Understanding the Success of Populist Parties in the Italian Political Context since 1994

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Abstract

Populism as a guiding political force has been rapidly gaining global attention. In Europe, the balance of traditional politics has been disrupted by this phenomenon promoting an agenda of nationalism. This is well-demonstrated by Italy’s multiparty system, which has institutionalized three populist governments since 1994. In the recent 2013 Italian national elections, three of the four top-voted parties can be considered populist; Popolo della Libertà, Lega Nord, and MoVimento 5 Stelle. This research aims to understand how these three parties can coexist and compete for legislative representation and what factors of the Italian political context contribute to the growth and success of populism. An analysis of the relationships between parties and the Italian electorate will be achieved by examination of party rhetoric, propaganda, and manifestos following the Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) framework of populism. The purpose of this analysis is to shed light on the Italian democratic situation lending itself to populist forces.
Dedication

For my father, Marty Kehoe, whom I love more than Brussels sprouts.

Thank you for inspiring a lifelong interest in politics and for always challenging me to think more critically.
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<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Democrazia Cristiana</td>
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<td>FI</td>
<td>Forza Italia</td>
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<td>LN</td>
<td>Lega Nord</td>
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<td>M5S</td>
<td>Movimento Cinque Stelle</td>
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<td>PD</td>
<td>Partito Democratico</td>
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<td>PdL</td>
<td>Popolo della Libertà</td>
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<td>PSI</td>
<td>Partito Socialista Italiana</td>
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<td>UKIP</td>
<td>United Kingdom Independence Party</td>
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1. Introduction

Populism is a widespread phenomenon lacking a canonized definition in academia. Yet, an understanding of populism is essential in the modern political climate as its powers have gripped Western democracies with increasing force since the 1980s (Mudde, 2004). Populism in the Italian context has been particularly successful. In the 2013 general election, three of the four top-voted parties were labeled populists: MoVimento 5 Stelle with 8,691,406 votes; Popolo della Libertà with 7,332,134 votes and Lega Nord with 1,390,534 votes. These numbers suggest 37.0% of eligible voters actively pursued a populist government in 2013. Therefore, populism can be considered a large phenomenon that merits consideration regarding how and why these non-traditional parties are attractive options for almost 1/3rd of the Italian population.

The purpose of this research is to investigate what factors of the Italian political context contribute to the growth and success of populism in Italy by comparing the campaign goals and methods of these three major populist parties. This research is important because the majority of the literature regarding the phenomenon of populism in Italian politics is centered on Berlusconi’s parties (Donovan, 2015; Vaccari, 2015; Fabbrini, 2013; Severgnini, 2011; Newell, 2009; Shin & Agnew, 2008; Schlesinger, 1990) with additional attention to the Lega Nord (Giordano, 2004, 2001; Tambini, 2001; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Diamanti, 1996, 1991). Alternatively, the M5S had not taken center stage until the recent 2013 elections and therefore is under-studied. Furthermore, the relationships between the parties are even less studied, therefore I hope to contribute to knowledge in this field while also investigating why the Italian political scene appears to have a predisposition toward populism. May 2018 will see the first national
election since the M5S success and the results will be very revealing as to how the Italian people feel about the M5S and whether they are willing to continue supporting the movement. The research in this field is essential to understand how people see themselves in relation to their political representation and governing entities. Identifying problems in this relationship may be the key to moving toward a more productive interaction between political parties and the people they claim to represent. From what I have gathered from my research of populism, its appearance in a political system can be likened to the blinking of a check-engine light; both can be interpreted as a warning for underlying problems that need to be addressed.

The underlying problems that populism might be signaling are tied to the efficiency of democracy. The fact that over a third of the Italian population is willing to democratically elect a populist government suggests a flaw in the political system. The question of Italian populism serves to analyze the interaction between Italian people and democracy as an institution. Regarding Huntington’s waves of democracy (1991), the wave of populism sweeping Italy since the 1990s may be indicative of a democratic backslide. The backslide can be traced to the 1990s investigation of the political class which marked the end of the First Republic and the post-war government led by decades of Christian Democrat leadership. The investigation was intended to reinvigorate the political class by removing corrupt individuals. However, I hypothesize that this period of political crisis did not bring the profound change it claimed, but instead reinforced the mistrust Italians felt toward their democratically elected officials.

In order to understand the Italian context specifically, the first chapter will outline the theoretical framework of the ideology. Starting with a literature review on populism and the limitations involved in the label, the first chapter sets a base for understanding this phenomenon before then focusing on radical right-wing populism, the third wave of populism, as specific to
the European context. Finally, these layers of contextual populism bring the reader to the foundational understanding of the specific Italian political scene and its relationship with populism. The subsequent three chapters will each be case studies analyzing the messages and ideas of: Berlusconism, which includes both Forza Italia and Popolo della Libertà, Lega Nord, and MoVimento 5 Stelle. In the methodological section of the first chapter I explain why the Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) definition of populism serves as a framework for the comparative analysis of these parties based on three criteria: who the party defines as its people, how the party defines the general will of the people, and who the party constructs to be the elites antagonistic to the general will of their people. These criteria are open-ended enough to apply to all brands of populism while also providing insight into the specific relationship that populists create between themselves and their people.

This research investigates how three major players in the Italian political field can all be considered populist while maintaining distinct ideological platforms that have respectively proven successful amongst their target audiences. The relationships between these parties and how they coexist in the same arena reveal much about the Italian voting body and the volatile post-1990s Italian political climate.
2. Theory of Populism

Identifying a populist movement poses a challenge because the term is rarely used self-referentially. Unlike established political ideologies for which liberals call themselves liberals and conservatives call themselves conservatives, the label of populist is not only externally imposed but is also perceived as a pejorative and therefore likely to be denied by populists (Canovan, 2005). However, the connotation of the word is evolving as leaders like Beppe Grillo use it positively to describe their movements. Populist movements must be contextualized as this phenomenon has occurred all over the world. Finding a common thread between the French Revolution 1789, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, and the British UK Independence Party is not an obvious task. These movements and their leaders represent drastically diverse political thoughts and orientations. This poses a challenge for political scientists who aim to draw connections between them and look to the historical legacy of international cases of populism for a better understanding of a current movement. However, the fact that there is a large international legacy of populism suggests that this political approach can be local and universal at the same time. The answer to this paradox lies in the limitations of the populist ideology which will be analyzed in this chapter. Furthermore, the populism taking root in the Italian context must be understood in relation to European populism since the 1980s. This distinguishes the Italian scene from the rest of Europe as particularly vulnerable to populism. Finally, the context of Tangentopoli, the political crisis of the 1990s, is necessary to understand the political parties in question as they all emerged following this political destabilization. With this theoretical framework, the reader
understands Italian populism historically, regionally, and domestically providing tools for comparing Forza Italia, Popolo della Libertà, Lega Nord, and MoVimento 5 Stelle.

Limitations of Populism

The difficulty in identifying populist ideology stems from the following factors: its episodic manner, inconsistency, locality, and lack of uniformity. However, these factors are better described as side-effects than as core qualities. These side-effects can be traced to the idea that populism is a “thin ideology” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). To contextualize the ideology, the definition that best fits the goals of my research centralizes the thinness of populist ideology as it can be used to explain the intricacies of the phenomenon. Mudde and Kaltwasser define the indefinable as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (the general will) of the people” (2013: 498). This definition highlights the core issue being attacked by populist movements: the perceived disenfranchisement of ‘the people’ by the elite government; the perceived struggle is a core theme in literature attempting to define populism (Betz 1996; Mény and Surel 2000; Taggart 2004; Canovan 2005; Mudde 2004, 2007; Stanley 2008). This antagonistic binary division is the basis for a thin ideology, rather than a movement, that can be characterized as populist.

A thin ideology is malleable, “the very thinness of the populist ideology is one of the reasons why some scholars have suggested that populism should be conceived of as a transitory phenomenon: it either fails, or if successful, transcends itself” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p 498).
The malleability of a thin ideology does not allow for it to stand alone. Therefore, a thin ideology is often supplemented with an additional label, for example, the radical right or radical left. In the American context, this was seen in the 2016 presidential election when populists campaigned on both sides of the isle: Bernie Sanders on the left and Donald Trump on the right (Goodhart, 2017). Populism is not tied to the traditional right-left spectrum but is used alongside an existing ideology as a method of garnering support, radicalizing, and capitalizing on the emotions of voters. The fact that populism takes and uses elements and ideas from alternative ideologies makes the phenomenon more challenging to identify because of the differences between different populist expressions and their similarities to existing ideologies. Another example from American populism, Bernie Sanders can be labeled a socialist as well as a populist. This process has generated subtypes of populism, which are largely responsible for the extended success of the phenomenon (Canovan, 2005). The proliferation of subtypes helps populism to carry on even when ideologies die or movements end.

The episodic nature of populist parties means that they are short-lived. These parties are often quick to organize but usually never endure therefore their movement is often a contained episode. Populist parties exist typically as a reaction to a force outside the control of the people, i.e. political corruption, economic downturn. Because of this, the movement typically does not have a legacy, a history, or a manifesto to refer to or propagate that would be relevant to any other populist party besides their own. Therefore, the movement largely has two options: complete its objective thus rendering itself unnecessary or fail. For example, if a populist movement is united by disenfranchised anti-corruption values, the only options for their movement are to eliminate corruption or cease to exist. Therefore, Stanley (2008) argues that long-term populist movements do not exist.
A common misconception about populist movements is the idea that they require following a cult of personality, i.e. Juan Peron’s Peronismo in Argentina, Hugo Chavez’s Chavismo in Venezuela. This is not a necessary dimension of populist movements because the development of a cult of personality is often a side-effect of the movement making it easier for individuals to follow. Since populism is intended to represent the people as its name suggests, having a leader or individual to associate with the movement makes it more accessible to their intended voter base. However, this common side-effect presents a problem, as once the key individual is no longer able to lead the movement due to death, imprisonment, exile, etc., the movement collapses, reinforcing its episodic nature. If the ideology were not thin, it would not benefit so greatly from a cult of personality to follow.

