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Bread or Circuses? Repoliticization in the Italian Populist Government Experience

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Abstract

The majority view within political science is that populism is best understood as a (thin) ideology. We problematize the ideational approach by broadening the scope of analysis, linking populism to the rise of long-term generalized anti-political sentiments, against interpretations that tend to tie the populist wave to conjunctural factors related to recent crises. We argue that the essence of populism lies at the intersection of the ‘material constitution’ of advanced industrial democracies (that is, how macroeconomic governance relates to democratic decision-making) and the feelings of societal alienation that are at the heart of anti-political sentiments. We show the peculiar coexistence of economic turbulence, heralded by the crisis of the cartel party and of the neoliberal economic consensus, and an appeal to a post-democratic ‘virtual politics’ of performed but ineffectual popular sovereignty. The policies of the populist coalition governing Italy in 2018–19 provide a key case to test the relevance of our arguments.

Keywords: anti-politics; depoliticization/repoliticization; virtual politics; democracy

Fifteen years ago, Cas Mudde wrote a very influential article in *Government and Opposition* – by far the most cited in this journal to date – outlining the emergence of a ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004). Is it now time to move on from definitional debates on populism and to acquiesce in the emerging consensus (Rooduijn 2019) over the ideational approach Mudde proposed in that article, which defines populism as a ‘thin ideology’ that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’? Conversely, is populism a product of conjunctural factors, chief among which are the global financial crisis and the refugee crisis, and therefore destined to make news only as long as these particular shocks keep rippling through European politics? In the 2019 Schapiro Lecture, Mudde himself, revisiting his work, reckoned that since his 2004 article too little attention has been devoted to how populism can thrive by reversing dynamics of depoliticization, which have spread in Western societies, especially over the past two to three decades. In this article, we focus on how populist parties gain credibility in the eyes of frustrated voters,

unsatisfied by the unwillingness and/or inability of traditional parties to provide concrete solutions for their problems. We combine a comparative analysis with an in-depth focus on Italy, a country recently hit by a ‘populist storm’. To do so, we focus on the importance of a longer-term phenomenon, anti-political sentiment, which has been with democratic politics for a very long time, but which has generated a dramatic form of repoliticization.

Our purpose in this article is to suggest that a focus on anti-politics narrows down the topics of concern. Hence, we attempt to recentre the theoretical debate on populism on two recent, paradigmatic accounts that give contradicting answers to the key question emerging from this redefinition of the topic: when populists promise to tackle the ills that have fuelled anti-politics, are they promising a different economic policy or a different style of politics? Bread or circuses (or perhaps both)?

In answering these questions, we claim that the burgeoning literature on populism has not paid sufficient attention to important contributions on more historically grounded related issues such as depoliticization (Orsina 2018; Wood and Flinders 2014) and the cyclical nature of the crises – and current dysfunctionality – of democracy (Jones 2019). Theoretically, we show that the recent surge of populism can be interpreted, especially in Europe, as a case of repoliticization (Brubaker 2017) of important issues that had been depoliticized in recent decades (especially, though not exclusively, as a result of the European integration process). Empirically, we identify the recent emergence of a ‘populist coalition’ in Italy in 2018 as an ideal case in which to highlight the significance of the repoliticization process promoted by the two governing parties, the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, henceforth M5S) and the League (Lega).

In Italy we see the continued salience of all the factors commonly associated with the success of populism in Western Europe, namely, immigration, regional identity, corruption and Euroscepticism (Taggart 2017). In this article we evaluate whether and in what way the populist coalition government presented a challenge to neoliberalism. As other scholars, on the other hand, tend to insist on the notion of symbolic politics leading to the creation of collective identities as the fundamental essence of populism, we explore non-economic policies of the first government led by Giuseppe Conte (June 2018–August 2019) with strong symbolic valence for the two coalition partners.

The article is divided into four sections. The next section identifies the links between populism, anti-politics and the dynamics of de/repoliticization. Our main argument is set forth in the following section, where we describe the pre-conditions of populist politics in Europe as an adjustment prompted by broad shifts in political economy and in collective mentalities. We describe two alternative paths for populism, on the basis of whether the repoliticization concerns material interests or symbolic politics, and we reflect on the stakes of these alternatives for the future of European party systems and government institutions. We then turn to the complex interplay between populism, anti-politics and the questions of de- and repoliticization. Interestingly, we find that in Italy both forms of repoliticization of voter grievances expressing anti-political (and anti-establishment) stances have been advanced by the allied parties. The final section concludes the discussion by reiterating the advantages of our long-term, anti-political approach to populism.

Research on populism, anti-politics and de/repoliticization

Research on populism has skyrocketed in recent years. However, as Matthijs Rooduijn (2019: 6) underlines, ‘one of the main problems of contemporary populism research is that it remains too detached from adjacent literatures’, using the example of the literature on ‘anti-political establishment’ parties. Research on anti-politics (Clarke et al. 2018; Mete 2010; Vines and Marsh 2017) and depoliticization (Wood and Flinders 2014) offers important arguments on how populism can thrive by mobilizing dissatisfied voters (Brubaker 2017). The majority view within the literature is that most populist parties are also anti-political. While this is generally true, one cannot forget that: ‘Their action is anti-political when it is expressed in pure forms of protest, but every time they act in the arena of institutionalised competition, starting from participation in the elections, it becomes purely political action, even if it is explicitly oriented against the establishment’ (Tarchi 2013: 129).

