

Populism and Its Expression in Italy

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Abstract: The political practice of populism has long existed in Europe, in recent years, the concept of “populism” has received increasing attention and it has frequently appeared on the political stage in various European countries. “Populism” is especially popular and typical in Italy, while problems also emerge with different forms. What’s more, this ideology always appears as a discourse of two opposing groups. The paper explores the development of populism in Italy, its impact on Italy and Europe as a whole by using a case study of Italian populist political parties and adopting Cas Mudde's definition of populism. As a result, populism could be illustrated as a tool for regulating the European society when there is a democratic imbalance. In the end, we can find the pattern of populism, try to predict its future development and its effects in different spheres in Europe, and then gain some awareness of the predicament of European society.

Keywords: populism, Italian populist parties, Italy

1. Introduction

The idea of "populism" in Europe can be traced back to the ancient Greeks' political demands for direct democracy in city-state politics, emphasizing citizens' control over politics. In the long process of historical development, representative democracy has become the main political system in Western countries, however, populism has not disappeared and still exists in Western political practice. In the 19th century, “populism” first officially appeared in Russian populist activities. Since then, populism, populist parties, and populists have continued to develop with the changes of the times, concepts such as neo-populism and techno-populism have emerged, too. Therefore, populism has profoundly affected the direction and future of contemporary European politics.

Before analyzing the political development of populism in Italy, an important question is, what is populism? Populism itself is a ‘thin-centred ideology’ that is difficult to identify, as a result, scholars usually define populism in different ways, mostly from the perspective of ideology and political strategy [1]. Some paper defined populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ [1].” While someone believed that populism means “the people” is a fixed and harmonious entity, and it is a harbour for authoritarian tendencies [2]. An article stated that populism is a “political logic”, which is based on people’s demand [3]. Populism has also been illustrated as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government based on direct and unmediated support from a large number of unorganized followers” [4]. Although these scholars made different definitions on “populism”, it is clearly that the theories are all based on the relationship between two

separate groups, “people” and their enemy--” the corrupt elites.” In this sense, the first approach for understanding the concept of “populism” is universal and applicable. And this article will be based on this definition to analyze the element of “populism” in Italy.

Why does populism arise? Why are populist parties particularly powerful in Italy compared to other countries in Europe? What is the influence of the “populism” in Italy on European society? These topics are important and will be further discussed in this paper.

Italy is a place where populist parties have developed rapidly since 1990s and thus made it a special and typical place to explore the idea of populism. From 1990s till now, a lot of materials proved that the leaders of these parties invariably chose "populist" discourse to show their party's nature and win supporters, these populist parties include the Northern League, Forza Italia, the Five Star Movement and the Brothers of Italy. By analyzing their performance, we can see how populism has developed in Italy's modern history, how it has been interpreted and expressed with different forms and what is the impact of populism on European politics.

The rest of this paper includes three parts. First, the first part of the article will elaborate on the concrete definition and characteristics of populism itself. After that, it will make a case study based on Italian populism, and mainly focus on the causes of Italian populism, the development process of populist political parties, and the political, economic, and social impacts of populism on Italy and Europe. Finally, the article will review and summarize the whole contents of "populism" and discuss its future as an instrument that rectify the democratic system.

2. The discernment of populism and its utilization

The reasons for the emergence of populism are complex. It is believed that “If a society managed to achieve an institutional order of such a nature that all demands were satisfied within its own immanent mechanisms, there would be no populism...The need to constitute a 'people' arises only when that fullness is not achieved [3].” The emergence of populism is essentially a friction between the interests of ordinary people and the party's inability to satisfy people's need. According to the illustration, populism is a “thin-centred ideology” that pits a morally virtuous people against a corrupt and self-interested elite [1]. From this we can derive the subject defined by the ideological “populism”. In this definition, the “people” and the “elite” become two independent subjects. The “people” is a broad concept, it means a special identity that stands on the opposite side of the enemy, it can refer to either a regional group of people or the entire national citizens. The elite refers to the mainstream political parties under the Western representative system. The importance of popular sovereignty and opposition between the two forms the core of populism. Therefore, “populism” has mainly three features that separate it from the traditional political ideologies: anti-establishment, anti-system and anti-pluralism, and it is reflected in the populist's social planning [4]. In the view of populists, the current representative political system is unreasonable, the voter election system cannot represent the will of the people and is manipulated by corrupt elites and representative governments. “Implicit in this definition of ‘populism’ is a conception of political representation as a mode of ‘embodiment’ of an essentially unified and ‘homogenous people’[5]” The single attribution of “people” stipulate the exclusion of the “others”.

