

A Comparative Analysis of Populisms in Europe: exploring populist parties' ideological flexibility and ambiguity

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Abstract. Despite the recent academic literature widely focused on populism research, the development of populist parties' ideologies remains one of the least explored factors. As such, this chapter provides two different approaches in examining populist parties' ideologies in Western Europe. More specifically, it namely investigates: (a) the causes behind their ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of their ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term. The first topic will be explored comparing the ideological flexibility of The League and the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage. While the second topic will be analyzed comparing the impact of the ideological ambiguity of Italian populist parties (M5S Party, The League and Brothers of Italy) to their electoral performance at the national and subnational levels. Through the deploy of multiple quantitative methods, including secondary data analysis (from the CMP and CHES databases) and manual content analysis, the central finding of the first case study is that both The League and the National Rally have been ideologically flexible – whilst in different ways – with regards to the new transnational cleav-

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age regardless of their party reputation on the European (EU) issue. For the second case study, the core finding is that the M5S Party has suffered a severe electoral decline since the 2018 domestic election. The main factor behind this electoral performance is due to its ideological ambiguity. By contrast, The League and Brothers of Italy Parties have adopted clear positional stances. The results from both case studies are important as they demonstrate the development of populist parties' ideology, alongside underlying as the research has much to debate about both the nature and impact of populist parties' ideologies³.

Keywords: Populism; Ideology; Flexibility/Ambiguity; Transnational cleavage; Electoral performance.

1. Introduction

This chapter provides a comparative approach in examining populist parties in Western Europe. More specifically, we explore two key themes that provide different empirical insights when investigating the ideology of populist parties in Europe, namely: (a) the causes behind their ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of their ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term. For the first theme, we will compare the ideological flexibility of two 'established' populist political parties with regards to the European (EU) issue which constitutes a new transnational cleavage structure. Therefore, two countries in Western Europe (France and Italy) are selected as both country cases

³ Alessio Scopelliti's part of the chapter draws on his ongoing research which explores the ideological flexibility of populist parties in both France and Italy. James F. Downes examine the negative electoral consequences of ideological flexibility for the valence populist M5S Party in Italy, drawing on his co-authored work with Nicola Palma (University of Bologna).

share similar political, economic, and cultural experiences of the European integration process and witnessed the recent pivotal role of populist parties (such as the National Rally and The League) within their national party systems.

While, in exploring the second theme, we will explore the electoral consequences of ideological ambiguity within one country case (Italy) as it offers the possibility to compare different ‘types’ of populist parties (The League, Brothers of Italy, and Five Star Movement) within the same national and sub-national level party systems. Therefore, the chapter draws on a ‘supply-side’ approach in investigating the implications of the ongoing ideological transformations of populist parties in contemporary European politics.

Two core empirical findings are found in the chapter. Firstly, the chapter demonstrates that, over long periods of time, established populist political parties are more flexible than we thought. Both country cases highlight the overall agenda flexibility on the EU issue for these two established populist *radical right* parties: The League and National Rally. Moreover, the main findings of the chapter highlight how established populist radical right parties can employ diverse ideological elements at the national level via employing stances that include both elements from Euroscepticism and Europeanism.

Secondly, focusing on a short timeframe, the chapter highlights the negative role played by ideological ambiguous party strategies (issue blurring) specifically on the electoral fortunes of the valence populist M5S Party in Italy. The main findings for the M5S Party shows how a lack of ‘clarity’ (clear positions) on key socio-economic and socio-cultural issues has hindered the party electorally, particularly in the post-2018 Italian General Election context. In contrast, the M5S’s main electoral competitors, The League and Brothers of Italy Par-

ties have adopted clear positional stances on a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. Therefore, the main findings in the M5S case study highlight the widespread anti-incumbency effects for the valence populist M5S Party, with a lack of clear policy direction (ambiguity) hindering the party electorally and contributing to the party's ongoing systematic electoral decline post-2018 Italian political landscape.

2. Defining Populism and Parties' Ideological Flexibility and Ambiguity

2.1. The Ideational Approach of Populism: The Case of the Five Star Movement

A wealth of academic literature has been conducted on the concept of populism in recent years. There are numerous key features of populism; the antagonistic struggle between the "pure people" and the corrupt elite as well as a harsh criticism of the institutions of representative democracy (see Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007). These elements have characterized the political rise and the electoral success of the populist M5S Party in Italy. From the initial refusal to forge alliances with traditional political parties considered as belonging to a corrupt caste (see Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013) to the emphasis attributed to the tools of direct democracy, capable of involving citizens in the decision-making process (Manucci et al, 2018); alongside post-ideological approaches capable of guaranteeing the electoral support of voters now disillusioned by the crisis of the political system (Russo et al., 2017).

We build on the existing literature in party politics which argues that the M5S party should be defined as neither a left-wing political party, nor a right one, due to its capacity of adopting contingent stances located at different points in the

ideological left-right spectrum. This approach is consistent with recent contributions to the study of populism, such as the *valence* populist classification (see Zulianello, 2020). Building on the so-called ideational approach on populism (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2007) this categorization enriches the traditional distinction between left-wing and right-wing populist parties by adding a new variant to which valence populist parties belong. Instead of being ideologically positioned along the various dimensions of the party system, valence populist parties emphasize non-positional policy domains, such as anti-corruption and anti-political establishment rhetoric.

Furthermore, the pairing of populist rhetoric and a diversified ideological background operates also in the definitions of other scholars who identify as *polyvalent* or *eclectic* the tendency of M5S to adopt left-wing positions on economic issues whilst adopting conservative positions on socio-cultural policy issues, such as the party's vague and nativist position on immigration and European integration (see Mosca and Tronconi, 2019; Pirro, 2018; Pirro and Taggart, 2018; Zulianello, 2020).

The party's diverse ideology also reflects the ideological and political positioning of its voters (see Isernia et al, 2018). The electoral success of M5S, especially its exceptional result achieved in the 2018 Italian General Election, occurred in a political context of increasing dissatisfaction amongst voters with existing political parties on the mainstream of Italian politics, alongside socio-economic events like the long-term effects of multiple crises in Europe, such as the 2008-13 economic crisis (Downes and Loveless, 2018) and the 2015-2018 EU refugee crisis (Downes et al., 2021).

Since M5S was founded in 2009 by the comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo, the M5S has focused on anti-establishment

positions, on the merit of direct democracy alongside the need for redistributive and environmental policies. In particular, by means of emphasizing welfare and social protection policies, the party acted as issue-entrepreneurs to secure electoral consensus, exploiting the low emphasis attributed by mainstream parties to policy issues related to the provision of social welfare schemes (De Vries and Hobolt, 2014). Thus, prior to the 2018 Italian General Election, the M5S centered its electoral propaganda on its anti-establishment rhetoric alongside the support of redistributive policies to reduce poverty and enhance social security schemes to unemployed persons.