Politicization can be defined as ‘the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political’ (Zürn 2019: 977–978). Michael Zürn also stresses the importance of connecting the literature on politicization across three main levels – national, European and global. At the national level, depoliticization began in the 1960s, and most scholars view it negatively (Wood and Flinders 2014). On the contrary, for the European level the recent politicization follows the transition from a ‘permissive consensus’ to a ‘restraining dissensus’ among European electorates in the early 1990s, a worrying sign of discontent. In Europe, repoliticization aims to solve the key tension identified in the classic work of Peter Mair (2014) driving the crisis of established parties, namely the excessive skew towards responsibility at the expense of responsiveness, captured by the prevalence of supra-national financial imperatives over priorities expressed by national electorates.

Rogers Brubaker (2017) suggests deconstructing the populist wave into a series of structural transformations (a crisis of institutional mediation, the rise of protectionist politics) that set the stage for a specific, exogenously triggered situational shock, in which populist repertoires can be activated by political entrepreneurs to decisive effect. He introduces ‘antagonistic re-politicization’ as ‘the claim to reassert democratic political control over domains of life that are seen, plausibly enough, as having been depoliticized and de-democratized, that is, removed from the realm of democratic decision-making’ (Brubaker 2017: 364).

This point is particularly important for Italy, where ‘politicians made great efforts to explain the economic advantages of tying one’s hands, embracing European integration as a *vincolo esterno* or external constraint’ (Jones 2019: 87). With the emergence of the crisis, the Italian electorate turned Eurosceptic, displaying the greatest swing among all EU member states in net reported attachment to the EU between spring 2007 and spring 2017 (Baldini and Giglioli 2019: 8). While this element is noteworthy, we should not conclude that the combined success of the M5S and Lega is entirely contingent on the crisis. As we show below, the two winning parties of the 2018 election, while sharing anti-euro attitudes and slogans, successfully activated anti-political sentiments which were embedded in the political system.

If political issues appeared particularly important in the eyes of M5S voters (Corbetta et al. 2018), when compared with the electorates of other countries

that voted in 2017 (Germany, France, the UK, the Netherlands and Austria), Italian voters were concerned not just about unemployment, but also about corruption and the costs of politics (Emanuele and De Sio 2018).

In comparative West European perspective, Italy's recent outburst of populism can be usefully analysed on a broader scale, pointing to the multiple long-term dynamics that have made its political system peculiarly prone to crisis and the periodic emergence of anti-establishment forces (see also Clarke et al. 2018). Hence, our contribution, while being inspired by many of the insights present in the literature, analyses the state of European populism from a different angle: it focuses on the broad, epochal changes outside of politics proper that have made populism possible, specifically through the welling up of long-present reservoirs of anti-political sentiment deep in the body politic.

Repoliticizing: interests or identity?

We claim that contemporary populism is best understood as a fundamental systemic shift in the political systems of European countries, an embodiment of long-term trends of anti-political sentiment. Hence, it can be seen as an adjustment of the political sphere (as the weaker, dependent variable) to deep changes both in the political economy of the continent and in collective mindsets. In this section, we begin by sketching what we take these deep changes to be, referring to various strands in social science literature. Next, we discuss two prominent new characterizations of populism (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019; Hopkin and Blyth 2019) that share our theoretical focus on broad-based, long-term change, while reaching two different sets of conclusions regarding the goals of populist political action and the nature of the threat that populism presents to the status quo. We further argue that in order to adjudicate between these two hypotheses it is useful to think of populism in terms of dynamics of depoliticization and repoliticization, and of the stakes of such a process in terms of the old concept of material constitution (Mortati 1998 [1940]).¹ On this basis, we conclude that we can understand the variations within populism, across countries and political actors, as different instances of repoliticization: how much they impinge on the material constitution depends on local circumstances.

The starting point for such an analysis is the development of widespread social atomization in many European societies over the past generation, linked to the crisis of many traditional institutions of social integration and cohesion (unions, churches, political parties) and the destructuring of the labour market and the work–leisure balance wrought by post-Fordism. The new economic normal (high unemployment, stagnating mean wages, anaemic growth) has led to a generalized crisis of credibility of the European social model. The loss of faith in the ability of governments to improve standards of living has also engendered a more general distrust of authority and of the role of political power. The end of social and political deference as a stabilizing factor in social relations has dovetailed with a backlash against all manner of technical and scientific expertise (Nichols 2017). Concurrently, the increasing diversity of European politics and the rise of multiculturalism have challenged traditional bases of pre-political solidarity. The social uniformity that constituted the background of modernist projects of large-scale

political transformation has largely evaporated. It is in this broad social context that anti-political sentiment is no longer constrained by traditional countervailing forces, and collective mentalities present a fertile ground for the development of populist political projects.

To sum up, we conceive of populism as a change in the sphere of democratic decision-making that absorbs the shocks to these two other spheres, the underlying material constitution of the European political economy and the feelings of restlessness, grievance, suspicion of authority and social alienation diffusing through the body politic and public mentalities. What is crucial to a thorough understanding of the populist phenomenon, however, is how this new political construct takes on the problems that gave rise to it. In recent contributions to the theoretical debate on populism that adopt our perspective of a long-term shift, two approaches appear to us to embody the polar opposites in the dilemma to which our title refers: is populism ultimately about bread – that is, redistributive issues and an attack on the political economy status quo – or is it essentially about circuses – that is, symbolic issues that reshape collective identity while largely bypassing material concerns?

