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Populism and migration in local contexts: the case of Southern Italy

Michela Franceschelli*

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Abstract

Amid the surge of populism across the globe, migration is very often politicized, and migrants accused of causing the loss of jobs and the underperformance of welfare and health services. Right-wing populists exacerbate these claims and capitalize on thriving racism and xenophobia. So far, the scholarship's emphasis on global populism has tended to overlook the importance of local experiences in filtering these dynamics and shaping voters' perceptions. This article examines Southern Italy, arguing that migration plays a relevant role in fostering the appeal of populist platforms, but in relation to socioeconomic inequalities and the history of the local area.

Key words: Migration; populism; Southern Italy; local; global; inequality

Abstract

Nel mezzo del caos del populismo in tutto il pianeta, la migrazione viene molto spesso politicizzata, e i migranti accusati di causare la perdita del lavoro e lo scarso rendimento dei servizi di sussidio e per la salute. I populistici di destra esasperano queste affermazioni e sfruttano il prosperare del razzismo e della xenofobia. Sinora, per l'accademia l'accento sul populismo globale ha finito per tralasciare l'importanza delle esperienze locali nel filtraggio di queste dinamiche e nella formazione delle opinioni degli elettori. Questo articolo prende in esame il Sud Italia, sostenendo che la migrazione gioca un ruolo rilevante nella promuovere il ricorso alle impalcature populiste, ma in relazione alle ineguaglianze socioeconomiche e alla storia locale della zona

Parole chiave: Migrazione, populismo, Sud Italia, locale, globale, ineguaglianza

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Introduction

The instability which affected much of the Arab World culminating with the Arab Springs in 2011 and the war in Syria, but also the severe repression in Eritrea, have increased quite dramatically the number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants moving to Europe. This has been happening in the post-Great Recession climate, when Southern European countries – particularly Italy and Greece – were struggling with the economic recovery. In this respect, Betz (1993; 1994) had already anticipated that the growing numbers of migrants and refugees in Western Europe would have led to an outburst of xenophobia and the rise of the “politics of resentment”, eventually favouring right-wing populist parties.

Migration is indeed considered central to the understanding of right-wing populism, particularly in its contemporary forms: narratives about the growing numbers of migrants and refugees heading to Western countries are often exploited. Migrants are accused of causing the loss of jobs, the underperformance of welfare services, and threatening national unity and identity (Mau and Burkhardt 2009; Roy 2016; Brubaker 2017). Amid these accusations, populists also blame national governments for neglecting their citizens in favour of foreigners. In analysing the political consequences of migration, scholarship has largely focused on the simultaneous occurrence of populist phenomena in different regions of the world, identifying common patterns, but largely overlooking the impact of local contexts.

This paper examines how migration and related anti-establishment sentiments play out at the local level in the specific context of Southern Italy, taking into account its history and widespread presence of socioeconomic inequalities.

Populism is in itself a highly contested concept. Three elements of populist ideology are usually observed: people, élites and leaders (Canovan 1999). Populist narratives advocate for popular sovereignty to be given back to the people (Kriesi and Pappas 2015), avenged against the corruptness of élites (Mudde 2004). The “people”, supposedly represented by populists, is a vague rhetoric construction, finding its concreteness only through its manichean contrast to the élite (Van Kessel 2015). Populism has also been defined as a strategy which politicians may refer to if political and economic contingencies make it convenient to do so (Bonikowski 2017).

Migration is an interesting filter to use here, since it takes into account both the two major explanations of the recent success of populism. First, according to culturalist explanations, progressive changes in Western culture towards secularization, individualism, permissiveness, cosmopolitanism, and gender equality (Wilterdink 2017) left some parts of societies disoriented, triggering a sense of loss of values exploited by populists contrasting insiders vs. outsiders (Inglehart and Norris 2011; 2016). Second, economic explanations identify globalization and economic liberalism as causes of a progressive economic disconnection between societal strata, generating inequalities and causing resentment towards traditional politicians (Rodrik 2018; Fetzer 2019), and immigrants (Hochschild 2016).

This article argues that both explanations shall be endorsed given that they obviously interact, as the scholarship analysing migratory flows in the Mediterranean Sea and their political consequences evidences (Franceschelli 2019; Dines *et al.* 2018; D'Alimonte 2019). While trying to link populism and migration, we argue that historical dynamics and the structure of socio-economic inequalities have to be taken into account together and at the local level.

It should be stressed that here we are devoting particular attention to right-wing populism. Indeed, populist platforms can be combined with different ideologies, such as liberalism or socialism, possessing only thin-centred ideological attributes (Mudde 2004). It is hence possible to observe left-wing and right-wing populisms coexisting, but the latter is more likely to politicize migration, given its frequent use of nativist narratives (Rossell Hayes and Dudek 2020), based on the contrast between natives and foreign outsiders (Higham 1955; Mudde 2007).

Considering the impact that recent migration is having in Europe, Southern Italy seems an optimal ground to study these dynamics, as evidenced in part by the success of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement – 5SM), and especially by the recent appeal of the Lega (League), a nationalist party with its historical stronghold in the wealthier Northern regions (Albertazzi *et al.* 2018). Nonetheless, populism is not a new phenomenon in the area. Southern regions, on average, have voted for populists incessantly since 1990s. Hence, even though migration certainly plays a role in explaining the recent League's success, we can hypothesize more complex dynamics are at play in the area, encompassing both its history and the widespread presence of socio-economic inequalities. This study is a first attempt to bridge socio-economic, cultural and historical factors in the South which made – and keep making it – inclined towards populism.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we will provide background to the relationship between migration and populism. Then, we will describe migration policies in Italy, before focusing on the specific context of Southern Italy, with its labour market's features and socio-economic inequalities. After having looked at the electoral history of the area, we will conclude with a case study of the island of Lampedusa.

