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This is not the end: How the appeal of populism changed due to the COVID-19

pandemic

Michele Roccato, *University of Torino, Italy*

Nicoletta Cavazza, *University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy*

Pasquale Colloca, *University of Bologna, Italy*

Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed the world, the contextual conditions in which the rise of populism took place deeply and rapidly changed. Did this mark a turning point in the trend of populism? In this chapter, we attempt to answer this question mainly based on a longitudinal research program we undertook soon after the pandemic onset (taking advantage of a pre-pandemic wave) to monitor Italian public opinion longitudinally. The pandemic triggered a widespread sense of vulnerability and psychological distress, followed by the need to regain control over one's life. We documented two ways in which Italians have coped with this and that are linked to the populist trend. On the one hand, citizens relied on institutional authorities involved in crisis management (the typical "rally effect"), and, on the other hand, we observed an enhanced desire for strong leaders who can individuate solutions and effectively enact quick actions. In relation to these trends, our research program documented that the pandemic led to a break in the rise of populist votes in Italy. However, populist orientations remained unchanged. Thus, it is plausible that populism had a temporary halt, but it is likely to rebound to higher levels when the health and economic situations will return to pre-pandemic levels.

Introduction

As shown in other chapters of this book, since the 1970s, in both advanced democracies and developing countries a long populist wave has appeared. In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the wave became greater, and the success of populist parties became more widespread. Leaders such as Tsipras in Greece, Hofer in Austria, Orbán in Hungary, Le Pen in France, and Trump in the USA had increasing electoral success (Marchlewska et al. 2018; Obschonka et al. 2018). Moreover, the result of the Brexit referendum was apparently favored by deep populist dynamics (Cisłak et al. 2020). More generally, in 2019, based on the analysis of the political dynamics in 40 countries, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported that from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, the number of populist leaders doubled (Pérez Curiel 2020). In Italy, the country where the studies that we will discuss more in detail were performed (see below), the success of the Lega (League), of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), and of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) was spectacular. There are considered the three most populist Italian parties according to the PopuList project (Rooduijn et al. 2019; see <https://popu-list.org/>). Taken together, these parties gained 54.4% of the valid votes in the 2018 general election and even 57.8% in the 2019 European election.

This concerns the trend of populist votes. Unfortunately, there are no parallel data on the trend of populist orientations in the pre-pandemic world. Still, they could have increased, much like the increasing trend of attitudes strictly linked to populist orientations, such as institutional distrust (e.g., Chevalier 2019), anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g., Czaika and Di Lillo 2018), and anti-UE worldviews (e.g., Serricchio et al. 2013). This led Algan et al. (2017) to paraphrase the famous Marx and Engels' (1848) citation placed at the very beginning of the *Communist manifesto* and to conclude that “a spectre [was] haunting Europe and the West—the spectre of populism” (p. 309).

In this scenario, at the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak made its appearance. When the pandemic engulfed the world, the contextual conditions in which the rise of populism took place deeply and rapidly changed. This influenced citizens' political attitudes and orientations.

Did the COVID-19 pandemic mark a turning point in the trend of populism? The purpose of this chapter is to discuss whether and how the outbreak might have affected populism and led to a change in voting behavior and political worldviews in favor of populism. From a conceptual perspective, some of the factors triggered by the crisis could have reinforced the populist orientation and others could have counteracted it.

First, the unpredictable and previously unknown existential threat posed by the outbreak fostered a strong and widespread sense of vulnerability and psychological distress, followed by an urgent need to regain some sense of control over one's life. One way to do this is to rely on institutional authorities involved in crisis management (i.e., the well-studied phenomenon labeled "rally effect"). Institutional distrust is a key "ingredient" of the populist worldview; thus, the persistence of this rally effect may have weakened its appeal.

Second, people's sense of insecurity was exacerbated by the severe economic crisis triggered by months of disruption to all non-essential productive activity and the resulting social isolation. These measures dramatically worsened the economic security of millions of people (Maliszewska et al., 2020). Perceived economic insecurity is one of the drivers for the development of populist orientation (Roccatto et al., 2020a). However, neither sense of insecurity nor for economic insecurity can be blamed by populists on their usual enemies (i.e., elites and migrants).

In summary, from a psychological perspective, the uncertainty triggered by the pandemic activated and evoked a strong need for control. This need could be satisfied by strengthening institutional trust and compliance with the restrictive measures adopted, which would mean a weakening of populist tendencies. A second way to deal with uncertainty is to look for a strong leader capable of finding explanations and solutions and of taking strong measures. Indeed, in times

of crisis, people tend to accept authoritarian and action-oriented leadership (Hasel, 2013). This source of compensatory control would be more consistent with a populist mindset and pose a threat for liberal democracies.

