making the outcome will be identical regarding the 5SM's anti-elitism. In some circumstances, this occurs to the point where (even if the themes expressed are the same in nominal terms) the political meaning attached to a specific theme differs completely from one populist party to the other.

To begin with the first theme, the League's *anti-elitism* takes a certain form where it is aimed at both financial elites and the political class. As already explained, financial institutions such as the Bank of Italy and *Consob* are not entirely trusted and ideally need to be closely monitored or regulated. However, when it comes to the political class, in its individual program the League's "attacks" towards this group are more subtle and moderate when compared to those of the 5SM's. Primarily, the League requests a direct election of the Head of State (this aspect of anti-elitism clearly overlaps with their *direct democracy* theme) and this reflects the distrust the *leghisti* harbour towards this chief's (current) institutional power and form, considered elitist and detached from the will of the majority. After all, the Italian "Head of State" (President of the Republic) is only elected by members of Parliament and not by the people. Alternatively, in terms of policy, the 5SM does not suggest a direct *Presidentialism* like the League but still significantly attacks the political class, to an even greater extent. As shown in the manifesto analysis, they devised an overwhelming number of law proposals to keep the power of the "corrupt" political elites restrained. Their endorsement for an Italian parliament that legislates much less, the hindering of the "*prescrizione*", their call for more wiretapping (for suspected politicians and affiliated elites) and for the introduction of a new stricter prosecuting institution, can all be understood in the light of populist anti-elitism. The 5SM's ideological anti-elitism leads the party to considers the political elites from traditional parties as the *primary* enemy. Notwithstanding, the presence of a few norms against banks (e.g. *Glass-Steagall Act*, compensation of "scammed savers", etc.) shows that the 5SM is - like the League - considerably sceptical of financial institutions and corporate power.

The interviews, consistent with the parties' manifestos, demonstrated that their representatives *equally* reflect anti-elitism. All the politicians interviewed (ten out of ten) made anti-elitist remarks during the formal conversations. Those that particularly stand out are claims made by (ex) 5SM's Paragone MP and the League's (former) representative abroad, Di Biasio. The former argues that the "dominant class" (the politicians, both in Italy and within the EU) are to blame for soaring inequality between ordinary Italians and the rich, whilst the latter specifies that the isolation of "the people" from political decision-making and state policy is wanted by the Bilderberg Group ("the Bilderberg Group wants this" – stated Di Biasio). Di Biasio's statements appear to dangerously border full-fledged conspiracy theory. Additionally, as shown earlier, many more anti-elitist remarks

against the traditional parties' *status-quo* have been made by other representatives from both League and 5SM (e.g. Borghi MP).

Concerning *unpolitics*, the unpolitics of the right-wing populist *leghisti* is extremely similar to that of the left-wing populist *grillini*. What transpires from the manifesto's is that both political formations foster an impatience with the (sometimes slow) processes of conflict resolution pertaining to representative democracy. Frequently, from a populist perspective, politics is not only slow, but corrupt and sometimes so inefficient that it becomes unnecessary. As we know, populists generally want fewer laws made in Parliament (the 5SM calls for an end to the "jungle of laws") and fewer bureaucracy, yet they expect more anti-political corruption norms – a so-called "certainty of punishment" for offenders. Especially the League, argues that Parliament should never choose the Prime Minister without consulting the populace. Overall, the League's (more right-leaning) populist unpolitics is aimed at taking away some power from the political class, parliament and the supposedly "over politicised" judiciary (e.g. separation of careers law proposal). At the same time, they want to increment the power of the executive, and have the state predominantly led by a strong leader *directly* elected by the citizenry. We now know the 5SM essentially proposes the same things, but its unpolitics takes an ever more specific form than the League's and is actually even more forthrightly aimed at the national political class. The *grillini*'s unpolitics goes beyond scrapping laws and "unnecessary" bureaucratic regulation, and the call for a certainty of punishment (and the reduction of lengths of trials for politicians implicated) to include an even more detailed and severe list of policies that serve the purpose of depriving politicians of power and privilege. Discarding "Golden Pensions" ("*pensioni d'oro*") and returning 50 billion euros utilised by the Italian state (to fund parliamentary functions) directly to the people are only two examples of a longer list. The League's unpolitics is more moderate and less focused (against Italian MPs) than the 5SM's.

If one carefully observes results originating from the interview analysis, it becomes clear that unpolitical rhetoric is overwhelming on both sides. Nonetheless, unpolitical remarks are less common than anti-elitist ones. Moreover, as expected, the more leftist and socialistic elements of populist unpolitics transpire from the rhetoric of 5SM politicians compared to League politicians. Informants such as Coltorti MP, state that politicians from the traditional parties (e.g. Democratic Party, Forward Italy!) are to blame for social inequalities and the failure to solve any issues related to social welfare, environmental conditions, and the rise in the cost of services (water, light, gas). Therefore, in this case, the *grillini* are more inclined than the *leghisti* to be reliant on other peripheral concepts from ideologies such as socialism/social democracy and environmentalism to fit and blend with their core populist unpolitical narrative. The stauncher unpolitics and generic

critique of the (Italian) political class manifested by the left-wing populists is clearly determined by the fact that the 5SM is a newer party than the League, originally conceived from disorganised forms of anti-systemic protests – which only eventually became less and less anti-systemic and more institutionalised. In contrast to the 5SM, the League is a populist party that had already been integrated in the political system (hence with the parliamentary class) and in government long before the 2018 election. A further explanation is that the 5SM's *raison d'etre* has never been Euroscepticism *per se* (notwithstanding Grillo's anti-Euro propaganda) but that of thoroughly transforming the country's institutions (beginning with parliament) and replace the functions of a parliamentary representative democracy with a more direct and unmediated form of politics (e.g. direct democracy, and *e-democracy*).

Overall, the same amount of League and 5SM politicians have made unpolitical remarks, four out of five on both sides (with the exceptions of Paragone MP and Panza MEP). As suggested earlier, the 5SM's unpolitics is just more distinctly articulated towards contemporary national politicians. More specifically, the League's representatives appear more inclined to contest the power and influence of the European Union's "political" class instead. Uncoincidentally, when the League's Borghi A. MP criticises the political class he does so primarily because he considers Italian politicians (from other non-populist mainstream parties) as "at the service of big lobbies and the European superstructure" (see Borghi, 11 November, 2019). As discussed, he insists this is not only a form of betrayal towards people they have made promises to, but it also damages the national economy. Thus, apart from the odd exception (e.g. Alvise Maniero, a highly Eurosceptic 5SM MP), it can be inferred that the League's unpolitics is more pronounced with Euroscepticism than the 5SM's. Accordingly, the EU's political class, even more so than the Italian one, is composed of bureaucrats, technocrats, and politicians who are either pushing forward sectarian party interests or the elite interests of multinationals and the corporate world ("they…act exclusively to favour 'the powerful'" was Borghi MP's precise statement). There are many[144] more "unpolitical" statements made by both parties' members that have not been included in the main analysis but have been transparently listed under the "Code(s)" column in Table A1.

