

Populism and affective polarization in the times of “Giorgia”: an assessment of the effect on European voting

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Abstract:

Despite the attention paid by comparative studies to the themes of populism and affective polarization (AP), the connections between these two concepts remain under-investigated. Both of them describe the conflict between ingroup (“us”) and outgroup (“them”) individuals. Nonetheless, although in the first case, the conflict pits the people against the elite, in the second case conflict occurs between party supporters and other parties (e.g., leaders, members). Even if conceptually and empirically separate, populism and AP are key explanatory factors of today’s politics and voting behavior. The increase in voter discontent, also fueled by a succession of economic, migratory, and pandemic crises, has indeed facilitated the rise of populists and affective sentiments. Do they work in parallel or show some points of contact? How do they interact in voting choices across different parties?

In this paper, we analyze the Italian context to shed light on the dynamics and effects that AP and support for populist parties produce on voting behavior. We present new data from a dedicated survey conducted in Italy during the 2024 European elections, and our analysis highlights the complex implications stemming from these two political phenomena: Whereas AP is positively associated with voter turnout and support for ideologically driven parties, certain forms of populism are negatively associated with turnout and influence party choice in distinct ways.

Keywords:

European election; vote; populism; affective polarization

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Introduction

Populism and affective polarization (AP) are among the most influential phenomena in politics today. Populist rhetoric has emerged in party strategies across nations and ideologies, while some parties have been explicitly labeled as “populist” for their opposition against political elites (Noury and Roland 2020). The recent electoral successes of these parties show that populist sentiments have risen in western societies. Similarly, the ways in which people “affectively” polarize in support for a party – perhaps most notably, their rejection of the idea that opposing parties may govern – has found fertile ground, especially during recent electoral campaigns. Europe is not immune from these sentiments, which are giving rise to the electoral successes of new political actors (Milner 2021; Hahm et al. 2023; Reiljan et al. 2024).

Populism and AP also appear to affect ‘second-order’ European elections. In 2019 and 2024, mainstream pro-European integration parties hold the majority within the European Parliament, but the electoral success of populist parties remained high (Mudde 2019). In a context where high volatility, low participation and reactions to incumbent national governments play a crucial role, populist and affective sentiments could be crucial to explain voting dynamics.

Populism and AP have played a central role in shaping voting behavior in US presidential elections, where they tend to exert a mutually reinforcing influence in support of specific parties or leaders (Garzia et al. 2022). In the European context, however, the impact of these factors may differ due to distinct institutional and political configurations, such as multi-party systems and proportional electoral rules. On the continent, voters affiliated with socialist and confessional parties—which typically score low on populism indices—often display strong partisan identities rooted in long-standing political traditions. Conversely, supporters of populist radical-right parties have demonstrated a powerful convergence of populist attitudes and affective polarization (Harteveld et al., 2022), suggesting that the interaction between these dimensions may vary considerably across party families and electoral systems. According to these arguments, we want to investigate *to what extent populism and AP affected voting behavior in the 2024 European elections, and whether they have a mutual reinforcing on voting.*

In our analysis, we address the Italian case, taking advantage of an ad hoc survey conducted in the context of the 2024 EU elections. In addition to presenting an opportunity to use a unique dataset with key indicators, the analysis of this case appears particularly interesting due to factors such as high levels of abstentionism, high electoral volatility, and post-crises effects, all of which have shown a relevant and peculiar impact on voting (Angelucci et al. 2024; Giovannini et al. 2023¹;

¹ See the IJES Volume 86 n. 1 (2023). Available at <https://oaj.fupress.net/index.php/qoe/issue/view/822>.

Chiaromonte et al. 2022). Because Italy has often been a political bellwether—experiencing phenomena that later emerge in other European countries—understanding how populism and AP affect voting in this case may contribute to unveiling similar dynamics in the whole EU.

The following sections will define the concepts at the core of this study, describe their theoretical connections, and present the research hypotheses. We then describe the data and the analysis method before addressing the results. The concluding section will wrap up our findings.