Therefore, real politics should be based on the direct expression of the people, bypassing procedures and intermediate institutions established by the elites, and achieving direct democracy which is under people's rule[5]. Based on this conception, populist parties have continued to change and extended the subjective meaning of populism by presenting it in different forms in European political practice.

At present, populism in Europe is in a stage of vigorous development and moving towards gradual stabilization, rewriting the political landscape of Europe. For example, Britain's exit from the European Union is the result of populism's power in the political arena. However, it can be seen that

most of the populist parties in Europe are now trying to transform themselves, including ruling in coalition with traditional parties and thus integrating into the European system of representative democracy. In fact, the future of populism in Europe will remain a serious problem: first, the conflict between the European integration process and the interests of the people under national sovereignty will continue, and these European countries have not yet found a suitable way to resolve the conflict. Secondly, populism will have a divisive connotation, which will have a direct impact on the development of democracy in Europe, and European democrats will be polarized. Finally, the concept of populism is thin, and it is difficult for a concept that cannot stand on its own to survive as a guiding idea in Europe for a long time.

However, populism will be an upward trend in the future: people's self-consciousness will become stronger with the development of the times, and they will inevitably reflect more and more strongly on the imbalance of power in the social structure, while the impurity of party politics regarding the use of populism will further intensify people's discussion and reflection on populism itself.

3. The case study of populism in Italy

3.1. The reasons account for the rising of “populism” in Europe and Italy

There are several reasons account for the rising of “populism” and populist parties. From the general background and regular pattern in history, many countries in Europe have shared some similarities: under the influence of the economic crisis or problems, country's economic recession has led to a decline in people's living standards and welfare benefits. In the process of political practice, representative democracy has been split up from the society for a long time, elements of populism have never disappeared in Europe. The European Integration, European refugee problem and internal conflicts in the era of globalization have intensified the trend for developing populism[6]. These reasons also apply to the Italian case: economic globalization and European integration have weakened Italy's control over the economy as a sovereign country, causing problems such as imbalances in economic development between the north and the south, and the imbalances in people's incomes. Italy also has a serious corruption problem. Political parties always have power for a short period of time, and there is basically no single ruling party that dominates Italian politics for a long time. As a result, the populist ideas promoted by populist parties have great appeal to ordinary people in Italy.

3.2. The “populism” elements in the Italian populist parties

Some populist parties in Italy have developed since 1990s, for instance, the North League, which is known for its leader Umberto Bossi and the Forza Italia, which was reorganized as PDL lately, is famous for the populist leader called Silvio Berlusconi. Except these two populist parties, Since 2013, a new populist party, Five Star Movement, is becoming an important force in Italian politics. Its leader Beppe Grillo is also different from the former two leaders.

These three populist parties are typical cases that include the element of “populism”, although they are classified into different types, ‘the people as sovereign’ is the always present key feature of populism in democracies. It is a scientific way to analyze the discourses expressed by these populist parties and their leaders, and discover the different forms and the development of “populism.”

As we can see from figure 1 that Forza Italia /PDL is a right wing populism party in Italy, this party believes that the main enemies of people are the elites. Data shows that in 2006 and 2008, among the percentages that calculated four key elements of the discourse on “populism”, “elites” accounted for 75% in 2006, and 66.7% in 2008[7].

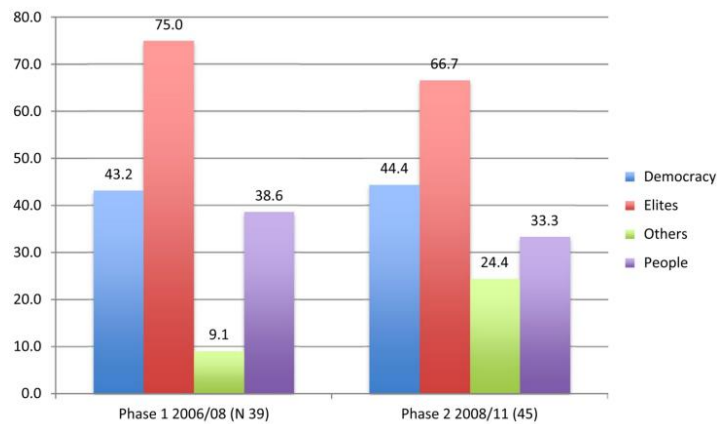


Figure 1: Presence of key elements of "populism" in FI/PDL

In 2009, Berlusconi stated in public that 'we are the party of Italians with common sense and good intentions. We are the party of Italians who love freedom and want to remain free.' His political discourse conveyed two messages: First, he and his party are the defenders of people's freedoms and interests, anyone who is detrimental to the people is on the opposite side of them. Secondly, they are also part of the Italian people who oppose the decadent leftist elite. Under such political discourse, the people and elites formed an opposition (Figure 1).