1. Narratives and representations of migration in right-wing populist discourses

There are different ways in which migration is deployed within right-wing populist discourses, namely the moral panic about a migrants' invasion and their illegality; migrants as a financial burden; the claims about migrants stealing jobs; and issues of nationalism and sovereignty.

First, the narrative of invasion and the control of illegal migration has been central to the argument about the need to protect national borders and close ports. A crucial

theme in this context is the widely discussed – and media endorsed – “Mediterranean migration crisis”. Critical literature (Campesi 2011; Dines *et al.* 2015) has discussed how this crisis has been rather “manufactured” to hide the failure of European migration policy (Friese 2010) and the effects of austerity, including growing inequalities, slow growth and lack of public investments.

Second, migrants’ entitlement to welfare and public services, and their economic cost, represent another cornerstone of current right-wing populist rhetoric. The idea that access to free welfare has become a pull factor for migrants has questioned the welfare state’s universal value in favour of restrictionism (Mau and Burkhardt 2009; Phillimore 2011). Issues of access and entitlement have given rise to claims about migrants as “health tourists” taking advantage of national public services – as suggested by concerns about the NHS in the UK in the Brexit context – or as burden for the taxpayers in the case of asylum seekers accused of exploiting Italian reception centres. In Italy, the League’s leader Matteo Salvini has promoted the idea that “illegal migrants” (“clandestini”) cost Italians’ taxpayers 35 Euro a day, and that they spend their time “lazing around” while Italians are increasingly poorer and left behind.

Third, claims about migrants stealing jobs from the natives have been increasingly pressing within populist discourses particularly since the Great Recession. Yet, in Italy this narrative comes together with the model of “subordinate integration” (Ambrosini 2018), where migrants are tolerated as long as they remain enclosed in segments of the labour market rejected by Italians, for instance as domestic workers or agricultural labourers. This interplay between subordinate integration and the “they take our jobs” narrative (Triandafyllidou 2000) is relevant to the case of Rosarno presented below.

Finally, migrants are also accused of threatening national unity and identity, hence becoming central in populist discourses over sovereignty. Sovereignty – intended as the right of a nation state to exercise uncontested power within its own borders – has been capitalized on by populists, promoting the primacy of national interests above global issues. The term invokes the idea of a homogenous nation whose citizens only detain political legitimacy (Bludhorn and Butzlaff 2019) with implications for the exclusion and the demonization of migrants, prompting racism and bigotry (Wuthnow 2018). Politically, sovereignty has meant the endorsement of protectionist platforms, with increased levels of policing, the criminalization of migrants and a stronger emphasis on border control, as the Italian case – presented in the next section – also suggests.

2. Migration and migration policy in Italy

Italian migration policy, particularly in the last few years, is tightly linked to shifts in public opinion, influencing – and been influenced by – support for populist parties.

In 2017, the numbers of arriving migrants started to decline following the interventions of the Gentiloni's government (Dec 2016-June 18) via the "Minniti's decree" and subsequent law (April 2017). The [law](#) cut down the time required to process asylum applications and provided funding and new infrastructure in the form of regional repatriation centres. Importantly, the law also set out to develop bilateral agreements with migrants' sending countries to foster repatriations and prevent further departures in exchange for economic support in areas most affected by migration, such as that signed in early 2017 by Gentiloni and Fayez al Sarraj, Prime Minister of [Lybia](#), the current main route from Africa to Italy. Between 2016 and 2018 the arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers to Italy indeed fell by more than 70%. However, the agreement sparked [international debate](#), due to the creation of detention centres for migrants in Lybia.

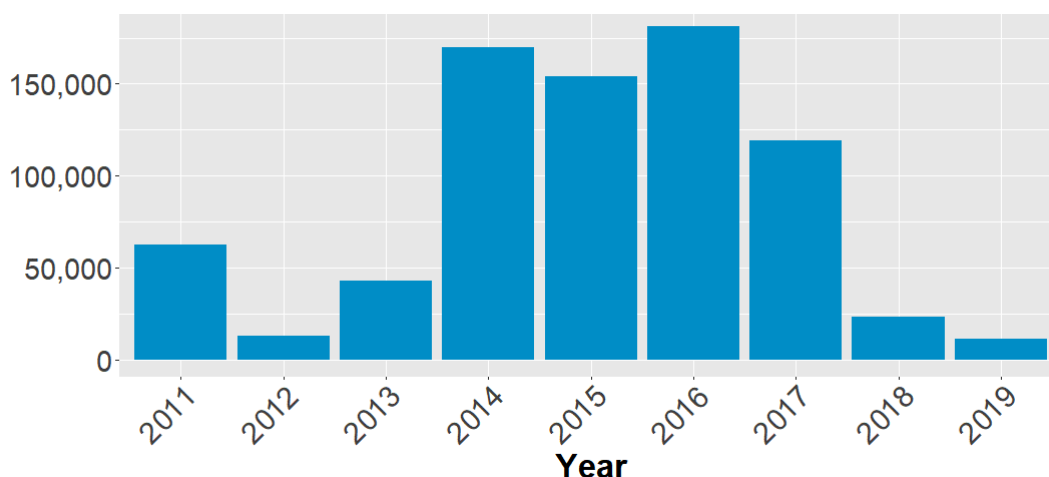
After March 2018 national election, the 5SM-League coalition government (June 2018-Sept 2019) took over from Gentiloni and nominated the League's leader and deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini as Home Secretary. In October 2018, Salvini issued the defining act of the new government's migration policy: the "[security and immigration](#)" decree converted into law in December 2018. The new law combined measures aimed to: cut down the number of citizenship permits by scrubbing applications for humanitarian reasons; abolish the main centres for social integration programmes; and impose stricter policing and security measures to limit the success of applications for those with a criminal record. Later on, new penalties were introduced for the NGOs accused of supporting traffickers and violating entry restrictions in Italian territorial waters. The closing of ports to prevent the disembarking of NGOs boats carrying migrants rescued in open sea became the focus of Salvini's discursive strategies.

