**8. Italy: The Diverging Strategies of the Populist Radical Right During the Pandemic**

*Lisa Zanotti and Carlos Meléndez*

**Abstract**

This chapter assesses the response of the populist parties to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. From the theoretical point of view, we maintain that populists profit from a crisis when they can frame it as a failure of representation. In the case of a health crisis, it is harder for populist actors to frame it as a crisis of representation since it calls for competence instead of representation. While the League (*La Lega)* and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia, FdI) have similar characteristics, the erratic strategy of the former allowed the latter to successfully depict the whole political establishment as morally corrupt and to become the largest party in the system.

This chapter addresses how populist radical right parties reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, one of the European countries most affected by the spread of the virus in terms both of infection rate and death toll. At first glance, given the very features of the health crisis, it was difficult for populists in the opposition to benefit from it. Globally, the most expedient way to manage the Covid-19 pandemic was by imposing state-led measures to restrain the spread of the virus. Implementing measures such as social distancing and lockdowns, limiting individuals’ freedoms, seemed to be the only way to limit the contagion. Italy subscribed to these restrictive policies since the first wave. However, when the initial emergency was somehow contained, populist leaders in the opposition had the chance to politicize different aspects linked to the consequences of the pandemic itself (see Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte forthcoming). Our main argument is that populists are successful in taking advantage of a crisis when they can credibly frame it as a failure of representation. The case of Italy, which has been defined as a “country of many populisms” (Tarchi 2008, 84), is particularly insightful. Since the outbreak of the pandemic at the end of February 2020, there have been two populist radical right parties in the system: the League (formerly Northern League) and Brothers of Italy (FdI). It is worth noting that some scholars consider the Five Star Movement to be a populist party. With respect to this, two points are in order. First, this chapter focuses exclusively on the populist radical right. M5S’s populist ideology is very flexible but far from qualifying as “radical right” (see Manucci and Amsler 2018). Also, we maintain that since 2019 the M5S has gradually lost its populist rhetoric (see Zanotti 2021).

After an initial period known as “rally around the flag,” the two parties’ strategy was similar until they started to diverge substantially, in February 2021. Until the breakdown of the Conte II Cabinet, the League discursively attacked the government’s handling of the pandemic, focusing mainly on two issues: immigration and the economy. When the League joined the government, supporting Mario Draghi’s cabinet, its discourse shifted even if its loyalty to the government was markedly inconsistent. This strategy of keeping “one foot in and one foot out of government” (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005) has been a trademark characteristic of the League since the 1990s. And while FdI, shared the League’s criticism of the government during the first year, since February 2021 it has changed its strategy, becoming the only relevant party in opposition to Mario Draghi’s government. This allowed FdI to systematically challenge the government’s actions and to depict itself as the only party acting in the people’s interest, opposing the elite. Even if the pandemic is still unfolding, vote intention has ascended FdI to the largest party in the system. It has demonstrated that it has taken advantage of the crisis, through a framing that was more functional with its populist appeal and which, in turn, was perceived by voters as more credible.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly outline the magnitude and characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. Thereafter, we briefly discuss the nexus between populism, crisis, and political representation. In the third section, we assess the reaction of the two radical right-wing populist parties, the League and FdI, at different moments of the pandemic. We close with some final remarks.

**The Covid-19 pandemic in Italy**

Italy was the first European country to be severely hit by the SARS-Covid-2 virus. In January 2020, after notification of an outbreak in the province of Hubei in China and a warning issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) of a moderate health risk, the Italian government set up a task force to handle a possible emergency (see Bertero and Seddone 2021). After the discovery of some Chinese tourists who were infected with the virus, the government suspended commercial flights from China. At that point, “the risk of an actual outbreak in Italy was perceived as remote, simply requiring prevention and monitoring” (Bertero and Seddone 2021, 67). However, a few days later, the first infections not related to trips to China were recorded, with two outbreaks in the Milan region and in a small town in Veneto—another Northern region—that were rapidly declared red zones by the national authorities. When the number of infections increased and the health system began to show signs of coming under pressure, the alert was extended to other Northern provinces.[[1]](#endnote-1) Subsequently, national authorities decided to extend lockdown measures to the entire country. This was to prevent the Southern regions from collapsing, as they historically presented a structural gap in terms of health facilities (Franzini and Giannoni 2010). Once the spread of the virus began to slow, a gradual reopening became possible from the beginning of May 2020. Towards the end of October 2020, Covid-19 cases again began to rise, reaching their peak (the second wave) in mid-November, and the number of infections remained relatively high throughout the Winter (with a third peak at the beginning of March 2021). Unlike the first wave, which primarily affected Northern regions, this second peak reached the South, leading to the collapse of the health system in various regions (Del Porto and Sannino 2020). Figure 8.1 shows the evolution of the number of infections and deaths between February 2020 and the end of June 2021.

