



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Populist polarization in Italian politics, 1994-2016 : an assessment from a Latin American analytical perspective**

Zanotti, L.

### **Citation**

Zanotti, L. (2019, September 26). *Populist polarization in Italian politics, 1994-2016 : an assessment from a Latin American analytical perspective*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/78561>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/78561>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/78561> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Zanotti, L.

**Title:** Populist polarization in Italian politics, 1994-2016 : an assessment from a Latin American analytical perspective

**Issue Date:** 2019-09-26

## Introduction

*“Le prossime elezioni saranno un plebiscito, un referendum fra il vecchio e il nuovo, fra il popolo con i suoi diritti e i poteri forti, i signori dello spread, i signori delle banche, i signori della finanza” (...) lo scontro non è più tra destra e sinistra, lo scontro è tra il popolo con i suoi diritti (...) contro i poteri forti”*<sup>1</sup> - Matteo Salvini on Facebook Live streaming May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Populism is a hot topic today. It seems to have proliferated in countries around the world; in some of them, populist parties won seats in the legislature and, in others, they are even part of government coalitions, sometimes heavily affecting the internal dynamic of political competition.

The literature on the causes of populism focuses on various factors, which, for the sake of simplicity, can be divided into two groups: mass society theories and economic theories (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017). While mass society theses link the emergence of populism to threats to culture and feelings of identity loss, economic theses employ a Downsian spatial and materialist conception of political representation to explain the emergence of populist political options (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, pp. 268-69). Even though both these theories are surely useful to explain the emergence of populist parties, my interest lies in those cases where the populist/anti-populist cleavage polarizes the political system. For this reason, I develop a different theoretical frame, which nevertheless stays in relationship with some of the aforementioned arguments.

This theoretical framework partly relies on the long tradition of study and academic empirical analysis of populist regimes in Latin America. To develop my argument, it is quite important to make a link with the literature on Latin American populism. Latin America is the region with perhaps the longest tradition of populism in the world, from the classical populism of Perón in Argentina in the 1970s to the neoliberal populism Fujimori in Peru the 1980s and Chávez’s radical left populism in Venezuela in the 2000s (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; López Maya 2011). Moreover, in viewing those three waves of populism within the region, it can be observed that each generated a very clear pattern of political competition: a new cleavage between those in favor of the populist forces and those against. To what extent does this

---

<sup>1</sup> "The next elections will be a plebiscite, a referendum between the old and the new, between the people with their rights and strong powers, the lords of the spread, the lords of the banks, the lords of finance...the clash is no longer between right and left, the clash is between the people with their rights...against the strong powers".

argument travel to other regions? I think we can adapt this idea to better understand the political situation in certain European countries.

This study goes beyond the analysis of the causes of the emergence of populist actors in the party system, focusing instead on those cases in which populism and its counterpart anti-populism, translate into an ideological and discursive divide that contributes to structuring a certain party system. When populism/anti-populism emerges as a political cleavage, the factors behind parties' political choices in general, and electoral coalition preferences in particular, can be affected. For this new cleavage to start to polarize, a change in the political opportunity structure is needed. In fact, when the political opportunity structure opens as a consequence of events external to the party system new actors may enter the system, producing a change in the dynamic of competition.

Moreover, considering also the organizational density of the parties in the system, defined as “the power of penetration of a given party, both in terms of intensity and reach” (Sartori 2005a, p. 8), this dissertation can shed light on the likely duration not only of the parties but also of the cleavage.

This happened in Italy starting in 1994. When Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) entered the party system with more than the twenty-five percent of the vote and the Lega Nord gained electoral relevance in the northern regions, the structure of the party system and the patterns of political competition started to change. The aforementioned re-structuration of the party system was a consequence of two features of these very parties. First, both FI and the LN were *populist* parties (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005; 2010; Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001; McDonnell, 2006; Zaslove, 2011a). Second, as mentioned above, on the occasion of the 1994 election and in the following, both parties were able to gain a relevant share of popular vote and keep it.

Later, since the 2013 general election, as a consequence of the Great Recession, another populist movement emerged, changing the composition and dynamics of the whole system: the Five Star Movement. Near the same time, a more coherent anti-populist discourse also started to emerge. This anti-populist discourse was interpreted by two actors. First, the technocratic government led by former EU bureaucrat Mario Monti started to develop an anti-populist discourse with elitist features. Additionally, with the ascension of Matteo Renzi in the Democratic Party (PD) and during the electoral campaign for the constitutional referendum of December 2016, the center-left PD also started to develop an anti-populist discourse.

## **The populism/anti-populism political cleavage**

The object of this dissertation is analyzing the factors that may enable populism to become a salient dimension of political competition. In line with that aim, I conceive of populism/anti-populism as a political cleavage that may structure the party system by itself or, more frequently, with other cleavages.

For populism/anti-populism to be conceived of as a cleavage, populist actors need to obtain a significant part of the general vote share. For this reason, it is important to understand under what conditions the populist message can attract and win over an important sector of voters. In other words, I try to respond the following question: what are the factors that contribute to the emergence of a political divide between populism and anti-populism which, under certain circumstances, can become as relevant as—or even more relevant than—the classic left-right divide?

By acknowledging the literature on Latin American populism, I realized that an important factor to consider is the formation of a new political cleavage between populist and anti-populist forces. Furthermore, as explained later, the literature on party system collapse—one of the factors that led to the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage—has not been considered by the European literature on the causes of populism.

To build theoretically the dependent variable of this study—the polarization (or emergence) of the populism/anti-populism political cleavage—I employ three key concepts in political science. First, I use the concept of partisan polarization. Polarization in political science is a fuzzy concept. For the purpose of this work, following Sartori, I maintain that a party system is polarized if the two extremes of the competition axis are occupied. As a consequence, the opposite conceptual pole of polarization is convergence. Even if I am employing a conceptualization of the phenomenon close to Sartori's, there is one important difference. In this dissertation, polarization is *normatively* neutral. In other words, whether polarization is good or bad for the stability of a certain party system or for democracy is treated as an empirical question.

This statement is the consequence of the fact that at least one cleavage needs to be polarized for the party system to function. If no polarization is present in the system, voters would be unable to distinguish among different political options (Lupu, 2015). In other words, a certain degree of polarization is essential for giving voice to and adequately representing the ideas and interests of different segments of the electorate.

The second concept needed for the theoretical building of the dependent variable is populism. Populism is a contested concept. The concept also carries a negative bias. This is mainly due to the fact that, at least in Europe, populism has often been identified with the radical right (Stavrakakis, 2018). This led to conceptual confusion, since nativism and authoritarianism are attributes of (populist) radical right parties, not intrinsic characteristics of populism. In fact, in Latin America, populism has adopted a rather inclusionary, egalitarian cast (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013a; 2017). Even in European countries, there are numerous examples of populist parties that adopt an inclusionary discourse such as Synaspismós Rizospastikis Aristerás (SYRIZA) in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Inclusionary populism can be a corrective for democracy, since it helps bring into the realm of politics sectors of the population that were excluded before, restoring the importance of the participatory component of democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2018). When relevant populist options emerge in countries and start to structure the party system, mainstream parties (sooner or later) react. As Stavrakakis points out, populists are never the only ones that create narratives of crisis, since mainstream voices articulate their own crisis narratives, pointing to particular causes and solutions (2018, p. 35). But the major contribution of Stavrakakis is underlining that “given that very few political forces self-identify as ‘populist’, there is a huge need to also study anti-populism and incorporate this inquiry into the study of populism proper” (2018, p. 35). In other words, when populism takes the shape of a cleavage, it looks inevitable that mainstream parties adopt a kind of anti-populist discourse. In a certain way, it can be said that the effect of populism on democracy depends also on the behavior of the other side, i.e., anti-populism.

As mentioned before, in Latin America we have seen the rise of populist forces that polarize the electorate between those in favor and those against. A clear example lies in the polarization of the chávismo/anti-chávismo political cleavages in Venezuela from the late 1990s (McCoy and Diez, 2011, p. 59).

In order to describe what I mean by populism/anti-populism cleavage, I need to provide a definition of populism. As stated above, populism has certainly been a contested concept, and, to some degree, remains so. However, the ideational definition has gained strength among scholars. Following the ideational definition, I define populism as a “thin centered ideology that conceives society as divided into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups the ‘pure’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elite and that maintains that politics should be the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde and Rovira

Kaltwasser, 2017). Defining populism as an ideology has at least two advantages. First, it can account for both the elite and mass level. In other words, for populists to become electorally relevant, there needs to be a demand for populism, but, at the same time, there must be a supply of credible populist alternatives. The demand side is a consequence of structural changes which contribute to activating populist attitudes in the masses, while the supply side refers to those conditions that favor the performance of populist actors in the political and electoral arena (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 99; see also Hawkins, Pauwels and Read, 2107). Second, conceptualizing populism as a set of ideas allows us to detach the appearance of the phenomenon from the appearance of a charismatic leader (see Weyland, 2001). This link between the appearance of a charismatic leader and the emergence of populism seems problematic, since it underestimates the number of cases. More in detail, the explanation seems flawed because not all populist forces are led by charismatic leaders and, on the other hand, because it overlooks the fact that in the electorate, there may be demand for populism independent of the presence of a populist leader (see Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Last, to construct theoretically the dependent variable of this study, we need the concept of cleavage. The concept of cleavage was used for the first time in the classic work on the emergence of Western European party systems by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). The authors define cleavages as dichotomous divisions of society into two opposing camps that are determined by the position of individuals in the social structure (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; see also Bartolini and Mair, 1990). As this division is very deep, it ends up configuring alignments between the two sides of society and political parties. Following this strand of literature cleavages need to fulfill three requirements. First, there needs to be an empirical referent of the concept which we can define in social-structural terms. Second, cleavages feature a normative element, that is, the set of values and beliefs which provides a sense of identity and role to the empirical element and which reflect the self-consciousness of the social group(s) involved.

Last, there is the necessity of an organizational/behavioral element, that is the set of individual interactions, institutions, and organizations, such as political parties, which develop as part of the cleavage.

Even though this “sociological” definition of cleavages has been widely accepted, it is worth remembering that Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) explanation for the formation of party system referred only to some Western European countries. As a consequence, the majority of the countries outside Western Europe have not gone through the same development pattern.

Moreover, a more recent strand of literature started to argue that, mainly with respect to the variety of party systems around the world, some of the contraposition in their party systems are not clearly anchored to rival social blocs (Kitschelt, 2007; Roberts, 2016). Any competitive party system must “cleave” the electorate as rival parties mobilize support, and cleavages constructed in the political arena between rival party organizations, without reference to social group distinctions, are not necessarily unstable alignments (Roberts, 2016, p. 56). In other words, some party systems are structured along divides that are not rooted in society, but they can endure over time (Kitschelt, 2007) and are not necessarily more unstable than traditional cleavages. This particular kind of cleavage is called political cleavage (Roberts, 2016).

Some of the former communist parties provide a good case in point. Indeed, in these countries, historical legacies of communism made it difficult for former communist parties to develop party systems based on solid social divisions. At the same time, Kitschelt maintained that “the clash of interests between relative winners and losers of transition would lead to the alignment of the main axis of competition between parties which offered pro-market, cosmopolitan, and internationalist policies, and parties which offered particularist, interventionist and anti-integrationist policies” (1992, p. 16). In other words, if communist legacies inhibit, per some scholars, the formation of stable cleavages at both the social and party system level, at the same time, they allow political actors to establish a more immediate type of linkage with voters. This division can be conceived of as a liberal/communist divide at the party system level.

Another example is related to the structure of the Chilean party system after the return to democracy in 1989. As Tironi and Agüero (1999) suggest, the origins of the configuration of forces in the Chilean party system, needed to be found not in the social cleavages, mainly class, that had structured the system before the military took the power. Instead, the origin of the bipolar competition pattern within the Chilean party system was a consequence of a new political-cultural divide, namely authoritarianism/democracy (see also Tironi, Agüero, and Valenzuela, 2001).

In sum, in line with examples of political cleavages such as the communism/anti-communism divide or authoritarianism/democracy in Chile, I maintain that the dependent variable of this study, the populism/anti-populism cleavage, is a political divide. I define the populism/anti-populism cleavage as a political cleavage, since the division in the system has no sociological roots but at the same time represents a frontier that involves “the construction



of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’” (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis, 2000; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2018).

### **Theoretical argument**

With respect to the factors that enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage I rely on a theoretical framework that considers three factors. First, the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties, in many cases due to inter-party agreements, results in a perception that the parties are not fulfilling their role of representation. Moreover, the breaking of massive corruptions scandals further undermines the linkages between voters and parties, since the voters perceive that the scandals touch the totality of the political elite. When these two factors occur simultaneously, the unresponsiveness of the party system reaches its most extreme level. Since the whole system is no longer able to represent the ideology and the interests of the electorate, the party system collapses. The collapse of the party system represents the third factor in my theoretical framework. A party system collapses when the principal type of linkage between voters and parties breaks down and the other types are not able to replace it (Morgan, 2011). During the period analyzed, a populism/anti-populism cleavage started to structure the system. Extreme levels of unresponsiveness led to the collapse of the system: voters feel that the whole system is unresponsive, and, in turn, the party system cannot establish new linkages to connect with voters and adapt to their needs. In the Italian case after the collapse of the party system, electorally relevant populist options emerged. In this sense, the collapse of the party system represents a critical juncture. Critical junctures in historic institutionalism are defined as brief phases of institutional flux during which more dramatic change is possible (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, p. 341). These phases occur in between long periods of path-dependent institutional stability. In the same way Pierson stresses that “junctures are ‘critical’ because they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter” (2011, p. 135).

When the system collapses, there are no linkages between voters and parties. After the collapse in Italy, relevant populist options emerged, giving shape to a new political cleavage, which I call the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

The collapse of the party system opens the political opportunity structure and can permeate the institutions and allow the entrance of new political actors. In other words, the collapse represents a sort of big bang that reverts the system to scratch. At this point, there is no certainty with respect to the path that will be followed. It is worth underlining that I am not assuming

that the collapse of the party system is either a sufficient or a necessary factor for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Instead, representing a critical juncture, it opens the political opportunity structure in such a way that permits new forces to enter the system and changes the patterns of partisan competition.

### **The Italian case**

In selecting a single case I am performing both theory-building and theory-testing exercise. First, I develop a theoretical frame to account for the causes of the emergence of the so-called populism-anti/populism cleavage. Secondly, I test my argument for one case: Italy between 1994 and 2016.

There are two reasons for selecting this case. First, at least some of the explanatory factors I use in my theoretical framework have been mainly used to analyze Latin American cases, especially the collapse of the party system. Indeed, the cases of party system collapse, namely Venezuela, Colombia, Peru<sup>2</sup> and Bolivia, and Italy are all Latin American, except for Italy.

The literature on Europe has not worked much with the concept of the collapse of the party system. The emblematic cases are Bolivia in 2006 with the election of Evo Morales and Venezuela in 1999 after the election of Hugo Chávez (Coppedge, 2005; Ellner, 1999; López Maya, 2011).

As I show below, bringing this type of literature to the analysis of the Italian case is interesting because it can shed new light on the causes of the emergence of electorally relevant populist options, different from the ones studied before.

In other words, since party system collapse is such a crucial piece in my theoretical frame, I decided to construct a framework to explain the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage and apply to a non-Latin American case: Italy. I am interested in seeing whether my argument, with some adaptation, can “travel” outside of the region. In other words, employing a strand of literature that has so far been used to explain Latin American cases, my objective is to test its validity in a different case.

The second reason behind the selection of the Italian case is linked to the characteristics of this study. There are plenty of studies on populism that focus on the Italian case (Diani, 1996;

---

<sup>2</sup> While for Seawright (2012), Peru represents a positive case of party system collapse, for Morgan (2011) Peru cannot be classified as collapse since the previous party system was not institutionalized.

Betz, 2001; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005; Caiani and Della Porta, 2010; Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). These studies are very insightful with respect to some populist parties, such as Forza Italia (Edwards, 2005; McDonnell, 2013) and the Lega Nord (LN) (McDonnell, 2006; Zaslove, 2011; McDonnell and Vampa, 2016). Moreover, studies proliferated focusing on another populist actor which emerged on the national scene after the 2013 election: the Five Star Movement (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013; Mosca, 2014; Lanzone, 2014; Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016). However, the Italian party system has not been studied in a longitudinal perspective that allows mapping the parties and the political cleavages that structure the system. Mapping both populist and non-populist parties, their evolution and their organizational characteristics shed light on possible divides that one may overlook focusing only on one or a type of parties.

In sum, with this study I intend to fill a research gap and provide a theoretical framework that advances understanding of the populist (and anti-populist) phenomenon from the 1990s to the present. The other novelty of this study is that the theoretical building blocks I employ have been rarely used to analyze a non-Latin American case.

As mentioned above, Italy constitutes a positive case, since the so-called populism/anti-populism cleavage started to structure the party system in 1994. From the 1994 parliamentary election until today, populist parties have kept their total vote share above forty percent.

Moreover, Italy represents an interesting case due to the different sub-types of populism it features. In other words, the populist pole in Italy changes its configuration over time, featuring four subtypes of populist ideologies such as neoliberal populism (Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Popolo della Libertà), regionalist populism (Lega Nord from 1994 to late 2000s), radical right populism (the Lega Nord from 2010 to today). To these subtypes of populism, we add the Five Star Movements (M5S), noteworthy in the fact that its brand populism is unattached to any clear full ideology. For this reason, some scholars talk about its "pure populism."

In Italy, populists achieved a role in government five times during this period—9 of 17 years. The two populist forces in the system up to 2011 were both situated on the right of the partisan axis of competition. However, they attached to different host ideologies. The LN, under the leadership of Umberto Bossi, was a regionalist populist party which at some point, after the breakdown of the first Berlusconi government in 1995, advocated for the independence of the northern regions of Italy. Toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the party started an ideological shift, becoming a populist radical right party. Since then, the

core ideological shift of the party carried a focus on nativism and authoritarianism, while keeping the discursive populist component. In other words, while until the late-2000s, the “us” category was represented as the “hardworking northern people,” when rightist radicalism came to be the main ideology of the party, the inner group was represented by Italians, mainly those hit by the economic crisis of the 2010s, without any geographical limitation. On the other hand, there was a change also in the “others” category. While at first, the professional politicians in Rome who were blamed for privileging the “lazy” southerners who were the others, once the LN became a populist radical right party, the “others” became the immigrants who arrived illegally, stole jobs from Italians and behaved violently (Bobba and McDonnell, 2015).

Moreover, the NGOs that rescued migrants in the Mediterranean Sea are equated with the smugglers that bring them illegally to Italy. From the organizational point of view, the LN displays a high level of organizational density, since within the party there is a system of checks and balances that counterbalance the discretion of the founder-leader.

With respect to Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and Popolo della Libertà (2007-2013), the main coalition partner of the populist right-wing governmental coalitions from 1994 to 2011, the party ideology has been described as neoliberal populism (Mudde, 2007, p. 47). According to FI/PdL, its people, the decent, ordinary, family-oriented Italians, were under threat from the undemocratic, immoral elites of the left: the intelligentsia, the judiciary and those parts of the media not owned by Berlusconi, all of whom were also said to have joined forces to impede economic growth due to their supposed continuing attachment to communist and “anti-Italian” values (Bobba and McDonnell, 2015, p. 162–63). FI and, later the PdL, from an organizational point of view, were personal parties characterized by a low level of organizational density thanks first to the founder-leader’s dominance of the party and perceived centrality to its survival and second to the relationship between the party and the members, which saw active membership discouraged and organization at the local level extremely limited/nonexistent (McDonnell, 2013; Kefford and McDonnell, 2018). This type of extremely leader-dominated party was new in Italian politics.

In 1998, another populist party joined these two rightist populist parties, this time on the left side of the political spectrum. Italia dei Valori (IdV) was a leftist populist party that put particular emphasis on the anti-corruption. Being a single-issue party, it did not have a clear thick ideology. The founder was former Mani Pulite judge, Antonio di Pietro, and the party reached its highest electoral performance in the European election of 2014, obtaining 8 percent of the vote. After the loss, di Pietro abandoned the party, which has since become electorally

irrelevant. From an organizational point of view, like Silvio Berlusconi's parties, the IdV can be categorized as a personal party, displaying a low level of organizational density. While the FI, the LN and, later, IdV filled out the populist pole, the anti-populist pole did not emerge, at least during the 1994-2011 period.

The discourse that the non-populist parties articulated in opposition to the populist center-right coalition did not reject the populist component per se, but instead critiqued Silvio Berlusconi. Anti-Berlusconism focused on policies implemented by the center-right coalition leader and against the new style of leadership embodied by Berlusconi. During almost 20 years (1994-2011), Italian politics were based more on an *anti* instead of an *alter* dynamic of competition (De Giorgi and Ilonszki, 2018).

Things changed in the 2011-2016 period. After the Great Recession and partly as a consequence of the neoliberal adjustment measures implemented by the technocratic government of former EU Commissioner Mario Monti, a new populist actor emerged, the Five Star Movement (M5S). The Movement was different from the other populist forces for at least one reason. It was not ideologically close to the other populist parties along the left-right axis.

The M5S cannot truly be placed along that axis, given the extreme ideological heterogeneity of the members of the Movement (Bobbà and McDonnell, 2015, p. 169). For this reason, the populist component is prevalent, and the party is defined as "pure populist" (Tarchi, 2015; Manucci and Amsler, 2017). This is quite uncommon since populist ideology tends to be associated with a host ideology (Bobbà and McDonnell, 2015). Quite intentionally, at the organizational level, the movement is more similar to FI and the PdL than to the LN. It was similar to Silvio Berlusconi's parties in the sense that it relies heavily on the leadership of comedian Beppe Grillo. Even if there are surely organizational differences between the two parties, both feature a low level of organizational density.

Between 2011-2016, a more coherent anti-populist pole consolidated. First, the technocratic government led by Mario Monti developed an elitist and essentially anti-populist discourse, criticizing the irresponsibility of the administrations prior to the crisis in managing the economic and financial emergence. Elitism represents the opposite conceptual pole of populism. In fact, elitist discourse reversed the populist dichotomy between people and elites since, for elitists, technocrats are more likely to solve the country's problem because they are experts and they know better. On the other hand, though, some scholars hold that populism and technocracy are not totally in conflict. For instance Leonard notes that populism and technocracy are "two contradictory and mutually reinforcing forces" (2011). In other words,

beyond the evident opposition between populism and technocracy, there is an underlying complementarity between the two (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017). The authors underlined that “this complementarity consists in the fact that both populist and technocratic forms of discourse are predicated on the critique of a specific political form, which we refer to as party democracy” (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017, p. 3–4). The main characteristics of party democracy are the mediation of political conflicts through the institution of political parties and the idea that the specific conception of the common good that ought to prevail and therefore be translated into public policy is the one that is constructed through the democratic procedures of parliamentary deliberation and electoral competition (Manin, 1997; Mair, 2013; Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017). With the transformation of catch-all parties in cartel parties there was a weakening of the parties’ representative over their government function (Katz and Mair, 1995; Caramani, 2017).

Moreover, another actor in the system started to adopt an anti-populist discourse. In fact, since the election of Matteo Renzi as secretary of PD and especially during the campaign for the 2016 constitutional referendum, opposed by all the populist parties (FI, the LN and the Movement), the PD also started to develop an anti-populist discourse. The constitutional referendum was portrayed as a sort of battle against the populist front, and the leader of the PD tried to distance himself from the establishment. In fact, European leaders, the OCSE, the FMI and the European agencies were in favor of the referendum. In doing this, he also tried to reclaim “the people,” enabling a further moralization of the political debate in the country. In fact, while populism is not the only ideology that sees politics as a contraposition of the “people” and the “elite” its key feature is morality. As Mudde (2018) observes, “populism is based on morals and that creates a whole different interaction, because if you are ‘pure’ and the other person is ‘corrupt’, compromise leads to corruption of the pure. Corrupt people are not legitimate opponents, and that is an important difference.” In this circumstance, anti-populism is based on the same moral distinction as populism. I name this type of anti-populism basic anti-populism. In fact, it is characterized by the strategy of “fighting fire with fire”, i.e., discursively attack populist parties on the basis of a moral evaluation.

## **Methodology**

From a methodological point of view, this argument is illustrated through a single case study which, in general terms, contributes to constructing and validating theoretical propositions

(George and Bennett, 2005; Bennett and Elman, 2007; 2006; Levy, 2008; Mahoney and Goertz, 2006).

As Levy (2008) notes, even though there is a quite widespread use of case studies in social sciences, there is no an agreement on a proper definition. For George and Bennett, a case study is a “an instance of a class of events” which is also “the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events” (2005, p. 5). This conceptualization of case study is explicit in “structured comparisons” as the use of a set of theoretical questions or propositions to structure an empirical inquiry on a particular analytically defined aspect of a set of events (George 1979). In line with this perspective, Gerring defines a single case study as the intensive study of one case where the purpose of that study is, at least in part, to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population). However, as Gerring (2006) observes, it is important to distinguish between case studies and “single outcome studies.” While the former aim at some degree of generalization, the latter aim to explain or interpret a single case but not to generalize beyond the case, involving a purely idiographic analysis of a single historic episode (see Levy 2008, p. 3). This reasoning is in line with the rejection of the assumption that Dogan and Pelassy (1990) make about the lack of generalizability of single case studies like this: “One can validly explain a particular case only on the basis of general hypotheses. All the rest is uncontrollable, and so of no use” (p. 121; see also Diamond, 1996, p. 6). However, this depends on the type of single case study. As maintained before, in fact, single outcome studies can perform only a theory testing function while case studies can perform also a theory building role, being at least in part generalizable.

To illustrate this point, I first gathered and analyzed the parties’ manifestos and other primary sources. With these two sources, and the analysis of secondary literature, I was able to distinguish between populist and non-populist parties for the 1994-2016 period. Moreover, these sources also allowed me to distinguish which host ideology was used in the populist party discourse. Specifically, I used parties’ leaders’ public speeches in parties’ conventions and social media, broadcasting and newspaper reports.

With respect to the organizational features of the parties, I relied on secondary literature, which allowed me to determine whether the Italian parties between 1994 and 2016 were characterized by a high or low organizational density. Even if organizational density accounts for just one aspect of the organizational characteristics of parties, the analysis of secondary literature can give us insight on other structural characteristics of the parties.

To a certain extent, my dissertation stays in close relationship with a long tradition of Latin American literature that takes in-depth case studies as the basis for novel theory. For example, Gino Germani (1978) analyzes European fascism and the extent to which it can illuminate the Argentinian case. He developed a new theory that argues that fascism proper should be seen as primarily a middle-class reactionary movement, while lower-class authoritarianism of the Argentinian sort demands a separate category, which Germani calls national populism. More recently, also researching Argentina, Ostiguy (2009) demonstrates the emergence of the high/low divide that, at least partially structures the political space.

### **The structure of the book**

The dissertation is structured as follows.

Chapter One is dedicated to the construction of the dependent variable, i.e., the emergence/polarization of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. As stated before, to theoretically construct the dependent variable, I employ three key concepts in political science: polarization, populism and cleavages. Following Sartori, I maintain that a party system is polarized when both poles are occupied. Unlike Sartori's, the conceptualization I adopt does not carry a normative bias, i.e., whether polarization is good or bad for the stability of the party system and for democracy is treated as an empirical question. Second, to characterize the populism/anti-populism cleavage, I employ the ideational definition of populism. Following this definition, populism is defined as a set of ideas which represents, on the one hand, "the people" as a morally pure unified subject in contraposition to "the elite," which is morally bad and corrupt. Third, I maintain that populism/anti-populism is a political cleavage. Political cleavages are different from classical sociological cleavages, à la Lipset and Rokkan, since the former structure the party system without necessarily representing a fracture at the societal level. In other words, a political cleavage may not represent a division within society. After the analysis of the three concepts employed to build the dependent variable of this study, I focus on the organizational characteristics of the parties within a system. Considering party organization is relevant since the object of this study is a political cleavage. In fact, considering the types of parties that compose the populist and anti-populist poles, it is possible to make inferences about the duration of the cleavage. More specifically, focusing on the literature on party organization, I argue that parties that are more organizationally dense have greater odds of survival than those parties that lack organization and heavily rely on the founder-leader.



In Chapter Two, I explain the theoretical argument, pointing out that the simultaneous occurrence of two factors, namely the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruptions scandals, may undermine the responsiveness of the party system and result in a collapse. More in detail, programmatic convergence orphans a relevant portion of the electorate, who may feel unrepresented and vote for a populist candidate that depicts himself as a political outsider, totally detached from the country's elite. In this same manner, when the majority of a country's political class is involved in a corruption scandal, there are greater odds that a new political actor enters the system on the basis of a populist discourse which helps depict the "old" political class as morally (and financially) corrupt as a whole. When there is a simultaneous occurrence of programmatic convergence and massive corruption scandals, the party system experiences a collapse. In this theoretical framework, the collapse of the party system represents a critical juncture. It relaxes the institutional boundaries for the entrance of new actors in the system, enabling the emergence of the populism/anti-populism political cleavage.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four are the empirical chapters, and they cover the period in Italian politics between 1994 and 2016.

In detail, in Chapter Three, I analyze the period between 1994 and 2011, which was characterized by the emergence of a populist pole formed by Forza Italia, the Northern League and Italia dei Valori. Analysis of this period reveals two things. First, from the beginning of the Second Republic, the dynamic of partisan competition started to change. The entry of new actors in the system not only reshuffled the classic left-right axis after collapse of the previous party system but there was also an emergence of an electorally consistent populist pole, mainly represented by the two main parties on the right of the political spectrum. Second, notwithstanding the formation of this populist pole, during this period there was no clear emergence of an anti-populist pole. Instead, the political left started to develop a discourse that featured anti-Berlusconi rhetoric. Things started to change after the Great Recession.

Chapter Four focuses first on Mario Monti's technocratic government that, from 2011 to 2013, implemented economic neoliberal adjustment measures and on the emergence of the third populist actor in the system, the Five Star Movement. This chapter makes two observations. First, the populist pole changed its configuration with the entrance of the M5S. Both the ideological and organizational characteristics of this party had effects on the dynamics of the party system. The second is related to the consolidation of the anti-populist pole. The technocratic government started to develop an anti-populist discourse with emphasis on the

irresponsibility of the populist forces that were frequently in government during the previous twenty years.

Finally, in the conclusion I summarize the major theoretical and empirical contributions of this dissertation, its theoretical implication, and thoughts on the future research agenda. In summary, this dissertation makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. With respect to the first type, this study contributes to the literature in at least two ways. First, this study is different from those which seek to explain the emergence of populist parties. In fact, its main objective is studying the conditions under which populism and anti-populism can structure a party system. This area has only recently started to be explored and no studies exist on Italy.<sup>3</sup> It is a perspective that sheds light on the dynamics that occur within the party system in the long run. The second theoretical contribution of this dissertation is linked to the factors that enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Some of the factors that I used to construct the theoretical framework, especially the collapse of the party system, have been employed mainly in a non-European context, with a special focus on Latin America. In sum, this dissertation represents a theoretical contribution for at least two reasons. First, going beyond the more studied question about the causes of populism, its object is studying the determinants of the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Moreover, constructing of theoretical contributions that have been so far used for explaining Latin American cases, this study seeks to adapt it and see the degree of its application for another case.

Beside these two theoretical contributions, this also fills two empirical gaps. First, even if there are many studies that focus on Italian populist parties, I contribute to this literature by systematizing a long period of time, giving a global overview of the populist phenomenon in Italy. Second, focusing on the organizational characteristics of the parties in the system, both populist and non-populist, I am able to make inferences on the duration of the cleavage. Since the populism/anti-populist cleavage at least partially structures the party system, this is relevant for making inferences on the future dynamic of partisan competition within the system.

---

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, the only non-Latin American case studied is Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsamebekis, 2018).