2.2. The Political-Strategic Approach of Populism: The Cases of The League and The National Rally

Alongside the ideational approach, the second most used theory to study populism in the academic literature is the political-strategic approach. Academic scholarship often refers to populism as a core founding feature for certain political parties, especially those belonging to the far-right party family (see e.g., Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2007; Betz and Meret, 2012). Nonetheless, scholars such as Weyland (2017) are skeptical with the ideational approach because it is arguably limited for a deeper understanding on the implications and operationalization of such phenomenon.

The main argument in favor of the political-strategic approach is the chameleon effect of such features, although the ideational approach has become the most dominant in the political science literature (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017), it remains ambiguous. The main issue is that the identification of ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupted elite’ can have different meanings according to the different types of both (a)

populist parties that can be generated from the (b) left vs. right ideological spectrum.

For instance, Bugarić (2019) speaks of populist *radical left* parties as those political forces that change the current status quo through the reduction of income inequality and slightly retreating from the economic consequences of globalization (see Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). On the other hand, populist *radical right* parties are more focused in overcoming the corrupted elite in the defense of the interests of the ‘pure (native) people’, which purity is, therefore, determined by one’s ethnic belonging to the majority group in the country (Rydgren, 2007). For the latter, the fight against the ‘establishment’ is meant to protect the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the native majority population.

Moreover, some recent studies confirm that the feature of populism is not unique of fringe parties, but it can also be employed by mainstream parties such as La République En Marche! in France (see Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Perottino, and Guasti, 2020) or the Democratic Party in Italy between 2016 and 2018 (Salvati, 2016; Castaldo and Verzichelli, 2020). Scholars often refer to these cases as constituting centrist populism or technocratic populism. Furthermore, a different kind of populism is one which emphasizes technocrat competences in response to the ‘incompetence’ of populist radical parties.

On this basis, populism is more recognized as a political strategy that can be easily employed by a multitude of ideologies. In Jagers and Walgrave’s (2007: 323) words:

Populism, thinly defined, has no political color; it is colorless and can be of the left and of the right. It is a normal political style adopted by all kinds of politicians from all times. Populism is simply a strategy to mobilize support, it is a standard communication technique to reach out to the constituency.

In line with the above literature, we argue that both The League and the National Rally best represented the political-strategic approach of populism. The core ideologies of these two parties are not derived from the ‘moral’ conflict between the elites and the people, but they are rather the ultimate consequence of three main constitutive features that best reflect contemporary radical right ideology: nativism, authoritarianism, and hostility toward liberal democracy. To deliver these three different strands, The League and the National Rally strategically employ populist features, which includes: offering simplistic solution over complex issues (often through deploying plain and emotional use of language) and framing themselves as the saviors of their countries through the extraordinary capacities of their charismatic leaders.

2.3. Defining the Ideological Flexibility and Ambiguity of Political Parties

Drawing on ideas of rational choice institutionalism, political parties are conceptualized in this chapter as actors that behave instrumentally according to their goal, which is gathering the maximum number of votes (Downs, 1957). Drawing from Harmel and Janda (1994: 275), parties’ ideological flexibility and ambiguity coincides with their definition of party change which occurs as “*any variation, alteration or modification* in how parties are organized, what human and material resources they can draw upon, *what they stand for* and what they do” (*our emphasis*). In its broadest sense, this definition encompasses a variety of elements that can determine party flexibility, stretching beyond the scope of this contribution (e.g., parties’ organizational theory).

This definition provides useful insights to implement rational choice theory when exploring party ideological flexibil-

ity and ambiguity. The key point proposed by Harmel and Janda is that of including not only contextual/external (or demand side) factors as the driving forces that shape parties' behavior, but there are also internal (or supply-side) factors which also play an important role in exploring party's ideological change (Hornig, 2010: 26-27). To quote Sartori (1990: 169), using as an example the Italian Communist Party:

It is not the 'objective' class (class conditions) that creates the party, but the party that creates the 'subjective' class (class consciousness). [...] The party is not a 'consequence' of the class. Rather, and before, it is the class that receives its identity from the party.

To sum up, the ideological flexibility and ambiguity of political parties is theoretically conceptualized as "any variation, alteration, or modification [...] [on] what they stand for" (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 275) and it is empirically operationalized by observing changes within the supply-side of political parties (see Hornig, 2010: 26-27).

3. Ideological Flexibility: Changes of the European Issue within the Established Populist Radical Right Agenda

Having discussed parties' ideological flexibility and explored the instrumental behavior assumptions of rational choice institutionalism, in this section we will explore the core findings on the first thematic focus of this chapter: the ideological flexibility of established populist radical right parties with regards to the European issue in the long-term. Firstly, while briefly introducing the rationale why comparing the ideological flexibility of The League and the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage, we construct a causal argument, that the flexibility of a political party is bounded

(but not limited) by the nature of its founding cleavage. Subsequently, we explore the main features of these ideological changes within their party agenda from one domestic election to another in the last four decades by exploring the multidimensionality of the European issue: the institutional dimension (Federalism vs. Soverainisme), the economic dimension (Marketism vs. Welfare Chauvinism) and the cultural dimension (Multiculturalism vs. Nativism).

3.1. Combining Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism

Based on historical institutionalist ideas, political parties are often portrayed as ideologically inflexible by nature. This inflexibility is mainly assumed from a tactical point of view. Indeed, the ideological flexibility of parties can be very harmful for party reputation and, thus voters would not trust a party that changes position too many times (Bouteca and Devos, 2016: 4-5). In fact, established political parties are constrained by their history and societal backgrounds, and they cannot ignore it (Meyer, 2013; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). In this sense, there is the implicit assumption that when a political party belongs “to a given side of the cleavage [, it] does not change over time by definition” (Emanuele et al., 2020: 7).

However, drawing on Katznelson and Weingast’s contribution (2005), we argue that it is possible to combine elements from historical institutionalism – e.g., notions of path dependency – with the wider processes of rational choice institutionalism – e.g., the agency factor of political parties – to explore party ideological flexibility (Weingast, 2005). As such, when looking at parties through rational choice institutionalist eyes, parties have goals, and they want to accomplish them, but relying on the assumption of “bounded rationality” from

the neo-institutionalism theory, it might be more problematic for a party to change its founding cleavage as it is closely connected with the reasons that the party was politically mobilized (regardless of the salience of that topic in the public debate).

For instance, Volkens and Klingemann (2002: 145) provide the following example. It would be unusual for a communist party to shift from proposing policies to defend fair wages and being voted for by people belonging to the working class, to policies that propose a free-market regime and then, being voted for by employers. For that reason, although we consider political parties as votes-oriented entities, we argue that we shall consider the bounded nature of their founding cleavage. As outlined above, this is what is called the assumption of *bounded rationality*: the claim that a political party is constrained (but not limited) by its founding cleavage.

