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Left and right in the age of populism: Has the populist zeitgeist permeated citizens' representation of ideological labels?

Abstract

We studied whether the current populist zeitgeist has changed the social representation of the political labels "left" and "right" in terms of their relevance, understanding, and meaning. We merged two post-electoral quota samples of the Italian adult population. The first (N = 1,377) was collected in 2006 by the ITANES research group, and the second in 2019 (N = 1,504) for this study. We analysed the *relevance* of left and right in politics as the frequency with which participants placed themselves on the left–right axis, its *understanding* as the frequency with which participants answered at least one of two open-ended questions about the meaning of such categories, and the *meaning* participants gave to left and right in politics through the content analysis of their responses to the open-ended questions above. From 2006 to 2019, the relevance and understanding of left and right declined. In terms of meanings, references to the traditional elements of left and right became less common, while references to specific leaders and the notion of "left" and "right" in politics no longer making sense became more widespread; moreover, none of the other populist categories significantly changed their frequency. Strengths, limitations, and implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: populism, public opinion, social representations, left, right, political ideology, interest in politics

Word count: 7989 words

Introduction

The funeral of "left" and "right" as relevant categories for understanding political behaviours and events has been celebrated many times (e.g., Lipset 1960; Shils 1968;), and it has even translated into a recommendation that the use of the left–right

scale in political surveys be abandoned (Bauer et al. 2017). However, many studies continue supporting the hypothesis of the ongoing functionality of left and right for citizens, parties, and political leaders (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; BLINDED 2009a; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Jost 2006).

We believe that now is the time for a new investigation into this topic due to the populist wave that has hit all Western countries, provoking radical political changes, and possibly marking a turning point in the way people think of political ideologies. Several populist movements, parties, and leaders have been successful in parliamentary and local elections, and this has occurred together with a dramatic spread of citizens' populist orientation (Algan et al. 2017). This success may have been the shove for the weakening of the left-right distinction. First, for its rhetoric underlining the uselessness of such a distinction (Mudde 2007) in favour of a homogenous representation of the good people. Second, because the populist (thin) ideology may fulfil the same functions previously recovered by the left-right distinction: to help people simplify and understand the complex political reality, and provide a social identity based on the feeling to belong to a positive social entity (the people) in contrast with negative outgroups (elites). In this article, we discuss some mechanisms by which populism could weaken the left and right categories and compare the relevance, understanding, and representations of left and right in politics between 2006 (before populism become central in Italian politics) and 2019 (when all the Italian parties showed relevant symptoms of populism, and the two parties considered as being most populist were governing the country: see BLINDED 2018).

Populism as a "thin" ideology

According to Mudde (2007, 23), populism is "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" Building on this definition, four main defining features of populism have been empirically identified (e.g., BLINDED 2019): (a) a negative attitude towards the political, financial, and economic elite; (b) the conception of the people as a homogeneous and virtuous entity, entitled to take part directly in political decision-making, without intermediate and representative bodies mediating between the citizen and the state; (c) the need for a strong leader; and (d) the loss of relevance of the traditional ideologies. In this view, populism represents a set of minimal abstract ideas to be concretized through specific political goals and programs. Some of these propound far-right values, and others radical left-wing ones, while some refer to the centre of the political spectrum.

The affirmation of populism, especially as a citizens' orientation, has been accompanied and promoted by a political communication making the above-mentioned key elements salient. In particular, according to Reinemann and others (2016), the lowest common denominator of populist rhetoric across time and contexts is organized through two elements. First, there is an *appeal to the people*, which aims at building a symbolic representation of what and who the people are, promoting a sense of "we" – that is, identification with a positively and emotionally connoted ingroup. The vagueness of the term "people" (as well as other commonly used synonyms, such as citizens, Italians, etc.) is the reason for its functionality: It unites, under the same label, individuals and social groups with very different values, conceptions, and goals (Meny and Surel 2002). At the same time, because it is devoid of strong ideological content, it

has ready-to-use appeal for any leader, whatever concrete position s/he wants to support.

Since social identity becomes salient in the comparison with other social groups and categories, the symbolic *construction of "them"* is the second key element of populist communication. In this sense, populist messages (negatively) refer to outgroups deriving from both *anti-elitism* stands (i.e., the ruling elite in the political, economic, and cultural domains) and *exclusionist* claims, in its right-wing version, mainly against social minorities and immigrants. In this framework, reference to the traditional ideological left–right distinction seems to be left completely behind.

Relevance, meanings, and functions of the left–right distinction

The historical longevity of the left–right distinction, starting from its conception during the 1789 constituent assembly at Versailles, testifies of its usefulness as a conceptual tool able to summarize political differences among parties, policies, stances, leaders, and individuals (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). In recent decades, there have been proposals that this conceptual template should be abandoned, as it appears to have lost its heuristic and political power. However, the idea that the left–right distinction is declining and dwindling, despite becoming increasingly common in the discourses of journalists, commentators, and politicians, can be considered speculation rather than compelling empirical evidence. Indeed, many studies have provided evidence of this distinction's persistent utility over time and contexts (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; BLINDED, 2009a; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Jost 2006).