**Figure 8.1 Number of infections and deaths in Italy (February 2020-June 2021)**

[Figure 8.1 here]

*Source:* Elaboration of the authors based on Johns Hopkins CSEE Covid-19 and European Centre for Disease and Control data

**Populism and crisis: a matter of representation**

The Covid-19 crisis was a sort of perfect storm, somehow unprecedented. While the pandemic was first and foremost a health crisis, it also affected the economy and other different societal aspects.

Although there are many academic publications about populism, the relationship between crisis and populism is, at best, undertheorized.[[2]](#endnote-2) Crises conceived as critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) are not in themselves events that are “ready” to be profited from by populist actors. On the contrary, we maintain that *populists capitalize electorally or politically on changes in the political opportunity structure when they can credibly frame crises as failures of representation***.** Since populism assumes that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004), framing crises as issues linked to the inability or unwillingness of mainstream politicians and/or non-elected bodies to comply with the people’s will is particularly functional to the populist discourse. That is, by appealing to anti-establishment sentiments and/or anti-establishment political identifications (Meléndez forthcoming). In doing so, populists discursively define two constructed entities: the people,” who are morally pure—and “the elite,” who are morally corrupt because they do not act in the interest of the people. Through a mechanism of blame attribution, populists achieve to simplify situations that usually are not that straightforward, transforming them into battles of *good* versus *evil*. In this way, they can create “new” (representation) crises that they usually discursively perpetuate in time. They can also use this to transform a critical juncture which is, by definition, a brief period, into a prolonged crisis of representation.

This argument goes in hand with what many scholars have pointed out: that populism puts a strain on internal contradictions within liberal democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Zanotti and Rama 2020). If, on the one hand, democracy is the rule of the people by the people, on the other, it also supposes both the protection of certain disadvantaged groups such as minorities and the existence of unelected bodies that function as controllers (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014).

This contradiction is the main reason why populists have issues, at least discursively, with the prevailing mechanisms of representation, preferring a more unmediated relationship with the masses instead (Meny and Surel 2002). How populists frame crises as failures of representation varies according to the host ideology with which populism is associated. Both “the people” and “the elite” are empty signifiers whose content is not fixed (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Therefore, populist actors, when framing a crisis as representation failure, fill these empty signifiers in a manner that achieves the mobilization of voters. This, in turn, means that, at least in principle, certain crises are a better fit for certain types of populism. For example, the migration crisis can be more easily taken advantage of by the populist radical right since immigration is crucial in their discourse. This explains why these same parties have tried to shift the focus of attention from a health crisis onto a migration (representation) crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**The populist radical right and the pandemic in Italy**

According to the ideational approach populism is a set of ideas that conceives society as divided into two homogeneous but opposed and morally defined groups: the “pure people” versus the “corrupt elite.” Also, populism is characterized by the concept that politics should be the expression of the people’s general will (see also Stanley 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

As mentioned in the Introduction, both the League and FdI are populist radical right parties (Zaslove 2011; Vercesi 2021). According to Mudde (2007), these parties share at least two other ideologies besides populism: nativism and authoritarianism. As observed in the populist radical right in Europe, nativism appears as the core ideology. Nativism which can be defined as an ideology that relates state benefits solely to natives (Mudde 2007) usually results in anti-immigration rhetoric and policy proposals seeking stricter immigration rules (Ivarsflaten 2008). Authoritarianism, namely the belief in a strictly ordered society, results in the pursuit of “law and order” policy preferences (Mudde 2007).