Furthermore, the selection of The League and the National Rally as case studies for this comparative analysis is driven by two main reasons. The first one is because both parties are particularly similar. As described above, they belong to the same radical right party family and, for that reason, they are both considered as EU issue owners (in line with the issue ownership theory) who are historically antagonistic towards the European integration process (see e.g. Leruth et al., 2018; Vasilopoulou 2018a, 2018b) and “just as the religious cleavage and the class cleavage were raised by Catholic and socialist parties on one side of the divide” (Hooghe and Marks, 2018: 111), in the current Western European party competition, the new transnational cleavage structure is primarily mobilized by radical right parties. Secondly, these parties are not identical. In fact, the second reason to select these parties is due to their different founding cleavage. On the one hand, (a) the League has a long independentist history being founded on

the classical regional cleavage (Mannheimer, 1991). On the other hand, the (b) National Rally is a party that was founded on the new transnational cleavage as, from the origins of the party, the firm belief to pursue and maintain national self-determination forms the bedrock of its natural antagonization of the European integration process (see Goodliffe, 2015; Ivaldi, 2018).

3.2. The Restructuring of the European Issue: Changes in Terms of Emphasis and Position

In this chapter, political parties' agenda is defined as a product of an interaction between (a) political offers and (b) political narratives. The political offer indicates, in a more practical way, what is a party's budgetary plan for those policies that it wants to accomplish once joining the government. While the political narrative has the role to reinforce voters' support from previous elections or to appeal new voters. Both elements are fundamental to have a clear picture of what political parties say during a domestic election campaign since voters do not only rely on single sources when they must inform themselves on what are the political alternatives during an electoral campaign. Through deploying quantitative methods, such as secondary data analysis and manual content analysis of primary data, we coded multiple sources of partisan literature with the same codebook that included both parties' manifestos and official press/social media releases⁴. Subsequently, we computed the mean between the political offer

⁴ See Appendix 1 for the data sources.

and the political narrative to have a complete overview of parties' agenda⁵.

Moreover, to graphically represent the ideological flexibility of the case studies, we combined two measures to plot how issue emphasis and position have changed within parties' political agenda in the long-term. The first one is the standard deviation to measure the extent to which the emphasis or position of parties tend to be close or distant from one year to another. The second one is the measurement of trend lines coefficient for each ideological conflict in order to observe in which direction the party tends to move after long periods of time. With this methodological strategy, we can then observe and, therefore, compare how the classical cleavages⁶ (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), the transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) and the dimensions of the transnational cleavage have changed over the years.

3.2.1 The Ideological flexibility of The League in terms of Emphasis and Position

Figure 1 plots The League's ideological flexibility in terms of issue emphasis in all (a) cleavage structures and (b) dimensions of the new transnational cleavage. It is important to note that some cleavages are less flexible than others. In particular, the community cleavage, the religious cleavage and the class cleavage did not significantly change when com-

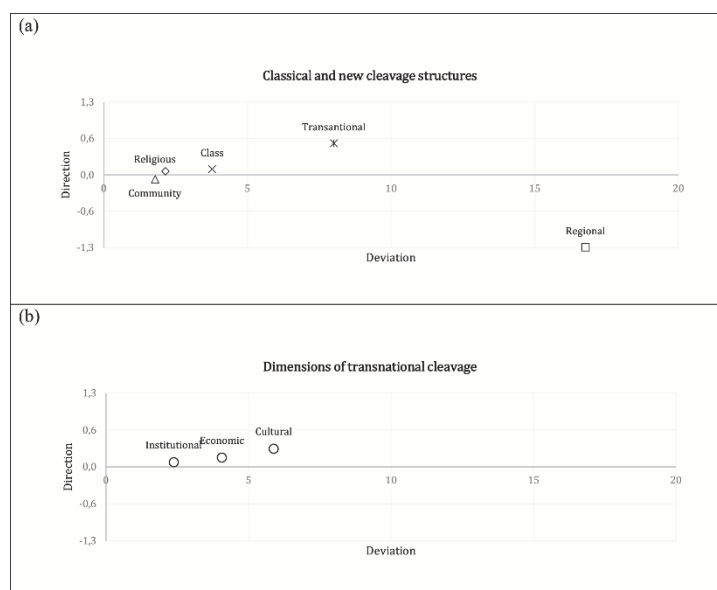
⁵ See Appendix 2 the overall supply side of The League and the National Rally in both terms of emphasis and position.

⁶ The classical cleavages mentioned above refer to the four classical ideological conflicts identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967): 'State vs. Church' (religious cleavage), 'Center vs. Periphery' (regional cleavage), 'Urban vs. Rural' (community cleavage) and 'Employers vs. Workers' (class cleavage).

pared with the other two cleavages (transnational and regional). When focusing on the new transnational cleavage, from 1983 to 2018, The League has constantly increased the level of emphasis of this new ideological conflict in every national election. This result suggests that, over the years, the transnational cleavage has become an issue that has increased in terms of priority within The League's supply-side in increasing its ownership of the European issue.

Furthermore, the second part (b) of Figure 1 shows that within the new transnational cleavage, the institutional and economic dimensions are less flexible when compared to the cultural dimension. These results suggest that the institutional dimension and economic dimension did not substantially change in the last ten domestic electoral campaigns. On the other hand, among the three dimensions constituting the new transnational cleavage, the cultural dimension is the one that mostly influenced the ideological flexibility of The League within its political agenda by increasing its European issue ownership. This result is pretty much in line with our expectations since radical right parties often deliver most of their messages towards their electorate on cultural-related issues such as the discourse to favor nativist policies to the detriment of multicultural policies.

Figure 1 – Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of emphasis:

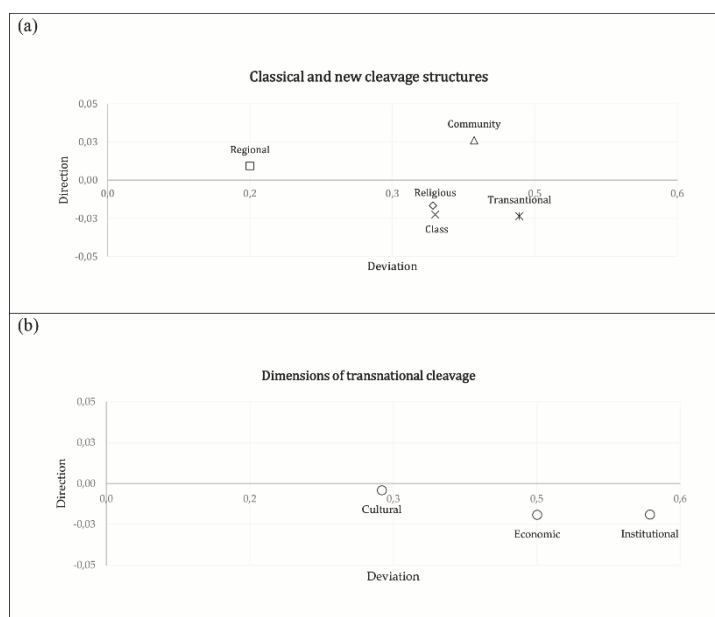


Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

Figure 2 below plots the ideological flexibility of The League in terms of issue position. The first part (a) is dedicated to the flexibility of both classical and new cleavages. This part shows that the regional cleavage is least flexible when compared with the other cleavages. By contrast, the other classical cleavages (religious, class and community) are moderately flexible. Ultimately, the transnational cleavage looks to be the most flexible ideological conflict, especially in terms of deviation. This means that The League tends to shift position on the European issue more often than the other cleavages from one election to another. Particularly, The League tends to shift position towards the anti-EU dichotomy. Therefore, the next stage is to observe which dimension

mostly influence this positional shift of The League with regards to the transnational cleavage. Thus, moving to the second part (b) of Figure 2, we can notice that amongst these dimensions, the cultural dimension is the least flexible issue. It is almost frozen (in terms of direction). While the economic and the institutional dimensions are, on in contrast, the most flexible ones within the new transnational cleavage. Moreover, they both tend towards the dichotomies that constitute an anti-EU position, which are welfare chauvinism and sovrenism. These results are important as they demonstrate that The League actively changed its supply-side with regards to the new transnational cleavage, particularly with the economic and institutional dimensions to coherently align its political agenda on the EU towards all positions that antagonize the European integration process (Souverainisme, Welfare Chauvinism and Nativism).