The main reason for this persistence has been individuated in the functions that the left–right distinction fulfils for citizens, parties, and leaders, particularly in complex political scenarios (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976Sartori 1976). At the collective

level, the left–right dimension may be conceived as an organizing principle of the political space. Social groups, parties, and leaders can use it to place themselves in relation to each other and to define conflicts and commonalities among them, thus serving a function of social orientation and symbolic point of reference. At the individual level, it addresses epistemic (i.e., the need to reduce uncertainty, complexity, or ambiguity) and relational (i.e., the need for affiliation satisfied by personal and social identification: see Jost, Federico and Napier 2009) needs. In this sense, it helps generate heuristics through which even relatively inexpert individuals can place themselves in respect to complex political issues and helps create a sense of "we" based on a shared value-based worldview (BLINDED, 2009b).

However, variations in the meaning attributed to left and right in politics were observed over time, across countries and between levels of respondents' political involvement and participation (Zuell and Scholz 2019). Far from provoking a radical weakening of its relevance, these variations contributed to the enrichment of the meaning of left and right in politics (Noël and Thérien 2008).

In Italy, BLINDED (2009a) compared the meaning of "left" and "right" in politics expressed by two samples of the Italian population surveyed, respectively, in 1975 and 2006. In 1975, ideology dominated the Italian and European politics (Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 2009). The Cold War was central to Italian politics, the traditional parties founded after or even before the fascist dictatorship were the keystones of the political space, and Italians showed a strong party identification. In 2006, the decline of the traditional parties and a series of institutional reforms, accelerated by the fall of the Berlin wall, led to a complete disintegration of the "first republic" and to the foundation of a less ideological and more politically secular "second republic," characterized by parties with a short lifespan, by rapid changes in

political leadership, by a periodic turnover between different governments, and by a drastically weakened political identification among voters.

BLINDED (2009a) used the social representation framework to analyse the resulting changes in relevance, understanding, and content of left and right in politics. Social representations are sets of shared beliefs, evaluations, and symbolic references about socially relevant objects, serving social and individual functions (Moscovici 1984). The social representation framework allows to differentiate the core elements assuring the stability of the symbolic shared representation from the peripheral elements assuring adaptation to changing circumstances (Flament 1987). BLINDED found that the relevance (assessed as participants' self-placement rate on the left–right continuum and their ability to place the main parties on such a continuum) and understanding (assessed as the answer rate to at least one of the open questions about the meaning of left and right) of left and right in politics increased over time. Moreover, regarding their content, they observed an increase in references to abstract principles (e.g., values). These findings showed that a core of abstract meaning assigned to left and right guaranteed the ongoing functionality of the left–right ideological labels for public opinion. BLINDED concluded by suggesting that, even after a dramatic change of the political world, the distinction between left and right was alive and well.

However, in subsequent years the Italian political context experienced further radical changes. In the 2000s, the political crisis was exacerbated by economic and cultural crises. The electoral law underwent a number of subsequent changes, there were a break in the link between traditional cleavages and electoral choices and intense voter mobility, and Italians' trust in institutions became weaker and weaker (Chiaramonte et al. 2018). As a result, Italy presented the preconditions for the development of the "majoritarian type of populism" (Bornschier 2019) and, consistently, nearly all of the

Italian parties showed some trace of populism (BLINDED, 2018). Mainly, the post-ideological populism indisputably emerged and spread in Italy through the Five Star Movement (FSM), an anti-system party that has characterized its disruptive success using a post-ideological rhetoric. When we performed the 2019 survey, the FSM was in office together with the League. A couple of months after the survey, a left-wing coalition, including the Democratic Party, substituted the League in the governing coalition.

Why populism may have weakened the left-right distinction?

The left-right political distinction has lasted so long thanks to the social and individual functions it recovered. Today, the question is whether the spread of populism has weakened this functionality by fulfilling it by its own. Populism may have promoted the decline of the left-right distinction as a result of four factors. First, the idea that left and right have become obsolete is central in the populist rhetoric (Mudde 2007). In Italy, for example, the rhetoric of the FSM strongly pointed to overcoming the political left-right relevance and was indeed successful in collecting similar shares of left and right wing voters, breaking the bipolar dynamic that had characterized the so-called Second Republic (Russo, Riera and Verthé 2017). Moreover, this rhetoric has aimed at the acquisition of electoral consent even of ideological voters disappointed in both blocs, potentially attracted by an "unlabelled" left-right party. Second, "thin" populism is actually an ideology (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels 2017), beyond its derivatives from left or right ideologies, expressing citizens' responses to the crisis of the legitimacy of liberal democracy (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels 2017). Indeed, the globalization process provided new chances to restructure the ideological and political competition spaces (Azmanova 2011), challenging the conventional left-right divide. The populist narrative

depicts a dramatically simplified representation of reality and a mental map "through which individuals analyse and comprehend political reality" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 498–499), thus fulfilling the individual functions mentioned above. Moreover, the people -elite distinction is a way for citizens to feel part of a positive social entity (the people), and easily individuate their outgroups (the ruling elite, some stigmatized internal social minorities, and immigrants), fulfilling their need for affiliation and relationship. Third, populist rhetoric conveys a conception of the people as homogeneous and sharing interests and goals that hinder the classic ideological cleavages based on the competition among the interests of different social classes. Finally, the "us vs. them" schema applies equally well to both right-wing and left-wing populism and, in many contexts, the mainstream political rhetoric has integrated the typical populist symbolic categories. This convergence of factors may have actually relegated the traditional ideological categories to the background and undermined their meaning in citizens' minds.

