

**Working paper for the ECPR General Conference in
Hamburg 2018**

*„Populistization“ of Mainstream Parties?
Evidence for populist contagion in Italy*

Panel: Far Right ‘Movement Parties’ in Europe

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Paper presented and published by

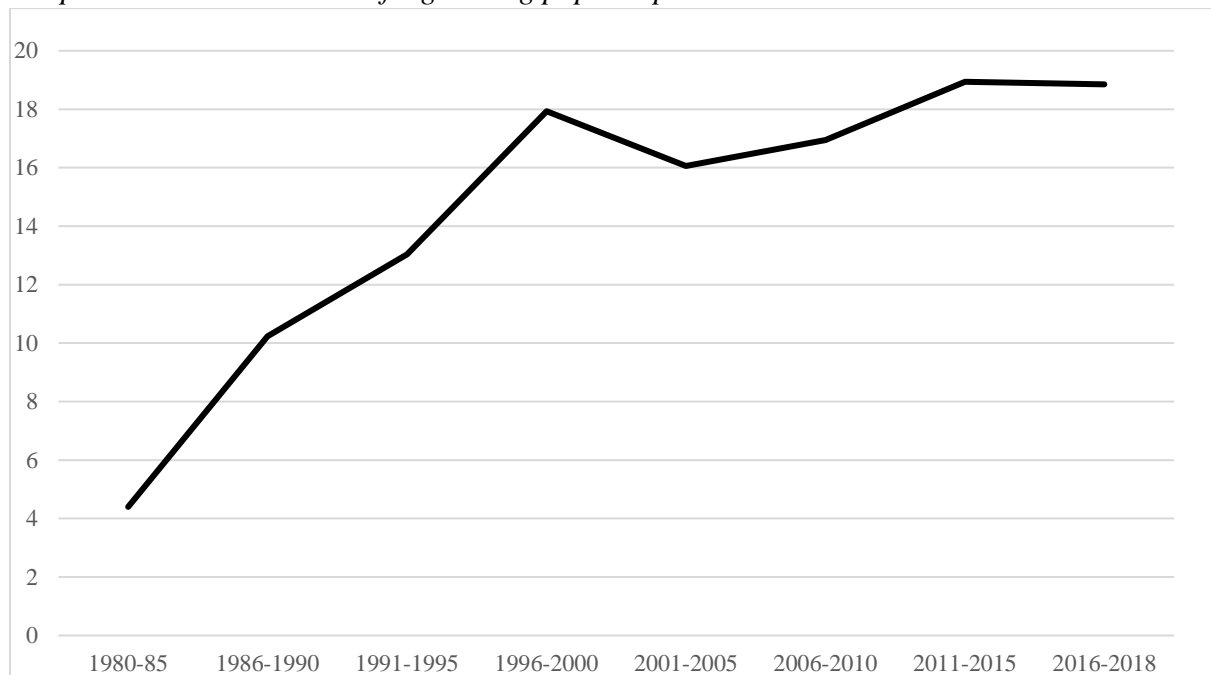
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1. A „populist Zeitgeist“ in Europe

The rise of populist parties and movements in western Europe has brought about the thesis of the „populist Zeitgeist“ in the European social sciences (Mudde 2004, 542). The increasing electoral success of (right-wing) populist parties over the past decades is a fact that can hardly be denied, and easily illustrated (Graph 1).

Populist parties are usually characterized as anti-establishment parties that accuse the political elite of not acting in the interests of the people. People-centrism, demanding popular sovereignty, and anti-elitism are often named as the three central elements of populism¹ (Ernst et al. 2017; Manucci and Weber 2017; Müller et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2014; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011).

Graph 1: Electoral success of right-wing populist parties since 1980



Own illustration (arithmetic mean of national election results of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ + BZÖ), Danish People's Party, Progress Party of Norway, Swiss People's Party, and Flemish Block (+Flemish Interest).

However, according to Mudde, the populist Zeitgeist does not only mean electoral success of populist parties, but the reaction of established parties towards the populists as well. They are implementing populist elements in their own rhetoric and claims:

[...] parts of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion und inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes und rhetoric to try und fight off the challenge. This dynamic will bring about a populist Zeitgeist, like the one we are facing today, which will dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over its top (Mudde 2004, 563).

¹ See chapter 2.

Following this argumentation, mainstream parties do not become thoroughly populist, but adopt a “soft populism”, or a “populist rhetoric” (Mudde 2013, 9). Oscar Mazzoleni reiterates the claims that a “populist contamination of mainstream political discourse” can be observed and that the discourses of the established parties become increasingly populist (Mazzoleni 2008, 57). Frank Decker and Marcel Lewandowsky even see it as proven that the established non-populist parties take over both political positions of right-wing populist actors, as well as their appeal to the voter (Decker and Lewandowsky 2017, 22).

Yet, even though many scholars argue that a “populistization” (Manucci und Weber 2017, 4) of mainstream parties’ communication can be observed, this is “rarely investigated empirically” (ibid., 1). The question whether mainstream parties actually make use of more populist discourses has hardly been investigated so far. Only a few studies directly or indirectly touch upon this question. Their main focus is the measurement of “people-centrism” and “anti-elitism”. While this gives us insight into the general development of the usage of populist concepts, it does not distinguish between left and right-wing populism (Manucci und Weber 2017; Rooduijn, Lange, und van der Brug 2014). I seek to provide a more detailed view into the contagion of populist communication, highlighting the differences stemming from left- and right-wing populism. Furthermore, former studies that measure populism over time use electoral programs as text sources (ibid.). In this study, electoral programs are combined with data from the party websites, in order to broaden the focus, and to take not only official programs but also public statements from party politicians into account. This paper should be considered as a contribution to the current debate about how left-, right-, and “core-”populist “communication strategies” spread, and how this could be measured over time.

Empirically, the question *if* mainstream parties are becoming more populist will be addressed. Some hypothesis deriving from theory of party behaviour are formulated regarding the populist contagion on mainstream parties. Yet, I cannot account for the underlying causal mechanism. In addition to the establishment of a new populist party, there are several other factors that might influence mainstream parties’ populist communication: The development of the financial crisis, inner-party conflicts and changes, events on the European level, the factor of the party being in opposition or in government, as well as many others. The goal of this study is to design an approach that creates a most-likely scenario for a populistization of mainstream parties’ communication and that is applicable to other cases as well. Here, the approach is applied to the Italian case.

2. Defining Populism

Many scholars emphasize the difficulty to define populism (Canovan 1999; Priester 2011; Wirth et al. 2016), or highlight the widespread disagreement concerning the use of the term as an analytical category (see: Decker 2006; Dubiel 1986; Rensmann 2006). In fact, the term populism has been and is being avoided or is not considered as measurable by some social scientists (Dézé 2004; Ford 1992; Harris 1994; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Korsch and Wölk 2014).

However, populism seems to be widely accepted as an analytical concept nowadays, even though different approaches and definitions continue to exist. It is hereby noteworthy that most of them are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other (Manucci and Weber 2017, 2; Rooduijn 2013, 5). Within the plethora of definitions, the following are particularly noteworthy.