Which of the two contrasting phenomena had the greatest association with the populism trend in Italy? In the following sections of the chapter, we will try to answer this question based mainly on the results of the COsequences of COvid-19 (COCO) project, a longitudinal research program we conducted shortly after the onset of the pandemic (but using an earlier wave as a reference) to monitor longitudinally Italian public opinion in its various political facets.¹ The COCO project is based on the longitudinal interview of a wide quota sample of the adult Italian population, stratified by gender, age, and geographical area of residence and surveyed via email. Seven waves have been conducted, in June 2019 (i.e., before the pandemic, T1, N = 1504), April 2020 (T2, N = 1199), October 2020 (T3, N = 1156), April 2021 (T4, N = 1148), October 2021 (T5, N = 1151), April 2022 (T6, N = 1150), and October 2022 (T7, N = 1150).

In the third and in the fourth sections, we will discuss the rally effect as a possible inhibiting factor of populism and the desire for anti-democratic or technocratic governments as a facilitating factor, interpreting them using the compensatory control model (see Sect. 7.2) as theoretical framework. Finally, we will discuss in Sect. 7.5 whether and how they are consistent with the changes in populist votes.

COVID-19, threat, and compensatory control

Many theoretical approaches postulate a basic existential motivation to defend from the perception of the world as an unpredictable, random, and chaotic place (Adler, 1946; Heider, 1958; Lefcourt, 1973). Consistent with this, several empirical studies have shown that human beings have

¹ Beyond the authors of this chapter, the CoCo research team includes Silvia Russo (Università di Torino). More details are available at the project website (https://www.dippsicologia.unito.it/do/progetti.pl/Show?_id=9fxo).

a deep and fundamental need to feel in control over their lives (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1989). When this need is not satisfied, it triggers uncontrolled arousal and anxiety, and more generally, it hampers psychological well-being (Luck et al., 1999). According to Kay et al.'s (2008, 2011) Compensatory Control Mechanism (CCM), people are pushed to cope with resulting psychological distress when they are unable to exert primary control over their world. From the cognitive standpoint, they may illusorily find order and predictability in their world, for instance, placing a non-existing meaning in incoherent sets of stimuli. From the social-psychological point of view, they may endorse external systems that elicit a vicarious order and a compensatory structure to the world. In line with this idea, several results show that external threats may lead to many relevant attitudinal and behavioral changes, including religious conversions (Kay et al., 2008) and submission to authoritarian authorities (Mirisola et al., 2014). According to the uncertainty—threat model of political conservatism (Jost et al., 2007), the need for certainty, control, and closure resulting from uncertainty and threat is satisfied by resistance to change and adherence to authority figures, which explains the likelihood of choosing a conservative political orientation in threatening situations.

Recent studies have shown that these results extend to the public opinion changes that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered. As we will discuss in section three of this chapter, even though the COVID-19 crisis has some unique features compared to the previously studied crises, it involved consequences similar to those provoked by other exogenous crises. One way to increase control and to reduce one's anxiety indirectly was to rely on institutional authorities involved in crisis management, giving rise to the social phenomenon called “rally effect”.

Exogenous crises and rally effects

Exogenous crises, such as wars or terrorist attacks, provoke a severe sense of unpredictability in public opinion and the need to cope with a wholly novel and unknown threat

with potentially destabilizing consequences for the status quo (Amat et al., 2020). Such crises can spark fear, panic, and large-scale calls to action (Strong, 1990), but they can also inspire acts of unity and compassion (e.g., Ntontis & Rocha, 2020).

At a national level, when individuals are faced with a sense of uncertainty stemming from a collective threat, they tend to support governments and their actions. The phenomenon, called the “rally-round-the-flag effect”, or, more simply, the “rally effect”, was first defined by Mueller (1970, 1973) to explain American citizens’ short-term increase in trust toward the incumbent president. In Mueller’s studies, a substantial increase in presidential support was observed immediately after inter-national negotiations that followed the escalation of the Cold War. Specifically, while domestic economic crises weaken institutional trust (e.g., Tormos, 2019), the rally effect is typically triggered by crises in which an exogenous enemy confronts a nation as a whole. In particular, rally effects have been observed not only during potential armed conflicts but also in other exogenous crises, such as in the aftermath of terrorist attacks (e.g., Chanley, 2002; Dinesen & Jaeger, 2013) and natural disasters (You et al., 2020). A prototypical example of the rally effect was observed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when in a few days, the popularity of President George W. Bush improved from 51 to 86% (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003).

More recently, several studies documented rally effects in many countries outside the USA, including Spain (Dinesen and Jaeger 2013), Belgium (Kuehnhanss et al. 2020), Japan (Kobayashi and Katagiri 2018), and South Korea (Hwang et al. 2018). The literature shows that rally effects play important social functions because they help societies react rapidly and cohesively when facing a threat from exogenous shocks (Chatagnier, 2012), where dissatisfaction and grievances toward the government and pre-existing political cleavages are put aside. From a social-psychological perspective, people are pushed toward a source of social identity (e.g., “I am an American”), which is superordinate to what they usually resort to when thinking about politics (e.g., “I am a Democrat”) (Brewer & Brown, 1998). The consequence is “a unity with the ‘central’ values, the

political processes, the moral integrity of the political system, a loyalty to and support of the going order” (Lane, 1962, p. 162).