The present study

A growing line of research has been devoted to study populism as an individual orientation (Hawkins et al. 2018). However, a study of whether the populist rhetoric has actually been able to permeate and modify the social representations of left and right in politics is still missing. We designed the present research to provide an answer to this question.

Goals and Hypotheses

We aimed to analyse the evolution of the social representation (in terms of relevance, understanding, and symbolic references) of the left–right distinction in correspondence with the spread of the present populist zeitgeist. Starting from the 2006

Italian National Elections Studies (ITANES) dataset previously analysed by BLINDED (2009a), in 2019, we performed a new national survey, asking participants to place themselves on the left–right continuum and to freely answer the same two open-ended questions about the meaning of left and right in politics that BLINDED (2009a) used in the 2006 survey.

We pursued our goals via content analysis of the responses to these open-ended questions aimed at capturing traces of populist symbolic references in the respondents' words. In particular, based on BLINDED (2019), we coded all the references to the main defining categories of populism (i.e., the people as a homogeneous and/or virtuous entity, the elite, the cleavage between the people and the elite, leaders, and the overcoming of left and right in politics), and all the references to the main categories that populist rhetoric devalues because of their association with mainstream politics (i.e., traditional ideological/values references, class cleavages, parties, and economic references).

If the populist rhetoric has permeated the social representation of left and right held by public opinion, we should observe the following changes between 2006 and 2019. The relevance of left and right in politics should have decreased (H1), the understanding of left and right in politics should have decreased (H2), and references to the traditional semantic categories, especially to the more abstract ones (i.e., ideology/values) included in the core of the social representation of left and right in politics, should have decreased (H3), while the use of populist references should have increased (H4).

Social representations of socially relevant objects vary as a function of the symbolic distance between social groups and the object (Moscovici 1981). The symbolic distance to politics can be represented by citizens' political interest. Therefore,

we hypothesized that lowly (vs. highly) interested citizens could be those more attracted by populist rhetoric (H5), because of its ability to provide a simplified representation of a complex domain, in which easily understandable solutions are envisaged for complex social problems. Therefore, we should observe a decrease in relevance and understanding of the ideological labels, and an increase in references to populist semantic categories, at the expense of the classic ones, among the former more so than among the latter.

Method

We based this study on data from two post-electoral surveys performed on two quota samples of the Italian adult population – the first carried out in 2006, and the second in 2019. The first dataset (N = 1,377, men = 51.3%, M_{age} = 46.98, SD = 16.59, $M_{education}$ = 10.23, SD = 3.91) was collected through face-to face interviews by the ITANES research group, and the second (N = 1,504, men = 48.9%, M_{age} = 47.80, SD = 15.06, $M_{education}$ = 13.70, SD = 3.32) was an *ad hoc* survey performed online by our research group. Both samples were stratified according to gender, age, geographic area of residence, and municipality size. The exact information about the field period and the response rate of the 2006 survey was not available; the 2019 survey was performed between May 26 and June 1, with a 18% response rate.[1]

The sociodemographic distributions of gender , $\chi^2(1) = 1.57$, $p = .21$, and age, $t(2879) = -1.39$, $p = .16$, were equal, while the participants from the 2019 dataset were

[1] In both surveys, the votes expressed by the participants did not perfectly overlap the results of the elections. In the 2006 dataset, the votes for the left-wing coalition were overrepresented (+ 7.5 percentage points). In the 2019 dataset, the votes for the League were slightly underrepresented (-2.4 percentage points) and that for the FSM were overrepresented (+ 5.7 percentage points). Those for the other parties were similar to those from the official results.

slightly more educated than those from the 2006 dataset, $t(2879) = -25.74$, $p < .001$. Thus, we controlled for participants' education in our analyses (see below). The first survey was conducted to study the dynamics of the 2006 general election, and the second to study the dynamics of the 2019 European election. In the two surveys, a core of identical questions was available. This allowed us to merge the two datasets. More details are available on the ITANES website (www.itanes.org/en) regarding the first database, and from the corresponding author regarding the second one.

Measures

Partly building on the work by BLINDED (2009a), we assessed relevance and the understanding participants gave to left and right in politics using two open-ended questions.

We assessed the *relevance* of left and right in politics as the frequency with which participants placed themselves on the left–right axis, using the standard European Social Survey question (ESS: see http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/).

We assessed the *understanding* of left and right in politics as the frequency with which participants answered at least one of the two open-ended questions about the meaning of such categories.

We assessed the *meaning* participants gave to left and right in politics by analysing their responses to the open-ended questions above. We used a mix of an instrumental and representational approach (Shapiro 1997), in which we looked for specific content categories inferred by the definition of populism to find out how this rhetoric has permeated the meaning that respondents attach to left and right in politics. In particular, we built a coding grid including four pivotal classical references (ideology/values; parties; class cleavage; economic stands) and five categories derived from the definition of populism and the rhetoric of the current populist discourse (the

people as a homogeneous and/or virtuous entity, the elite, the cleavage between the people and the elite, leaders, and the overcoming of left and right in politics). Two of the authors coded the open answers through the coding grid (mean intercoder reliability $k = .83$, cases of disagreement were discussed by all three authors until agreement was reached).Table 1 reports the categories we used and provides an example for each of them.

