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## Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most populist of them all? A comparison of League and Five Star Movement voters

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**Abstract.** The article investigates the voting determinants for partners of the first populist government in Western Europe, the first Conte cabinet. Although the Five Star Movement (FSM) and the League share a common populist root, they differ in their ideological morphology: the FSM embodies an almost pure populism with inclusionary tendencies, while the League expresses an exclusionary populism clearly anchored to the Right. The article explores how populism affects voting choices for these two parties, looking at the interconnections between the thin-centred populist ideology, other host ideologies and policy preferences. We show the importance of populism as a predictor of voting choices for these two parties, as well as marked ideological differences between the two electorates. Moreover, support for the main policies of the government has been mixed, a symptom of the poor cohesion between these two parties.

**Keywords:** Populism, Italian Politics, Public Opinion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Populism is undoubtedly one of the most popular (and elusive) concepts of contemporary Political Science. Despite a deep-rooted history within the discipline, the academic debate around this phenomenon remains wide open. There is no unanimous agreement on its real nature, since its morphology is variously interpreted as a communicative style, a mentality, a political strategy or an ideology (Tarchi, 2016). While each perspective emphasises a different combination of characteristics to define it, two elements seem shared by all of them: a powerful critique against the economic, cultural, and political establishment (the corrupted *élites*), and the centrality assigned to the people as a whole, the exclusive depository of political power (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, 2019).

However, over everything else, the differences are often profound, given the interconnections between the 'thin' populist ideology and other host ide-

ologies in which populism is embedded. In particular, a recent debate has developed in Europe on the variety of populist parties on the Left and the Right. Is populism in Europe an exclusive domain of radical right-wing parties, or do left-wing parties also find a home under the admittedly hospitable umbrella of populism?

This article stems from three premises. First, it focuses on the demand side. The literature agrees that this dimension is less explored than the supply side when it comes to the discussion about the morphology of populism (Piccolino and Soare, 2021), and we exploit a rich dataset to shed some light on voting behaviour for populist parties.

Second, the article explores two relationships that involve populism, and which are, ultimately, at least ambiguous. On the one hand, we have the interplay between populism and other host ideologies. On the other hand, we explore the connection between varieties of populism and policy preferences.

Third, we use Italy as our case study, a crucial country for the analysis of populism, to the extent that it has been labelled as a ‘populist paradise’ (Zanatta, 2002, p. 286). We focus our attention on a brief yet crucial period in which, for the first time ever, a genuine populist-only government ran a Western European country (Piccolino et al., 2018). More specifically, we compare here the voters of the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), now simply the League, and those of the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*) between the summer and autumn of 2018.

Based on these considerations, the article is organised into four sections. We first introduce the two parties, giving a brief account of their government experience. Next, we discuss the theoretical contributions dealing with the varieties of populism and those related to the differences between left-wing and right-wing populist voters. We then present our data and discuss the results, which reveal a markedly different profile between the electorates of the two government allies. The article ends by exploring the implications of our results for the debate on populism and its various specific ideological forms.

## 2. LEAGUE AND FIVE STAR MOVEMENT: THE (POPULIST) ODD COUPLE

In the Italian political landscape, it is possible to trace populist parties in each of the main populist waves that have crossed the continent. Indeed, in this country populism has reached a high level of normalisation, to the point that the ‘convergence around the themes and argumentative styles of populism [...] is now so wide-

spread [...] that what until a short time ago was considered by nearly everyone a pathological feature of representative democratic systems has now become one of their physiological components’ (Tarchi 2018, pp. 376-377; *translated by the authors*).

In this national context, the (Northern) League is certainly the most important populist party in the history of the country. This party was founded in 1991 as an evolution of a coalition formed for the 1989 European election by some regionalist parties of the North, under the brash yet attractive leadership of Umberto Bossi, the party’s indisputable leader. Ideologically, and particularly since the end of the 1990s, the Northern League adopted an ideological profile that was chameleon-like, yet close to that of the populist radical right-wing party family (Mudde, 2007), even though other authors have preferred to classify this party as populist and regionalist (McDonnell, 2006; Albertazzi, 2007).

Bossi’s party exploited the political cleavage between the centre and the periphery of the country which, despite the profound divisions between the North and the South, had been dormant until then. The Northern League was able to ignite the disaffection of the rich regions of the North against the perceived inefficacy and clientelism of the political-bureaucratic apparatus of Rome, the worst enemy in the party’s imagery of these early years (Diamanti, 1993; Biorcio, 1997; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001). Crucial in this growth was the symmetrical decline of the Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*), Italy’s largest party for decades, which had managed to bury the deep economic and cultural divisions between the various regions of the country in the name of anti-Communism and common Catholic roots, an appeal that was no longer attractive after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Morlino, 1996).

