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

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Citation

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

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

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Issue Date: 2019-09-26

Conclusion

Populism has been the object of numerous studies in recent years. Great scholarly and press attention has been given to this phenomenon, especially following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018. However, populism is nothing new. In some European countries, populist parties began to enter national parliaments since the 1980s. The Front National in France is a good example. Jean Marie LePen founded the party in the 1970s, and it adopted a populist ideology during the 1980s. Another remarkable example is the Belgian Vlaams Blok, which began as a radical nationalist party in the 1970s before adding a populist element in the 1980s (Golder, 2016). In general terms, populist parties began to enter parliaments of numerous European countries in the 1980s. A part of the academic production of populism has focused on the causes of the emergence of populist parties or leaders (Weyland, 1999; Skolkay, 2000; Hawkins, 2010; Cannon, 2013; Hawkins, Pauwels and Read, 2017). The objective of this dissertation is different.

Indeed, it seeks to study the determinants of the configuration of the populism/anti-populism as a political cleavage. I tried to give an answer to the following question: under what conditions does the populism/anti-populism crystallize as a political cleavage that, at least partially, contributes to structuring the party system? To answer this question, I constructed a theoretical framework which relies on the simultaneous occurrence of two elements: the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and the breaking of massive corruptions scandals. Those two factors together undermine the responsiveness of the party system, leading to its collapse. The collapse of the party system represents a critical juncture for the emergence the populism/anti-populism cleavage. Not only do these two elements weaken party-voter linkages but they also buttress the populist discourse, since both paint the whole political elite of the country as morally corrupt and uninterested in the people's will (Roberts, 2017).

Italy is a good case in point. In Italy, populist parties started to emerge in 1994, after the collapse of the party system. However, the Italian case is not just about the emergence of populist parties. In Italy, in 1994 a populist/anti-populist cleavage started to emerge and to partially structure the party system. For the whole period known as the "First Republic" (1948-1994) the Italian party system showed a high degree of programmatic convergence. The high level of programmatic convergence was reinforced by two factors. First, for more than forty years the same party, alone or in coalition, was been in government. Only three prime ministers

were not Christian Democrats during the First Republic. The lack of unpredictability and the permanence of the same party in power lowered the level of vertical accountability of the whole system.

The second element has to do with government pacts, especially during the 1980s. Those pacts between the parties in the system limited the relevance of the voters' choice, mainly due to the parties' goal of limiting the Communists' access to government. Thus, those pacts restricted the number of parties that effectively had a chance to join government coalitions. Beyond programmatic convergence, from 1991 to 1994 most of the Italian political and economic elite was involved in a series of corruption scandals known with the term *Tangentopoli*. The following judiciary investigation and trial known as *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) fully discredited the whole political class at the eyes of the voters. Both programmatic convergence and massive corruption scandals, even more when they occur simultaneously, pave 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 et al., 2018, 4). Both elements can increase the level of unresponsiveness to the point the party system collapses, which represents a critical juncture in my theoretical framework. Following the comparative institutionalism literature, critical junctures are defined as "brief phases of institutional flux during which more dramatic change is possible" (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007, p. 341; Pierson, 2000) which opens the political opportunity structure in favor of the dramatic change of the inter-party patterns of competition. Critical junctures in fact, relax the institutional barriers and permit new actors to permeate the system. 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."

Contributions

This dissertation contributes to the literature on both the theoretical and empirical level. First, even if populism is a hot topic in academia, the phenomenon analyzed in this dissertation, i.e., the polarization of the populism/anti-populism cleavage, is less studied.

In other words, this study goes beyond the analysis of the causes of the emergence of populist actors in the party system, focusing instead on those cases in which populism and its counterpart anti-populism translate into an ideological and discursive divide that contributes to structuring a party system. Studying the emergence of a political cleavage has different implications than studying the emergence of a single populist party. For instance, when