Locality and inconsistency are additional problems contributing to the difficulty in defining populism. There is inconsistency between movements because the core concepts are open-ended and often manipulated to serve different purposes as populism can be represented across the political spectrum. Left-wing populism looks very different from right-wing populism, therefore drawing parallels can present a challenge. Further, there is no international network for populist parties as there are for Communist or Socialist parties. This means most populist movements look different and do not communicate amongst each other nor collaborate on the basis of being populist. The locality of populism suggests the uniqueness of each movement in order to fulfill a need or address an issue that is facing the local population. The nuances of each local case of populism can be difficult to compare across geographic and cultural borders thus contributing to inconsistency. The inconsistency of the vast variety of populist movements and the specific local issues which elicit these movements are both side-effects stemming from the thinness of the ideology that contribute to the difficulty in accurately defining the term.
Third Wave Populism in Europe

Regarding the history of the phenomenon, Mény (2003) identifies three waves of populism. The first wave is defined by Russia’s agrarian populism, represented by the *narodnik* movement, which sought land reform in favor of peasants. In this case, the land-holding elite were deemed antagonistic to the marginalized farming peasant class. The second wave of populism took place in Latin America inspired by socio-economic concerns. Allende in Chile, Peron in Argentina, and Chavez in Venezuela identified the wealthy elites in their respective countries as oppressive to the marginalized impoverished people. Since the focus of further research will be on the Italian context, it is essential to establish the greater context regarding the “third wave” of populism. The radical right wing populism gaining popularity in Europe and at the center of this wave was first labeled by Hans George Betz (1993, 1994), who used the label to highlight the difference between radical right wing parties and the populist phenomenon regarding populists’ “unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment, and their appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense” (Betz, 1994, p 4). This category of parties includes the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Dutch Freedom Party, and the UK Independence Party. Mass populism in general is not of the Western European tradition, therefore this new trend is unprecedented. Western Europe has a history of elite-led politics and paternalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p 497). It was not until the 1980s that populism started to emerge due to the social changes: a general trend toward liberalism and rising immigration. Mudde and Kaltwasser identify the core issues that radical right wing populists claim to attack as “immigration, crime, and corruption” (2013, p 497), which are addressed through anti-elitist and anti-establishment rhetoric. Notably, the economy is not one of the core issues of the third wave even though the
economy is often a talking point for these parties, especially in Italy (Canovan, 2005). This is because the economy is used as a justification for welfare chauvinism and anti-immigration policies (Brodignon & Ceccarini, 2013). By claiming that immigration and pro-EU policies will damage or negatively affect the Italian economy, people less financially secure easily become emotionally involved and are easier to garner support from via populist rhetoric. Therefore, while the economy is not a core concept for the radical right-wing populist parties, it is a factor in their discourse surrounding the topics of immigration, crime and corruption.

Think tank professional David Goodhart discusses the social demographic that makes up radical right-wing populists as a deviation from the traditional left-right spectrum. In Goodhart’s work *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and Future of Politics* (2017), the author distinguishes a new social cleavage as the cause for the rise of this third wave populism across Europe: *anywheres* versus *somewheres*. Goodhart establishes this cleavage along the bases of education and mobility. The anywheres are free to live or work anywhere because of the opportunities afforded them by either higher education, financial security yielding mobility or both education and mobility. The somewheres are attached to somewhere, a physical location, often limited by financial insecurity or dependents. Goodhart identifies immigration as the central conflict between somewheres and anywheres that is yielding the rise in radical right-wing populism. While the somewhere versus anywhere debate is unique to Goodhart, the key issue of immigration is agreed upon as a focus of radical right-wing populist groups in Europe since the 1980s (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Vadlamannati & De Soysa, 2017). The consideration on immigration is supported by all three of the mainstream populist groups in Italy as they all disperse messages of anti-immigration sentiment.
Core concepts of Populism

Despite the thinness of populist ideology, there is a strong pattern in the following three core concepts: the people, the elite, and the general will (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Much of the literature identifies the construction of a dichotomy of the people against the elites as the key populist struggle (Betz, 1993; Canovan, 2005; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Stanley, 2004; Taggart, 2004). To map the goals, similarities and differences between the parties, I will investigate 1) who the populist parties identify as their antagonizing elite juxtaposed with 2) who they include in their definition of the people and 3) what the party leadership thinks those people want. Understanding the parties from these three perspectives will reveal which revealing factors of the Italian context particularly lend the domestic political scene to the success of populist parties.

The general will must first be distinguished as distinct from the will of all. Next, the concept of the people is not as broad and inclusive as it wants to portray itself and therefore requires disambiguation. Finally, the elite must be distinguished, as there are many different elites in various spheres of social, political, and economic life. The discussion of these core concepts will further guide the fundamental understanding of populist ideology.

The general will must first be distinguished from the will of all because the former favors a majority rather than an inclusive totality. When populist parties claim to work for the “general will” or “the will of the people,” this only represents the interests of a homogeneous society and therefore alienates those who do not align with the dominant social group. To populists, the general will is seen as the absolute and indisputable democratic right of “the people”. The often-misinterpreted Lincoln quote from the Gettysburg Address, “government for the people, by the people” is taken out of context by populists and used to justify the dominance of their general will opposed to the will of the elites. However, while distinguishing the disparity between the
elite ruling classes and the general will of the people, there is a silencing of the will of all (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). The will of all is the bigger picture in any context, which includes the general will of the “people” as well as the voices of marginalized members of society. This is because the general will does not represent the whole of society, but the dominant concerns of “the people”. As “the people” are a variable group contingent on who “the elite” are, the general will of the people is thus a flexible ideology to follow and can differ based on context. For example, xenophobes maintain the “general will” to close borders to refugees, while refugees as a collective have a “general will” to gain physical security. The two needs of the two separate groups do not align yet both can be described as “general wills” because the distinction relies on who is identified as “the people.” In this example, the will of all would be a mutually beneficial solution, which recognizes the wills of the different groups in society. Therefore, populists advocate for the general will instead because it is polarizing. This is the idea that majority rules, an idea that is easy for the majority to support, but the problem lies in the exclusion of the minority opinion. Therefore, populists identify their mission as that of the general will of the people, whoever the people in that case may be, and understanding their mission gives insight into 1) “the elites” that populist parties paint as antagonists and 2) who is being excluded from their mission.

There are three key perspectives on the idea of the “the people” (Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2004; Mény & Surel 2000) that are essential for understanding the concept which refines the question of who are the people. The idea of “the people” as the champions of populism resulting from political disenchantment is a common thread in the literature (Mény & Surel 2000, Mudde 2004, Canovan 2005, Stanley 2008). However, the problem with designating “the people” as one of the core concepts of the ideology is that the term requires further distinction of who these
people are. Mény and Surel (2000) divide the populist target of “the people” into three
dimensions to fully understand the multifaceted group that is not representative of the entirety of
a population in the civic or legal sense. First, populists advance the idea that the people are
rightfully sovereign, a dimension that Stanley (2008) agrees upon. They believe that sovereignty
gives the people the right to influence change when their government is not accurately
representative of the majority, or not carrying out the general will. Second, populist parties
appeal to the people of a downtrodden class. This is meant in an economic sense, not that they
have been systemically oppressed. Mény (2003) suggests that the downtrodden are those who are
victims of the global transition to a post-industrial service-based economy. This is representative
of coal miners and factory workers whose jobs are rapidly being made obsolete in light of
technological advancements. This creates resentment toward progress and nostalgia for the past
from which they likely benefitted. The third dimension of how populists identify their “people”
is that of the nation, which is further specified to regard the cultural definition of the word to
highlight a specific ethnicity rather than the civic understanding, which would be more inclusive.
However, this definition is restrictive because the class dimension does not account for
neoliberal populists (Betz, 1993), who are current of the third wave European populism and are
typically more affluent (Goodhart, 2017).

Next is Taggart (2004) who identifies the “heartland” idea as an interpretation of “the
people.” An ambiguous term in itself, the idea of a heartland is subjective and differs by location
and perspective. While this may be initially interpreted as liberal, the confines of who does and
does not belong to the heartland are determined by the populists without inclusive intentions
because the lack of precision in the definition of “the people” or the “heartland” allows for
alienation. Alienation theoretically leaves a group of people outside of the dominant group and
those left out can potentially become scapegoats in populist campaign rhetoric. In addition to alienation, a fault in the heartland lies in its essential need for a return to the past, “the heartland is a construction of an ideal world but unlike utopian conceptions, it is constructed retrospectively” (Taggart, 2004, p 274). The heartland wants to return to a world in which the people’s privilege was more secure at the expense of oppressing marginalized communities. Pre-globalization did not require regulating migration, interacting on a global stage, or, on a smaller scale, using politically correct language. Therefore, those who benefitted from the traditional model and see its return as more valuable than progress are inclined to actively participate in populist rhetoric and movements.

Mudde (2007) widens the definition of the people with the introduction of the nativist argument, suggesting a polarization between natives and foreigners. Nativism is the idea that a nation-state should be inhabited by the original people of the territory and their ideas. Nativism uses “us versus them” rhetoric to demean external influences and ideas that are viewed as threatening to the way of life of the natives. While nativism is not inherently threatening, populist parties are frequently the nativist response to immigration issues and therefore nativists are seen as populists, while in reality populism is just the political expression of a nativist sentiment. For example, the UKIP party in England was established for the perceived need to protect native British people from the constructed threat that immigrants posed to “English culture.” The concept of nativism contrasts Taggart’s more inclusive and less polarizing idea of the heartland (2004). While both understandings have a strong connection to the land the people inhabit, nativism is more polarizing and tangible while the heartland is vaguer.

To conclude the discussion on the definition of the people, we can say that the core concept is intentionally confusing. This is an important element of the thinness of the ideology,
as the core concepts must be as malleable as the ideology itself. While the idea of the people could be inclusive, the exclusionary nativist theory best fits the European context of populism. Therefore, as the discussion moves forward, the core concept of “the people” must be regarded loosely as specifying who the people are for each populist party will reveal information about the party itself.

The final core concept to be defined is the elite. This is a concept more straightforward than that of the people or the general will. The elite are abstract in that they can be cultural elites, economic elites, media elites, etc. However, elites are “defined by a basis of power” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p 503). Populist grievances regarding the elite are usually centered on the interpretation that elites ignore the people usually by prioritizing self-interest or international concerns above national ones. This is most exemplary in the event of European countries assisting and welcoming refugees, which has received much backlash and fueled xenophobic rhetoric of populist right wing parties. However, it is also exemplified by the 1990s Italian controversy known as mani pulite, an investigation which yielded the removal of corrupt Italian politicians and mafia members who made up the old guard of the stagnant political elite. Therefore, the elites are seen as the ruling parties and people who have the ability to make decisions that do not directly benefit the people, whether or not their decisions are positive or negative. This directly connects to the idea of the general will because elites are expected to carry out the general will due to the sovereignty of the people. When elites ignore or fail to carry out the general will, for any reason including that the general will is unreasonable, the people who populist parties identify as their downtrodden base are given a reason, valid or otherwise, to feel disenfranchised and oppose the elites. Therefore, identifying the general will is essential for
populist party leaders because that is what they use to create distance between their elites and their people.

The three core concepts are malleable and contribute to the malleability of the thin ideology of populism. However, it is important to understand the general will as that of the people and as distinct from the will of all. Additionally, it is important to understand the people as not just the people of a country or an ethnic group or class but as natives of a geographic location with a cultural legacy being threatened by globalization. Finally, the elite must be understood as not just a political or media elite, but as a power wielding body able to make decisions for the people that the people may not understand or want. These core concepts play into each other and when we define who the elite and the people are as well as their general will in regard to FN/PdL, LN, and M5S, this process will shed light on the ideologically populist dimensions of each political party.

Methodology

In order to understand the political parties in question, each will be evaluated based on Mudde & Kaltwasser’s (2013) interpretation of populism. This interpretation, which suggests the criteria by which a political movement can be considered populist, is broad enough to be inclusive of historical populism as well as of the trend of radical right-wing populism that has been developing in Europe since the 1990s (Mény, 2000). Therefore, the methodology involves breaking down the following criteria as they apply to the electorally successful Italian populist parties: the people, the elite, and the general will.