Some scholars understand populism as a form of organization of political parties or social movements (Weyland 2001), or as a political style: an „appeal to ‚the people““, characterized through „simplicity and directness“ (Canovan 1999, 2ff). According to Alan Knight, populism is „best defined in terms of a particular political style, characteristically involving a proclaimed rapport with ‘the people’“ (Knight, 1998, 223). In this respect populist parties present themselves as ‘different’ and as outsiders by pretending to belong to the ordinary people, rather than the (party)elites, as well as by creating or displaying “social movement practices” like “marches and demonstrations” (Kitschelt 2006, 286ff).

Finally, populism is also characterized „as a set of ideas“ (Hawkins 2009, 1043). In this respect, Cas Mudde's frequently cited journal article “The Populist Zeitgeist” – in which he characterized populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde 2004, 542) – has had great impact, and the definition of populism presented in his paper was adopted by several scholars (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Canovan 2002; Decker 2006; Mudde 2004; Rensmann 2006; Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018). Other social scientists talk of “discourses” (Hawkins 2009; Laclau 2005). Even though not all of these scholars agree with Mudde’s approach of populism as an ideology, they agree that populism is a kind of political worldview, “a Manichaeian way of looking at democracy in which the Good side is equated with the will of the people, and the Evil side is equated with a conspiring elite” (Rooduijn 2013, 5).

As in other studies that attempt to make populism measurable (Ernst et al. 2017; Manucci and Weber 2017; Müller et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2013; Wirth et al. 2016), this work defines populism in the sense of Mudde as

“an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543).

According to this definition, populism can be broken down into three elements: People-centrism, anti-elitism, and demanding popular sovereignty (Wirth et al. 2016).

However, depending on the so called „host-ideology” for populism (Bakker, Rooduijn, and Schumacher 2016, 304), and on the concept of the people of the respective populist actor, there might be more targets that are excluded from the populist notion of the ‘true’ people (Wirth et al. 2016, 11). The majority of populist actors in western Europe are characterized as nationalist, or right-wing populists (Corbetta 2013, 200; Wirth et al. 2016, 10). Here, in addition to the political elite, ethnic, and cultural groups (or sometimes simply ‘immigrants’) are excluded as well. They are represented as enemies, or at least as a burden for the people (Table 1). One could argue, that right-wing populism is hostile in two directions. Up, towards what it perceives as the corrupt elite, and down, towards what populists perceive as lesser people who don’t belong to the ‘true’ people. Contrary to that, the targets of left-wing or socio-economic populism are economic players such as banks, the financial industry, top managers, or parts of the upper class (Pelinka 2013, 7).

The political elite and the other enemies or burdens constructed by the populists are the negative counterpart to the people and “depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 3).

The different foci of populist agitation lead to the following classification:

Table 1: Different types of populisms

Enemies / threat for the people	Core-populism	Right-wing populism	Left-wing populism
<i>Political elite</i>	+	+	+
<i>Cultural/religious/ethnic groups</i>	-	+	-
<i>Economic actors/elites</i>	-	+/-	+
<i>Media actors</i>	+/-	+/-	+/-

Own table based on Schwörer 2016; Corbetta 2013. + Obligatory position; - Position not possible; +/- Position possible but not obligatory.

3. Populistization of mainstream parties?

At the heart of many theoretical work regarding party behaviour lies the spatial theory of Anthony Downs (1957) that claims that rational parties choose certain policies or claims in order to minimize the distance between the voters and themselves (Meguid 2005). This is also true for Muddes Zeitgeist-Hypothesis: parties of the political mainstream will adopt some rhetoric and issues, in order to counter the new, populist contestant. One of the first studies to measure this contagion effect of populism on political parties was published by Rooduijn et al. in 2014. It (564f) expresses some considerations regarding the causes of a potential contagion effect:

First, it is argued, that parties are “conservative organizations that only change when they are under pressure” (ibid., 564, see also Harmel and Janda 1994). This pressure might also stem from the rise of new political actors (Harmel and Janda 1994, 267). Thus, “political parties respond to the political market” (Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 565) and might change their communication and claims due to new political competitors and electoral uncertainty (Harmel and Janda 1994, 265; see also Panebianco 1988). In the case of new populist parties, one counter-strategy might be the adoption of populist rhetoric or claims (Mudde 2004). I therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Mainstream parties become more populist in their communication² when a populist actor is considered a new political competitor.

Furthermore it can be assumed that parties in general change their communication or programs when they are in competition with an ideologically adjacent party (Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 565). Matland and Studlar (1996) argue that especially those parties that are close to an “innovator” of a claim, are most likely to be affected by a contagion effect.

Since the core-populism (anti-elitism and people-centrism) is neither left nor right, it is assumed that parties of any ideology could adopt its communication strategies. However, it is argued that specific right-wing populist rhetoric is more likely to be adopted by parties from the centre-right and left-wing populist communication strategies by those of the centre-left. Following this logic, Harmel and Svåsand (1997, 317) claim for example, that right-wing parties are more prone to adopting anti-immigration policies of far-right parties than left-wing parties. Thus, the second hypothesis is the following:

² The elements of core-, right-wing and left-wing populism that are measured are called “populist communication strategies” or just “populist communication” in this paper, following Aalberg and Vreese 2017; Vreese et al. 2018; Wirth et al. 2016.

H2: Centre-right parties are more inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication, while centre-left parties are more prone to include left-wing populism.

Rooduijn et al. (2014, 565) mention another factor that might contribute to a populistization of mainstream-parties. It is assumed, that mainstream parties adopt populist claims or rhetoric, when the populist parties are on the rise: “As long as allegedly populist parties are relatively unsuccessful, mainstream parties might not be inclined to adjust their programs” (ibid). However, when populist parties attract voter’s attention, mainstream parties might use populist communication strategies as a counter strategy. Thus, populist rhetoric or claims “may be partially taken on board by parties integrated into the system and to which the label ‘populism’ has rarely been applied” (Mény and Surel 2002, 13) and some scholars claim that the “electoral strength” of parties such as the French Front National “has influenced the fortunes of others” (Meguid 2005, 347). This does not mean, that these populist parties have to be ‘new’ or appear for the first time on the political scene (see Hypothesis 1). Rather rising electoral results (or results according to opinion polls) can be considered the independent variable for the populistization of the political mainstream.

H3: Mainstream parties are more inclined to adopt populist communication strategies when the populist parties’ vote intention is high.

4. Research aim and former approaches

The first aim of this paper is to find a method and a research design in order to measure core-, right- as well as left-wing populism over time. To test this new approach, Italy is selected as a first case, since in 2013, a new populist “movement party” with the “Five Star Movement” (M5S) (Della Porta et al. 2017) entered the national parliament, obtaining an astonishing electoral success. Within the Italian media it is argued that – due to the establishment of the M5S – the mainstream parties – especially the centre-left “Democratic Party” (PD) – have become more populist (Sarcinelli 2017).