North League is a regionlist but also populist radical right party. Similarly, in July 2008, Bossi said, 'either we get reforms or there will be a battle and we will capture our liberty [7].' He expressed a strong will to fight for the people to against a failed government. However, what makes this populist party different is that unlike the Forza Italia /PDL, North League stressed the importance of protecting the interests of the people of northern Italy, it viewed the main enemies of people not only include the corrupt elites, but also the "others"- the refugees, the homosexuals, the people who are not native citizens in Italy. From the same data collected in 2006 and 2008, the "Others" was used frequently in its political discourse, occupying 23.7% and 47.6% of the tables respectively, more than twice as much as the previous party's data(Figure 2).

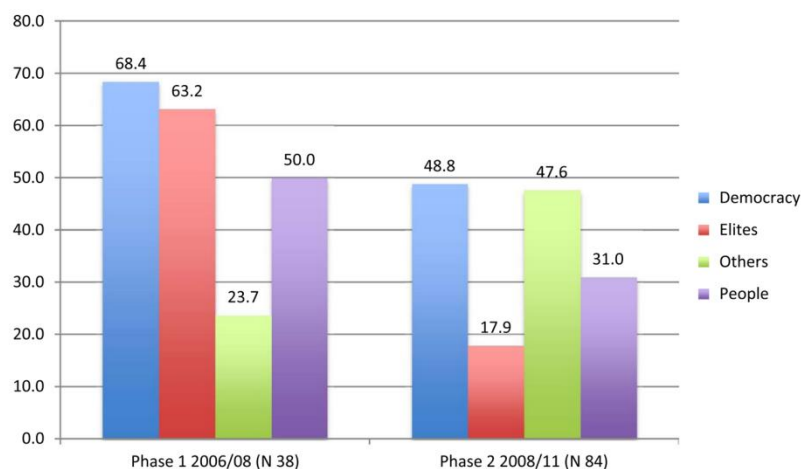


Figure 2: Presence of key elements of "populism" in NL

As these two cases showed, the Forza Italia placed great emphasis on the aversion to corrupt elites, while the North League paid great attention to the role of "others" in Italian populist politics, which

means the North League is more concerned with a specific group of the population - the people of Northern Italy - and is opposed to non-natives being part of the population.

In conclusion, “Populism” is expressed in different political strategies because of leaders’ tendencies and understandings of populism. Some may focus on the side of the “elites”, and some may pay more attention to the “people”, but they always use the opposition between the two groups in the populism discourses.

In 21 century, Five Star Movement has developed rapidly with schemes for populism, it opposes representative government and advocates direct democracy, allowing the people to decide the direction of national policy through the Internet. It also advocates reform of the health care system, the demand to reduce working hours to 20 hours per week. The party has showed its wide range of protection for people’s right, and it also has a tough stance against the social elites. “ Its leader Grillo bluntly stated that ‘political parties are evil’, adding that corruption is ‘a cancer’ that is eating up our country and making the lives of honest people impossible[5].” The Five Star Movement is purer in its populist formulation and has made progress on the basis of previous populist parties. For example, in the past, people's concept of populism was abstract and limited, while Grillo used Internet media to create website, launch open and transparent voting in public as well as publish articles about populism to expand its influence, making the idea of populism concrete.

3.3. The political impacts of populism in Italy

These populist parties and their illustration on “populism” in Italy have some certain effects on European politics.

Firstly, the success of these populist parties in forming a government in Italy will give great confidence and encouragement to populist parties in other European countries, causing the spillover and continuous spread of populist ideology at the international level, and the power of populism in Western Europe will rise further. Secondly, “populism” may become an exacerbation of political polarization and political instability, and finally have an adverse impact on democracy. Under the system of representative government and democracy procedures, issues need to be tolerant or compromised, and even allow a certain degree of interest exchange. However, among populists, those “opponents” or “competitors” are sensitively polarized into two antagonistic groups. For example, in the cases that mentioned before, including the North League, the Forza Italia/ FDI.