In September 2019, a new coalition government by the 5SM and centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) took over replacing the 5SM-League coalition, which collapsed due to disagreements among the parts. Salvini's decree however is yet to be revoked.

It seems clear that in Italy migratory "crises" have been managed with a focus on border control and policing rather than social integration. This draws on a background characterized by structural deficiencies, especially in Southern Italy, considering in particular its labour market's features.

3. Migration and labour market dynamics in Southern Italy

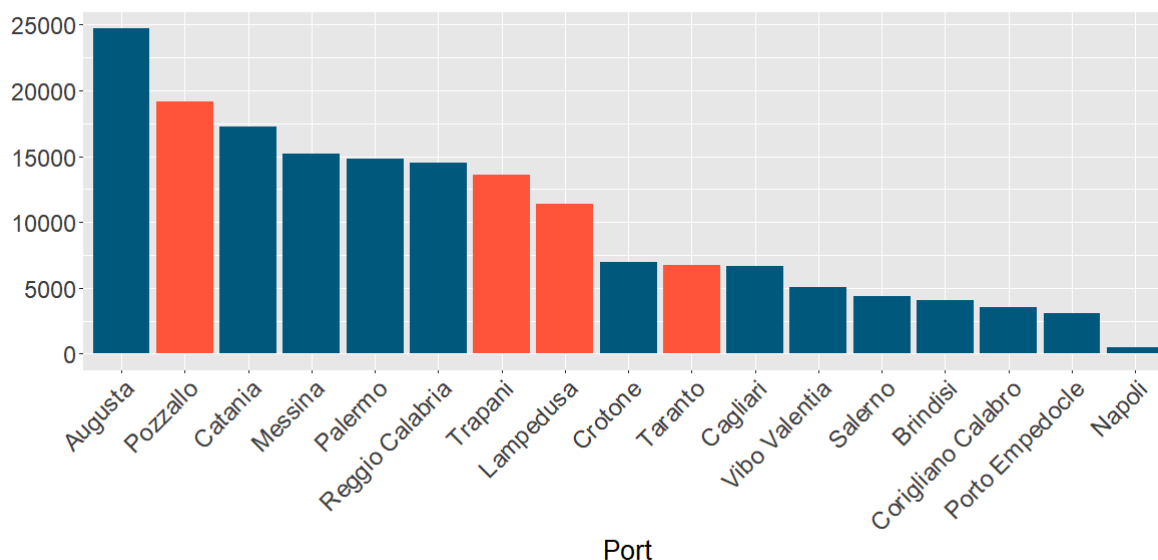
Between 2011-2019 about 780,000 migrants and asylum seekers arrived in Italy ([Ismu 2019](#)), with the peak between 2014-2018. The highest number of arrivals was recorded in 2016, with more than 181,000 migrants and asylum seekers.



Source: ISMU - Home Office Data

Figure 1. Number of migrants landed in Italy by sea

Migrants are distributed across different regions, based on their size and population, with Lombardy – among the richest regions in the North – receiving the greatest proportion (Interni 2016). Southern regions are however more exposed to the arrivals – particularly Sicily and Calabria as Figure 2 suggests.



Source: Home Office Cruscotto Statistico - trackings on land excluded

Figure 2. Number of migrants disembarked in Italy in 2016 by port

Although there are important regional variations and Southern Italy¹ is not a perfectly homogenous area, some shared characteristics about the history and experiences of migration can be identified. Migrants started arriving in Southern Italy during the early 1990s, but the migrant population increased substantially only during the 2000s:

¹ Southern Italy is here defined following the official Eurostat classification of Southern regions (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia) and the two major islands (Sardegna, Sicilia). This is usually defined as the “Mezzogiorno”.

between 1981 and 2018 the number of migrants in Italy shifted from just over 200,000 to about 5 million, 8.5% of the total population (Macri *et al.* 2018).

It is useful to analyse these migration trends in tandem with Southern Italy's labour market dynamics. The Mediterranean migration model has been characterized – particularly since the 1990s – by an increasing demand for intensive agricultural jobs, lower skilled service sector jobs, and housekeeping jobs (De Haas 2011). The increase resulted from a number of factors. On a global level, the combined challenges of climate change, international competition and falling prices required an increasingly cheaper labour force provided by migrants (Morice and Michalon 2008). Locally, Southern Italy's labour market is characterised by high segmentation requiring a deregulated, precarious and low paid labour force. Furthermore, the mismatch between a higher demand for less skilled labour and local highly qualified youth who tend to leave leads to labour shortage during the harvesting time. Agriculture is not the only sector in the area, but it is a prominent one and relies on family-run businesses which are also affected by the involvement of criminal organizations.

The Italian migration system that since the “Bossi-Fini” law (2002) criminalises migration and refuses work permits for seasonal workers increments the illegality and irregularity of migrants' status (Corrado 2011), making them subject to extremely poor working and housing conditions (Czaika and de Haas 2013), and legitimising xenophobic discourses (De Haas 2011).