Italy's precarious stability on the eve of 2024 European Parliament elections

To test our hypotheses, we focus on the Italian case in the context of the 2024 European elections. This case is crucial for understanding current and prospective developments in electoral dynamics, given its similarities with other national contexts and its potential implications for the evolution of national political landscapes within the EU.

First, Italy's current political stability has emerged from a period of turbulence. During the XVIII legislature (2018–2022), three different governments were formed: The first two were led by the Five Star Movement (M5S) leader Giuseppe Conte and the third was a technocratic-led government supported by almost all political parties. The roots of this instability can be traced to both the increasing multipolarity of the party system, which granted smaller parties significant leverage, as well as the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In this context, the 2022 national elections took place amid a climate of uncertainty and fragmentation similar to that observed in other EU countries (Chiaromonte et al. 2022).

As in other contexts, the political landscape of the Italian party system remained relatively stable. However, volatility was a defining feature of the 2022 elections, as Giorgia Meloni's small party experienced a dramatic surge in support, rising from approximately 4% in 2018 to 26% of the vote (Chiaromonte et al. 2022).

On the eve of the 2024 EU elections, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) continued to enjoy a "honeymoon phase" with voters, bolstered by strong economic performance and significant public spending under the NextGenEU framework. Her decision to not support Mario Draghi's government successfully channeled popular discontent and anti-establishment sentiments, drawing voters away from other populist forces (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2023).

Like in other EU countries, Italy's party system has shifted toward the extremes of the political spectrum, both in voter preferences and party leadership positioning, as evidenced by Elly Schlein's victory in the Partito Democratico (PD) primaries. The rise of non-moderate leaders may be linked to the growing prevalence of AP sentiments (Bettarelli et al. 2023), and to the perceived need to break away from moderate elites. In this context, the leadership of the formerly most prominent populist

parties, M5S and the Lega Salvini Premier (formerly the Northern League - NL), remained unchanged. However, their participation in the governments of the XVIII legislature significantly weakened their ability to attract anti-system voters. In this regard, Italy is among a growing number of cases where major populist parties have assumed governmental responsibilities. As such, it may provide valuable insights into how anti-establishment sentiments and affective feelings shape electoral results in a fragmented and radicalized party system.

Affective polarization, populism, and voting behavior: Selective literature review and hypotheses

In this article, we address the influence of populism and AP on electoral turnout and voting choice in the Italian 2024 European elections. Given their second-order nature—characterized by lower salience and emotional engagement (Reif and Schmitt 1980)—European elections would appear less susceptible to the influence of AP on voter turnout. Nonetheless, the technocratic character of the European Union and its policy decisions have consistently served as focal points for populist critique, reinforcing the anti-establishment narratives promoted by these parties (e.g., UKIP in the United Kingdom). Consequently, European elections provide a valuable context for assessing the mobilization potential of populist parties, which are likely to intensify their anti-establishment appeals by directly targeting EU institutions and key political actors. Indeed, recent research suggests that populist criticism of the EU has proven effective in mobilizing electoral support in both European (Milner 2021) and national contests (Conti et al. 2022).

AP has increasingly been considered in analyzing voting behavior, given its growing relevance in the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019) and other contexts (i.e., Wagner 2021). According to Iyengar et al. (2012), AP captures both strong positive feelings toward one's in-party (positive partisanship) and strong negative feelings toward out-parties (negative partisanship). It differs from ideological polarization in that it is driven by feelings rather than issue-based differences.

Most of the literature on AP has focused on its negative consequences, such as the weakening of social cohesion and inter-group positive interactions or the growing preference for partisan goals over democratic norms (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Recent scholarship has focused on its positive effects, stressing AP's role in increasing political mobilization (i.e. electoral turnout). For example, Ward and Tavits (2019) found that AP stimulated a greater perceived importance of voting, thereby triggering higher turnout. Using the same dataset but widening the scope of the research, Wagner (2021) reached similar conclusions, stressing how AP is associated with a greater propensity to participate in politics. Building on these studies, Harteveld and Wagner (2023) reached yet more

solid conclusions; the positive impact of AP on turnout holds even after accounting for positive partisanship, ideological polarization, and reverse causality. Ferreira da Silva and Garzia (2024) reported similar findings, also considering the positive impact of AP toward political leaders on turnout, although their analysis showed that AP toward political parties has an even stronger positive effect on electoral participation. This phenomenon explained by social identity theory: Higher AP increases the salience of party competition and its perceived stake (Ward and Tavits 2019). Affectively polarized citizens will consider opponents to be enemies and are encouraged to participate to keep opponents out of power. Based on this scholarship, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. Citizens having higher levels of affective polarization have a higher probability to vote.