In the following years, the Northern League changed its ideological positioning and approach toward the centre-right several times. The party participated in three different governments (1994-1995; 2001-2006; 2008-2011) within the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi in which, however, it failed to assert its federalist plans. At the beginning of the 2010s, the party experienced an abrupt change in its platform. Bossi’s leadership was fatally compromised by a major scandal over the management of the public funding assigned to the party, which involved close relatives and allies of the leader. After the short pragmatic leadership of Roberto Maroni and a poor result in the 2013 general election, Matteo Salvini became leader of the Northern League. In a short period, the young leader radicalised the already hostile stances on immigration and European integration and, above all, quickly downplayed

the autonomist agenda to evolve into a national party (Albertazzi et al., 2018). This strategy clearly paid off in terms of electoral results. The party saw initial growth at the 2014 European election, to then reach unexplored levels of support in the 2018 general election, where the party was presented as just the *Lega*, obtaining 17.4% of the vote, and becoming the largest party in the centre-right coalition.

The history of the Five Star Movement is rather different (Tronconi, 2015; Corbetta, 2017; Biorcio & Natale, 2018). This party was born essentially around Beppe Grillo, a successful ex-comedian. In 2005 Grillo launched his blog, which echoed some themes already present in his theatrical production during the 1990s, such as environmentalism, anti-corruption, and consumer protection. The blog soon started to promote grassroots participation through the online platform Meetup, whose groups laid the foundations of the new party (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013). After a successful protest rally in 2007, Grillo obtained wide media visibility, which led to the foundation of the Five Star Movement in 2009.

After some good results in local elections, the party achieved its first major success in the 2013 general election, when it garnered 25.6% of the vote. After the election, the FSM refused any collaboration with the centre-left, which won an absolute majority in the lower house but not in the Senate. Grillo's party thus led a strenuous opposition to the cabinets led by the Democratic Party, in alliance with some centre-right parties, formed during the legislature. Despite some difficulties related to the political inexperience of its parliamentary groups, the FSM continued its growth in the subsequent 2018 general election, achieving 32.7% of the votes – becoming the largest Italian party by far – under the leadership of Luigi Di Maio, who had replaced Beppe Grillo as the party's leader in 2017.

The interpretation of the ideological mixture of the party posed a challenge for the literature. The FSM has been considered 'close to an ideal-typical image of a populist party as far as its political rhetoric and style of communication are concerned' (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019, p. 1259). Its staunch refusal of the left/right ideological continuum, the heterogeneous stances of its platform, the absence of analogous European parties, as well as its ability to attract voters from different origins (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2014), made the classification of the FSM particularly difficult. The use of themes usually associated with the Left, such as environmentalism and welfare intervention, has led some authors to classify the party within left-wing populism (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017; Santana & Rama, 2018), while others have

considered it close to a case of pure populism (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Soare & Stambazzi, 2017)

After the 2018 election, the Italian Parliament appeared thus divided into three main blocs, the centre-left coalition led during the election by Matteo Renzi, the centre-right gathered around Salvini, and the Five Star Movement. Initially, the FSM was open to a coalition with both the League and the Democratic Party, an offer rejected due to the stark opposition of Matteo Renzi's area. After weeks of negotiations, a cabinet was eventually formed by the two main populist parties. Their agreement was based on the 'Contratto per il governo del cambiamento' (*contract for the government of change*), a 58-page long document containing the preferred policy solutions of both the League and the Five Star Movement. The two parties struggled to find a name to lead the new cabinet, ultimately selecting an almost unknown Law professor, Giuseppe Conte, an independent figure close to the Five Star Movement. The leaders of both parties sat in the cabinet as Deputy Prime Ministers, with Di Maio at the Ministry for Economic Development, and Salvini as Minister of the Interior, in charge of the domestic security of the country.

The cabinet was marked by a lack of political experience among its members. It was composed almost entirely of ministers without previous government experience. Only two of them – Enzo Moavero Milanese (Foreign Affairs) and Paolo Savona (European Affairs) – had held cabinet positions before. Moreover, they were both independent, another crucial characteristic of this government which was, at the same time, the most populist and the most technocratic (considering only party political cabinets) in the history of the country: indeed, roughly one-third of its members had no political affiliation (Valbruzzi, 2018, p. 475).

The government had a rather difficult life. Salvini took advantage of his role to put his restrictive immigration policy at the heart of the public debate, overshadowing the FSM ministers. Despite important political successes, such as the introduction of the *reddito di cittadinanza* (citizenship income), the Five Star Movement failed to assert its role as the major partner in the coalition. After one year, the balance of power between the two partners reversed. At the 2019 European election, Matteo Salvini's party gained over 30% of the votes, while the FSM halved its share compared to one year earlier. As a result, during the summer, Salvini called for a snap election. Somewhat surprisingly, the Five Star Movement managed to find an agreement with the Democratic Party for a new cabinet, again with Giuseppe Conte at the helm.