The combined effects of the Mediterranean migration model (De Haas 2011) and the ethnically segmented labour market add further complexity to the socio-economic context of Southern Italy. The informal nature of the agricultural sector in the South has indeed implications for the high numbers of irregular workers: in Calabria, for instance, a total of 146,000 workers are employed in the informal economy, accounting for the 10% of the regional GDP ([CGIA Mestre 2018](#)).

The small town of Rosarno, a countryside town in Calabria with less than 16,000 residents, is significant to understand how labour market's features and the socio-economic context have led to the politicization of migration. Rosarno, and the surrounding area of the Piana of Gioia Tauro, have become sites for seasonal workers from both Eastern Europe and Africa (Jacomella 2010). In 2010 the town became a place of social unrest when a group of migrants responded to some local youth who had attacked them. Local armed patrols of people from Rosarno, including some from 'Ndrangheta clans, retaliated by injuring several more migrants. After two days of violence, the intervention of the police led to the deportation of 1,500 people (Corrado 2011), detentions and arrests (Jacomella 2010, 44).

This case points at the relevant potential for populists to exploit discourses over the criminalisation of migrants. However, Rosarno also suggests that there is something more than mere bad management of migration. As it appears, the settlement of migrants in the South is also subjected to the specific conditions of the

local labour markets and the informality of the agricultural sector. This socio-economic context has provided a safe ground for populist platforms over the years. This paper is indeed an attempt to capture the local specificities which made populist narratives appealing, accounting for how migration relates to other factors that shape populist experiences of the area, such as long-term inequalities.

4. Southern Italy and socio-economic inequalities

To explain the support for populism in Southern Italy we will refer to two main perspectives: the culturalist and economic explanations. This paper seeks to show both must be taken into account in a complementary rather than mutually exclusive way, in particular when considering the role played by migration. We will start with economic explanations, which link populism and economic disparity.

Economic inequality between Northern and Southern Italy is worrisome, at the cost of the latter. Average household income in the South is roughly half of its Northern counterpart, while income inequality within regions is significantly higher in the South, in particular in Sicily and Campania (Pratesi *et al.* 2018). The regions of the South suffer from low per capita income and wealth, and significantly higher inequality of opportunity if compared to the North (Checchi and Peragine 2009). Indeed, between 2007 and 2017, average per capita income decreased by 6.9% in Campania, 6.4% in Calabria, 7.2% in Sicily and 5.9%, against only -1.9% in Piedmont, -1.4% in Emilia Romagna, -2.6% in Lombardy and -1.4% in Veneto².

When analysing Italian inequalities however, it is paramount to take into account not only material aspects of inequality, but also the role played by non-material disparity, in the form of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1977), including social network ties, educational qualifications, skills and personal abilities, the use of language, and cultural taste (Mackebach 2012). If individuals or groups share the same levels of income or wealth, actual economic inequality measures do not capture any imbalance. Nevertheless, *ceteris paribus*, non-material inequalities may make people strongly feel and perceive the presence of inequalities.

Ultimately, non-material resources will often represent a strong comparative advantage for certain social strata coming from different regions. Hence, the frustration of the worse-off strata will increase as they will notice the impossibility of developing these resources at a too late age making them more inclined to the promises of populist parties.

Non-material inequalities are particularly relevant for understanding differences in access to public services, such as healthcare or education, in Italy both dramatically worse in the South compared to the North (Fantini *et al.* 2014).

As inequalities – both material and non-material – provide an important background to understand issues of “access” to public services, they are also key to understand

²InfoData IIsole24Ore data.

populist claims about entitlement and exclusion. All these factors, tangible and non-tangible, are targeted by populist rhetoric, increasing voters' receptiveness and political resentment.

Southern Italy is indeed characterized by a complex process of grievances accumulation, which adds perceptions of material economic inequality, considered relevant in explaining voters' behaviours (Franko 2017), to perceptions of immaterial disparity, filtered by culture and education.

The resulting effect is a resentment which is easily exploited by populists, in particular by right-wing populists through migration narratives. Yet, what is referred today as the current "migration crisis", is a relatively recent phenomenon, whilst populism has a much longer history in Southern Italy, as voting trends since the 1990s presented below suggest.

5.Voting trends and populism in Southern Italy

Parliamentary elections in 2018 represent a breakthrough moment in Italian politics: the populist 5SM and League stormed their opponents. The 5SM became the first party in Italy and, interestingly, the country appeared divided in two political areas: the North went to the League, the South to the 5SM. More recently however the League gained traction in the South, with good performances in local, regional, and European elections. The success can be explained by Salvini's ability to exploit migration narratives as explained above. But migration is just part of the story. Populists have dominated in the South since long time: Forza Italia (Go Italy – FI) first, and the 5SM more recently. We will now analyse these trends.