Figure 2 – Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of Position:



Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

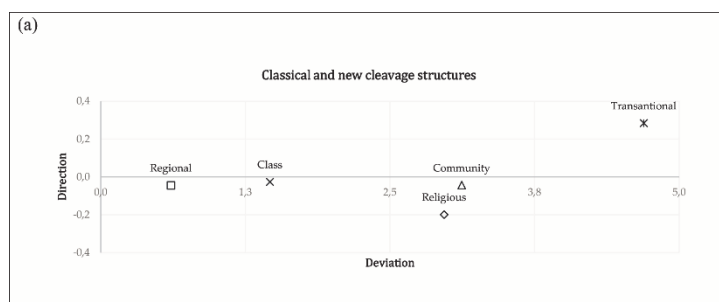
3.2.2 The Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Emphasis and Position

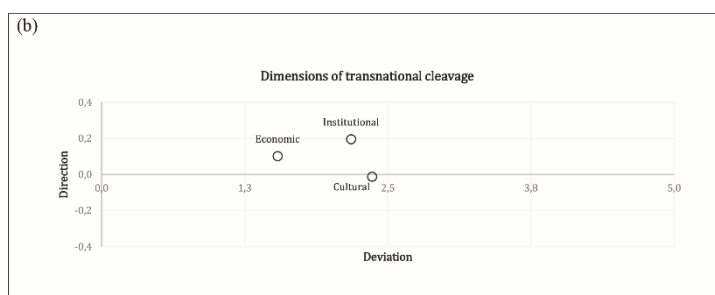
In this section, we focus on the ideological flexibility of the National Rally with regards to the new transnational cleavage. Starting with the ideological flexibility of the National Rally in terms of emphasis, the first part (1) of Figure 3 shows that all classical cleavages are less flexible than the new transnational cleavage. In fact, the new transnational cleavage is the most flexible when compared with the other classical cleavages both in terms of variation and direction. These results clearly demonstrate how the National Rally increased its ‘issue own-

ership' over the new transnational cleavage from 1981 to 2017.

However, expanding the analysis to observe which dimension is behind the increase of the National Rally's European issue ownership, when looking at the second part (b) of Figure 3, the institutional dimension is the most flexible dimension when compared to the economic and cultural dimensions. One would expect that the cultural dimension (which is at the core of the nativist discourses produced by far-right movements) would have been increasing over the years. Alternatively, the National Rally appeared to have increased its issue ownership on the EU especially through the institutional dimension by increasing the urgency to reclaim national sovereignty from the transnational to the national level.

Figure 3 – Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Emphasis:



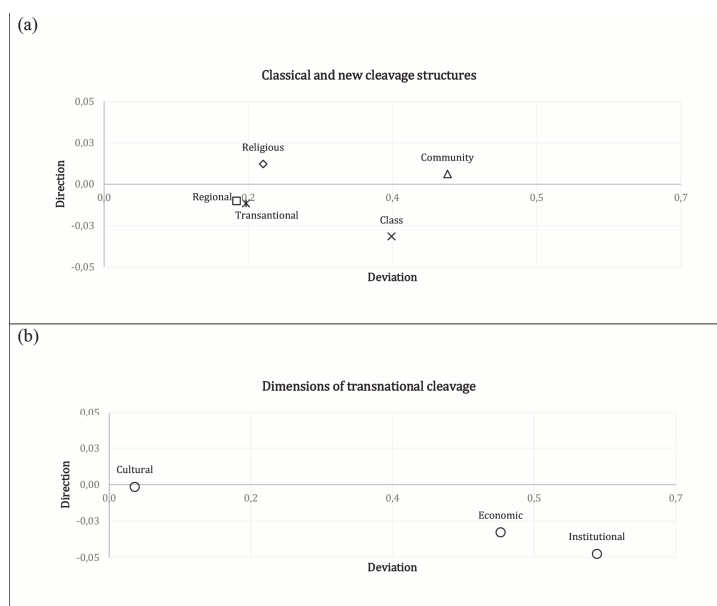


Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

Finally, when exploring the ideological flexibility of the new transnational cleavage within the National Rally's political agenda in terms of position, we can observe from Figure 4, in the first part (a), that the new transnational cleavage is particularly frozen when compared with the other classical cleavages. The National Rally never ideologically changed in terms of position over the years, but it kept a strong polarized position towards the dichotomy 'anti-EU'. Therefore, considering these results, it is necessary to expand the analysis within the new transnational cleavage to observe which dimension (or dimensions) caused this ideological "rigidity" of the National Rally with regards to the European issue. Thus, when looking in the second part (b) of Figure 4, one can observe that the cultural dimension is the one that substantially anchored the ideological flexibility of the National Rally as the French radical right party did not substantially change in both terms of deviation and direction over the years. By contrast, the economic and the institutional dimensions demonstrated significant level of ideological flexibility, and in both cases, the National Rally Party shifted position towards the dichotomies of welfare chauvinism and souvrenism. However, the cultural dimension is "frozen" and therefore ameliorates the effect of

the other two dimensions in influencing the ideological flexibility of the new transnational cleavage.

Figure 4 – Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Position:



Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

3.2.3 Core Findings

Based on the empirical results, when looking at the changes within the political parties' agenda, this section makes two key findings. The first one is that established populist radical right parties, such as The League and the National Rally, demonstrate ideological flexibility with regards to the new transnational cleavage (in the long-term) regardless of their consolidated brand reputation or their funding cleavage. However, there are few differences between the case studies.

It emerges from this analysis that The League has been ideologically flexible with the new transnational cleavage in terms of both emphasis and position. In contrast, the transnational cleavage (its founding cleavage) appears to constrain the flexibility of the National Rally Party. Therefore, these results confirm our theoretical expectations that political parties can be ideologically flexible. More specifically, in line with the bounding assumption, the National Rally had more difficulties than The League to be ideologically flexible. Yet, regardless of its founding cleavage, the National Rally Party still found enough space to change its European issue ownership.

The second major finding relies on the differences amongst the two case studies with regards to their ideological flexibility towards the dimensions constituting the new transnational cleavage. In fact, when deepening the analysis on the dimensions of the new transnational cleavage for each case study, the empirical analysis reveals that their ideological flexibility on new transnational cleavage has been shaped by different dimensions within the supply-side of The League and the National Rally. Starting with the institutional and economic dimensions, within the supply-side of the League, the economic dimension is the one that mostly shaped League's attitude towards the EU.