To sum up, the experience of the first Conte cabinet can be considered a *fiasco* for both parties. The League

was undoubtedly able to put forward its preferred policy stances and increase its electoral share. However, at the same time, it clearly missed the opportunity to strengthen its position after the European election, being able in a few weeks to establish itself as the country's largest party and to be confined to the opposition. For the Five Star Movement, the inexperience of its government team, rather than the policy results achieved, led to an electoral bloodbath that abruptly stopped the growth of the party.

### 3. IDEOLOGY, ISSUE PREFERENCES, AND POPULISM

As mentioned, the discussion about the varieties of populism has already produced a significant set of theoretical reflections and empirical data. In this regard, an important distinction is the one suggested by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser between the *exclusionary* and *inclusionary* variants of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). The authors argue that this phenomenon 'hardly ever emerges in a pure form. Consequently, populism is almost always attached to certain other ideological features that are related to particular grievances existing in different regional contexts' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, p. 168). Accordingly, exclusionary populism would be prevalent in Europe, whereas in Latin America populism would predominantly take the inclusionary form. Both variants share a common populist core, but they often differ markedly in the economic and political spheres, as well as over the meaning of what constitutes the 'people' and the 'élites'. Exclusionary populism would emphasise the ethnical differences between non-native groups and the native population, favouring the latter in the distribution of economic and political resources, whereas inclusionary populism would highlight the social homogeneity of the people and the need to include the weakest social groups, regardless of their ethnocultural origins, in society (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, pp. 158-166).

Mény and Surel had already distinguished three different forms of the key reference of populism, the people, which 'often become confused in practice' (Mény & Surel, 2000, p. 185; *translated by the authors*). More specifically, the authors identify its political manifestation, the sovereign people (*demos*), interpreted as the sole source of political power, whose originality can be traced back to the 'perpetual disaffection with the effective practice of popular sovereignty and, by corollary, in defining the people/élite dichotomy as perpetually structuring' (Mény & Surel 2000, p. 191; *translated by the authors*). Then we have the class-people (*plebs*),

its economic component, a framing of the people as the bottom part of the society. This conceptualisation rejects the class struggle, and rather blames 'a parasitic and idle minority' (Mény & Surel, 2000, p. 202; *translated by the authors*), usually identified with the financial sector and other economic élites, for exploiting the small and hard-working people. Finally, we have the nation-people (*ethnos*), its historical-cultural manifestation, primarily constructed on a negative basis, starting from the ethnical and cultural elements not belonging to the people (Mény & Surel, 2000, pp. 204-214).

Recently, a third distinction has been debated in literature – that between left-wing and right-wing populism. According to scholars adopting the ideational approach, populism is a thin-centred ideology because of its limited scope and lack of consistency, beyond a few core concepts, compared to fully-fledged ideologies (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Moreover, since 'thin-centered ideologies are often attached to other worldviews, the term is a useful way of theorizing about populism's tendency to combine with other sets of ideas' (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019, p. 5).

Two positions compete for supremacy here, as described by Luke March (2017). A first position argues that, despite ideological differences, the placement on the Left/Right continuum may be less influential when it comes to populist parties. Populist *repertoires* would be rather independent of the Left/Right positioning, in that populists on both sides share profound commonalities not related to other ideological contents, and we may argue that '*populism trumps (underlying) ideology*' (March, 2017, p. 284). Others suggest that although populism marries different host ideologies, the placement on the Left/Right continuum remains more relevant, and there may indeed be important differences in the populist characteristics of a party depending on its ideological positioning. According to this perspective, '*ideology trumps populism*' (March, 2017, p. 285), in that what really matters in assessing the ideology of a populist party is the host ideology in which populism becomes lodged.

A second aspect, related to the ideological sphere, has to do with the role of issue preferences in explaining support for populist parties. By virtue of their different ideological roots, '[w]hile left populists base their argument on an economically defined dimension, the right uses a culturally defined one' (Loew & Faas, 2019, p. 496). Many questions in this field remain to be answered. Is populism able to gather voters with a set of coherent (and radical) policy preferences or, on the contrary, does the fact that it is not a fully-fledged ideology enable it to attract voters with a variety of policy concerns?

In this article, we look at these two different determinants of voting choice, political ideology, and issue preferences. Even though the literature on the voting determinants of populist parties on the Left and the Right in Western Europe has reached a high degree of sophistication and consistency, studies that directly address how the varieties of populist positions meet ideological beliefs and policy preferences are rather limited. Akkerman et al. (2017), analysing the case of The Netherlands, found a commonality in the explanatory power of populist attitudes, and profound differences on other policy variables. Pauwels (2014) highlighted distrust toward the functioning of democracy as a unifying factor for populist electorates, while Rooduijn (2018), taking into consideration fifteen countries, did not find unifying elements among the populist electorates, either at the socio-economic level or in terms of political inclinations.