The first position is persuasively argued by Jonathan Hopkin and Mark Blyth (2019) in an article for *Government and Opposition*, itself a restatement of the Leonard Schapiro Lecture of 2017. The two authors take a straight political economy approach to contemporary European populism: they interpret it as a result of the fraying of the neoliberal economic consensus upheld by the cartel party model of political organization, ascendant since the 1980s–1990s, since the global financial crisis. The most important implication of this approach is a sidestepping of much of the debate on the illiberal nature of populism: beyond the political theatre and folklore, the authors claim, representative democracy is doing just what it is supposed to do, that is, express the interests of social groups. The real risk of populism, rather, is the challenge it brings to the economic status quo, considering the degree of disruption that would be required in order to modify the basic tenets of the neoliberal regime.

One may quibble with the empirical evidence on which Hopkin and Blyth build their case (for instance, in the coding of populist parties on the left–right dimension), and the authors themselves recognize that their interpretation does not apply seamlessly to all national cases (France and Italy being the most ambiguous), but their overall theoretical point is of considerable interest.

Within this framework, a fairly clear prediction emerges for the political trajectory of populism: if populist movements represent the material interests and aspirations of social strata menaced by neoliberalism, it is reasonable to assume that if they take power the policies they promote will eventually come up against the constraints of what we have described as the material constitution of European political economy. If they do not, these populist actors will be outflanked by even more pugnacious challenger parties who will promise greater purity of intent. The outcome of this ‘crossing of red lines’, hence ultimately the fate of the neoliberal regime, cannot be confidently forecast, but it does not seem outlandish to claim that the clash would engender significant economic turbulence and potentially macro events such as output crashes, crises of confidence or debt defaults. Therefore, the greatest threat to the viability of populist politics would take the form of capital mobility and the current configuration of the international economy.

In many ways the opposite position to Hopkin and Blyth's was articulated by Ingolfur Blühdorn and Felix Butzlaff (2019) in a recent article for the *European Journal of Social Theory*. Whereas Hopkin and Blyth focus on political economy, Blühdorn and Butzlaff are mainly interested in communicative processes and the discursive constitution of collective identity. They interpret populism as a reaction to the 'emptying out' of democracy in contemporary societies, and thus as an attempt to reassert the sovereignty of the people; however, such sovereignty cannot be exercised in fact, and therefore can only live a virtual existence, as a representation that merely mimics actual subjectivity. Specifically, populism does not and cannot induce change in the established socioeconomic order: it does not threaten the material constitution of political economy. What it *does* threaten are the norms and standards of liberal representative democracy, but only to the extent that populists recognize and explicitly embrace a fact that is implicit in all contemporary political activity – that is, that the abstract normative model of liberalism is hopelessly out of reach in the context of late modernity.

Blühdorn and Butzlaff's argument goes to the heart of the debate regarding democratic deconsolidation. Specifically, it poses the question of deconsolidation in the context of a broader analysis of the underlying state of health of actually existing liberal democracy, even in the absence of any populist challenge. If liberal democracy is receding from its normative ideal as the consequence of structural conditions inherent in late modernity – conditions to do with the constitution of the late modern subject as much as with neoliberalism – then populism can hardly be demonized for pointing out that the emperor's new clothes do not, in fact, exist. On the other hand, if this transformation does not herald a transition to a new, undemocratic competing political regime, if in other words there is no question of an alternative, populism is an internal challenge to democracy (Arditi 2004; Canovan 2004) – that is, it is simply the contemporary form politics takes once we have passed 'peak democracy' – and such a configuration is stable, at least for the time being.

Consequently, if populism represents a mutation of democratic practice that is stable, in that it does not tackle key elements of the status quo, the prediction emerging from Blühdorn and Butzlaff's argument regarding the outcomes of populism is a form of cyclical recurrence, a populist churn (Stanley 2017) in which the actors change but the basic script of the show does not. If what populism accomplishes is a virtual politics of performed popular sovereignty, intrinsic in its 'show business' logic is a periodic change in the actors and stunts, which nonetheless has no tangible effect on the social function of the performance itself. By the same logic, the main countervailing force to this self-propagation of populism, the main threat to its viability, would be the need for checks on illiberalism mandated by the proper functioning of the underlying political economy structure. Such checks, in turn, could be voiced, for instance, by supranational institutions. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the two outlooks.

The common trait of these interpretations of populism is that they centre around a repoliticization of certain topics, cleavages or policies that had previously been marginalized in establishment political discourse. Such repoliticization is necessarily antagonistic (Brubaker 2017), is presented as iconoclastic and invariably elicits accusations of irresponsibility from populism's adversaries. With regard to our

Table 1. Two Perspectives on Populism

	Hopkin and Blyth (2019)	Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2019)
Stakes	Economy, not democracy	Liberalism, not economy
Sphere	Political economy	Symbolic politics
Manifestation of populism	Challenge to neoliberal policy consensus	Redefinition and performance of national identity
Prediction	Economic turbulence	Populist churn
Threat to populism	Capital mobility	Supranational institutions

dichotomy of bread or circuses, however, what matters is whether the site of these populist repoliticizations is an issue area that touches upon key elements of the material constitution or not: in other words, whether the target of the iconoclastic ire is actually a vital interest or if the payoff of populism is simply the performance of taboo-breaking for its own sake. This, in turn, amounts to asking how revolutionary populism actually is in practice. Put another way, the question is whether populism demands sacrifices only of stigmatized minorities, delegitimized elites and shadowy foreign interests, or also of the components of the People in whose name populists operate. How viable such a political path is, how compatible with a rhetoric of outrage and its anti-political wellspring, remains to be determined.

How populists repoliticize: insights from the Italian case

In 2018, the Italian electorate turned its back on the mainstream parties that had governed hitherto. The main losers were Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Democratic Party (PD). The verdict was particularly harsh for former prime minister Matteo Renzi, who had won an extraordinary 40% in the 2014 European Parliament election by adopting a populist style and rhetoric. But if Renzi had many traits of a populist leader, at least his populism (much like Berlusconi's) was played inside the perimeter of the establishment, without explicitly challenging the neoliberal consensus.