The nature of rally effects is a matter of debate. For example, according to Mueller’s (1970) seminal conceptualization, rally effects are patriotic reflections triggered by citizens to support the incumbent president. Following Brody and Shapiro’s (1989) explanation, however, rallies occur because, during an exogenous crisis, opinion leaders stop criticizing the government’s policies; consequently, the absence of negative evaluations produces surges in presidential popularity. Alternatively, Parker (1995, p. 526) conceptualizes the rally effects as something broader and able to invoke “feelings of allegiance toward national political institutions and policies”. Hence, they do not merely promote patriotism or zealous support for political elites but support the entire institutional system. Consistent with this, Bol et al. (2021) recently showed that unexpected exogenous shocks tend to heighten satisfaction with the functioning of democracy beyond fostering trust toward political institutions. At the same time, beyond their social nature, it has been observed that rally effects also fulfill a relevant individual function in promoting psychological well-being. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous section, institutional trust may represent an asset to deal with the uncertainty triggered by threats, fostering people’s psychological well-being.

Strengthened trust is undoubtedly a symbolic capital for governments and authorities to help tackle a crisis. However, the assessment of the performance of institutions in managing exogenous crises is a key factor in shifting public opinion (e.g., Colaresi 2007), and the perceptions of negative management can have further political consequences (Boin et al. 2017). After a short-term initial phase, people experiencing higher levels of subjective threat begin to develop more negative evaluations of how the government managed the crisis due to their more extensive experience of the many inefficiencies of the public management of the crisis. Moreover, even if the government manages a crisis perfectly well over time, it is expected to lose support as soon as the perceived threat level decreases. Indeed, rally effects weaken because political entrepreneurs come to the

foreground, and pre-existing political orientations and identifications are reactivated (e.g., Parker, 1995). Furthermore, opposition supporters return to their normal and physiological critical assessment of the government.

In some respects, the COVID-19 emergency represents a situation similar to previous crises analyzed in the context of the rally effect, while in others it is very different. Specifically, it is exogenous in nature and has led to a collective loss of subjective security, increasing existential anxiety. After months and years of the pandemic, we still face a long-lasting crisis caused by a less easy-to-spot and morally neutral enemy.

Not surprisingly, recent studies documented relevant rally effects in many countries. Indeed, even if partisan divisions regarding public support for the government persisted during the COVID-19 crisis (Kritzing et al., 2021; Pignataro, 2021; Shino & Binder, 2020), most of the studies converged to show that the outbreak triggered classic rally effects in nearly all the nations surveyed (e.g., Bol et al., 2021; Kudrnac & Klusáček, 2022; Wang & Cheng, 2021). This happened even in countries, such as Sweden, with unusually high pre-pandemic levels of institutional trust (Esaiasson et al., 2021).

The duration of rally effects during COVID-19 is, to date, a less explored and discussed issue (Johansson et al., 2021; Satherley et al., 2022). However, it is well known that, in times of crisis, political leaders can rarely translate this initial rally effect into long-term support (Johansson et al., 2021; Woods, 2011). This is problematic because prolonged pandemic crises need citizens' compliance toward the demanding behaviors required to tackle the outbreak. The few available longitudinal studies during COVID-19 confirmed that rally effects are fundamentally short-term public opinion changes. Indeed, rally effects triggered by the outbreak lasted from two to eight months (Johansson et al., 2021). For example, Bækgaard et al. (2020) found a positive trend in public trust toward the Danish first minister in the first three months after the lockdown announcement. Interestingly, Satherley et al. (2022) showed that the duration of political attitude

change depends on party voters and that support wanes faster among opposition party voters. Specifically, they showed a generalized increase in trust toward the governing party in the first five months of the pandemic, followed by a faster decrease among the opposition party's voters.

As far as Italy is concerned, we tested the duration of the rally effect in a 3.5-year longitudinal study using the COCO project dataset (Colloca et al., 2024). Our results confirmed that trust in political institutions (the Italian parties, the local administration, and the Italian parliament, assessed with the standard 10-category European Social Survey items) increased after the COVID-19 outbreak (April 2020) and decreased thereafter in a few months (October 2020), showing that rally effects had a short life in the context of the outbreak. In addition, in the long-term trend, our longitudinal data showed that the effect completely leveled off over three years when political trust returned to the pre-pandemic level.