The concept of “the elites” is usually the clearest to identify because the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites is at the core of the populist message. Therefore, defining the elites for each party will be done by analysis of party public rhetoric. Parties’ public
rhetoric is methodologically effective because the elites of any populist movement are constructed elites and therefore can only be defined based on how the party perceives the power imbalance between elites and the people. Therefore, primary sources such as speeches supplemented with news sources quoting statements made by party leadership, will aid in understanding who each populist party perceives to be the elite and how the party leadership wants their followers to see the elite as well. For the Berlusconi parties, this includes headlines from *Il Giornale*, because of its use under Berlusconi’s ownership as a propaganda platform, as well as speeches that identify specific threats to the people. For the Lega Nord, the elite is identified in the speeches made by the leadership as well as political cartoons and campaign posters. Understanding MoVimento 5 Stelle’s perception of the elite will require a look at the leader’s speeches (Grillo, 2013) which are documented on the party’s blog.

The concept of “the people” must be defined in two ways. First, the people are those who contribute to the electoral success of the party by voting. The majority of populist voters are the people who identify with the party’s message and idea of the people, therefore seeing themselves as the party’s people. The voters are defined based on surveys yielding data on voter demographics (Tronchi, 2013; Cataldi, 2012; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Diamanti, 1991). However, the definition of the people in this populist context also comes from the party messages and propaganda. While the idea of the people is defined by the voters, it is also defined by the party based on who the party is attempting to target. Evaluating who the party sees as its people is possible through an examination of party propaganda. Campaign posters and ads that include images of “the people” are analyzed to see which groups of people the populist parties are claiming to represent and therefore which groups the voters may see themselves as a part of reflected by these campaign materials. Furthermore, in the case of M5S, the web-based party has
a unique method of maintaining supporters through its blog, which will be discussed at length in chapter 4.

The concept of “the general will” shall be analyzed by coding the rhetoric of party platform texts. For the Italian populist parties, there is a trend of making promises, pledges, and contracts to the parties’ peoples outlining the goals and wants of the parties. These texts provide essential insight into how the party reflects the general will of its people. By coding these texts for their content, I am able to rank the priorities of the parties as they portray themselves publically. For the Berlusconi parties, I will analyze his 2001 “Contratto con gli Italiani.” For the Lega Nord, I analyze the 1983 Manifesto of the Lega Lombarda, predecessor to the Lega Nord, and the 1996 Declaration of the Independence of Padania, which marks a notable shift in the goals of the party. Regarding MoVimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), I will analyze the meaning of the party’s program, which is illustrated by five stars representing the different goals of the movement, as well as the 2009 Carta di Firenze, predecessor to the five stars program. I have selected these texts because of their relative comparability; each text was written by a party with the goal of efficiently communicating their goals to the Italian people.

It is important to note that my analysis must include texts, rhetoric, and campaign materials throughout the parties’ existence because the parties in question all carry out major ideological shifts. This is important because it is inherent of populist parties, and a key strategy, to adapt to different political contexts in order to remain relevant. Otherwise, the episodic and local manner of populist movements would render the parties useless. Therefore, the primary sources used in this analysis must be representative of the party as it evolves not only to have a fuller understanding of the party but also in regards to the scope of the research as looking for
what factors of the Italian context contribute to the success of these populist parties, a success that is measured by representation in legislature and votes.

The Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) criteria for populist movements provides a framework loose enough to apply to the radical right-wing context while also making connections to the history of populism. At the same time, the criteria is also precise enough to reveal the core elements of each party. By using these criteria, I am able to identify the most populist aspects of each party while also placing them in an Italian context juxtaposed with each other thus revealing their differences and similarities as populist radical right-wing Italian political parties.

Conclusion

Understanding populism not as a political movement but as a thin ideology is necessary for evaluating how the three parties, Lega Nord, Forza Italia/Popolo della Liberta, and MoVimento 5 Stelle, use populist techniques and ideas to garner support and to create emotional reactions from their target voter bases. Evaluating the three core concepts of the people that the parties target, the elites that the parties identify as antagonistic to the people, and the general will of the people as either being ignored or circumvented by the elites, creates a fuller image of how populism works to support the party (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). By analyzing how these parties present themselves through their literature and media control, how scholars evaluate the influence of the parties, and the electoral success or failure of the parties, it becomes clear how they gain power and use populism to take advantage of the fractured Italian political scene.
3. Berlusconism

Berlusconism is a phenomenon that marks Italy’s Second Republic having spent 17 years leading the majority coalition. The First Republic, which followed the fall of the fascist regime at the end of World War II, existed until the revelation of *tangentopoli* (roughly translated to “bribesville”) and the *mani pulite* investigations of the 1990s which uncovered the corrupt political elite accepting money from entrepreneurs and conspiring with *mafiosi*. This discovery marks a turning point that left Italian voters disenchanted and unwilling to trust traditional politicians who had ruled Italy since the end of World War II through the Cold War period. Silvio Berlusconi capitalized on the then floundering political system and rose from the ashes of the traditional political elite as an outsider, entrepreneur and wealthy business man. His popularity was unparalleled and granted him the opportunity to be institutionalized in three governments (1994, 2001, 2008). As a leader, Berlusconi has used populist techniques to establish and maintain his political parties, Forza Italia (FI) and Popolo della Libertà (PdL), as well as the general sentiment of the right-wing. He identifies the old guard of political elites as the enemies of his people (Fabrini, 2013; Severgnini, 2011; Ruzza & Fella, 2009). In doing this, he establishes the antagonistic binary of traditional populism. Berlusconi projects himself as the lone representative of the people and the only one who can save the people from the corruption of politicians. Berlusconi’s constructed elites, his downtrodden people and their general will guide his personal brands of populism.

Throughout the second half of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Berlusconi was gaining popular momentum. The 1975 repeal of the RAI monopoly on Italian television and
radio broadcasting at a local level was well received and led to rapid expansion of the commercial sector. RAI was to maintain its monopoly of national broadcasting, but local networks and channels were to be privatized. This rapid expansion of private local television was too fast to be regulated by the slow and bureaucratic Italian legislature, therefore allowing for the rise of the duopoly; Berlusconi’s network called Mediaset represented private and commercial interests while RAI represented the state. The abused loophole that yielded the Berlusconi media empire was the insufficient definition of the term “local” regarding the local broadcasting (Schlesinger, 1990, p 272). While the established and publically funded RAI broadcasting was highly regulated, the private and commercial networks were not. With so many stations competing for regional attention, Berlusconi saw an opportunity and strategized the elimination of competitors: “by September 1980, Berlusconi was operating as a superregional broadcaster in Northern and Central-Southern Italy, using video-cassettes broadcast simultaneously by a collection of local stations” (Schlesinger, 1990, p 273). Berlusconi quickly ascended to the status of media mogul. His television networks, newspapers, and companies, Fininvest and Mediaset, have garnered him a net-worth of $7 billion USD (The World’s Billionaires, 2017). Berlusconi was able to use the legislation to his benefit and would continue to do so well into the 21st century.

His success would continue with the development of Milano Due, a suburban community he developed outside his hometown of Milan. From this venture, he then purchased the football team A.C. Milan, the cheer for which is “Forza Milan!” This slogan would later give the name of Berlusconi’s 1994 political party, Forza Italia. For the 1994 general election, Berlusconi decided to run for office just 60 days before the Italian people went to the polls. However, his lack of time to campaign was no hindrance as his name and face were already widely popular and
recognized thanks to his television and football empires. Despite electoral success, the first Berlusconi government lasted only six months before crumbling under legal investigations of campaign finances. This is an essential turning point that precipitated a six-year hiatus from politics. Having been ousted and suffering various indictments, similar grievances of exclusion from politics were felt by some Italian people. Berlusconi emerged on the scene as a political outsider and this image was reinforced when his government was ousted, making him a champion for anti-political Italians.

The orientation toward personal gain is a consistent theme in the literature regarding the politics of Berlusconi (Bickerton & Accetti, 2014; Fabbrini, 2013; Severgnini, 2013; Ruzza & Fella, 2009). His rise to power is an example of how he sees himself as beyond the rules that apply to others, yet his money and ability to earn it are inspiring qualities for some Italian people. Berlusconi’s personal wealth plays a large role in his campaigns and leadership style, which are entrenched in his “ebullient personality and clientelistic networks” (Bickerton & Accetti, 2014, p 23). While he was successful as the owner of the private half of Italian television, his time as prime minister allowed him authority over almost the entirety of Italian broadcast media. Each time he was elected, the two sides of the duopoly merged to one and his influence was unparalleled. From this platform, he delivered messages to the Italian people in order to gain and maintain support for his personal brand of politics, Berlusconism.

The elite: Communists and their co-conspirators

Berlusconi verbally targets an elite class hypothetically composed of communists, leftist judges, and competing media sources (Ruzza & Fella, 2009). This perceived elite class is referenced in his rhetoric to create panic and fear. He frequently generalizes the left by using the
word “communist” because of the heavy historical connotation the term carries. Pitting the people against the communists creates a fear for the deterioration of quality of life. Communism is a sensitive subject specifically in the Italian context, which was home to the largest communist party in western Europe until its dissolution in 1991 following the Cold War. Italy has throughout history been delicately balanced between eastern and western Europe and Italian politics have been susceptible to communism. In 2005, Berlusconi told Corriere della Sera “Se la sinistra andasse al governo il risultato sarebbe miseria, terrore e morte, come accade in tutti i posti dove governa il comunismo” [If the left goes into government the result shall be misery, terror and death, like what happened in all the places where communism has governed] (Meli, 2005). Statements like this are designed to inspire fear and insecurity while perpetuating the mistrust conservative Italians already feel toward their government, a sentiment that has grown since the 1990s and mani pulite.

The attack on communism has been a central strategy of Berlusconism for three main reasons. First, Berlusconi’s ascent to power was possible because of the mani pulite investigations which left the Italian political scene open (Ruzza & Fella, 2009). Blaming the communists for the corruption and instability that rendered the necessity of the investigation not only distinguishes communists as a negative and destructive political force but also reinforces the idea that Berlusconi is a savior. The martyr trope is reinforced by the man himself; on the campaign trail Berlusconi once said “sono il Gesù della politica, una vittima. Mi sacrifico per tutti” [I am the Jesus of politics, a victim, I sacrifice myself for everyone] (Frasca, 2006). Thisfurthers his cult of personality putting him, rather than a party or an ideology, at the center of the conservative political scene in Italy.
Second, attacking communists is beneficial for Berlusconi’s media dynasty as his only competitor in the television duopoly was the state-funded RAI broadcasting network. By creating an idea of communist corruption as the central problem in the past Italian governments, Berlusconi distances himself as both an entrepreneur providing an alternative to RAI and as a new politician uninvolved in the scandals of the 1990s. Therefore, his fans and followers recognize the competition between Berlusconi’s self-made networks juxtaposed with what he considers publically funded communist propaganda.