Although the relationship between AP and voter turnout has been diffusely examined, less attention has been paid to AP's impact on voter choice. Pierce and Lau (2019) have found that in US elections, AP is positively correlated with voters' likelihood of choosing of candidates whose policies are more closely aligned to their interests. According to Hartevelde (2021), AP in the Netherlands is stronger between those who support and oppose the populist radical right. Rodon (2022) reported that in Spain, individuals displaying higher AP were more likely to vote for left-wing parties. The heterogeneity and limited scope of these findings do not allow us to predict clear patterns in the case of the 2024 EU elections in Italy. Nevertheless, by emphasizing certain conceptual dimensions of AP, it is possible to outline preliminary expectations and identify plausible trends to be investigated through an exploratory analysis. Because AP favors identity over policy (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015), we may expect voters with higher AP to prioritize a candidate or party's symbolic representation of their values rather than specific policy proposals. This strengthens positive partisanship, encouraging voters to align with their party and making them more likely to vote based on party identity rather than policy positions or candidate qualities. Cleavages may favor the identity dimension of partisanship by distinguishing blocs of opposing individuals (e.g., left vs right, regionalists vs nationalists, confessional parties vs secularists). Accordingly, parties that clearly emphasize a position on a cleavage may attract supporters with high AP; on the other hand, personal parties (Rahat, 2024) and "catch-all" parties (Gunther and Diamond 2003) tend to downsize the identity issue in favor of the paramount figure of the leader or of opinion moods. Moreover, another component of AP (negative partisanship) stresses a strong sense of hostility to the out-groups. Consequently, citizens may choose parties that provide a sense of defense against the perceived threat posed by out-groups.

These AP features reduce the likelihood that voters will consider candidates from opposing parties and thus narrow voters' choices, which may allow us to predict that affectively polarized citizens will be more likely to favor parties that appear most aligned with their emotional loyalties toward the in-group and that more viscerally manifest their opposition to out-groups.

We turn now to populism. Here, we follow the ideational approach (Hawkins et al., 2019), which intends populism as a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ 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). Populism is often identified with the “supply side” (i.e., party level), considering parties' programmatic platforms or leaders' discourses (i.e., Rooduijn 2013). Studies on the general public “demand side” consider populism to be a multi-dimensional concept whose ideological core consists of three interrelated components: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichean perspective (Akkerman et al. 2014). Regarding the first, populists emphasize the centrality of ordinary people, intended as the embodiment of democratic virtues and the basis of democratic decision-making processes. Ostensibly, the people share a single will and have the same interests, which only the populist party can represent. Anti-elitism regards the elite as an evil homogeneous group, usually including the political establishment in the form of established political parties perceived as unresponsive, incompetent, and corrupt. Finally, the Manichean perspective considers the distinction between people and the elite in morally binary terms as a fight between good and evil.

Although the literature on populism has tended to stress its detrimental effects on democracy (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Rummens 2017; Castaldo 2018; Castaldo and Memoli 2024), several authors have highlighted the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy (Mudde and Rovina Kaltwasser 2012), and others have even suggested a positive role in enhancing inclusiveness and participation (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). In this perspective, populism is seen as a corrective to democracy because it seeks to mobilize the people in a struggle against existing power structures. Because this process may increase the participation of excluded groups or bring neglected issues back into the political debate, several studies have suggested a positive relationship between populism and turnout. The tests have produced mixed results, with more studies indicating a positive but conditional impact of populism on turnout. For example, Spittler (2018) finds that right-wing populist parties increase electoral participation by addressing neglected issues, dissatisfied voters, and citizens with anti-establishment attitudes. Verbeek and Zaslove (2016, 318) asserted that in Italy, populism “has been partly functional [...] in contributing to establish more contestation.” Avritzer (2002) argued that populists in Latin America mobilize the formerly disenfranchised to participate in politics. With a few exceptions (e.g., Nemcok et al. 2023), the literature stresses the positive effect of populism on turnout.