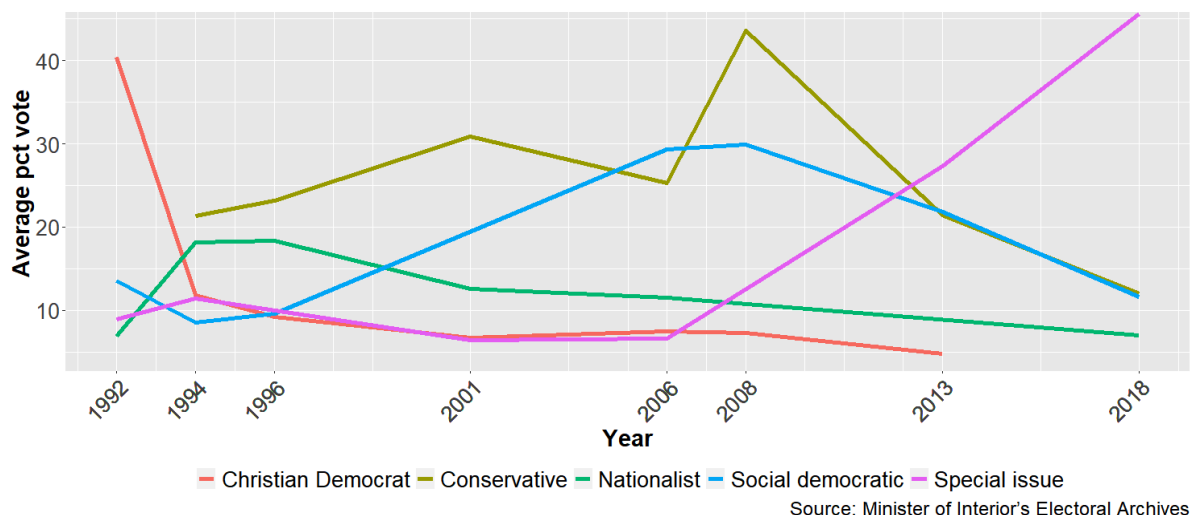


Fig. 3. Electoral results by party family, Parliament elections (Chamber), Southern Italy, 1992-2018.

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of electoral trends between 1990 and 2020 for parliamentary elections (Chamber) in Southern Italy. Party families have been

coded using the [Manifesto Project Database](#): Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance – AN) – later Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) – and the Northern League (then League) are here coded as “nationalist”; FI and Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom) as “conservative”; the 5SM as “special issue”.

To analyse these plots, it is important to reflect upon the historical premises that preceded 1992. At the end of 1980s-beginning of 1990s Italian political landscape was subject to several pressures (Hopkin 2004). First, the end of the Cold War, which revolutionised the international system, also undermined the role of the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy – DC) as champion against the Italian Communist Party. Second, judicial campaigns (“Tangentopoli-Mani Pulite”) against politicians and entrepreneurs shook the public opinion and brought a further change of direction. Third, financial and currency crises challenged the economic system with consequent pressure on parties, (Bobba and McDonnell 2015), paving the way to outsiders such as the Northern League and Silvio Berlusconi’s FI. Last, 1994 electoral reform, introducing a majoritarian rule system, contributed to further altering the political scenario.

As a result, these years are considered the end of the “First Republic”, which left room for the Second. In the South this translated into the dissolution of DC’s absolute predominance, unchallenged since the end of World War II.

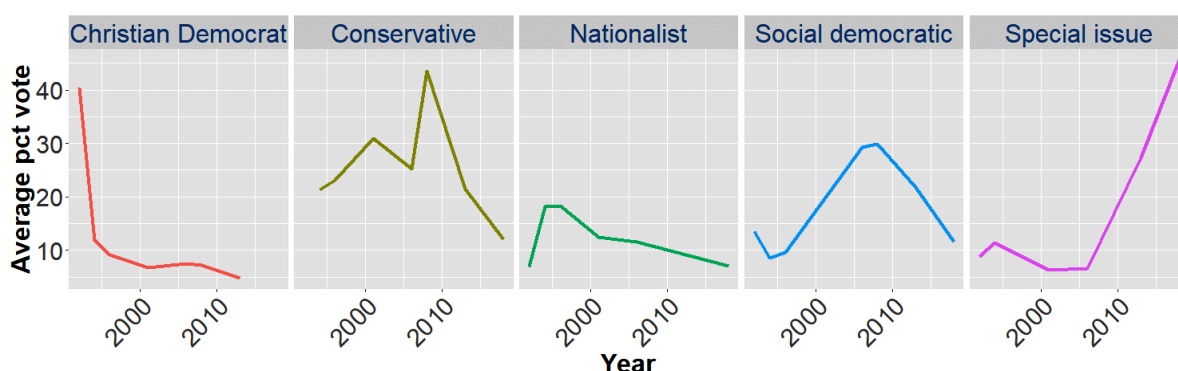
The DC’s control of the South over the decades went in tandem with a deeply rooted political clientelism. The party developed a complex system of mediation between Southerners’ needs and scarce resources from the central state (De Luca 1997), which often implied the support of the mafia in exchange for economic privileges, particularly in the construction sector (De Feo and De Luca 2017).

In terms of redefining new party equilibria, the real watershed moment is found in 1994 when two new parties entered the scene. Indeed, on the one hand the Northern League, whilst born in 1990, in 1992 was still in a gestation phase and performed rather badly in national elections as it was able to mobilize support in some Lombardy’s districts only. On the other hand, FI was debuting in 1994, trying to intercept the “Pentapartito”’s voters, *i.e.* to fill the vacuum left by the great coalition composed of the DC, the Socialist Party, liberals and republicans. A third party however needs to be mentioned: AN, born in 1994 too on the ashes of the far right Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement – MSI) and the Destra Nazionale (National Right). In Southern Italy AN and FI were allied in 1994 (“Polo del Buon Governo”³), and the strategy will prove to be successful.