The M5S can hardly be described as a right-wing populist party, but it is argued, that it also criticizes economic actors (Schwörer 2016; Tarchi 2015).³

In addition to the M5S, the Northern League constitutes another party that is characterized as right-wing populist even though it is not a new political actor within Italian politics (Albertazzi 2017; Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods 2017). Thus, the Italian case might include all three types of populist communication strategies: Negative evaluations of the

³ See chapter 7.

political elite, of economic actors as well as of immigrants/immigration or cultural groups. It therefore appears to be a reasonable first case in order to test the hypothesis, as well as to put the new measurement of populist communication strategies – discussed in chapter 6 – into practice. Since this study focuses solely on one specific case, findings of this paper can't yet be generalized. However, the method and research design are to be applied to several other cases.

There have been at least two studies that tried to measure a “populistization” or a “contagion effect” of populism on mainstream-parties' communication. First, Rooduijn, Lange and van der Brug (2014) investigated if the electoral manifestos of mainstream parties in Western Europa have become more populist in the last decades. Therefore, they analyzed 83 electoral programs of 31 political parties in five countries (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Great Britain), selecting four different time periods: Two election periods in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. They coded paragraphs as populist when both, “criticize elites” and “refer to the people” appeared together (ibid., 567). They conclude: „the results indicate that the manifestos of mainstream parties in Western Europe have not become more populist in the last two decades, and hence that populism is not particularly contagious“ (Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 569).

A second study was conducted by Manucci and Weber (2017). They analyzed 111 electoral manifestos of 39 political parties in five western European countries (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands). One program per decade was selected – from 1970 until 2010. However, their operationalization of populism was much more detailed than that of Rooduijn et al. It is based on a large codebook created by scholars of the Swiss “National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR)”. However, a linear increase of populist statements couldn't be observed. Only for the period 2010 a stronger increase of populist communication strategies was identified. Thus, they conclude: “These results seem to indicate that populism is a cyclical occurrence in Western European countries rather than a new phenomenon” (ibid., 13).

5. Research design

As mentioned above, former studies measured a populistization of mainstream parties' communication by analyzing their electoral manifestos. Furthermore, they selected a long timespan – over several decades – and analyzed one or two programs per decade. The approach applied in this paper differs in many aspects from the research design of former studies.

Firstly, I cast a wider net regarding the sources for detecting populistization: besides election manifestos, I also make recourse to political statements from the parties' websites⁴ because it is argued that electoral manifestos may not be used as a tool for appealing directly to the voters. In their study, Rooduijn et al. (2014, 571) conclude that

“We realize that a study of party programmes has its limitations. One could argue that populist statements are not always included in party programmes, because the appeal of these programmes is not particularly great and voters are often not aware of their content.”

Therefore, it could be less worthwhile for parties, to include populist communication strategies in their programs. It could be assumed that communication with the voters rather takes place through other channels such as social media (Facebook and Twitter) or the traditional media. However, Facebook and Twitter have become campaigning tools only in recent years, which makes them of limited use for this study, due to its longitudinal approach. For this reason, the website articles from the three most relevant⁵ political parties (Northern League, PD, Forza Italia/The People of Freedom (FI/PdL)), as well as the M5S are selected as sources since they are used at least since the mid-2000s as campaigning tools.⁶ These articles resemble press releases and most of them can be characterized as political statement towards a certain issue or political opponent.⁷

Secondly, while Rooduijn et al. (2014) as well as Manucci and Weber analyse several decades, this study focuses on a shorter timespan, which is scrutinized in great detail. The timeframe for this analysis is 2008 – 2018. As time units, the last four weeks of an election campaign on the national level have been selected. Especially during that time, the party websites are highly frequented, as analytical software such as “Alexa” shows.⁸ Since one important assumption is that the mainstream parties have become more populist during or after the parliamentary election of 2013 (when the M5S participated for the first time successfully at elections on the national level), two time units before and two periods afterwards have been selected. Elections for the national, as well as for the European Parliament have been included (Figure 1).

⁴ They can be found on the websites of the respective party under the category “News”.

⁵ According to election results.

⁶ By using the “Wayback Machine” this can be traced: <https://archive.org/>.

⁷ Only those articles have been selected which contain more than 3 sentences in direct speech. Furthermore, articles which are about the situation in other countries, the death of a certain person, which only announce events or are written by non-party politicians as well as other news that do not express an opinion towards an political issue/situation or target, have been excluded.

⁸ The free website „Wolframalpha“ is working with this software and is available at <http://www.wolframalpha.com/>.

Figure 1: Selected time units for the websites



Time periods: Campaigns for elections for the national parliament (ENP) and the European parliament (EEP). First election campaign with participation of the (relevant) M5S.: 27.1.-23.2.2013.

In order to include a wider range of text sources and to know if the results differ from the ‘traditional’ source of electoral manifestos, the programs were analyzed as well. Four elections for the national parliament have been taken into account: 2006, 2008, 2013 and 2018. It should be noted however, that the election programs are manifestos from the centre-right and centre-left electoral coalitions, and not only of the PD and FI/PdL.⁹

Figure 2: Selected time units for the election manifestos



Time periods: Parliamentary elections in Italy. First election with participation of the M5S: 2013.

6. Methodical approach and operationalization

The different sources were analysed using a non-computer based content analysis (Mayring 2015; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). It is the most common way of measuring communication strategies that derive from populist ideology so far (Ernst et al. 2017; Hawkins 2009; Manucci and Weber 2017; Müller et al. 2017; Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014). The unit of measurement is the sentence. Rooduijn (2013, 59) criticized this idea “because populist claims are usually presented in multiple sentences“ (Rooduijn 2013, 59). However, in contrast to Rooduijn’s approach, sentences don’t have to be both people-centred as well as anti-elitist in this study, in order to be coded. The two elements are coded separately, and the first pre-tests revealed that these populist communication strategies can be found in the single sentences.

⁹ That means that other (smaller) parties probably had an impact on these manifestos as well. However, relative to their electoral results these smaller allies are much less relevant than the mainstream parties – with exception of the LN within the centre-right alliance (especially in 2018). The main centre-left party, the PD, didn’t exist in 2006 since it was officially founded in 2007. The largest parties of the centre-left alliance in 2006 were the two predecessors of the PD, the “Democrats of the Left” and “Democracy is Freedom – The Daisy”.

Measuring “core” populism

The definition of Muddes, core-populism, is divided in three elements: People-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty. Taking former studies as a starting point (Ernst et al. 2017; Müller et al. 2017), I created my own operationalization of populism. Broadly speaking, anti-elitism consists of discussing negative characteristics, plans or behaviours of the political elite – thus of a negative evaluation of this target. People-centrism, on the other hand, is based on discussing positive characteristics or behaviours of the population. Demands for popular sovereignty (claims for more power/control/transparency for the people) were subsumed under the element people-centrism. Claims for less power/privileges/costs for the political elite are coded as anti-elitism (see Appendix 1). The “populism score” for the texts was created by calculating the mean of the percentage of people-centred and anti-elitist sentences per time unit.

Only references to the people as a whole were coded, rather than references to certain subgroups within the people, such as women or workers. Regarding the political elite, only references to the whole political establishment (the parties/politicians; caste; deputies...) were coded as anti-elitism.