This work introduces two new elements in the attempt to analyse the interplays between populism, host ideologies, and policy preferences. The first is the very nature of the parties under study. Unlike other analyses, in which the comparison is between left-wing and right-wing populist parties, we will compare one party with a clear position on the Left/Right continuum with another whose ideological makeup is so blurred as to make it difficult to identify another, different host ideology beyond the ‘thin’ populist one.

The second reason why these two parties are interesting for our purposes is the very special moment in their life that we examine. The opportunity is represented by the fact that both parties were in government together, while they were busy putting forward, quite vehemently, different policy solutions to pressing political problems. In other words, examining voting choice for these two parties in a period in which some of the most important policies they advocated during the electoral campaign had to be put into place.

For these reasons, all our hypotheses are related to the debate around the varieties of populism. First of all, compared to non-populist parties, we should expect a marked role played by populism in explaining the voting choice for two parties which, after all, despite marked ideological differences, still belong to a common populist *genus*:

H<sub>1</sub>: Populism will be a positive predictor of the chance of voting for the FSM and the League compared to non-populist parties.

However, we should also expect a difference in the *degree* of populism between these two parties. As we have seen, the Five Star Movement displayed an archetypal populist profile. By contrast, we should expect

that the vote for the League will be less linked with this phenomenon, since this party is more contaminated by other, more traditional, political content. This led us to expect that populism will be a better predictor of the chance of voting for the FSM compared to the case of the League:

H<sub>2</sub>: populism will be a stronger predictor of the chance of voting for the FSM compared to the League.

The following two hypotheses are closely connected with the first two, and deal with the relationship between populism and other host ideologies. As already noted, the electorates of the League and the FSM have rather different ideological profiles (Emanuele et al., 2022). Here we adopt the ideational approach to populism, namely that the ‘thin’ populist ideology will co-exist with other host ideologies. This interpretation, however, fits better with the League, a party clearly positioned on the Right, for which other host ideologies can be identified. It is thus possible to predict that both populism and the placement on the Right of the Left/Right continuum, a proxy of ideological positioning, will be associated with voting preferences for the League.

This framework is instead problematic for the Five Star Movement, a party that does not have a proper host ideology to encapsulate populism, and whose classification on the Left/Right continuum is rather unclear. Moreover, perhaps no other European party has rejected this line of division more than the FSM. In this case, we thus expect that the explicit *refusal* to place on Left/Right will be a determinant of the voting choice for this party, beyond a strong association with populism. Consequently, this leads us to formulate two hypotheses:

H<sub>3</sub>: All placements on the Left/Right continuum will be a negative predictor of the chance of voting for the FSM compared to the other parties.

H<sub>4</sub>: The placement on the Right of the political Left/Right continuum will be a positive predictor of the chance of voting for the League compared to the other parties.

A further hypothesis concerns the role of ideological explanations in accounting for policy preferences. Following the line of interpretation discussed in the previous hypotheses, we expect a different role of policy preferences in defining the voting choices for these parties. As we anticipated in our discussion on the first Conte cabinet, this experience was characterised by fierce competition between the two government parties in putting their own policies into practice.

The League, being an expression of exclusionary populism, should be linked with the preferences for a restriction of immigration policies, while it is difficult to make *a priori* assumptions on the preferences of these voters toward policies connected to the inclusionary variant form. On the one hand, these policies should not fit the ideological profile of the League. On the other hand, they were part of the agenda of the government supported by this party.

Although it is difficult to place the FSM even between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Font et al., 2021), this party has supported policies more linked to the former, such as the introduction of the *reddito di cittadinanza*, a guaranteed minimum income often misinterpreted as a basic income scheme (Baldini & Gori, 2019). In this case as well it is difficult to predict what position FSM voters will adopt on the policy supported by the other coalition partner. For this reason, we will be conservative in our hypotheses, limiting them to a comparison between each party and the rest of the Italian parties.

H<sub>5</sub>: Preferences for more restrictive immigration policies will be a positive predictor of the chance of voting for the League compared to other parties.

H<sub>6</sub>: Preferences favouring the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income will be a positive predictor of the chance of voting for the FSM compared to other parties.