Furthermore, what transpires from the TCA analysis is that *sovereignism* is an important ideological element in both right-wing and left-wing variants of Italian populism. Clearly, as an inherently sovereignist (and perhaps even nationalist) party the League wants the whole EU to be drastically reformed so that it gradually becomes less influential compared to individual nation-states. In the

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[144] Among those, two that appear particularly powerful are Anonymous 5SM's claim that the 5SM precisely reflects a "retaliation against traditional politics" (Anonymous 5SM, 1 October 2020) and Maniero MP's one that the 5SM contested "not just the *status quo* but parties themselves (particracy)" (Maniero, 11 January 2021).

manifesto, their proposals highlight the importance of having national state parliaments be decisive in political and economic decision-making. The *leghisti* have made it explicit they will only remain in the EU if *all* major treaties are renegotiated (e.g. abrogate Schengen and Dublin Treaties, reconfigure the internal market). Moreover, strict border control, generic isolationism and protectionism (e.g. tariffs, "defend" *Made in Italy* brand) are recurring mantras for the right-wing populists. Interestingly, based on both manifesto and interview analysis, the 5SM's sovereignism has proved itself to be slightly dissimilar. Apart from the fact the 5SM gives less importance than the League to sovereignism *per se* in its 2018 manifesto, its ideas to reform the EU are less pronounced and more vague.

In fact, in the interviews, only Maniero MP (who since February 2021 uncoincidentally no longer represents the party) displayed radically Eurosceptic views, though only from an *economically sovereignist* standpoint. However, overall it cannot be concluded that the 5SM is a party that only manifests economic sovereignism given apart from a sovereignist protectionism (e.g. promote the *Made in Italy*) the manifesto contains proposals to repatriate illegal migrants, and to repress what the *grillini* call "the immigration business" (see *Trento Today*, 5 January 2018). Immigration is important but is still not the main priority for the 5SM, and there are more proposals that can come under the banner of "anti-immigration" in the League's programme. Nonetheless, like Italian left-wing populism, Italian right-wing populism must still be understood as a form of "soft" Euroscepticism, given the League did not (in their 2018 manifesto) officially present any proposals to formally leave the European Union and single market. The League believes Italy (especially its export-dependant Northern-regions businesses) can benefit enormously from a reformed EU. In essence, what they aim for is having a more decisive EU Parliament (that does not accept the Commission's *diktats* on legislation) and a Union more resistant to immigration from non-European (non-Christian) countries that also strengthens its economy by safeguarding (through the use of tariffs) only its own (European) products against foreign economic influence.

Eight out of ten interviewees made sovereignist statements. Only one League representative and one 5SM representative (either voluntarily or involuntarily) abstained from articulating any views that can be considered fully sovereignist. It can therefore be argued that the parties are equally sovereignist, but are inspired by different strands of sovereignism. 5SM MPs, both the more radical (Eurosceptic) sovereignist Maniero MP and the more moderate Coltorti MP (Paragone MP and Porrello occupy a middle position) complain about the current state-of-affairs in Brussels and Strasbourg, but only the former seems to believe the bloc cannot be reformed and that Italian interests will always come second to German ones. Apart from Maniero, who is clearly a 5SM

outlier, the other 5SM politicians exhibited views that are more or less in line with the official positions of the party leadership. In their view, the EU can and *must* be reformed from within. In such manner that a greater voice can be given to southern European/Mediterranean countries[145] by establishing a common and more efficient policy on most matters – all the way from law-making and judicial norms to environment, state-spending and welfare. In this case, immigration is somewhat secondary.

In essence, both League and 5SM are parties that engage with populist sovereignism, but whilst the right-wing populists hold tougher positions against immigration and EU reform the left-wing populists are more vague regarding these issues, possibly making them also more "moderate". One conclusion we can also draw after observing the sovereignism of the 5SM is that the nature of the party itself is certainly left-wing populist but (to some extent) also protean, as it is both political home to moderate progressives like Coltorti MP who only criticise the EU from a social-democratic (and ambiguously Europhile) perspective and more radical (Eurosceptic) nationalists like Maniero MP who are more difficult to categorise on the left-right spectrum. From their statements, the other 5SM politicians interviewed (apart from Paragone MP perhaps) appear to be politically more adjacent to Coltorti MP than Maniero MP. Ultimately, this means that among the *grillini* the hard-line Eurosceptics potentially represent a minority.

Unlike sovereignism, *producerism* is not a theme that political scientists normally would associate with left-wing populist parties such as the 5SM. In the short (2018) manifesto presented by the 5SM there was no policy or language that could directly be correlated to producerism. Naturally, the same cannot be said for the League. The League's programme contains *at least* six policy ideas that fall under the umbrella of producerism. As previously shown, among these there are important proposals like the abolishment of the (centre-Left's) "*studi di settore*" in order to provide a general deregulation and decrease the power of revenue authorities over small-medium business (and entrepreneurs) and the revision (and also deregulation) of EU agricultural and fishing norms. On the whole, six out of ten interviewees communicated producerist views, five *leghisti* and only one of the *grillini*. Notably, notwithstanding producerism was not found in the 5SM's personal (20-point) manifesto, this idea was partially (but transparently) articulated by one 5SM MP – Gianluigi Paragone. In this case, this MP played the role of the anomaly among his parliamentary group given he stressed the importance of "businessmen" in society (not only the families or workers that leftist populists usually defend) and how they were supposedly "betrayed" by elites and traditional politicians with other interests in mind. That being said, I purposely excluded this statement made

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[145] This view was actually inspired by Grillo's original idea of creating an alternative Southern European bloc or Union for only Mediterranean nations. This proposal can be found in the 5SM programmes from the "early days" of the party.

by Paragone MP from the main TCA analysis (though it is listed as a code from the interviews in the appendices though, see Table A1) on producerism to focus on the more frequent and more explicit remarks made by League politicians. In fact, as established, individuals affiliated to the League like Ciambetti, De Biasio and Panza MEP, all displayed high levels of ideological producerism by speaking in favour of small and medium businesses through the promotion of an anti-globalist state capitalism which has as a principal aim the elimination of excess bureaucracy and regulation (mainly opposing the EU). All *leghisti* demonstrated to have a preference for deregulation when it comes to the national economy, with the hope that a specifically anti-bureaucratic form of (typically right-wing populist) policy-making will boost private enterprise and growth within a "producerist community".