Measuring left and right-wing populist communication strategies

As in the case of anti-elitism, left- and right-wing populist communication strategies consist of negative evaluations of certain targets: Economic actors, such as banks, the financial industry or multinationals (left-wing populism) or certain religious, cultural, ethnical groups, or immigrants as such (see Appendix 2).¹⁰ Additionally, another subcategory has been created inductively: that of “Preferential treatment”. That means that either economic actors or immigrants ‘get what they want’ (privileges, money) or that they don’t get what they don’t want (e.g. higher taxes).

Since an explicit negative evaluation of cultural, religious or ethnical groups does occur rather sparsely, a second element – anti-immigrations claims and stances – of right-wing populist communication has been created that can be seen as another core feature of right wing populist parties (van Spanje 2010, 571).

In the following the three hypotheses are to be tested for the Italian case. Furthermore, some observations, not connected to these hypotheses are to be discussed.

¹⁰ Only the anti-elitist element “detaching the elite from the people” is not part of the subcodes, since it does not occur in the texts

7. First results: Italy

The first question to be answered to conduct further analysis is, if the M5S and the LN are (more) populist (than the others). Table 2 illustrates the average values regarding the measurement of core-, left-wing and right-wing populist communication strategies for the website articles, that is the average score over the entire timespan. From these measures, it turns out that the M5S as well as the LN are more core-populist than the other parties (4,24% and 3,64% respectively, compared to values below 2% for the mainstream parties).¹¹ Furthermore the M5S is slightly more left-wing populist than the mainstream parties, especially in 2013 (in this period 2,1% of all coded sentences were left-wing populist), what the table does not illustrate.

A very considerable amount of right-wing populist communication strategies can be found in the website articles from the LN (6,65%), compared to right-wing populism scores below 3%, for the mainstream parties.

Table 2: Average values of different types of populist communication strategies (website) in %

	Core	Left-wing	Right-wing
M5S	4,24	1,33	0
LN	3,64	1,27	6,65
PD	1,57	1	0,34
FI	1,86	0,31	2,46

Illustrated is the percentage of populist coded sentences.

The numbers shown above prove, that M5S and LN are, in fact, more populist than the other parties under scrutiny.

7.1 Hypothesis testing

This finding leads me to testing the hypotheses stated above, namely:

H1: Mainstream parties become more populist in their communication when a populist actor is considered a new political competitor.

¹¹ While the recoding for the PD and FI/PdL was already completed, this has not been done yet for the scores of M5S and LN. Experience shows that the populism scores rather increase after the recoding. That means that the actual scores of the M5S and LN might be even higher.

H2: Centre-right parties are more inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication, while centre-left parties are more prone to include left-wing populism.

H3: Mainstream parties are more inclined to adopt populist communication strategies when the populist parties' vote intention is high.

Hypothesis 1

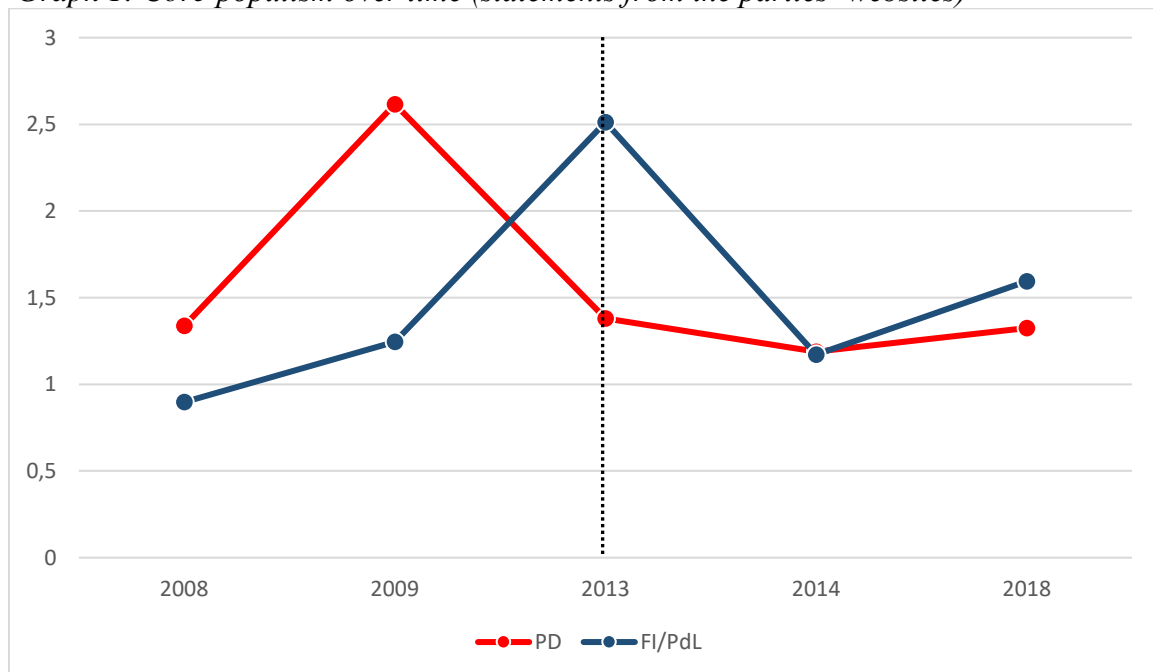
Following the first hypothesis, the establishment of the M5S should cause an increase of core-populist communication strategies among the mainstream parties.

H1a: Mainstream parties – PD and FI/PdL – become more core-populist in their communication when a populist actor – M5S – is considered new political competitors.

H1b: If the competitor – M5S – uses left-wing populist communication strategies, the parties will adopt left-wing populist communication.

This should be the case in 2013, since the M5S can be considered a new political competitor during this election campaign. Opinion polls show that the M5S would have received nearly 14% of the votes, shortly before the elections.¹²

Graph 1: Core-populism over time (statements from the parties' websites)



Graph 1 illustrates the development of core-populist communication strategies (mean of people-centrism and anti-elitism) of the articles from the parties' websites of the PD, and Berlusconi's

¹² See the website of "termometropolitico": <https://www.termometropolitico.it/sondaggi-politici-elettorali>.