#### 4. DATA AND VARIABLES

The data used in this study come from four waves of surveys (two in June, one in July and one in October) carried out by SWG in 2018 as part of its opt-in panel. In each wave, a sample of approximately 1,200 individuals was interviewed online, for a total of 4,935 completed interviews. The four samples are independent of each other, so the study is not a panel survey but rather a pooled cross-sectional survey. The four samples are representative of Italy's 18+ population, and are stratified by gender, age class, and geographical area. Interviewees answered a CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) questionnaire that includes a standard section, identical throughout the four waves, and a section on specific themes that varied across the waves. After collection, the data was also weighted by age, gender, education level and geographical areas, to ensure the representativeness of the samples to the population on such parameters. For weighting, we relied on the data of the general population with access to the Internet provided by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat 2018),

and we used the iterative proportional fitting procedure (Kolenikov, 2014).

Since we have hypotheses that compare the Five Star Movement and the League with non-populist parties and others that separately test them with the rest of Italian parties, we will use three different dependent variables, obtained from a question that asked respondents to indicate their voting intention. For our hypothesis on populism, we created a variable with three values: voting choice for FSM, the League, and non-populist parties. In the other cases, we will separately compare the voting choice for FSM and the League with *all* Italy's parties, including the respective governing ally. From these variables, we excluded non-voters, 'Don't know' answers, and undecided respondents, as it would have been impossible to assign them to a party choice.

The ideology of respondents was measured through two items. The first one encompasses a series of variables that estimate the attachment to, and the evaluation of, populism on the part of the respondents. This set of items differs from the study of populist attitudes, a recent and promising field of study (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020) but, nevertheless, it can give us a measure of the position of the respondents toward populism. We constructed it starting from three questions. The first one simply asked the respondents *What is populism according to you?* Two answers were possible: 'Demagoguery, systemic adulation of the crowd, making appeals to the lowest instincts of the population' and 'It is considering the needs of the people and listening to its voice'. The second question investigated whether the label of 'populist' attributed to a politician or a party has become a negative or a positive thing. Respondents positioned themselves on this question with a 4-point forced Likert-type scale, from 'Very positive' to 'Very negative'. The last item asked the respondents how close to or far from a populist proposal they feel, with three possible answers: 'Far', 'Partially close' and 'Close'. These questions were present only in the first wave. The three items (standardised Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). were ordered from the least to the most populist answer, standardised and added together to create a single scale.

The investigation of the traditional Left/Right continuum was operationalised through a question that asked the respondents to position themselves on this spectrum with six possible answers: 'No political area', 'Right', 'Centre-Right', 'Centre', 'Centre-Left' and 'Left'. We grouped the respondents placed on the Left and the Right of the spectrum with a single value for each of them, thus obtaining a nominal variable with four values considering the other two positions (refusing to place on the scale, and Centre).

As regards policy preferences, we focus on the two policy areas that represent the ‘flagship policies’ of the parties under scrutiny. Moreover, they are both present in the same wave, the second. Therefore, we will have:

- a ‘*Reddito di cittadinanza* index’. This variable was obtained from a question that asked the respondents their judgment on the introduction of this scheme, using a 4-point forced Likert-type scale from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’. Respondents agreeing with the introduction of the citizenship income were asked if they would have been favourable to its introduction also in the event that it had led to a high increase in public spending. Respondents disagreeing with the main question were asked to confirm their opinion in the event that the absence of such a scheme would leave millions of people in poverty. For each detailed question, there were three possible answers: ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Don’t Know’. From the combination of the answers to the main question, and those to the detailed questions, we produced various positions on the scale. For this calculation, we also used the ‘Don’t Know’ answers to the detailed questions, placing them halfway between those who responded ‘Yes’ and those who responded ‘No’. Even though they did not express an opinion on the more detailed questions, they nevertheless expressed an opinion on the main question, which is why we decided to keep them in the index<sup>1</sup>. We thus have a 12-point scale, scaled from the lowest (0) to the highest (1) support for the introduction of the citizenship income.
- an ‘Immigration index’. This was obtained from a question that asked the respondents the best strategy to deal with the migrant influx. Three options were possible: ensuring the rescue of migrants at sea; creating hotspot camps in Libya; and adopting a strict rejection policy. In line with the previous scale, each option was followed by a more detailed question with the following possibilities: the burden of dealing with the influx rests completely with Italy only (first case); inhumane treatment of migrants in Libya (second case); risks of deaths of migrants at sea (third case). We thus obtained a 9-point scale, scaled from the most sympathetic (0) to the strictest (1) stance on immigration.

Beyond the political-attitudinal variables to test our hypothesis, we also used a series of socio-demographic

<sup>1</sup> We also ran models eliminating the ‘Don’t Know’ answers to the detailed questions from these indexes. The results did not alter the results of our hypothesis testing, and we decided to keep the complete indexes.

variables for control, present in each wave. In particular, we have age, gender, education, and perception of personal economic situation. Moreover, the models on the whole sample had a variable to take into account the different waves, and in some of them we employed some variable transformations to deal with the lack of linearity. Table 1 shows a short description of the variables employed in the study. For categorical variables, we present relative frequencies *in lieu* of means. As a result of the “honeymoon” between the Italian electorate and Salvini during the Conte I cabinet, the share of voting intentions for the League is not very distant from that of the FSM.