The COVID-19 pandemic had some interesting specificities as concerns the rally effects it provoked. On the one hand, it affected people's institutional trust even beyond their governments. For instance, when the virus hit Italy, De Vries et al. (2021) found a rise in institutional trust in France, Germany, Poland, and Spain, where the pandemic had not arrived yet. Moreover, Schraff (2021) showed that the increased trust in the Dutch government exhibited during the pandemic was a genuine rally effect and not a consequence of the decision to lock down the citizens. In Schraff's study, the shift of trust was driven by the intensity of the crisis and not by the specific measures implemented by the governments. At the same time, as we have seen, Bol et al. (2021) demonstrated that the pandemic also heightened satisfaction with the functioning of democracy across seven European countries, suggesting that it has had a general positive spillover effect on support for democratic institutions. Consistent with this, Bækgaard et al. (2020) observed a rally effect with respect to other public institutions, such as the judiciary, the legislature, and the public sector in general, suggesting that trust in government tends to spillover to other institutions.

Moreover, we showed that the public opinion changes triggered by exogenous shocks transcend the involved institutions' national boundaries by generating a counter-effect toward international institutions (Cavazza et al. 2022). In our longitudinal study, we found that after the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italians' trust in political and *super partes* institutions (i.e., the judiciary, the police, and the President of the Republic) rose when compared to the pre-pandemic level, while trust in international institutions (i.e., the United Nations and the European Union) did not². In this case, the exogenous shock of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered increased salience of a specific set of social identities, the national ones, weakening the supra-national identification. This interpretation was in line with Amat et al.'s (2020) results, which showed a strong preference for a national vs. an internationally coordinated response to COVID-19, much stronger than that for managing other international crises, such as international terrorism and climate change. Additionally, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of increasing difficulty in international policy coordination favored a common feeling of "every country for itself" (Cavazza et al. 2022).

It is evident that, consistent with the social function that rally effects fulfill, the rise in national institutional trust was an asset for governments that struggled to limit the COVID-19 spread by taking measures that were highly restrictive of individual freedom, such as curfews, lockdowns, and mandatory vaccines. Implementing such measures without triggering strong social conflicts requires a consolidated, trust-based relationship between citizens and political institutions. However, even if in many countries the governments have successfully faced the difficult and unprecedented pandemic situation with a weak baseline of political trust, overall, citizens showed good compliance with governments' preventive policies. The temporary rise in institutional trust sparked by the pandemic favored this compliance.

² Once again, trust in these institutions was assessed via the standard European Social Survey 10-category items.

COVID-19 and support for anti-democratic political systems

Beyond the previously discussed rally effects, a second compensatory mechanism to restore subjective order and predictability facing a social threat which has implications for the holdover of populism is the proneness to support anti-democratic authorities (Kay et al. 2011). The media may facilitate both rally effects and anti-democratic attitudes if they focus their content on authorities or leader actions with milder critical accents than in normal times. This focus directs public attention to the management of the crisis rather than to citizens' ideological preferences (Hargreaves et al. 2021). Pre-pandemic research confirmed strong relationships between a societal threat (e.g., criminality and terrorism) and support for anti-democratic political systems, conceived as an individual's authoritarianism, support for anti-democratic governmental systems, or intention to vote for extreme right-wing political parties (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Russo et al., 2019). More recently, threats stemming from natural disasters such as earthquakes (Russo et al., 2020; Sibley & Bulbulia, 2012) were shown to foster attitudinal anti-democracy, plausibly because—just like societal threats—natural disasters undermine people's subjective control over their lives and social world (Afifi et al., 2014). The results from these studies, conducted adopting a social-psychological approach, have been confirmed by Blickle's (2020) fascinating archival research, which, using German cities as unity of analysis, showed an intriguing significant association between the Spanish influenza deaths in 1918 and the votes for the Nazi party in the 1932 and 1933 elections.

Some studies performed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic found results consistent with those performed before the pandemic. The first study was conducted by Amat et al. (2020) at the very beginning of the outbreak. Using a mix of survey and experimental research, these authors showed that the Spanish population favored muscular management of the outbreak based on strong leadership. Consistent with this, the Spanish citizens were ready to give up some relevant quotas of individual freedom in exchange for efficient management of the pandemic. Finally, even a

technocratic government was considered an adequate way to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. It is apparent that technocratic governments—based on the exercise of political power by elite experts legitimized by their competence, efficiency, and neutrality and not by the vote of the majority of the constituency—are at least in part alternative to representative democracy (Ganuza and Font 2020). Indeed, technocracy has often been conceived as complementary to populism, because they both underly the crisis of the party democracy and share many aspects, first of all the critique to political pluralism (e.g., Reiser and Hebenstreit 2020). Consistent with this, some scholars detected a technocratic populism (e.g., Castaldo and Verzichelli, 2020). It is plausible that experts become particularly appealing during complex crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We will revisit this idea later in this section.