Since the 1980s, The League has particularly favored the European integration process from an economic perspective, such as the implementation of the European Monetary Union because the Italian party considered the Northern Italian regions as ready to handle this economic process (Quaglia, 2008: 69). In this sense, the economic dimensions of the new transnational cleavage were historically perceived by the League as an instrument to advantage the northern regions to the detriment of the Central and Southern regions of Italy. For instance, in 1992, the newspaper *Lombardia Autonomista*

used to run the headline “farther from Rome, closer to Europe” (*Lombarida Autonomista*, 5 March 1992). While, moving to the National Rally, both the institutional and the economic dimensions had a decisive role in shaping the new transnational cleavage, but mostly in terms of emphasis.

Indeed, the French National Rally Party under the guise of its former alias (*The National Front*) accelerated its coverage on the EU issue since the early 1980s to compete as a political alternative, at the national level, against the ultra-liberal agenda promoted by the EU. In terms of issue position, the institutional dimension was mostly flexible. Although it is important to note that the ambiguous pro-Europeanism of the National Rally was primarily motivated by geo-political interests against the Soviet threat (Shields, 2007: 240). For instance, in the electoral manifesto of 1981 one of the main program points was “ensuring peace and national independence through loyalty to our European and Atlantic alliances” (National Rally manifesto, 1981) and Jean-Marie Le Pen would also repeatedly declare that “Europe needs France, the world needs Europe. A strong France within a strong Europe” (National Hebdo, 26 February 1986).

Finally, the cultural dimension has impacted differently the overall ideological flexibility of both *The League* and the National Rally. Within the supply-side of *The League*, the cultural dimension has highly influenced its flexibility on the new transnational cleavage in terms of issue emphasis. Under Matteo Salvini’s leadership of *The League Party*, a large proportion of *The League’s* electoral campaign are focused on the nativist rhetoric and the promises to implement policies to disadvantage immigration and multiculturalism in Italy. In contrast, the cultural dimension has been a counterweight to the National Rally’s ideological flexibility regarding the new transnational cleavage. Simply put, the “Nativist” dichotomy is

what anchored the National Rally to the “anti-EU” dichotomy over the period observed.

4. Ideological Ambiguity: The Electoral Decline of the Five Star Movement in Italy

In the next section we examine the key empirical findings on the second key theme of this chapter. We then investigate how intra-party and organizational features such as the degree of internal dissent and parties’ ideological ambiguous features have an impact in explaining political parties’ electoral failure, via the case of the M5S party in the post-2018 Italian General Election political landscape.

4.1. The M5S’s Electoral Performance: Post-2018 Italian Landscape:

The regional elections held after the 2018 national parliamentary election took place whilst the Five Star Movement was actively involved as a Coalition partner of two consecutive and highly heterogeneous coalition governments. The first government (Conte I, 2018-2019) took office after a coalition agreement with the radical right League party. By virtue of the overall number of parliamentary seats acquired after the 2018 Italian General Election, the Five Star Movement played a central role in the process of government formation by proposing Giuseppe Conte as the leader of the coalition government with the League. The second M5S led coalition government (Conte II, 2019-2021) was sworn in, with the center-left Democratic Party, after the League party leader’s (i.e., Matteo Salvini) motion of no confidence against the prime

minister alongside Salvini's failed attempt to call for early elections in 2019.

Nonetheless, national alliances are only partially reflected in the electoral dynamics at a subnational level (see Vampa, 2021). Indeed, the M5S leadership led the party to refuse any coalition agreement in nearly each regional election without replicating the national government alliances at the regional level. Only in the regions of Umbria and Liguria did M5S form an alliance with the then government ally, the Democratic Party with both parties supporting the same political candidate.

The reasons for the M5S's regional electoral strategy are multifaceted. On the one hand, the party risks losing its status as an 'outsider' now that it has served in separate coalition governments at the national level and is perceived as being part of the ruling political establishment. On the other hand, the electoral system of the Italian regions with the head of the regional executives being directly elected according to a presidential style system, increases the role of the candidates, and thus makes the subnational party competition less liable to national political parties' dynamics (see Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2017). This trend is confirmed by the electoral strategy of incumbent regional presidents aspiring to hold office, right-wing and left-wing alike, to participate in regional elections with the joint support of both personal and candidate-centered lists alongside traditional political parties' endorsement.

In some regions, such as Campania, Liguria and Veneto, the lists centered on the candidate's figures exceeded those of the mainstream political parties, thereby effectively guaranteeing the re-election of incumbent heads in regional executives (i.e., Vincenzo De Luca in Campania, Giovanni Toti in Liguria, alongside Luca Zaia in Veneto). In this political con-

text, the Five Star Movement, which did not have any incumbent regional presidents among its ranks, supported its candidates only through the list attributed to the party at the national level. Therefore, the M5S party faced difficulties in both setting up their electoral campaign exclusively on subnational issues and at the same time in exploiting the electoral strength of local candidates.

The explanations for M5S's electoral decline at the regional level are multifaceted. These explanations range from the lack of a clear organizational structure at the subnational level to the attitude of the M5S leadership, struggling with different internal factions and political currents, alongside the resignation of Luigi Di Maio as the leader of the party in early 2020.

Furthermore, the M5S party and its leadership hierarchy must increasingly come to terms with the increasing perception that the party is no longer an insurgent anti-establishment 'challenger' party, but instead is now part of the political establishment as a 'governing' party, having served in the last three coalition governments. In addition, it can be argued that some of M5S's voters did not vehemently oppose a governing alliance with the radical right League, whilst other M5S voters expected the former government agreement with the Democratic Party to become structural and long-term oriented, under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

4.2. Ambiguity and Blurring (M5S) v. Clarity (Lega and Fratelli d'Italia) Party Positions:

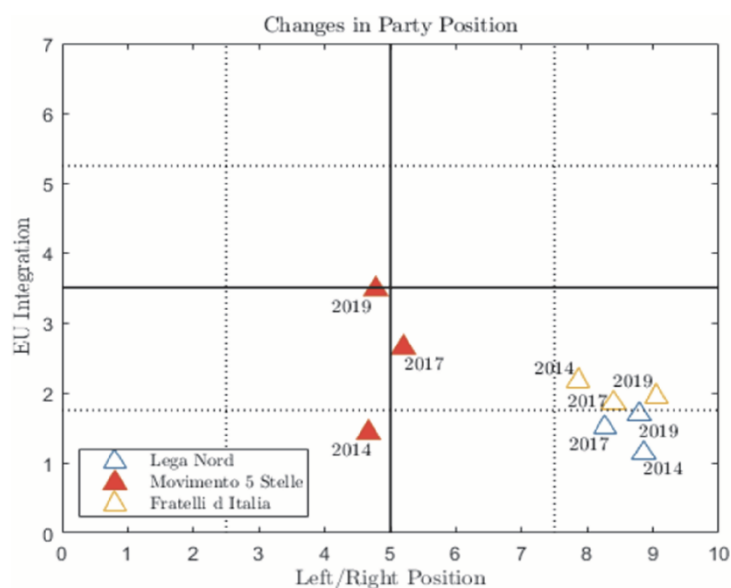
Drawing on the internationally renowned Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data (CHES) from the 2014, 2017 and 2019 waves, we make four important observations regarding the party posi-

tions and stances of the ideologically ‘ambiguous’ M5S, alongside the populist radical right Lega and its electoral competitor, Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy). We argue that the ambiguity of the Five Star Movement is one of the main causes of its recent electoral decline.

