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

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## **Chapter 4**

### **New Populism Vs. Old Populism and the Emergence of the Anti-Populist Pole**

As seen above, the period between 1994 and 2011 was characterized by the emergence of a populist pole. This populist pole was formed mainly of right-wing parties, namely Silvio Berlusconi's FI and the Lega Nord. Conversely, the discourse of non-populist parties does not show anti-populist traits. Nevertheless, until 2011, the discourse of left-wing parties has been characterized by an anti-Berlusconi stance (De Giorgi, 2016).

This chapter covers the period between the fall of the fourth Berlusconi government in November 2011 and the Constitutional Referendum of December 2016. In the political arena, this period was characterized by the permanence of the so-called populist pole on the right side of the political spectrum, with Lega Nord's electoral performance improving and subtype of populism shifting, from regionalist populism to radical right populism, and the weakening of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. On the left, with the disappearance of di Pietro's Italia dei Valori, the Democratic Party consolidated as a centre-left government alternative despite a rise in internal disputes, and the extreme left declined. The analysis of Italian politics, more specifically, of the cleavages that came to structure the party system during the period under consideration, can provide insight into possible coalition formation patterns beyond those accounted for by the classical coalition theory literature (Golder, 2006). In fact, if the parties compete along two (or more) the axes, the feasible coalitions are different from the ones possible when the only axis structuring the party is the traditional left-right spectrum. Three essential arguments are developed in this chapter.

The first argument relates to the appearance of a second wave of populism in Italy during the Great Recession, represented by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. The emergence of this movement was mainly a consequence of the implementation of neoliberal adjustment measures, but also, more generally, it was the result of the politicization of the widespread anti-political sentiment that has affected Italy since the collapse of the party system. Moreover, the discourse of the M5S effectively politicized corruption, exploiting the scandals that involved representatives of the main parties in the early 2010's.

The Movement's populist discourse is peculiar because it altered the dynamics of competition in the system, framed against the country's entire political class, even against the still-present populists of the first wave (i.e. the Lega Nord and Forza Italia).

Second, after the emergence of the so-called populist pole in the previous period analyzed (1994-2011) the populism/anti-populism cleavage came to completely structure the party system, since non-populist parties adopt a consistent anti-populist discourse. Essentially two types of anti-populist discourse were articulated in this period. On the one hand, Monti's technical government articulated an anti-populist discourse with elitist features. Being elitist, the technocratic government inverted the logic of the populist discourse, maintaining that the elites should rule because "they know better." On the other hand, an anti-populist discourse, still elitist but with different features, was articulated by the centre-left Democratic Party in the electoral campaign for the general election in 2013 until at least the constitutional referendum of 2016.

Third, the emergence of the M5S had a double impact on interparty competition. After the emergence of an anti-populist discourse concomitant with the neoliberal adjustment measures implemented by Mario Monti's technocratic administration, the appearance of the Movement led a further polarization of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Furthermore, the difficulty of positioning M5S on the left-right axis of competition, the socioeconomic cleavage parties have partially lost relevance in structuring the Italian party system.

In sum, during the 2011-2016 period, the populist pole changed its configuration, partially enabling the reaction of the non-populist parties that developed an anti-populist discourse.

The chapter is divided as follows.

The first section offers a short overview of Italian politics between 2011 and December 2016. During this period, one national election took place and three administrations were formed, including the Monti government. Their average duration was 617 days (less than two years). It is worth noting that the most important feature of this period was the so-called Great Recession, the financial and economic crisis that hit hard Southern European countries mainly in the form of a sovereign debt crisis.

In the second section I analyze the ideology and organizational features of the new actors in the system: Mario Monti's technocratic government and the Five Star Movement (M5S). As I recalled in the previous chapter, the analysis of the discourse is relevant, first, for understanding whether the configuration of the populist pole has changed with respect to the previous period and whether or not an anti-populist ideology has surfaced.

The analysis at the organizational level, on the other hand, as covered in chapter three, is necessary to make inferences about the duration of the parties in the system. This could seem obvious for the classic literature on parties but the literature on populism, focusing on party ideology or on charismatic leadership, has often neglected the analysis of the organizational

features of parties, with a few exceptions (Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016; McDonnell 2013; Kefford and McDonnell, 2018). As a consequence, both the Monti administration and the M5S are relevant in the analysis of the populism/anti-populism cleavage, since each of them took opposite positions on the moral dispute between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” First, Monti presented himself and his technocratic government as a solution to the fecklessness of the parties in the system and thus may be interpreted as a response to the populist coalition in power, Berlusconi’s FI and the LN, for most of the Second Republic. The second new political actor, the Five Star Movement, founded by comedian Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianlaberto Casaleggio in 2009, which participated for the first time in the general elections in 2013 and won more than the 25 percent of the vote, may be interpreted as a response to the economic stabilization measures adopted by Monti’s technocratic government (Mosca, 2014). The M5S was able to politicize the anti-political sentiment in the Italian society using the convergence of most parties on the neoliberal measures of economic stabilization implemented during Monti administration. This allowed Grillo and the Movement to create the rhetoric of “they are all the same”, in particular regarding the two main parties in the system, the Democratic Party (PD) and the Popolo della Libertà (PdL). To underline that the interests and the values of the two major electoral forces in the country were the same, Grillo renamed them together “PD-L” (PD minus L). This rhetoric worked also during the Letta government which enjoyed the parliamentary support of most parties in the system.

Finally, in the third part of the chapter, I analyze the non-populist parties in power which have developed an anti-populist discourse. From the technocratic government until the campaign for the constitutional referendum of 2016, two kinds of anti-populist discourses were articulated. This implies a study first of the technocratic government and then the analysis of the other type of anti-populist discourse, neither entirely elitist nor entirely pluralist, developed by the Democratic Party. This second type of anti-populist discourse, which still can be described as elitist, consists in targeting specific populist actors and causing a full moralization of the political debate in the country, since this kind of anti-populist discourse reinforces in some way the populist contraposition between the “good” and the “evil.” This type of anti-populism, analyzed in chapter three, has been characterized as a sort of basic anti-populism.

The analysis of the ideology and organization of the actors in the system is relevant to determining which cleavages structure the party system and to shedding light on the possible duration of those cleavages. Moreover, being able to map the position of the parties in the political space give us insight into the possible future dynamics of coalition formation. In fact, if the left-right axis is not the only one that structures the system, we could better explain some

the alliances of parties that are not programmatically close one another. In other words, populism, i.e. the thin ideology that two parties share, may function as the “glue” between them even if they are not close on the ideological plane.

#### **4.1 Overview 2011-2016: The Great Recession and its consequences for the Italian party system**

The effects of the global economic crisis hit Italy in 2011. That year represented a turning point for many reasons. First, the effects of the so-called Great Recession put an end to the fourth Berlusconi government in November. Furthermore, as explored below, two new actors entered the system: the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement) and Mario Monti’s technocratic government. Both these political actors are relevant for the structure of the party system, representing changes both in the populist and non-populist side.

The period analyzed in this chapter begins with the breakdown of the fourth Berlusconi government in November 2011 and ends with the constitutional referendum in December 2016. To fully understand the characteristics of the period in question, it is important to analyze the characteristics and the consequences of the Great Recession and its major economic and political consequences for Southern European countries.

The term Great Recession has been used in recent years to refer to the generalized period of economic decline in world markets during the late 2000s and the early 2010s. The crisis had its origins in the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2007-2009 in the U.S. and spread around the world, though not homogeneously. In general, Southern European countries and Ireland experienced severe macroeconomic consequences. These European peripheral countries experienced the Great Recession mainly as a sovereign debt crisis, which exploded in 2010 when international financial markets’ doubts about the ability of the Greek government to repay its bonds led to the country losing access to the private bond market (Armingeon and Baccaro, 2012, p. 163). The most obvious economic response during crises such as the Great Recession was currency devaluation. However, Southern European countries’ policy responses were limited because, as members of the Eurozone, devaluation was not a viable option.

Permitting domestic inflation to fight the debt problem was not an option either, given the inflation aversion of the European Central Bank (ECB). As Armingeon and Baccaro (2012) pointed out, these countries were forced into pro-cyclical austerity measures in a time of recession. In Southern European countries, the only remaining option was “internal devaluation”, namely to “engineer a recession strong enough to lower wages below productivity and make up for the lost competitiveness” (2012, p. 168). In fact, independent of

the political orientation of the government, the policy responses were quite similar: fiscal consolidation and structural measures were implemented with the aim of increasing the degree of competitiveness of the labor and product markets (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012). Empirical evidence demonstrated that in almost all countries severely hit by the crisis, there was an important degree of support for cutting public spending instead of increasing taxes (Bermeo and Bartels, 2014, p. 19). In general, it can be maintained that almost all European countries, eschewing the quantitative easing strategy adopted in the United States, have preferred austerity measures not resulting in major changes in the realm of public policies (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2018, p. 537).