We assessed participants' political interest using the standard EES political interest item

All the questions are listed in the Appendix.

Data analyses

We performed a three-step data analysis. First, we compared the relevance of left and right in politics by means of a contingency table. Since the 2019 survey participants had, on average, higher levels of education than the 2006, for 2019, we calculated the predictive margins (Graubard and Korn 1999), controlling for education. Moreover, we performed a hierarchic logistic regression aimed at predicting participants' placing vs. not placing themselves on the left–right axis as a function of the year of the survey (−1 = 2006, 1 = 2019) and their political interest (mean-centred score), entered in Model 1, and their interaction, entered in Model 2. In both models, we controlled for participants' education.[2] Second, we did the same regarding the understanding of left and right in politics – i.e., the dummy variable expressing having vs. not having answered at least one of the two open-ended questions on the meaning of left and right, independent of the content of the responses. Finally, using the same techniques, we analysed the changes in the meaning of left and right in politics, focusing on having vs. not having

[2] Parallel analyses, performed while controlling for participants' gender and age, led to results (available upon request from the corresponding author) analogous to those we are publishing.

used references falling in the nine semantic categories displayed in Table 1 to answer the two open-ended questions on the meaning of left and right in politics.

Results

Consistent with H1, left and right in politics became less relevant between 2006 and 2019 (Table 2).

Table 3 (left column) shows that education had a positive association with the relevance of left and right in politics. The first step of the analysis showed a positive association between the latter and participants' political interest and confirmed a negative association between being surveyed in 2019 vs. in 2006 and the dependent variable. Model 2 showed that political interest moderated the association between the year of the survey and the relevance of left and right in politics (see Figure 1). The association was stronger among participants with a low (- 1 *SD*) political interest, *simple slope* = −.68, *SE* = .10, $p < .001$, than among those with a high (+1 *SD*) political interest, *simple slope* = −.41, *SE* = .07, $p < .001$, meaning that the relevance of left and right decreased more for those lowly interested in politics than for those highly interested. The difference between the two slopes was statistically significant, $t(756) = 2.21$, $p = .027$.

Substantially consistent with H2, the understanding of left and right in politics declined in the 13 years between 2006 and 2019, even if the association was only marginally significant (Table 4).

The understanding of left and right in politics had a positive association with respondents' education (Table 3, right column). The dependent variable showed a negative association with being surveyed in 2019 vs. in 2006, and a positive association with political interest, entered in Model 1. Model 2 showed that political interest

moderated the year of the survey-understanding of left and right in politics association (see Figure 2). The negative association was significant among participants with a low (−1 *SD*) political interest, *simple slope* = −.34, *SE* = .07, $p < .001$, while it was not significant for those with a high (+1 *SD*) political interest, *simple slope* = −.02, *SE* = .08, $p = .76$, meaning that only lowly interested respondents were less prone to indicating left–right content in 2019 than in 2006.

Table 5 shows how the meanings of left and right in politics have changed between 2006 and 2019. Consistent with H3, i references to the traditional contents of left and right (ideology/values, class cleavage, and economy) declined, with the exception of the reference to specific parties, which increased. Partially consistent with H4, the reference to specific leaders and the idea that left and right in politics do not make sense became more widespread, while none of the other content categories hinged on the populist rhetoric significantly changed its frequency.

Table 6 and Table 7 list the results of nine logistic regressions aimed at predicting the use of each of the categories referring to the classic meanings of left and right in politics and of those referring to their possible changes subsequent to the spread of the populist zeitgeist. In the first model of the analyses, education showed a positive association with choosing the ideology/values and economy categories, and a negative association with choosing the leaders category, while participants' political interest showed a positive association with choosing the ideology/values, class cleavage, and economy categories, and a negative association with choosing the leaders category. The associations between the year of the survey and choosing the nine categories substantially paralleled those that stemmed from the contingency tables above. More interestingly, the second models of the regressions indicated that participants' political interest moderated the relations of the year of the survey-dependent variables as

concerns choosing the class cleavage, economy, and leaders categories. The negative association between the year of the survey and choosing the class cleavage category was stronger among participants with low (−1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = −.68, *SE* = .11, $p < .001$, than those with high (+1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = −.32, *SE* = .07, $p < .001$. The difference between the two slopes was statistically significant, $t(756) = 2.76$, $p = .005$. Moreover, the negative relation between the year of the survey and choosing the economy category was stronger among participants with low (−1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = −.60, *SE* = .12, $p < .001$, than among those with high (+ 1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = −.24, *SE* = .09, $p < .01$. The difference between the two slopes was statistically significant, $t(756) = 2.40$, $p = .017$. Finally, the positive association with the year of the survey and choosing the leaders category was significant among participants with high (+ 1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = .63, *SE* = .16, $p < .001$, while it was not statistically significant among those with low (−1 *SD*) interest scores, *simple slope* = .03, *SE* = .13, $p = .82$ (see Figure 3).

To sum up, consistent with H5, the 2006–2019 decrease in references to class cleavage and to economy was more pronounced among those lowly (vs. highly) interested in politics, whereas the 2006−2019 increase in the reference to political leaders was more pronounced among the highly (vs. lowly) interested respondents.