The 2018 populist wave can be interpreted as the belated, and therefore magnified, consequence of the path Italy took through the global financial crisis. When compared with other Southern European countries, Italy over the past decade presents interesting peculiarities. After winning a bipolar election in 2008, Berlusconi was compelled to resign following the sovereign debt crisis and make way for the technocratic government of Mario Monti in 2011, in a pattern similar to Greece. However, the country did not experience the sort of massive, disruptive macro-economic shock seen elsewhere: wages stagnated, GDP fell, unemployment soared, but there was no default, no international bailout, no conditionality, no imposed dismantling of the welfare state as witnessed in other countries (Branco et al. 2019 speak of 'implicit conditionality'). Hence, the realignment which took place in the 2013 election (in which the M5S was the most-voted-for party with 25.6%), which was triggered as much by an anti-austerity reaction as by a revolt against the establishment, failed to produce any macroscopic consequences on

government formation or public policy. When Renzi tried to reform the constitution by reducing the political system's veto points 'the Italian electorate was deeply disenchanted with the whole political process [and ...] did not buy into the dream of a more effective political process' (Jones and Matthijs 2017: 201).

The 2018 elections represented the final blowback against Renzi's brand of internal challenge to the political status quo. However, Italy had been considered a laboratory of populism long before the emergence of the recent crises (Mény and Surel 2000; Tarchi 2015). After the 2018 election, Italy acquired a paradigmatic significance at the international level. In endorsing Matteo Salvini, the Lega's leader, Stephen K. Bannon, erstwhile assistant to US President Donald Trump, said: 'You are the first guys who can really break the left and right paradigm. You can show that populism is the new organizing principle' (Horowitz 2018). But if, in Bannon's way of thinking, Italian populism is a trailblazer, its current manifestation also appears to differ from other European instances in three main ways. First, Italy has already in recent times undergone surges of populism, especially after Berlusconi's entry into politics 25 years ago. Second, the 2018 election saw the victory of two very different forms of populism, much more diverse than Forza Italia and the Northern League had been in the governments Berlusconi led. Finally, the socioeconomic and cultural context in which the Conte government was born was distinctive in being marked by a deep democratic malaise (Corbetta et al. 2018).

Background

More particularly, we can distinguish between long-term (dating from the period of democratic consolidation in the aftermath of the Second World War and the ensuing First Republic, and in some ways even from the birth of the unified Italian polity, 80 years previously), medium-term (referring to the peculiar 'critical juncture' experienced in the problematic transition towards a Second Republic) and short-term factors, which can be located in the peculiarly toxic mix of economic and migration crises of the last decade. Since its period of democratic consolidation, Italy has suffered from low levels of systemic legitimacy, the presence of strong anti-systemic parties (Sartori 1976), a low propensity to mutually recognize the legitimacy of political adversaries (Orsina 2018) and, last but not least, record levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Morlino and Tarchi 1996). Already in the late 1940s, the Common Man's Front of Guglielmo Giannini was the forerunner of European populism (Taggart 2017), becoming a source of inspiration for *poujadisme* in France a few years later, and long pre-dating the emergence of a populist zeitgeist in contemporary societies (Mudde 2004). The event that decisively set Italian political culture apart from other European countries, however, was the systemic crisis of the early 1990s, in which corruption investigations toppled the hitherto dominant political class in its entirety. Out of this crisis, a new phase of Italian politics emerged, in which the possibility of alternation in power in a bipolar configuration was decisively influenced by the novelty of Silvio Berlusconi's entry into politics. Therefore, extreme personalization and entrepreneurial politics were balanced by recurrent instances of technocratic government and other anti-majoritarian influences: the courts, the presidency of the Republic and, crucially, the European level.

What this historical flashback shows us is that, if in 2018 Italy demonstrated the presence of all the elements of Brubaker's (2017) populist repertoire (extreme majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, protectionism, 'low style'), each of these already had an independent history in Italian political culture and was thus not tied to a particular, contingent populist crisis. Hence, in 2018, not only was populism expressed in all its forms in the Italian electoral scene, it was also offered in 'specialized' varieties, insisting on one or the other of its constitutive elements.

The parties and the strange alliance

Lega and the M5S represent two different varieties of populism. Populism often appears associated with a host ideology (Mudde 2004). While the Lega is a nativist party, the M5S appears to lack a host ideology, a point substantiated by the ease with which it changed coalition partners (the PD in the Conte II government) after Salvini brought down the populist coalition experiment in the summer of 2019. The key point to underline here is that M5S and Lega were able to form a government after fighting the election as adversaries thanks to two elements: the 'glue' provided by their anti-EU ideological 'connection' (Valbruzzi 2018: 471) and a government 'contract'. As we show below, the latter allowed the M5S especially to face the test of government by balancing the repoliticization of economic issues with the depoliticization ingrained in its culture of 'legalism' (Corso 2019). True, the two parties had not shared a precise anti-EU platform. However, they both expressed a strong hostility to anti-austerity measures and to the single currency; a brief comparison highlights the complementary nature of their populist appeal, focused on cultural elements (immigration and nativism) for the League and on more redistributive aspects for the M5S.

The League is the successor to the Northern League, itself the oldest extant Italian party, having been formed as a coalition of regionalist Leagues in 1989–91. The party's rebranding as League (Lega) at the end of 2017 was an initiative of Salvini's. Since 2013, under Salvini's extremely personalized leadership, the party had morphed from a regionalist (and once secessionist) force into a nationalist, radical right profile, strengthening its nativist focus on security and hostility to immigration (Albertazzi et al. 2018).