As far as the effects of the Great Recession on the Italian economy, it is important to underline that Italy is the third largest economy of the Eurozone (after Germany and France) and that the country held the largest public debt (over €2 trillion) which had been growing at an astonishing pace, even in more recent times and particularly as a ratio of GDP (130%) since the latter has been contracting fast. Italy's economic problems were similar to the other GIIPS:<sup>24</sup> the loss of competitiveness vis-à-vis Germany due to stagnant productivity increases (Lane, 2012). Since 2011, the interest rate on the Italian treasury's ten-year bonds exceeded the interest rate of the German bonds by more than five percentage points. Moreover, the country has suffered since the early 1990s from a very high public debt, which consecutive governments have not been able to reduce despite the frequent fiscal consolidation adjustments implemented since the 1990s.

Since mid-2011, the European Union started to demand tough economic reforms from Italy. More specifically, European leaders Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, during various meetings of the EU organisms in Brussels, demanded that Berlusconi present a plan for growth and for reducing Italy's public debt (Bosco and McDonnell, 2012). However, disagreement within the government coalition with the Lega Nord over the economic measures to adopt, especially pensions reform, made it impossible for the government to fulfill the requests of the European Union. Beyond the strain that the adoption of some of the demanded economic measures put on the governing coalition, EU institutions, international financial institutions (IFIs) and European leaders strongly supported the appointment of Mario Monti over a new coalition government led by Berlusconi. This may seem quite contradictory, given the neoliberal features of Berlusconi's populist discourse. One could expect that the austerity

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<sup>24</sup> Acronym used to identify the country more affected by the Great Recession (Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Spain)

economic measures demanded signaled that the European leaders and the markets in general believed that Silvio Berlusconi was the right man for the job. However, his five administrations have not been characterized by the implementation of neoliberal economic policies. As Gualmini and Schmidt argue, “Italy’s trajectory since the postwar years has gone back and forth between normal periods of non-liberal political leadership – in which what opportunistic political leaders said had little to do with what they did – and crisis periods of neo-liberal technocratic leadership, in which pragmatic leaders neo-liberal words matched the actions” (2013, p. 347).

Therefore, his past record did not give Berlusconi credibility in the eyes of the European institutions. The typical inertia of the Italian political system, following Gaudalini and Schmidt’s (2013) interpretation, was perpetuated by opportunistic and self-interested political elites, embodied in Berlusconi, which limited or precluded any reformist policies in favor of the so-called *partitocrazia*, i.e., an economic system in which clientelism and patronage strongly connected to political parties prevailed.

On the other hand, the appointment of former European commissioner, Mario Monti, at the end of the year was seen as a step forward in addressing the structural problems that had affected Italian economy since the First Republic. Days before Monti’s appointment as prime minister, the President of the EU, Herman Van Rompuy, claimed that Italy “needs reforms, not elections.” Historically, Italy’s neo-liberal reforms capability came from outside the country and was mainly an effect of the power of the EU, seen as a normative ideational construct and an institutional constraint and opportunity (Gualmini and Schmidt 2013, p. 348). Thus, these technocratic executives, who are not unusual in Italy’s political post-war history,<sup>25</sup> represent a transformational period during which technicians implement neo-liberal policies that apparently can be carried out only outside party politics.

On a general level, it has been said that the Great Recession included different intertwined dimensions: first, there was a competitiveness crisis which resulted a slowing down of economic growth in most of Europe; second, a banking crisis, due to undercapitalization of banks and their consequent lack of liquidity; and third, a sovereign debt crisis, especially in those countries that could no longer fund public debt on their own because of rising bond yields (Kriesi and Pappas 2015, p.1). Like the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Great Recession started in the U.S., ended up affecting most of the world’s countries and opened a long period

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<sup>25</sup> The two examples of fully non-party technocratic government in post-war established European democracies are both in Italy: Lamberto Dini’s administration (January 1995-May 1996) and Mario Monti government (November 2011-April 2013).



of hardship. Even though the economic crisis was not uniform in terms of outcomes, it seems that so far, the political consequences for the party systems have been very limited. Following the literature about the consequences of the Great Recession, we can say that three factors help explain this finding (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanolini, 2018). First, the presence of welfare states which “are designed to insure against social risks, such as unemployment, poverty and income loss and thus should serve to cushion the harshest impact of the recession” (Anderson and Hetch, 2014, p. 53). Second, as Bartels (2013; 2014) and Kriesi (2014) convincingly demonstrate, the limited reactions to the economic crisis lay in the extensive use of the retrospective voting. The Great Recession, in fact, seems to confirm that voters tend to punish incumbents during times of economic hardship while rewarding them during periods of economic expansion. The Berlusconi government breakdown, for instance, can be analyzed in light of the effect of the Great Recession, since in the 2013 elections, when the Italian economy was already seriously affected by the crisis, voters punished him and the centre-left succeeded despite the closeness of the election (Bellucci, 2014). Third, at the political system level, in most cases, the Great Recession has amplified preexisting electoral trends rather than provoking major changes. However, in several countries, new political actors emerged or established parties gained force both on the radical right, such as True Finns in Finland (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), and the radical left, such as Podemos in Spain (Ramiro and Gomez, 2017). Some of the parties or movements that emerged with the crisis are populist, with a critical stance towards the political order, such as Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S) and Jon Gnarr’s Best Party in Iceland (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015, p. 2). We cannot forget that even in those cases in which the crisis contributed to the erosion of the existing party system, populism has been a long-term process that had already started at the time of the Great Recession (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015).

Then, even if the literature on the Great Recession demonstrates that the political consequences of the economic crisis were in most cases limited, it is also true that, at least in the GIIPS countries (Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Spain) there were major changes at party system level. These Southern European countries experienced a harsher economic crisis, mainly because of the structural shortcomings of their economies.

On the party system level, in Spain, Greece and Italy, new parties emerged or became electorally relevant. In 2009 and 2014, in Italy and Spain respectively, two new populist parties and movements, the Five Star Movement and Podemos, made their political debuts. In 2012,

two new parties debuted in the Greece party system. On the left, SYRIZA,<sup>26</sup> which was initially a coalition of parties which shared a thick ideology close to ecological socialism, Marxism and euro-communism, achieved 36.34 percent of the vote in the January 2015 election, the most of any party. In 2012, this time on the right, ANEL was founded by Panos Kammenos, a former MP for mainstream Nea Demokratia. Even though ANEL did not match SYRIZA's electoral success, the two parties joined their forces and formed a government together.

The coalition of these two parties is particularly interesting from an analytical point of view, since it represents the first governing alliance of left-wing and right-wing populist parties in Europe (Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016).

This empirical observation led to a reflection on the theoretical link between the economic crisis and the emergence of populism. The literature that focused on the consequences of the Great Recession does not find a necessary causal connection between the economic crisis and the emergence of populist alternatives. However, one could think the economic crisis "fertile soil" for the emergence of populist actors. The effects of the economic crisis, above all the neo-liberal economic measures implemented by most EU governments, produce discontent and angst among voters. Since the austerity measures have been implemented in every country severely affected by the Great Recession, we could assume that the demand for populist alternatives was the same in all those countries. However, to understand the emergence of populist political actors, we need to also consider the supply side of the equation. On the empirical level, this is demonstrated by the absence of populist alternatives in Portugal, a country that experienced severe macroeconomic fall, comparable with GIIPS peers. In other words, the Portuguese party system was more responsive to voters' concerns and no relevant populist actor could take advantage of the "fertile soil" produced by the Great Recession.

As Mair (2009; 2013) points out, the erosion of the mainstream parties' representation is due to the increasing tension between responsibility and responsiveness, the two main functions of the parties. The lack of responsiveness of mainstream parties to specific demands from voters make the latter feel unrepresented and more likely to prefer a political alternative that distances itself from the "corrupt" party system. In sum, the economic crisis, on the one hand, cannot be considered either a sufficient or a necessary cause for the emergence of populism but, on the other hand, it can be interpreted as a critical juncture (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007) which amplified the tension between responsiveness and responsibility as governments seemed to have little power to and interest in confronting technocratic

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<sup>26</sup> SYRIZA was formed as a coalition of small left parties in 2004. Later, in 2012, they unite and formed a party.