The third reason Berlusconi benefits from attacking the left is because the left continues to be a traditional force on the Italian political scene, now represented by the center-left Partito Democratico. Berlusconi had consistently targeted both the old guard of political elite, specifically those who were ousted during *mani pulite*, and communists; by the second Berlusconi government in 2001, the leader also began attacks on leftist judges and magistrates. He was forced to diversify the party’s perception as the communists gradually became less of a threat in the post-Cold War world. After 17 years in power berating the communists, the left, the magistrates, etc. for taking advantage of the Italian people, Berlusconi had grown into what he sought to dismantle: a stagnant and ineffective political elite. This judgement is passed based on his inability to lower taxes despite decades of promises to do so and the failure to carry out the promises of his Contratto con gli Italiani. Therefore, his attack on the leading forces for leftist corruption intensified because he lost the credibility necessary to distance himself from the rest of the corrupt and stagnant political elite. While this seems to be a disadvantage, the benefit is in that the idea of “communists” was easily translated to “the left” under the guise that both were representatives of the First Republic.
The focus on communists as the elites is tailored to Berlusconi’s benefit. When a new threat arose, he was quoted speaking out against M5S in a similar manner, “i Cinque Stelle sono pericolosi e oggi dobbiamo fermarli nello stesso modo in cui all’epoca fermammo i comunisti” [the Cinque Stelle are dangerous and today we need to stop them in the same way we stopped the communists back then] (Labate, 2017). The comparison between his former enemy and current competitor is striking because of the distance between the two regarding ideology. Both the left and the M5S pose an electoral threat by presenting ideological alternatives to Berlusconism. Therefore, delegitimizing the alternatives by comparing them to, or labeling them as, communists is a defense mechanism in order to preserve the party’s voting base.

**The people: The Italians**

The general goal of Berlusconism is to target what his ideology understands as the average Italian (Donovan, 2015; Fabbrini, 2013). Cataldi (2012) evaluates the Italian electorate based on age, religiosity, job, gender, level of education, and geographic location, giving insight into who the PdL voters are. According to the findings, the PdL voters are of all ages but with a slight increase in the elderly population. Out of 100 people surveyed, PdL holds the largest number of voters who say they attend mass every week compared to the followers of eight other major parties. At the time of the study (2012), there was a consistent predominance of female voters in the electoral base, although both genders are well represented. Regarding education levels, the groups that had “none” or “elementary level” education are consistently the largest group among Berlusconi voters. This fact supports the Goodhart (2017) somewhere/anywhere theory mentioned in chapter one that suggests the people most vulnerable to populist rhetoric and strategy are those with a low level of education. Cataldi (2012) also identifies PdL as
consistently most popular in the south and center south of the Italian peninsula. Compiling this data results in seeing the average PdL voter as religious, likely elderly women but also men, who usually are not heavily educated and live mostly in the south and center of the country.

Of Italian conservatives, targeting support of the disenfranchised southerners is feasible as southern conservatives have, until recently, been excluded by the Lega Nord party, which traditionally espoused northern superiority. Additionally, southern support for Berlusconi is connected to media consumption. Rates of television watchers and frequency are higher among those in southern regions (ISTAT, 2017). Therefore, those who consumed media via television in Italy are likely to be exposed to Berlusconi-biased programming.

The general will: Fear and financial insecurity

As Berlusconi’s popularity in the south has secured votes for Forza Italia and Popolo della Libertà in the past, understanding why this Milanese billionaire appeals to the southern Italian population is key to seeing the general will that he seeks to harness. The south has traditionally maintained a depressed economy in comparison to the north. This fact is reflected in the disparity of unemployment rates between north and south and the conflict regarding redistribution of tax money from the high-earning northern regions to the less productive southern regions. In fact “sustaining southern Italy” was one of seven campaign missions of the PdL in 2008 (Campus, 2009, p 140). Sustainment in this sense is economic because the economy is the key issue that Berlusconi supporters cite to justify their vote. During the 2008 election, the economy was a central topic as the US began to slip into the Great Recession, taking with it many less financially stable countries that relied on the US economy. His personality as a
wealthy and successful businessman provides his voters with hope for success in their own financial endeavors.

The general will of Berlusconi voters is financial security. Berlusconi is able to use this will to persuade voters by constantly promising to lower taxes. For decades, Berlusconi has campaigned on the incentive that he will be the politician to lower taxes for the Italian people, however the opposite has happened (Romei, 2013, ). In fact, the percentage of GDP related to income tax has been consistently rising since Berlusconi’s first government in 1994 from 9.82% to 11.34% while the OECD average has fallen from 9.19% to 8.42% (OECD, 2017). In fact, the “only area in which Italian tax rates reduced over the past nearly two decades is corporate taxes” (Romei, 2013) and this is credited to the Prodi government which understood the incentive of a lower corporate tax in order to attract businesses. However, this did not necessarily alleviate financial pressure on individuals.

**Figure 1: Berlusconi’s Contratto con gli Italiani**

**Figure 2: Translation of Contract with Italians**
Reinforcing the general will as financial security, Berlusconi transparently put his personal goals for Italy into a concise list in 2001 with his “Contratto con gli Italiani.” This contract, which was introduced and signed on Bruno Vespa’s show *Porta a Porta*, illustrates five goals that the then-opposition leader promised to accomplish upon securing electoral victory. According to the contract, failure to accomplish a minimum of four of the five goals would make the leader ineligible to run in the next election. All five of these goals were heavily rooted in economic concerns and are categorized as follows: financial, security, welfare, employment, infrastructure. Figures 1 and 2 show the original and translated texts. This contract, revolving around lowering taxes, raising pensions and creating employment opportunities, directly targets voters who may struggle with financial security. Two out of the five points were not related to economic stability, but regard civil security from crime and developments in infrastructure, both of which would directly benefit citizens. Therefore, this document suggests that the general will of Berlusconi’s “people” is financial security.

**Conclusion**

Berlusconism targets the fears of the disenfranchised, religious, uneducated southern population of older men and women who are likely struggling to make ends meet due to the significant unemployment rate in the south which is double that of the north, 19.4% versus 8.1% (ISTAT, 2017). While simultaneously targeting their fears, he lives their greatest desires as he represents the romanticized goal of extreme personal affluence. His promises to eliminate and/or lower taxes are met with hope from Italians who seek just a fraction of his financial security. However, in true populist style, if Berlusconi were to institutionalize his campaign ideas, his
campaign would die. If he were to lower taxes, then he would no longer have such a universally appealing campaign platform.

Of his five goals from the contract, Berlusconi was only able to achieve one: raising pensions (Vaccari, 2015). However, his failure to deliver on campaign promises did not inhibit his electoral success in 2008 as the contract was not legally binding. This demonstrates the flexibility of campaign promises and the moral flexibility of the Italian people who continue to support politicians that do not fulfill their promises. However, a turning point came in 2011 when Berlusconi was forced to resign from the office of Prime Minister that he gained in 2008. Berlusconi’s government was unable to stabilize the increasing interest rates on debt securities, risking further destabilizing the Italian economy and was therefore forced to stepdown (Chiaramonte, 2014). For the man who embodies and consistently campaigns on the idea of financial security, this failure was catastrophic, leaving many of his followers disenchanted. After his third time in government, Berlusconi still had not improved the lives of “his people”, the consequence of which I believe to be the 2013 electoral success of the MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S), the anti-political populist protest party. Therefore, while this transition should signal a new phase in post-Berlusconi Italian politics, the October 2017 elections for regional governments saw the reinstatement of the center-right coalition led by Forza Italia win the island of Sicily, beating even M5S. These regional elections are being watched closely as they likely foreshadow the events to come in the May 2018 national election. Therefore, while Berlusconi continues to have ups and downs in popularity, his party endures to carry on his populist legacy.
4. Lega Nord

Officially formed in 1991 under the leadership of Umberto Bossi, the Lega Nord per L’Indipendenza della Padania (Lega Nord, Lega, or LN) is a regionalist Italian party. Since the 2013 elections, this party has held 12 opposition seats in the Senate (3.8%) and 19 opposition seats in the Chamber of Deputies (3.0%). Despite its minority representation in the bicameral legislature, its regional approval ratings reveal more success. The Lega Nord has a tradition that is rooted in the 1980s with a federalized system of regional parties; 1991 was the date of the merging of Lega Lombarda, Lega Emiliano-Romagnola, Piedmont Autonomista, Uniun Ligure, Alleanza Toscana, and Liga Veneta. These parties were formerly allies in electoral rebellion against the centralized Italian state. This fragmented but grassroots movement was first labeled populist by Ionescu and Gellner (1970) because of the initial way Rome was identified by these groups as a political elite antagonistic to the working-class northerners. Since the party’s unification in 1991, it has undergone multiple transitions and refocusing of party values. Diamanti (1991) identifies the first four stages of the party from 1983-1991, however I expand on that to discuss the institutionalization of the party after 1992.

In the 1980s, the various chapters of the Lega Nord emerged with ethno-regionalist programs (Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Giordano, 2001; Diamanti, 1991). This means that the focus of the parties was centered on distinguishing the regions they represented as distinct from the rest of the Italian peninsula and therefore worthy of different policies of governance. This phase lasted from 1983-1987 and was marked by party leadership comparing the struggle of northern Italians to that of the then-dissolving Yugoslavia and former-Soviet satellite states
(Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Diamanti, 1991). Regionalism was a strong force of change in the east that the Lega Nord sought to harness for its own purposes during that time. This period fostered the roots of the political party, however the party message and goals have deviated from its initial purpose of ethno-regionalism. Following 1987, there was a refocusing toward socio-economic regionalism with core arguments focusing on welfare chauvinism (Vadlamannati & de Soysa, 2017). Welfare chauvinism has remained a key part of the Lega’s argument for autonomy. Following the fall of the First Republic and the revelation of Tangentopoli, the 1990-1992 period was marked by anti-state protest, a popular theme amongst the minority parties at the time as the traditional majority parties crumbled to their deaths. The final phase Diamanti (1991) identifies is the transition the Lega made to become a party of government. After his publication, the Lega Nord swept the 1992 general election and became the third most popular party with 8.65% of the national vote. Since the 1992 general election, Lega Nord has consistently been represented in the legislature. There have been two key adjustments made to the core messages of Lega propaganda since then to include anti-immigration and euroskepticism. The latter has been made most prominent with the leadership of Matteo Salvini since 2013. This constant refocusing of the core messages and values of the party is made necessary by the thin ideology of populism. In order to stay relevant and to continue gaining votes, the Lega must constantly adjust itself to what its leadership perceives to be the will of the people.