The profile of the M5S is more eclectic (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). While in opposition, the party stressed the political elements of populism, emphasizing disintermediation, transparency and the fight against corruption, but also challenging the PD on how to tackle poverty (via a 'citizenship income' proposal, as discussed below). In its first five years in parliament (2013–18), dozens of dissidents were expelled from the parliamentary party. The introduction of a binding mandate for MPs, a two-term limit for all party representative offices and new binding citizen-initiated referendums were, together with the reduction of the size of parliament, other key programmatic elements.

When compared with Salvini, however, M5S's leader Luigi Di Maio looked weaker and less in control of his party. There were two main reasons: the presence of other important leaders, in line with a more diverse ideological inspiration and less pronounced personal leadership, and the peculiar organization of the party, de facto supervised by a duopoly of founder Beppe Grillo and the private consulting

firm of the party's co-founder, Casaleggio Associati. The latter controls the online platform – significantly called 'Rousseau' – used periodically to consult its rank and file. Although online voting is strictly top-down managed, the League had nothing similar. Finally, analysing the profile of the voters, it has been found that 'Lega voters are clearly distinguishable from others for their higher cultural disorientation', while M5S voters are not characterized by perceived economic hardship (or by cultural disorientation), but by higher political discontent (Corbetta et al. 2018: 289).

In a nutshell, Salvini's Lega, despite having scored much worse than the M5S (17.3% as against 32.7%), appeared less constrained in its action. If all populist parties, which claim to stand on the side of the people vs. the elites, face huge challenges in moving to government (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016), in 2018 the plight of the M5S was objectively more severe, considering it was also in its debut in executive office.

The first Conte government: constraints and policies

The Conte government had a particular mix of populism and technocracy. Crucially, the government contract guaranteed 'the signatories' mutual acceptance of autonomous, parallel, action in pursuit of their separate agendas' (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019: 5). In their challenge to the traditional principles of party government, populism and technocracy are inspired in theory by opposite principles: will (of the people) vs. reason (Caramani 2017). In practice, as Caramani explains, they can exhibit several similarities, among which the denial of any accountability mechanism and the unmediated relationship between the people and the elite (Caramani 2017) are interesting for our purposes.

Conte was himself a technocrat, close to the M5S but not a member of parliament. Moreover, other key portfolios were given to other non-partisan members (beginning with the minister of economy and finance, Giovanni Tria), thus reinforcing the idea of a third 'institutional leg' of the government (Cotta 2019) – beside the two of the parties in coalition – on a 'Rome–Brussels' axis between the president of the Republic Sergio Mattarella and the EU Commission.

In implementing their policies, the two parties, however, faced significant constraints other than the 'third leg'. The first problems appeared during the long government formation and negotiation phase, in which the two parties had to abandon a (leaked) first version of the agreement which referred to the possibility of an 'Italexit'. Then, the formation of the government was delayed by the refusal of President Mattarella to approve the nomination of Paolo Savona – an anti-euro economist – as the new economy and finance minister. The most significant constraints, however, came from the supervision of the European Commission (Codogno and Merler 2019; Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). Technocracy therefore did not take the form the M5S had intended (i.e. a progressive strengthening of digital democracy in which citizens could vote on all dossiers, thus sidelining parliament), but rather came from the fact that Conte, together with Tria and Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi formed a non-partisan axis that was increasingly perceived as 'a bridge to the European institutions and a guarantee of constructive Italian engagement within them' (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019: 6).

Hence, in analysing policies, our queries are essentially aimed in three directions. First, at the highest level of generality, we wish to know whether the flagship policies effected by the Conte government allow us in any way to adjudicate between the two different interpretations of populism discussed in the first section: was the populism of the Italian populist coalition government mainly about bread or about circuses? Second, descending to the level of political ownership of the policies by the two coalition partners, we seek to determine how these policies help differentiate the types of populism embodied by the two governmental parties: in what way do the League and the M5S represent different populisms? Finally, when considering the internal and external constraints faced by the Conte government, we aim to spell out the role played by technocratic forces and by coalition dynamics in shaping the policies: how did Italian populism fare in its encounter with governmental responsibilities?

In order to address these research questions, we present evidence in the form of qualitative case studies of a few key policies of the Conte government. With regard to economic policy, we discuss the roll-out of two major initiatives, the *reddito di cittadinanza* (an anti-poverty measure taking the form of income support) and the *quota 100* (a lowering of the pension age to 62 for those with at least 38 years of contributions); further, we analyse immigration and three projects for constitutional reform (the introduction of citizen-initiated ballot measures, the slashing of the number of members of parliament and a redistribution of funding resources between the central state and the regions) with very strong symbolic overtones.

Methodologically, having contextualized the political experiment of the Conte government, we offer a description of the policymaking process, tracing the political debate, the bargaining procedures within the coalition and with the European authorities, and concluding with the implementation stage and the public evaluation of outcomes.

Economic policies

The two main economic initiatives of the Conte government were the *reddito di cittadinanza* and *quota 100*. While other important legislation targeted the labour market (the so-called ‘dignity decree’), the interventions focused on fighting poverty and lowering the pension age were the most significant in terms of macro-economic and budget impact. In focusing on these policies, therefore, we are discussing the two key drivers of the Italian budget deficit for 2018, hence also the central issues of contention with European fiscal watchdogs. It is, however, important to note as a preliminary matter that at least two other major economic policies which had featured heavily in the 2018 general election campaign were not pursued by the government: the first, the abandonment of the European single currency (potentially by means of the introduction of a parallel currency for the payment of government debt) was implicitly set aside as a condition for the formation of the Conte government itself (see the Savona incident, above); the second, the so-called flat-tax proposal championed by the League, was tacitly postponed until the 2019 budget, in the face of funding constraints. Hence, the positive manifestations of a populist economic policy by the Conte government were already the products of a selection that vetoed more extreme measures, tempering electoral promises (Santana Pereira and Moury 2018).