This first descriptive data shows that both parties have a much higher mean on the populist index compared to non-populist parties, and the placements on the policy indexes also show a fracture between them and the other parties. The placement on the Left/Right axis reveals some interesting differences, in particular among the two governing allies. Among League voters, placement on the Right (62%) is prevalent over all other positionings, even though the share of people who refused to place themselves on this axis is conspicuous (22%). Among Five Star Movement voters, the explicit rejection of this axis is the most selected category (40%). As a result, and among those who are placed on this continuum, the Left is prevalent (32%) but we can observe also non-negligible percentages on the other two positions (17% for the Right, and 11% for the Centre).

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the models employed to test our first and second hypotheses. Since these hypotheses involve a comparison between the two governing allies and the non-populist parties, we employed multinomial regression models, using as a reference category the intention to vote for non-populist parties<sup>2</sup>. In the first model, beyond socio-demographic controls, we used only the populist index, while in the second we also added the placement on the Left/Right continuum. However, this variable will merely serve as a control variable, and not as a test for our third and fourth hypotheses. In these two hypotheses, we deal with separate comparisons between the League and the FSM and the rest of the

<sup>2</sup> Some questions may be raised regarding the applicability of this label for Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia), a right-wing party with an ideological profile similar to that of the League. We ran additional models excluding Brothers of Italy from the reference category, i. e. employing it as a separate category from the other opposition parties. This operation did not alter the results of the test of our hypotheses.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the variables employed in the study (weighted data, unless otherwise specified).

	Total Sample			Parties		
	Mean/Rel. Freq. (st dv)	N (Unweighted)	Min/Max (continuous variable)	Non-Populist Parties	FSM	League
				Mean/Rel. Freq.	Mean/Rel. Freq.	Mean/Rel. Freq.
<b>Voting intention</b>	-	<b>3,687</b>	-			
<i>Non-populist parties</i>	0.39	1,612	-			
<i>FSM</i>	0.32	1,118	-			
<i>League</i>	0.29	957	-			
<b>Left/Right Positioning</b>	-	<b>4,585</b>	-			
<i>No political area</i>	0.27	966	-	0.09	0.4	0.22
<i>Left</i>	0.39	2,079	-	0.64	0.32	0.09
<i>Centre</i>	0.08	389	-	0.06	0.11	0.07
<i>Right</i>	0.27	1,151	-	0.21	0.17	0.62
<b>Populism Index</b>	<b>0.23 (2.6)</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>-3.29/4.43</b>	<b>-1.5 (2.06)</b>	<b>1.48 (1.99)</b>	<b>2.08 (2.09)</b>
<b>Reddito di cittadinanza Index</b>	<b>0.57 (0.32)</b>	<b>1,113</b>	<b>0-1</b>	<b>0.45 (0.3)</b>	<b>0.77 (0.22)</b>	<b>0.59 (0.31)</b>
<b>Immigration Index</b>	<b>0.51 (0.35)</b>	<b>1,120</b>	<b>0-1</b>	<b>0.32 (0.33)</b>	<b>0.57 (0.30)</b>	<b>0.75 (0.25)</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>44.55 (15.1)</b>	<b>4,929</b>	<b>18-93</b>	<b>44.13 (16.51)</b>	<b>44.11 (14.21)</b>	<b>45.48 (14.53)</b>
<b>Gender</b> (Dummy, Female=1)	<b>0.49</b>	<b>4,935</b>	-	<b>0.41</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Education</b>	-	<b>4,935</b>	-			
<i>High</i>	0.22	1,868	-	0.27	0.19	0.14
<i>Medium</i>	0.51	2,533	-	0.49	0.55	0.52
<i>Low</i>	0.28	534	-	0.24	0.26	0.35
<b>Difficulties with household income</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>4,840</b>	-	<b>0.51</b>	<b>0.68</b>	<b>0.63</b>
<b>Waves</b>	-	<b>4,935</b>	-			
First	0.26	1,224	-	0.28	0.27	0.23
Second	0.25	1,223	-	0.24	0.26	0.26
Third	0.25	1,253	-	0.25	0.26	0.25
Fourth	0.24	1,235	-	0.23	0.21	0.25

Source: authors' own table, based on SWG data.

Italian parties, while in this case our reference category is limited to non-populist parties.

An initial inspection of the first model allows us to see that both parties, compared to non-populist parties, have a highly positive and significant coefficient of the index of populism. This finding is in line with our first hypothesis, and it highlights the common populist root of the FSM and the League.