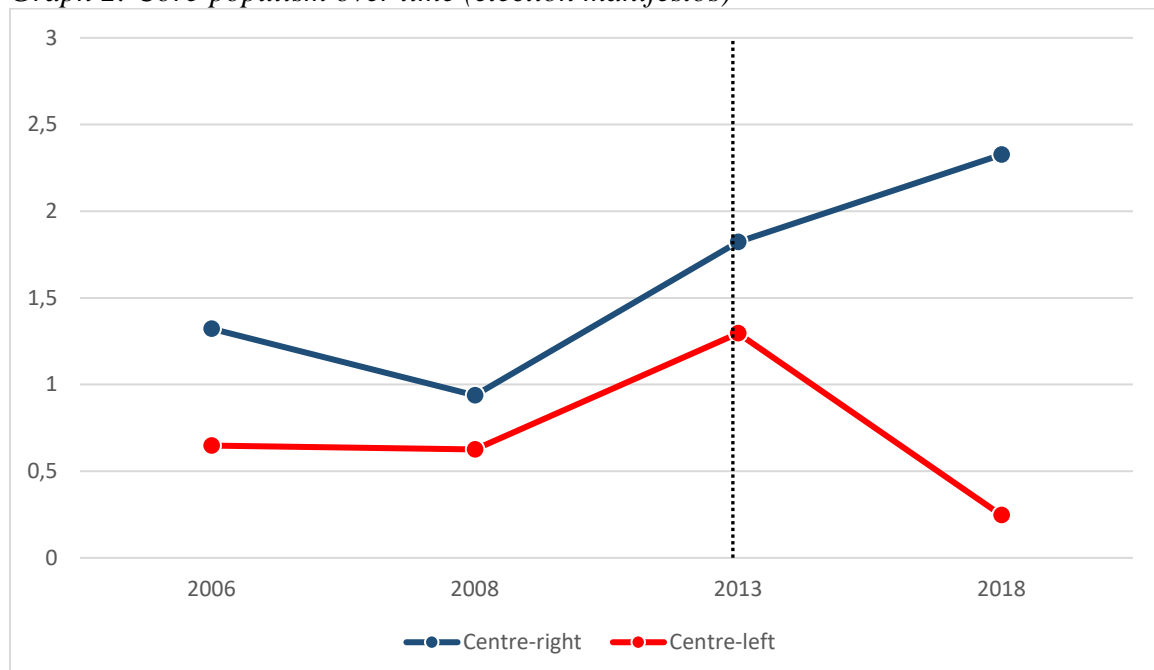
centre-right party¹³ (FI/PdL) from 2008 until 2018. The overall amount of populist sentences increased over time, and considerable peaks in populist communication can be observed in 2009 for the PD and in 2013 for the FI.

Regarding the centre-right party (FI) the first hypothesis, that mainstream parties increase their populist communication strategy, once they consider a populist actor as competition can be confirmed: The period of 2013 contains about 1,25% more populist sentences than the former. This increase is considerable: the total percentage of the centre-right party's core-populist sentences is 2,5% in 2013. However, for the centre-left party (PD) the hypothesis cannot be confirmed. The peak of core-populist sentences is reached in 2009.

In addition to the websites, the coalition manifestos were analyzed. The differences to the website, here, are striking.

Graph 2 shows the development of core-populist sentences regarding the centre-left and centre-right coalition manifestos. A populistization of the centre-left as well as the centre-right election program can be observed from 2008 to 2013. Yet, while the score of the center-left drops considerably afterwards, the centre-right increases their core-populism even further in the following period of 2018.

Graph 2: Core-populism over time (election manifestos)



¹³ At the European elections 2009 and the parliamentary elections 2013 “Forza Italia” was renamed in „People of Freedom” and included – as the second larger party – the post-fascist “National Alliance”.

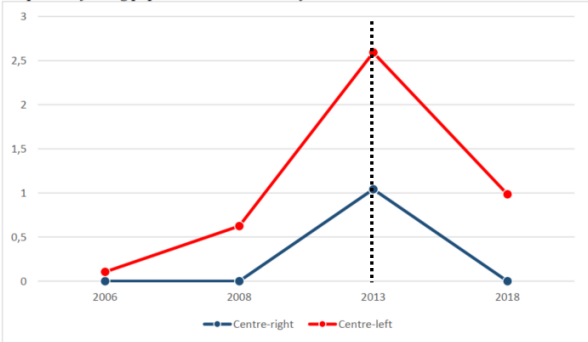
These results leave us with some evidence for Hypothesis 1: The mainstream parties, and the coalitions increased their use of populist communication strategies, after a new, populist competitor entered the stage. One exception to this are the website articles of the PD, whose populism score dropped in 2013. This could be understood as a counter-strategy towards a populist actor.

After the development of core-populism is scrutinized, the next interesting question is, whether the parties adopted a more left-wing populism (H1b). This hypothesis can be confirmed (see Graph 3 and 4): When the M5S became a new populist competitor in 2013, the mainstream parties made use of much more left-wing populist communication, especially regarding the centre-left party/coalition.

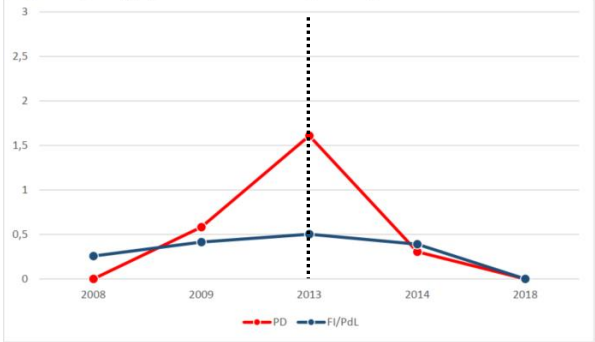
Firstly, I will consider the election manifestos of both coalitions to show this: Both the centre-left as well as the centre-right alliance increase their left-wing populist statements in 2013 up to 1% (from 0) and 2,5% (from about 0,5%) respectively in 2013.

As for the parties' websites, especially the increase of left-wing populist communication strategies regarding the centre-left in 2013 is substantial with about 1%. Regarding the centre-right party of Berlusconi, the effect is marginal.

Graph 3: Left-wing populism in election manifestos



Graph 4: Left-wing populism in the statements from the parties' websites



Hypothesis 2

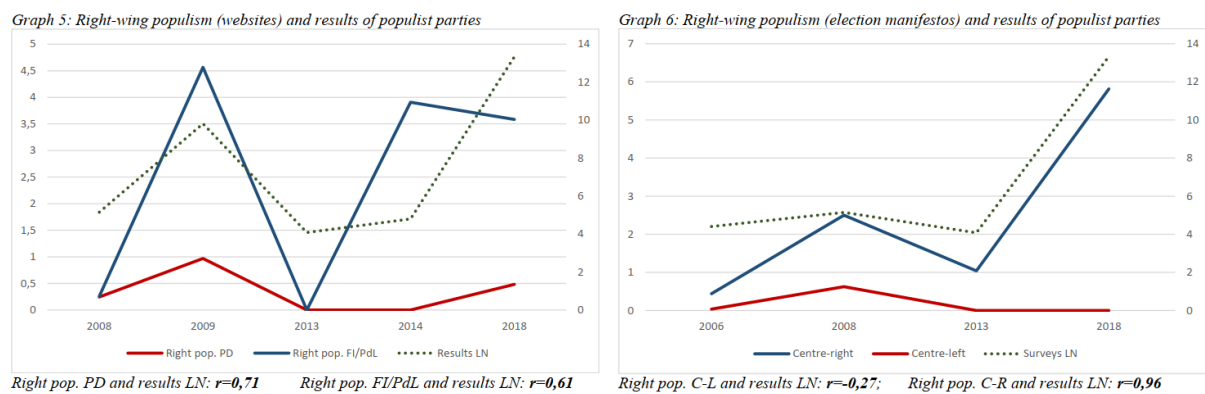
Graph 3 and 4 provide some evidence for the first claim of the second hypothesis as well:

H2: Centre-right parties are more inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication, while centre-left parties are more prone to include left-wing populism.