Discussion

More than 10 years ago, BLINDED (2009a) concluded that in Italy, despite the radical changes that occurred in Italy between the “First Republic” and the “Second Republic”, the distinction between left and right was alive and well. Based on our results, we can conclude that, with the spread of populism and the transition to the so-called “Third Republic”, the social representations of left and right in politics remain

alive, but they are not very well, and it is likely that this declining trend will continue in the future, mainly in relation to their use in terms of traditional meanings.

Scholz and Zuell (2012), after observing variations (over time, across countries, or in relation to respondents' political involvement) in the meaning attributed to left and right in politics, stressed how these variations contributed to the enrichment of the meaning of left and right in politics and to the renewal of its persistent usefulness in terms of political heuristics. However, in contrast, and consistent with theorizations and research on how the complexity of the political scenario affects the content of left and right (e.g., Inglehart and Klingemann 1976), we showed that populist rhetoric has tinted the social representation of left and right. Consistent with our expectations, between 2006 and 2019, the traditional functions fulfilled by the left–right distinction for citizens, parties, and leaders underwent a significant decline.

In terms of the relevance and the understanding of left and right in politics, the data consistently documented the expected effect of the populist zeitgeist. As expected, respondents showed a significantly higher reluctance to place themselves on the left–right axis (i.e., relevance of the left-right distinction) and to express meanings for the left–right representation (i.e., its understanding). In terms of meaning given to left and right in politics, a progressive weakening of the references to the traditional semantic categories was also evident, especially to the more cultured and politically complex ones (e.g., ideology/values). However, while the more traditional ideological meanings significantly lost their importance, the novel populist meanings did not consistently increase their presence,. There were two exceptions in this picture: from 2006 to 2019, the attribution of meaning in terms of parties (a classic category) and leaders (a populist category) increased. This increase in the concreteness of the descriptions of left and right may signal the difficulty of resorting to the most cultured and politically complex

meanings at the very core of this distinction. Based on the theoretical framework that conceptualizes left and right in politics as social representations, previous studies performed before the populist zeitgeist (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; BLINDED 2009; Jost 2006) interpreted the observed changes as only affecting the peripheral elements of the social representation of left and right, while no effective change concerned their core elements. In contrast, our results suggested that in times of populism, a marked change is also occurring at the core of the left–right social representation: the space previously filled by the traditional concepts of the left–right dimension, on which electors can anchor their ideological orientations, is getting thinner. However, at the same time, this subtractive change is actually not followed by a subsequent increase of novel populist meanings (except for the less central category of "leaders"). This pattern of results demonstrates a growing difficulty in finding one's way and one's place in a changed political world, that may be due not only to the affirmation of the populist rhetoric, but also to the tendency of left and right parties to "depoliticize", coming closer on some of the questions at the heart of the left-right divide.

These results have been unlikely biased by context effects on participants' answers. Indeed, in both surveys the questions about the meaning of left and right were in the first part of the questionnaire, after a block of questions about economy and social attitudes in the 2006 survey and a block of questions about perceived economic situation in the 2019 survey. In the 2006 questionnaire there were not questions about populism; in the 2019 questionnaire the questions about populism were placed after the open-ended questions about the meaning of left and right in politics.

This study expands the scope of the previous research on this topic by also identifying the critical role that political interest plays in the changes we have analysed.

Our analysis showed that political interest influences the strength of the relationship between populism and ideological representations. The negative effect of populism on left-right relevance and understanding, indeed, was significantly more pronounced for lower interested participants

In reference to left–right meanings, our results stressed that the decline in the use of more cultured and politically complex traditional categories – such as class cleavage and economy – was less evident among the highly (vs. lowly) interested participants, confirming their political expertise in the tendency to avoid overtly simplified representations in a complex domain. In contrast, regarding the rise in the use of populist categories, the moderating role of political interest was not significant, except for the less politically complex category, the "leaders" category: in this case, the data show a flattening effect exerted by the populist zeitgeist, leading highly and lowly interested participants to use this category in a similar way. This comparison between people with high and low political interest definitely speaks in favour of a growing political bewilderment of the former.

The current study has some limitations that need acknowledgment. First, the two surveys we analysed were performed using different data collection techniques (face-to face the former and online the latter). The use of at least partially suboptimal data is typical of secondary analyses (e.g. Kiekholt and Nathan 1985). We believe that the positive features of our data stand above the negative ones. However, a replication of this study performed using samples extracted via the same method could be interesting. Second, the post-electoral datasets were collected after different electoral appointments: parliamentary elections in 2006 and European elections in 2019. According to the second-order elections theory (Reif and Schmitt 1980), it is possible that the 2019

second-order election was less salient than the 2006 parliamentary elections, activating the electorate less, in terms of turnout and in cognitive terms.

Third, the relations between the year of the data collection and our indicators of relevance, understanding, and meaning of left and right in politics were not very strong. However, consistent with Von Wright's (1971) principle of genuine explanations, the relevant level of semantic autonomy between the *explanans* and the *explanandum* speaks in favour of the relevance of our predictions. Fourth, it remains to be seen whether the weakening of relevance of left–right ideological representations we have detected is a distinctive feature of the Italian specific political dynamics or whether is a general empirical fact that could be extended to other countries currently experiencing the same populist zeitgeist. Indeed, the presence of the FSM represents a very peculiar case of post-ideological populism, and Italy is often considered a "laboratory of populism" and a privileged observatory for the analysis of different types and forms of populism (Blokker and Anselmi 2019). A replication of this research performed in other contexts could be interesting.