Contrary to our expectations, however, the coefficient among voters for the Five Star Movement is *lower* compared to that of the League. This picture does not change in the second model, where we added the placement on the Left/Right axis as a control. Using the relative risk ratios, we should expect that one-unit change in our populist scale will be associated with an increase of 1.76 (FSM) and 1.97 (League) times in the chance of voting for the two then governing parties compared to

the baseline. In both models, however, the differences in the index of populism between the two parties did not attain statistical significance. In other words, we found support for our first hypothesis, without however supporting evidence for a difference in the degree of populism between the two parties. Our second hypothesis is thus rejected.

While the first two models helped us in ascertaining a common populist root between the Five Star Movement and the League, in Table 3 we show the models to test the rest of our hypotheses, using separate logistic models.

In the third and fifth models, we tested the role of the Left/Right continuum with some socio-demographic controls, with a sample crossing all waves of our survey. These first results are in line with our third and fourth hypotheses. Compared to the baseline of the refusal to

**Table 2.** Multinomial Logit Models on Populist Index.

	Reference Category: Non-Populist Parties			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Populism Index and controls		Populism Index and controls, including Left/Right positioning	
	FSM vs Non-populists	League vs Non-populists	FSM vs Non-populists	League vs Non-populists
	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.	Coeff.
Populism Index	0.57*** (0.07)	0.7*** (0.08)	0.56*** (0.07)	0.68*** (0.1)
Left/Right positioning ( <i>baseline category: No political area</i> )				
Left			-1.21* (0.49)	-1.50* (0.67)
Centre			-1.24 (0.65)	-1.02 (0.74)
Right			-1.79** (0.61)	0.94 (0.63)
Age (centred)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Age (centred squared)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)
Female	0.34 (0.32)	0.67 (0.35)	0.25 (0.33)	0.76 (0.42)
Education ( <i>baseline category: Middle</i> )				
High	0.25 (0.31)	-0.37 (0.37)	0.33 (0.32)	-0.32 (0.43)
Low	0.84 (0.5)	0.84 (0.50)	0.60 (0.49)	0.83 (0.58)
Difficulties with household income	0.56 (0.34)	0.10 (0.37)	0.58 (0.36)	0.08 (0.39)
Constant	-0.7 (0.4)	-0.81 (0.47)	-0.41 (0.64)	-0.78 (0.8)
N	503	492		
Log likelihood	-402.938	-335.066		
McFadden's R2 (adjusted in parentheses)	0.238 (0.208)	0.350 (0.308)		

Source: authors' own table, using SWG data. Robust standard error in parentheses. Models weighted for socio-demographic characteristics. Significance level: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

place on the Left/Right continuum, all the positions on this spectrum show negative and significant coefficients among Five Star Movement voters. Interestingly, however, the coefficients for placement on the Right and the Left are much more pronounced and significant compared to placement on the Centre ( $b = -0.42$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ). By contrast, among League voters, compared to the baseline of non-placement, self-placement on the Right is positive and highly significant.

Moving to the fourth and the sixth models, where we added both the indexes on *reddito di cittadinanza* and immigration, two findings stand out. First, for both

parties, the indexes of their flagship policies are positive and highly significant. Thus, for each party, placement on their preferred policy area is a relevant predictor, corroborating our hypotheses 5 and 6. However, it is interesting to note how voters for these two parties place themselves on the other ally's policies. Among Five Star Movement voters, on the index on immigration, we observe a concave relationship, which was corrected by introducing a centred squared term, and a positive coefficient which just fails to achieve statistical significance ( $b = 0.75$ ,  $p = 0.054$ ). Among voters for Salvini's party, the relationship with the immigration index appears slightly