According to H2, the PD and the centre-left coalition should be more inclined to adopt left-wing populist communication than the FI/PdL and the centre-right coalition. This hypothesis seems to be proven for the election campaign 2013. That means, that the centre-left appears to be more affected by a left-wing populist contagion than the centre-right since its left-wing populist graphs increase much more than those of the centre-right in 2013.

For the adoption of right-wing populist communication strategies, the picture is as follows. The centre-right is more inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication strategies than the centre-left (Graph 5 and 6). Due to the electoral success of the right-wing populist party LN (or its vote intention), the centre-right seems to become far more right-wing populist. Thus, the second hypothesis can be confirmed: In Italy, centre-right parties are more inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication than the centre-left. But the centre-left parties are more prone to include left-wing populist communication than the centre-right.

Hypothesis 3



According to Hypothesis 3,

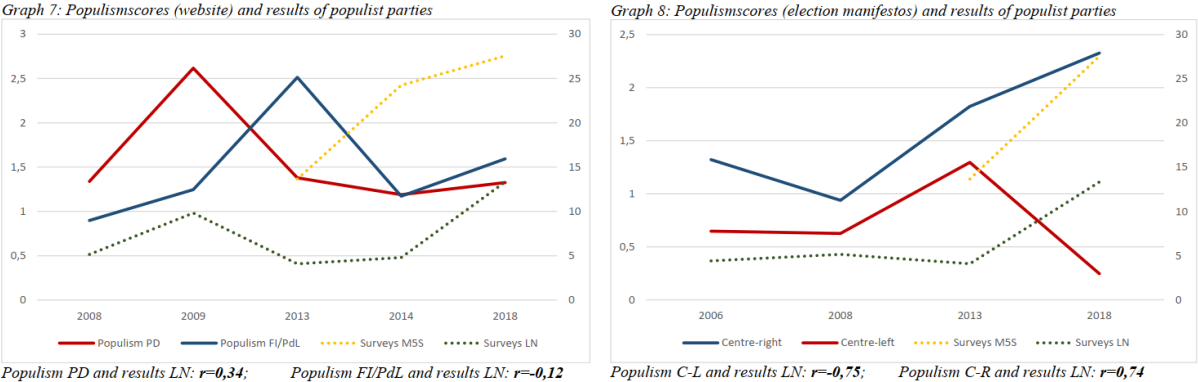
H3: Mainstream parties are more inclined to adopt populist communication strategies when the populist parties' vote intention is high.

the mainstream parties – PD and FI – should adopt populist communication when the vote intention for populist parties is high. For the Italian case that means, that the mainstream parties' right-wing populist communication should increase due to a higher vote intention for the right-wing populist LN. Even though the correlation between the right-wing populist score of the PD and the success of the LN seems to be considerable regarding the texts from the website, the same does not hold true for the election manifestos (Graph 5 and 6).¹⁴

However, there is strong evidence, that the increased vote intention for the LN caused an increase of right-wing populist communication strategies among the centre-right party and coalition in which the LN takes part. Thus, the centre-right is inclined to adopt right-wing populist communication strategies when the right-wing populist's vote intention is high.

¹⁴ The Pearson correlation coefficient is probably not statistically significant also due to zero values and few time units, but it is illustrated in order to give some more insights.

Furthermore, according to H3, also core-populist communication strategies among the mainstream parties should increase due to a high vote intention for the populist LN. However, as Graph 7 and 8 show this does not seem to be true.



Surprisingly, there only seems to be a slight correlation between the core-populism score of the PD regarding the website articles and the vote intention of the LN. Regarding the values for the election manifestos it appears interesting, that after the rise of the LN in 2018, the coalition program becomes more populist. Thus, there is some evidence for the thesis, that the centre-right mainstream in Italy only adopts right-wing populist communication strategies due to rising electoral success of right-wing populist parties, but not anti-elitist or people-centred rhetoric. The establishment of a non-right-wing populist party however, might also cause the adoption of core-populist communications in the short-term among parts of the political establishment as H1 illustrated.

Regarding the second populist party (M5S), there is little evidence that the vote intention of the M5S correlates with the core-populism score of the mainstream parties. Therefore, H3 cannot be confirmed regarding the M5S. However, since data for the M5S exists only for few time units, H3 cannot be rejected entirely.

Table 3 summarizes the results of hypothesis testing.

Table 3: Summary

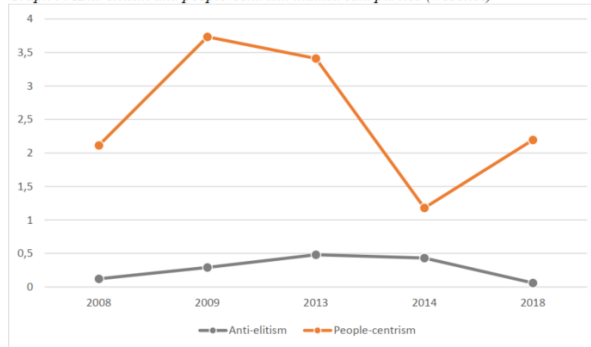
	H1		H2	H3 (LN)	
	Core	Left-wing		Core	Right-wing
Centre-left	+	++	++	+	+
Centre-right	++	+		+	++

+ means that it is true for only one of the two sources analyzed for this paper. ++ means that it is true for both sources.

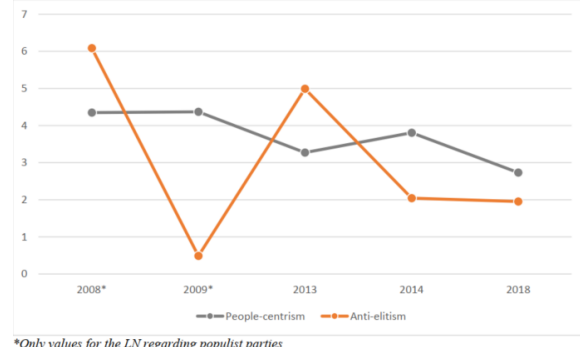
Further results

By having a look at the two elements of populism – anti elitism and people-centrism – it becomes evident that the core-populism score of the two mainstream parties rather consists of the element people-centrism (for statements from the parties’ websites; see Graph 9). With few exceptions, a critique towards the whole political establishment can’t be observed and seems to be the ‘unique selling proposition‘ of the populist parties M5S and LN (Graph 10).¹⁵ Thus, the increase of the ‘people-centrism score’ of FI/PdL and PD is higher than the growth of its populism score (that is the mean of the values for anti-elitism and people-centrism).

Graph 9: Anti-elitism and people-centrism mainstream parties (websites)

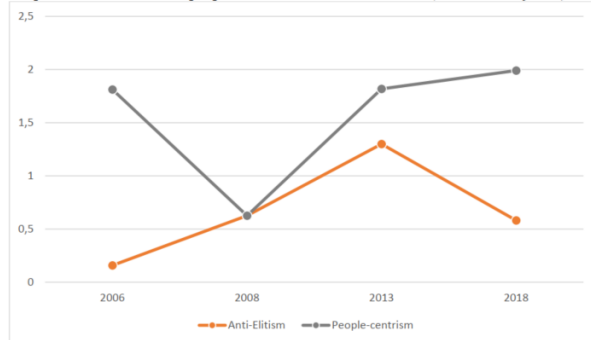


Graph 10: Anti-elitism and people-centrism populist parties (websites)



*Only values for the LN regarding populist parties

Graph 11: Anti-elitism and people-centrism electoral coalitions (election manifestos)



This result doesn’t hold true for the election manifestos (Graph 11). However, the anti-elitist sentences are claims for cutting privileges for politicians and parties, demands for reducing the ‘costs’ of politics, and cutting the number of parliamentarians. Negative evaluations of the whole political elite do not occur. This might be due to the fact, that programs contain more claims than evaluations of political opponents.