The end of the century thus marks the end of the DC’s absolute control of Southern Italy, in a political scenario becoming progressively more populated by non-traditional parties. The Northern League struggled at producing momentum in the South, given its regionalist nature and its platforms and rhetoric explicitly addressed against Southern Italy. Hence, the traction of nationalist parties came from the far

³ Not in the North given the incompatibility between AN’s and Northern League’s leaders.

right even though, as a party family, it will progressively decrease in importance. On the contrary, FI started doing very well and was able to replace the DC since the beginning. Until 2013, parliamentary elections have been a triumph for Berlusconi, with the exception of 2006 elections which marked a success for the social democrats. The latter indeed grew steadily since the beginning of the Second Republic, but will not recover since the defeat in 2008. Berlusconi's era is hence characterized by a stable and rather bipolar system in Southern Italy. Empirical evidence suggests that FI inherited also the DC's clientelist network and connections with mafia organizations (Buonanno *et al.* 2014).



Source: Minister of Interior's Electoral Archives

Fig. 4. Electoral results by party family, Parliament elections (Chamber), Southern Italy, 1992-2018.

Berlusconi's reign came to an end in 2011. Similarly to the beginning of the 1990s, economic crises and political scandals paved the way to new actors: the 5SM and the League. Born in 2009, the 5SM combines inter-ideological populist narratives with a particular stress on direct democracy through its web platform (Gerbaudo 2019). The League, formerly Northern League, whilst originally opposed to the central state in Rome and to Southern Italy in a typical regionalist and autonomist guise, significantly changed its strategy since Salvini became its leader in 2013, as we have seen already.

The 2013 elections represent a turning point in this sense. Traditional parties and the far right declined, while the 5SM rose to the highest levels of support, in particular in 2018. The latter indeed has been able to leverage Southern feelings of having been left behind, deeply entrenched with the various dimensions of perceptions of inequality highlighted above, proposing the "citizenship income" ("Reddito di Cittadinanza"), a minimum income for the unemployed or for people living in severe poverty conditions. This measure has been presented as a paradigmatic shift in Italian fight against poverty and, in particular, inequality (Petrini 2018; Ardeni and Gallegati 2019).

	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Abruzzo	DC	AN	AN	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	5SM	5SM
Basilicata	DC	PDS	PDS	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PD	PD	5SM
Calabria	DC	PDS	AN	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	5SM	5SM
Campania 1/2	DC	PDS/AN	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	PDL	5SM
Molise	DC	AN	AN	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	5SM	5SM
Puglia	DC	AN	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	PDL	5SM
Sardegna	DC	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	L'Ulivo	PDL	5SM	5SM
Sicilia	DC	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	Forza Italia	PDL	5SM	5SM

Table 1. Winning parties at Parliamentary elections (Chamber) by region. Source of data: Minister of Interior's Electoral Archives.

Looking at regional trends more in detail (table 1) we confirm that 1994 represented a turning point marking the success of AN and the consolidation of its ally, FI, in the following years. The latter will then keep expanding, eventually segregating the far-right AN and Brothers of Italy.

Looking at table 1 it also appears clear how Southern Italian regions are uniform in terms of voting behaviours apart from Basilicata, where the social democratic left outperformed FI during the majority of elections in Berlusconi's era.

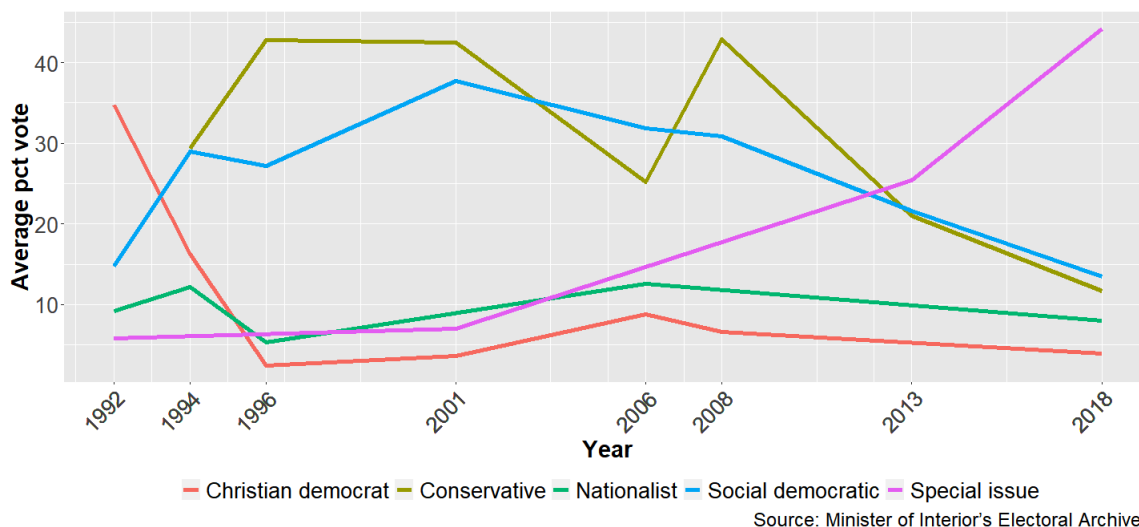


Fig. 5. Electoral results by party family, Parliament elections (Senate), Southern Italy, 1992-2018.

Results for the Senate House (fig. 5 and table 2) present similar trends. However, social democratic party family, in particular by the means of the Progressisti (Progressive) alliance, outperformed conservatives in 1994. Even in 1996 the battle between conservatives and social democratic was significantly fiercer. Berlusconi will soon regain support and will dominate until 2010s, with the usual 2006 exception.