Both signature policies can be seen to have interrupted an ideological consensus dating back several decades. In this sense, the Conte executive's self-styled appellation as 'the government of change' was not merely bluster.

Pension reform has been one of the most visible instances of neoliberal macro-economic adjustment policies in Italy. Given the legacy of comparatively high pension expenditure, several waves of intervention, beginning in the early 1990s and spanning governments of different ideological persuasion, have consistently aimed at raising the pensionable age. The drag on public resources and the debt burden have invariably been invoked in justifying these measures, which enjoyed full international support (Reichlin 2019). As for anti-poverty measures, the Italian system has long been characterized as an exception among advanced economies, as it had no universalist mechanism for income support. The confluence of the two traditional political cultures (the Christian democrat, whose focus was the family unit, and the social democrat, whose focus was the protection of workers) entailed a failure to deal with poverty as such (Ferrera and Jessoula 2015; Ranci Ortigosa 2019).

These long-term trends came to a head in the context of the global financial downturn and the austerity measures that were taken by the Monti government to ward off the sovereign debt crisis (Culpepper 2014). Populist parties capitalized on their refusal of budgetary 'responsibility' in the 2013 election, and their relegation to parliamentary opposition only strengthened their case at the polls in 2018. Following these elections, part of the mandate of the Conte administration was to challenge economic orthodoxy.

The main interlocutor in the decision-making process was the European Commission. In particular, given the weakness of the parliamentary opposition and the enduring popularity of the government (a rather rare feature for executives in Italy), the domestic institutional and technocratic forces aiming to curb populist economic policies were obliged to rely on this external constraint and to attempt to present themselves as reasonable mediators between the political desires of the country and the supranational budgetary regime (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). Within the government itself, a clear division of roles developed, with the prime minister and the economy minister not only heading the institutional dialogue with the Commission and the Euro-group, but also aiming to sound a voice of moderation domestically; the two deputy prime ministers, on the other hand, represented the unmediated attitudes of their populist electorates.

This complex negotiating posture needs to be contextualized. Attempts to bend the will of the Brussels institutions on budgetary constraints had been made before by Italian statesmen, including the Renzi and the Berlusconi governments (to mention only two recent episodes). What was novel about the negotiations of 2018 was the 'rhetorical temperature' of the exchanges, which questioned the very legitimacy of the EU's oversight mechanism. The strident nature of the debate was itself influenced profoundly by the competition between the two coalition partners in asserting their populist bona fides. Arguably, even on these redistributive and material topics the importance of establishing a confrontational stance trumped the actual final bargaining outcome in the eyes of the M5S and League leadership (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). The final point of equilibrium thus was significantly closer to the EU's initial bargaining position than to Italy's stated budgetary goals, though

with a considerable amount of deferring of hard choices (Codogno and Merler 2019), e.g. on how to avoid scheduled VAT increases.

Another key factor was the concurrence of opinion of several net creditor EU member states in calling for a policy of rigour vis-à-vis Italy – not a foregone conclusion considering the general ideological proximity of some of these governments with the League. It is important to note, however, that the issues of contention with the EU were limited to general macroeconomic equilibria. The Commission was not ideologically opposed to the creation of a mechanism for income support in Italy, and while it was much less convinced by the rationale of lowering the pension age, once the overall entity of the budget was settled to its satisfaction it did not insist further. The specifics of policy design, therefore, were much more the result of domestic constraints.

As mentioned, the Conte government set about reversing entrenched policy paradigms on both pensions and poverty (Giugliano 2019). However, this overall parallelism masks very significant differences between the political rationales of the two reforms. While the *reddito di cittadinanza* was introduced as a universalist measure, attempting to rationalize the patchwork of pre-existing welfare state provisions, *quota 100* always was a much more narrowly targeted intervention, favouring a specific, limited but cohesive demographic. Moreover, while the latter harked back to a previous equilibrium in Italian political economy, hence not directly calling into question issues of compatibility with market liberalization, the former was much more innovative and controversial, raising issues of labour market participation, growth and budgetary viability in the medium term. These differences also point to the pressures that were brought to bear in the design and implementation process.

Quota 100, according to most policy analyses, was limited by being implemented as a pilot programme with only a few years' financial coverage. Material disincentives were placed in the way of those who chose to retire early under the scheme, limiting its appeal. *Quota 100*'s overall effect on stimulating employment among the youth to replace early pensioners has proved very limited (Banca d'Italia 2020). Nevertheless, its political logic was preserved: as an electoral handout to a particular wedge demographic, it fulfilled its function of signalling the League's solicitude toward its new working-class constituents.

The 'normalization' of the *reddito di cittadinanza* (Gallo and Sacchi 2019), on the other hand, was politically wrenching. The idea of a universal basic income was attacked by the right-wing opposition (especially Berlusconi's Forza Italia) as a rent for idleness and a spur for the undocumented black labour market. In order to escape the stigma of a reversion to *assistenzialismo*, the type of largely corrupt public welfare expenditure that characterized the waning years of the First Republic, the M5S sponsors of the *reddito di cittadinanza* decided to emphasize its means-tested, welfare-to-work characteristics, which began to resemble classic neoliberal welfare reform schemes as they had been shaped since the 1990s. As a consequence, access to income support was significantly curtailed, while the job-finding mechanisms to which many benefits were ultimately tied rested with an untrained and untested bureaucracy whose global effectiveness was open to doubt. The final element was the exclusion of most immigrants from access to benefits (Baldini and Gori 2019), which skewed the application and effects of the

measure, while signalling an intellectual acceptance of ‘welfare-chauvinist’ populist stances.