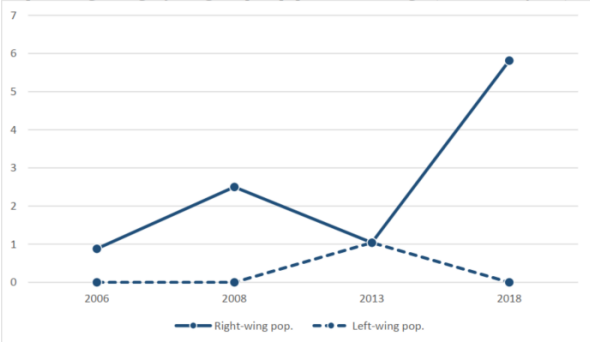
Since a main threat of populism for democracy is considered the delegitimization of all political opponents due to anti-pluralist anti-elitism (Müller 2016), the core-populistization of mainstream parties that was illustrated in this paper can hardly be considered a threat for democracy. The largest share of populist statements made by the mainstream parties is made

¹⁵ Illustrated is the mean value of the mainstream parties/coalitions and the populist parties (LN and M5S).

up of references to the people, and claims for institutional reforms. The (core-) populism of the mainstream party is therefore best described as “empty populism” lacking the anti-elitist element (Jagers and Walgrave Stefaan 2007; Vreese et al. 2018). The increase of right-wing populist communication strategies, including the construction of threat-scenarios should be considered a major threat instead.

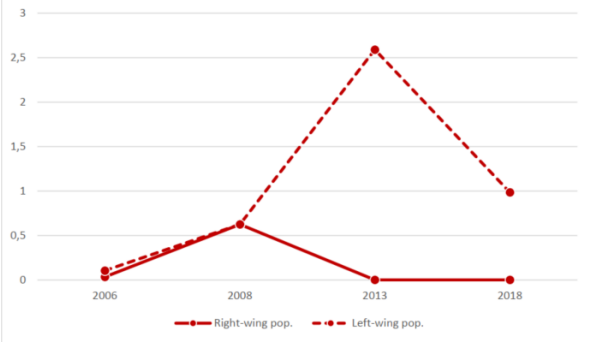
Furthermore, it could be speculated that left-wing populist communication impedes right-wing populism. As Graph 12-15 demonstrate, rising left-wing populism is often accompanied by a decrease of right-wing populism. This is true even for the right-wing populist LN and especially for the period 2013. Thus, there is some first evidence, that left-wing populist communication could be a strategy against right-wing populism. However, since these are first findings, further research has to be done in this respect in order to confirm this hypothesis.

Graph 12: Right-wing, left-wing and pure populisms centre-right (election manifestos)



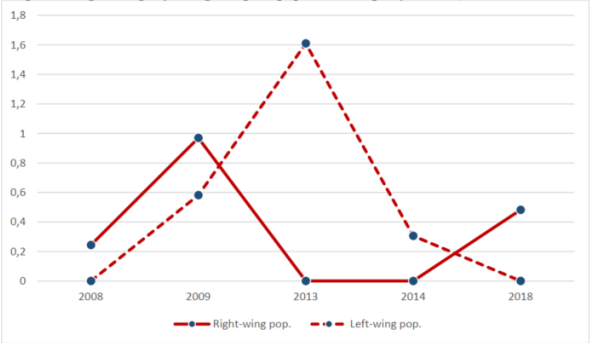
$r(\text{left/right}) = -0,6$

Graph 13: Right-wing, left-wing and pure populism centre-left (election manifestos)



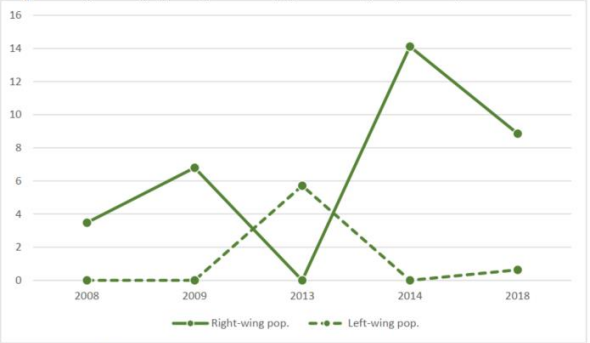
$r(\text{left/right}) = -0,32$

Graph 14: Right-wing, left-wing and pure populism PD (party website)



$r(\text{left/right}) = -0,26$

Graph 15: Right-wing, left-wing and core populism LN (party website)



$r(\text{left/right}) = -0,68$

8. Conclusion

In this paper, an approach has been developed in order to measure core-populist, as well as specific left- and right-wing populist communication strategies in texts. This approach had been put into practice by analyzing texts of political parties/politicians in Italy over time. The starting point for selecting the research design presented in this paper was the Zeitgeist-hypothesis of Cas Mudde. He – and several other scholars – assume that the established parties would include