	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Abruzzo	DC	Progressisti	Polo Libertà	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	5SM	5SM
Basilicata	DC	Progressisti	L'Ulivo	L'Ulivo	Democratici Sinistra	PD	PD	5SM
Calabria	DC	Progressisti	Polo Libertà	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	PDL	5SM
Campania	DC	Progressisti	L'Ulivo	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	PDL	5SM
Molise	DC	Progressisti	L'Ulivo	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	5SM	5SM
Puglia	DC	Progressisti	Polo Libertà	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	PDL	5SM
Sardegna	DC	Progressisti	L'Ulivo	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	5SM	5SM
Sicilia	DC	Polo Buon Governo	Polo Libertà	Casa Libertà	Forza Italia	PDL	5SM	5SM

Table 2. Winning parties at Parliamentary elections (Senate) by region. Source of data: Minister of Interior's Electoral Archives.

While Southern Italy appears as an even, monolithic bloc, oriented towards populism for the entirety of the Second Republic's history, another feature stands out, *i.e.* Southerners progressive disaffection with politics, which is particularly evident with respect to electoral competition. Indeed, as table 3 shows, turnout rates kept decreasing in all Southern regions since 1992, moving from an average of 80.3% in 1992, to 68.4% in 2018. Interestingly, in most regions the positive peak, excluding 1992, is 2006 when social democratic won, suggesting that lower turnout does seem to penalize traditional rather than populist parties.

	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Abruzzo	81.88	80.09	77.01	77.75	83.71	80.95	75.95	75.25
Basilicata	82.76	79.70	75.14	75.07	80.29	75.38	69.50	71.11
Calabria	74.39	72.48	67.36	70.88	74.60	71.41	63.15	63.64
Campania	82.40	79.59	76.05	76.99	78.93	76.35	68.05	68.34
Molise	74.69	72.88	68.03	69.77	82.36	78.60	78.13	71.63
Puglia	84.64	82.04	77.64	78.32	79.37	76.21	69.94	69.08
Sardegna	84.07	88.71	77.49	77.45	77.94	72.30	68.32	65.51
Sicilia	77.54	74.88	70.69	71.26	74.94	74.97	64.52	62.68

Table 3. Percentage of actual voters on those having rights. Source of data: Minister of Interior's Electoral Archives.

Last, table 4 presents regional elections' results. The presence of the left is more significant, as well as its turnover with the right. Interestingly, the 5SM was less able to convince voters at the regional level and, contrary to national elections, FI was able to retain its attractive strength even after 2013.

	Abruzzo	Basilicata	Calabria	Campania	Molise	Puglia	Sardegna	Sicilia
1995	PDS	PDS	Progressisti	PDS	PDS	PDS		
1996								FI
1999							Polo Libertà	
2000	DS	DS	FI	FI	FI	FI		
2001					FI			FI
2004							L'Ulivo	
2005	DS	Ulivo	DS	Margherita		FI		
2006					FI			FI
2008	PDL							FI
2009							PDL	
2010		PD	PDL	PDL		PDL		
2011						PDL		
2012								PD
2013		PD			PD			
2014	PD		PD				PD	
2015				PD		PD		
2017								FI
2019	League	5SM					FI	
2020			FI					

Table 4. Winning parties at regional elections by region. Source of data: Minister of Interior’s Electoral Archives

The picture depicted above is hence of a political context where populism is the distinctive feature. It is interesting to reflect on whether the South can be claimed to be mainly right oriented. Surely, Berlusconi’s predominance is strong evidence in that sense. Nonetheless, FI is not a traditional, conservative right-oriented party. On the contrary, the party has been described as a “liberal-populist” party (Taguieff 2003): Berlusconi’s style has legitimised populism in Italy, and evolved the concept making it the distinctive feature of the entire 1994-2011 period. Therefore, if a regularity in the South has to be found, it would be populism rather than conservatism. In this sense, a continuum can be traced between Berlusconi’s FI and the 5SM, with the former to be considered as 5SM’s trailblazer.

Finally, these trends suggest that the anti-establishment feelings of Southerners predate the so-called “migration crisis”. While migration is definitely a powerful weapon for right-wing populists such as Salvini, who has been able to make the League appealing in the South too, this happened only very recently. On the contrary, this review of electoral trends suggests that Southern Italy’s predilection for populism is deep-rooted. These insights suggest also that the context is quite fluid in terms of demands for – and supplies of – populist platforms: boundaries between right and left-wing populist platforms are easily crossed and seem to be interchangeable. The case of Lampedusa presented below sheds light on socially situated aspects of these feelings and how they relate to local circumstances.

6. The case of Lampedusa

The island of Lampedusa, just over 200 Km from the coast of Sicily, is a key transit site for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Italy. Although the island represents a quite unique case for the analysis of populism and migration due its newly acquired role in the current European migration debate, it also reveals insights that can be extended to other Italian Southern regions.

Two sets of events have marked the experiences of Lampedusa in relation to migration. First, in 2011, just after the outset of the “Arab Spring”, great numbers of Tunisians fleeing their country arrived on the island, whose population grew in 6 months from 6,000 to over 15,000. The situation escalated to violence when hundreds of Tunisians rallied against the threat of being forcibly taken back to Tunisia (Orsini 2015). Second, on 3rd October 2013, more than 360 migrants died in a shipwreck off the shore of Lampedusa (Musarò 2017). Since then, Lampedusa acquired increasing space in the political debate about migration at both national and European level.

Research conducted on Lampedusa during 2017 based on 65 interviews with local residents and ethnographic fieldwork (Franceschelli 2019) provides important insights on how migration plays out into political discourses. An animated debate took place in May 2017, just at the outset of the campaign for the mayor election, revolving around issues of lacking local sovereignty – *i.e.* the power of locals to decide about their own community and control the circumstances of the island. The debate was articulated into two different but interconnected populist discourses: the need to prioritise local citizens over migrants, and the resentment toward the national government.