Even if both the League and FdI share these communalities, they also display important differences. On one hand, the League is the heir of the populist Northern League founded in the 1990s, which pursued federalism, even secessionist policies, in the Northern regions. Following major corruption scandals that involved the party’s leadership, Matteo Salvini took over as Secretary of the party in 2014. This change in leadership led to a modification in the party’s ideology, which steered towards the radical right-wing spectrum of the system, maintaining the populist component. Thanks to this ideological shift, the League acquired a nationwide presence, focusing on immigration and law-and-order issues (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018; Zanotti 2019).

On the other hand, FdI can trace its origins back to the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946. Since 1995, when Gianfranco Fini became its leader, this party has undergone a process of moderation, changing the brand into National Alliance (AN) and joining the center-right coalition in 1994, 2001 and 2006. Heir of AN, FdI in its current form have only existed since 2012, under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, continuing to a certain extent to garner support from Italian neo-fascist groups (Manucci 2020, 31).

When the pandemic hit Italy at the end of February 2020, the electoral coalition that supported the Prime Minister—the independent Giuseppe Conte—was primarily composed by the M5S and the center-left Democratic Party (PD).[[3]](#endnote-3) The M5S has been defined as a movement party which is difficult to locate on the left-right axis of competition (Zanotti 2019). It emerged as a response to the austerity measures implemented to counteract the effects of the Great Recession. As briefly mentioned, it is a former populist party that has been increasingly losing its anti-establishment rhetoric since it has been in government with the Democratic Party. That is why it is worth mentioning, but not to fully analyze their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic in this chapter.

When Giuseppe Conte lost the parliamentary majority, the current Italian President, Mario Draghi—the former Director of the European Central Bank (ECB)—was invited to form a new government. The new executive was sworn in on January 13, 2021, and was supported by Silvio Berlusconi’s party, Forza Italia (FI), and the League, together with the parliamentary parties that previously backed Conte (e.g., M5S, PD, LeU and Iv). The only party that stayed in opposition was FdI.

In assessing the reactions of populist parties to the pandemic, we can distinguish two different moments. The first goes from the beginning of the pandemic to the breakdown of the Conte II cabinet. The second period covers this first part of 2021, namely the tenure of Draghi’s executive. The main difference between those two periods was strategic. Whereas during the Conte II cabinet, both the League and FdI figured as part of the political opposition, during the second period the League decided to support Draghi’s government while the FdI decided to stay at the opposition.

***The League and the pandemic: Still “one foot in and one out government”***

In general terms it can be said that the attitude of the League towards the Covid-19 pandemic was, at best, erratic. A newspaper article published on April 16, 2020, tracked all Salvini’s statements which showed his contradictory stances (Mari 2020). For example, on February 21, 2020, Salvini asked for stricter border controls, implying that the contagion could have arrived from Africa through boats approaching the southern border (Vicentini and Galanti 2021; Custodero 2020). Just a few days later, on February 27, 2020, he demanded a reopening of the Northern regions, the most affected during the first wave and administered by his party. Again, at the beginning of March 2020, when the situation began to worsen, and the country was put in lockdown, Salvini supported the decision in the name of “national unity” (Segatti 2020).

However, when the pandemic was still considered a “Chinese issue” (sic) in early 2020, Salvini’s discursive strategy consisted in framing the crisis politicizing those aspects close to its worldview. As pinpointed, the Covid-19 pandemic began as a health crisis, putting a severe strain on health systems globally. A crisis of these characteristics was not functional to populist actors since citizens in these circumstances tend to prefer a responsible instead of a responsive government (Mair 2009). In this sense, Covid-19 changed the political opportunity structure in a way that in principle, was more functional to mainstream parties than to populists since it was more about *competence* than *representation*. Yet, populist parties had the chance to reframe it as a failure of representation, conveying a credible message to their voters (Van Kessel 2015). The League, being a populist radical right party with a strong emphasis on nativism, attempted to shift the focus onto anti-immigration rhetoric.