populism/anti-populism emerges as a political cleavage, the factors behind parties' political choices in general and electoral coalitions preferences are affected. For this new cleavage to start polarizing, a change in the political opportunity structure is needed. In fact, when the political opportunity structure opens due to events external to the party system, new actors may enter the system and produce a change in the dynamic of competition. The second theoretical contribution is related to the factors that explain the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. In fact, even though some of the factors employed in the analysis have been used to explain the emergence of populist parties, the framework is different since the object of the study is the polarization of a cleavage. Among the factors I employed to construct my argument, the collapse of the party system has been mainly employed to analyze Latin American cases. This study seeks to apply to a non-Latin American case a theoretical argument whose factors have been mostly employed to explain a different reality. In short, I maintain that three factors enable the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage. First, the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties and in many cases in the presence of inter-party agreements result in a perception that the parties are not fulfilling their role of representation. When programmatic convergence and the breaking of massive corruptions scandals occur simultaneously, the linkages between voters and parties are further undermined, causing the former to perceive that the country's political elite is no longer responsive. In other words, when these two factors occur simultaneously, the unresponsiveness of the party system reaches its most extreme level. This level of unresponsiveness means that in the eyes of the voters the whole system is no longer able to represent their ideology and their interests and the party system collapses. A party system collapses when the principal type of linkage that links voters to parties break down and the other types are not able to replace it (Morgan, 2011). The collapse of the party system represents a sort of critical juncture that lowers the institutional barriers for new actors to enter the system. In this sense, the political opportunity structure changes for those new actors who start to employ a populist discourse.

From an empirical point of view, this dissertation also makes two contributions. First, it goes beyond the analysis of single populist parties in the Italian party system. Those analyses, which are surely very insightful, do not provide an overview of the effects on populist parties for the party system. As the object of this study is political cleavage, it entails the analysis of a longer period of time. The consideration of more than twenty-two years allows analyzing the interactions within the system along the reactions of non-populist parties over time. Moreover, the study of the factors that cause the populism/anti-populism cleavage to polarize are different from those that have been used to explain the emergence of single populist parties. In fact, even

though the theoretical framework I use builds on some of the factors used to explain the emergence of populist parties, it also allows for the introduction of new factors which give an account of the dynamics of the whole Italian party system in the long run. The second empirical contribution of this study has to do with the presence in the analysis of the organizational characteristics of the parties in the system. Examining the organizational characteristics of the parties, in fact, can shed light on the possible duration of both the same parties and the populism/anti-populism political cleavage. In the typology I constructed and applied in both Chapters Three and Four, I categorized parties based on the presence of populism in their discourse and the level of organizational density they display. Putting the Italian parties in this typology, it emerged that both the Silvio's Berlusconi parties FI and the PdL as well as M5S are populist parties and they display a low level of organizational density for their heavily reliance on the founder-leader and the lack of checks and balances, bodies or mechanisms that may limit the will of the leader. On the contrary, the Lega (formerly Lega Nord) shares the populist ideology but at the same time has a high level of organizational density. It can be observed in the late 2010s when, after a corruption scandal that involved the leaders of the party, and especially the founder-leader Umberto Bossi and his family, the party managed to survive and even become electorally stronger. On the non-populist side, I found that Mario Monti's Scelta Civica, the party the former EU bureaucrat founded after his experience leading the technocratic government, does not share the populist ideology and has low organizational density. Lastly, Alleanza Nazionale does not display a populist ideology, while showing high organizational density.

Insight on the consequences of the emergence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage

The emerge of the populism/anti-populism cleavage is not a widespread phenomenon. However, it can have important consequences both for the party system and for the democratic regime.

At a theoretical level, if the populism/anti-populism cleavage starts to polarize and structure the party system, it can be the case that populism/anti-populism becomes a determinant in the evaluation of parties' coalition formation. In other words, parties would consider both axes of competition when evaluating the possibility of engaging in electoral coalitions. How is this analysis relevant to explaining the patterns of coalition formation in Italy after the collapse of the party system in 1994 and 2016?

First, the left-right axis does not completely account for the dynamics of competition in the Italian party system. To fully understand them, we need to consider that the political space in

Italy, but not exclusively there, is structured alongside two axes, or cleavages, the left-right and the populism-anti-populism. Under this new configuration, the possible coalition patterns may considerably change. In fact, following the classical coalition theory literature, we expect that two (or more) parties will more probably form a coalition if they are relatively close on the ideological plane. However, if we consider the political space as structured by two lines of conflict the possible coalition incentives may change.

One example of this occurred during Italy's last general election in March 2018. This election is not the object of this study, but it represents a good opportunity to see one of the possible effects of the presence of the populism/anti-populism cleavage on the parties' incentives for coalition formation. After the results of the election did not give to the center-right coalition a clear majority, especially in the Senate. At that point, the Lega broke the pre-electoral alliance with the other rightist parties to join the Five Star Movement, with an agreement to form the so-called "government of change". As claimed in Chapter Four, the Lega and M5S are not close on the left-right continuum. However, both adopt the populist ideology. This can be considered a determinant of the formation of the coalition. Only few months have passed since the formation of this coalition and surely it is premature make predictions about its future.