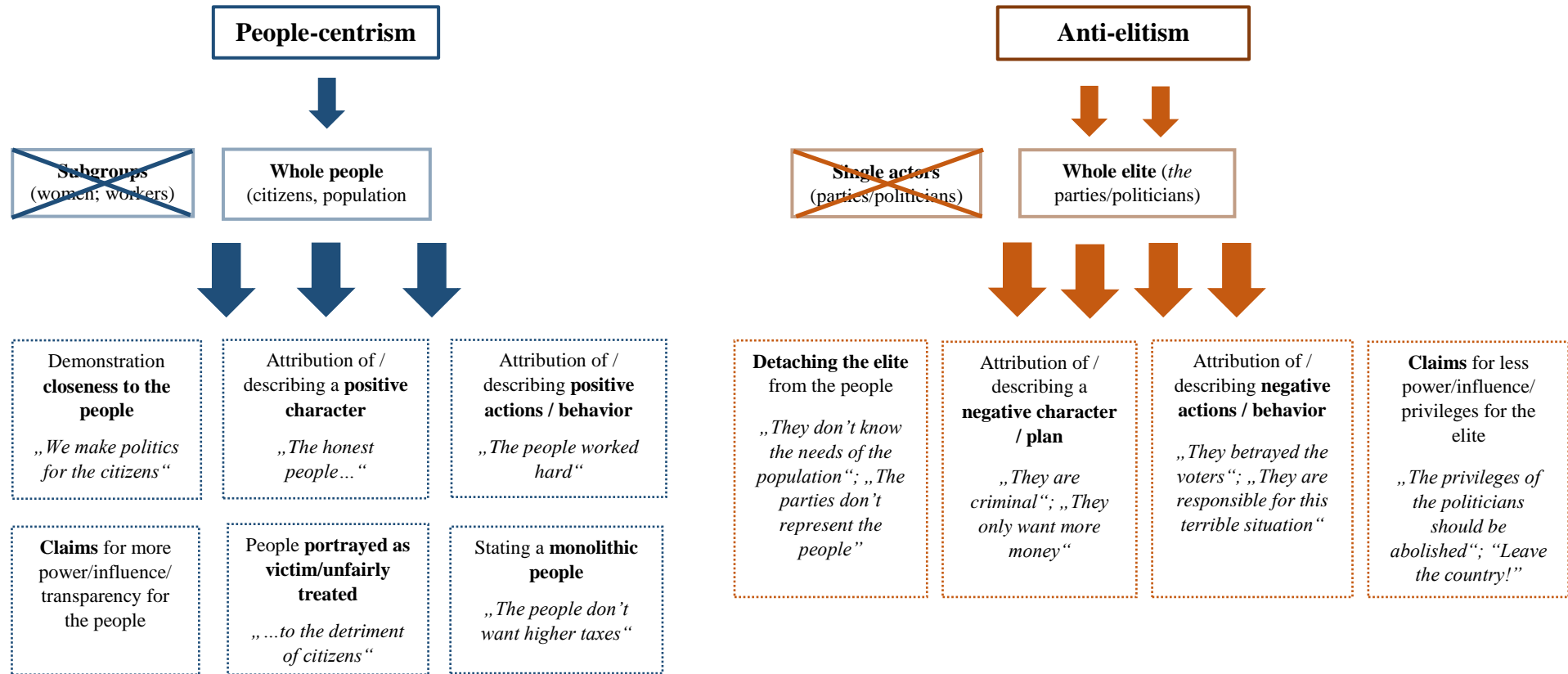
populist rhetoric or communication strategies due to the rise of populist parties. Therefore, three hypothesis has been formulated.

It turned out that there is empirical evidence for at latter two of the three hypotheses: The establishment of a new populist actor that also criticized economic targets might have caused an increase of core-populist – mainly people-centered – communication strategies among the mainstream parties (especially the centre-right party/coalition) as well as left-wing populism (H1). It also seems to be true, that the centre-left party/coalition is more prone to include left-wing populism in its statements and programs than the centre-right. On the other hand, the centre-right includes more right-wing populist communication strategies than the centre-left (H2). There is also strong evidence, that the rise of the right-wing populist LN (according to opinion polls) caused this right-wing populistization of the centre-right (H3) but not that much a core-populistization (anti-elitism/people-centrism).

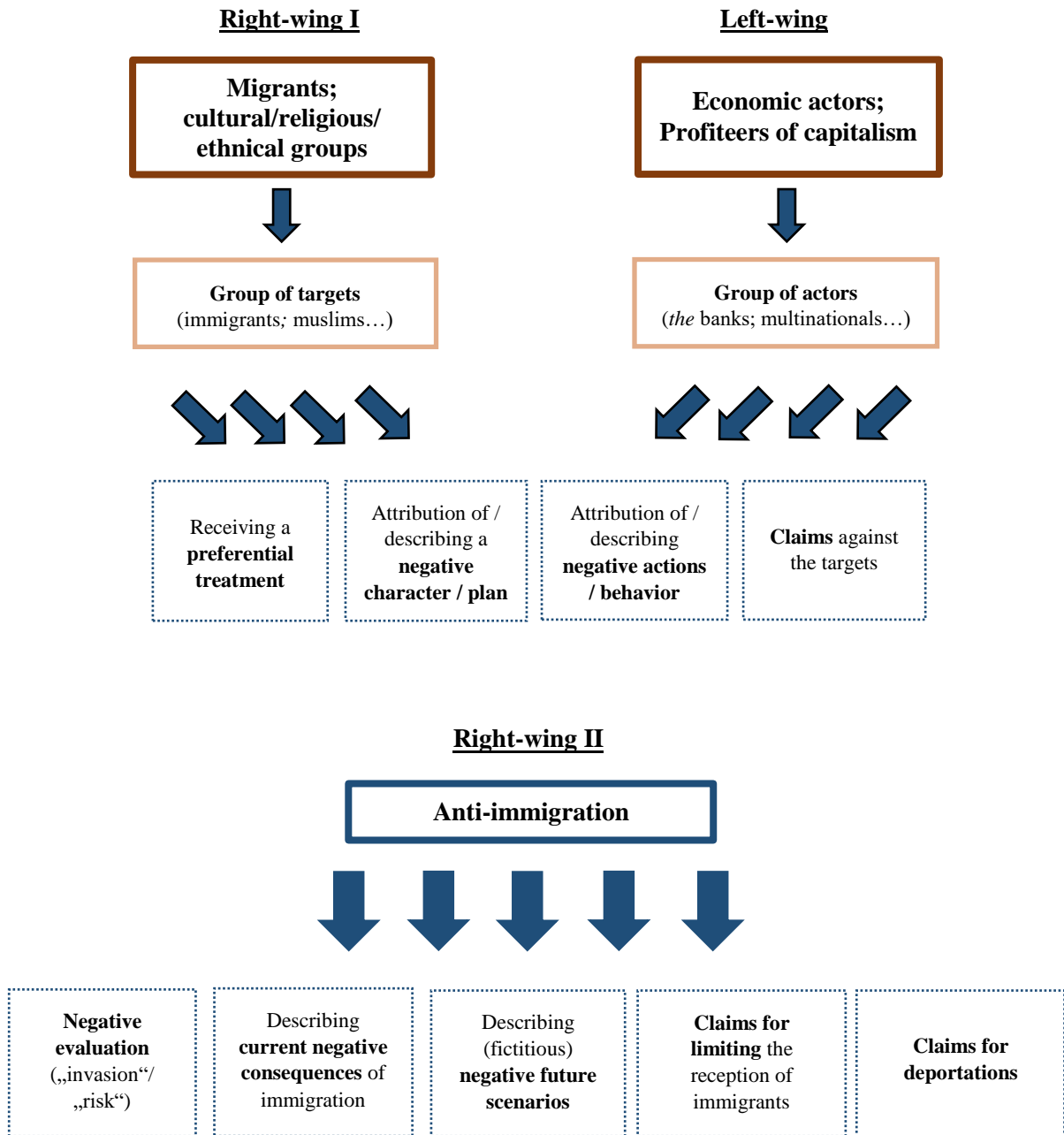
In this respect it could be argued that, at least for the Italian case, non-right wing and populist parties contribute to an increase of references to the people among the political establishment in the short term. The presence of right-wing populists first and foremost seems to lead to an increase of anti-immigration claims, also in the long term. Thus, not all types of populist parties might be a threat for democracy. Quite the contrary: It could be argued that more references to the people might also be a positive sign for democracy since the political elite takes into account that they depend on the people.

Furthermore, there is some first evidence, that left-wing populism might dampen the rise of right-wing populist communication – not only among mainstream parties but even among right-wing populists themselves. However, since this is only a first single case study, more empirical findings are needed to validate this hypothesis.

Appendix 1: Category system for the measurement of core-populism



Appendix 2: Category system for the measurement of right- and left-wing populism



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