The TCA analysis has also highlighted how *reformism* plays a key recurring role as a populist theme. Unsurprisingly, the democratically reformist, non-revolutionary, and non-extreme policies presented by League and 5SM - each in their own manifestos - also unveil their "common denominator" – populism itself. As established, League is predominantly interested in reforms pertaining to the European Union, law and order, family life, welfare, taxes and (to a lesser extent) the environment. The complete reconfiguration of the EU (especially by revising treaties, e.g. Nice Treaty) to ultimately turn it into a "Europe of the Peoples" (as Salvini often claims), the introduction of stricter punishments such as castration for those who offend regularly, the reform of primary education (e.g. free *kindergarten*) and of certain aspects of welfare/healthcare are only a few examples of a long list. Similarly but not identically, based on the manifesto analysis, the 5SM anchors its reformism to new welfare and employment proposals. Examples would be their famous "Citizen's Income", their idea for new employment centres, and to lower the retirement age. In addition, like the other populists, they push for reform in areas such as taxation and the environment, by respectively scrapping taxes for poorer Italians (incomes below 10,000 euros) and with a major green economy investment to allow the country to leave Petroleum behind by 2050. Unlike the *leghisti*, the *grillini* are not particularly concerned about reforming the political system to promote the interests of the nuclear family through extensive changes to the education model and are more vague concerning EU reform than their "right-wing" (populist) counterparts. For example, they do not explicitly mention what EU treaties need to be revisited. This is a sign of a more cautious, and perhaps "softer" form of Euroscepticism, at least in their party literature. Regarding law and order reform, if we exclude the "*certezza della pena*" and abolishment of the "*prescrizione*" (which have more to do with anti-elitism and unpolitics), and all those other policies that concern criminal

activity of a higher[146] level, proposals to tackle every day crime are virtually absent from the manifesto. The 5SM's combined policy that states the *grillini* plan to hire 10.000 extra police officers and establish two more jails, is the exception that proves rule. Considering this aspect, among others mentioned earlier, the 5SM appears more committed to social-democratic types of reforms when compared to the League which is more conservative, less ecologist (notwithstanding their call for a greener economy), and mildly more Eurosceptic than the 5SM.

Beyond manifesto analysis, in the interviews observed, what is interesting is that both League and 5SM align ideologically in terms of taxation, welfare, and - last but not least - EU reform. Nine out of ten interviewees mentioned wanting to reform aspects of Italian state politics either explicitly or implicitly – five out of five *leghisti* and four out of five *grillini*. Let us consider immigration first, no 5SM politicians openly or directly discussed immigration, which is a further sign of the party's more moderate orientation on this issue. However, it must be noted that the *leghisti* did mention that at the time of the coalition the 5SM was in full agreement with the League on stopping illegal migrants from entering the country (e.g. see De Biasio's reported statements, in previous chapter). Overall, as the League is a more conservative type of populist party, it should come as no surprise that its representatives are more expansive in their complaints against migrants. Second, when it comes to taxes, the *leghisti* are clearly more inclined towards the *Flat Tax* and appear ideologically opposed to supposedly more egalitarian "socialistic" forms of progressive taxation. Some of them (see Covolo, 11 October, 2021) also openly mention the importance of pension reform and *Quota 100* in their agreement with the 5SM left-wing populists. Third, the respondents clearly showed an interest towards generic EU reform, with Covolo MP explaining the whole coalition's programme was essentially based on the "urgent" reform of Italian and European institutions and laws, and Coltorti MP (5SM), Panza MEP (League) and De Biasio (League) instead bringing attention to the fact they welcome change (in terms of austerity and "balanced budget" norms) without questioning the whole democratic system.

Last but not least, results of the TCA analysis revealed that *direct democracy* is a fixed point of both right-wing and left-wing populist narratives in the Italian context. In the manifestos, it played a role as a theme to inspire essential policy of the League with proposals such as the direct election of the President (as explained, this overlaps with anti-elitism), but also the possibility of a formal *recall* for politicians who switch sides, and - of course - the request for referendums without quorums. Surprisingly, unlike in previous political manifestos (the 2013 one for example) in 2018 the 5SM represses its majoritarian vocations leaving out policies that can be traceable to direct democracy as

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[146] What is meant here by "higher level" is corruption pertaining to the relationship between the world of politics and the mafia in Italy.

a populist theme. Perhaps, this was done purposely by leadership in an effort to show public opinion that the party fully conforms to representative democracy and does not pose a threat to the country's long-standing institutions and checks and balances. In any case, the League's understanding of democracy is essentially indistinguishable from the 5SM's understanding of it, this becomes evident from the interviews. When explicitly asked how to define their view of democracy, eights out of ten political informants interviewed made claims that can fall under the category of direct democracy. Especially, strong statements by figures like Paragone MP, Borghi MP, Porrello, Coltorti MP, and Ciambetti, either (inexplicitly) claiming that only political formations who are populist can truly give a voice to the citizenry ("their needs", "their aspirations", etc.) as other parties "no longer interpret" the *volonté générale* or in favour of localist self-government (e.g. Ciambetti's statement, see also Appendices/Table A1). Based on the interviews, it is interesting to note that the theme of direct democracy is where the two parties possibly align the most (even if the 5SM didn't touch upon direct democracy in their manifesto) because out of the eight *leghisti* and *grillini* who manifest an attachment to this antique concept, *all* demonstrate a conscientiousness towards the interests of the masses. League and 5SM representatives simply believe that direct democracy is the last hope (as shown, Paragone MP unequivocally uses this word) and the only tool left for *silent majorities* to voice their opinion in politics – as apparently traditional parties are no longer interested in representing them. Although 5SM Senator Coltorti MP, is the only one that directly addresses direct democracy by giving it a name (he refers to it as *participatory democracy* though) he states that it should be expanded to "as many people as possible" – it is difficult to imagine that any of the other politicians interviewed (from both sides) would disagree with him based on their general political outlook.