(1) EU Integration:

Figure 5 below depicts party positions on EU Integration on a 1-7 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 7 implies positive EU attitudes, whereas a score of 1 indicates a strong opposition to EU Integration and the wider EU project. Figure 5 shows how the Populist Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) has shifted from being anti-EU, towards a more ‘neutral’ and ideologically ambiguous position on EU Integration. The populist radical right Lega and Fratelli d’Italia both resemble and adopt clear anti-EU stances on this dimension.

Figure 5 – Changes in Party Positions on EU Integration



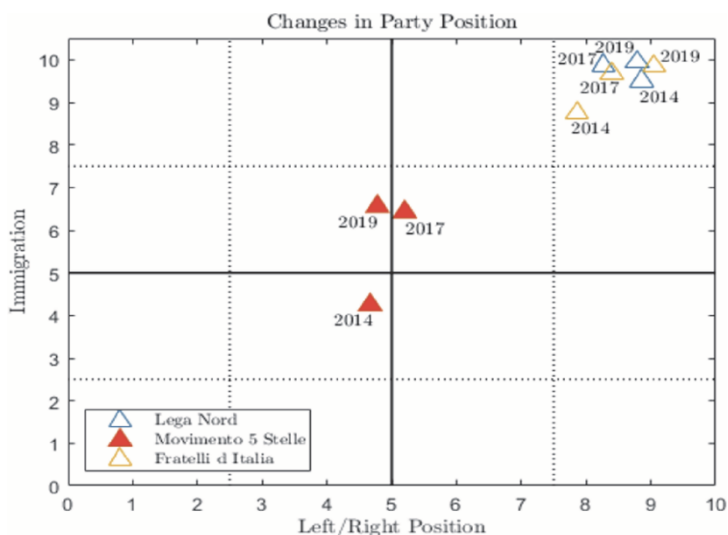
(2) Immigration:

Figure 6 below depicts party positions on Immigration on a 0-10 scale in 2014, 2017 and 2019. A score of 10 indicates more restrictionist and anti-immigration attitudes, whereas a score of 0 implies much more positive attitudes towards immigration. Figure 8 below outlines how M5S has also become more right-wing on the Immigration issue (particularly from 2014). However, the Populist Radical Right *Lega* is much more anti-immigrant and its positions on Immigration have largely remained 'static'.

The PRR League's nearest electoral competitor *Fratelli d'Italia* has adopted a near 'identical' anti-immigrant stance, an increase from (a) 2014 to (b) 2017 and (c) 2019. Though

not presented in the first two charts, the ‘mainstream’ center left Democratic Party (PD) and center right Forza Italia (FI) parties in Italy are much pro-EU Integration, in comparison to the three ‘main’ populist parties in Italy. Interestingly, for each of the three time points (i.e., 2014, 2017 and 2019) *Forza Italia* (FI) maintained a more anti-immigrant position than the Five Star Movement did during this period.

Figure 6 – Changes in Party Positions on Immigration



(3) Economics:

Figure 7 measures party positions on redistribution via a 0-10 scale in 2014 and 2019. A score of 0 implies that a political party favors redistribution, whereas a score of 10 implies a party strongly opposes redistribution. Figure 7 outlines how party positioning on “Redistribution” is particularly noteworthy. It seems to confirm M5S’s attempt to set the political

agenda on different issues from the ones at the center of the League's political campaign, such as Immigration and Internal Security. According to the CHES 2019 latest wave, the issue salience attributed by the League to immigration policy in 2019 was around its maximum value (i.e., 9.9 out of 10) against the 6.5 points attributed by the M5S. In contrast, the Five Star Movement's salience on redistribution was nearly 8, in comparison to the League's score of 5 on the same issue.

Figure 8 also provides an additional measure that includes improving public services versus reducing taxes and demonstrates how M5S has become more left wing (from 2014) in 2019 and favors improving public services.

During the recent Coalition Government (2018-2019) between M5S and LN, the Five Star Movement launched the Citizenship Income which is a redistribution of wealth measure. The positioning of the government allies in 2019 are almost opposite on this issue. It is important to note that the Figures show that M5S's positions on socio-economic issues correspond more to the left-wing dimension, rather than a clear story about 'ambiguity.'

Figure 7 – Changes in Party Positions on Redistribution of Wealth

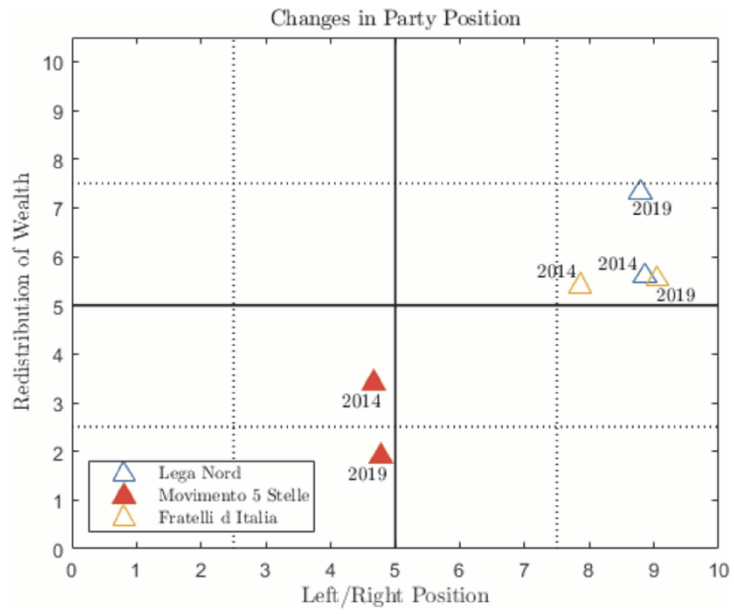


Figure 8 – Changes in Improving public services versus reducing taxes

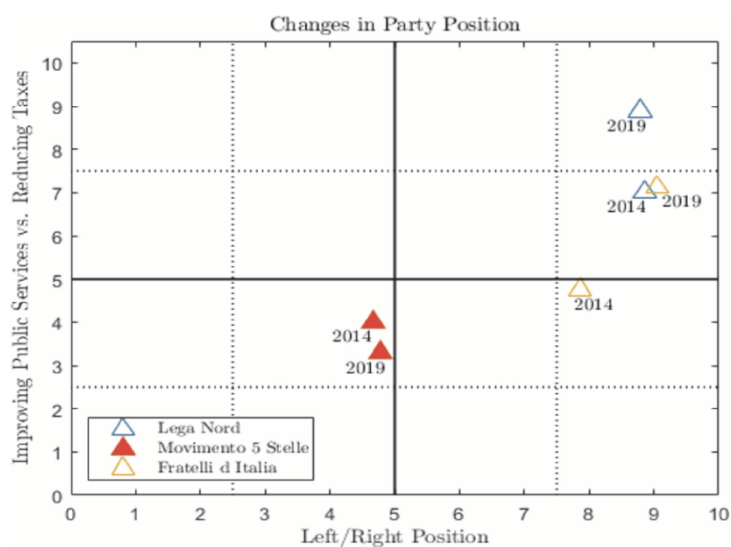


Table 1: Main Political Parties in Italy and Issue Blurring (CHES, 2019)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Integration: Blurry (2019)	GALTAN: Blurry (2019)	Left-Right Economic Position: Blurry (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Ambiguous	6.3	4.9	6.1
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	3.1	0.8	3.6