Three studies we performed using the COCO project dataset confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic could have generated the risk of a democratic emergency after the health emergency. One study performed in April 2020, i.e., at the beginning of the pandemic, when Italian citizens were locked down, showed that direct and indirect exposure to COVID-19 and perceived economic threat were associated with the preference for an anti-democratic political system, operationalized as the combination of a favorable evaluation of a government led by a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections and of a military government, measured via two standard 4-category items from the European Social Survey (Roccatò et al., 2020b). A longitudinal replication and extension of this study showed that this effect lasted at least six months and that it was favored by a negative evaluation of how the government managed the pandemic from the health and economic points of view (Roccatò, et al., 2021). Two other Italian studies conducted using the COCO project dataset confirm that at least some of the changes the COVID-19 pandemic led in public opinion could be all but temporary shifts. These showed that household crowding during the lockdown fostered people's desire for an anti-democratic government even a year and a half after the lockdown (Cavazza et al., 2021; Russo et al., 2022).

These results are consistent with the theory related to CCM and with research applying it as the main theoretical framework. As we have previously seen, Amat et al. (2020) showed that the pandemic fostered the desire for technocratic management of the pandemic. This desire for technocracy aligns with the idea that in threatening times technocrats may be considered relevant sources of secondary control. More recently, we confirmed and extended the results stemming from Amat et al.'s study in a multilevel study with a quota sample of the Italian population (N = 8,210, data collected between March and June 2021), who were interviewed in the context of the ResPOnSE COVID-19 project (Vezzoni et al., 2020). The data have been collected via a rolling-cross-section (RCS) design, an approach that consists of the distribution of the interviews conducted within the classic one-shot cross-section surveys over time and in a controlled manner. In RCS, the same questionnaire is administered to independent samples (randomly chosen) in the same setting on different days. Thus, as the basic characteristics of the daily samples do not vary systematically, RCSs allow for a nesting based on daily samples (Lutz et al., 2013). We showed that the subjective health and economic vulnerability triggered by the pandemic was positively associated with trust in science and scientists. In turn, this had a positive association with a positive attitude toward technocracy, especially among people with low trust in political institutions (i.e., among those with the strongest need for an alternative source of compensatory control).³ Interestingly, the daily prevalence of COVID-19 (used as a Level-2 variable) was positively associated with the preference for a technocratic government. Therefore, beyond subjective threat, an actual threat may lead people toward compensatory control (see Cena and Roccato 2023).

³ All of these variables were assessed using the standard European Social Survey items.

COVID-19, populist orientation, and populist votes

Do the pervasive increase in institutional trust (rally effect) and the heightened attention to alternative sources of compensatory control, such as anti-democratic and technocratic governments, mean that there has been an evolution in citizens' populist orientation and vote? It is not easy to answer this question because, at present, the literature on this topic is scant and often tackles this issue indirectly and sometimes in contradictory ways. Moreover, there is good reason to develop contrasting and alternative hypotheses.

The COVID crisis was strongly politicized in many countries. For instance, in the USA, political conservatism was negatively associated with the probability of enacting protective behaviors via the mediation of perceived risk and severity of the infection and perceived effectiveness of protective behaviors (Stroebe et al., 2021). Beyond conservatism, populism was undoubtedly a hub of this politicization. Populist leaders politicized expertise to increase their legitimacy and bypassed institutional channels of crisis response (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020). Moreover, they spread messages that were consistent with their populist ideology. For instance, Bolsonaro and Trump framed the pandemic as a struggle between the pure and honest people on the one hand and the corrupt and inefficient elite (Cervi et al., 2021) and a number of dangerous "others" (Lasco, 2020) on the other.

On the side of public opinion, the pandemic has plausibly made salient two of the main roads to populism detected in the literature: the economic road (due to the economic crisis it fostered) and the political road (especially among the people who were dissatisfied with the way the democratic institutions managed the outbreak; see Roccato et al., 2020a, 2020b). Concerning the economic road to populism, it is apparent that people's sense of insecurity was dramatically worsened by the serious economic crisis triggered by the severe interruption of unnecessary production activities and social isolation. Therefore, it could be plausible that populism had a positive trend during the pandemic.

In a complementary way and considering the political road to populism, a core politicization of the pandemic was the COVID-19 vaccine (Barello et al., 2023). In the USA, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine refusal was overrepresented among Republican voters (Hornsey et al., 2020). In Europe, Ward et al. (2020) found a positive association between being an extreme right or an extreme left voter and COVID-19 vaccine refusal, while Becher et al.'s (2021) comparative study showed that in the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship between ideology and compliance with health guidelines varied across countries. More interestingly, theoretical and empirical links between COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and populism can be traced. Indeed, vaccine refusers and populists have a number of common features: they share limited trust in political, medical, and scientific institutions (Allington et al., 2023), they believe in conspiracies behind the outbreak (Eberl et al., 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021), and tend to develop their beliefs about COVID-19 based on social media (Bhagianadh & Arora, 2021), where the fake news about COVID-19 have proliferated (Salali & Uysal, 2022). Thus, it is anything but surprising that populist orientations showed a positive association with COVID-19 vaccine refusal (Roccatò & Russo, 2023). In this light, the COVID-19 pandemic could have fostered populism. This actually happened in Romania, where the outbreak fostered mistrust toward mainstream political institutions and leaders, contributing to the rise of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, an extreme right-wing populist party (Doiciar & Cretan, 2021).