However, this effect is not strong, and it is found mainly in specific segments of society (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015) or in certain regions (Leininger and Meijers 2021). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Citizens with higher levels of populism are more likely to vote.

Relevant to our investigation of the relationship between populism and voting choice, past literature has addressed the connection between populist attitudes and support for populist parties. Are citizens with high populist attitudes more likely to vote for populist parties? Rooduijn (2014) and Akkerman et al. (2014) have found support for an affirmative answer to this question. More recent studies (e.g., Castanho Silva et al. 2020), as well as other research using partially different indicators of populism (e.g., Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013), have reached similar conclusions. However, a few studies (e.g., Stanley 2011) have questioned this finding. Other research has sought to disentangle the role of host ideologies and thin populist ideology and their constitutive components. For example, Neuner and Wrátil (2022) found that in the German case, only some elements of the populist ideology (people-centrism) effectively increased the propensity to vote for a populist party. Moreover, these authors found that host ideology issues were more effective in influencing how citizens vote. In a replication study, Castanho Silva, Neuner, and Wrátil (2023) applied Neuner and Wrátil's framework to the United States, finding that although their general conclusions held even in a different context, there were also several differences (e.g., greater impact of anti-elitism vs people-centrism). In this sense, the effect of populism's sub-components is context-dependent, stressing the value of testing their specific influence on different contexts. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. Citizens with stronger populist attitudes are more likely to support populist parties.

Data and Method

We ran several logistic regression models to test our hypotheses using data collected from an original survey fielded in the context of the 2024 European election in Italy.² Five dichotomous variables represent our dependent variables. They have been created by recoding the answers to the question on voting behavior.³ The first variable distinguishes those who did not vote (coded as 0) from those who did (coded as 1), and the other five binary variables distinguishing voters for the most relevant parties/lists: PD, Forza Italia (FI)–Noi Moderati, Lega Salvini Premier, M5S, and FdI. These variables distinguish voters for each party from those who voted for another party.⁴ The leading independent variables are represented by three indices, which express the different dimensions of populism (Table 1), as well as by AP.

Following Akkerman (2014), we measured citizens' attitudes using a 12-item ordinal battery. By applying a polychoric principal component analysis (PPCA) to our indicators,⁵ it was possible to aggregate our information in three indices and obtain a synthesis (factor scores) that expresses the respondents' different populist dimensions.

² The sample, which consists of 3,431 interviews conducted by the SWG using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) technique, is representative of the adult population residing in Italy. The sample design, distributed according to five stratification parameters—area of residence, age group, gender, educational qualification, and party voted in the last European elections—is based on Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) and Eligendo data from Italy's Ministry of the Interior. Further information on the number of contacts, interviews, missed responses, and the post-stratification weights technique is available in Table A1 reported in the Appendix.

³ The question reads as follows: "Which party did you vote for in the recent European Parliament elections?" The answers are as follows: 1 "Partito Democratico (PD)," 2 "Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra," 3 "Azione," 4 "Pace Terra e Dignità," 5 "Stati Uniti D'Europa (Italia Viva e +Europa)," 6 "Forza Italia (Fi) – Noi Moderati," 7 "Lega Salvini Premier (Lega)," 8 "Movimento 5 Stelle (MCS)," 9 "Libertà," 10 "Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)," 11 "Pace Terra e Dignità," 12 "Altro" 13 "voted blank ballot or invalid vote," 14 "did not vote," 15 "does not have the right to vote," 98 "don't know or don't remember," 99 "don't know." We deleted all cases that answered, "does not have the right to vote," "don't know or don't remember" and "don't know."

⁴ Descriptive statistics of variables used are reported in Table A3 in the Appendix.

⁵ We eliminated all cases that answered "I do not know" or "no answer" to the 12 questions from the analysis. See Table A4 for percentages.