Beyond its limitations, this study had some strong points, mainly as concerns its methods. First, it was performed on two wide quota samples of the Italian population. Probabilistic samples are preferable to non-probabilistic samples. However, typical surveys of the general population are performed using quota samples (Pavía and Aybar 2018), as it happened in this study. Most importantly, social representation studies are typically performed using convenience samples. Thus, our results are much more generalizable than usual. Another strong point of this research was its diachronic approach, which allowed us to analyse the evolution of the social representations of left and right in correspondence to relevant political changes. Finally, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of literature on populism. Much of the research is focused on

the measurement of populism (e.g., Hammeelers and de Vreese 2018; Schulz et al. 2018; Wettstein et al. 2020) and on its causes (e.g., Bornschier 2019; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In this study, we used populism as a cause, and not as an effect of other social-psychological phenomena (e.g. perceived economic or cultural threat). This helped in analysing a facet of populism that is still under-investigated, and that could be the focus of new research aimed at a better understanding of its nature and consequences.

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Appendix: Variables used in the analyses

In politics, people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

Left										Right	I do not	I don’t
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	place myself 11	know 12

What do you mean with “right” in politics? (open question)

And what do you mean with “left” in politics? (open question)

How interested would you say you are in politics?

Very interested

Quite interested

Hardly interested

Not at all interested

Tables and figures

Table 1. Classification of the responses to the open-ended questions of the meaning of left and right in politics

Semantic areas	Examples of terms referred to in the responses	
	Left	Right
Traditional categories		
Ideology/values	Social justice	Capitalist ideology
Class cleavage	Those who defend the workers	Those who favour the entrepreneurs
Economy	State control	Opportunities for companies
Parties	Names of specific parties (e.g., Democratic Party)	Name of specific parties (e.g., Fratelli d'Italia)
Populist categories		
Leaders	Names of specific politicians (e.g., Prodi)	Names of specific politicians (e.g., Salvini)
Overcoming of left and right in politics	Ideology that does not exist anymore	They are not here anymore
Cleavage between the people and the élite	In origin they were in favour of the people, but now they pursue their own interest	For the people against the lobbies
People as a virtuous and/or homogeneous entity	Those caring for the people needs	Italians first
Elite	The caste and the great power	The interest of the lobbies and Confindustria

Table 2. Relevance of left and right in politics: Participants who placed and did not place themselves on the left-right axis. 2006-2019

	2006	2019	Significance of the association
Participant who did not place themselves on the left-right axis	16.3% (224)	26.5% (399)	$\chi^2(1) = 35.50$; $p < .001$
Participant who placed themselves on the left-right axis	83.7% (1,152)	73.5% (1,105)	
N	1,376	1,504	

Note. In the cells the column percentage and the observed frequency are reported.

Table 3. Prediction of the relevance and understanding of left and right in politics, 2006-2019

	Relevance				Understanding			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)
Education	.05*** (.01)	1.05	.04*** (.01)	1.04	.06*** (.01)	1.07	.07*** (.01)	1.07
Year of the survey: 2019	-.49*** (.06)	.61	-.55*** (.06)	.58	-.22*** (.05)	.80	-.18*** (.05)	.83
Political interest	2.25*** (.19)	9.52	2.33*** (.19)	10.31	1.89*** (.18)	1.97	1.93*** (.18)	6.86
Year of the survey: 2019 * Political interest			-.46*** (.19)	.63			-.54*** (.17)	1.72
Constant	.94*** (.17)	2.56	3.12*** (.33)	22.62	.48** (.16)	1.61	.40* (.16)	1.49
Nagelkerke's pseudo r-square	.11		.11		.10		.10	
AIC	2765.84		2762.18		3010.11		3002.23	

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Understanding of left and right in politics: Respondents who answered about the meaning vs. respondents who did not answer. 2006-2019

	2006	2019	Significance of the association
Participant who did not answer both open-ended questions on the meaning of left and right	22.9% (315)	26.1% (393)	$\chi^2(1) = 3.18$. $p = .074$
Participant who answered at last to one of the open-ended questions	77.1% (1,061)	73.9% (1,111)	
N	1,376	1,504	

Note. In the cells the column percentage and the observed frequency are reported.

Table 5. Meaning of left and right in politics, 2006-2019

	2006	2019	Significance of the association
Ideology/values	46.7% (643)	41.2% (620)	$\chi^2(1) = 7.57$; $p = .006$
Class cleavage	20.8% (286)	10.4% (156)	$\chi^2(1) = 47.07$; $p < .001$
Economy	11.6% (160)	6.6% (99)	$\chi^2(1) = 18.19$; $p < .001$
Parties	7.6% (105)	16.3% (245)	$\chi^2(1) = 40.63$; $p < .001$
Leaders	4.5% (62)	6.5% (98)	$\chi^2(1) = 4.62$; $p = .031$
They do not have sense	1.0% (14)	4.4% (66)	$\chi^2(1) = 21.46$; $p < .001$
Cleavage between the people and the élite	1.8% (25)	1.0% (15)	$\chi^2(1) = 2.88$; $p = .090$
People as a virtuous and homogeneous entity	6.1% (84)	5.5% (83)	$\chi^2(1) = .30$; $p = .581$
Elite	1.2% (17)	.6% (9)	$\chi^2(1) = 1.63$; $p = .202$
N	1,377	1,504	

Note. To save space, for each row, we report the number of participants who used references to that category. The χ^2 statistics have been computed for each of the 2*2 tables crossing having vs. not having made reference to that category and the year of the survey. The column percentage and the observed frequency are reported.