However, a contrasting hypothesis is equally plausible. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic could also have represented a barrier in the long populist wave that hit the world in the last decade for two reasons. On the one hand, because of the large-scale anxiety it caused (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2020). Anxiety is a very relevant emotion in social and political psychology. According to the affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000), people's behaviors depend on their interpretations and evaluations of their situations. When they face unfamiliar, uncontrollable, and threatening events, such as during the pandemic, people activate a surveillance system that shifts

their attention to new or threatening stimuli. Overall, anxiety, the emotional expression of such a system, decreases reliance on habits and dispositions and promotes reasoned thought and engagement in risk-averse strategies (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). In the political domain, as it reduces partisanship and fosters reconsideration of previous opinions (Redlawsk et al., 2010), anxiety often leads to changes in previously stable political attitudes and vote choices (e.g., Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). On the other hand, the literature converges to show that distrust toward institutions is one of the core dimensions of populism (e.g., Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). Accordingly, consistent with the idea that anxiety triggers the rally effect described above (i.e., trust in established institutions) (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015), at least for the first few months after the outbreak onset, the COVID-19 pandemic could have helped stop the populist wave as a consequence of the temporary increase in institutional trust it triggered, whereas the proneness to trust the salvific power of a strong leader could have given it further strength.

Two longitudinal studies from our research group, conducted in Italy, supported the second hypothesis empirically. Both of them have been performed in the context of the COCO project.

In the first study (see Russo et al., 2021), we adopted a short-term longitudinal approach to describe and predict the trend of populist votes and voting intentions using the first two waves of the COCO project. In this study, based on the affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000), we measured anxiety asking participant to report how often, in the days preceding the survey, they have felt anxiety, fear, and worry, using a 4-category format. Results showed that the overall electoral instability was significantly higher in April 2020 (30.41%), when the pandemic dramatically hit Italy, than it was in 2019 (23.9%), before the outbreak, $\chi^2(1) = 6.77, p = 0.009$. This was consistent with the much higher large-scale anxiety that characterized public opinion in 2020 compared to 2019 (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2020). Interestingly, in 2019, consistent with the pre-pandemic growing populist Zeitgeist, people who declared to have changed their vote or voting intentions (compared to 2018) were significantly overrepresented among those who moved toward populism. On the

contrary, consistent with the conception of anxiety as a trigger of reliance to place trust in established institutions (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015), in 2020, they were overrepresented among the voters who moved away from populism, $\chi^2(2) = 53.17$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 *Vote changes from and toward populism*

	Stable	Moving away from populist parties	Moving toward populist parties
2018-2019	557 (88.7%)	25 (4.0%) [-5.34]	46 (7.3%) [5.34]
2019-2020	531 (84.6%)	75 (11.9%) [5.34]	22 (3.5%) [-5.34]

Note. Cells report the observed frequencies, the row percentages (in brackets), and the adjusted standardized residuals (in square brackets). If > 2 , adjusted standardized residuals express a significant, positive association between the row and the column, and if < -2 , a significant, negative association between the row and the column. If ranging from -2 and 2 , they express a non-significant association.

Source Russo et al. (2021, p. 158)

A multinomial logistic regression (electoral stability was used as the reference category) directly confirmed the role anxiety played in the public opinion changes fostered by the pandemic. Indeed, anxiety was positively associated with electoral instability from populist to non-populist votes. In contrast, it was not associated with the mobility from non-populist to populist votes, Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2 = .07$ (see Table 7.2).⁴

⁴ At a first glance, this Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 may look small. However, in explanatory research genuine explanations, even with small determination coefficients, are preferable to non-genuine explanations in which high determination

Table 7.2 *Prediction of instability of populist votes between 2019 and 2020*

	Moving away from				Moving toward			
	populist parties				populist parties			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Intercept	-1.20	1.04	.250		-.66	1.74	.704	
Anxiety	.40	.18	.028	1.49	.35	.32	.281	1.41
Male gender	.01	.26	.981	1.01	-.00	.47	1.000	1.00
Age	-.02	.01	.026	.98	-.05	.02	.005	.96
Education	-.02	.04	.611	.98	-.06	.07	.38	.64
North-western Italy	-.80	.42	.062	.45	-.67	.65	.309	.51
North-eastern Italy	-1.03	.47	.028	.36	-1.28	.77	.096	.28
Central Italy	-.57	.42	.174	.56	-1.68	.87	.02	.19
Southern Italy	-.45	.40	.257	.63	-.66	.65	.314	.52
Size of area of residence	.00	.00	.562	1.00	.00	.00	.433	1.00

Source Russo et al. (2021, p. 159)