However, two considerations are in order. The first relates to the strength of the coalition. In general terms, it is important for answering the following question: is a governmental coalition primarily constructed on the populist ideology, which by definition is thin, essentially more volatile than one based on the sharing of a more complex ideology? This obviously is not the place give an exhaustive answer. One could think that without at least a partial agreement on policies, which in turn may be enhanced by proximity on the left-right axis, a governmental coalition may have worse chances of survival. However, the history of Italian governmental coalitions shows that similar positions on the left-right axis do not necessarily enhance stability.

The second consideration has to do with the organizational features of the two parties. As shown in Chapter Four, while the Lega can be classified as a party with a high level of organizational density, M5S cannot. This difference in terms of organization in the long run can affect the viability of the coalition, as happened in 2013 with the breakdown of the PdL (see Chapter Four). This leads to another point. The durability of the populism/anti-populism does not depend solely on the reproduction of the confrontational discourse between populism and anti-populism but also on the type of organization of the parties on both sides. In fact, if the destiny of the parties in the system is somehow intertwined with the fate of their leaders, the durability of the parties, and of the cleavage, may be affected. The populism/anti-populism cleavage also acted as a determinant for the formation of electoral coalition in contexts other

than Italy, such as Greece. As mentioned before, in both Greece's January and September 2015 general elections, populist radical left SYRIZA formed a coalition with populist radical right Anel.

Future research agenda

This work be the starting point for a future research agenda that can develop in different directions. The first way to complement this study is through an analysis of the demand side, i.e., the voters' side. Indeed, all three factors employed in this study to explain the emergence of the populism/anti-populism are related to the supply side, i.e., they are just considering the actors in the party system to explain the result. The voters' side, i.e., the demand, is less developed, even if there is the need of both the presence of a populist discourse at the elite level *and* the activation of populist attitudes in the society to account for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism political divide. Until recently, scholars explained electoral support for populist forces without considering the level of populist attitudes among voters. Even if I agree that any study of populist voting that ignores voter attitudes is incomplete, for the period I analyzed there is survey data available. For these main reasons, I maintain the whether the three factors that I mentioned also activate populist attitudes in the electorate is a question that needs to be answered in future research. Since the demand side of populism has been the object of recent research in different countries (Van Kessel, 2013; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Akkerman, Zaslove, and Spruyt, 2017; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis, 2018), it would be possible to study whether the populism/anti-populism cleavage is dividing voters at the electorate level as well. The literature on the demand side of populism has until now been proceeded almost exclusively from an European point of view. Whether or not this theory can travel to other contexts remains an open question. Latin America would furnish good test cases, containing as it does countries with long populist traditions, such as Argentina and Venezuela, and others which seem immune to populism, like Chile.²⁹

Moreover, since the study has identified a cleavage, the stability and duration of the cleavage can be analyzed from the demand side starting now. The analysis of the demand side can in fact shed further light on the future of the cleavage. Indeed, on the one hand, if the level of populist attitudes in the electorate falls this can have a negative effect on the efficacy of the

²⁹ The only study that to my knowledge has yet examined the demand side in a cross-regional fashion compares the activation of the populist attitudes in Greece and Chile (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and Andreadis, 2018).

populist ideology and, consequently, on the duration of the cleavage. On the other hand, if the populist attitudes are widespread within the electorate and the cleavage has with sociological roots, the possibility of duration of the cleavage increase.

Another further step that can be made with this study as a starting point has to do with the comparative potential of the theoretical argument. In this sense, the future research agenda can be further explored in two directions. First, since this dissertation analyzes a single case, the question of whether this theoretical framework can travel to other countries is worth examination. At first sight, these arguments can surely be used to analyze other cases. As maintained above, there are some Latin American cases that make us think that this theoretical framework, with some adjustments, can be useful in explaining them. Venezuela, for example, was considered an example of democratic success in the region, with government alternating between two institutionalized parties, Acción Democrática and COPEI. However, since the 1980s, things started to change and by the late 1990s the programmatic position of the two parties was indistinguishable. Moreover, as in Italy, interparty agreements created the image that parties colluded. As stated in Chapter Two, this bolstered the populist discourse, since it gave populist actors the chance to depict mainstream parties and politicians as “all the same.”