Political Party	Party Family	EU Integration: Blurry (2019)	GALTAN: Blurry (2019)	Left-Right Economic Position: Blurry (2019)
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	1.5	0.5	4.4
Democratic Party (PD)	Center Left	1.9	3.1	3.2
Forza Italia (FI)	Center Right	5	4	2.3
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	3.4	2.9	3.6

Source: CHES (2019); *Note:* Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

4.3. M5S Internal Party Dissent and Issue Blurring

The CHES 2019 wave includes variables that measure (a) the degree to which political parties ‘blur’ issues and (b) ‘dissent’ within political parties (see Table 1). Both measures are drawn on in the Italian political context and show the issue ‘blurring’ of M5S compared to other political parties in Italy, alongside internal party dissent of M5S on EU Integration, immigration, and left-right economic positions. Compared to all the other main political parties in Italy, M5S has the highest level of issue blurring and at the same time, the highest level of party dissent.

We can also examine the mean change in party dissent on EU integration and immigration. Table 2 shows that internal party dissent within M5S has increased substantially on immigration (0.6) and European integration (+1.4). These are important findings and demonstrate the ideologically ‘ambiguous’ nature of M5S and a party that has high levels of internal party dissent in 2019.⁷

Table 2: Main Political Parties in Italy and Issue Dissent (CHES, 2019 and 2017)

Political Party	Party Family	EU Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Immigration Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Left-Right Economic Position: Dissent (2019)
Five Star Movement (M5S)	Am-biguously	2019: 5.5 2017: 4.1	2019: 5.4 2017: 4.8	6.9
Lega (LN)	Radical Right	2019: 2.8 2017: 1.2	2019: 0.2 2017: 0.1	2.9

⁷ It is also important to underline that these findings do not capture the context or the timeframe of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The CHES data that we draw on does not extend to this time period and it is also important to supplement the party position data with individual level survey data, such as voters’ perceptions data of the three different populist parties. However, early indications show that M5S is continuing its ‘downward’ trend in 2022.

Political Party	Party Family	EU Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Immigration Dissent (2019 and 2017)	Left-Right Economic Position: Dissent (2019)
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	Radical Right	2019: 0.6 2017: 0.3	2019: 0.3 2017: 0.8	2.8
Democratic Party (PD)	Center Left	2019: 1.6 2017: 3	2019: 3.6 2017: 4.1	5.4
Forza Italia (FI)	Center Right	2019: 4.1 2017: 4.8	2019: 3.8 2017: 3.1	4
	CHES AVERAGE (2019)	2.6	2.7	2.9

Source: CHES (2019 and 2017); *Note:* Figures rounded up or down to 1 decimal place.

4.4. Implications for the Future of M5S

The main argument in this section of the chapter is that the valence populist M5S Party has harmed itself electorally due to its ideological ambiguity. In essence, M5S has self-sabotaged (i.e., internal factors) its electoral prospects, due to its (a) 'issue blurring' and (b) ideologically ambiguous positions on key issues such as EU Integration (adopting more 'neutral' positions) alongside immigration (adopting more

right-wing positions) and a wider range of left-wing stances on socio-economic issues.

This has arguably made it difficult for M5S's policies to resonate clearly amongst Italian voters. In contrast, the PRR *Lega* alongside its right-wing electoral competitor, *Fratelli d'Italia* have adopted clearer positions (i.e., external factors) on a wide range of socio-cultural issues, namely on immigration and EU Integration.

Though M5S has been in Coalition Government and served in three successive Coalition Governments, the ideological future of M5S looks increasingly uncertain, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and a declining macro-economic situation in Italy that has continued into 2022. This wider pattern of electoral volatility and party fragmentation is likely to continue in the coming future for the M5S Party, particularly with the upcoming 2023 Italian General Election looming ever closer on the horizon.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored two key themes of (a) the causes behind parties' ideological flexibility in the long-term and (b) the electoral consequences of parties' ideological ambiguity (or issue blurring) in the short-term within the context of contemporary populism in Western European party politics via a 'supply-side' approach. The first case study in Italy and France highlighted the overall agenda flexibility on the EU issue for established populist radical right parties in Italy and France. Therefore, this case study provided two important implications for the academic literature. Firstly, this chapter improves our understanding on political parties' ideology and its flexibility. In fact, whilst previous research argued about

the ideological rigidity of parties arguing that political parties “do not reinvent themselves with each electoral cycle [as they] have long-standing agendas” (Marks et al., 2002: 586), in contrast, we argue that populist political parties change ideologically because they lack a *Weltanschauung* (worldview), like empty vessels whose ideology blows in response to their electoral interests. Furthermore, this study has contributed to extending the current literature on Euroscepticism, in exposing how established populist radical right parties employ ideological ambiguities that allows them to adopt elements from both Europeanism and Euroscepticism. Such ideological ambiguity may conceivably be an advantage for established populist radical right parties to distinguish themselves as a valid political alternative in their national party systems to the mainstream parties, which historically tends to favor the European integration process in all its dimensions (Brack and Startin, 2015).

The second case study in Italy highlights the multifaceted electoral decline of the valence populist M5S Party and how in the post-2018 Italian General Election context, the M5S Party has suffered a severe electoral decline. The valence populist M5S Party has experienced a high degree of internal party disunity alongside lacking clear positional stances on both socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. In direct contrast, the M5S’s main electoral competitors, The League and Brothers of Italy Parties have adopted clear positional stances on a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. Thus, the main findings in the M5S case highlight the widespread anti-incumbency effects for the valence populist M5S Party, with a lack of clear policy direction (ambiguity) hindering the party electorally and contributing to the party’s ongoing systematic electoral decline post-2018 Italian political landscape.

Therefore, both case studies are important as they demonstrate the evolving strategies of different ‘types’ of populist parties in twenty-first century European politics, alongside developing a wider thought-provoking debate about both the nature and impact of populist parties’ ideologies.