In light of all this pertinent information, in this conclusion it certainly needs to be noted that - in terms of *degree* of populism - the TCA analysis ultimately revealed identical results for both of the Italian parties. Although they may be populist in a distinct manner, they are still both full-blown populists that deserve the score of "1" on a gradational scale. Without going into disproportionate detail about the specifics of the methodology (as it has been rigorously outlined before) it needs to be stated that whilst the League's independent 2018 manifesto and the Yellow-Green manifesto depicted full-blown populism (they scored a *1* because contained *at least* five themes or more, six to be precise) the 5SM's independent 2018 manifesto did not score as "full-blown populist" but only "considerably populist" as it contained four populist themes and not more. Nevertheless, this did not impact the 5SM's degree of populism overall by making it ultimately lesser than the League's given based on the calculation outlined in the methodology section (see also equations in the appendices) considering the average(s) from its other manifesto (the "yellow-green" one) and the interviews

(where it scored higher) it still displayed very high level of populism, obtained a final score of *1* in the same way as the League. As *per* the interviews, not every political interviewee resulted being a "full-blown populist" as not every one of them discursively manifested at least five of the six themes. Three candidates, one from the League and two from the 5SM, obtained a quantitative score not higher than "0.7" as they did not display more than four themes each. Those were respectively Panza MEP from the *Carroccio* (this is an Italian pseudonym for Salvini's League), as well as Anonymous 5SM and surprisingly Maniero MP from the 5SM.

In summation, it should come as no surprise that both League and 5SM ultimately obtained the score of *1* (in terms of the quantitative aspect of methodology applied by TCA) as they are radically populist parties that exhibit exorbitant levels of populist ideology in both manifestos and interviews collectively. Beyond the six themes, observing from a more generic ideological perspective, the former party (still led by Salvini) has come across as a force that intertwines socio-culturally conservative-populist views (e.g. private property, "law and order", the nuclear family, Christianity) with a populist approach to the economy (e.g. protectionism, subsidies for national agriculture, lower taxes for autonomous workers/local businesses) and foreign policy (e.g. "no more wars", NATO-scepticism, "no to Russian sanctions") and role of the state (e.g. less state funds for parties, less MPs, less bureaucracy). The latter party, currently led by Giuseppe Conte (with Grillo behind the scenes) may at times appear as an anomalous political creature, however it is simply a limb of the contemporary populist left. The 5SM projects a socialistic populism both economically and socio-culturally. Their recent welfare provisions - "Citizen's Income" and "Citizen Pensions" - cannot be understood as being "revolutionary" but are certainly thoroughly reformist and have seen great opposition from political opponents and EU elites. Apart from immigration, where their stance has always been ambiguous, the 5SM has until 2018 convincingly presented itself as an anti-elitist force that would presumably pursue people-centric politics. Among those we would find the "Mandate Constraint" and *Recall*, the reduction of politician salaries and privileges, the public investment bank for savers, the *Superbonus* incentive on small/medium business (but this is a 2021-2022 policy), the referendum without *quorum*, and the anti-corruption measures.

If in the past the intellectual Marco Tarchi (2002: 129) has spoken of the (then Northern) League as a party that ideo-programmatically combined liberalism with populism, but where the first component always depended on the second, the same argument can be made about the party today but with the exception that it is conservatism rather than pure liberalism to be integrated with the predominant populism. A similar scenario plays itself out with the 5SM, socialism and populism are both ideological components, but the latter has a more decisive role. Essentially, even if it may

sound like a far-fetched observation to some, but what is academically known as the "host ideology" usually plays a subsidiary function in the ideology and discourse of the two parties.

If instead of observing the parties separately, for a moment one considers them conjointly (almost as if League and 5SM were a whole) one will discern that the temporary political bond established between League and 5SM during the "Yellow-Green" government phase took shape as a consequence of an ideological affinity. This ideological affinity (which eventually became a programmatic affinity through a joint venture of agenda-setting) comprised an attachment to anti-elitism, unpolitics, sovereignism, producerism, reformism, and direct democracy. Their *traits d'union* were not so much a product of their akin approach to political activity - such as being omnipresent on social media platforms as well as in city streets, squares, and people's doorsteps - but of their convergence on these specific aspects of populism. Both together (when in power) and separately (when they first drafted their own 2018 manifestos) League and 5SM managed to turn *populist ideology into populist policy*.

For instance, in terms of ideology, the *anti-elitism* they shared allowed them to propose a reduction of the number of parliamentarians and direct election of the President of the Republic, whilst their *unpolitics* shaped their agreement to reduce state bureaucracy and politician privileges (namely the "*vitalizi*" and "*pensioni d'oro*"). Also, a unifying Eurosceptic attitude (even though the parties would only leave the bloc on the grounds that large-scale reform fails) has given them the opportunity to include *sovereingnism* in the agenda. Accordingly, both parties intend to re-negotiate EU treaties, take away decisional power from the EU Commission and Council to give it to the EU Parliament, rebel against the *troika*'s fiscal regulations, provide the Italian state with more power to tackle illegal immigration and use economic protectionism as a safety-net from foreign competition. They also propose a sovereignist semi-isolationist foreign policy that differs from that of traditional centrist actors. Furthermore, the sub-ideology of *producerism* made the "yellow-greens" (League and 5SM when ruling together) promote (in their associated manifesto) a cutback of bureaucratic regulation and flat forms of taxation for local agriculture and fishing businesses. It is instead a non-revolutionary *reformism* that has led them to try and implant people-centrism in institutions and policy-making pertaining to welfare ("Citizen's Income"), pensions ("*quota 100*"), banking ("Savers Indemnity Fund", *Consob* and Bank of Itay reform), crime (self-defence deregulation, "Certainty of Punishment"), the judiciary (separation of judge careers) and taxes (cut the red tape for small/medium business). Ultimately, their support for *direct democracy* (preferred to representative liberal-democracy) explains their suggestion to introduce (a series of) referendums without quorum (as well as the "unpolitical" *Recall*) to consult public opinion for political decision-

making on a regular basis. The Italian populists claim that the will to turn the democratic process into something more horizontal and more egalitarian, by re-politicising the state to suit the general needs of the majority and give the *demos*/body politic an authentic interclassist identity (with no strict racial, linguistic, or religious boundaries) is at the heart of their agenda.

Reflections

In this research project the focus exclusively remained on two major Italian cases of populism. The *heuristic value* of the dissertation lies in the fact that it adopts a thematic method (the identification of populist themes) to determine the nature and degree of populist ideology relevant to two important parties in a way that is as detailed, straightforward, and objective as possible. This contribution gives a fair hearing to populism, and a chance for populists (the interviewees in this case) to provide an open perspective in order for it to be evaluated thematically from scratch and treated as being part of a holistically populist grand narrative. However, it is self-evident that these cases alone are not sufficient to make incontrovertible and conclusive statements about populism worldwide. Although this systematic inquiry did (hopefully) demonstrate that the political agenda's and narratives of right-wing and left-wing populists are very similar (at least in the Italian context) and offered some insight on why populism may be strictly considered as an ideology (given ultimately its "comprehensive programme" encapsulated six core themes) further research is required in the future to discover whether these very themes are effectively universal. After all, as established previously, providing so-called "empirical universals" is not necessarily a compulsory process in political science, but it may indeed represent an added advantage (Sartori, 1970: 1035).