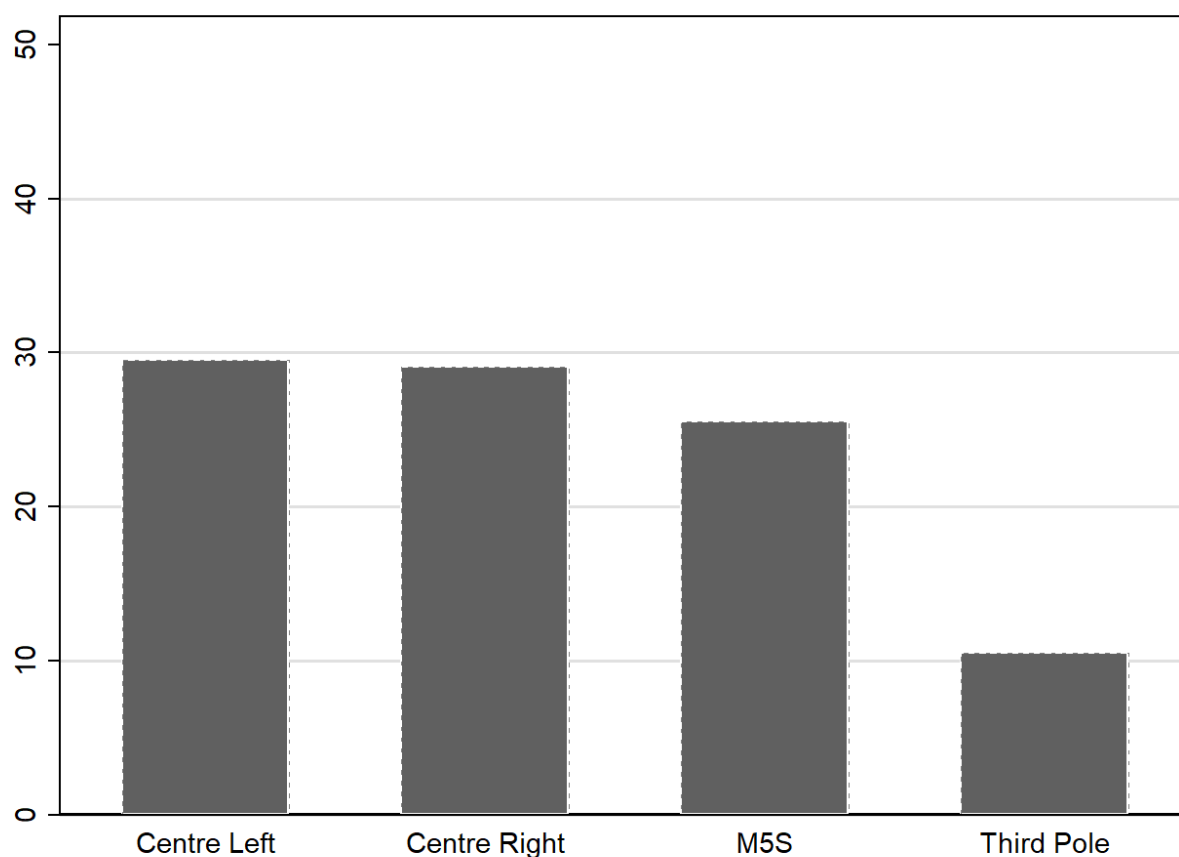
international institutions such as the Troika, i.e., the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which sought fiscal consolidation at any cost (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanolini 2018, p. 540).

The emergence of populist political options like the M5S in Italy can be seen as both the malfunctioning of the representative democracy, with reference to the parties, i.e., the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, and the aftereffect of the Great Recession and the neo-liberal adjustment measures implemented by Monti's technocratic regime.

Another feature of 2011-2016 Italy was the partial estrangement of Silvio Berlusconi from the political life of the country. After the breakdown of the fourth Berlusconi government, the leader of the centre-right coalition started to distance himself from the political life of the country albeit without formally retiring. Judiciary scandals, responsibility in Italian and European public opinion for the disastrous situation of the country's economy and internal disagreements drove Berlusconi away from political life, and without their leader the party began to weaken, especially after the 2013 election. The decline of Forza Italia, which had been the "glue" of the Italian right for more than twenty years, started a process of fragmentation on the right.

On the right, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the LN completed the transition from a populist regionalist party to a radical right party (Zaslave, 2011; Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018). Decisive in this transition was the change of leadership, with the election of Matteo Salvini as secretary in 2013. From the beginning of his leadership, he demonstrated that the regionalist ideology was part of the history of the party. In 2014, he founded "Noi con Salvini" (Us with Salvini), a sister electoral list of the LN for the central and southern regions. In 2017, the leader changed the name of the party to Lega (without Nord) as well as the party's symbol for the 2018 national election.

*Graph 4.1: Vote percentage in 2013 national election<sup>27</sup>*



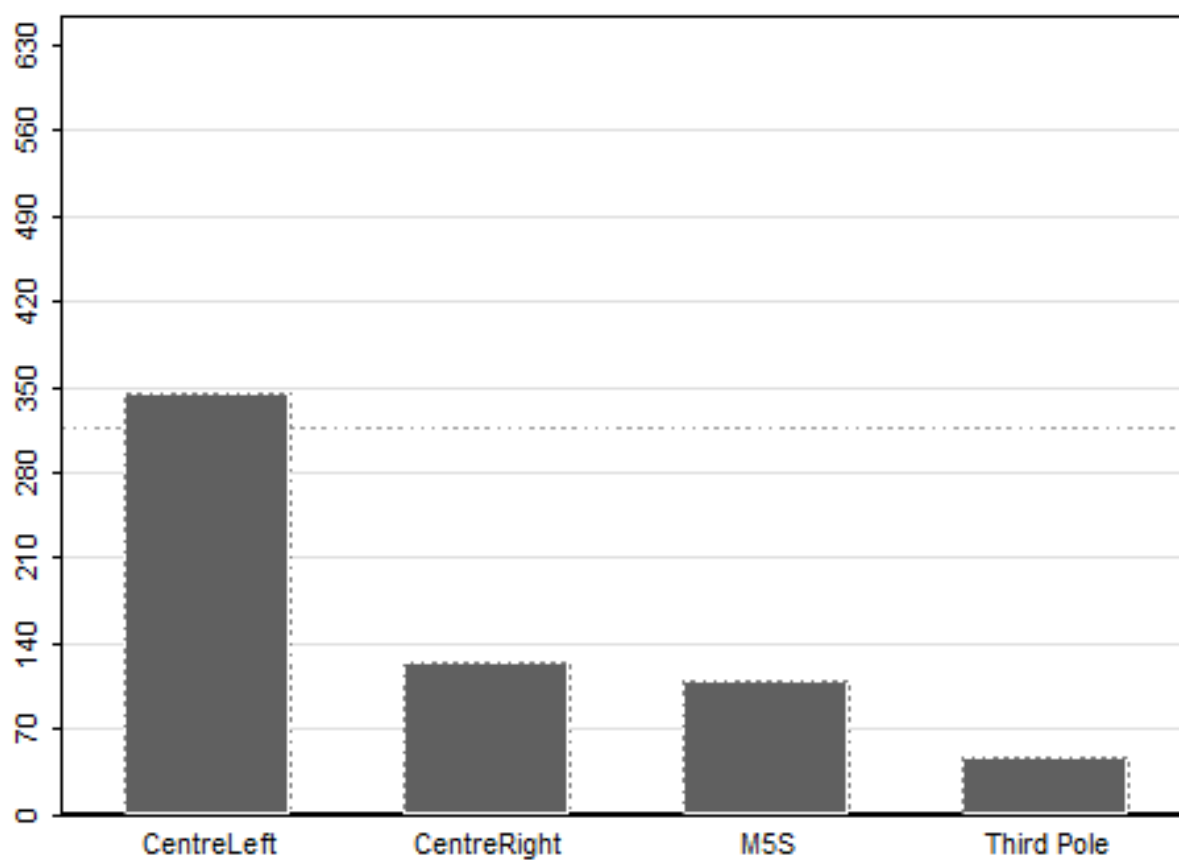
Source: Governo Italiano, Ministero dell'Interno, Archivio Elettorale.

Graph 4.1 shows the vote percentage in the 2013 national election. As shown in the graph (above) the differences between the shares obtained by the top three are slim, with the center-left and the center-right divided by less than one percentage point and M5S gaining more than 25 percent.

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<sup>27</sup> Centre-left coalition was composed of the PD, SEL, Centro Democratico and other minor parties. The centre-right coalition included FI, LN, Fratelli d'Italia-Centro Destra Nazionale and other minor parties both in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate.