The perception of low responsiveness as a product of the programmatic convergence between AD and COPEI was fueled by the high level of corruption in the country. Even if a corruption scandal à la Tangentopoli did not break in Venezuela, external constraints put a further strain on the responsiveness of the party system. For instance, the economic crisis constrained the ability of the parties to deliver. Thus, it can be said that the effect on the perceived unresponsiveness of the party system was the same, even in the absence of a full-blown corruption scandal. At this point, like in Italy, the party system collapsed. Venezuela's party system collapse acted as a critical juncture for the emergence of the populism/anti-populism political divide, with the election of the populist outsider Hugo Chavez in 1999. Other cases that may be suitable for evaluating the “travelling” potential of this theoretical framework are Peru with the fujimorismo/anti-fujimorismo and Argentina with the peronismo/anti-peronismo divide. Thinking of non-Latin American cases, Greece seems interesting. As a consequence of the Great Recession and Greece's very high public debt, since 2010 the European Union and international financial institutions have pressured the Greek government to implement neoliberal adjustment measures on which they conditioned financial aid. When the incumbent ND government lost the 2009 election to the social democratic alternative, the leader of PASOK and prime minister, Papandreu, had no alternative but ask for a bailout. This choice had the effect of sparking a wave of protest and demonstrations through the entire

country. Indeed, this “bait and switch” marked a sort of betrayal for PASOK’s base, evident in electoral results from 2009 on. Two trends are observable. First, PASOK’s vote share has generally fell, probably as a result of the aforementioned policy shift. Secondly, SYRIZA, a left-wing populist party, began to increase its vote share, becoming the strongest political party. SYRIZA won the January 2015 election and formed a coalition government with right-wing populist Independent Greeks of ANEL (ANEL). This coalition represents the first European alliance between a radical-left and a radical-right populist party (Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). The Greek case merits two considerations. First, even if the alliance between two populist parties which do not lay close on the left-right continuum may suggest that a populism/anti-populism divide is at least partially structuring the party system, since fact that the last two elections are close in time suggests caution. Moreover, the latest polls for the 2019 parliamentary election show a declining support for SYRIZA, with ND between the 31 and 38 percent in most of the polls. The second consideration involves the collapse of the party system. Greece did not experience a collapse mainly because only PASOK’s base felt unrepresented. On the contrary, ND still was the runner-up in both the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections. In the case that in the 2019 election populist parties lose vote share, there is no political cleavage, at least in the way I define it in this study. This might have to do with the fact that the Greek party system did not experience a critical juncture like the collapse of the party system. To conclude, the possibility of utilizing this theoretical framework to explain the Greek case is still under consideration. As seen above, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2018) maintain that for a period after democracy was restored in Greece, PASOK adopted a populist ideology that was dismissed in the late 1980s, following a massive corruption scandal that involved the party’s leaders. Therefore, the populist/anti-populist cleavage in Greece would have emerged back in the 1970s and from the 1980s it would have been latent. As a consequence of the economic crisis and the PASOK bait and switch, the cleavage gained strength again with the electoral exploits of SYRIZA. This can shed light on another aspect of the comparative potential of this theoretical framework. The comparative value of this theoretical argument, it is not just related to cross-country comparisons. Like in the Greek case, to have a clear overview of the cases in which the populism/anti-populism cleavage has emerged, the historical perspective must not be neglected. In other words, even if few cases now exist in which the populism/anti-populist cleavage is structuring the party system, a historical perspective can reveal more cases.

To conclude, further research needs to engage more deeply with the anti-populist ideology. While, as mentioned before, populist actors are widely studied, anti-populism is a less-analyzed

subject. This is particularly relevant in the studies of the effects of populism on both the party system and the political regime. Indeed, it can be the case that anti-populism, just like populism, could also have either a negative or positive effect on democracy depending on its characteristics. In this dissertation, I differentiate between a basic and a more sophisticated anti-populism. The subjacent idea is that the basic anti-populism strategy is to fight fire with fire, i.e., trying to reclaim the people on moral considerations, leads to a further moralization of the political debate. This in turn would entail further polarization in the populism/anti-populism cleavage, which may have pernicious effects on both the party system and the democratic regime. Conversely, anti-populist forces may construct a pluralist dialectic, refusing to conceive of society as divided into two, morally opposed groups. Depicting society as composed of different groups of people who are not intrinsically “good” or “bad” may help lower the level of the moralization in the system. This in turn may have a beneficial impact on democracy.