Taking all of this into account, there are essentially two aspects related to this academic contribution that are undeniably useful in encouraging future research. First, it would be appropriate to examine other cases of populism worldwide ideally utilising the same theoretical framework and methodology used here to discover whether parties accused of being (or self-proclaiming themselves) "populist" in democratic polities that have had a relatively similar historical trajectory or are part of a culturally and socio-economically homogenous society to the Italian one (e.g. France, Austria, Germany, Spain) display the same themes in their political manifestos and discourses. Correspondingly, populist leaders, unorganised movements, or organised parties, belonging to societies with significantly distinct characteristics to Italy could be investigated by future scholars with a keen interest for this particular topic. Organisations as (supposedly) disparate

from each other (in nations geographically located very far apart from one another) as the French *Rassemblement National*, the Argentine *La Libertad Avanza* and the *Partido Federal ng Pilipinas* or even the transnational movement *DiEM25* to assess whether they exhibit the core themes of populism through party literature or statements made by official representatives. Second, another scientifically valuable and viable exercise would be that of using an identical framework and method to the one used in this work to analyse whether the same degree of populism is present in other manifestos/programmes published by League and 5SM before or after 2018. Concomitantly, an alternative group of party representatives that were excluded from this study could be interviewed to produce a new inquiry that would shed some light on whether different *leghisti* and *grillini* share distinct populist views and manifest a more or less populist ideology in terms of degree. Eventually, the new results could be directly compared to those produced from the interviews conducted for this thesis. The sub-field of populism cannot but benefit from further research in this specific area involving themes.

By now, it is almost indisputable that ideational the approach(es) have immensely contributed by broadening our understanding of what the populist phenomenon is and how it functions as an ideology. Even scholars who have focused on investigating the more generic characteristics of populism (e.g. a reaction to crisis, conspiracy theories) (see Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Pappas and Kriesi, 2015; Pirro and Taggart, 2022) do not question that there are strong ideological components to it. Certainly, it is also desirable for scholars to maintain a degree of broad-mindedness and attempt move beyond the idea that populism is only a temporary (and "passing") phenomenon which displays only "weak" or "thin" characteristics that can be summarised by observing its somewhat superficial *people vs. elite* binary. Not to mention, treating populism as an ideology does not necessarily have to result in a complete aversion to secondary political-strategic or discursive/socio-cultural elements that ignores the possibility that even a functional (and comprehensive) ideology may sometimes produce specific rhetorical patterns and electoral strategies, when possessed by parties and politicians in a competitive political arena. That being said, this piece of work closely inspected two Italian parties from an essentially entirely ideological perspective in order to ultimately determine how right-wing and left-wing populism relate to each other. In other terms, the nature of their politics was discerned. It is now evident that the nature of the relationship between League and 5SM was first and foremost *ideological* and not political-strategic. Their entire political agenda, especially during the Yellow-Green government phase, was built on an ideological concurrence facilitated by their adherence to six typically populist themes – *anti-elitism*, *unpolitics*, *sovereignism*, *reformism*, *producerism* and *direct democracy*. The TCA analysis carrid out throughout this contribution revealed that *all* of these themes were present in

both party literature and interviews with party politicians. At the risk of being repetitive, results showed that both the League and 5SM, are inherently ("full-blown" or full-fledged) populist political organisations. In conclusion, the nature of the relationship that existed between League and 5SM can also be condensed by a simple and single phrase which I took away from a one-to-one interview with a League's regional representative: "*the affinity with the 5SM in 2018 was born out of the common will to face up to a profound and radical renewal of the state*" (Ciambetti, 2 August, 2022). This quote surely speaks for itself.