In sum, the two flagship economic policies of the Conte government went squarely against the sedimented consensus of the past quarter-century. The amount of actual disruption they caused, at the level of both budget outlays and implementation outcomes, was, however, not truly transformational. Macroeconomic stability was preserved at the expense of populist orthodoxy (Afonso 2015), albeit in a context of heightened pressures on the bond market and greater open antagonism towards EU rules.

From a partisan point of view, the two policies produced very different consequences for their main sponsors. *Quota 100* was less ambitious overall, but more effective as a cement for a segment of the League’s electoral bloc; the *reddito di cittadinanza* struggled to live up to the great expectations engendered by the M5S triumph in the 2018 elections. In a way, the League benefited from its role as junior partner in the coalition, for it had a ready excuse for the limits it encountered in delivering on its electoral promises.

Non-economic policies

Among non-economic policies, we concentrate on two main aspects, immigration and constitutional reform. While the M5S’s main non-economic legislative victories focused on reducing the cost of politics, the League’s key symbolic political focus was migration policy. Such a focus was in keeping with a general trend for national populist parties, who normally campaign on ‘welfare-chauvinist’ platforms. The policy had a long-term centrality in the xenophobic discourse of the League, but Salvini’s debut at the helm was marked by an ‘increased focus on immigration, identity issues and law and order’ (Albertazzi et al. 2018: 5). In this respect, until 2018 the M5S was much more ambivalent on immigration, with positions including a favourable stance towards more inclusive citizenship legislation. Hence, within the populist coalition government the League was able to achieve near-complete issue ownership of migration policy, promoting a crackdown that was broadly popular with the electorate.² Salvini was personally invested in this policy, in his role as interior minister, and spent significant political capital in further politicizing immigration, following a three-pronged strategy based on securitization, scapegoating and spectacularization.

On the securitization front, despite the decreasing numbers of sea arrivals since 2016 (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020: fig. 4), the League insisted on linking immigration with threats to national security and community cohesion. The normative vehicles for this strategy were the *Decreti sicurezza* (security decrees). Scholars have questioned their effectiveness: Andrew Geddes and Andrea Pettrachin (2020: 4), for instance, argue that they ‘actually generate greater irregular migration that may well exacerbate a sense of insecurity that fuels the politicization of migration’. A gap between rhetoric and policy results was readily apparent. Upon taking up his job, Salvini had promised to expel half a million clandestine immigrants. While precise data are difficult to obtain, estimates refer to a total of fewer than 7,000 expulsions up to late December 2019 (hence including three months in which Salvini was no longer minister).³

As for scapegoating, Salvini frequently blamed Europe for stalling on the reform of the Dublin Regulation, which obliges asylum seekers to make their status claim in the first EU country of entry. While Salvini was clearly in good company in his exclusionist attitudes in Europe, he did not spend much political capital attempting to achieve change through the EU institutions, as has been remarked (Magnani 2019). Throughout his tenure as interior minister, he failed to attend any EU Council meetings dealing with immigration, sending junior ministers or bureaucrats in his stead. Such behaviour fed the suspicion that the League benefited from the current regulatory status quo as a rhetorical target of invective more than they would from any concerted attempt at reform (which, given the country's diplomatic isolation on the dossier, would have been an extremely long shot in any case).

In terms of spectacularization, however, the 'closed ports' policy was a domestic public relations triumph. Particularly successful was the attack on international NGOs assisting migrants in the central Mediterranean⁴ (although they were responsible for less than 10% of arrivals in the country). Salvini's mediatization of the issue, especially on Twitter (where he is by far the most active of Italian political leaders), was extremely effective. Several surveys supported the minister's crackdown on NGO operations, essentially accepting the League's narrative of intrusive cosmopolitan do-gooders shielding their states of origin from their political responsibilities.⁵ Hence, a class critique and a policy critique became intertwined with a strategy of antagonism at the international level. Whether spectacularization was a deliberate choice to polarize or a *pis aller* to distract attention from the inability to keep electoral promises, it was completely consistent with the notion of simulative politics (Cento Bull 2009) and a good example of the 'pervasive *glibness* of analysis' that characterizes the League's worldview (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017, emphasis in original).

Moving to constitutional reform, for parties promoting change and – especially for the M5S – a new way of doing politics, this was also a key field. The main areas of intervention were the introduction of elements of direct democracy, the reduction of the costs of politics, and the granting of major autonomy to regions, as made possible by Article 117 of the Italian constitution.

A clear division of labour can be found in this sphere, as well: while the M5S took charge of curtailing the costs of politics (mainly via the reduction of the number of members of parliament) and introducing citizen-initiated referenda, the Lega pushed for greater autonomy for the regions, which had been demanding it since 2017, especially Lombardy and Veneto, both governed by the Lega (Emilia Romagna, governed by the PD, asked for milder reforms). For the two coalition partners, 'change' in this field meant, first and foremost, distancing themselves from the overambitious constitutional reforms that both Berlusconi (in 2006) and Renzi (in 2016) had failed to implement. However, this is where the similarities between the two parties end. While the two reforms sponsored by the M5S required a lengthy double procedure in both chambers, the 2001 constitutional reform on state–regions relations meant that – in theory – a faster track for autonomy could be followed. In practice, the opposite happened. The League followed the M5S dutifully on both the referendums and the reduction in the size of the assemblies. While both these reforms sailed through their first readings (the downsizing

of parliament only becoming an issue in the August crisis), autonomy was continually postponed.