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Appendix 1:

League's political offer: selected electoral manifestos

Election Year	Source	Type of data
1983	Lombardia Autonomista	Primary
1987	Piemont Autonomista	Primary
1992	CMP	Secondary
1994	CMP	Secondary
1996	CMP	Secondary
2001	CMP	Secondary
2006	CMP	Secondary
2008	CMP	Secondary
2013	CMP	Secondary
2018	CMP	Secondary

League's political narrative: selected newspapers and tweets

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
27 June 1983	October-November 1982* September 1983	Lombardia Autonomista	Primary
15 June 1987	April 1987 May 1987	Piemont Autonomista	Primary
06 April 1992	January 1992 31 January 1992 24 February 1992 25 February 1992 March 1992	Lombardia Autonomista and Piemont Autonomista	Primary

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Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
	05 March 1992 10 March 1992 30 March 1992		
28 March 1994	04 November 1993 17 December 1993 19 January 1994 26 January 1994 02 February 1994 09 February 1994 16 February 1994 28 February 1994 09 March 1994	Lega Nord: Italia federale	Primary
21 April 1996	22 January 1996 29 January 1996 05 February 1996 12 February 1996 19 February 1996 26 February 1996 04 March 1996 11 March 1996 18 March 1996 25 March 1996	Lega Nord: Italia federale	Primary
13 May 2001	All days from 13 April 2001 to 12 May 2001	La Padania	Primary
10 April 2006	All days from 10 March 2006 to 09 April 2006	La Padania	Primary
14 April 2008	All days from 14 March 2008 to 14 April 2008	La Padania	Primary

Populism and Far-Right

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
25 February 2013	All days from 25 January 2013 to 25 February 2013	La Padania	Primary
04 March 2018	All days from 04 February 2018 to 04 March 2018	@LegaSalvini	Primary

Notes: * we included also the number published in 1982 as it was the absolute 1st number of the newspaper and September 1983 is the second absolute number.

National rally's political offer: selected electoral manifestos

Election Year	Source	Type of data
1981	SciencesPo et les Archives électorales du CEVIPOF	Primary
1986	CMP	Secondary
1988	CMP	Secondary
1993	CMP	Secondary
1997	CMP	Secondary
2002	CMP	Secondary
2007	CMP	Secondary
2012	CMP	Secondary
2017	CMP	Secondary

French National Elections (Newspapers)

Election Day	Period covered	Newspaper/Twitter account	Type of data
12 March 1978	February/March 1978	Le National	Primary
14 June 1981	May 1981	Le National	Primary
16 March 1986	All days from 13 February 1986 to 20 March 1986	National Hebdo	Primary
05 June 1988	All days from 05 May 1988 to 09 June 1988	National Hebdo	Primary
21 March 1993	All days from 18 February 1993 to 25 March 1993	National Hebdo	Primary
25 May 1997	All days from 24 April 1997 to 29 May 1997	National Hebdo	Primary
09 June 2002	All days from 09 May 2002 to 13 June 2002	National Hebdo	Primary
10 June 2007	All days from 10 May 2007 to 14 June 2007	National Hebdo	Primary
10 June 2012	All days from 10 May 2012 to 10 June 2012	@RNational_off	Primary
11 June 2017	All days from 11 May 2017 to 11 June 2017	@RNational_off	Primary

Appendix 2:

Operationalization and results of parties' emphasis and position on cleavage structures

EMPHASIS = DICHOTOMY 1 + DICHOTOMY 2

Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of emphasis

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Transnational cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	0	58	5	2	5	5	0	0
1987	1	27	9	9	3	1	0	3
1992	1	34	5	10	11	4	3	4
1994	2	22	5	11	10	1	7	1
1996	0	25	4	11	10	1	5	4
2001	4	12	2	8	7	4	2	1
2006	7	3	2	11	12	8	2	1
2008	3	20	4	3	18	4	14	0
2013	2	8	5	17	10	2	6	3
2018	1	3	4	7	32	20	3	8

Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of emphasis

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Trans-national cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	9	2	13	9	19	13	6	0
1987	6	1	4	7	19	13	4	2
1992	8	1	3	5	17	12	4	1
1994	8	1	4	5	16	10	4	2
1996	9	0	4	4	28	17	6	5
2001	7	1	3	5	18	9	6	3
2006	9	0	8	6	23	12	7	5
2008	2	0	6	7	23	12	6	6
2013	2	0	6	6	29	14	9	6

$$\text{POSITION} = \frac{\text{DICHOTOMY 1} - \text{DICHOTOMY 2}}{\text{DICHOTOMY 1} + \text{DICHOTOMY 2}}$$

Ideological Flexibility of The League in terms of Position

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Trans- national cleavage	Cul- tural di- men- sion	Eco- nomic di- men- sion	Institu- tional dimen- sion
1983	0.0	-1.0	0.0	0.5	-0.5	-0.5	0.0	0.0
1987	-1.0	-1.0	-0.4	0.5	0.4	-0.5	0.0	0.6
1992	-0.5	-1.0	-0.4	0.8	-0.3	-1.0	-1.0	0.8
1994	-1.0	-1.0	-0.3	0.8	-0.1	-1.0	-0.2	0.0
1996	-0.4	-1.0	-0.3	0.8	0.0	-0.5	-0.9	0.9
2001	-0.6	-0.9	0.0	0.1	0.0	-0.5	0.0	0.8
2006	-1.0	-1.0	0.0	0.4	-0.6	-1.0	-0.2	0.6
2008	-0.9	-1.0	0.7	0.2	-0.9	-0.9	-1.0	0.7
2013	-0.8	-0.8	0.4	0.1	-0.4	-0.3	-0.6	0.2
2018	-1.0	-0.5	0.5	-0.1	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0

Ideological Flexibility of the National Rally in terms of Position

	Religious cleavage	Regional cleavage	Community cleavage	Class cleavage	Trans-national cleavage	Cultural dimension	Economic dimension	Institutional dimension
1983	-1.0	0.2	0.0	1.0	-0.8	-1.0	-0.5	0.0
1987	-1.0	-0.3	0.1	0.9	-0.4	-0.9	0.5	0.7
1992	-1.0	-0.3	-0.6	0.9	-0.7	-1.0	0.1	-0.5
1994	-1.0	-0.3	-0.5	1.0	-0.7	-1.0	-0.4	-0.5
1996	-1.0	-0.3	-0.6	1.0	-0.9	-1.0	-0.7	-1.0
2001	-1.0	-0.1	-0.9	0.8	-0.9	-1.0	-0.8	-1.0
2006	-0.5	-0.3	-0.4	0.7	-0.8	-1.0	-0.4	-1.0
2008	-1.0	-0.3	-0.3	0.2	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0
2013	-0.6	-0.3	0.5	0.2	-1.0	-1.0	-0.9	-1.0

Appendix 3:

CHES Variables:

EU_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on European integration in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

GALTAN_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on libertarian/traditional issues in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

LRECON_BLUR = how blurry was each party's position on economic issues in 2019.

0 = Not at all blurred.

10 = Extremely blurred.

EU_DISENT = degree of dissent on European integration in 2017 and 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

IMMIGRATE_DISENT = degree of dissent on immigration policy in 2017 and 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

LRECON_DISENT = degree of dissent on economic issues in 2019.

0 = Party was completely united.

10 = Party was extremely divided.

LRGEN = POSITION of the party in 2019 in terms of its overall ideological stance.

0 = Extreme Left.

5 = Center.

10 = Extreme Right.