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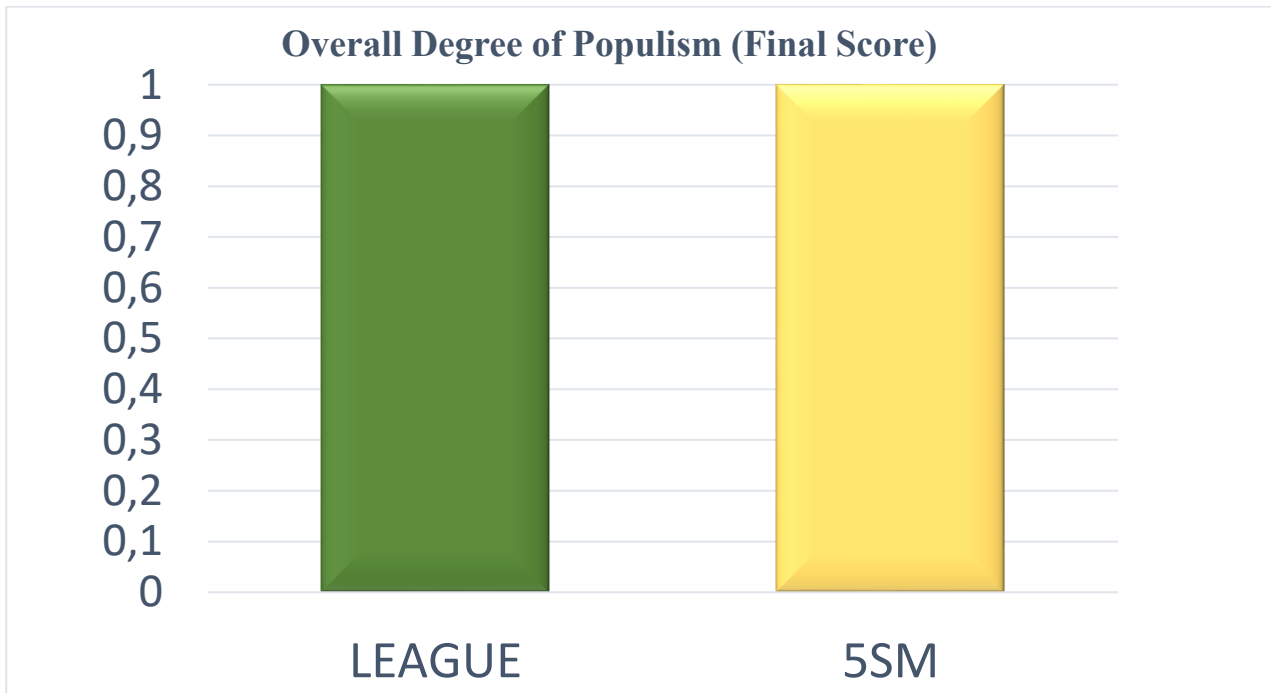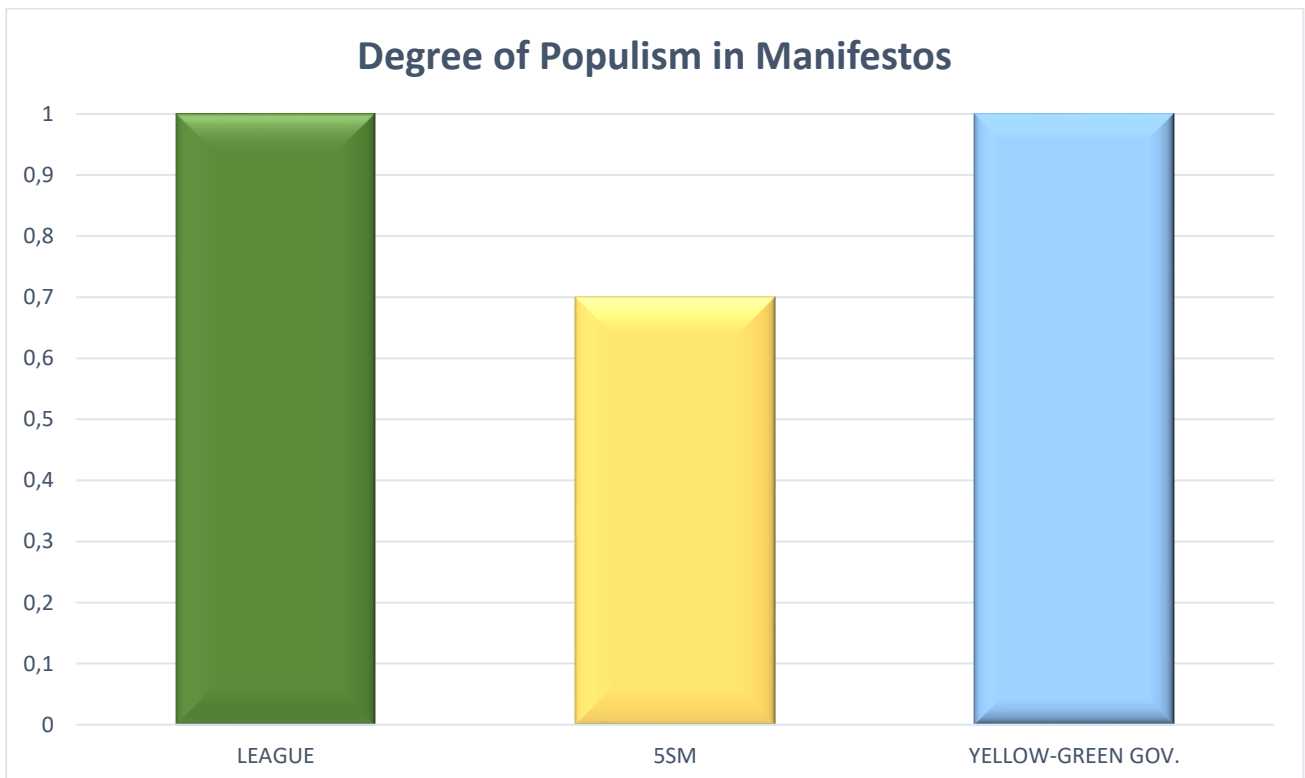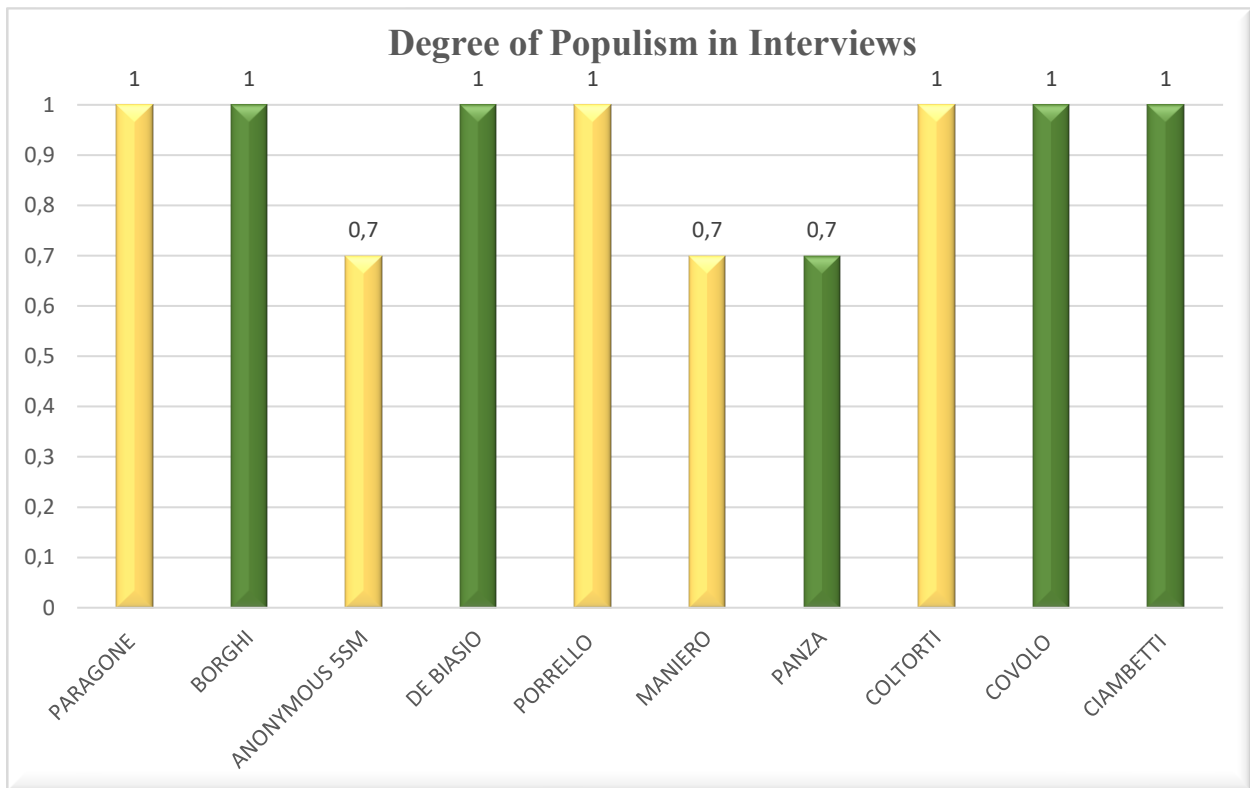
Appendices