This study disclosed an interesting political effect that the COVID-19 pandemic fostered: in Italy, for the first time in decades, the populist wave that hit the world had halted, mainly due to the dramatic anxiety the outbreak elicited. However, the study had two main limitations. Firstly, it analyzed a short time period. As discussed in this chapter, the rise of institutional trust fostered by exogenous shocks is brief. Consistent with this, the reduction of populist votes could have just been

coefficient are a consequence of an excessive semantic proximity between causes and effects (Von Wright 1971). In this case, the high semantic autonomy between the *explanans* (participants' anxiety) and the *explanandum* (the vote they have cast) argues for of the authenticity of this explanation.

a side effect of the temporary growth of trust toward institutions during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak (Funk, 2020). Secondly, the study only focused on the trend of political votes, neglecting those in populist orientations (i.e., the set of attitudes and social representations that may drive the choice of a populist party). The decline of populist votes should be considered a genuine change only if paired with a parallel decline of populist orientations. If not, it should be regarded as a superficial slowdown that will plausibly rebound at the end of the pandemic emergency.

Another study from our research group helped make a step forward in understanding the populist dynamics generated by the outbreak. In this second study, we adopted a long-term longitudinal approach (using the first four waves of the COCO project). We modeled both the trend of populist votes (operationalized as the degree of populism of the voted party, measured based on the quantification by the POPPA Expert Survey, see <https://poppa.shinyapps.io/poppa/>) and populist orientations (measured using Roccato et al.'s 2019 POPOR Scale, a 6-item forced choice balanced scale) from June 2019 to April 2021. A latent growth curve model showed that populist votes showed a significant negative linear trend (coeff = -0.016 , SE = 0.006, $p = 0.013$), with significant individual variation around this trend (variance = 0.007, SE = 0.003, $p = 0.026$). Figure 7.1 shows this effect graphically.

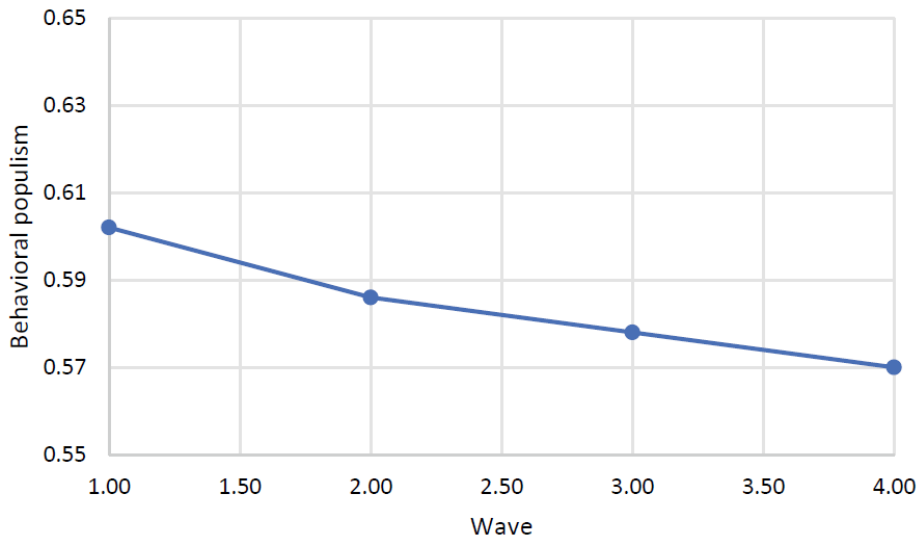


Fig. 7.1 Negative linear trend of populist votes from June 2019 to April 2021

On the contrary, populist orientations did not change between June 2019 and April 2021 (coeff = -0.207 , SE = 0.339 , $p = 0.594$), see Fig. 7.2.

The negative linear trend of populist votes was fostered by participants' anxiety, measured in the second wave of the COCO project (April 2020). Thus, consistent with the theorization and research based on the affective intelligence and on the CCM model, the weakening of the populist party appeal was particularly strong among the participants who activated more strongly the surveillance system due to the outbreak (see Table 7.3).

Based on the results of this second study, we conclude that the decline in populist votes observed in the pandemic period is plausibly a superficial effect, mainly due to the increase in the anxiety caused by the outbreak. At a deeper level, when basic worldviews are concerned, Italian public opinion remained unchanged regarding its populism.