An essential shift took place within the party leadership with the emergence of Matteo Salvini who, with 82% of the party vote, replaced Umberto Bossi as party secretary/leader. Salvini’s agenda for LN strongly favored exit from the Eurozone and stopping illegal immigration (Rame, 2015). In order to achieve this agenda, Salvini has pushed for expanding the
voter base of the Lega Nord to the south, which despite seeming paradoxical, is likely in recognition of the fact that LN is forced to make coalitions with FI/PdL in order to take part in the majority of parliament. Salvini’s initiative to change the name of the party from Lega Nord to La Lega was staunchly opposed by Bossi, who responded by calling the leader a fascist, and Roberto Calderoli, vice president of the senate, who left the party because of this (Cremonesi, 2017). This shift is still taking place as I write my research but the official Lega Nord website has not changed its name therefore in this chapter I will refer to the party with its established name.

The people: I padani

The people that the Lega Nord claim to target are the padani, the people of Padania. Padania was introduced as a concept in 1995 when the party realigned itself toward secessionism, as opposed to federalism. The party’s newspaper changed from Lega Nord to La Padania in May of that year and Umberto Bossi, the long-standing party leader, announced at a meeting of the Parliament of the North, which is a non-legally binding entity of representatives from the Lega chapters, that “federalism is no use anymore.” This was a political strategy because Berlusconi’s fresh Forza Italia party had adopted a similar platform regarding federalism and the Lega risked becoming obsolete if it did not change its stance (Tambini, 2001). However, Padania does not have a homogeneous cultural history. While Lombardy and Venetia can claim dialects and long independent histories, they do not have native languages aside from Italian nor a cultural history that separates either from the peninsula. Therefore, “since there is nothing we can identify as a pre-existing Lombard or Padanian culture, the nationalism of the League is an
inauthentic posture, rather than a genuine nationalist movement” (Tambini, 2001, p 9), which leaves the question – who are “the people”?

Cento Bull and Gilbert (2001) cite Mannheimer (1991, 1993) and Diamanti (1991) in an analysis of surveys collected on Lega Nord voters. The typical profile of the 1990s Lega Nord voter was “predominantly young, male and from the lower middle class, the independent middle class and the working class” (Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001, p 69). Naturally, the majority of LN supporters came from the northern regions, with strongholds in Lombardy, Veneto, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Additionally interesting, Cesareo, Rovati and Lombardi (1989) (as cited in Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001), found in their study of 234 residents of Lombardy that the majority still lived in the same town or village in which they were born. This concept supports the Goodhart’s (2017) Anywhere/Somewhere thesis suggesting that populists are likely to have emotional and reactionary opinions regarding the land to which they, as “somewheres,” are bound.

A piece of propaganda from the 2009 regional and local elections reveals further how the party sees its voters. In a campaign video, nine individuals stare into the camera explaining their top two or three voting priorities. The transition between each speaker is marked by a disembodied voice repeating “con la Lega, si può” (with the Lega, you can) while stamping the Lega Nord Bossi logo on the screen. Of the nine individuals, each represents a target voting base that the party is attempting to reach with its propaganda. There are three laborers: a truck driver, a welder, and a factory worker; all are filmed at what appears to be their job while wearing their laborer outfits. The laborers express their priorities of less state intervention, wanting to be paid fairly and enough to be able to raise a family while also looking forward to a pension. These individuals are likely used in the propaganda to present the party as relatable to those who found
themselves victims of the global transition to a post-industrial service-based economy (Mény, 2003). In addition to the laborers, there is one small business owner depicted in a suit standing in what appears to be his factory and expresses his desire to be self-sustaining in his homeland otherwise he will be forced to move his business abroad and put all his workers on the street. There is an environmentalist man, sitting in a field of grass, prioritizing renewable energy and agricultural development. There are three women who speak: the first is a mother wanting her children to grow up learning their cultural roots, the second calls for the immediate expulsion of all clandestini, and the third, posed in front of a carabinieri truck, expresses her desire to feel safe and protected by law enforcement knowing that those who break the law will face consequences. Six out of the nine actors appear to be below the age of 30 and all the actors in the campaign video are white. With the representation of working class folk who care about their families, communities, and environment, LN appeals to precisely their zuccolo duro, their core voters, while also humanizing its campaign. The messages the actors are speaking carry LN ideas reinforcing the antagonistic binary between the people and the elite. References to less state intervention, the need for improvements in local law enforcement, and the need for job security are indirect critiques of Rome as the capital. Mentions of the expulsion of illegal immigrants and the ability to take work abroad are indirect critiques of the European Union.

The elite: Rome & Brussels

The targets of Lega Nord propaganda are not necessarily the political elites antagonistic to the general will of the LN’s “people.” This is because most Lega Nord public rhetoric attacks southerners and immigrants, but neither of these categories can be considered elites because they do not maintain positions of power allowing them to deny the general will. Therefore,
southerners and immigrants can be considered perceived threats, both of which maintain direct relationships with the constructed elites. The Lega Nord antagonizes two elite structures, both of which represent political elites; Rome and the European Union (Zaslove, 2011). Rome, as the capital of the centralized state, has been a core target since the inception of the local leagues (Zaslove, 2011; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Tambini, 2001; Diamanti, 1996). The Lega Nord and predecessors have painted Rome as the negative “other” for three central reasons: corruption, welfare chauvinism, and southern preference. Corruption came to the forefront in the 1990s with the collapse of the First Republic marked by post-war political monopolies. After nearly half the legislature was put under investigation for corruption, the Italian people sought an alternative to the traditional power structures, Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Socialista Italiana. In order to garner support from the people, the leagues actively disparaged the Italian state for its faults. This anti-Rome rhetoric is well-exemplified in the political cartoon, figure 3, published by the group Lombardia Autonomista after 1982 that depicts Lombardy as a hen laying eggs that are funneled directly to a plump woman dressed in peasants garb waiting with a basket (Tambini, 2001, p 108). This cartoon, since 1982, has been recirculated various times to promote the identity of Padania beyond the singularity of Lombardy. The cartoon identifies with writing that the peasant woman is to represent Rome, and through metaphor the grievances of welfare chauvinism. On the original Lega Lombarda cartoon, the translation reads “Shut up and pay, Lombard Ass. The Lombard hen lays golden eggs for Rome and below. They all get fried and never come back! And you Lombards just get accused of racism” (Tambini, 2001, p 108). This rhetoric justifies prejudice against the south in the names of welfare chauvinism and unfair treatment. The concepts of political corruption and unbalanced tax allocation are interrelated as
the LN voters do not want their taxes going to waste on what they perceive to be exclusively southern corruption.

![Lega Nord political cartoon](http://www.leganord.org/il-movimento/la-nostra-storia/manifesti?showall=&start=1)

Figure 1 Lega Nord political cartoon

The idea of the European Union and the Eurozone were instead initially welcomed by Bossi who presented these institutions to the people as potentially fruitful future endeavors. As the concept of a European Union was being discussed before its foundation in 1993, Bossi saw it as an opportunity to link northern Italy more closely with Europe and to distance it from Rome (Giordano, 2004). This was politically advantageous at the time as the concept of regionalism was reemerging throughout Europe. The European Union would be a regional political structure and an opportunity for the LN to demonstrate how northern Italy belongs in the same region as Germany, Switzerland, and the rest of the productive and industrial central Europe. Doing so would distance the northern region from the backwards south which was depicted as limiting and corrupt. LN promoted the idea that EU standards would safeguard Northern agricultural production, as the northern industry already complied with regulations, and would in turn punish
southern production that did not comply (Giordano, 2004). The LN leadership thought that if the central government was forced to pay fees for the informality of southern commerce, it would take more responsibility in regulating the south. Also, the Eurozone was to be an advantageous capitalist venture featuring free trade which would greatly benefit the productive north. Therefore, the Leagues were initially pro-EU.

The LN promotion of European integration peaked in 1996 when Bossi led the party and followers to believe that Italian acceptance in the Eurozone would be hindered by southern deficit problems (Giordano, 2004). After building up European integration to be financially beneficial for the country, Bossi was able to take advantage of the fears of his less-financially-secure electorate by using the southern half of the peninsula as a scapegoat. His intention was to use this reasoning in favor of secession from the republic as he thought that northern Italy would be more likely accepted into the Eurozone than the whole of Italy. This plan failed, as the entirety of Italy was accepted in the first round of applications, and corroded the Lega’s pro-euro stance. Since 1996, there has been a decline in Lega Nord’s euro-support which has snowballed into euro-skepticism and anti-euro sentiments. One of the key grievances that the LN has toward the EU is the further displacement of sovereignty which it constructed as already limited by the Italian state.

The general will: Economic autonomy

There are two key documents published by the League that demonstrate the party’s goal of carrying out the “general will” of the people: The Manifesto of the Lombard League 1983 (figure 4) originally published in the periodical Lombarda Autonomista and the Declaration of Padanian Independence (figure 5) that was read by Bossi in Venice 1996 following the first Festa
dei Popoli Padani. These two texts, which were published at the beginning and transitional moments for the party respectively, allow insight into what the party leadership believed the people wanted to hear.

The Manifesto of the Lombard League established 15 goals that the party sought to accomplish upon being elected into office. Of the 15 goals, I identified six categories, coded as: decentralization, welfare chauvinism, anti-Rome, environmentalist, protection of culture, and government involvement in stabilizing the economy. This last category was not one that I expected considering parties on the right tend to prefer economic liberalism. However, all the points in that category are vague and lack a plan of action therefore they can also be interpreted as job protectionist rather than economically liberal, which, considering the people the LN is targeting, is a logical strategy to take advantage of their fears of financial insecurity. The category coded as government interventionist has the most points: 4, 7-12. To summarize the seven points, the Lega Lombarda sought regional government protection for the economy. Decentralization was represented in points 1-3 with ideas for reorganization of the relationship between the state and its regions. Point 5 was coded as welfare chauvinist because of its will to reserve welfare for a specific group of people. Points 6 and 15 were notably anti-Rome and therefore exemplify an attack on the elite; first by calling out the state’s inability to provide adequate public services and then with the denunciation of the ‘soggiorno obbligatorio,’ a program intended to disrupt mafia influence in the south by sending Mafiosi to the north which the LN and its followers blamed for the national spread of organized crime and corruption. Culture is mentioned in point 13, which called for the use of the school system as a vehicle for preservation of language and tradition. The environment was mentioned vaguely in point 14 almost as an afterthought. From this piece of writing which was part of the foundation of the
Lega Nord movement, the general will of the people can be understood to encompass the following issues: the people want a less-centralized state able to protect their industries and jobs while preserving their social welfare and preserving their culture and environment.