Table 6. Prediction of the meaning given to left and right in politics: Traditional semantic categories

	Ideology/values				Class cleavage				Economy				Parties			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)
Education	.08*** (.01)	1.08	.08*** (.01)	1.08	-.02 (.02)	.98	-.02 (.02)	.99	.06** (.02)	1.06	.07*** (.02)	.06*** (.02)	-.02 (.17)	.98	-.02 (.02)	.98
Year of the survey: 2019	-.21*** (.04)	.81	-21*** (.04)	.81	-.45*** (.06)	.64	-.50*** (.07)	.60	-.36*** (.07)	.70	-.42*** (.08)	.66	.43*** (.07)	1.54	.43*** (.07)	1.53
Political interest	1.46*** (.15)	4.32	1.46*** (.15)	4.32	.77*** (.18)	2.17	.99*** (.21)	2.70	.86*** (.24)	2.37	1.02**** (.26)	2.78	.04 (.22)	1.04	.10 (.22)	1.11
Year of the survey: 2019 * Political interest			.00 (.15)	1.00			.59** (.21)	1.81			.61* (.25)	1.85			-.26 (.22)	.77
Constant	-1.17*** (.14)	.31	-1.17 (.14)	.31	-1.54*** (.18)	.22	-1.65*** (.19)	.19	-3.11*** (.25)	.05	-3.23*** (.25)	.04	-1.82 (.21)	.16	-1.78*** (.21)	.17
Nagelkerke's pseudo r-square	.09		.09		.05		.05		.05		.03		.02		.03	
AIC	3755.23		3753.23		2403.14		2396.67		1678.10		1674.15		2079.89		2080.47	

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 7. Prediction of the meaning given to left and right in politics: Populist categories

	Leaders				They do not have sense				Cleavage between the people and the elite				People as virtuous and homogeneous entity				Elite			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)	*B* (*SE*)	Exp(*B*)
Education	-.05* (.02)	.95	-.05 (.03)	.96	.02 (.03)	1.02	.03 (.03)	1.03	.05 (.05)	1.05	.05 (.05)	1.05	-.01 (.02)	.99	-.01 (02)	.99	.03 (.06)	1.03	.04 (.06)	1.04
Year of the survey: 2019	.25** (.10)	1.29	.33** (.11)	1.39	.75*** (.16)	2.12	.84*** (.19)	2.32	-.33 (.18)	.72	-.45* (.21)	.64	-.08 (.09)	.93	-.09 (.09)	.91	-32* (.22)	.73	-.47 (.27)	.62
Political interest	-.72* (.32)	.49	-.84*** (.34)	.43	-.33 (.43)	.72	-.83 (.57)	.44	.65 (.59)	1.91	.98 (.64)	2.67	.48 (.30)	1.62	.52 (.30)	1.68	.71 (.73)	2.04	1.14 (.81)	3.12
Year of the survey: 2019 * Political interest			1.03** (.33)	2.79			.80 (.56)	2.22			1.08 (.63)	2.94			-.27 (.29)	1.30			1.33 (.79)	3.78
Constant	-2.31*** (.29)	.10	-2.52*** (.32)	.08	-4.11*** (.44)	.02	-4.27*** (.46)	.01	-4.84*** (.59)	.01	-5.08*** (.61)	.01	-2.63*** (.28)	.07	-2.68*** (.29)	.07	-5.07*** (.72)	.01	-5.39*** (.75)	.01
Nagelkerke's pseudo r-square	.01		.03		.05		.06		.01		.02		.00		.00		.01		.02	
AIC	1206.62		1198.22		717.31		717.17		424.83		423.73		1279.58		1280.75		301.77		300.76	

Figure 1. Relevance of the left-right dimension as a function of the year of data collection respondents' interest in politics