	Anti-establishment populism	Rousseau populism	Pluralism
The politicians in the Italian Parliament must follow the will of the people		0.801	
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important political decisions	0.670	0.421	
The political differences between the elites and the people are larger than the differences between the people		0.690	
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician	0.667	0.418	
Elected officials talk too much and take too little action		0.697	0.325
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil	0.706		
What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles	0.608	0.467	
In a democracy, it is important to make compromises among different viewpoints			0.746
It is important to listen to the opinion of other groups		0.522	0.615
Politicians should lead rather than follow the people			0.755
Our country would be better governed if important decisions were left up to successful business people	0.834		
Our country would be better governed if important decisions were left to independent experts	0.581		
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.822		
Barlett’s Test (Sig.)	0.000		
Eigenvalue	2.923	2.506	1.878
Alpha di Cronbach	0.781	0.755	0.513

Table 1. Polychoric factor analysis on Akkermann’s populism scale in Italy after the 2024 European elections

As reported in Table 1, the three indices allow us to distinguish three types (factors) of attitudes within the Italian electorate, two referring to populism and one to pluralism. The first, “anti-establishment populism,” merging part of the populist and elitist attitudes of Akkermann et al. (2014) by denoting a particular opposition to the political class. Although seemingly contradictory, (given that populism includes anti-elitism among its key features), our results mirror those of Akkermann et al. (2014), which provide theoretical and empirical justifications for this partial overlapping of populist and elitist attitudes. In this perspective, anti-elitism targets the political establishment represented by politicians, who are seen as siding against ordinary people. According to this view, other (e.g., economic, technocratic) elites are acceptable and preferable to political elites. We labeled the second type “Rousseau populism” because, while including items referring to different sub-

components of populism, it shows a prevalence of people-centrist attitudes. The third type, pluralism, which overlaps with Akkermann et al.'s (2014) pluralist attitude, represents the opposite of populism and is coherent with democratic values.

AP has been operationalized through respondents' different levels of distance/appreciation, expressed on a scale from 1 to 11, for the five largest parties in the competition.⁶ Relying on Wagner (2021), we have first calculated the average absolute party like–dislike difference relative to each respondent's average party like–dislike score:

$$AF = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^p (like_{ip} - \overline{like}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

where p is the party, i the individual respondent and $like_{ip}$ the like–dislike score assigned to each party p by individual i . Subsequently, because “the affective polarization measures in multiparty systems should then capture the extent the single in-group is seen positively compared to the out-group” (see Reiljan 2019, quoted in Wagner 2021: 3), we calculated the weighted affective polarization (WAP) equation for parties j and voter i by applying the following formula:

$$Weighted\ AP = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^p v_p \frac{(like_{ip} - \overline{like}_{ip})^2}{n_p}}$$

where v_p is the vote share of each party, measured as a proportion with a range from 0 to 1.

We controlled the relationships between dependent and independent variables by using several types of sociodemographic information (see Table A2), such as gender, age, education, and occupation. We also considered information related to politics (political trust and political interest), the economy (national economic perception of last year), and local contexts (regions).

⁶ The exact question is “I will list a series of parties that are part of the Italian Parliament. Express a judgment on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not like that party at all, and 10 means that you like that party a lot.” For the five parties analyzed, 0 represents the maximum distance from the party, while 10 expresses the maximum closeness or appreciation for the party in question. See average values by affective polarization in Table A3 in the Appendix.

Analysis

Table 2 presents a (logit) regression regarding the choice to vote or not during the 2024 European elections in Italy.

		Not-Voting vs. Voting	
		OR	Std. err
Anti-establishment populism		0.978	0.088
Rousseau populism		0.724***	0.066
Pluralism		0.983	0.091
Affective Polarization (weighted)		1.656***	0.156
Political trust index		1.727***	0.194
Political interest (not at all+a little)		1.627*	0.318
Left_right self-placement scale		0.880**	0.035
Gender (man)		0.895	0.169
Age (19-92)		1.012*	0.006
Education (not educated-elementary)			
	Middle School	4.653*	3.242
	High School	6.747**	4.417
	Degree	7.078**	4.759
	Master-PhD	7.685**	5.597
Occupation (not employed)		1.341	0.288
Economic perception of last year - (remain the same)			
	somewhat worse+much worse	1.497	0.308
	somewhat improved+much improved	1.666	0.612
Regions (Piemonte)		@	
Constant		1.654	1.695
	Pseudo R2	0.136	
	LR (Prob>chi2)	0.000	
	Number of observation	2,073	

Table 2 Affective polarization and populism on voting turnout in the 2024 European elections in Italy

The different types of populist and pluralist attitudes do not affect voting participation except the Rousseau's populist type, which shows a negative significant value ($or = 0.724$). Accordingly, the higher the respondents' level of Rousseau's populism, the lower the likelihood they will vote. Hence, our H2, which suggests a positive relation between populism and turnout, is not supported by our analysis. As expected, our data support H1: Citizens showing high levels of AP were likelier to vote ($or = 1.656$).⁷ These findings are consistent with those observed in other Southern European countries characterized by high levels of AP (Bettarelli et al. 2023). Our control variables indicate that voting participation is higher among those who are more interested in politics ($or = 1.627$) and more inclined to trust political institutions ($or = 1.727$). Voting tends to increase with age, among different levels of education, and in left-side voters ($or = 0.880$).

We turn now to the effects of populism and AP on party choice. Despite its ideological affinities with the radical right and its populist tendencies before coming to power in 2022, FdI represents a national conservative party (Vassallo and Vignati 2023). Although the different dimensions of populism and pluralism do not produce statistically significant effects on the vote for FdI, AP shows a significant and positive effect such that FdI voters are more likely to be polarized ($or = 1.788$). This result is likely due to the strong sense of identity among FdI voters, whose ideological principles today are based on nativism, sovereignism, and Euroscepticism. This finding implies that FdI has been the right-wing party chosen by those polarized citizens who wanted to avoid an electoral affirmation of the left. The likelihood of voting for FdI increases with respondents' age and is stronger among those with greater trust in institutions ($or = 1.354$) but show little interest in politics. FdI voters place themselves on the right side of the political space ($or = 2.019$). Although sometimes included in the groups of radical-right populist parties (see PopuList classification, Rooduijn et al. 2024), FdI represents a "new" form of populism focusing mainly on nativist identity and strong leadership (Baldini et al. 2022), yet with only sparse anti-elite rhetoric. Thus, our results reinforce the thesis that FdI is not chosen for its populist anti-political elite positions. Conti and colleagues (2022) already showed that FdI MPs ranked negatively on populism and that populism was not a significant factor in voting for FdI in the 2018 national elections.

This is also the case for FI but with a significant difference. Until the death of its leader, Silvio Berlusconi, FI had been considered a personal party and a precursor of populism in the form of techno-populism (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020). Although FI has never been considered a purely populist party, populist sentiments historically ran strong among its voters (Conti et al. 2022). Tajani's new leadership appears to have blunted Berlusconi's populist accent. Hence, still in search of a new

⁷ Further research is needed to identify the mechanisms behind these findings. For example, political interest, which in our analysis is positive and significant, may play a relevant role (see De Sio 2008; Harteveld and Wagner 2023)

political identity, FI is assuming moderate positions on many policies (including immigration citizenship, the EU and liberalism) which do not appeal to affectively polarized citizens ($or = 0.642$).

The leadership change is also at the origin of our results regarding the Lega Salvini Premier. When Umberto Bossi led the party, the Lega Nord (LN) was a regionalist party with strong anti-political elite rhetoric as well as a geographically and socially defined electoral base. The party's motto, "*Roma ladrona*" (Rome the thief), summarizes a regionalist populist view that is hostile to national (corrupt) political elites. These characteristics have changed with the leadership of Matteo Salvini (Vampa 2017, Albertazzi et al. 2018), as the party's ideological position shifted from regionalism to national identity and sovereignism. Although the League's rhetoric retained its xenophobic and traditionalist features, it was increasingly framed within a national context in an effort to broaden its electoral appeal. Salvini's electoral lists also flourished in southern regions, gaining unprecedented electoral success in the 2018 national elections (17%) and 2019 European ones (34%). The League's nationalist U-turn is likely the originating factor of our results on AP and the voting choice for this party in 2024. Indeed, the relationship is not significant, indicating that the regional identity associated with the region of Padania—previously a driver of AP among the League's traditional electorate—has been diluted among the party's broader national support base, reflecting the party's redefined identitarian orientation. Conversely, the League remains a party opposed by those who have pluralist sentiments ($or = 0.728$) and is sustained by populism. This is in line with previous literature on the League's populist nature, although our sub-categorization of populism shows that only the emphasis on people's will remains significant in electoral matters (Rousseau populism, $or = 1.379$). As the party lost its populist anti-national elite rhetoric and acquired a governmental role, the anti-establishment sentiments did not significantly affect its electoral gains.

The PD shows a different perspective: The likelihood of voting for the PD increases as pluralist attitude rises. By contrast, Rousseau-style populism negatively relates to voting for the PD ($or = 0.848$). However, it should not be forgotten that this party showed populist tendencies under Matteo Renzi's leadership (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020) and that, in 2019, the party established a government coalition with the populist M5S, which is now struggling to become a more structured political alliance within the so-called *campo largo* (broad field of alliances). At the same time, past studies revealed that MPs of the Democratic Party oppose populism (Conti et al. 2022), and populist voters tend not to support this party. PD voters show higher AP ($or = 2.135$) than FdI supporters, suggesting that they were more likely to vote with the intent of preventing a right-wing victory. PD's strong identity is a heritage of the party's origins from the Italian Communist Party of the First Republic. Hence, a solid identity base is rooted in 20th-century politics with traditional symbols and a party structure that goes beyond the current leadership. Women are more likely to vote for the PD

than for other parties ($or = 1.375$), a result in line with the theory of the modern gender gap (Inglehart and Norris 2000). It also enjoys a greater share of the vote among older voters and those who place themselves on the left side of the ideological spectrum ($or = 0.626$).

Predictably, anti-establishment ($or = 1.327$) and Rousseau ($or = 1.191$) populist attitudes, as well as negative and significant results in the pluralist attitude's type ($or = 0.824$), have fueled the M5S vote. This party has epitomized populism in recent Italian history by targeting politically corrupt elites in its discourses and policy proposals, adopting internal rules toward direct democracy, and favoring the people's needs over the interests of elites. However, M5S has clearly shown an ideological flexibility, as confirmed by its participation in ideologically different government coalitions. Since the beginning of Conte's leadership, the party has been living through a profound transformation, moderating its populism and trying to establish itself as a progressive party anchored on the left side of the political spectrum (Tronconi, 2022). The low level of polarization among voters ($or = 0.502$) supports the idea of an electorate, in line with the party, with a "chameleon-like character" (Pirro 2018), which—despite being on the left of the ideological spectrum—tends to be characterized by a significant distrust of institutions ($or = 0.727$), a factor that remains key today for its electoral consensus.

	Vote - Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)		Vote - Forza Italia (FI)		Vote - Lega		Vote - Partito Democratico (PD)		Vote - Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S)	
	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr	OR	Stdr
Anti-establishment	0.924	0.070	0.976	0.102	1.109	0.118	1.112	0.063	1.327***	0.106
Rousseau populism	1.003	0.083	0.932	0.107	1.379**	0.152	0.848**	0.053	1.191*	0.092
Pluralism	0.913	0.076	1.161	0.136	0.728**	0.152	1.359***	0.085	0.824*	0.068
Affective Polarization (weighted)	1.688***	0.156	0.642***	0.081	0.957	0.112	2.135***	0.153	0.502***	0.043
Political trust index	1.166	0.106	1.234	0.157	0.833	0.098	1.390***	0.104	0.727**	0.069
Political interest (not at all+a little)	0.521***	0.096	0.779	0.201	1.498	0.386	0.750	0.112	0.997	0.189
Left_right self-placement scale	1.927***	0.085	1.531***	0.090	1.833***	0.113	0.626***	0.020	0.854***	0.032
Gender (man)	0.887	0.147	0.823	0.192	1.223	0.272	1.375**	0.165	0.807	0.131
Age (19-92)	1.014*	0.006	1.015	0.008	1.991	0.008	1.012**	0.004	0.991	0.005
Education (not educated-elementary)										
Middle School	0.489	0.412	0.800	0.924	0.738	0.388	2.304	1.667	0.227	0.185
High School	0.570	0.462	0.631	0.701	0.684	0.273	2.851	1.976	0.234	0.178
Degree	0.554	0.457	0.872	0.980	0.530	0.219	3.374	2.364	0.167*	0.130
Master-PhD	0.527	0.452	0.715	0.842	1	--	2.696	1.939	0.247	0.151
Occupation (not employed)	1.240	0.247	0.768	0.213	0.697	0.182	1.255	0.182	0.792	0.151
Economic perception of last year - (remain the same)										
somewhat worse+much worse	0.635*	0.124	0.675	0.181	0.580*	0.155	1.147	0.155	1.248	0.238