The Manifest of the Lombard League

1. The transformation of the Italian state into a confederation of autonomous regions.
2. Direct democracy with popular initiatives and referenda.
3. The decentralization of political power to the provinces (canton) and to the local councils.
4. Public sector employment on an ethno-regional basis.
5. Government housing and subsidized buildings in general in Lombardy reserved for Lombards.
6. Effective health service, social security and pensions on a regional level.
7. Fiscal policy at regional level.
8. Industrialization proportional to the availability of local labor.
9. Guarantee of work for Lombard workers, or returning Lombard emigrants before those coming from other regions.
10. The creation of an economic climate that favors the return of immigrants to their country of origin.
11. The support and provision of incentives to Lombard agriculture with the defense of agricultural land from large industrial powers.
12. Particular attention to small business due to its productive nature.
13. The recuperation of the cultural and linguistic inheritance of Lombardy and its diffusion through the school system.
14. The conservation of the hydrological equilibrium of the territory, through environmental policy that does not conflict with the citizen, and industrial policy that is limited to the availability of local labor.
15. To stop the use of Lombardy as site for the ‘soggiorno obbligatorio’ and for the sending away (‘l’allontanamento definitivo’) of immigrants that commit serious crimes and get involved in kidnap, extortion or drug pushing.

key: decentralization, welfare chauvinism, anti-fascist, environmentalist, culture argument, government involvement in stabilizing the economy

Figure 2 Manifest of the Lombard League, translation by Tambini, 2001, p 42

Over a decade later and marking the change in party platform from federalist to secessionist, the Declaration of the Independence of Padania, as read by Umberto Bossi, highlighted a narrowing of the LN message. In this section of the declaration, Bossi listed the transgressions allegedly committed by the Italian state and therefore focused the political message more closely on the antagonistic relationship between the people of Padania and the state government. In analyzing this message, there are two key categories of grievances against the state: social and economic grievances. Words like “moral violence” relating to the oppression of the “social system of Padania” suggest this prioritization of the social and emotional
grievances. The pronoun “our” is used to refer to the geography suggesting a communal fight against the powers of Rome. The economic grievances are noted with references to exploitation, clientelism, waste, and mafia. Rome is depicted as a major threat to the northern economy, which can be seen as a continued theme from the prior text in that it targets the less-economically secure voters and hoping to take advantage of their fears of financial instability.

Declaration of the Independence of Padania – Venice, September 15, 1996

The history of the Italian State has become the history of colonial oppression, of economic exploitation and moral violence.

The Italian state has, through its bureaucratic apparatus, systematically occupied the economic and social system of Padania.

The Italian state has systematically annulled every form of autonomy and government from our communes, from our provinces and from our regions.

The Italian state has compromised the security of the future generations of Padania, wasting enormous resources in corruption, clientelism and criminal operations that have brought Padania and Italy to the brink of bankruptcy.

The Italian state has forced the peoples of Padania into a situation in which the products of everyday work are systematically exploited and wasted in the mafia and clientelist assistentialism of the South.

The Italian state has deliberately attempted to suppress the languages and cultural identities of the peoples of Padania through colonizing the public schools.

key: social, economic

Figure 3 Translation and coding of the Declaration of the Independence of Padania from Tambini, 2001, p 131

These key texts reflect what the Lega Nord believes its voters want to hear. As the party shifted, adapting to external pressures and a changing political landscape, the messages it expounded adjusted as well. However, from the analysis of these two texts, the theme of the economy takes center stage. While the texts were published more than a decade apart, their commonalities in attacking Rome out of defense for the northern economy demonstrate a general will to feel financially secure. The previously discussed idea of welfare chauvinism also supports this concept and is at the heart of the anti-immigration platforms of radical right populist parties throughout Europe (Vadlamannati & de Soysa, 2017). Therefore, this analysis suggests that Lega Nord voters are motivated to go to the polls because they have been convinced by party
propaganda that LN will help “the people” achieve financial security, either by limiting Rome’s perceived southern preference or by imposing immigration regulations.

**Conclusion**

Considering the question of this research asking what factors of the Italian political context contribute to the success of populist parties in Italy, the analysis of Lega Nord’s ideas of the people, their antagonistic elite, and the general will that the party claims to uphold reveals the importance placed on the economic security of working class northerners. The voters of the party have been found to be typically lower class and working class (Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001) which is reflected in the campaign advertisements valuing the opinions and priorities of workers among various other northern societal roles (Lega Nord Padania, 2009). The elite that the LN paints as antagonistic to the people are highlighted for their misappropriation of funds: Rome is referred to as a thief that wastes tax money on corruption (Zaslove, 2011; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Tambini, 2001; Diamanti, 1996) and the European Union is considered an infringement on the regions’ already weak sovereignty because of its sanctions, which leghisti would argue should only be directed at the south (Giordano, 2004). Therefore, the Lega Nord is considered primarily an ethno-regionalist populist party and secondarily a radical right populist party and the economy is one of the core values that the leadership consistently returns to appealing to the electorate.

Looking forward to the 2018 general election, LN electoral success will be contingent upon that of FI. Since the 2001 general elections, the Lega has played a part of the center-right coalition led by Berlusconi in subsequent general elections. This relationship within the coalition also regulates the relationship between the two parties because, on a national level, a vote for either party would yield the same result in ruling coalition. In this vein, LN and FI occupy the
same space, however the 2010 regional elections brought LN the opportunity to rule unaligned as the party won primacy in both Piedmont and Veneto, and later Lombardy in 2013. While Piedmont would return to PD primacy in 2014, Veneto reaffirmed its Lega affiliation in 2015, and Lombardy will have the opportunity to decide in early 2018.
5. MoVimento 5 Stelle

Il MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S) is an Italian political movement started by comedian and television personality Beppe Grillo and political activist Gianroberto Casaleggio. The pair developed a comprehensive anti-political movement with five central goals, which will be examined in detail for the understanding of the general will of the movement. In this chapter, I consistently refer to Grillo as the party leader and the embodiment of charismatic leadership because Casaleggio was more essential to the party’s strategy rather than its public image. Additionally, for this chapter the words “movement” and “party” must be clarified as the M5S leadership and message emphasize the idea that they are indeed a movement, not a party because their platform is largely anti-political therefore rejecting the institution of political parties. However, as the M5S has been represented in local governments since 2009 and in the national legislature since 2013, I will refer to them as both a movement and a party. This is because their rejection of the idea of a party does not change the fact that they have intentionally institutionalized themselves as an elected party in government.

The origin of the party is closely linked with the transformation of Grillo from TV star to political organizer. As an actor, comedian, and television personality in the 1970s and 1980s, Grillo gathered a popular following with his anti-establishment political satire that appealed to Italian audiences. His popularity grew until the 1986 incident that altered his career path. Grillo accused the then socialist government of thievery on live television and was thus expelled from the RAI production company. As RAI still is the publically owned and operated television network, it is logical that they would use their power to censure critics of the administration. However, in doing so, Grillo was painted as an outsider and an anti-government symbol for the
Italian people, despite his former success as a RAI, and therefore government, employee. After the incident, he was in and out of the television spotlight until 1993 when he officially announced the end of his television career. No longer allowing himself to use television platforms, Grillo took to the piazzas and the pubs to orate his messages denouncing the government for its corruption and scandals (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p 429). The idea of Grillo as an outsider was relatable for some Italian people who felt outside the political process as well. The fall of the First Republic reinforced this idea of disenchantment with political processes and representation.

One of the most notable and unique aspects of M5S is its web strategy. This aspect is essential to understand because of its advantages, limitations, and flexibility. Initially, the movement was anti-technology, “Grillo, who used to detest computers, to the point of destroying one at the end of each of his shows, became an enthusiast of the web” (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p 429). From destroying computers to boasting of a web-based movement, Grillo’s refocusing is typical of populist leaders who maintain a stance on an issue only until it is no longer convenient for them; the internet became a convenient platform for Grillo to gather support, therefore the digital shift took place in 2000. Since the launch of Grillo’s blog, beppegrillo.it has been the platform from which Grillo communicates with his followers and allows them to engage in discussions on forums. Because of this direct interaction between leader and followers, M5S claims to be completely transparent, unlike the traditional parties which do not have that same level of rapport. However, Tronconi (2015) suggests that the use of the blog by party members is more limited than one might assume. He claims that “84 per cent of M5S voters declared that they used television as a source of political information, while the internet is cited by 33 per cent, which is even less than newspapers (37 per cent)” (Tronconi,
This data suggests that the online participation of M5S followers is not as essential as Grillo claims it to be. This is reflected in the amount of likes and comments on each post which, for a party that secured nearly 9 million votes in 2013, never reaches more than 4,000 likes or 100 comments per post.

Despite the paradox of the blog, the meetup.com platform has proved very efficient for mobilizing the electorate as was demonstrated in the 2013 general election. The site www.beppegrillo.it/meetup/ provides instructions and information for those interested in organizing and hosting meetups. This method created a strong grassroots movement for the party through its development of strong and committed local movements throughout the peninsula and abroad. The results of this growing movement were demonstrated clearly in the results of the 2013 general election when MoVimento 5 Stelle secured the most votes of any single party represented in the Chamber of Deputies. However, the party remained in opposition because of a coalition between the Partito Democratico, Socialisti Italiani and Sinistra Ecologia Libertà. This leftist coalition, led by the PD which lost over 3 million votes in comparison to the 2008 election, secured the majority in parliament, therefore garnering them the majority bonus allocated by the 2005 Porcellum electoral law.

The 2013 election was also significant for the greater Italian political context as M5S saw unprecedented first-time electoral success. The ability of a new party to not only gain legislative representation but to also win the popular vote is astonishing when one considers the barriers to new parties: minimum 4% of the national vote for representation, no access to public funds for campaigns until represented in government, and the challenge of gathering support. However, electoral volatility was at play in this scenario as “in 2013, almost two voters out of five chose a party different from the one they had voted for in 2008 … the highest [electoral volatility] of all
Italian elections since 1945” (Pasquino, 2014, p 429). This means that many M5S voters probably voted out of protest against the inefficient mainstream parties they had supported in the past. Unsatisfied by political stagnation, Grillo’s messages against the political elite swayed them in his favor. However, the 2013 election also marked a decrease in voter turnout, 75.1% of eligible Italians voted, down 5.4% from the 2008 election (Chiaramonte, 2014, p 48). These numbers put into the context of a 30-year downturn in Italian voter turnout reveal the growing mistrust that Italians felt toward their government. This sentiment likely contributed to the success of the M5S in this election.

Despite the strength of the M5S demonstrated by the electoral results, institutionalization of the party showed its weaknesses. The rules of the party dictate that candidates representing the movement in parliament cannot previously have been elected to local or national office. This is to avoid a stagnant political scene and to avoid corruption. Therefore, the party representation in parliament is unexperienced, which has proved to be a disadvantage. Furthermore, party leadership seeks direct control over the party representatives. “Not only do Grillo and Casaleggio ‘mandate’ what their parliamentarians should do and how they must vote, but they dictate the expulsion of those who disobey and behave in a less than disciplined way” (Pasquino, 2014, p 431) also known as vincolo di mandato, a strategic reinforcement of party lines. Vincolo di Mandato was banned in the post-war 1948 constitution with Article 67 in order to protect the new republic from over-controlling parties following a tradition that started with Prime Minister Depretis in 1883 and the policy of Trasformismo; the ability to get elected with one party and then switch to another. M5S has advocated for the removal of this constitutional article suggesting that it no longer applies to the post-war context (Dall’Osso, 2017). This is deeply problematic because not only is this practice constitutionally illegal, it also consolidates power in
the hands of the party leadership. This is further problematic in the specific case of M5S because the leader, Grillo, is ineligible for office by Italian law or M5S party regulations. M5S regulates in Article 7 of their “Non Statuto” (MoVimento, 2016) that none of their parliamentary representatives can have criminal records. However, 1985 Grillo was found guilty of manslaughter. Therefore, with the advocacy of vincolo di mandato, it appears as if Grillo has created a political movement to represent himself in politics since he is ineligible.