**Table 3.** Logit Models for Left/Right Positioning and Policy Preferences.

	Model 3 Left/Right Positioning	Model 4 Left/Right Positioning and Policies	Model 5 Left/Right Positioning	Model 6 Left/Right Positioning and Policies
	FSM vs Other Parties Coeff.	FSM vs Other Parties Coeff.	League vs Other Parties Coeff.	League vs Other Parties Coeff.
Left/Right positioning ( <i>baseline category: No political area</i> )				
Left	-1.18*** (0.13)	-0.75* (0.3)	-1.66*** (0.19)	-1.50*** (0.42)
Center	-0.41* (0.19)	-0.59 (0.49)	-0.12 (0.20)	0.38 (0.45)
Right	-1.83*** (0.15)	-1.49*** (0.32)	1.25*** (0.14)	1.37*** (0.31)
Immigration Index (centred, model 4, squared root, model 6)	-	0.75 (0.39)	-	3.61*** (0.56)
Immigration Index (centred squared)	-	-3.93*** (1.11)	-	-
<i>Reddito di cittadinanza</i> Index	-	3.35*** (0.42)	-	-0.85* (0.4)
Age (centred model 3)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)
Age (centred squared)	-0.00** (0.00)	-		
Female	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.29 (0.22)	0.30** (0.12)	0.74** (0.25)
Education ( <i>baseline category: Middle</i> )				
High	-0.13 (0.10)	0.08 (0.22)	-0.36** (0.11)	-0.25 (0.27)
Low	-0.16 (0.16)	-0.35 (0.34)	0.24 (0.16)	0.35 (0.32)
Difficulties with household income	0.38*** (0.10)	0.65** (0.22)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.25 (0.25)
Waves ( <i>baseline category: First</i> )				
Second	0.03 (0.14)		0.15 (0.16)	
Third	-0.08 (0.14)		0.23 (0.16)	
Fourth	-0.19 (0.14)		0.29 (0.16)	
Constant	0.29 (0.17)	-0.79 (0.5)	-1.29*** (0.18)	-3.73*** (0.67)
N	3434	811	3434	811
Log likelihood	-1868.975	-376.890	-1577.641	-308.937
McFadden's R2 (adjusted in parentheses)	0.095 (0.088)	0.221 (0.196)	0.201 (0.195)	0.325 (0.301)

Source: authors' own tables using SWG data. Standard error in parentheses. Models weighted for socio-demographic characteristics. Significance level: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

logarithmic-like, and we transformed it with a squared root term which proved to be highly significant and positive. Moreover, placement on the *reddito di cittadinanza* index is even *negative*, suggesting that a one-unit change on this index will reduce the chance of voting for the League, a coefficient which however barely achieves statistical significance ( $b = -0.852$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ). In other words, for both parties, we can observe a strong role of their preferred policies in explaining the chance of voting for them, and a weak or even negative role of the other main policy supported by their government.

Second, the coefficients on the Left/Right axis of League voters, and especially that on the Right, do not particularly differ from the model that does not take into account the policy indexes. Among Five Star Movement voters, by contrast, we can observe a sharper reduction of the coefficient of the Left placement, and a coefficient on the Centre that is no longer significant, a finding that does not allow us to fully confirm our third hypothesis. If we regress on the same sample of the fourth model the equation without the policy indexes, both placements have indeed much more explanatory power and statistical significance ( $-1.03$ ,  $p = 0.012$  for the Centre,  $-1.299$   $p < 0.001$  for the Left). In other words, this finding may suggest a mediating role of the policy indexes on the Left/Right as regards the Five Star Movement.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This article tried to explore the voting determinants of two of the most successful contemporary populist parties, the Five Star Movement and the League, in a crucial period for Italian – and, arguably, European – populism. More specifically, we relied on the literature on the varieties of populism to account for affinities and divergences between the electorates of the two (then) governing allies. Our results confirmed most of our hypotheses, but also highlighted some important *caveats*.

Both parties share a clear populist root. Our index of populism has introduced a line of demarcation between the Five Star Movement and the League, on the one hand, and non-populist parties, on the other. However, contrary to our expectations, we did not observe a significant difference in the degree of populism between the two electorates, whereas our theoretical framework suggested a higher level of populism in an ‘almost pure’ populist party, the Five Star Movement, compared to the League. The ‘pureness’ of the populism of Grillo’s party appears observable in another focus of our analysis, placement on the Left/Right continuum. We thus observed a party where populism co-exists with a clear

ideological anchorage (the League) and another one whose populism is more associated with the refusal to place on the ideological spectrum.

Compared to the rest of the Italian parties, in the FSM electorate, all placements on the Left/Right continuum have shown a negative coefficient compared to the explicit refusal of this line of division, even though our models suggested a mediating role of the policy areas. Among League voters, we found a strong and significant role of placement on the Right. The electorate of this party is thus rooted in the traditional political line of division between Left and Right, even though a meaningful share of the voters of Salvini’s party rejects the validity of this axis.

In line with our expectations, the preferences for the policy supported by their respective party have been a powerful predictor of the voting choices for the FSM and the League. A crucial question remained: what role has been played, in each electorate, by the policy supported by the *other* government partner? We did not draw up any hypothesis on this effect, as these policies, on the one hand, contrasted with the populism embodied by each party while, on the other hand, being put forward by the government they supported. Our analysis showed a weak role of these policies, and in the case of the League even a negative coefficient for the index of the *reddito di cittadinanza*.

In other words, beyond a common populist root, both parties showed profound differences both on the ideological and the policy levels within their electorates. These findings confirm the scarce cohesion among the two allies and, among other factors, may account for the failure of their joint cabinet after just one year of governing together.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study are available for replication upon request to the authors.

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