A few months after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the League began to strongly criticize Conte’s government over its management of the health crisis. On August 14, 2020, on his personal Twitter account, Salvini claimed: “The only problem linked to the virus is not those who dance, but those who disembark.” This was a clear-cut criticism of the government for closing clubs to avoid the spread of the virus, while allowing foreigners to disembark on the Southern coast of the country. For the League, the latter comprised those responsible for the spreading of the disease in Italy. Accordingly, Salvini defined “us” as the teenagers who danced while the outgroup “them” was represented by those who disembarked, i.e., foreigners. On several occasions, Salvini publicly asked the Prime Minister to resign “if not able to defend Italy and Italians” (Tondo 2020).

Framing what originally was a health crisis as a representation crisis, the League’s leader aimed at mobilizing the electorate, making it easier for voters to relate to his discourse. Moreover, the League started to advocate for those allegedly “left behind” by the government’s inaction, switching between demands to restore normality and resume economic activities, and protest for the lack of support for those categories heavily affected by the pandemic. At the end of April 2020, Salvini and another 70 parliamentarians from his group occupied the Chamber of Deputies and Senate as a protest against what they considered a lack of response by the government to the economic difficulties stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic (La Vanguardia 2020). This tense situation changed when Draghi became Prime Minister. On this occasion, Salvini decided to support the government “without conditions and vetoes” (La 7 2021) in what was depicted as another demonstration of putting the country’s interest first. After this unexpected decision, Salvini stated “what I care about are only actual facts like having more construction sites start up again around the country and very special attention given to our schools. About our future participation in the government, with specific ministries, I can tell that this has not been discussed yet. What we care about now is the future of our country” (Grandesso 2021). During Draghi’s government, the League’s strategy was very similar to that adopted while in government with Forza Italia (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). This strategy of maintaining “one foot in and one foot out of government” consisted in discursively supporting Draghi’s expertise while criticizing some of his political ministers––mainly those from the PD and the M5S especially the Health Minister, Roberto Speranza (Italy 24 News 2021). This strategy became more evident when the League, joined by FdI, confronted the government on its decision to make the Covid certificate a requirement for getting into cinemas, bars, and gyms from August 6, 2021, joining a protest that took place in 12 Italian cities (Lettig 2021). The party adopted the same inconsistent attitude concerning vaccines, attacking the idea of making the Covid-19 vaccine passport (Green Pass) obligatory for teachers, and pupils aged 12 and over, for them to be able to access Italy’s schools when the new academic year starts in September 2021.

Looking at the polls, it looks like the League was not able to capitalize on the crisis, having suffered a setback since the beginning of the pandemic (Manucci 2020). Figure 8.2 shows variation in electoral support for the League.

**Figure 8.2 Mean of electoral polls for the League (February 2020-August 2021)**

[Figure 8.2 here]