Problems with institutionalizing the party continue as M5S representatives abide by their anti-political movement by not participating in parliamentary compromises. This effectively denies representation to constituents making it difficult to legislate for the M5S causes. Without compromising with the other parties in government, the M5S is unable to effect change alone in opposition. Therefore, “‘winning’ the election has proved easier for Grillo and his Movement than ‘governing’ the victory” (Pasquino, 2014, p 430) much to the dismay of the M5S protest voters who put their faith in the party.

The elite: Only enemies

My analysis of the perceived elite is based on Grillo’s 2013 Letter to the Italians, an English translation of which is available on his blog. This piece, which was written during the most important year of M5S’s political rise, reveals candidly how Grillo feels about the elite and who they are. His speech was delivered on the campaign trail in Bologna:

Italy must become a community. No one must be left behind. It’s intolerable, inhuman, to see the queues of people who have been turfed out of their jobs a few years before retirement age, people turfed out of their homes, and people who are unemployed waiting at the Caritas soup kitchens while the people who have plunged the country into poverty
are going around with body guards, in official blue cars and with no financial problems. The parties are the main ones responsible for this situation. They have occupied the State. They have sold it off. They have taken out its flesh from the inside. Now, thanks to the newspapers and the TV channels that they control, they present themselves as the saviours of the fatherland, they, the very people who have fleeced it and used it for their own interests (Grillo, 2013).

Based on the messages delivered in this passage, Grillo identifies “the parties” as the elite. This vague idea, which encompasses all active political parties, recognizes a collective failure rooted in the misallocation of funds and general corruption. Grillo identifies the disparity between the people, who are economically marginalized, and the political elites, whose status is acknowledged with the purchasing of bodyguards, further highlighting the wealth gap which Grillo uses to portray the elite as antagonistic. The fact that this was the only primary source I could find that directly attacks a named entity makes me hypothesize that the elite in this case is intentionally a broad and vague category allowing further flexibility of the already thin ideology.

This differs from the other parties that have actively named their enemies and have thus been forced to refocus; Berlusconi had to widen his scope from communists to the whole left, LN shifted from anti-South and pro-EU to anti-EU and southern-inclusive. In the case of M5S, the party discourse derives its strength from the emotional rhetoric conveying the idea of community and the importance of each voter as an active citizen. However, this emotional rhetoric comes from the complete and total disillusion of the efficacy of the Italian political system. Grillo convinces voters that his party is the only viable option, antagonistic to all other parties that have consistently failed and stolen from the Italian people. Therefore, the M5S
followers perceive all Italian parties and the whole party system as the political elite antagonistic to their general will.

The people: I grillini

The people who vote for M5S are referred to by the party leadership as either *amici di Beppe Grillo* or *grillini*. Identifying the people of the movement has posed challenges because I do not think that all the people who voted for M5S can be considered *grillini*. While data from the 2013 election does provide insight, it does not reveal a full picture of the people. In the election, M5S won primacy in 11 regions evenly distributed between the north and south of the peninsula: Piedmont, Liguria, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Marche, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Calabria, Sicilia, and Sardinia (Tronchi, 2013). This suggests that “the people” are not tied to a specific geographic location and that the M5S is able to overcome deeply rooted traditional loyalties (Tronchi, 2013, p 358). Therefore, “the people” are represented by Italians throughout the peninsula.

To further investigate who these people are, I took a sample of 250 from the 2,238 registered members of the Amici di Beppe Grillo di Roma. On their meetup website¹, the profiles of members are available publically with their first name, last initial, and usually a photo for their profile. The sample was taken randomly as the first 250 members on the list. I sought to discern the gender gap within the party and recorded the number of male profiles as opposed to female profiles; I assumed the gender of a profile based on both the name, as the vast majority were traditional gendered Italian names, and the profile photo, which was usually of the user’s face. If the name and photo were not clear indicators, I was able to read the person’s profile and

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¹ https://www.meetup.com/it-IT/Grilli/members/?offset=0&sort=last_visited&desc=1
determine their gender based on how they conjugated self-referential adjectives. From the 250 users in the sample, 200 were men and 50 were women, and there was only one profile that had a picture of a person of color. The data collected is consistent with that of most populist parties in Europe: male dominated (Goodhart, 2017; Cataldi, 2012; Zaslove, 2011; Mudde, 2007, 2004; Taggart, 2004).

As the profiles showed no indication of age or education level, the evaluation of “the people” remained limited. However, an understanding of the factors that contributed to the electoral volatility of 2013 help to understand the mentality of “the people.” The greater context of the 2013 election is largely rooted in the 2008 election and Berlusconi’s government that followed. As the stock market infamously crashed in America that year, Italy shortly after felt the repercussions. Berlusconi, who typically runs on a platform promising economic security, was unable to stabilize the “increased spread between German and Italian interest rates on debt securities” and was therefore forced to submit his resignation making space for Mario Monti to take over the government in November of 2011 (Chiaramonte, 2011, p 46). The recurrent theme of economic insecurity making “the people” receptive to populism reveals insight into who “the people” are. Furthermore, many are likely ex-Berlusconi voters disenchanted by his continued failure to deliver on promises to change the country after over a decade in office. This hypothesis is reinforced by how much M5S targets Sicily, a well-known Berlusconi stronghold. Grillo targeted Sicilian voters in 2012 by inaugurating his electoral campaign with a swim across the Strait of Messina (Tronconi, 2015, p 221). This spectacle garnered massive media attention before Grillo’s campaign tour through Sicily and was electorally successful as M5S narrowly beat the center-right coalition for the popular majority with 33.6% of the region’s votes as opposed to 31.3% for the coalition. Based on this analysis, the people that M5S target are Italian
men evenly distributed throughout the peninsula that were former FI/PdL or PD voters who sought to protest the established Italian party system.

**The general will: Five stars**

To understand the general will of MoVimento Cinque Stelle, I examined the Carta di Firenze (figure 6), the first manifesto Grillo proposed at a national meetup hosted in Florence, the Five Stars, which are explained in detail on the M5S blog, and a blog post about the September 8, 2007 V-Day initiative. The Carta di Firenze served to guide the grillini running in local elections in 2009. The document is a list of 12 points to form a cohesive and standardized M5S platform.

![Figure 4: Carta di Firenze](image)

![Figure 5 Translation and coding of Carta di Firenze](image)

1. Public water
2. Compulsory purification plants for every dwelling not connected to a sewage plant, communal contributions/financing for private purification plants
3. Expansion of urban green
4. Concessions on building permits only for the demolition and reconstruction of civil buildings or to make use of neglected industrial areas
5. Plan for public transportation that does not contribute to pollution and a network of bike lanes for citizens
6. Mobility plan for the disabled
7. Free internet for town residents
8. Creation of public telework points
9. Zero waste
10. Development of renewable resources like solar panels and wind turbines with contributions/financing from the towns
11. Energy efficiency
12. Promotion of local production

key = **water**    **environment**    **connectivity**  **development**  **transportation**
The 12 points are coded (figure 7) into categories that align with what were to become the 5 Stars representing the goals of the movement. Two pieces of the Carta di Firenze did not get transferred to the later platform, points 4 and 12: concessions on building permits and the promotion of local production. While the former is in promotion of building public housing and avoiding corruption in construction, the latter is to protect Italian production from competition abroad. These two ideas seem like they would appeal to a broad audience, however were not included in the later refined 5 Stars. While there is no known reason for this, I infer that populists are generally more likely to narrow their platform than expand it because part of their strength is derived from their ambiguity inherent of the thin ideology.

The Five Stars are as follows: Acqua, Ambiente, Connettivita, Sviluppo, Trasporti (water, environment, connectivity, development, and transportation). Each star has a detailed document attached to it available on the website. Each document describes a different plan or expectation regarding the goals of each star. Beginning with water, 10 key points are outlined regarding its protection. I coded the points and was able to distill them into three categories of concern: environment, economy, democracy. The coding reveals that 3 points are supporting the democratization of drinking water by making it public and accessible, 3 points regarded the economic strategies of carrying out this plan, and 5 environmental standards to be upheld. Grillo considers water a human right and therefore its public access is not only the first star but also the first point in the Carta di Firenze, reinforcing that this idea is central for the platform.

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2 http://www.movimento5stellevitorioveneto.it/features/le-5-stelle-cosa-rappresentano/
The second star is the environment and discusses the importance of respect for the environment in order to preserve it for future generations. The plan proposed by M5S includes regulating the automobile industry and construction projects while also investing heavily in renewable energies.

The third star is connectivity and promotes democratizing the internet. This is of high importance in the earlier document as well as the current document because of its potential to expand literacy, spread information faster and more efficiently, as well as potentially grow the Amici di Beppe Grillo network; the more Italians with internet access, the more potential grillini.

In the document discussing this star, there is criticism over the privatization of Telecom Italia in 1999 suggesting that connectivity should be something accessible and therefore government sponsored. The document claims that approximately 25% of Italian towns are without internet, however, this figure is neither cited nor supported with data.
The fourth star is development and is largely centered on the concept of Zero Waste, point 9 of the Carta di Firenze. To explain this concept, there are five rules (figure 8) and five actions (figure 9).

### 5 Actions

1. Reducing waste
2. Reduce unnecessary packaging (which also lowers costs)
3. Sales of post-consumer materials by recycling stores
4. Door-to-door pick up of separated waste with punctual and consistent taxes for those who do not participate
5. Separated collection outside the home – on the street, in hospitals, schools, theaters


### 5 Rules

1. Anything that cannot be recycled, reused, or composted will be eliminated in the next few years by a productive cycle in our economy through the collaboration between institutions, universities, and businesses. In the coming years, we must work to make this concept clear, there is not longer waste but post-consumer materials
2. Zero waste means more work – there is research done saying that 15 jobs are created from recycling, while landfills and incinerators, both in crisis, only create one job at a time.
3. Looking at the costs, incinerators are an incentive to waste public money. According to the Corte dei Conti, the incinerators would not be able to operate without public funding. This is an Italian embarrassment.
4. Let us remember that incinerators and landfills cause economic damage by the social costs of management, the environmental cost, and the cost sanitation. From 4 to 21 euros per ton disposed into incinerators, and 10 to 13 euros per ton disposed in a landfill. They are a ruin for our planet, our pockets and our economy.
5. The real energy-saving is the door-to-door pick up of separated waste. There was a study done on this is Mantova that demonstrated small towns can recover a lot of energy and earn real savings from differentiated door-to-door collection of waste, it is not a roadblock that instead stimulates incinerators and landfills

From reading these lists, the fourth star of development is limited to the realm of developing zero waste solutions. These ideas are closely linked to the protection of the environment by investing in research for renewable energies. This green and eco-friendly platform initially made M5S uniquely appealing but has since been adopted by other parties.