The reforms sponsored by the two parties had very different financial implications. On the one side, as well as being a very popular reform, the reduction of the size of parliament could entail tangible if limited savings. Similarly, the cost of a citizen-initiated referendum would not be a major bone of contention, insofar as it would presumably be a rare occurrence; moreover, half the electorate, and an even higher proportion in the 'yellow-green' camp, agreed that on relevant political questions 'it's always better if citizens decide via a referendum' (Bordignon et al. 2018: 204). On the other side, autonomy would imply a very significant redistribution of resources away from the south, where the M5S obtained the bulk of its votes in 2018.

Stefano Ceccanti, a constitutional scholar and PD MP, argues that Salvini never really pushed hard for the reform, as this would mean putting at risk the new 'national' identity of the League. In general, both Di Maio and Salvini left the scene to other protagonists to handle this hot issue: on 21 July 2019, to justify a further delay, Conte penned a letter to the governors of Lombardy and Veneto – published by *Il Corriere della Sera* – linking inaction to the need to overcome possible constitutional breaches in some requests coming from the regions. Two weeks later, Salvini mentioned the stalling of autonomy as one of the (too many) times the M5S had said 'No', which justified his abandonment of the alliance and the call for fresh elections.

Apart from the topic of the minimum turnout to validate a proposal (quorum), the media resonance of the citizen-initiated referendum remained limited. Two aspects can be underlined: the procedure was significantly slowed down; at the same time, the non-exclusion of budget laws – despite several amendments aimed at avoiding this – from the topics on which citizen-initiated referendums can be held suggests a potential challenge to the neoliberal consensus and financial austerity.

All in all, in this field the two parties generally respected the informal division of labour agreed between them. The mediating role of Conte on autonomy matched the highly symbolic and substantive relevance of the issue. However important, none of the cases mentioned above was ever at the centre of the media confrontation between the parties, at least until July 2019, when relations between the M5S and the League broke down.

In some ways, the different varieties of populism expressed by the two parties did not manage to unfold completely in the constitutional camp. Change in regional autonomy was postponed due to intrinsic problems in squaring the circle between the former and the present manifestation of *leghismo*. When compared with non-constitutional issues, this camp did not see a direct involvement of the EU. Asked by the two speakers of the chambers about the role parliament should have on autonomy, President Mattarella expressed the 'wish' that the institution should be involved. However, significant parliamentary debate of regional autonomy proposals never took place.

Conclusions

At the closing of the populist alliance experiment (Conte and the M5S formed a new government in September 2019, but this time in alliance with the PD and other small centre-left parties), what conclusions may be drawn from our evidence?

First of all, it is not easy to separate out resource/material and symbolic dimensions in policy proposals: economic policies may embody deep identity claims while having a negligible impact on their beneficiaries' well-being, and conversely constitutional reforms may have massive implications for resource allocation, without obvious payoffs in terms of symbolic posturing on their proponents' part.

Second, the performance of populists in power in Italy was decisively influenced by external constraints (the European level) and by internal ones (coalition party competition, technocratic 'third leg'). The process had ideological and organizational winners and losers and resulted in the electoral balance of power between the coalition partners being reversed in little more than a year. The League was more skilful in pursuing its policy objectives that allowed for rapid, decisive action, with limited budget outlays. The more ambitious M5S reform plans encountered significant implementation snags. The League's sequencing clearly paid political dividends.

Third, as a general indication, the performance of the Conte government was more akin to the picture Blühdorn and Butzlaff paint than to Hopkin and Blyth's. The attempts to challenge the economic status quo were rather comprehensively rebuffed by the supranational EU establishment, with the assistance of domestic technocratic allies. As for the representation of a virtual sovereignty, in which spectacle overshadows the lack of policy substance, the immigration measures championed by the League perfectly fitted the theoretical prediction, not least in the political advantages they accrued for the party (and for Salvini personally).

As a consequence, we can state a final conclusion: the prediction consistent with this interpretation for the future of populism in Italy is one of churn, rather than turbulence. It became progressively clearer during the course of Conte's premiership which of the two partners had developed a more appealing mode of representing anti-system intent. It remains to be seen whether this will lead to a hegemony of the League over the populist field, and in turn if this is sufficient to (re-)conquer power.

The approach we present does not aim to displace others, and we do not claim that we have accounted for all the key questions populism raises. It is a modest theoretical proposal, seeking to highlight aspects of contemporary European society most observers would easily concede are present, but often become obscured in debates about populism. Much further empirical work is necessary, and to be encouraged, to determine whether populism as the result of the repoliticization of long-term anti-political sentiment is a paradigm that will yield further, valuable insights.

Notes

1 To be sure, this is an extrapolation of Mortati's thought, which extends the concept analogically well beyond its original formulation. For similar uses, see Goldoni and Wilkinson (2018).

2 Immigration was already politicized in Italy well before 2018 (Grande et al. 2019). Experts assessing the immigration policies of the Conte I government also underline the continuities with the previous PD-led governments, especially regarding quotas for non-EU migrants as annually determined by the so-called *Decreti flussi* (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020).

3 For instance, on the exact weight of voluntary as opposed to forced repatriations: see Hall (2019) and Massariolo (2019).

4 The Sea Watch affair was particularly polarizing (see Schlamp 2019).

5 Tecnè poll for RTI, 1 July 2019, Eumetra poll for Mediaset, 15 July 2019. The League's polling topped 30% (Bailo 2019).

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