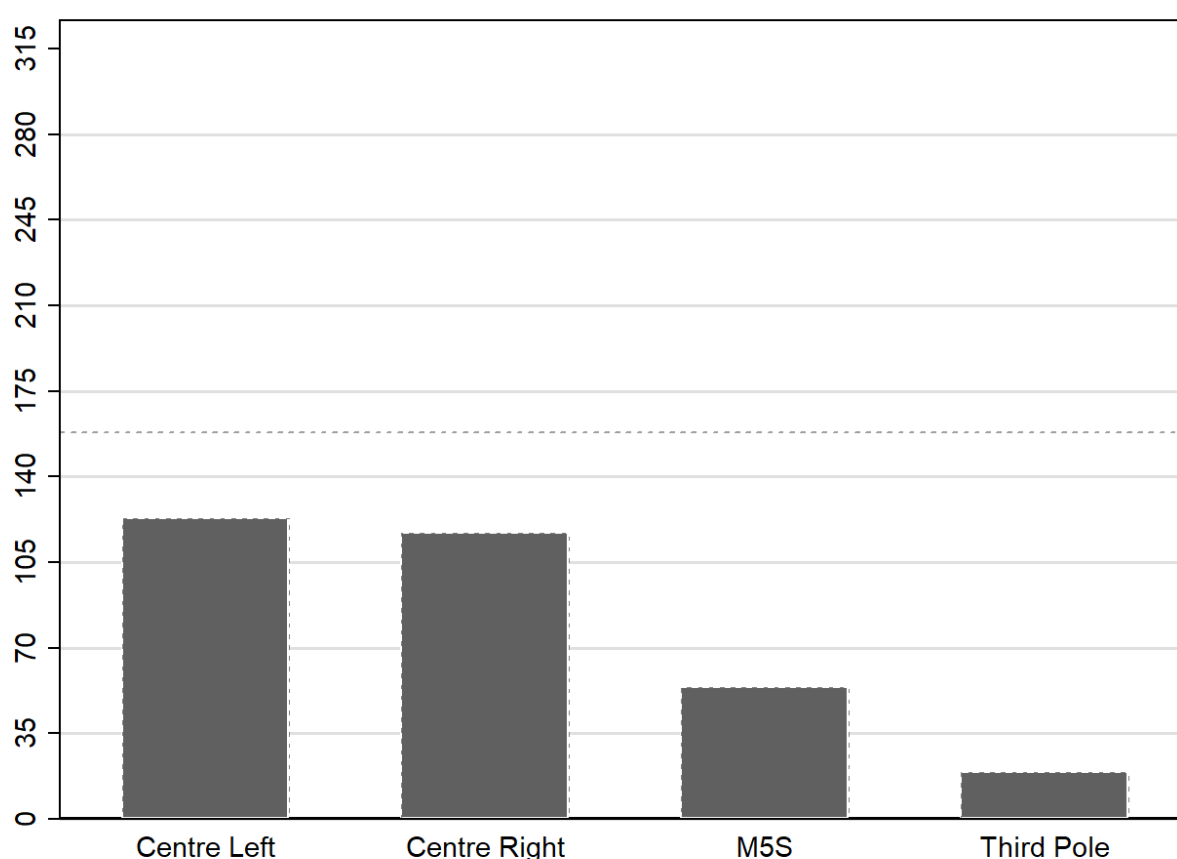
*Graph 4.2: Number of seats in 2013 national election (Chambers of Deputies)*



Source: Governo Italiano, Ministero dell'Interno, Archivio Elettorale.

To take a closer look at the 2013 national election, graphs 4.2 (above) and 4.3 (below) show, respectively, the vote percentage obtained by the three main parties (or coalitions) in the 2013 national elections and the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate.

Graph 4.3: Number of seats in 2013 national election (Senate)



Source: Governo Italiano, Ministero dell'Interno, Archivio Elettorale.

As the graphs show, the difference between the vote shares obtained by the biggest parties was minimal. Also, at least in the Senate, the PD had only a slim majority, which made it difficult to build a solid parliamentary bloc to support the executive. The uncertainty of the electoral results was aggravated by internal problems within both the centre-left and centre-right coalitions, which led to fragmentation and the inability to form a viable parliamentary majority for several weeks after the 2013 election.

The leader of the centre-left coalition and Secretary of the PD, Pierluigi Bersani, tried to build a majority for two months without success, mainly because of the slim difference of seats in the Senate. In April 2013, he resigned as secretary of the PD after the PD's candidate for president, Romano Prodi, failed to secure a parliamentary majority in the presidential election. The turbulent situation, both at a political and economic level, persuaded President Napolitano, 87, to run for a second term in "the high interest of the country." At that point, the president pushed for a period of grand coalition government with the major parties involved. The task of arranging this majority was given to Enrico Letta, a PD leader. The aim of this broad coalition was to implement reforms that would lead the country out of the political stalemate. Letta

managed to organize PD, PDL, UdC, Radicals, and Scelta Civica (Civic Choice) into the new party formed by Monti after the end of his tenure as prime minister in 2012. The LN and others opposed to the Letta government alleged the new prime minister to be an imposition by President Napolitano and not the outcome of a popular vote (Tarchi 2018, p. 154). The most important measures tried to bolster the country's productivity and to reach the approval of the budget law for 2014 through a confidence vote. Letta's resignation in February 2014 followed the National Direction of the PD that manifested "the will and the urgency to begin with another phase, with a new executive." Because of the disagreements caused by the budget vote in the Senate, Berlusconi's PdL withdrew support from Letta's government. However, at this point Berlusconi, worried by an imminent vote in the Senate on the proposal to dismiss him due to his conviction for tax fraud, restored the brand Forza Italia to achieve stricter control (Tarchi, 2018, p. 154).

However, this decision caused a scission within the party, with three ministers, one deputy minister, seven junior ministers, 29 deputies and 30 senators, led by Angelino Alfano, adopting the name Nuovo Centro Destra (NCD). Berlusconi denounced the "betrayal," accusing the president of being behind it and moved FI to the opposition benches (Tarchi, 2018).

In February 2014, the National Direction of the PD supported a motion presented by the new secretary, Matteo Renzi, asking Letta to resign and for the formation of a new administration.

The Prime Minister left his mandate in the hands of the President and the party supported a new government led by Matteo Renzi. Only thirty-nine years old, Matteo Renzi became the youngest prime minister of Italy. Before that, he served as president of the province of Tuscany from 2004 to 2009 and as mayor of Florence from 2009 to 2014.

A feature of the period under consideration was the attempt of the centre-left coalition, after the 2013 national election, to form a stable government alternative. However, the appointment of Matteo Renzi as the PD's new secretary and later as prime and, more specifically, his personalist rhetoric fomented internal disagreements which led to several scissions in the party.

With most the party supporting his candidature, it seemed the inauguration of a period of relative stability at least within the party. Although Renzi's new political style of and personalistic leadership has been very powerful in attracting electoral support and media attention, it clashed with the cultural and organizational roots of the centre-left. This dissonance between the new type of leadership and the organization's heritage led to a further weakening of the internal cohesion of the party, which resulted in factions forming within the party and even some scission. Indeed, the PD had since its formation been characterized by a higher

degree of internal democracy or, at least, by a directive organism that was not subordinate to a single personality.

Renzi's administration lasted almost three years but after the unfavorable outcome of the constitutional referendum at the end of 2016, the Prime Minister was forced to resign and left his mandate in the hands of the president of the Republic.

## **4.2 The new actors in the system: Discursive and organizational features**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Great Recession contributed to ending the fourth Berlusconi government in late 2011. Moreover, the timing of the economic crisis overlapped with a difficult phase of political transition, characterized by an increasing lack of legitimacy and by the decline of several of those political actors who had consolidated their positions over the last two decades (Marangoni and Verzichelli, 2015).

As the economic crisis hit Italy and after the breakdown of Berlusconi government, Italian politics experienced a partial reconfiguration, with new actors entering the system. In this sub chapter, I analyze these new actors with respect to their discourse and organization. The actors studied are the technocratic government and Civic Choice (*Scelta Civica*), the party created by the former leader of the technocratic government, Mario Monti, to compete in the 2013 national election, and the Five Star Movement (*MoVimento Cinque Stelle*).

### **4.2.1 The technocratic government and the formation of the Civic Choice**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, after the breakdown of the fourth Berlusconi government in November 2011, President Napolitano appointed Mario Monti as a senator for life, then gave him the task of building a technocratic government. The administration started operating after the vote of confidence in the Senate on November 18th, 2011. Monti, a former European Commissioner for competition policies and president of the Bocconi University in Milan, one of the most prestigious university in Italy, was first perceived as a sort of savior not only in Italy but also in the European capitals and Brussels. His predecessor, former PM Silvio Berlusconi, was widely judged incapable of solving Italy's economic problems, which European leaders feared may have led the Eurozone to breakup (Culpepper, 2014; Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013).

The program of Monti's government was approved with the parliamentary support of most of the parties, opposed only by the Lega Nord. Monti government was the second example of fully technocratic government, i.e., composed without any party representatives, in the history



of Italian politics (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2012; Bosco and McDonnell, 2013; Di Virgilio and Radaelli, 2013).<sup>28</sup>

A government formed with no party representatives is extremely rare in post-war Europe. Also, the duration of the administration, 528 days, exceeded the average for Italian governments after the Second World War. In the literature about technocracy, different conceptualizations have been proposed. Generally, from a conceptual point of view, a technocracy is defined as a political situation in which effective power belongs to technocrats (Meynaud, 1968). Following Silva, a technocrat is an individual with a clear technical-scientific orientation and that manages to acquire political influence in high circles of government due to his possession of specialized skills and expertise in the fields of economic policies, finance and state administration (2006, p.178). An operational definition of technocrat is provided by McDonnell and Valbruzzi who maintain that a prime minister or minister is a technocrat if, at the time of her appointment to government, she: (a) has never held public office under the banner of a political party; (b) is not a formal member of any party; (c) is said to possess recognized non-party political expertise which is directly relevant to her role in government (2014, p. 657).