And the Five Star Movement, all of the leaders chose and used the radical populist rhetoric, which inflamed popular sentiments and accelerated the speed with which political parties rotate and fall from power. Some of their populist discourse also contained strong opposition from the establishment, elite politicians and immigrants., thus made struggle easily to be put on the political agenda and threaten the stability of the whole Italian society[8].

Thirdly, as the populist government in Italy has taken power, it will affect the process of reforming the European Union. The core of the European populist appeal is the re-enforcement of national sovereignty[9]. However, European integration for so many years has been centered on the transition of the European countries, turning them from nation-state to member state, and asking these states to cede a portion of their sovereignty and surrendering it to this supranational institutions in a peaceful way[10]. This kind of supranational governance was opposed by the political practice of populism because part of the sovereignty separated from the country has become hollow and the EU has not assumed corresponding political responsibilities, the government also has used this to divert internal conflicts, people's sovereignty is therefore missing.

3.4. The economic and social impacts of populism in Italy

In addition to the political sphere, populism has also had an impact on the economic and social spheres in Italy and the Europe. For example, when populist political parties came to power in 2010s , they chose to implement high welfare policies and loose fiscal policies in order to satisfy the cries of their voters, which is contrary to the austerity policies implemented by the European Union. The implementation of the policies reflects the political parties' goal of pursuing fairness and good treatment of the population, but it does not solve Italy's long-standing public debt problem [11]. As for the social sphere, Italy's populist parties have been very harsh on refugees, which is linked to the strong anti-immigrant and anti-refugee demands of the electorate to enter Italy. The various populist parties that have come to power have made statements about advocating a reduction in the size of the refugee population. As a result, in 2020s, the scale of immigration into Italy has been significantly reduced. From the standpoint of the Italian "people", this defends their rights and eases their plight in a downward economic spiral [12].

The impact of populist parties on Italian politics, economy, and society can be seen in the fact that populism functioned more as a means of reconciling democratic society. Both the discourse and the policies of the parties are centered on changing the uncontrolled situation of democratic imbalance in which the mainstream parties are under-powered. This is the reason that the influence of populism has been on the rise. Can populism be a real solution to Europe's problems? This seems to be difficult. From its definition, a thin ideological theory does not have a sufficient base to support it, and often needs to be integrated with other theories in political practice. In terms of the role it plays, populism tends to develop in a way that is contrary to democratic political systems, and therefore it is unable to break down and give birth to new political institutions that would radically transform the whole Europe.

4. Conclusion

The core concept of 'populism' has remained the same since 1990s, it involves a moralization of the opposition between the people and elites. In countless political practices and experiences, populism functioned with this definition, not only in the Italy, but also in Britain, in Spain and other European countries. The form of this ideological theory has also changed with the the globally setup under different eras. For example, the scope of the population has become more clearly defined--from northern citizens to Italian people; the role of the Internet media has broadened the popularity and influence of the concept of populism-- Beppe Grillo's blog compared with Berlusconi's "television populism"; also, populist political parties have gradually integrated into the mainstream political parties--Five Star Movement had to form a coalition with other parties to preserve power. In Italy, the populist parties are the results of the development of populism, but it also in turn influenced the politics in Italy and the whole of Europe.

Italy is a special case, while in other countries, the populist parties still follow this basic logic in their political strategies. It should be noticed that "populism" has both positive and negative effects on European politics, economics and society. When it functions as a reformer in the political practice and combines with the political situations in Europe, it would promote the development of democracy in Europe and stimulate the reforms and reorganizations, providing new political reform plans to make up for the shortcomings of democratic politics. Nevertheless, if "populism" is abused by the populist parties or leaders without limitation, it would cause a form of majoritarian extremism[13].

Populism could function as a "coordinator" to deal with the economic crisis when populist leaders try to work for their people, while its weakness makes it difficult to address the root causes of Italy's, and Europe's economic problems. As for the society, the main issue for Italy is the conflict between populist-influenced nationalism and the admission of refugees under EU obligations. This is

detrimental to the development of the Italian labor market and to the international image of guaranteeing human rights, also to the relationship between Italy and other European countries.

In general, populism is an effective method of solving and regulating Europe's democratic political dilemma at the moment, although it is not effective enough to destabilize the European political scene, it is a wake-up call of inaction for Europe's democratic political system and mainstream political parties.

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