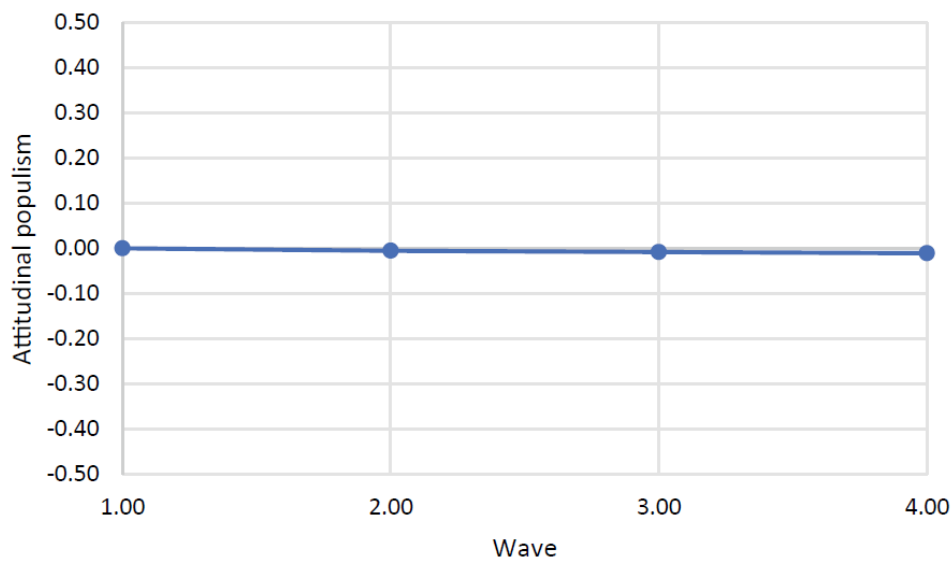


Fig. 7.2 Stable trend of populist orientations from June 2019 to April 2022

The negative linear trend of populist votes was fostered by the increase in economic insecurity (used as a proxy for anxiety) from pre-pandemic (June 2019) to the first pandemic wave (April 2020) of the study. Thus, consistent with the theorization and research based on the CCM model, the weakening of the populist party appeal was particularly strong among the participants who felt subjectively more at risk due to the outbreak (see Table 3).

Table 7.3 Time-invariant covariates of the slope of the trend in populist votes

	coeff.	SE
Being woman	-.082	.082
Age	-.056	.084
Years of education	.123	.083
Perceived economic vulnerability at T ₁	-.047	.080
Increase in perceived economic vulnerability between T ₁ and T ₂	-.195*	.077

Note. Standardized parameters are displayed. * $p < .05$

Based on the results of this second study, we conclude that the decline in populist votes observed in the pandemic period is plausibly a superficial effect, mainly due to the increase in subjective insecurity caused by the outbreak. At a deeper level, when basic worldviews are concerned, Italian public opinion remained unchanged regarding its populism.

Conclusion

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to study changes in public opinion, contributing to scholarly knowledge about attitudes in times of crisis. The pandemic crisis had an impact on all social and existential spheres and led to dramatic changes that cannot be easily reversed. In particular, from a social-psychological perspective, the pandemic led to multiple feelings of threat that affected individual well-being and increased levels of uncertainty and anxiety (Castelli et al., 2020). According to compensatory control theory and research (e.g., Kay et al., 2008) and the uncertainty—threat model of political conservatism (Jost et al., 2007), threats and loss of control can motivate people to find ways to cope with these negative feelings. Specifically, individuals facing these threats may activate compensatory processes that can change their public attitudes and behaviors.

Our research program showed that the factors activated by the COVID-19 crisis contrasted with the long populist wave that hit Italy in the last decade. One of the ways with which Italians coped with this was to rely on institutional authorities involved in crisis management. Indeed, we observed the typical “rally effect” caused by exogenous shocks. This benefitted the government, which had to take strong unpopular measures to limit the COVID-19 spread, counting on a weak baseline of political trust. Since institutional distrust is a central “ingredient” of the populist worldview, this rally effect has weakened its attractiveness.

Moreover, we must consider the heightened sense of insecurity caused by the serious crisis derived from the pandemic is a push factor for populist orientation. We documented that beyond the rally effects, a way to cope with uncertainty was to enhance the desire for strong leaders or anti-democratic systems viewed as able to individuate explanations and solutions and enact rapid actions without the delays and inefficiencies stemming from the check-and-balances of representative democracy.

Notwithstanding this second trend, overall, our research program showed that the pandemic led to a break in the rise of populism in Italy, at least from a behavioral perspective. The data from the September 2022 Italian general election are consistent with our results: the most populist Italian parties gained 50.5% of the valid votes. This is significantly lower than the 57.5% they gained in the 2019 European election. However, one in two Italian voters still expressed a populist vote even if the pandemic was not definitively over. Consistent with this, from 2019 to April 2021, the populist orientation of Italians did not change. A recent report analyzing the political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public opinion in 27 Western democracies (Foa et al., 2022) showed a global trend reverse in the rise of populist attitudes and approval of populist leaders and votes, even though it was associated with a decrease in the preference for the democratic regime and principles. The authors' conclusion is a cautious but optimistic one. According to them, at present, we are witnessing a mere suspension of populism attractiveness. Still, they seem to propend the idea that the observed weakening of social and political conflicts could also fuel social cohesion in contrast with the populist temptation, as after other dramatic crises (e.g., Spanish influenza and World War II). Based on the results of the stability of the populist orientation underlying voting behavior over time, we are somewhat less optimistic than them. Indeed, it is plausible that the long populist wave had a temporary halt, but it is likely to rebound to higher levels when the health and economic situations will return to pre-pandemic levels.

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