Contrasting the experience of technocrat-led government in postwar Europe with technocracy in a classic sense, we can observe that the latter is formally respectful of democratic values and institutions (Radaelli, 1999, p. 24). It is important to underline that technocratic governments are not a-political. In fact, as Meynaud points out “when he becomes a technocrat, the expert becomes political” (1968, p. 259) since there is a conceptual difference between the term “a-political” or “non-political” and “not party political”. In this sense, technocratic government represents a challenge to representative democracy and, in some cases, can put a strain on the political system as a whole. Technocrats are, or at least are perceived, as political outsiders who are not “legitimate,” first, because they are not elected by voters, i.e., they do not respect the procedural bases of democracy. Moreover, and as a consequence, they do not need to be responsive to their constituency (Mair, 2009).

From a discursive point of view, then, the technocratic government’s ideology can be defined anti-populist. Because of its elitist discourse, it reverses the classical populist dichotomy between the people and the elite maintaining that the later should be in charge because technician know better (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). As this research seeks to explore the causes of the emergence of the populist/anti-populist cleavage, analyzing the ideological characteristics of the technocratic government is relevant because populism and

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<sup>28</sup> The first fully technocratic administration in Italy was the Dini government (1995-1996).

technocracy have been treated, by some, as correlative and related to each other. For instance, Muller argues that “technocracy holds that there is only one correct policy solution; populism hold that there is only one authentic will of the people. In a sense, therefore, they are curiously apolitical. For neither technocrats nor populists is there any need for democratic debate” (Muller, 2016).

This could sound counterintuitive since as I recalled above, the technicians’ discourse is clearly elitist. However, even if technocracy in its elitism is often conceptualized as opposed with populism, they surely share common ground. They both claim they are non-political and they criticize two features of the modern democratic politics: political mediation and procedural legitimacy (Bickerton and Invernizzi, 2017). In this sense, both the technocratic government and the emergence of the Five Star Movement can be interpreted as the response to the same anti-politics sentiment that has been a feature of the Italian political system since the end of the First Republic. In Italian politics, this anti-sentiment feeling has mostly been directed against the parties and this feeling was reinforced as a consequence of the Tangentopoli corruption scandal and the ensuing the judicial trial that found that the majority if the political class was involved. Political parties are the main political body that mediates the political process between voters and the state. One central feature of political parties and the conception of democracy they are tied to its procedural understanding of political legitimacy (Bickerton and Invernizzi, 2017, p. 331). In fact, party democratic legitimacy “is based on the principles of freedom and equality that are realized through parliamentary deliberation and decision-making rules that are either majoritarian or more consociational depending on the country in question” (2017, p. 331). This is evident in Monti’s discourse when he compares political parties with problematic features of democracy such as “short-termism”, “demagoguery”, “rent-seeking”, and the systematic pursuit of “private interests” at the expenses of the common good (Monti and Goulard, 2012).

With respect to the policies implemented by the technical government, they were all animated by a neoliberal spirit and provoked strong criticism from the trade unions and from the parliamentary opposition formed of the Lega Nord and small far left parties. In other words, Monti’s government can be positioned on the right of the classical socioeconomic axis of competition (left-right). The most resounding example was the pension reform promoted by the Minister of Labor and the Social Politics, Elsa Fornero, who weathered harsh criticism not only from the trade unions but also from civil society. This was unsurprising given that the executive was made up of highly educated, wealthy individuals coming from the establishment and who enjoyed powerful political connections. On example was the Minister of the Economic

Development, Infrastructure and Transport, Corrado Passera, former CEO of Banca Intesa and former director of Silvio Berlusconi's publishing house, Mondadori. Another example is Interior Minister Anna Maria Cancellieri, who was prefect in Genoa and commissioner in Bologna during from February 2010 to May 2011 during a mayoral crisis. In general, most of the ministers appointed by Monti, such as the Minister of Labor, Social Policies and Gender Equality, Elsa Fornero, and the Minister of Justice, Paola Severino, were scholars from top ranked Italian universities, such as the Bocconi in Milan and the University of Turin.

As noted earlier, the technocratic government was initially supported by the two main parties. However, at the end of April of 2013, Silvio Berlusconi's PdL withdrew its support, forcing the President to dissolve the Parliament and call for elections. After the dissolution of the technocratic government, Monti formed Scelta Civica (Civic Choice). The aim of Scelta Civica was "to appeal to moderate voters dissatisfied both with the left and the right, but it became largely an umbrella organization in which former Christian Democrats and former neo-fascists found an opportunity to survive" (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2013).

The party competed for the first time in the 2013 national election, joining a coalition with Pierferdinando Casini's UDC and part of the former AN, Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (FLI). This coalition has been named the "third pole" by pundits and scholars (Bosco and McDonnell, 2012). On the left-right axis, Monti's party sits at the center of the spectrum, while on the populism/anti-populism axis, it adopted a clear anti-populist stance (see below). The electoral results of the 2013 national election, however, showed that Italians rejected Monti's newly formed party. The "third pole" won just over the ten percent of the total vote share, not obtaining the numbers to be a viable coalition partner (Culpepper 2014, p. 1265). From an organizational point of view, two considerations are in order. First, Scelta Civica was founded a few months before the 2013 elections. In that limited span, the creation of a solid organizational structure was simply not feasible. Second, the foundation of Scelta Civica depended on Mario Monti, who recruited the candidates, investing primarily on his personal resources. In sum, according to the typology elaborated in chapter one, Scelta Civica can be categorized as an electoral party, since it did not feature a populist discourse and has low organizational density.

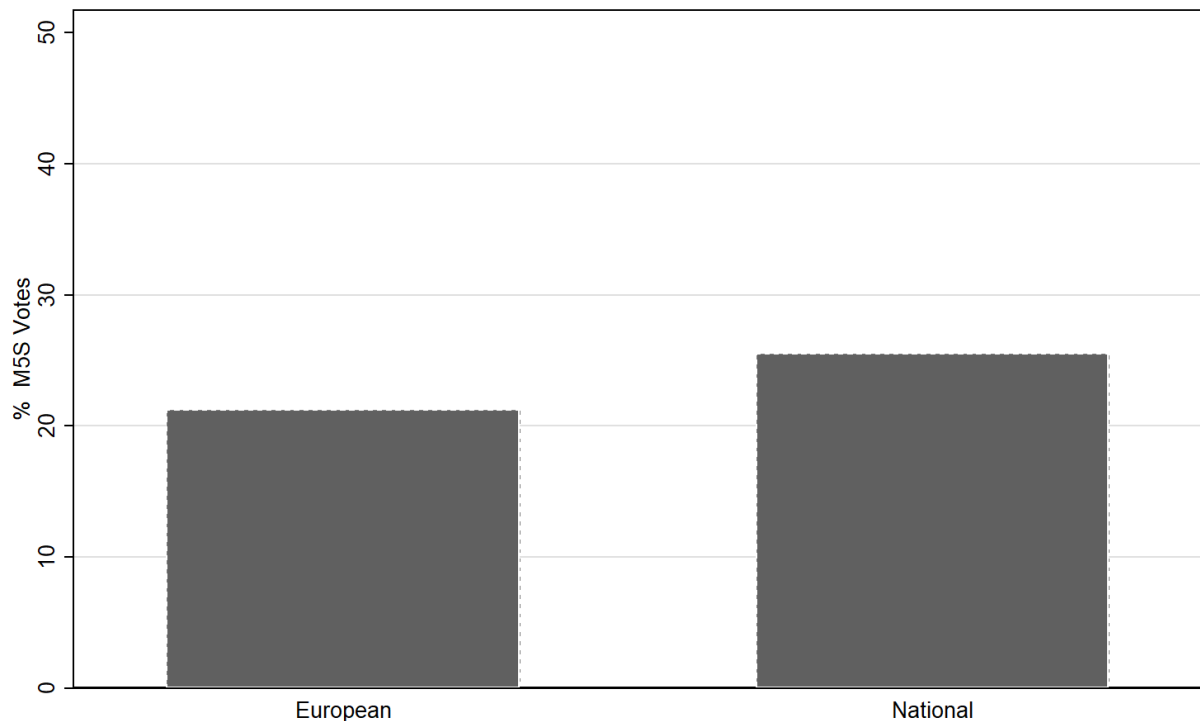
#### **4.2.2 The Five Star Movement: a case of pure populism?**

The Five Star Movement (M5S) is a political movement founded by comedian Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianalberto Casaleggio in 2009. However, Grillo's involvement in politics

can be dated back in the 1970s and 1980s when, as a comedian and television presenter, started to develop an anti-establishment stance which saw him banned from the national public television broadcaster, RAI. In the 2000s, Grillo became an enthusiast of the web and created his blog, *beppegrillo.it*, which is the foundation of his political project. While the blog proved to be successful, Grillo did not stop touring Italy, reaching the peak of his notoriety with the so-called Vaffanculo Days (or V-Days), which can be translated as “Fuck Off Days” (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013, p. 4). On the blog, he maintained that he would not be running in the 2008 because the closed lists did not allow voters to choose candidates through a preference vote. In the 2009 European elections, Grillo backed two independent candidates in the lists of the former Italia dei Valori (IdV), the centre-left populist party formed by the former anti-mafia judge, Antonio di Pietro (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Although the logo of the party was used in the 2008 local elections, the M5S was not officially formed until October of 2009. The only requirement to become a member was not be a member of a political party. Also, those interested in running for office needed clean criminal records.