FIGURE 1:

Overall Degree of Populism (Final Score)

FIGURE 2:

Degree of Populism in Manifestos

FIGURE 3:

Degree of Populism in Interviews

Amedeo Varriale

EQUATION 1: DEGREE OF POPULISM

$$\text{Average of Manifestos (League)} = \frac{\text{League (1) + Yellow−Green Government (1)}}{2} = 1$$

$$\text{Average of Interviews (League)} = \frac{\text{Borghi MP (1) + De Biasio (1) + Panza MEP (0.7) + Covolo MP (1) + Ciambetti (1)}}{5} = 0.94$$

$$\text{Average of Manifestos (5SM)} = \frac{\text{5SM (0.7) + Yellow−Green Government (1)}}{2} = 0.85$$

Average of Interviews (5SM) =

$$\frac{\text{Paragone MP (1) + Anonymous 5SM (0.7) + Porrello (1) + Maniero MP (0.7) + Coltorti MP (1)}}{5} = 0.88$$

$$\text{Final Score (League)} = \frac{\text{Average Manifestos League (1) + Average Interviews League (0.94)}}{2} = 0.97 \text{ (rounded to "1")}$$

$$\text{Final Score (5SM)} = \frac{\text{Average of Manifestos 5SM (0.85) + Average of Interviews 5SM (0.88)}}{2} = 0.865 \text{ (rounded to "1")}$$

TABLE 1:

POLITICIAN	CODE(S)
PARAGONE (5SM)	• "Inequality the dominant class/caste has brought us" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "The neoliberal model (elites) tends to disaggregate states" - **SOVEREIGNISM** • **"**Families, businessmen, workers, betrayed *savers*" - **PRODUCERISM** • "The Movement should continue to reflect its anti-systemic identity" - **REFORMISM** • "We represented *hope*, a *redemption*" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
BORGHI (League)	• " *status quo*… is no longer sustainable" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "political class out of touch with electorate" - **UNPOLITICS** • "protecting our products that are *Made in Italy*, safeguard our national businesses " - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "development and competitiveness" - **PRODUCERISM** • "change the political rules of the economy"- **REFORMISM** • "the will to spark a revolution/ "a break with the past" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
DE BIASIO (League)	• " the Bilderberg group wants this" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "forgotten/dismissed by professional political elites - **UNPOLITICS** • "…reflects today's failure of globalised capitalism"/"identities give people strength and culture" - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "in the last century capitalism (or at least how it used to be conceived) used to be a producerist/productivist capitalism" - **PRODUCERISM** • "we believe it (the system) only needs to be modified, and reformed to involve people more and help with their necessities" - **REFORMISM**
ANONYMOUS POLITICIAN (5SM)	• "there are structure of power that obstruct the growth of our country" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "retaliation against traditional politics (the 5SM)" - **UNPOLITICS** • "we just wanted to reform Europe" - **REFORMISM** • "exalting their values, desires, frustrations and collective popular sentiments" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

PORRELLO (5SM)	• "they (elite powers) carry out their own interests against national interests" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "politics and politicians have given them (elites) a *blank check*" - **UNPOLITICS** • "Northern Europe continues to have a certain attitude towards us, go on their own course, and widen the gap." - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "We can reform it (the EU) and change it into a *Europe of the peoples*" - **REFORMISM** • "We have made ourselves interpreters of some issues that other parties no longer interpret" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
MANIERO (5SM)	• "there are several (elite powers) that limit us and strangle our country" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "it (the 5SM) contested the *status quo* but not just the status quo but parties themselves (particracy)" - **UNPOLITICS** • "Sovereignism is the past, present and future of Europe" - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "people are so distant from politics that I think it is about time to bring people closer again" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
PANZA (League)	• "Let's just say many in Europe/EU want Italy to be held back" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "The people, according to our constitution, are sovereign" - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "the EU cannot expect to legislate on everything as this results in a bureaucratic clog that slows down decision-making and complicates the life of citizens and businesses" - **PRODUCERISM** • "this Union (the EU) can be reborn and restrengthen itself to better compete at a global level" - **REFORMISM**
COLTORTI (5SM)	• "Will of the people as something of primary relevance" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "those who vote 5SM are people tired with false promises and politics…from traditional parties" - **UNPOLITICS** • "If they (the EU elites) adapt austerity again this (the return of sovereignism) is very likely" - **SOVEREIGNISM** • "We need to reconsider a European politics that must become one of solidarity and support" - **REFORMISM** • "expand it (participatory democracy) to as many as many people as possible" - **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

COVOLO (League)	• "The judiciary, just to mention one state power, changes the course of events with its decisions." - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "Siamo lontani dalla logica dei palazzi e dalla politica centralista che non guarda agli interessi locali" - **UNPOLITICS** • "I believe that on the flat tax for autonomous for autonomous workers (with a limit on 65.000 euro revenues) there was (with the 5SM) full harmony" – **PRODUCERISM** • "This was about converging on some of the urgent reforms for the country" - **REFORMISM** • "I think we cannot give a negative accentuation to the term *populists*, if with this word we intend to recognise anyone who is a promoter of the requests of citizens, bringing politics among the people, to understand their needs" – **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
CIAMBETTI (League)	• "Of the European Union we have always criticised…it being a dominated interpreter of financial elites" - **ANTI-ELITISM** • "I feel popular not populist… in contrast to the *ZTL* ('Limited Traffic Zone') parties" – **UNPOLTICS** • "It is (sovereignism) a political position which claims for popular sovereignty and therefore of the electoral result in contrast to unelected guarantee bodies: I believe in Italy this theme is of great relevance" – **SOVEREIGNISM** • "*leghismo* is widespread in areas characterised by an economic fabric of small and medium enterprises that is interlaced with the agricultural economy, a territory that has strong social values and concrete solidarity, decidedly anchored to traditions…" – **PRODUCERISM** • "the affinity with the M55 in 2018 was born out of the common will to face up to a profound and radical renewal of the state." – **REFORMISM** • "Ours is not a living room or virtual movement, nor is it an instrument at the service of elites or power groups, but rather one that lives in the *people* and in the *territory* of which it expresses needs, sentiments and aspirations including self-government" – **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

TABLE 2:

YELLOW GREEN GOVERNMENT (LEAGUE and 5SM)	
THEMES	*POLICIES*
ANTI ELITISM	• Reduction of MPs
UNPOLITICS	• Cuts to costs of politics • Cuts to cost of institutions • Cuts to politician salaries and privileges (*vitalizi* + golden pensions) • Mandate constraint • *Recall* • Certainty of punishment (corrupt politicians, *mafiosi*, etc.)
SOVEREIGNISM	• Revisit/ Renegotiate EU treaties and laws • Strict border control • More power to Italian parliament • Economic protectionism • Defense of *Made in Italy* products • "Pro-people" anti-interventionist foreign policy
PRODUCERISM	• Less bureaucracy for small and medium businesses (also fishing and agriculture) • *Flat Tax* for families and businesses • Deregulate internal market for primary sector
REFORMISM	• Reform pension scheme (abolish Fornero Law, implement "*quota 100*") • Reform banking (Consob, Bank of Italy) • Reform welfare ("Citizens Income") • Reform education (overcome '*buona scuola*') • Reform Self-Defence laws • Green Economy
DIRECT DEMOCRACY	• *Recall* • Referendum without *quorum*

TABLE 3:

THEMES	GENERIC RIGHT WING POPULISM		GENERIC LEFT-WING POPULISM
	NATIONAL POPULISM	LIBERAL-POPULISM	SOCIAL-POPULISM
ANTI-ELITISM	Primarily attack "liberal elites"	Attack most elites without distinguishing properly	Primarily attack "corporate elites"
UNPOLITICS	Oppose professional politicians for being "corrupt" and "self-interested"	Oppose professional politicians for being "corrupt" and "self-interested"	Oppose professional politicians for being "corrupt" and "self-interested"
SOVEREIGNISM	Popular, economic and territorial sovereignism Economic protectionism	Mainly popular and territorial sovereignism Tend to support free trade	Mainly economic and popular sovereignism Economic protectionism
PRODUCERISM	Support small and medium business Support localism "Cut the red tape" Welfare Chauvinism Reduce taxes Distinguish between "producers" and "parasites"	Support business and deregulation in general "Cut the red tape" Anti-welfarist Reduce taxes Distinguish between "producers" and "parasites"	Support small and medium business Reduce taxes (but with exceptions) Welfare Chauvinism Do not put emphasis on Producerism
REFORMISM	Reform immigration, taxation, welfare, EU, state security and banking	Reform taxation, welfare, EU and role of the State	Reform welfare, environment policy, EU and banking
DIRECT DEMOCRACY	Support strong executive Direct democracy Redeem the people as an ethno-cultural community	Support strong executive Direct democracy Redeem the people as a laborious and productive community	Support strong executive Direct democracy Redeem the people as a unified lower class

TABLE 4:

PARTY	ITALIAN GENERAL ELECTION %	EUROPEAN ELECTION %
LEAGUE	**1992** **Chamber of Deputies: 8.65%** **Senate : 8.20%** **1994** **Chamber of Deputies : 8.36%** **Senate (coalition result) : 19.87%** **1996** **Chamber of Deputies :** **10.07 %** **Senate : 10.41 %** **2001** **Chamber of Deputies : 3.94 %** **Senate (coalition result) : 42.53%** **2006** **Chamber of Deputies : 4.58%** **Senate : 4.48%** **2008** **Chamber of Deputies : 8.30%** **Senate : 8.06%** **2013** **Chamber of Deputies : 4.09%** **Senate : 4.34 %** **2018** **Chamber of Deputies : 17.35%** **Senate : 17.61%**	**1994** **6.56 % (result in Italy + abroad)** **1999** **4.48 % (result in Italy + abroad)** **2004** **4.96 % (result in Italy + abroad)** **2009** **10.21% (result in Italy + abroad)** **2014** **6.15 % (result in Italy + abroad)** **2019** **34.26% (result in Italy + abroad)**
5 STAR MOVEMENT	**2013** **Chamber of Deputies: 25.56%** **Senate: 23.80%** **2018** **Chamber of Deputies: 32.68%** **Senate: 32.22 %**	**2014** **21.16% (results in Italy + abroad)** **2019** **17.06 % (results in Italy + abroad)**

TABLE 5:

PARTY	INTERVIEWEE	ROLE IN PARTY	MODE OF INTERVIEW	DATE OF INTERVIEW
5 STAR MOVEMENT	GIANLUIGI PARAGONE	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (SENATE)	IN PERSON (Rome, Italy)	7 November 2019
LEAGUE	CLAUDIO BORGHI	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (CHAMBER)	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (Rome, Italy)	11 November 2019
LEAGUE	LUCA DE BIASIO	VICE-PRESIDENT "LEAGUE IN THE WORLD" (ARGENTINA)	ONLINE/SKYPE (London, UK)	20 August 2020
5 STAR MOVEMENT	ANONYMOUS 5SM	REGIONAL ELECTIONS CANDIDATE	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (London, UK)	1 October 2020
5 STAR MOVEMENT	DEVID PORELLO	VICE-PRESIDENT REGIONAL COUNCIL (LAZIO)	ONLINE/SKYPE (Rome, Italy)	21 December 2020
5 STAR MOVEMENT	ALVISE MANIERO	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (CHAMBER)	PHONE CALL (Rome, Italy)	11 January 2021
LEAGUE	ALESSANDRO PANZA	MEMBER OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (London, UK)	11 May 2021
5 STAR MOVEMENT	MAURO COLTORTI	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (SENATE)	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (London, UK)	25 May 2021
LEAGUE	SILVIA COVOLO	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (CHAMBER)	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (Rome, Italy)	11 October 2021
LEAGUE	ROBERTO CIAMBETTI	PRESIDENT REGIONAL COUNCIL (VENETO)	ONLINE/BY EMAIL (Rome, Italy)	2 August 2022

Dear Amedeo,

Application ID: ETH2223-0259

Original application ID: ETH2122-0185

Project title: The Nature of Italian Populism

Lead researcher: Mr Amedeo Varriale

Your application to Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (EISC) was considered on the 25th July 2023.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 4 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact your supervisor or the administrator for the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research/consultancy project you must complete 'An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application'.

The approval of the proposed research/consultancy project applies to the following site.

Project site: **London, United Kingdom/ Rome, Italy**

Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Mr Amedeo Varriale

Approval is given on the understanding that the UEL Code of Practice for Research and the Code of Practice for Research Ethics is adhered to.

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research/consultancy project should be reported using the University's form for Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction.

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Fernanda Pereira Da Silva

Administrative Officer for Research Governance

Docklands Campus
University Way
London E16 2RD

Stratford Campus
Water Lane
London E15 4LZ

University Square Stratford
Salway Road
London E15 1NF

+44 (0)20 8223 3000
srm@uel.ac.uk
uel.ac.uk

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE