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

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Chapter 2

Programmatic Convergence, Massive Corruption Scandals and the Collapse of the Party System

2.1 Introduction

In 1994, something spectacular happened in Italian politics. Forza Italia, founded only eight months prior by the entertainment businessman Silvio Berlusconi, became Italy's largest party by gaining 21 percent of the total vote. Through the formation of electoral alliances with another relative newcomer, the populist Lega Nord (LN), in the north and with the former fascist party Alleanza Nazionale (AN) in the south, the center-right coalition obtained 46 percent of the national vote and Berlusconi was appointed prime minister. Only few years before, the protagonists of Italian politics were completely different. The main party since the post-war, the Christian Democrats (DC), vanished and the Socialist Party (PS) dropped more than ten points, while the Communists (PC) split in two different parties, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) and more extreme Rifondazione Comunista (PRC).

How can we explain this dramatic change in Italian politics? What implications did this change have for the Italian party system over the last twenty-five years? To answer these two questions, in this chapter I develop a theoretical framework which is useful for explaining the processes that led to the change of the political opportunity structure which, in turn, created a fertile soil for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

My central theoretical claim is that the emergence of the populism/anti-populist cleavage in Italy during the 1994-2016 period was driven by a sequence of three factors during the prior decades, strongly linked to the high levels of unresponsiveness in the Italian party system. First, although one must acknowledge the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties, programmatic convergence alone is insufficient for explaining the change in the political opportunity structure. Only after massive corruption scandals, which affected a significant portion of the country's political elite broke, did the electoral opportunity structure change sufficiently to produce the critical juncture — the collapse of the party system — that, by relaxing the institutional boundaries, enabled the emergence of electorally relevant populist parties and as I show later, of the so-called populism/anti-populism cleavage.

In general terms, the populism/anti-populism cleavage is more likely to emerge in party systems with high levels of unresponsiveness. Some of the factors that can indicate that a party system is unresponsive are the convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals. When the levels of unresponsiveness in the system reach extreme levels, the party system can experience a collapse (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012). One of the primary function of parties is to represent the interests of the voters. This task can be fulfilled through different types of linkages such as the programmatic, charismatic and clientelist, as described by Kitschelt (2000). When the principal linkage breaks down and a secondary fails to replace it, the entire party system collapses.

In the case of a collapse of the party system parties find themselves completely unable to perform their basic expressive function and, as a consequence, voters do not feel represented by any of the political options in the system (Morgan, 2011).

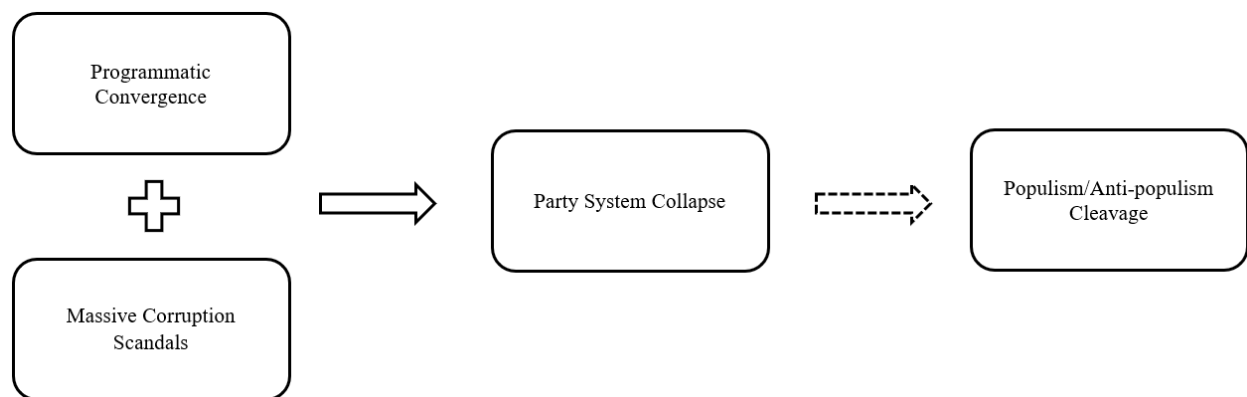
In the case of a party system collapse, the linkages between parties and voters break down, meaning not only a dramatic restructuring of the system but potential instability and conflict in the democratic regime (Morgan 2011, p. 6). The collapse, then, represents a sort of critical juncture (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007) which opens the political opportunity structure to the dramatic change of the inter-party patterns of competition. One of the possible consequences is the emergence of the so-called populism/anti-populism cleavage. In fact, the populist discourse may re-build the broken linkages on the basis of a discourse that pits “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite”.

In sum, the consequences of collapse qua critical juncture depend highly on the actions of the relevant actors in the system. As pointed out above, when the level of unresponsiveness reaches its peak and the system collapses, the political opportunity structure changes. This, in the Italian case, had implications both on the offer and on the demand side. On the former, the institutional barriers of the system lowered and allowed the entrance of new actors articulating a populist discourse. On the demand side, there was the activation of the populist attitudes in the electorate.

It is worth noting that the two factors that favored the collapse, namely the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals, especially when they take place simultaneously, are particularly useful to the populist discourse. In fact, both factors allow new actors in the system to depict other parties as morally (and eventually economically) corrupt.

The following figure (2.1) shows the argument in brief.

Figure 2.1: Determinants of the emergence/polarization of the populism/anti-populism cleavage



The rest of the chapter is organized as follows.

In the first section, I analyze the effect of the programmatic convergence of the mainstream parties and the role of corruption scandals in triggering the collapse of the party system and eventually the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

More specifically I maintain that two factors, which are symptoms of the unresponsiveness of the party system — the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals affecting the elite as a whole — happening simultaneously, lead to the collapse of the system (Morgan, 2011).

The collapse of the party system represents a critical juncture which produces a change in the political opportunity structure, facilitating the emergence of electorally relevant populist political options within the party system as well as the decay of the traditional political parties. On the one hand, programmatic convergence orphans voters if established parties do not represent the ideas and interests of their constituencies. On the other hand, massive corruption scandals discredit the majority of the political class in the eyes of voters.

In other words, these two factors together undermine the responsiveness of the party system to an extreme point in which the system collapses. The collapse represents a critical juncture which, in turn, determines a change in the political opportunity structure that may allow the entrance of new actors. These actors may employ a populist discourse to attract considerable portions of the electorate, since the collapse produced a total disconnection between voters and mainstream parties.

In the second part of the chapter I examine the validity of my theoretical frame for post-war Italy. In order to do that, I first show the level of programmatic convergence of the

mainstream parties in Italian party system from the first post-war election in 1953⁷ until the 1992 election, relying on the RILE index elaborated by the Party Manifesto Project —which estimates the position of parties alongside the left-right axis — weighted by each party vote share. The results demonstrate that programmatic polarization has stayed at low levels during the whole period analyzed. Since, as pointed out in chapter one, convergence represents the opposite conceptual pole from polarization, it can be said that the levels of programmatic convergence during the Italian First Republic were high.

This result is quite interesting because of the presence of extreme parties, the Italian communist Party (PCI) and the MSI, in the system. Indeed, Italy during the First Republic was one of Sartori's (1976; 2005) cases of pluralist polarized party systems. However, focusing just on the programmatic positions, the PCI and the MSI, the two parties that, ideologically, are considered at the extremes, scored as the most leftist and rightist parties in the system only in the 1987 election (MARPROR).

Secondly, especially from the 1980s onward, the high programmatic convergence shown by analysis of the party manifestos was reinforced by large interparty governing agreements, such as the Pentapartito, formed by the DC, PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano), PSDI, PRI and PLI and lasting for ten years (1981-1991).

These five governing parties “proved themselves no longer capable of providing enough policy responsiveness” damaging the programmatic linkage capacity of the party system (see Pasquino 1997, p. 46). At the same time, the only party that escaped the programmatic discrediting was the PCI, which, however, was not a viable option. Its exclusion from governance created a blockage in the system, prohibiting meaningful ideological alternation in government (Gilbert, 1995; Morgan, 2011). It is also worth noting that during the Historic Compromise the PCI provide external support to the government.

Furthermore, to show the effect of the massive corruption scandals on the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage, I analyze the characteristics of Tangentopoli, the corruption scandal of the early 1990s, and its consequences at the party system level.

In the last section, I draw on literature on Latin America to define and apply the concept of party system collapse to the 1991-1994 period in Italian politics as well as describe the concepts typically applied to the period, like change of the party system (Morlino, 1996; Katz, 1996).

⁷ Although the first post-war in Italy was held in 1948, the first available complete data are for 1953.

Although most of the literature agrees that the period's events produced a change in the Italian party system, the idea of a collapse of the entire party system is not systematically employed.

The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the collapse of the party system. As I pointed out earlier, programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and massive corruption scandals create the extreme, systemic unresponsiveness and set the stage for party system collapse (Morgan, 2011; see also Seawright, 2012). In turn, party system collapse represents a critical juncture, a *tabula rasa*, that may enable first the entrance of the new actors in the party system and the subsequent emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

At this point a clarification needs to be made. Collapse occurred in some party systems prior to the emergence of electorally relevant populist forces, such as Venezuela in 1998, Peru in 1990⁸ and Bolivia in 2006. In those cases, the populism/anti-populism cleavage also emerged. However, the collapse of the party system does not seem to be a necessary cause of the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

In other cases, such as Greece after the Great Recession, the party system did not collapse prior to the emergence of relevant populist options (Andreadis and Stavrakakis, 2017).⁹ Without a doubt, party system collapse constitutes a critical juncture (Thelen, 1999; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson and Skocpol, 2002; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007) that relaxes institutional barriers and permits new actors to enter the system, actors which may later enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

In sum, it is important to keep in mind that after collapse, or any critical juncture, there is no pre-determined path. Contingency plays a role. During the critical juncture, agency is crucial in determining the path that the party system will follow (Mahoney, 2000).

2.2 The Emergence of the Populism/Anti-populism Cleavage

As I recalled in the introduction of this dissertation, the populism/anti-populism cleavage only emerges in some countries.

⁸ Peru is an outlier. While in Seawright's (2012) conceptualization and operationalization, Peru is a case of party system collapse, Morgan (2011) claims that since within the Peruvian party system the patterns of partisan competition were not stable, it cannot be considered as a positive case of party system collapse.

⁹ Even if some authors maintain that the populism-anti/populism cleavage structures the Greek party system, my conceptualization of the cleavage assumes that populist parties need to gain 40 percent of the vote in two consecutive national elections. Since the last two national elections in Greece were only 9 months apart, the Greek case does not fulfill this requirement. However, some scholars pointed out that the populism/anti-populism discursive antagonism has been partially structuring the Greek party system since the post-authoritarian period (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2018).

In this section, I examine the factors that may facilitate the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage and, at the same time, rule out other mooted explanations. The aim of this section is to spell out the external determinants of the emergence (and success) of relevant populist options. This kind of determinant is often studied using the political opportunity structure framework, which constitutes the overarching concept of this chapter (Zaslave, 2008; Mudde, 2007).

Despite the attention paid populism both in academia and in public opinion in the last few years, the literature has delved little into the causes and the electoral successes of populism.

Before beginning, it bears mention that the success or failure of populist parties is not measured exclusively in electoral terms — the percentage of votes parties obtain — but is also captured by their ability to put topics on the public agenda (agenda setting power) or their policy impact power, i.e. the power to shape public policies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 98). A good example is the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a Eurosceptic right-wing populist party which, regardless of having won only one seat in the House of Commons in the 2015 election, saw implemented the only policy that it campaigned for, the UK's exit from the European Union. Even though UKIP is electorally irrelevant, it had power to set the agenda, managing to give Brexit priority in the public debate. Further, it saw Brexit implemented following the June 2016 referendum (Bale, 2018). The UKIP filled the gap left by the Tories when they abandoned both the populist discourse and Eurosceptic tones in 2006 on the cusp of the economic and migration crises, and the Conservatives cannot regain the initiative (Bale, 2018, p. 263). The Conservative government failed to keep their promises on immigration and the UKIP gained electoral relevance. Even though the UKIP's best electoral performance was taking 12.6 percent in 2015 (obtaining only 1 seat in the House of Commons), slipping in the next cycle to electoral irrelevance (1.8 percent) with no seats in Parliament, this was sufficient to pressure the Conservatives into promising an in/out referendum on staying in the European Union (Bale, 2018, p. 263). When Brexiteers prevailed, the UKIP obtained its only policy goal despite its electoral irrelevance.

Even if the impact and success of populist parties cannot be measured only by looking at their electoral strength, given that the aim of this study is finding the determinants of the emergence of a cleavage, populist parties' electoral strength over time matters. Therefore, I refer to the success or failure of populist parties in electoral terms. I maintain that the populism/anti-populism cleavage structures the party system if populist parties obtain a vote share of 40 percent or more of the total in two consecutive national elections.

To explain the success of populist parties, we need to take account of both the demand and the supply side of the populist politics. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) observe, one of the advantages of interpreting populism as a set of ideas is seeing its workings at both the elite and mass levels. 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 options. The demand side is a consequence of structural changes, which activate populist attitudes in the masses, while the supply side refers to those conditions that favor the success of populist actors in the political and electoral arena (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 99; see also Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017).

By contrast, those explanations that link the emergence of populism only with the appearance of a charismatic leader, who interprets the feelings of part of the electorate (see Weyland, 2001), seems problematic. This type of explanation is problematic because not all populist forces are led by charismatic leaders and 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).

2.2.1 Causes of Populism: A Literature Review

Populism has received growing attention in recent years. However, most scholarly literature has focused more on the conceptualization of populism than on its causes (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017). Within the literature on the causes of populism, categorizing the different explanations is difficult. To give an account of the different explanations for the emergence of populism, I follow the systemization of Hawkins and his collaborators (2017). They cluster the different arguments into two groups, though most explanations combine aspects of the two categories. The first group employ a “mass society thesis” while the others the so-called “economic thesis” (see also Rydgren, 2007). To Hawkins and his collaborators, studies using the “mass society thesis” examine “threats to culture and feelings of identity loss,” whereas those employing the “economic thesis” look to a Downsian spatial and materialist conception of political representation (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 268-69).

Let us look closely at the mass society theories. At base, the majority of these theories maintain that populism is a consequence of weak civil societies and/or weak or absent mass-based organizations, such as trade unions or traditional religions (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 269). Especially in those contexts where party organization is weak, such as in some Latin American countries, with fragmented and volatile party systems, individuals tends to

build personalistic linkages with voters (Weyland, 2001). In these cases, citizens turn to populist actors, whose politics cut across the traditional cleavages, to fill the gap. Here, a charismatic leader plays an important role by articulating the collective identity, positioning himself in contraposition of mainstream politicians and defending the general will of the people (Weyland, 2001, p. 269). Therefore, to emerge, this popular identity needs some contextual circumstances. One variation of this argument is proposed by Laclau (2005), who maintains from a neo-Marxist perspective that post-industrialization created multiple new identities that compete with the traditional class identity. By creating a popular identity through their political action, populists construct an equivalent to the working class that unifies people against a capitalist elite. Finally, another variation explores the proliferation of the new global mass media. By amplifying the cognitive weaknesses and the emotional vulnerabilities of the masses, these new media make people prey to populist messages. A notorious case is the entrance in the political arena (*discesa in campo*) of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, whose broadcasts tend to focus on entertainment, spectacle and scandal, giving a strongly personalized image of politics (Mazzoleni 2008). In other words, promoting a certain type of content, new media may enhance the success of populist options (see also Mudde, 2007). As Hawkins, Pauwels and Read (2017) pointed out, an older version of this theory can be found in Latin American studies on populism, which stressed the capacity of radio and television to create a sense of personal connection with the leader (see Skidmore, 1993).

The second strand of literature on populism and its causes employ the “economic thesis,” which follows a Downsian approach, based on the application of neoclassical economics to the study of politics. Even though Downs was not primarily interested in the study of populism, this approach considers both voters and politicians self-interested decision makers (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962). To maximize their self-interest in a world characterized by uncertainty and costly information, politicians create “packages of positions, i.e. ideologies, which are marketed by parties” (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 271). Since both voters and politicians are strategic, their interactions can be modeled spatially (see Downs, 1957).

Hawkins and his collaborators (2017) divided this in three sub-categories. The first, which focuses on the medium-term failure of established parties to respond to the demands of the electorate, is also known as the globalization losers thesis (Betz, 1994; Kriesi and Pappas, 2014). The losers of globalization are those that, in a globalized post-industrial environment, are at the margins of society because unemployed or unskilled or those whose jobs are threatened by advancing technology (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 271). These voters drift away from mainstream parties since they feel unrepresented by those who implemented

the neoliberal policies that marginalized them and, as a consequence, they turn to populist alternatives. This argument is often used to explain the emergence of populism in Western European countries.

The second category looks to long-term reactions to problems of corruption and weak governance more generally, often in relation to the so-called failures of democratic government. In contexts such as Latin America or Eastern Europe, corruption has been an endemic dysfunctionality of the political system arising from the state building process (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013). Dissatisfied with the political class, voters are attracted to political options that present themselves as antiestablishment (see Kriesi, 2014).

The third sub-category, which often is an interaction between the first and the second, addresses the role of party organization and electoral rules in allowing populist parties to enter the system (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 271). This sub-category links the emergence of populism to a change in the electoral opportunity structure, i.e. the interactions between mainstream and populist parties in the system (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 273). If mainstream parties leave space in the system by overlooking issues that are important to voters, populist parties may exploit the niche (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels, 2017, p. 273). This argument is often used to explain the emergence of populist radical right parties which outflanked mainstream parties on the immigration issue (see Ignazi, 1992; 1996). Considering the openness of the electoral system, for example, some scholars found that systems based on proportional representation with low thresholds would benefit new parties more than majoritarian systems (Carter, 2005; Norris, 2005; Van Kessel, 2015). However, it is worth noting that the electoral opportunity structure is not related only to the features of the electoral system, but also to the organizational capacity of party leaders. Following this argument, traditional parties will be less prone to adapting their message, especially if it means admitting new leadership to make the message credible, and this lack of flexibility can lead to the decline of the party system (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012). Meanwhile, many populist parties can be categorized, from an organizational point of view, as movement-parties which are, by definition more ideologically fluid and susceptible to the guidance of a charismatic leader. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that populist parties more likely to survive when the leader succeeds in recruiting competent personnel and creating a sort of organization (de Lange and Art, 2011).

In sum, one way of categorizing the literature on the causes of populism is to divide by thesis: mass society theories and economic theories. While mass theories focus on the failures

of the of democratic governance, the economic theories focus on the opportunities for populist parties to enter the system. (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels, 2017).

These determinants can surely, in some cases, account for the emergence of populist forces. However, since this study aims to explain the emergence of a particular political divide, namely the populist/anti-populist cleavage, I develop a different theoretical frame, which nevertheless stays in relationship with some of the arguments presented.

2.2.2 The Determinants of the Emergence of the Populism/Anti-Populism Cleavage

As mentioned in Chapter one, I maintain that populism/anti-populism has emerged if the populist parties obtain 40 percent or more of the vote share in two consecutive national elections, a definition that relies on the antagonism of two “factions”. Indeed, one can think that if a relevant populist discourse develops within the system, mainstream parties or new options in the system will respond by articulating an anti-populist discourse.

To account for the emergence of electorally relevant populist parties, I maintain that we should look at the combination two concomitant factors: the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of major corruption scandals that affect the responsiveness of party system. The presence of these two factors and the system’s inability to adapt may cause an extreme level of unresponsiveness. When a party system is highly unresponsive, and it lacks the means to reinforce or replace the principal linkage that connects parties to voters, it collapses (Morgan, 2011).

The situation in which the party system collapses represent a critical juncture may favor the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

If mainstream parties are perceived as all the same, this serves the populist discourse by lending credibility to the characterization of the entire political elite of the country as morally corrupt and disinterested in the people’s will (Roberts, 2017). Any newly-formed party needs political space to become relevant in the party system, but populist parties benefit especially from the convergence of mainstream parties because it reinforces their discourse. The fact the elite all share a position lends plausibility to the populist message that *they are all the same*.

Moreover, populist actors are more likely to become relevant if they can present themselves as outsiders, i.e. uninvolved with the country’s mainstream parties. Moreover, corruption scandals play a decisive role in weakening the basis of the representation between voters and politicians. Parties that rely on a single type of linkage are particularly vulnerable: corruption

scandals weaken the primary voter-party linkage while making it difficult for the party to use a clientelist linkage to replace the primary tie.

Given they depict the elite as morally corrupt, populist leaders need to present themselves as outsiders, i.e. individuals without any connections to the country's elites.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that populist leaders or parties are not necessarily true outsiders (see Carreras, 2013), but, at a discursive level, they tend to depict themselves as completely disconnected from the country's elites, helping them elude the blame and punishment of the voters. A classic example is Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Even if he was part of the Italian economic elite and very close to some of the political leaders heavily involved in the Tangentopoli scandal, he preserved an image as someone new, other than the old political class, a self-made man who did not need politics to live and entered the electoral race only out of patriotism.

In the next section I analyze the political opportunity structure framework. For the purpose of this study, the high levels of unresponsiveness in the system that culminate with party system collapse primes the political opportunity structure for the emergence of relevant populist actors and the establishment of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Once the party system collapsed, the cleavages that structured the system during the first republic unfroze while populism/anti-populism started to shape the political discourse among the political actors during the Second Republic.

2.3 The Political Opportunity Structure

Having assessed the theories that have been employed to explain the emergence of populism, in this section I examine the characteristics of the political opportunity structure framework. This framework helps identify the conditions that may enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

The concept of political opportunity structure first appeared in social movement literature and only later in party politics literature. The classic works that employ this framework within the social movement literature insight into topics such as the institutionalization of the environmental movement, the anti-nuclear movements (Kitschelt, 1986) and the new social movements in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Kriesi et al., 1992). First, Van Der Heijden maintained that "ecological modernisation and sustainable development are both ways of dealing with environmental problems without fundamentally challenging the

existing social order. Their applicability for environmental movements, however, is largely determined by political opportunity structures in individual countries” (1999, p. 199).

In a similar vein Kriesi et al. show the importance of the political context for the mobilization of new social movements (NSMs) in Western Europe (Kriesi et al. 1992, p. 220).

Changes in the political opportunity structure are linked with factors external to the social movement but that facilitate its emergence or consolidation. Such factors, such as economic or political crises, which are *independent* from the actions of the social movement, help the movement to generate a sort of propitious moment for it to emerge or consolidate. In Tarrow’s words, political opportunity structures (POS) are defined as “consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent, dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (1994, p. 85). Moreover, political opportunity structures are defined as “comprised of specific configuration of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others” (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 58). Political opportunity structures function like a filter between the mobilization of the movement, its choice of strategies and its capacity to change the social environment (Kitschelt, 1986). For instance, in order to develop a comparative analysis of anti-nuclear movements in different settings, Kitschelt (1986), focusing on France, Sweden, the U.S. and West Germany, observed that anti-nuclear movements have pursued different strategies which, in turn, led to a different impacts on energy policy despite intense conflicts over nuclear technology in all four. Kitschelt argues then that “a particular set of variables is most useful for explaining these variations, namely, a nation’s political opportunity structure” (1986, p. 57–58). In Sweden and to a lesser extent in the U.S. political input structures were open and responsive to the mobilization of protest, a search for new policies was triggered. On the other hand, where the political inputs structures were closed, as in France and West Germany, government insisted on a predetermined policy course (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 84).

The literature on party politics has also used the political opportunity structures frame to explain the entrance of new parties in the system. Following Mudde (2007), for example, “political and electoral systems do not so much determine whether political parties have electoral success; they provide them with electoral and political opportunities. As such, they are important building blocks of the larger political opportunity structures within which populist parties function, but “whether or not these parties successfully exploit the potential of the institutional framework in which they operate depends to a large extent upon what other

political actors do”. (Mudde, 2007, p. 237). For instance, in explaining the success of extreme right parties in Western Europe, Arzheimer and Carter (2006) incorporate a wider range of structural factors which together make up the political opportunity structure and that may potentially affect the extreme right’s performance at the polls (2006, p. 419). In detail they found that “voter’s socio-demographic attributes go a long way towards explaining his or her propensity to vote for a party of the extreme right” (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006, p. 438).

Being a white, male manual laborer increases significantly the probability of voting for the extreme right. However, since their results do not fully explain why the parties of the extreme right have encountered greater levels of electoral success in some instances while suffering relative failure in others, they introduced a political opportunity structure framework and elaborated a system-level explanation which accounted for the variation of the success of extreme right parties. The system-level variables that determine the political opportunity structure and explain the uneven success of the right-wing extreme parties in Western Europe are the level of unemployment, the position of the major party of the mainstream right, the disproportionality of the party system and the presence of a grand coalition government (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006, p. 438).

In searching for the conditions that facilitate or hinder the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage, the political opportunity structure is relevant because, for populist parties (or new parties in general) to be electorally successful, there has to be space for them in the system (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 105). If voters are fully loyal, the appeal of the new party would be limited to the small portion of new voters, i.e. the ones who never voted before. In other words, for populist parties to be electorally successful, a change in the political opportunity structure is needed. In my theoretical frame, the external factors that contribute to the change of the political opportunity structure are three: the programmatic convergence of the mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals that involve the whole, or a significant portion of, the country’s political elite. More specifically, these two factors lead the system to collapse when the system has reached an extreme level of unresponsiveness, the third factor that may lead to the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. The collapse represents a change in the political opportunity structure, a sort of “critical juncture”¹⁰ which may favor the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

¹⁰ In historic institutionalism, critical junctures are defined as “brief phases of institutional flux during which more dramatic change is possible” (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341; see also Pierson 2000).

Giving that the ideational definition of populism conceives of society as divided into homogeneous groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” it can be said that these three factors somehow may facilitate the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage since they so well embody the populist worldview. Programmatic convergence or electoral collusion (see below) between mainstream parties over a significant amount of time not only undermines parties’ responsiveness toward the electorate (see Morgan, 2011), but also can be used to depict those same parties as undifferentiated options. Moreover, if corruption scandals that involves a consistent part of the political elite burst, the populist discourse that focuses on the distinction between two homogeneous camps, the “pure” and “the corrupt”, can heighten and reinforce the opposition dynamic brought up by the programmatic convergence.

In other words, even though these two factors are exogenous to the emergence of the cleavage, they may be functional to the populist *we* vs. *them* way of thinking, since both ideological convergence and massive corruption scandals conceive of the parties and the members of the political elite as all the same. Moreover, if the party system cannot adapt to and reinforce the linkages between voters and parties, the system may collapse. Party system collapse represents a wider opening of the political opportunity structure. If the system experiences a collapse, the probability of new actors, perceived as outsiders, and using a populist discourse, emerging grows since the whole old system is delegitimized. In this situation, constructing a new kind of linkage on the basis of a thin ideology may provide a more immediate approach than re-constructing a linkage on the basis of a full ideology.

In the following sections I analyze these two factors in detail explaining their role in triggering the collapse of the party system and the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

2.4 Programmatic Convergence, Unresponsiveness of the Party System and the Emergence of The Populism/Anti-Populism Cleavage

In my theoretical framework, one of the factors that may change the political opportunity structure and enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage is the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties.

Many scholars assert that parties are determinant for the functioning of democracy (Lipset 2000). Just to quote some of them, Max Weber stated that political parties are “the children of democracy, of mass franchise, of the necessity to woo and organize the masses” (1946, p. 102). For LaPalombara and Weiner, parties are “the creature of modern and modernizing political

systems” (1966). Finally, Schattschneider (1942) claimed that “democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” Parties are necessary for the survival of the democratic regime because they perform a critical role: they are the link between the government and the voters, representing the interests and ideology of the latter in the former. As Dalton et al. observe, party government is synonymous with representative democracy (2011a, p. 3). The literature on representation that considers parties and voters draws upon responsible party government theories on political representation (Katz, 1987; 1997). This model presumes that “parties exercise control over the government and the policymaking process through party control of the national legislature” (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; 2011a, p. 23). As Sartori (1968, p. 471) maintains, “citizens in Western democracies are represented through and by parties. This is inevitable.”

That said, representation can be achieved in different ways. In other words, parties can establish different types of linkages with different constituencies (Kitschelt, 2000).

In general terms, programmatic linkage has been the most studied of voter-party ties; since one of the main functions of parties in modern democracies is represent voters’ ideology and the policy preferences, this type of linkage has always been conceived of as a superior type (Morgan, 2011, p. 49; see also Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). The sharing of programmatic positions between parties and voters and the consequent presence of a programmatic linkage is one of the ways by which representation works.

Even if they are not the only type of linkage between voters and elites (Kitschelt, 2000), programmatic linkages based on alternative policy platforms and preferences are integral to any conception of democratic representation and competition (Roberts, 2017). In other words, programmatic linkages are at the core of many forms of stable partisanship since the representation and the articulation of voters’ preferences have historically been one of the primary characteristics of modern political parties (Roberts, 2017; Lupu, 2016; Aldrich, 2011).

However, for the programmatic linkages to function properly, parties in the system need to offer voters different programmatic proposals which may be translated in different policy options. When, on the contrary, parties converge toward similar programmatic position, this kind of linkage is difficult to sustain since it does not allow voters to differentiate among rival policies proposals. I call the result of this phenomenon *overconvergence*, i.e. the excessive programmatic convergence of mainstream parties in the party system.

It looks like programmatic convergence may enable the emergence of extreme parties which are not necessarily populist (Mudde, 2007, p. 240). However, as previously discussed, programmatic convergence can serve to buttress the populist discourse which describes society

as divided into two homogeneous groups, the morally corrupt elite and the pure people (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The elite is depicted as “corrupt” because it does not respond to the interests of the people and offers only one ideological option. Therefore, if mainstream parties are perceived as *all the same*, this creates space for the emergence of populist actors who can depict themselves as the real representatives of the people.

In general terms, increasing levels of programmatic convergence have been one of the factors that led to a higher level of unresponsiveness of the mainstream parties in some countries (see Katz and Mair, 1995; Mair, 2009). The convergence of those parties on similar ideological positions orphaned voters because the parties did not represent their interests and values.

According to Mair (2009), in contemporary democracies, parties have growing difficulties when it comes to fulfilling their traditional double role of representing the interest of the voters on the one hand, while coordinating and giving coherence to the governing institutions on the other. As Katz and Mair (1995; 2009) point out, as a part of the process through which the parties have transferred their gravitational center from society to the state, parties have also begun to move from a combination of representative roles to an exclusive strengthening of their governing role. In other words, parties cannot fulfill the double role of representing the voters and governing and so choose to focus only on the latter. Mair points out that representation had become more difficult as a consequence of “the decline of the traditional large collective constituencies, the fragmentation of electorates, the particularization of voter preferences, and the volatility of issue preferences and alignment made it more and more difficult for parties to read interests, let alone aggregate them within coherent electoral programs” (Mair, 2009, p. 6).

As Roberts (2017, p.12) pointed out, the convergence of mainstream parties can make it harder for the same parties to articulate and represent policy preferences that are salient to a significant portion of the electorate is, therefore, a widely recognized source of new party formation. This failure of representation leaves a political space, normally, but not necessarily, on the left and/or right. Radical right parties in Europe furnish one example. Ignazi (1992, p. 6) links the emergence of radical right parties to the fact that, together with the spread of post-materialism (see Inglehart 1995), in Western Europe during the 1980s, “a different cultural and political mood, partially stimulated by the same ‘new politics’ has also been taking root”. While this change in attitudes has been partially absorbed and expressed by conservative parties, it remained largely latent. Such latent attitudes included “the emergence of new priorities and issues not treated by the established parties, a disillusionment towards parties in general, a growing lack of confidence in the political system and its institutions, and a general pessimism

about the future” (Ignazi, 1992, p. 6). In Ignazi’s words, just as the Greens emerged from a revolution led by the so-called New Politics, so too did radical right parties. In fact, it can be said that they represented a sort of “silent counter-revolution.” Convergence arguments, with some variations, have also been used by scholars to explain the emergence of populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2007, p. 239; Ignazi, 1992). For example, some argue that the centrist position of the largest mainstream right-wing competitor is crucial (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005; Norris, 2005). If mainstream parties programmatically converge on some issues, leaving aside policies that are important to voters, such as immigration and security, the latter may feel unrepresented and come to support other, more radical political options that run on those issues. Various factors have contributed to high levels of programmatic convergence.

The process of economic globalization, which translates in a widespread agreement on European integration, for instance, made the ideological positions of mainstream parties less easily differentiable for the voters. One example is the so-called Third Way in Europe (Giddens, 2013), a position akin to centrism that tries to reconcile right-wing and left-wing politics by advocating a varying synthesis of right-wing economic and left-wing social policies. This stance has been represented, for instance, by the presidencies of Blair in the UK and Schröder in Germany.

The UK’s former Prime Minister, in his introduction to the 1997 manifesto, stated that “[i]n each area of policy a new and distinctive approach has been mapped out, one that differs both from the solutions of the old left and those of the Conservative right” (Labour Party, 1997). Another crucial example was the deepening of the process of European integration. The role of parties in government has been stressed by the growing compromise that countries assumed participating in a deeper European integration that in turn limited the leaders’ discretion in decision making. Many studies have underlined that, as a consequence of processes such as globalization and Europeanization, a striking degree of policy convergence emerged; the development of similar or even identical policies across countries over time can be observed (Knill, 2005). In a similar vein, Mair underlined that European parties in government experienced multiple constraints represented by a “host of different and sometimes contradictory principals constituted by the many veto and semi-veto players who now surround government in its dispersed multi-level institutional setting, the central banks, the courts, the European Commission, the Council of Europe” (2009, p. 12).

Also, it bears mention that in Western Europe and elsewhere, like Latin America, the process of economic adjustment that followed global economic crises made mainstream left and right parties more programmatically convergent on the adoption of neoliberal adjustment

packages. More in detail, in Latin America the breakdown of state-development models, plus debt crises and hyperinflation around the region, led to the implementation of economic austerity measures. Following Roberts (2016; 2017), where the austerity measures were implemented by center-left or labor-based-populist parties that traditionally supported state-led economic models and redistributive policies, programmatic convergence left party systems without an institutionalized channel for societal opposition to market liberalism. This same process of implementation of neoliberal economic adjustments in Western Europe as a consequence of the Great Recession, led, for example, to the programmatic overlapping of Pasok and ND in Greece in 2012 general election.

Also, the emergence of the so called “moderate Left” in Latin America (Madrid, Hunter and Weyland, 2010; Roberts, 2017) follows on from (excessive) political learning from left-wing parties which led to their professionalization, more technocratic approaches to governance and drift away from grassroots mobilization and social networks. This overlearning can cause a political cost for these parties which may end up being perceived as part of an increasingly out of touch establishment (Roberts, 2011, p. 246). This was the case for the Chilean Socialist Party learned painful lessons in the 1973 coup about the risks of promoting rapid changes in property and state-market relations, especially in contexts of incomplete political authority (Roberts, 2011, p. 343). Consequently, given the patently anti-democratic origins and content of the constitutional order, the Chilean Socialists learned to refrain from making plebiscitary appeals for change. It learned the new lessons too well. Despite widespread public approval of Concertación, the coalition to which the Socialists now belong, during the Lagos (2000-2006) and first Bachelet government (2006-2010), political apathy in Chile surged, especially among young people (Roberts, 2011, p. 346).

In sum, programmatic convergence as an aspect of a broader phenomenon, such as the lack of responsiveness of the party system, may have an effect on the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. In fact, if the party system is extremely convergent, voters may have difficulties differentiating among political options and prefer populist forces that stress their differences to a morally corrupt elite.

2.5 Unresponsiveness, Massive Corruption Scandals and the Emergence of the Populism/Anti-populism Cleavage

Along with programmatic convergence between mainstream parties, massive corruption scandals, i.e., those involving a significant portion of the country’s political elite, lead to extreme levels of unresponsiveness in the party system and, ultimately, to its collapse.

The collapse of the party system represents a sort of Big Bang, a critical juncture, which, in turn, may facilitate the emergence what I called the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

In the academic literature, corruption is defined as the “misuse of public power for private gain” (Rose-Ackerman, 1999, p. 21). More specifically, corruption scandals are defined as “actions or events involving certain kind of transgressions which became known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (Thompson, 2000, p. 13). Corruption scandals erode vertical accountability and further delegitimized the traditional political class for the voters. In fact, corruption scandals play a decisive role in weakening the basis of the representation between voters and politicians. It is worth noting that corruption is a universal phenomenon, i.e. it is present in all societies. What varies, though, is the degree of corruption.

Nevertheless, corruption per se is not what affects the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage since in a society that is used to experiencing high levels of corruption, it may have a weaker effect on government legitimacy. However, if corruption scandals are massive, i.e. involve all or most of the political class, they can create the conditions for the emergence of relevant populist actors in the system.

Populist actors rely on blame attribution, depicting elites as responsible for bad circumstances in their countries. It is worth noting that populism has often been depicted as loaded with emotions, negative ones in particular (Fieschi, 2004; Muller, 2016). One example is the fertile soil “globalization losers” give for the emergence of populist alternatives such as Donald Trump in the U.S. and populist radical right parties in Europe. These losers of globalization are people such as “entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, all unqualified employees and citizens who strongly identifies themselves with their national community” (Kriesi et al., 2006, p. 922). Globalization losers are “expected to constitute potential for political mobilization within national political context” (Kriesi et al., 2006, p. 921). Those losers of globalization blame national and international elites who, in their opinion, are more interested in the fate of immigrants than in that of members of the nation.

Populist radical right leaders or parties, then, position themselves strategically with respect to these political potentials and have been able to articulate the demands of this growing portion of the electorate. Blame attribution works similarly in the face of massive corruption scandals.

The people’s anger following a massive corruption scandal can create the conditions for the emergence of actors that develop a populist discourse, blaming the mainstream elite for the country’s woes. The perception that a frustrating event is certain, externally caused, and unfair makes populism more appealing to voters as its defining attributes, strongly resonate with their

anger's underlying appraisals, making populism particularly well-suited to express this emotion (Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza, 2017, p. 445).

The more blame for the country's state falls on corrupt politicians and the greater the portion of the political elite seem corrupt, the greater the chances for the populist discourse to persuade voters that the establishment is responsible for the country's situation. At the same time, laying blame on the mainstream politicians, stressing that *they did that*, helps populist actors to depict themselves as different from the corrupt, compromised and self-interested elite. Managing to depict themselves as innocent of responsibility for the country's tribulations, populists in general attempt to persuade angry common citizens with easy solutions to their problems (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, 2014).

In other words, massive corruptions scandals tend to activate populist attitudes. A scandal that involves the majority of the country's political elite is a clear signal that the political class is not advancing the interests of the people. As a consequence, a significant part of the population will perceive political elites drifting away from the policy concerns of their constituents (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis, 2018, p. 4). Citizens then started to feel alienated and cease considering their leaders true representative of "the people". Indeed, the real corruption is not (only) monetary but mainly moral. The betrayal cuts deeper than the illegal monetary exchange: the elite placed its own wellbeing above the people's.

This, at the same time, creates new incentives for populist actors to potentially exploit. These actors may succeed in making the corruption scandal a central issue of the political debate, as a mean of attacking the political establishment. In this way, they can play the role of the "pure leaders" that deserve to rule, in contrast to the "corrupt elite" represented by the traditional parties who betrayed the people.

At this point, it bears keeping in mind that not all populists draw the pure people vs. corrupt elite dichotomy the same. Since "the people" and "the elite" are constructed categories, different sub-types of populism define them in different ways.

For example, for populist radical right parties in general, the rulers are corrupted because allied to the sector of the political and economic elites that ignore the interests of the native people. By contrast, leftist populists like Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, conceive of corruption mainly as an economic issue related to the increasing importance that the financial sector has in national politics. In Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's words, "these parties use populist rhetoric to blame the elite for help bringing the aliens into the country and for ignoring the problems that natives are suffering" (2018, p. 1678).

The categories of the “people” and the “elite” are filled accordingly to the host ideology to which the populist set of ideas has attached. Obviously, it may happen a corruption scandal with the features mentioned above does not become politicized and the party system may adapt.

Without a political actor, either a leader, a party or a social movement, that that can drive the issue into the center of the political debate, there is little chance for the divide to start structuring the party system. Therefore, agency remains central. Massive corruption scandals and mainstream parties’ programmatic convergence lead to the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage only if political actors can exploit not only the country’s ills but also to depict the situation as a crisis (Stavrakakis et al., 2017).

In sum, massive corruption scandals breaking improve populist actors’ odds of transforming corruption in a relevant issue in the political debate. This, in turn, increases voter perception of the system as unresponsive, as they come to believe that the established political forces are purely self-interested. In fact, if corruption exists but is considered a nonissue, that does not necessarily mean that the system is unresponsive. As pointed out above, neither programmatic convergence nor massive corruption scandals are the only symptoms of unresponsiveness. However, these are the two factors that combined may change the political opportunity structure in a way that facilitates the emergence of electorally relevant populist options.

In the previous two sub-chapters I discussed the impact of the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals on the polarization of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. In the following two sections, I apply my theoretical framework to Italy between 1953 and 1992, during the period known as the First Republic.

2.5.1 The Programmatic Convergence of the Mainstream Parties in Italy (1948-1992).

Scholars seem to agree on the fact that post-war Italy constituted a clear example of a pluralist polarized party system, i.e. a party system which is characterized by high levels of fragmentation and ideological polarization (Sartori, 1976; 2005; Sani and Sartori, 1980; Morgan, 2011).

This may *a priori* seem to be at odds with one of the hypotheses of this study, which maintains that a high level of programmatic convergence in Italy enabled the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage after 1994. However, there are two aspects to consider. First, I agree with Sartori on the fact that until the 1970s, the Italian party system experience high levels of ideological polarization. However, from the 1970s until the collapse of the party

system, choice was limited by different pacts between the parties, aimed at limiting Communists access to government. This restricted the number the parties that had a real opportunity to join a governing coalition.

Moreover, it is important to recall that programmatic convergence can be conditioned by factors other than ideology, e.g., the deepening of the process of European integration. The importance of the EU has increased in the past 60 years, and it can be said that “European integration [is] a process by which bargaining power is shifting from national political institutions to the European supranational institutions” (Dorussen and Nanou, 2006, p. 236).

During this process the major forces within European party systems converged on a series of rules such as the Maastricht convergence criteria, reducing the space for policy-making by national governments. Given that the decision-making power for almost all policy issues falls between the national and the EU level, this has particularly affected the legislative and executive branches of European governments, which feel weakened relative to the European Commission and, to a lesser extent, to the European Parliament (Dorussen and Nanou, 2006, p. 236).

The Italian party system throughout the First Republic is one of the cases (along with the Fourth French Republic, Chile before 1973 and the Weimar Republic) of pluralist polarized party systems listed in Sartori’s seminal book, *Parties and Party Systems* (1976). In general, Sartori constructed a party-system typology based on two variables: fragmentation of the system, (the number of relevant parties in the system) and polarization (the ideological distance between the parties).

To Sartori, the Italian party system was characterized by high polarization (ideological distance between Left and Right), high fragmentation (high number of relevant parties) and, finally, by a centrifugal competition dynamic (Sartori, 1976; Ieraci, 2007). For Sartori, when a party system is characterized by a centrifugal competition dynamic, the parties committed to the struggle for political power do not converge toward the center of the space of competition and the distribution of the electorate is bi-modal, with only a small percentage of them positioned in the center. The main consequence of this bi-modal distribution of parties in the system is that the competing parties will try to implement radically opposed policies as government incumbents (Ieraci, 2007; Downs, 1957). There is then a difference between those “moderate” democracies where the dominant drives of the party competition are centripetal, i.e. the competing parties are few (usually two, four at the most) and the political space is continuous, lacking in any ideological cleavage, and the “difficult” democracies, where the dominant drives of the party competition are centrifugal (Ieraci, 2007, p. 4).

To be more specific, the three characteristics that define a pluralist polarized system are: a) existence of bilateral and anti-system opposition, which is implied by the multi-polar and polarized party system; b) prevalence of centrifugal drives over the centripetal ones; c) ideological or immoderate attitudes of both the political class and the electorate (Sartori, 1982, p. 89).

The Italian coalition politics between 1948 and 1992 saw the Christian Democratic (DC) as a dominant party and pivotal actor in alliance with other minor parties situated on the center-left and/or on the center-right of the political spectrum (Daalder, 1984; Morlino, 1996). However, while there is no doubt Italy's party system experienced high levels of fragmentation during the First Republic, I partially disagree with Sartori's interpretation on one fundamental point regarding the level of polarization during the post-war period through 1992, at least at the programmatic level. While he predicted that "the parties at the extremes of the political system would grow by the attempt to split the system apart by diverging ... through an extremist appeal" (Sartori, 1965, p. 27), I agree with Tarrow (1977) that Sartori's interpretation does not describe exactly the paths of the Communist left and the former fascist right since the 1960s. Even if the former fascist MSI, through a strategy of tension, attempted precisely the polarization that Sartori predicted, it obtained poor results in the elections of June 1975 and June 1976 (Spreafico, 1975). On the other hand, the Communist left increased its vote share over time not through a radicalization of its message but, on the contrary, through a *moderation* of it and an attempt "to minimize issues that would have implications of a revolutionary character" (Sani, 1973, p. 558). Both these processes resulted in a development toward bipolarity, tempered programmatically by a shift towards the center by all the major parties (Tarrow 1977, p. 199).

In other words, as Ieraci (1997, p. 10) pointed, out the enfeeblement of the center predicted by Sartori did not happen. The DC did lose votes, but its electoral decline was balanced by the gradual inclusion in the coalition government of some "quasi pro-system" parties such as the Socialist Party and the Liberals. In other words, the center was not enfeebled by the party system dynamic, as Sartori predicted, but instead incorporated new parties into governing coalitions through a process of extension (Ieraci, 1999). The strategy of the "extension of the center" proved to be successful for a long time but revealed some inconsistencies of the theory of polarized pluralism (Ieraci 1997, p. 61-63).

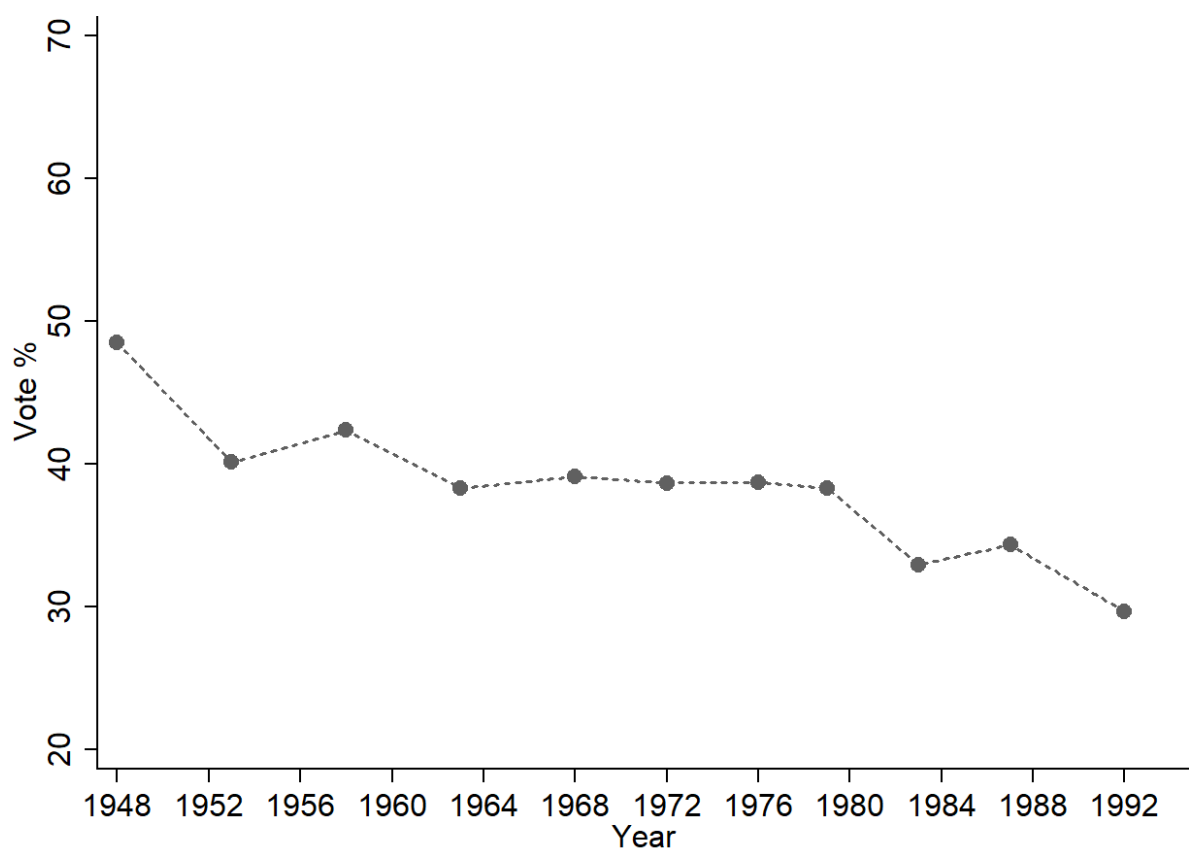
Moreover, the permanence of one party, the Christian Democrats (DC) in power for the whole period, by itself or in coalition with other parties, boosted the effect of programmatic

convergence over time and, in turn, created the conditions for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

In fact, programmatic convergence is more likely to occur when interparty agreement such like grand coalition governments or pacts include all or the majority of political options in the system. These agreements, in other words, contributed to further diluting the programmatic differences between parties which, in turn, debilitated the programmatic linkage between parties and voters. As Morgan pointed out “system-level discrediting is most likely to occur when interparty agreements like grand coalition governments or pacts include all the pro-system parties and thereby incriminate every viable governing options” (2011, p. 54) .

To understand the magnitude of the presence of the DC in government, it is worth noting that the party, founded by Alcide de Gasperi in 1943, furnished twenty-six of Italy’s twenty-eight prime ministers between 1947 to 1992. The following chart illustrates the trend of the DC’s vote share from the first post-war elections in 1947 until the last election before the collapse of the party system and the concomitant dissolution of the party in 1992.

Graph 2.1: DC vote share trend during Italy’s First Republic (1948-1992)



Source: Manifesto Project Database (WZB)

As it can be seen in graph 2.1, the DC always managed to win a vote share above the thirty percent in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Only in the 1992 national election, in the wake of the massive corruption scandal known as Tangentopoli, did the party vote share fall below the thirty percent threshold. Whenever the party failed to win enough seats to govern alone, it formed an alliance, normally with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and other minority partners. During the 1970s the DC secured the support of the Communist Party (PCI) through the so-called *Compromesso Storico* (Historical Compromise). After the abduction and homicide of one of the more prominent exponents of the DC and promotor of the Compromise, Aldo Moro, by the Marxist-Leninist Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse), the party hardened its stance, declaring that the state “must not bend” on terrorism.

In 1979 began a new era in the Italian party system, the so-called *Pentapartito* which consisted of a government coalition of five parties ranging from the Socialist party on the left to the Liberal Party to the right. This further undermined Sartori’s enfeeblement of the center thesis, since it revealed that the two “no-coalition” points could be pushed backward and forward (Ieraci, 1999).

Following the loss of support for the DC, in 1981 Spadolini of the Republican Party (PRI) was the first non-DC prime minister since 1944. He was at the head of a coalition which included the DC, the PSI, the PSDI, the PRI and the PLI. In the 1983 elections the DC suffered one of its largest electoral declines, and PSI leader Bettino Craxi was elected prime minister. In 1987, the DC regained the presidency after a mild electoral recovery and kept it until the end of the *Pentapartito* in 1992. The parties that had been in the coalition government in each election since the beginning of the 1980s withered over time as they entrenched in state institutions. Party organizations may become increasingly professionalized and dependent on state resources, eroding their grass-roots membership branches and linkages to social actors (see Katz and Mair, 1995; Ignazi, 1996). It can be said these parties, especially since the 1980s started to privilege their functions in government over their role of representing and articulating voters’ preferences, preferring to be responsible rather than responsive (Mair, 2009). Established parties may even come to resemble a closed and powerful political cartel that shares in the spoils of public office and excludes alternative voices from effective representation. As Roberts points out, even if these forms of “organizational cartelization” are meant to exclude outsiders, they can become highly susceptible to outsiders’ challenges in the electoral arena (2017, p. 10).

The second aspect of my divergence from Sartori's interpretation is in the classification of the PCI as an anti-system party from the Historic Compromise through the end of the First Republic. Palmiro Togliatti, one of the founders of the party and general secretary until 1964, stood by the USSR even after the Hungarian invasion in 1956. This decision created a major rift in the party, the Socialist scission. Later, the relationship between the PCI and the USSR fell apart and the party eventually moved away from the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy toward positions closer to Eurocommunism and the Socialist International. At that point, the party sought to partner with the Socialists and with the Christian Democrats, inaugurating the Historic Compromise.¹¹ Responsible for this change in the party orientation was Enrico Berlinguer, secretary of the Communist party from 1972 to his death in 1984. During this time, his main objective was pursuing a moderate line, repositioning the party within Italian politics and advocating accommodation and national unity with a strategy termed Eurocommunism. Those years were very complicated, marked by the so-called Anni di Piombo (Years of Lead), a period of social and political turmoil that lasted from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, and other social conflicts, such as the Hot Autumn of 1969-70. The Historical Compromise ended when Christian Democrat party leader Aldo Moro was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades in May 1978 and the PCI officially abandoned the Compromise as a policy in 1981.

In sum, the Communists substantially increased their share of the vote through a different strategy than predicted. They adopted a moderate appeal and attempted to "minimize issues that would have implications of a revolutionary character" (Sani, 1973, p. 558).

To support this interpretation, I measured the level of ideological convergence in the Italian party system from 1953 (the first post-war election with available data) to 1992.

To measure the level of programmatic convergence I used CMP/MARPOR's RILE index, which maps political parties on a left-right spectrum by analyzing their manifestos for positions taken in thirteen categories. A party's position on the left-right axis translates into a numerical value that ranges from minus one hundred (-100) for extreme left to one hundred (100) for extreme right. The categories in question are part of the core of the dispute between right and left, such as categories such as economic redistribution versus free market and expansion of the welfare state versus reduction of the welfare state (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Furthermore, I weighted these values by the vote share of each party for each national election, using the following formula developed by Dalton (2008):

¹¹ The Historic Compromise strategy was developed by PCI secretary Enrico Berlinguer in 1973, after the military coup, in an article called "*Riflessioni sull'Italia dopo i fatti del Cile*" ("Reflections on Italy after the Chilean facts").

$$PI = \sqrt{\sum (party\ vote\ share(i) * ([party\ L/R\ score(i) - party\ system\ average\ L/R\ score]/5)^2)}$$

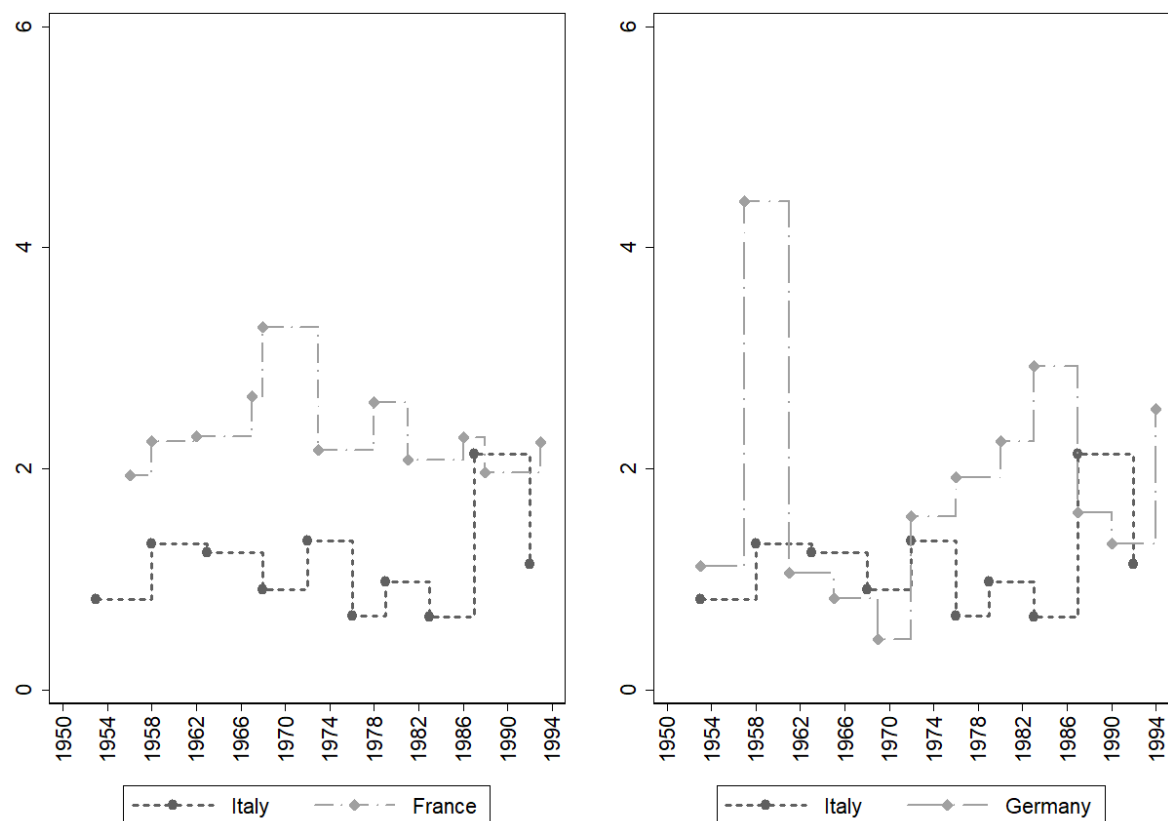
Here, *i* represent individual parties. Following Dalton, “this index is comparable to a measure of the standard deviation of a distribution and is similar to the statistic used by other scholars” (2008, p. 906). Since Dalton uses CSES survey data for the L/R score, to employ this formula, I standardize the RILE values on a 0 to 10 scale. Doing this, the polarization index ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 is total convergence and 10 is extreme polarization.

There are a variety of methods for measuring partisan polarization, but there are two reasons for choosing this one. First, since the variable I am measuring refers to convergence at the programmatic level, MARPROR’S RILE seems particularly suited because it provides an index which is based only on the codification of party manifestos. Furthermore, since I am measuring programmatic convergence during the First Republic (1953¹²-1992), MARPROR is the only available dataset that allows me to cover this time span.

Graphs 2.1 and 2.2 represent the level of programmatic convergence of the mainstream Italian parties between 1953 and 1992 compared to other European countries in the same period.

¹² Although the first post-war in Italy was held in 1948, the first complete available data are for 1953.

Graph 2.2: Levels of programmatic polarization of the Italian party system compared to France and Germany between 1953 and 1994

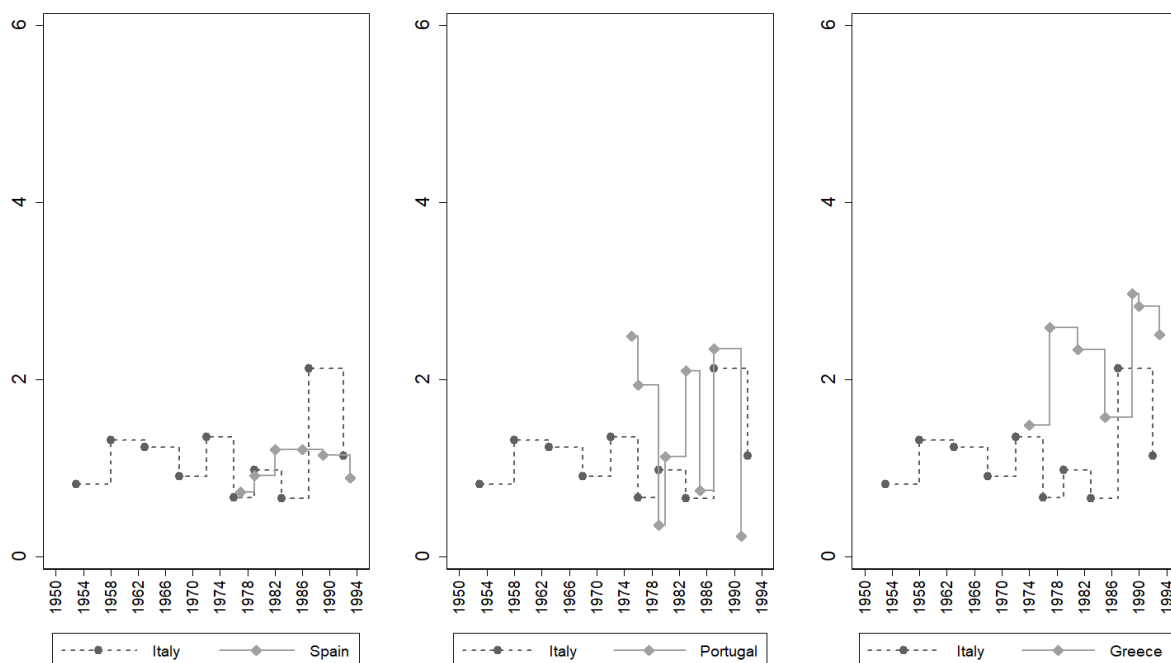


Source: Manifesto Project Database (WZB)

As we can see in graph 2.2, in Italy the levels of programmatic polarization were quite low for all the post-war period. This is evident looking at the comparison with other two big European countries in the same period such as France and Germany¹³.

¹³ For the polarization/convergence values countries for other European countries see Annex 1.

Graph 2.3: Levels of programmatic polarization of the Italian party system compared to Spain and Portugal and Greece between 1975 and 1994



Source: Manifesto Project Database (WZB)

In Graph 2.3 the levels of polarization in Italy are compared to the other Southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece.¹⁴ While the levels of polarization in Portugal and Greece are higher, Spain shows programmatic convergence similar to Italy's.

This high level of convergence was reinforced by the pact among the parties in the system during the 1970s and the 1980s first, the 1970s' Historic Compromise, later, the 1980s' Pentapartito.