The 2011 local election was the first in which the M5S participated, with candidates in 75 municipalities, achieving a 9.5 per cent vote share in Bologna. However, it was the 2012 local elections that represented the turning point in M5S’s political trajectory. As stated earlier, the M5S managed to capitalize the social discontent that followed the economic crisis and the adjustment measures adopted by Monti’s technical government and supported by the European Union and the financial markets. The following graph shows the vote share of the Movement in 2013 national election and in the election for the European Parliament in 2014.

*Graph 4.4: Five Star Movement vote share in 2013 national election and 2014 European election*



Source: Governo Italiano, Ministero dell'Interno, Archivio Elettorale.

As can be seen in graph 4.4, the Movement participated in its first national election in 2013 and was the first party to gain more than the 25.5 percent of the vote share in its first election cycle (Bouillaud, 2016). Moreover, in 2013 it gained 108 of 630 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 54 of 315 seats in the Senate, while in the European election, the M5S won 17 of Italy's 73 seats Parliament. To understand the phenomenon of M5S and its electoral success, we need to analyze two features: the ideology and the organization.

From the ideological point of view, the Movement is almost unanimously defined as populist (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013; Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; Biorcio and Natale, 2013). First, the dualist worldview which sees a division between the "pure" people and the "corrupt" elite is present both in the party manifesto (2013) and in the public speeches of Grillo and the main relevant actors in the party. The "pure" people in M5S's worldview are represented by those Italians who have paid the consequences for the economic stabilization measures implemented by the technocratic government but also, more generally, the average Italian who feels that the traditional parties and the classic left-right axis lost respectively their capacity to represent the voters and their significance. After the surprising performance in the

2013 general election, Grillo claimed that the result was “a non-violent, democratic revolution which eradicated the powers [and allowed] the citizen to become state and enter the Parliament in only three years” (Grillo, Lettera agli Italiani, 2013). While the “us” category, the “pure” people, is populated by those disappointed Italians, in M5S’s discourse the “corrupt” elite is formed of two categories, referred by the leader as *castes*: the whole political system and the media. As mentioned earlier, the M5S interpreted the widespread anti-politics sentiment in Italian society (Chiapponi, Cremonese and Legnante, 2014). The anti-politics sentiment addresses politicians in general but also state institutions. First, the attack is directed at professional politicians, interested only in defending their privileges and their connections to the economic elite of the country (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013, p. 7). However, professional politicians are not the only category in the party’s critique of the system. Political institutions, without exception, are strongly blamed for the situation of the country. Through the discourse, Parliament is delegitimized because of the presence of closed electoral lists and the impossibility for the voters to choose the candidate they prefer (V-Day 2007). Another critique of Parliament relates to the fact that many representatives have criminal convictions. During his speech at a rally, Grillo exclaimed: “when we talk about unlawful people, we naturally think of unauthorized windscreen cleaners or car park attendants, and whores, while the real unlawful people are in our Parliament’ (V-Day 2007). Grillo and the party have also levelled criticism at the former President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, condemning him for charging Enrico Letta with forming a “unity government after that the leader of the PD, Bersani, was not able to find a parliamentary majority.” During a December 2013 speech in Genoa, Grillo claimed: “Napolitano made a government in one night, the three of them [Napolitano, Letta and Berlusconi] made it...and I am here to officially tell you that [M5S] already filed for the *impeachment* for Napolitano, he needs to go” (V-Day 2013). Journalists, newspapers and television companies form the other group of “others,” i.e., the “corrupt elite,” in M5S’s discourse. M5S’s critique of the media mirrors that it levels at the parties. As Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013) observe, the media “are accused of being in cahoots with big political and economic interests, of hiding the truth and of dulling the consciousness of citizens.” During the second V-Day, Grillo proposed cutting public funding for newspapers and eliminating the order of journalists and the Gasparri law, which regulated radio and TV broadcasting. Another category of “others” in Grillo’s sights is the economic and political elite of the EU, guilty of demanding painful reforms of Italians. During a 2014 speech in Turin, in the middle of the campaign for the European election, he claimed “the first thing that Schultz [former president of the European Parliament] said about me when he came to Italy is that I

am like Stalin. He, as a German, should thank Stalin because if it was not for Stalin who defeated the Nazis, [Schultz] would be in the European Parliament with a swastika drawn in front (#VinciamoNoi Tour, 17 May 2014).

With respect to the subtype of populism the Movement is quite peculiar. Given that, as mentioned above, the M5S cannot be placed on the left-right axis, it is difficult to identify to which “host ideology” it is associated. Grillo himself in various occasions stressed the fact that the M5S is a movement not a party, since it cannot be placed in the traditional left-right axis. Different themes form the backbone of M5S’s political program: environmental issues, criticisms of consumerism and money and, in recent years, issues such as public security or immigration, with Grill staking his opposition to the granting of the Italian citizenship to the children of immigrants born in Italy. With respect to the European Union, the accession of Romania was strongly criticized (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013, p. 7).

The five stars in the movement’s logo are a reference to the five key issues of the party: public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, right to the internet access and environmentalism.

Given the variety of issues supported by the M5S, some of them shared with the radical right and some close to the positions of the radical left, it is difficult place the Movement on the left-right axis. For sure, the “glue” that keeps the Movement together is not a specific “thick” ideology associated with its populism.

The ideological diversity within the party constitutes one of the major strengths of the Movement. Not identifying with a particular thick ideology allows the M5S to attract voters from the whole political spectrum (Maggini, 2014), constructing a party with a catch-all message (Katz and Mair, 1995). The heterogeneity within the party and its lack of association with any specific ideology is surely an advantage while the party is in the opposition, since it can attract a broad spectrum of voters. However, once the party is in government, it will need to implement policies and take a stand on critical issues for the country, turning its catch-all appeal into a major weakness. First, the movement will probably see the linkage with part of its voter base weakened, at least at a programmatic level. The Movement will need to commit itself to certain policies losing, at least in part, its catch-all stance. Moreover, while in the opposition, the party does not need to be responsible; once in power, Italy’s political and economic commitments, mostly due to its participation of the EU and the Eurozone, and the need for structural reforms will require the implementation of policies opposed to their campaign platform. This last challenge, which obviously exists for all the parties once they get in power, is particular tricky for a movement like the M5S, given its “pure” populist character

and the fact that, until now, it has not relied on a stable core constituency of voters. In other words, its “purity” allows the M5S to adopt a more catch-all stance while in the opposition; however, once in power, it will have to commit to the implementation of policies that will make it less “pure” and, consequently, less catch-all.

As mentioned earlier, the strong anti-politics sentiment seems to be the only sentiment that voters and candidates of the Movement have in common. Consequently, none of the subtypes of populism used to classify populist parties is useful to define the M5S. For this reason, I define the Movement as “pure” populism (Tarchi, 2015; Manucci and Amsler, 2017). Given the presence of multiple “thick” ideologies within the party and the impossibility of or unwillingness to take a position on the left-right axis, the populist ideology is the only one that the movement’s members and voters share.

Also, from the organizational point of view, the Movement seems not to fit to any of the “classic” types used for describing the other parties. Before Grillo created the blog, no organization existed and the militants of the M5S all joined the movement by attending a “Meet-Up,” a local public meeting organized for blog’s audience. The web not only allowed the citizens to participate but also represents a direct link between voters and governments, making all intermediate institutions, such as parties, unnecessary. This double specificity of the M5S – no sponsoring organization(s) or previous organization(s), and intensive use of Internet to mobilize grassroots – makes the M5S rather unique among all the parties which tried to emerge in Italy since the return to democracy (Bouillaud, 2016). However, in some respects, a comparison can be made to the early version of Forza Italia, when it was a direct emanation of Silvio Berlusconi’s economic conglomerate. In the same way, Beppe Grillo owns the M5S trademark and can authorize its use for electoral competition in Italy. Also, the M5S so far seems to fit the “personal” party mold elaborated by McDonnell (2013). As stated above, a party can be defined as personal if its “expected lifespan is seen (not only by commentators, but also by party representatives and members) as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder-leader. In other words, significant internal doubts regarding party continuity in the absence of its founder-leader are present” (p. 222).

The M5S satisfies these requirements. Not only does the party’s expected lifespan seem dependent on the political lifespan of Beppe Grillo, but the organization has only occasional local presence and power, formal and informal, is concentrated in the hands of Grillo, since he has the power to oust members from the party. Further, the party’s image and campaign strategies are centered on the figure of the founder-leader (McDonnell, 2013, p. 222). Even though the M5S exhibits these four characteristics, there are substantial differences between its



organization and FI's. Unlike either the FI and the PdL, the Movement seems to have a "conception of membership activism" (McDonnell and Vampa, 2016).

This member activism, however, at least for now, does not translate into a dense party organization that goes beyond the leader. The web mobilization looks like a sort of strategic way to give voters and sympathizers a feeling of, rather than an actual avenue to, participation. In the words of the two leaders of the movement, Grillo and Casaleggio, parties are institutions that are destined to disappear thanks to the power of the web. In their words "parties live on money, on lobbies, on territorial structures: headquarters, press, offices, employees, newspaper. On the Internet, all this is worthless; it's not needed" (Casaleggio and Grillo, 2011, p. 8). However, while the Movement often use the rhetoric of the web as an equalizer of hierarchies, "in the management of dissent among elected members, one observes strong intervention by Grillo, who acts either as an executive controller or as the initiator of top-down processes (Tronconi, 2015, p. 132). These acts are for M5S's "sake", for its "reputation" or to "battle against an enemy that in some circumstances assumes the guise of the mainstream media and in others of the entire established political system (Tronconi, 2015, p. 132).

Even if in their non-statutes, as they called the M5S program to differentiate it from the traditional parties' manifestoes, they define the movement as a "non-association" and cite headquarters at the URL [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it) (Five Star Movement, 2009). The name and the symbol of the Movement are registered "in the name of Beppe Grillo, the only title-holder of the rights to their use." This is maybe the most controversial article since "it depicts the party as a sort of commercial enterprise headed by a boss who is its owner" (Tronconi 2015, p. 30).

To properly define M5S's organizational features, we also need to analyze features of its leadership. Beppe Grillo is without doubt the leader of the party. However, he is not a traditional Italian professional political figure. He comes from the show business where, as a comedian, he previously attacked the political and economic establishment of the First and Second Republic. During his shows, he gave voice to the anti-politics sentiments so common among Italian voters (Bardi 1996). Even if the comedian was a well-known person in Italian society, he is perhaps one of the truly outsider populist leaders. Even if populist leaders tend to present themselves as outsiders, most are very much part of the elite. One example is television businessman Silvio Berlusconi who before founding FI was linked both to the economic and political elite of the country, building his empire through connections with Bettino Craxi, the founder of the Socialist Party and former prime minister (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 75). On the other hand, true outsiders have no significant links to the elite and construct their careers far from the political mainstream. Outsiders are rare in institutionalized party-

dominated Western countries while enjoying more success in personalized and fluid political system, a phenomenon embodied in Venezuela's Hugo Chávez (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

In sum, as a “full outsider” kind of leader, Grillo seems to be an exception among the populist leader, at least in Western Europe democracies. Indeed, he fulfills both the requirement to be classified as a “full outsider” i.e. (a) he has not had a previous career in politics and public administration when the campaign started and (b) he participated in the election through the formation of a new political vehicle (Carreras, 2013, p. 45).

However, the anti-politics sentiment that has pervaded the Italian society since the post-war period and increased after the collapse of the First Republic made it easier for him, as an outsider with no connections with the elites, to build a movement that rapidly gained electoral ground.

In sum, the M5S has two peculiar characteristics that differentiate it from the other parties in the system. First, the party is not linked to any full ideology and the only “glue” that keeps it together seems to be populism. Second, the M5S as an organization surely shares some features with personal parties, even though it seems to keep a constant call to an active membership. However, this call seems to be more instrumental than a relevant feature of the party's decision-making process. For these reasons, the M5S fits in the first quadrant of the typology shown in chapter one.

These two peculiarities of the Movement permit some inferences about its duration. As I claimed in chapter one, populist parties with a low level of organizational density are expected to be less able to maintain linkage with voters in the long run.

This consideration also shed light on the future of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Two of the three parties that constitute the populist pole of the cleavage have not developed a strong organization and feature charismatic leadership. As a consequence, it looks like the cleavage seems poorly grounded. In fact, unless parties like Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement undergo organizational reshuffling, it seems difficult to imagine them surviving their leaders. In the following table, I placed the relevant Italian political party into the typology presented in chapter one. The typology accounts for the presence or absence of the populist ideology and for organizational density. More in detail Figure 4.1 organizes the major parties in the Italian party system between 2011 and 2016, according to the presence or absence of populist ideology and the high/low organizational density.

Figure 4.1: Main parties in the Italian party system (2011-2016)

Organizational Density \ Populist Ideology	High	Low
Yes	Forza Italia – M5S - IdV	Lega (Nord)
No	PD - AN	Scelta Cívica

The Five Star Movement and Forza Italia share a low level of organization density since they rely heavily on their leaders. Meanwhile, the Lega was able to make a transition from being a populist regionalist to a populist radical right party in the late 2010s. This demonstrated that the party has been successful at changing and surviving change of leadership. This was possible due to the high level of organizational density it was able to build, manifested in strong local presence and powerful intermediate bodies.

In the next sub-chapter, I analyze the main features of the so-called anti-populist pole. During this period, some non-populist options within the system developed an anti-populist discourse. First, the technocratic government developed an anti-populist ideology with elitist characteristics, while from 2013 on the centre-left administrations adopted an anti-populist discourse with pluralist features.

#### 4.3 The non-populist in power and the development of the anti-populist discourse

Between the formation of the technocratic government and the constitutional referendum of December 2016 anti-populist forces held power, aside from the ten months of the Letta government (April 2013-February 2014). After the electoral campaign of 2013 an anti-populist discourse began to emerge on the centre-left. While before 2011 the centre-left directed its criticism mainly against Silvio Berlusconi, his *ad personam* policies and the personal features of his parties, the main characteristic of the 2011-2016 period seems to be the formation of an anti-populist bloc. The anti-populist pole first developed elitist features during Mario Monti's technocratic government, while Matteo Renzi's government assumed pluralist traits.

After the national election of 2013, the close victory of the centre-left coalition and the inability of PD's leader, Pierluigi Bersani, to form a government, Enrico Letta accepted the challenge to form a large coalition government, with a bi-partisan support of the parties in Parliament, with the objective to pass reforms the country needed. This, from a theoretical and empirical point of view, has two consequences. First, even if the prime minister belonged to the Democratic Party, the government was a large coalition government and not a centre-left government. The second consequence is related to the position of the executive along the populism/anti-populism axis. Even though in the Manifesto of 2013, the PD clearly adopted an anti-populist discourse, the Letta government, because of its *raison d'être*, could not share that anti-populist stance.

Conversely, anti-populist discourse was one of the main features of the Renzi government (February 2014-December 2016), especially during the "electoral campaign" before the Constitutional Referendum of December 2016.

Monti's government manifested a clearly elitist and anti-populist stance and fell on the right of the political spectrum, pursuing neoliberal policies. For a few weeks after its inauguration, the Monti administration was one of the most popular in Italy's recent political history (Bosco and McDonnell, 2012). On the day of his inauguration, outside Parliament a crowd hailed the Prime Minister. Even the leaders of the European Union announced their trust in the ability of the new Italian PM to solve Italy's structural problems.

The Monti government was not the only technocratic government in Italian history. However, there were some differences between this government and the technocratic executive in the 1990s. The technocratic government in the 1990s worked closely with civil society, especially with the labor unions, to adopt reforms with broad social support (Culpepper, 2002; Baccaro and Lim, 2007). Monti's strategy of reform was different. The policies implemented during the seventeen months of his government were mostly related to the structural reforms the country needed to improve its macroeconomic indicators, watched so closely by the Troika institutions (EU, BCE and IMF) and the markets. More specifically, the executive's program involved four elements: revenue increase, spending cuts, rationalization of the state apparatus and liberalization of protected sectors (Culpepper, 2014, p. 1271).

The first measure approved by the technocratic government in December 2011 was the so-called Salva-Italia (Save-Italy) decree, which aimed to shore up state accounts and to ensure a balanced budget in 2011, focusing on the first three elements, especially on taxation increase. One example was the 25 percent increase in gasoline tax, making it the second highest in the Eurozone (Randall, 2013).

On the side of spending cuts, the Save-Italy decree started the reform of the pension system, one of the most criticized reforms by both civil society and the trade unions associations. The executive estimated that the total savings from the reform would be €5.4 billion by 2014 and more than €20 billion by 2020. The other measure was the removal of the indexation to inflation for all pensions above €1,400 per month (Culpepper, 2014).

One of the more contested aspects was the gradual raising of the retirement age of the private female workers from 60 to 62 years of age. Moreover, the retirement age was set to rise incrementally to 67 until in 2018 (Culpepper, 2014). In fact, as Culpepper (2014) notes, one of the characteristics of the Monti government, unlike the fully technocratic executive during the mid-1990s, was the attempt to impose an austerity plan without relying on any links to Italian society to generate buy-in for its difficult reform program (p. 1265). The Monti administration was described as an example of “unmediated democracy,” since its initiatives were not planned and implemented with the collaboration with social partners such as political parties, trade unions and other corporate interests. In particular, the trade unions were united against the deindexing of pensions and the increase in women’s retirement age. However, their discontent did not produce any government concessions even after the general public-sector strike, involving Italy’s three most important trade union umbrella organizations.

After Monti stepped down, the anti-populist discourse was articulated by another political party, this time from the centre-left of the political spectrum. More specifically, the PD’s discourse, both in its manifesto and in public speeches of its leaders, manifested a clear anti-populist stance. The first paragraph of the manifesto ends with “our objective is to defeat every form of populism” (PD, Programma di Governo, p.1). Moreover, the attack seems to be directed at a specific form of populism, the populism inhabiting the right end of the spectrum: “the populist right promised an illusionary protection from the effect of the financier liberalism building cultural, territorial and, in some cases, xenophobic barriers” (PD, Programma di Governo, p.4). The PD’s manifesto beyond criticizing rightist populism provides a sort solution saying that “the only response to populism is democratic participation. Today’s crisis of democracy needs to be fought with more democracy not less. More respect for the rules, a clear separation among powers” (PD, Programma di Governo, p.4).

As stated above, after the result of the 2013 national election it was impossible for PD’s leader, Bersani, to obtain a parliamentary majority in the Senate. Consequently, Letta had formed a government only with the support of a large bi-partisan parliamentary coalition. After the grand coalition broke down, a new administration was formed under Matteo Renzi, the new secretary of the Democratic Party, who gave new strength to and re-articulated the anti-populist

discourse, especially during the months before the Constitutional Referendum in December 2016. In 2010, Renzi launched a radical change within the Democratic Party with the objective set of setting aside the old ruling class (Bordignon, 2014, p. 1). His rapid rise led to comparisons, even from within his party, to Silvio Berlusconi's entrance into the political arena and accusations of exacerbating the personalization of Italian politics. Renzi's political project at a national level started in 2012 in the coalition primaries to choose the centre-left candidate for prime minister. His main opponent, Bersani, conceived of the party in a different way, as a collective and structured entity. On the other hand, Renzi wanted a "light" and "leader-centred" party (Bordignon, 2014). In the primary election, Bersani won with over the sixty percent of the vote but the debacle of the centre-left coalition in the 2013 general election showed Renzi the path to power within the party: election as secretary. In February of 2014, the President of the Republic gave him the opportunity to find a parliamentary majority and form a government.

The Renzi government was the fourth longest in Italy's postwar history. The party composition of Renzi's government was almost the same of Letta's: the PD, Scelta Civica and Nuovo Centro Destra – the parliamentary group formed when Berlusconi decided to take Forza Italia out of the parliamentary coalition that supported the Letta executive (Marangoni and Verzichelli, 2014). The first reform bills that Renzi launched concerned election law, the transformation of bicameralism and the education system (Pasquino, 2016). In 2015 the new electoral law for the Chamber of Deputies, the *Italicum*, which was developed with the initial support of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, provided a two-round system based on party-list with proportional representation corrected by a majority bonus and a 3 percent threshold.

With respect to the categorization of the discourse of the PD during the Renzi government and in particular during the electoral campaign for the 2016 constitutional referendum, part of the literature defines it as populist (Bordignon, 2014). In fact, Renzi's political stances and proposed reforms have sometimes been defined by pundits as expressions of a "light" or "constructive" populism. However, it seems that even though Renzi's discourse attacked the PD elites, a characteristic of a populist discourse, it lacks reference to the "pure" people and the belief that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people. Without a doubt, Renzi's political style is certainly different from Bersani's and, in general, from the style of the PD leaders before him. Personalities from the public opinion but also from the academia have compared Renzi to Silvio Berlusconi, categorizing the PD's leader as populist. Despite some similarities between Renzi and Berlusconi's political style, which can be defined personalist, this is not a feature of populism. Moreover, Renzi needed to work within the

boundaries of an organized party and did not enjoy the same discretion as Berlusconi within FI and the PdL.

On the contrary, as stated earlier, the discourse of the PD under Renzi seems to be characterized by stronger anti-populist features. However, this type of anti-populist discourse presents peculiar characteristics. In his discourse, there are multiple attacks on the populist actors in the system, but it does not seem that a sophisticated anti-populist discourse developed. The kind of anti-populism that Renzi's discourse incarnated, especially in the campaign before the constitutional referendum of December 2016, contributed to a moralization of the political debate in the country. As mentioned before, the PD type of anti-populism, at least until 2016, was characterized by elitist features. In fact, the categorization of the populist actors as "evil" and "dangerous for the society" and, at the same time the depiction of those who were in favor of the "yes" in the constitutional referendum as some sort of nation-saviors, does not reflect a sophisticated anti-populism; rather, it has the features of a basic kind of anti-populist discourse.

Two days before the referendum, during a speech in Florence, the Prime Minister maintained that those in favor of the referendum "are the ones that love Italy and the institutions" (speech in Firenze 2 December 2016). During a pro-referendum demonstration in Piazza del Popolo (Square of the People) Rome, Renzi started his speech with a direct attack on populist forces: "this square belongs to the people, not to populists." Then, during the speech Renzi attacked all the parties opposing the referendum, including Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and the M5S, implying that the referendum was a "fight" between the populists and responsible actors.

The tones of the political confrontation between the "yes" and "no" were particularly high during the months before the referendum. The representatives of the political institutions of the EU and the leaders of the EU's leading countries campaigned for the "yes" faction, worried about the political instability in the country and by the fact that populist parties campaigned for "no." In those months, the moralization of the political debate deepened even more, with the two factions (yes vs. no) presenting themselves to the ones actually interested in Italy's well-being and accusing the other faction self-interested myopia. This kind of anti-populist discourse is essentially different from that of Monti's technocratic government, which was elitist, but also from pluralist anti-populism. As recalled in chapter one, the pluralist discourse is characterized by the rejection of the dichotomist conceptualization of the society as divided in the people which are "pure" and the elite, which is "corrupt" (Mudde 2004). In fact, the pluralism sees societies as more complex and composed of various groups that represent different interests. The type of anti-populist discourse which emerged in Italy in the period

analyzed is different. It consists of a direct attack on populist actors, mainly by depicting them as irresponsible.

For a few months, Renzi was able to tame the Italian populist wave, converting it into fuel for his government and his reformist plan. Thereafter, return to a proportional logic has seemed to suggest a move in the opposite direction: the possible formation of a moderate centrist pact among the major parties of the Second Republic, in order to keep the “populist threat” beyond the city walls (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017, p. 299).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I analyzed the characteristics of partisan competition in Italy between 2011 and 2016. First, Italy between 2011 and 2016 was heavily affected by the economic and political consequences of the Great Recession. Indeed, various facts such as the breakdown of the fifth Berlusconi government, the appointment of the fully technocratic administration led by the former EU commissioner Mario Monti and the electoral exploits of Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement can be interpreted — at least partially — as effects of the global economic crisis of 2008. These events need to be interpreted at the light of the economic crisis which, in a country with such deep political and economic structural problems such as Italy, had disastrous consequences.

During the period analyzed two major actors entered the Italian party system: Monti’s technocratic government, and subsequently Scelta Civica, and the populist Five Star Movement. These two actors are at first sight diametrically opposed, since the former developed an anti-populist discourse with elitist features while the latter has been defined as “pure” populism. However, technocracy and populism share at least two important features: the rejection of both the representative democracy and the procedural aspects of politics (Bickerton and Invernizzi, 2014). As a result of these new forces in the system in this period, the populist pole was formed by three political forces: the Lega Nord, Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (and the PdL) and the Five Star Movement. These populist actors differ in host ideology. First, the Lega Nord, especially with the election of Matteo Salvini as secretary and the defeat of the moderate wing, can be defined as a radical right party. Silvio’s Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and PdL are both centre-right populist parties, but they are not ideologically radical. Instead, the full ideology they adopt is neoliberalism.

Finally, the populism of the M5S has been defined as “pure” since it does not seem to be attached to any full ideology in particular, given the heterogeneity of its affiliates.



The 2011-2016 period is also characterized by the consolidation of an anti-populist pole. Two moments can be underlined in this process. The first type of anti-populist discourse was adopted by Mario Monti's technocratic government (2011-2013) and had elitist features. The second moment in the consolidation of the anti-populist pole came via the discourse of the Democratic Party (PD) during the period between the electoral campaign of 2013 and the 2016 constitutional referendum. Clearly different from the elitist discourse of the technocrats, the PD's discourse is characterized by attacks on specific populist actors, stressing their irresponsibility which, at the same time, make them (the anti-populists) the only ones who can save the country. Lastly, looking at the typology proposed in chapter one, some inferences can be made about the probability of survival of the M5S, one of the actors that entered the system during the period analyzed in this chapter. It looks difficult for the Movement to survive for at least two reasons, one related to its ideology and the other one linked to the party's type of ideology. First, the party representatives and voters do not seem to share a common full ideology. While this peculiarity is without a doubt an advantage while the party is in the opposition, since it can attract voters from the whole left-right spectrum, exploiting its catch-all appeal, once in power, the party will need to commit to certain policies, displeasing part of its electorate. Moreover, because of its low-density organization and its heavy reliance on its leader, it does not seem to constitute a durable alternative. Unless it can change in type and build a more solid party organization with actual internal debate, territorial presence and intermediate organisms, it will stay fully reliant on its leader with unpleasant consequences for its survival.