*Source:* Elaboration of the authors based on Europe Elects 2020

***Brothers of Italy (FdI): Between responsiveness and identity politics***

As mentioned above, while during the Conte II cabinet, the strategy of the FdI shared several aspects with the League. During the first year of the pandemic, as Manucci (2020, 31) underlined, “FdI has been extremely vocal in criticizing the government and recently protested in front of the parliament, wearing masks with the colors of the Italian flag, to ‘give voice to the common people,’ the ‘silent majority whose future is at risk.’” Also, in line with the League, FdI’s leader, Giorgia Meloni at the end of January 2020 demanded that the Chinese authorities provide reliable information about the virus and later insisted that those arriving from China should quarantine (Albertazzi et al. 2021, 186). When the situation worsened, and the number of infections rose, FdI also moderated its discourse for a brief period, backing calls for closing the country for two weeks at the beginning of March. In the regional elections, FdI experienced further electoral growth with respect to the previous regional elections. Meloni claimed that FdI was “the only party to have grown, from north to south, in each region where a vote was held,” and that no-one could have predicted that a candidate from FdI would win in the Marche region (Albertazzi, Bonansigna, and Zulianello 2021). However, things changed when Mario Draghi took over as Prime Minister. In fact, whereas the League decided to enter government in an “act of responsibility,” FdI declined Draghi’s invitation and remained the only opposition party. The issue behind this choice was “political” since the party’s leader—Giorgia Meloni—stated that “if FdI had also entered government, Italy would have been the only European country to have a person not legitimized by popular vote and a democracy without an opposition” (Meloni 2021). In the months that followed, Meloni often criticized the government for ignoring the opposition and undermining democracy. Being the only party in the opposition allowed the party to depict itself as the only faithful bulwark of the interests of Italians. Namely, while other parties chose “responsibility,” FdI framed its choice of remaining in opposition as assuming the role of the only “true interpreter” and “caretaker” of the Italians’ interests. To sum up, being the only opposition party endorsed the FdI as the only “responsive” party. Undoubtedly, this context made this party much more visible, compared to Draghi’s coalition. FdI has substantially deviated from the League discourse during the past months; it has also heavily relied on its conservative discourse opposing abortion rights and euthanasia, as well as same-sex marriage. In its party manifesto, they seek a “safeguard[ing] of national identity against the process of ‘Islamization’ by opposing the removal of Christian symbols from school in addition to advancing other measures to defend Christianity both domestically and internationally” (Fratelli d’Italia 2018). With regards to the Covid-19 vaccine, Meloni developed a rhetoric aimed at interpreting the doubts of the common people. At an event in July 2021, she claimed, “yes, I got the vaccine, and I am not an anti-vaxxer. I am not against vaccines, I am used to saying things as I think them and it is very annoying that in our political debate anyone who has the courage to ask questions about things must be labelled, when your interlocutor doesn’t know what to say in answer to those sensible questions.” Also, on the Green Pass, in line with Salvini, she said, “I have already said that I disagree, because I consider it an ineffective measure, an economic measure that devastates our tourism” (Adnkronos 2021). Despite promoting similar narratives to Salvini’s party on some issues such as anti-immigration policies and against the restriction of freedoms, it looks as if being the only party in opposition seems to have paid off, and FdI, according to the polls, gained the most support since the beginning of the pandemic, managing to become the first party when we look at Italians’ vote intention. Figure 8.3 shows variation in electoral support for the FdI.

**Figure 8.3** **Mean of electoral polls for FdI (February 2020-August 2021)**

[Figure 8.3 here]

*Source:* Elaboration of the authors based on Europe Elects 2020

During the pandemic, FdI has been able to increment its vote intention due to its effort to simultaneously represent its traditional far-right electorate and moderate conservatives. However, this was possible only due to the moderation of the League, which pursued the strategy of entering government. As Urbinati argues, “in today’s hyperpolarized political landscape, moving to the center carries more risks than rewards. [Meloni] is popular precisely because she’s not moderate. When Salvini moved to the center, he lost consensus, and she’s too clever to make the same mistake” (Ferraresi 2021).

Even if the health crisis was, in theory, not functional to populists (especially when in opposition), when populist parties successfully frame crises as a failure of representation, they might benefit electorally from them. In this regard, while the League entered government, still somehow criticizing it from inside, FdI was more electorally successful in being perceived as different from the parties of the “establishment.”

**Final remarks**

In this chapter, we analyzed how populist parties reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. After a short overview of how the pandemic evolved from February 2020 to June 2021, we briefly outlined the nexus between crisis and populism. We claimed that populist leaders profit from a crisis when they credibly frame it as a failure of representation. In our analysis, we observed that even if both the League and FdI fall into category of populist radical right party, they adopted different strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Until the breakdown of the Conte II cabinet in mid-February 2021—while they were both opposition parties, they harshly criticized the government and its handling of the crisis. They did this mainly by politicizing the disembarkation of foreigners on the Southern border and criticizing the lack of economic support for independent contractors. Yet, the discourse of the two parties began to diverge when Mario Draghi took over as Prime Minister. On the one side, the League supported the government even if it maintained its classic “one foot in and one foot out of government” strategy. On the other hand, FdI decided not to join the government, becoming the only opposition party, gaining much more visibility, and successfully presenting itself as the last bulwark of democracy.

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1. Conte’s government passed emergency measures on 8 March 2020, extending the red zone mainly to the cities of Milan, Venice, Parma, Rimini and Padua and the surrounding areas, given the exponential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hospitals and health facilities. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a literature review on the relationship between populism and crisis see Moffitt (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The left-wing Free and Equal (LeU) and the centrist Italia Viva (Iv) were also part of the cabinet. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)