	somewhat improved+much improved	2.232***	0.446	0.836	0.245	0.702	0.194	0.326***	0.075	0.920	0.298
Regions		@		@		@		@		@	
Constant		0.002***	0.002	0.009**	0.014	0.001****	0.001	0.039***	0.035	7.668	8.027
	Pseudo R2	0.409		0.145		0.326		0.251		0.214	
	LR (Prob>chi2)										
	Number of observation	1,912		1,831		1,900		1,914		1,878	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; to save space, we do not report the 'Regions' for each models.

Table 3 Affective polarization and populism on voting choice of main parties in Italy during 2024 European Parliament Elections.

Conclusions

This study focused on the effects of populism and AP in Italy during the 2024 European elections. Our results showed that populism and AP have opposite effects on turnout: AP increases the likelihood of voting (thus confirming H1), whereas only Rousseau populism exhibits a statistically significant effect, negatively influencing voter turnout (thus rejecting H2). This suggests that when individuals delegitimize the role of political representatives and perceive an unbridgeable divide between ordinary people and the elite, they are less likely to vote in elections. We observed a similar opposing relationship among the leading independent variables concerning voting preferences. AP is significantly and positively associated with voting for parties that possess a strong identity and/or represent the more straightforward choice to prevent the victory of the “other” camp or out-group. These parties, FdI and PD, are located on opposite sides of the left–right ideological spectrum but have a long historical tradition rooted in the previous century with a national electoral basis inherited from their mass-party ancestors. Conversely, AP appears to have no effect on voting behavior, or even a negative one, in contexts where political leadership becomes central (as in the case of personalist parties), entrepreneurial issues take on a catch-all character, and the party undergoes a redefinition of its core identity elements—as observed with the Five Star Movement (M5S). These results appear to lend some support to the general expectations deductively elaborated in the literature and hypothesis section regarding the possible impact of AP on vote choice. The voters of the top populist party considered in the analysis are then the less affectively polarized.

Consistent results on populist attitudes complete the picture of our findings. The first and the second factors significantly relate to voting for a populist party (H3 confirmed), whereas pluralism does the opposite. The anti-establishment and Rousseau populisms increase the likelihood of voting for the M5S. As the League lost its anti-national elite rhetoric, only Rousseau’s populism was associated with a vote for Salvini’s lists, whereas it was negatively related to voting for the PD.

Overall, when AP is significant and positively associated with voting for a party, the effect of populism is negative or not significant. Otherwise, when populism significantly increases the likelihood of voting for a party, the effect of AP is negative or not significant. The case of the M5S is emblematic: significantly favored by populism and negatively affected by AP.

Our results on pluralism reinforce the findings. Although populism and pluralism are not necessarily conflicting attitudes at the individual level (Ellenbroek et al. 2023), in our analyses, they have opposite effects on voting choice. The same applies to populism and AP: Although they may positively correlate at the individual level (Davis et al. 2025), in some contexts (such as the United States), they mutually reinforce voting preferences, whereas in others (our case), they have opposite effects. The patterns of radicalization and fragmentation observed in different European political

systems suggest that similarly divergent effects of populism and affective polarization on voting behavior may be expected in other national contexts.

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