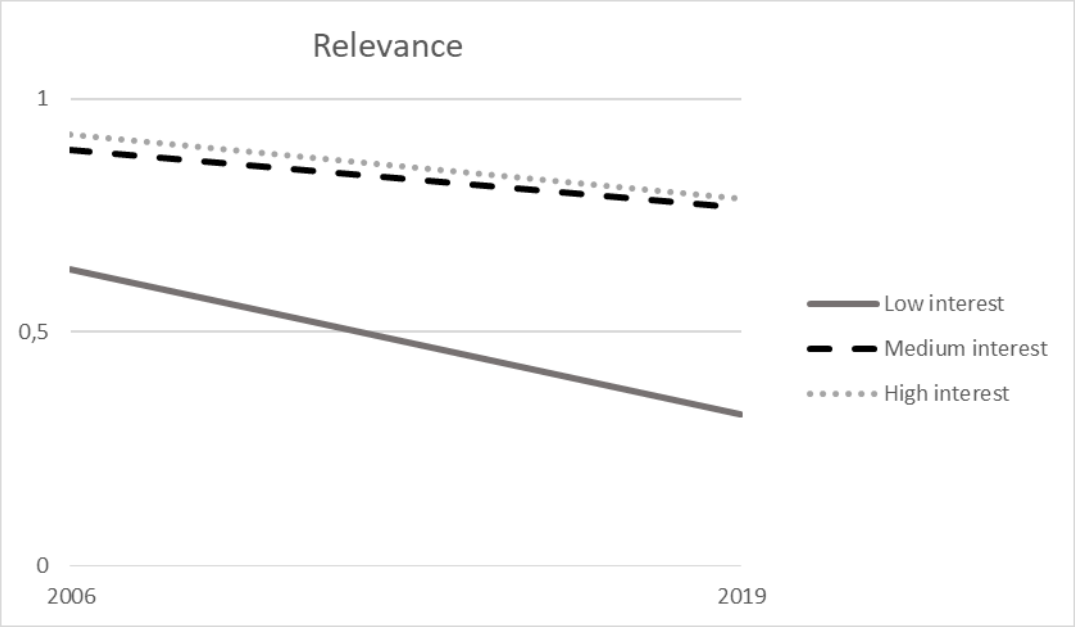

Figure 2. Understanding of left and right in politics as a function of the year of data collection respondents' interest in politics

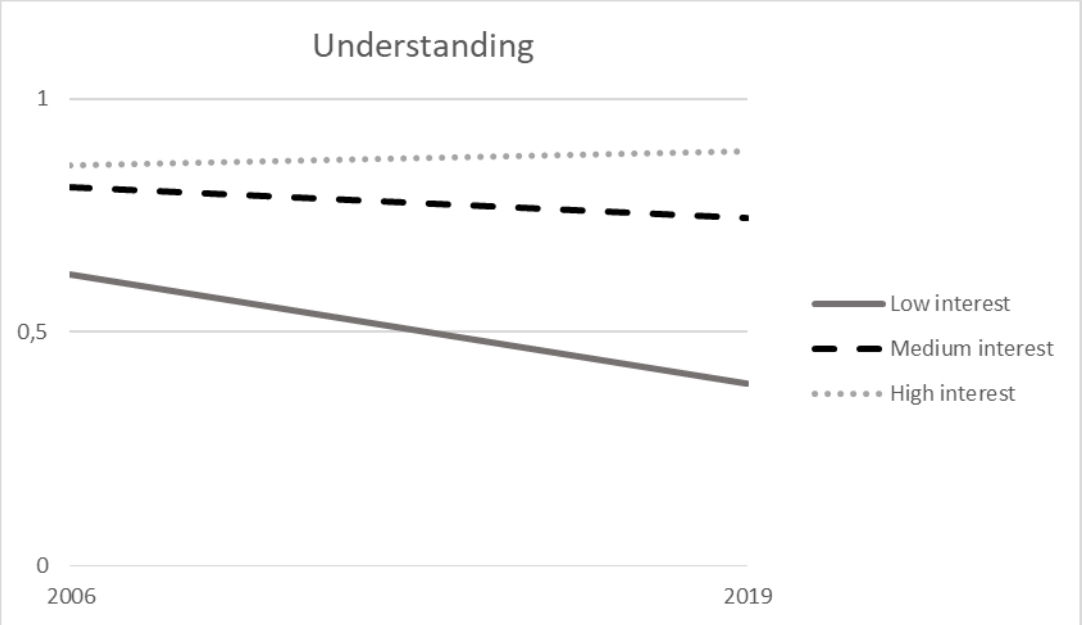
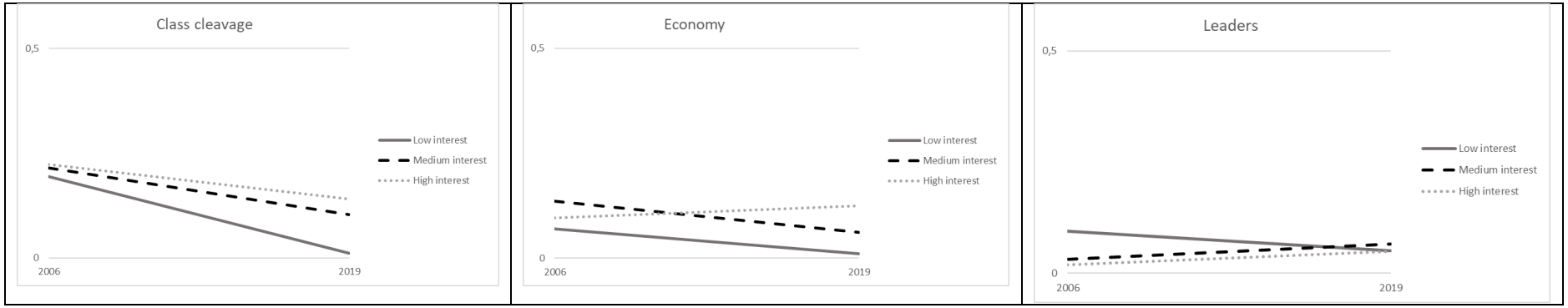
Figure 3. Reference to class cleavage, economy and leaders as a function of the year of data collection respondents' interest in politics