We saw that the idea of national sovereignty is a central motive in current (right-wing) populist discourses often in connection with nationalism (Rossell Hayes and Dudek 2020). However, Lampedusans’ populism was concerned with local rather than national issues (Franceschelli 2019). The research suggests that anti-government feelings were prominent in the accounts of Lampedusans who blamed the central government for neglecting the community and ignoring the calls for improving its living conditions. For instance, the government was held responsible for the poor quality of healthcare provision. These concerns were reified by the stories of a Lampedusan man who died of cancer because he could not afford to complete his chemotherapy in Agrigento, or pregnant women who had to go and give birth in the mainland as the island is lacking maternity care facilities.

Secondary education provision was also considered insufficient due to high teachers’ turnover, as well as the unreliable public transports, which leave Lampedusa isolated for long periods during winter.

In this context, migrants were considered the unwanted victims of a complex bundle of circumstances shifting the burden of global issues onto the local islanders. Lampedusans were particularly upset about the negative effects that migration – and the way it has been portrayed by the media – has had on their businesses, as the island mostly relies on tourism which dropped drastically during the peak of the

crisis (2013-2016). Yet, migrants were not blamed directly for the misfortune of Lampedusa but, instead, migration was considered the last and most discussed – but not the one and only – example of government's failure.

Angela Maraventano, the local leader of the League and former member of the Senate House for the same party, clearly articulates these issues in her interview, which took place during the campaign for the mayor election. Angela describes the sense of injustice that brought her close to the party many years ago:

Angela: I became a [member of the] Northern League... when a man from Lampedusa died 20 years ago after 9 hours in the polyclinic. After his death I wrote to all politicians and the only ones who answered were from the Northern League. As a result, I became friend with them, but not only did I discover that I had the same ideas ... I also immediately decided to start working [with them] on improving our island.

Researcher: What ideas?

Angela: Ideas to be owners in our land, to work for our island and, if necessary, to also help others, but our people must come first.

This sense of injustice is similar to the one identified by research in other countries, such as the US. Hochschild's (2016) in-depth study of Tea Party's supporters in Southwest Louisiana documents the "deep story" which helps making sense of how the locals, who described themselves as patiently waiting in a line, felt they had been overtaken by "line cutters" – including migrants – favoured by both national and federal governments. Similarly to Hochschild's, scholarship about broken communities and anti-establishment feelings (Silva 2019; Wuthnow 2018) is very much rooted into present experiences of dealing with the side-effects of globalization and post-recession structural hardship.

However, we found that the current anti-government resentment of Lampedusans was not just about economic inequality, but it reinforces preferences for populist parties, responsible for wider voting patterns in Southern Italy during the '90s and 2000s (e.g. Forza Italia) and with even longer-dated historical roots. Filippo, one of the research participants, made reference to the 19th century history and to the role of culture. The Bourbons, who ruled the island (and Southern Italy) in the mid-1800s, sent different families from various regions of Italy to administer Lampedusa:

There has never been a sense of community [in Lampedusa]. Maybe it's a cultural issue. We were colonized by the Bourbons in 1843. At that time, they brought [to the island] different families from various regions which settled like different factions. We still carry this thing with us. We have never been united in Lampedusa. Everyone thinks about his or her own profit as if belonging to different factions. I am convinced of this, also seeing the results of the last political elections. Giusi [centre-left former mayor] has changed the face of the island that [was shaped by a] cliental system. Yet she lost a lot. Because when one wants to put things in order then it ends up like this [losing].

Lampedusa is itself a very specific case, but this sense of long-dated disconnection from the rest of Italy, which trickles down to present time, is not unique to the island, but rather part of the shared history and political identity of Southern Italy (Di Maria 2014). Several historians agree that the complexity of the relation between the South of Italy and the central government dates back to the 1860s, the time of Italian unification. In 1876, a government inquiry – “La Sicilia 1876” (Sicily in 1876) – by two liberal-conservative politicians, Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino, highlighted the strong contempt of the locals for the national government. The inquiry documents similar sentiments and discourses to those we observe today in Lampedusa, about the misrepresentation and neglect of local interests, and the lack of trust on national institutions serving the “dominant families of the area” (Franchetti and Sonnino 1925, 29-30). The authors reported their impressions about how Sicilians perceived government officers as foreigners coming to “despise and denigrate” their land. The inquiry also informed the work of the Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), who explains how the national government offered no change to a feudal-like South which remained divided between the subordinated poor and a rich aristocratic class of landowners.

The nature of the relationship between the South of Italy and the central government is still an object of discussion among scholars. While some highlight the socio-economic dimension, others emphasise issues of conflicting loyalties and argue that Southern Italians associated the newly formed Italian State to the Savoia family and therefore to a Northern-led political project (Di Maria 2014; Franceschelli 2019). Both structural factors and the historical processes which reinforced and created complex loyalties have changed and evolved through history, but remain relevant to make sense of populist behaviours in Southern Italy.

Conclusion

By looking at Southern Italy, this paper draws on the intuition that, in order to understand the connection of populism and migration, fine-grained lenses over specific local contexts are needed. We claim that while migration is a relevant factor in explaining Southern Italy’s tendency towards populism, a more complex picture must be taken into consideration. Perceptions of inequality, a sense of dissatisfaction and resentment, and a general feeling of distance between the “central state” and the South – already depicted by the seminal works of Banfield (1958) and Putnam (1993) – make Southerners filter their everyday experience in a peculiar way, which translates in a dislike for “traditional” politicians. This paper thus points to the need of engaging in local analyses in a more structured way, combining both economic and cultural explanations of populism. Further research is needed to differentiate among Southern contexts, and to analyse historical trends more rigorously.

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