The fifth and final star is that of transportation. The document explaining the position suggests finding alternatives to fossil fuels and encouraging sustainable means like bikes, hybrids and car sharing. Again, this point is heavily centered on the environmental impact of transportation rather than the social impact. This is reminiscent of the Carta di Firenze point 5 calling for sustainable public transportation and a network of bike lanes. Therefore, the question of transportation is a fundamental one that has preoccupied M5S since its beginning.

By comparing the Carta di Firenze with the Five Stars, one can see how the movement has focused its goals into a succinct list accessible to the people. These lists portray the general will as heavily concerned with the environment and democratization. The concern with the environment is clear in stars 2 (environment), 4 (development), and 5 (transportation). As previously explained, the M5S stars outline various projects to aid the environment including zero waste, improving public transportation, and regulation of certain industries. Additionally, the concept of democracy is heavily relevant to the M5S brand of populism as stars 1 (water) and 3 (connectivity) promote more power to the people over their consumption of water and ability to connect to the rest of the world via the Internet. This seems to be the stronger party message than the environmental theme which is very apparent on paper. Curiously, there is no anti-political message among the stars. The anti-political sentiment appears to come directly from Grillo to the blog. The disparities between what is written, what is said and what is done reveal a flexible party message.
The anti-political sentiment circulated by M5S is best represented by their annual celebration of V-Day, a tradition that began in 2007. V-Day is a symbolic rebellion against the established party system. Its name is a joke derived from the Italian curse word “vaffanculo” (“fuck off”) and the 1980s anarchist graphic novel *V for Vendetta* by David Lloyd and Alan Moore. The film adaptation of the graphic novel was released in 2005, only two years prior to the Grillo blog post announcing the V-Day initiative that featured a photo of the symbolic Guy Fawkes mask (“Vaffanculo-Day”, 2007). In this selected text from the blog post, the anonymous author explains the purpose of the event,


[September will come and the Vaffanculo Day, or V-Day. A cross between the D-Day of the landing in Normandy and the V for Vendetta. It’s happening the 8th of September in piazzas throughout Italy, to remember that nothing has changed since 1943. Yesterday the king running away and the nation in disarray, today politicians securely locked in palaces immersed in “cultural” problems. The V-Day will be a day of information and public participation. Stay tuned to the blog.]

This event is representative of the actions the party takes. V-Day was organized throughout the peninsula for an estimated total of two million participants (Mueller, 2007). Organized via the blog, the event demonstrated the mobilizing capability of the grassroots movement. Grillo hosted
the nation-wide spectacle from Piazza Maggiore in Bologna where he read off 24 names of then-current parliamentarians who were also convicted criminals. This action was taken in order to raise awareness of political corruption in order to combat it.

From a combined knowledge of the written M5S party platform and the content of the V-Day event, different images of the same party come to view. On paper, the M5S is an environmentalist group advocating for democracy, while in real life and on the blog they maintain a stronger anti-political presence. These two faces allow followers to select which M5S they want to follow, permitting customizable political participation, the individuality of which is reinforced by the vague protest-themed general will. This is the populist advantage of catch-all parties because these parties can be supported by anyone because in the legislature they stand for nothing.

Conclusion

The MoVimento 5 Stelle is a political phenomenon that rapidly gained public support and electoral success in Italy. As the only Italian party to use the term “populist” self-referentially, M5S claims to represent the anti-political and anti-corruption sentiments of the Italian public. To construct an antagonistic elite structure, the leadership speaks out against the entire party system never aligning the M5S movement with the traditional left-right political spectrum. The target voting base, the movement’s people, are young men throughout the Italian peninsula who likely regretted voting for Berlusconi or PD in 2008. The general will of the M5S people is thought to be an environmentally-conscious democratic corruption-free Italy.

While the M5S is still a new party, they will play a large role in the 2018 general election. The national vote will survey whether one third of the Italian population eligible to vote is satisfied with their 2013 decision to support the M5S. While in opposition and refusing to
compromise with established parties, M5S was not able to legislate for its platform. Whether or not this further disenchants Italian voters remains to be seen. However, on a regional level, the party won the popular vote in the Sicilian regional elections October 2017 but will remain in opposition for the regional parliament because of the center-right coalition, mirroring the 2013 results for the Chamber of Deputies. The success of MoVimento in 2018 is unpredictable just as its 2013 electoral success came as a shock to the politically engaged public. Still, it will be intriguing to see if the protest party has continued success or otherwise.
6. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the research, the three parties have traditionally occupied different political spaces: FN/PdL have been the center-right, LN is radical-right, M5S claims to be outside of the political spectrum. The parties can all still be considered populist because populism is a thin-ideology, as explained in the first chapter, that constructs an antagonistic relationship between an elite structure and an exclusive group of the people. The analysis of the people revealed similar voting bases: low-income, low-educated young males. This demographic is also consistent with British and American populists (Goodhart, 2017). Despite the uniformity, the minor differences should be recognized including that FI/PdL have been more successful with women than the other parties but still have a large male base while also maintaining the most religious voters by comparison (Cataldi, 2012) and that the voters of all three parties are not strictly low-income but cover the breadth of the range from poor, to working class, to lower-middle class (Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Cataldi, 2012). However, these minor differences are not prominent enough to warrant the statement that each party targets a distinct voter segment.

The question of the elite is more revealing regarding distinct positioning. While Berlusconi consistently attacks communists and the left for what he considers corruption and inefficiency (Ruzza & Fella, 2009), the Lega Nord has built its platform opposed to the centralized state and the European Union. M5S has emerged with an anti-political and anti-party campaign. While all three parties have an anti-Rome core, they each maintain variations on the sentiment. Berlusconism is essentially against Rome’s traditional dominance by communists; LN is anti-Rome because of their perception of the capital’s southern preference demonstrated in the redistribution of wealth from the North to the South, protection of mafia industries, and inability
to develop the south to encourage self-sufficiency; the M5S is anti-Rome for everything that Rome represents, which in their eyes is corruption, extortion, theft, and waste. The way in which the parties construct the elite distinguishes the M5S from the other populist options by tapping into the essential anti-Rome core of Italian disenchantment. While protest voters in the past might have seen FI/PdL or LN as options to vote for based on their discontent, since 2009 they have their own party.

The recurrent anti-Rome theme as communicated by the significant populist parties is likely an expression of Italy’s democratic malaise. Carboni (2010) uses this label “malaise” to describe the public Italian sentiment toward its democratic system. The term suggests discomfort, a shared feeling the author attributes to three negative trends since the 1980s. The first trend in decline is political party membership. In 1980, of the 42,000,000 eligible Italian voters, 4,100,000 were members of political parties; however, in 2007 party membership fell to 2,600,000 despite the voting population increasing to 47,100,000 (Van Biezen et al, 2012). The party membership statistics suggest a growing mistrust of political parties, a sentiment reflected in the electoral success of populist alternatives. Decline in voter turnout and reliability on institutions are the other two trends Carboni (2010) recognizes.

While these three trends do offer insight into the weakening democratic framework of Italian politics, decline in party membership and voter turnout are also global trends that are taking place beyond the Italian context (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2004). Therefore, global trends cannot be regarded as the sole factors that contribute to the success of Italian populism. However, this merits the question of why the Italian context is especially vulnerable to the effects of these trends. The answer to this lies in the transition from the First Republic.
The *mani pulite* investigations during the crisis of *Tangentopoli* revealed the widespread involvement of political officials in illegal activities. Thousands of local politicians, over five hundred deputies and senators, and six former prime ministers were all investigated during this political crisis (Vannucci, 2009, p 233). The ousting of the majority of the political class was thought to create space for new and uncorrupted political leadership. The investigations were viewed as the cleaning of the political scene, which would yield an improvement in the future. However, this brings into question the very transition from the First Republic to the Second because I argue that there was no transition, only a façade that served to further frustrate Italian voters by raising their moral standards for political elite. The fall of the First Republic was supposed to signal a new phase in politics excluding the corrupt elite; while the formerly dominant parties DC and PCI have since been dissolved, their power has merely been transferred to different entities. Vannucci (2009) refers to this situation as “the Italian abnormality … the presence in an advanced democracy of levels of corruption higher than those to be found in some developing countries” (p 257). The Italian abnormality is likely the reason behind weak institutions and civic culture. The phenomenon is best explained from both an economic perspective and a socio-cultural perspective. Economically, corruption pervades if there is more to gain than there is to lose. Socio-culturally, Vannucci (2009) suggests that the political class must model civic culture for citizens, a sentiment demonstrated by Berlusconi’s 2003 defense in court when he said that yes, the law was equal for everyone but it was more equal for him because he was voted by the majority of Italy thus licensing him to act freely. His quote suggests that his position in power merits special treatment, an example of how the political class does not model positive civic participation. Consequently, the corruption of Italian politics is deeply rooted and *mani pulite* was only able to draw short-term attention to the matter. The legacy of the
political crisis is, “a deep-rooted pessimism concerning the integrity of political and economic elites; a delegitimation of almost all institutional authorities; [and] reinforcement of the widespread tolerance of illegal practices” (Vannucci, 2009, p. 258). Instead of improving Italian politics by eliminating corruption, the 1990s crisis established the sentimental foundation for populist success rooted in heavy disenchantment and a normalization of crime.

Looking forward, the May 2018 general election may demonstrate a shift in the paradigm. As the M5S targeted Sicily in 2013 with Grillo making the spectacle of swimming the strait of Messina to kick off the campaign tour, LN has rebranded as recently as October 2017 as La Lega in order to be more inclusive of southern voters (Cremonesi, 2017). Whether or not this tactical shift will improve electoral standing for LN remains to be seen. However, it is difficult to imagine initial electoral success in the south for a group that has preached their superiority for the past three decades. The results of the 2017 regional election in Sicily may foreshadow success for M5S despite the upholding of Berlusconi’s legacy. The center-right coalition, led by the resurgence of Forza Italia, claimed 40% of the seats in the regional legislature, while the M5S ran nonaligned earning 34.5%; but by looking at the popular vote, M5S won with 26.7% as opposed to FI which alone secured 16.4% of votes. The 2017 Sicilian regional election at the very least does reinforce the fact that FI requires a coalition to secure a majority while the M5S continues to be nominally successful alone.

When the Italian people go to vote in May, they will again be faced with a decision between the center-left PD, center-right FI, radical-ethno-regionalist LN, and anti-political M5S. Each of the populist parties (FI, LN, M5S) uses populism to garner support, to stay relevant in the rapidly changing political scene and to distinguish themselves from the elites that are antagonistic to the general will of the people. This phenomenon, which has gripped Italy since
Berlusconi was first installed in government in 1994, continued in 2013 with M5S winning the popular vote. While populism appears to be an attractive option for Italian voters, it is necessary to remember that the phenomenon is attractive largely due to the feeling that traditional government and traditional parties have failed. The failure of democratic efficiency is met with deeply rooted mistrust generated by a legacy of corruption as the political class failed to model positive civic participation. The question of democracy is essential for the future of the Italian state and for the possibility of regaining civic trust, a necessary facet of democratic success.
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