2.5.2 Corruption Scandals in Italy: Tangentopoli and its consequences

In February 1992, a major political crisis began in Italy. February 17th saw the first of many arrests of prominent politicians, representing most national political parties, who were charged with extortion, criminal conspiracy, corruption and ties to organized crime and receipt of stolen goods (Della Porta and Vanucci, 2007). The first arrested was Mario Chiesa, a partisan of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and local administrator in Milan. The investigation expanded to unveil the nature of Italy's public administration, not only in Milan, but also in the center and

¹⁴ Polarization values for Spain, Portugal and Greece are calculated from the first post-authoritarian election.

south of the country (Della Porta and Vanucci, 2007). In a few months the investigation revealed a picture of corruption and political illegality unprecedented breadth in the history of Western European democracies, with deep collusion between the quasi-totality of the political class and high-profile businessmen. The corruption scandal was so broad that in 1993 alone, 250 of the 630 members of the Chambers of Deputies and 81 of 320 senators were under investigation (Della Porta and Vanucci 2007). At the end of 1994, the numbers were even more shocking. The numbers of the people under investigation reached more than 7,000, including 338 ex-deputies, 100 ex-senators and 331 regional, 122 provincial and 1525 communal administrators with 4,000 preventive custody warrants orders issued by the judiciary (Samaracanda, 15th November 1994).

A corruption scandal of this magnitude was a critical ingredient in the mounting unresponsiveness of the Italian party system. While programmatic linkage was already weakened by the interparty agreements, especially during the 1970s and 1980s (Morgan, 2011), Tangentopoli and the following trials further discredited the political class in the eyes of the voters.

Again, voters felt vindicated in blaming the whole political elite for the conditions of the country, since the whole elite was proved to be involved in the biggest corruption scandal in Italy's history. In other words, this scenario "pave[d] the way for the alienation of citizens from established political actors, who are increasingly viewed as anything but the genuine representatives of 'the people'" (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis, 2018, p. 4).

In the case of massive corruption scandals or unresponsiveness more generally, citizens are not necessarily *more* populist than they would be otherwise, but their populist predispositions are activated *more* frequently by a context characterized by political unresponsiveness (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2018, p. 4).

In the first part of the chapter I analyzed the two factors, programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruption scandals, which are symptoms unresponsiveness of the whole party system. When the levels of unresponsiveness reach an extreme point, the party system collapses. In the last part of this chapter, I introduce the concept of party system collapse and its role in triggering the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. As mentioned above, Italy at the beginning of the 1990s constitutes a case of party system collapse (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012).

The literature, mainly Latin-American, conceptualizes party system collapses as an extreme change in a party system, where party systems change in type, and the major components become electorally irrelevant. In Italy, at least, such a collapse preceded the emergence of the

populism/anti-populism cleavage. The collapse of the Italian party system in 1994 is the only case of collapse in the post-war Western Europe. Following the literature, a party system collapses when “(established) parties’ breakdown and the structure of the system changes.” For Morgan, this results in the change of the patterns of representation, accountability and governance (Morgan 2011, p. 6). The collapse of a party system leads to the complete reorganization of the democratic order because significant changes in the structure of the party system can threaten the fulfillment of the tasks that political parties perform in a democratic regime.

2.6 The role of the party system collapse in the emergence of the populism/anti-populism collapse

In the academic literature there is broad agreement on the fact that political parties are an essential element of democracy. They are said to be “basic institutions for the translation of mass preferences into public policies” (Key, 1964, p. 22). On the same note, Schattschneider (1960, p. 2), maintains that political parties are “the only kind of organizations that can translate into the fact the idea of majority rule is the political party” and that “political parties created democracy [and] modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties” (see also Aldrich, 1995; Stokes, 1999).

According to Sartori, the most important functions parties perform in modern democracies are participation, electioneering, integration, aggregation, conflict resolution, recruitment, policy-making and expression (2005a, p. 23).

With respect to expression Sartori points out that it “concerns the party as the agency which typically communicates the demands of the society to the state, as the basic link or connector between a society and its government” (2005a, p. 24). In other words, we can state that an essential function of parties is to perform an expressive or representative linkage between voters and governments. Parties are the only representation channel that can transmit demands backed by pressure. It means that when parties field demands, they can compel a response (Sartori, 2005a). In perform this function, parties need to be responsive to voters, i.e. able to interpret and transmit voters’ policy preferences to government (see Stokes, 1999, p. 243).

What happens when parties fail voters in this basic function? Voters shift towards an alternate party or logic of voting (Rose and McAllister, 1990; Kitschelt et al., 2010). In fact, situations in which a party breaks down, i.e., it suffers a “massive electoral defeat...in a single election cycle [that results] in a fragmentation of the party system” (Lupu, 2011, p. 5), are quite common in modern party systems. But what happens when whole party systems collapse?

In general, a system is conceived of as a set of interacting units where the action of each participant entity is affected by the actions of all others (Waltz, 1979, p. 40). More in detail, a party system is defined as the totality of the parties and their interactions (Sartori, 1976). For Sartori, the system is important because “it displays characteristics and properties that are separated from its components and because it results, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its components parts”, (...) implies that “such interactions that occur do so not within, but across the boundaries indicated by the term party” (2005, p. 39). Once mainstream parties lose the capacity or willingness to be representative, voters will find themselves searching for other parties claiming to act as representatives. When this happens, the whole party system collapses.

The concept of party system collapse developed during the early 2010s to explain the deep changes that some Latin American party systems such as Venezuela in 1999, Colombia in 2002 or Bolivia in 2005 (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012).

From a conceptual point of view, a party system is not working properly when it fails to fulfill its primary role in democracy: linking society to state (Morgan 2011, p. 6). Such a failure is caused when an established party system faces challenges to its core linkage strategies and when specific institutional and environmental constraints limit the ability of the system and its component parties to respond appropriately to these challenges. The party system’s resulting inability to perform the critical task of linkage causes its collapse (2011, p. 7). This means that, according to Morgan, collapses occur when an established party system changes in type (transforms) concurrently with a decay in the system’s major parties (p.18). For Morgan, a party system can collapse only when “the structure of interparty interactions and the major parties are in place for enough time so that transformation—the collapse—constitutes a significant break with existing patterns” (2011, p. 19).

On the other hand, in his study about party system collapse in Peru and Venezuela, Seawright (2012) made clear that party system collapse is distinct from and more disruptive than other forms of party system change. In his study, the author aims at analyzing voter attitudes that lead to electoral support for an outsider without political experience but who enjoys prestige from other sources, mainly from a charismatic personality communicated to the people via mass media.

Seawright defines a party system collapse as a situation in which all the parties that constitute the traditional party system simultaneously become electorally irrelevant (2012, p. 48). To constitute a collapse, the party system change must satisfy two necessary and sufficient conditions, which need to occur simultaneously. First, there must be a significant decline of the major components of the system along with a transformation in the established system

structure. Moreover, timing is relevant since these two transformations must occur over a short period of time (2012, p. 19). With respect to the operationalization of the concept, the two scholars differ.

On the one hand, following Morgan (2011) the collapse occurs when two events occur in a brief span of time. First, an established party system needs to transform from one major type into another, for example from a two-party system to a multiparty system. At the same time, the party system experiences a collapse when the main parties of the old system together lose control of the legislature, specifically if the joint seat share of these parties drops below a simple majority. In this case, mainstream parties have clearly lost influence.

One of the most patent examples is Venezuela. During the 1960s and 1970s, the country enjoyed both political stability and economic prosperity. Furthermore, the Venezuelan party system was one of the most institutionalized in the region, with stable patterns of competition (Mainwaring, 1998). After 1973 national election, the system has been described as a 2.5 party system with two major actors, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democratic COPEI, plus Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) as the most relevant third party (Morgan, 2011, p. 74). The system started to show signs of decay in the mid-1980s. After Rafael Caldera, formerly of COPEI, won the 1993 presidential election, support for major parties dropped and the 2.5-party system changed into a multiparty system with more than five competitive parties. While in elections during the 1970s and 1980s AD and COPEI won about 80 percent of the seats, by 1998 the party system had collapsed and the two major parties lost control of the legislature, holding only 48 percent of the seats in the Senate and 43 percent in the lower chamber (Morgan, 2011, p. 77-78).

On the other hand, for Seawright, the requirement that the decline of all parties be simultaneous is taken to mean that the collapse must occur over a period of not more than two electoral cycles. In addition, the criterion of electoral irrelevance, central to the idea of party system collapse, is regarded as met whenever a party fails to achieve either the first or second place in a presidential election. Seawright analyzes two cases: Venezuela and Peru. Seawright (2012) tries to understand the cause of the party system collapse from both the demand and the supply side. The perception of ideological underrepresentation and concerns about corruption reflected in the changes of party identities are central motives at the individual level to produce the collapse of the party system. Indeed, both these sentiment cause anger, which in turn reduced the voters' risk aversion and facilitated their decision to vote for an outsider candidate. At the same time, the rigidity of mainstream parties made it difficult for them to change and adapt to the preferences of the electorate.

2.6.1 The collapse of the Italian party system and its relevance

For both Morgan's and Seawright's conceptualizations and operationalizations of the phenomenon, Italy experienced party system collapse in 1994.

As described above, the political revolution that took place in Italy in 1994 shook the entire party system. In 1994, two of the three traditional Italian parties fell into electoral irrelevance; the Socialists fell from a national vote share of 13.6 percent in 1992 to 2.2 percent in 1994, while the more powerful Christian Democrats (DC) fell from 29.7 percent in 1992 to 11.1 percent in 1994¹⁵ (Seawright, 2012). The third traditional party, the Communists, underwent meaningful electoral decline during roughly the same years, although the party did not reach the same depth as the other two. In the 1987 general election, the Communists won 25.6 percent of the vote, but at that point the party brand had changed in response to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The main heir of the PCI, the PDS, achieved 20.36 percent of the vote in 1992 (Bardi, 1996; Seawright, 2012).

All these events can be analyzed separately or through the concept of party system collapse as a single event (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012).

However, most scholars analyzing the Italian case do not employ the concept of party system collapse, preferring other concepts such as "crisis of the party system" (see Morlino, 1996; Gundle and Parker, 2002), change of the party system (Katz, 1996) or party system realignment (Bardi, 1996; Morlino and Tarchi, 1996). When the term collapse appears, it refers not to the entire party system but only to a specific party or parties, such as the collapse of the centrist alliance (Hopkin and Mastropaolo, 2001, p. 170).

With respect to the causes of the events of 1994, scholars have mentioned three major explanations: the electoral reform of 1993, the massive corruption scandal known as Tangentopoli and subsequent trials, known as Mani Pulite (Clean Hands), which implicated the leading parties in the system, and the idiosyncratic dissatisfaction with politics in Italy. It is fair to say that in most cases, these explanations are not employed separately; rather, most accounts use some combination of the three.

First, some scholars attribute the change to the effects of the electoral reform of 1993 (Morlino, 1996). The two major novelties were the allocation of seats, three-quarters to single-member districts and one-quarter to proportional representation, and the use of the English

¹⁵ The 1992 election is the last with the DC Brand. In 1994 the party name changed to PPI (Popular Italian Party).

first-past-the-post electoral formula in the uninomial districts were retained from the referendum result and applied to both chambers of parliament (Katz, 1996, p. 33).

With respect to the 1993 electoral law, Morlino (1996) underlines “anticipation reactions” to the law. As the author points out, even before the March 1994 elections the DC splintered in anticipation of the anti-center impact of those quasi-majoritarian mechanisms. The electoral reform of 1993 was depicted as part of the electoral catalysis of the end of the First Republic and the old *partitocrazia* (Donovan, 1995, p. 47). This reform was made possible by the outsider elites employing the referendum strategy in a situation in which the traditional governing elites were weakened by massive corruption scandals and the subsequent trials.

However, Katz (1996), maintains that even if the reform was intended to alter the structure of the party system and the relations between parties, interests and voters, the results of the (1994, 32) election raises doubts that the changes should attributed to the reform. The changes in the Italian party system following the 1994 election were depicted as consequences of more long-term processes such as the collapse of the left, which “was already evident in 1992 parliamentary election, in which the PDS and Rifondazione between them obtained only 21.7 percent of the vote,” while the collapse of the Christian Democracy “was at least foreshadowed by the communal elections of June 1993, in which the DC won only 18.8 percent and the PSI 3.6 percent of the vote in the larger communes, and even less in the smaller ones, and again in the communal elections of November/December 1993, in which their support was reduced still further” (Katz, 1996, p. 32).

The second factor that scholars mention to explain the change in Italian party system is related to the consequences of the major corruption scandal known as Tangentopoli and the subsequent trial which delegitimized the whole political system (Morlino, 1996; De Santa Olalla, 2016; Newell and Bull, 1997). Tangentopoli critically undermined the traditional governing parties “not only through its effect on public opinion, but also more directly by subverting the parties’ financial and organizational resources” (Newell and Bull, 1997, p. 87).

The 1994 collapse of the party system in Italy followed the massive corruption scandal (Tangentopoli) and resultant nationwide judicial investigation and trial into political corruption, Mani Pulite, which ensnared leaders from every party in the system, especially the Christian Democracy and the Socialist Party. The involvement of the political class was so broad that at some point more than half of the members of parliament were under indictment (Vannucci, 2009). More than 400 city and town councils were dissolved because of corruption charges and the estimated value of bribes paid annually in the 1980s by Italian and foreign companies bidding for large governments contracts reached four billion dollars (Koff, 2002). The change

in the Italian party system following the collapse is commonly known as the beginning of the Second Republic (Landi and Pelizzo, 2013). The first phase of the Italian republic was characterized by a strong *partitocrazia*, going well beyond the practice of party government (Pasquino, 2015, p. 155). For some scholars however, the so-called Second Republic never begun or at least never consolidated (Pasquino, 2000; Katz, 1996).

The third factor identified in the literature is chronic and widespread dissatisfaction and anti-party sentiment. This is an idiosyncratic factor of the Italian politics extant since the end of the 1940s (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996; Martini and Quaranta, 2011; Morlino, 2013). Some of the phenomena mentioned above, such as the corruption scandal, the April 1993 referendum and the new electoral laws, are important aspects of a complex funnel of causality but the chronic political dissatisfaction was able to manifest itself only in the early 1990s, when the constraints on its expression disappeared and incentives for its manifestation simultaneously appeared (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996, p. 43-44).

The dissatisfaction within Italian civil society was present since the end of World War II. Morlino and Tarchi observed that “whatever criteria we adopt to measure this [dissatisfaction], Italian democracy has had a low level of legitimacy since its beginning in the late 1940s.” They see the changes that the Italian party system faced in the early 1990s as an “announced earthquake” (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996, p. 41).

Refusing to consider corruption as a determinant variable, they focused on widespread dissatisfaction. Manifestations of this dissatisfaction in 1968-69 were the student movement, the protest of feminist groups and trade unions through non-conventional forms of conflictual participation (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996, p. 45).

In a more recent study, Martini and Quaranta (2014) found evidence that the widespread dissatisfaction has its roots in the fragmentation of the party system during the First Republic and in the inability to reduce the number of the parties in the system during the Second. Though these analyses merit consideration, I believe that by themselves they do not entirely account for the changes within the Italian party system at the beginning of the 1990s. As Morlino (1996) pointed out “the interest of the Italian case lies in the fact that it compels us to analyze more profound transformations involving the disappearance of one or more parties and the change of the very party system itself.”

As a consequence, only by analyzing the simultaneous occurrence of two factors such as the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties, especially the pacts among the governing parties during the 1970s and the 1980s, and the Tangentopoli corruption scandal, which involved most of the Italian political class, as symptoms the extremely high level of

unresponsiveness of the Italian party system during the First Republic, can we account for the 1992-1994 events. Moreover, analyzing the Italian case in light of the concept of party system collapse (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012) may offer valuable insights. This concept can be useful since it allows analysis not only of the breakdown of a singular party, but the failure of the whole system, which was perceived to be highly unresponsive by voters. Only recognizing that it was the whole party system which was perceived as unresponsive allows us to understand the entrance of new relevant actors in a system that was completely closed and “frozen” during the years of the First Republic. When the collapse occurred, it made the institutional constraints more flexible. Considering the collapse as a moment in which the party system was a sort of *tabula rasa* allows us to understand that there was space for a re-structuration of the pattern of competitions within it.

Although the academic literature that explains the causes of party system collapse is certainly useful, this body of work sheds little light on what comes after the collapse. The collapse of the party system represents a crucial event in the politics of a country and entails a total reconstruction of the system. As a consequence, it represents a change in the electoral opportunity structure and of the entrance barriers to the party system. In other words, the collapse represents a critical juncture that involves the rupture of the linkages between voters and mainstream parties, since the latter are perceived as illegitimate and corrupt. After critical junctures there is no determined path. These triggering events do set development along a particular path, but the agency has a crucial role in determining which path (Mahoney, 2000). In some cases, political actors took advantage of the changes in the political opportunity structure to develop a discourse that depicts the old parties as “the same” in the eyes of the electorate. However, it is not the aim of this work to speculate on the causation between the collapse of the party system and the emergence of relevant populist alternatives. Instead, this work focuses on the collapse of the Italian party system as a sort of “fertile soil” for the emergence of populist actors.

From a theoretical point of view, there may be other kinds of output for party systems after such a big change in the political opportunity structure.

First, since the concept has been developed mainly for research on Latin America, which is, according to Seawright, “a turbulent region for political parties” characterized by high instability, it could seem that party system collapse is an intrinsic characteristic of highly volatile party system, which is not necessarily the case. In fact, even those systems which have been characterized as stable and highly institutionalized, such as Venezuela and Colombia

during the 1990s (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; 1995a; Coppedge and Reinicke, 1990; Levine, 2015), experienced a collapse (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012; Roberts, 2016).

Moreover, the region has been characterized by phenomena such as debt crises, economic restructuring and neoliberal reforms during the 1980s and 1990s but the case of collapse of the party system are limited in number (Seawright 2012, p. 3). At this point a consideration is in order. While party system change has been common in the region, party system collapse has been rare, even in a high volatile region such as Latin America. As a consequence, party system collapses in Western European democracy, such as Italy, should be analyzed more thoroughly to understand the reasons behind the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I illustrate a theoretical argument that accounts for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. I maintain that three factors, the convergence of mainstream parties, massive corruption scandals and the collapse of the party system, play a role polarizing the cleavage and permitting it to structure the party system along a populism/anti-populism divide. The high levels of unresponsiveness of the system play a major role. The simultaneous occurrence of programmatic convergence of the mainstream parties within the system and massive corruption scandals got to a point in which the level of unresponsiveness reached an extreme. If the levels of unresponsiveness of the whole party system reach a point of no return, it results in a collapse of the system. A party system collapses when the parties that compose it decay and the structure of the system changes (Morgan, 2011, p. 6). The collapse represents a critical juncture in a party system because it means that the tasks typically performed by parties such as promoting accountability went unfulfilled, which could make the regime unstable (Morgan, 2011, p. 6). While such events represent a critical juncture, their consequences are not pre-determined. During these brief windows of time, the role of political actors in determining the future of the party system is crucial. One relevant aspect is that during these brief phases, institutions became more permeable and either new actors can enter the system or actors that were electorally irrelevant may grow in profile. Other than this general statement, the consequences of a collapse for a party system depend largely on the decisions that old and new actors make.

The collapse of the party system has the effect of changing the political opportunity structure and lowering the institutional barriers for the entrance of new actors in the system. These new actors are likely to frame their discourse in a populist manner as they can cultivate

a perception of distance from the country's political elite. In this sense, the role of agency is determinant in the appearance of the populism/anti-populism cleavage, because even with the presence of structural factors that may favor its emergence, a political actor — a leader, a party or a social movement — still needs to politicize them in a populist frame. Moreover, at the demand side, populist attitudes need to be activated for the populist actors to gain electoral support (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis, 2018; Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, 2014).

In the case of Italy, unresponsiveness reached a peak during the 1992-1994 period, when the party system experienced a collapse (Morgan, 2011; Seawright, 2012). The collapse was a consequence of both the high programmatic convergence of mainstream parties during the First Republic (1948-1992), reinforced by the inter-party agreements during the 1970s and the 1980s, which limited options for government formation. The situation was worsened by the breaking of a series of corruption scandals known as Tangentopoli (Bribe City), and the subsequent trials, which found the majority of the political class complicit in those scandals.

The simultaneous occurrence of programmatic convergence and a massive corruption scandal resulted in the decay of both the programmatic and clientelistic linkage. In the 1994 general elections, the configuration of forces was totally different from the 1992 and even more from the 1987 election. One new actor, Silvio Berlusconi's populist party Forza Italia, was able to gain almost 25 percent of the vote and occupy the center-right space of the political spectrum. Also, to the right of the political center, the populist Lega Nord (LN), a federation of regional leagues in the north of Italy, started to become more electorally relevant by promoting a program centered on greater autonomy for the northern regions. With the appearance of these two actors and the populist discourse they employed, the party system started to be structured along a new political divide, namely populism/anti-populism.

In chapters 3 and 4, focusing in detail on the Italian case in the 1994-2016 period, I show that it took a while for anti-populism to emerge in response to this populist pole. However, as populism/anti-populism represents a political cleavage, once relevant populist options started to introduce a populist discourse in the system, a reaction by other actors in terms of the development of some sort of anti-populist discourse was sure to follow.