Italy: a case of mutating populism?

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Italy: a case of mutating populism?
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Italy is often presented as a showcase of populist parties. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, half of the Italian electorate voted for a party that has been labelled populist. During the 1994–2011 period, Italy witnessed four coalition governments dominated by populists. In line with the framework guiding this special issue, Italy thus offers a unique opportunity to trace the reactions of political and societal actors to populists in government. We propose that it is necessary to examine not only how populism’s opponents react, but also how fellow populists respond. Indeed, we observe in Italy, on the one hand, what we will call mutating populism and, on the other hand, a peculiar mixture of paralysis, antagonism, and imitation by their opponents. This contribution is structured as follows: first, we describe Italian populism in the context of the end of the Italian First Republic and the emergence of the new party system under the Second Republic. In the process we discuss events under the four Berlusconi governments (1994–1995; 2001–2005; 2005–2006; 2008–2011). In each phase, we distinguish between populist and anti-populist contenders. We also describe the reactions abroad to governing Italian populists, especially within the European Union.

Keywords: mutating populism; Berlusconi governments; Italian party system; Italian coalition politics; Northern League; Five Star Movement

Introduction
Italy is often presented as a showcase of populist parties. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, 50% of the Italian electorate voted for a party that could be labelled populist: this includes Silvio Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertà (PdL), the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) and the new kid on the block, Beppe Grillo’s Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S) (Table 1). Unique for Europe, Italy witnessed four coalition governments dominated by populists (the LN and PdL (and its predecessor Forza Italia, or FI)) during the 1994–2011 period. In line with the framework guiding this special issue, Italy thus offers a unique opportunity to trace the reactions of political and societal actors, both domestically and

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externationally, to populists in government. However, we propose that it is necessary to examine not only how populism’s opponents react, but also how fellow populists respond. Indeed, we observe in Italy, on the one hand, what we will call mutating populism and, on the other hand, a peculiar mixture of paralysis, antagonism, and imitation by its opponents. By mutating populism we mean that populist actors in Italy have reacted and responded to the success and the institutionalization of fellow populist actors. In terms of this special issue’s attention to the demand for and supply of populism, Italy offers a complicated case. More specifically, we argue the following: first, Italian populism should be interpreted in the context of a democratic system which has been considered, both by its members and outsiders, imperfect, if not fragile, since its inception in the post-World War II period. Populism in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to bringing down the closed shop of Christian Democratic rule under the First Republic (1946–1992). This occurred in conjunction with the end of the Cold War, corruption scandals, and pressure from deepening European integration. Populism may actually thus have contributed to Italy’s second democratic transition to the so-called Second Republic in the early 1990s. Indeed, initial reactions to the LN’s populism were not negative overall. However, since the early 1990s, populist parties have begun to consolidate their positions and their opponents have had to adjust their positions, some reacting strongly against populists and their themes, others accommodating them. After the Berlusconi IV government, some populist forces became part of the traditional political class, producing, in part, another populist reaction: the rise of Grillo’s Five Star Movement.

This implies that in Italy the reaction to populism is more complex than elsewhere for three reasons: first, Italian populism has partly been functional to democracy (in helping bring down the First Republic and perhaps putting an end to the party system of the Second Republic); second, populism has partly been a reaction to populism (Forza reacting to the success of the Lega; M5S challenging the populism of Forza and Lega); third, anti-populists must respond to populism, but face an enemy with many different faces, who are united in their rejection of traditional party elitism in Italy.

This contribution is structured as follows: first, we will describe the rise of Italian populism in the context of the relative democratic fragility of Italy’s First Republic; next, we will sketch the reactions to the entry of populists in government.

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We will do so by discussing events under the four Berlusconi governments (1994–1995; 2001–2005; 2005–2006; 2008–2011). In each phase we will distinguish between populist and domestic anti-populist contenders. We will also describe the reactions abroad to governing Italian populists, especially within the European Union (EU). Subsequently, we will interpret our findings in light of (changes in) structural conditions of the Italian party system.

Who are populists in Italy?

Contemporary Italian populism begins with the arrival of the regionalist leagues in the late 1980s, in particular in Veneto, Lombardy, and Piedmont, leading to the formation of the Northern League in 1991. The origins of these leagues lay in regional tensions regarding both political representation and economic differences between the south, the so-called Industrial Triangle (i.e. Genoa, Milan, and Turin) and what became known as the Third Italy (located in the small and medium producers in the north and to some extent the centre). Although these early leagues possessed populist characteristics, it was not until Umberto Bossi, leader of the Lombard League, took over as the leader of the northern leagues that these new movements could be classified as populist. Under Bossi’s leadership the party developed a clear distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elites, between the hardworking people of the north and lazy southerners. Striving for more northern autonomy, the LN’s populism, at this point in time, could be described as populist regionalism. The Northern League’s success coincided with, and contributed to, the fall of the First Republic: in the early 1990s it became one of the most important parties in northern Italy; it formed an alliance for the 1994 elections with FI, and, together with the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) (which soon after the elections became Alleanza Nazionale (AN)), entered Berlusconi’s first centre-right government.

In addition to the Northern League, the most important populist movement has been Forza Italia. Its founder and leader, Silvio Berlusconi, in many ways built on the rise and the success of the Northern League. The Lega’s success was partly based on its pro-market positions which favoured the small and medium-sized businesses that constituted its core constituents in the early 1990s. Indeed, its radical right and anti-immigrant status was much less clear at this time. It was in this context that Berlusconi realized that there was a potential for a new pro-market liberal party. Berlusconi entered the political stage with a market liberal, anti-left platform that appealed to many “hard working, upstanding” people, building, but also reacting to and expanding on, the populism of the Northern League.

In the subsequent years (1994–2011), both populist parties carved their niches vis-à-vis each other, mutating into two forms of populism: Berlusconi’s centre-right market-based populism, which evolved into a mix of “anti-taxism” combined with his animosity for the judges, fused, perhaps ironically, with state spending (for example, on pensions and infrastructure). In reaction, the Northern League retreated into its regional strongholds and began more clearly combine its
regionalism with a radical right ideology. These developments led to division between the two populist parties after the first Berlusconi government. The two parties did, however, rejoin forces, first for the 2000 regional elections and subsequently for the national elections in 2001. The newly created alliance, Casa delle Libertà (and the subsequent Popolo della Libertà/Lega alliance after 2008), although heterogeneous (FI, AN, and Lega), became the dominant political force on the centre-right, holding power between 2001–2006 and 2008–2011.

The final step in the process of mutating populism took place with the arrival of the Five Star Movement (M5S) in 2009. Ironically, M5S was in part a reaction to the continued presence of populism in power, that is, the centre-right coalition consisting of Berlusconi and Bossi (2001–2006 and 2008–2011), as well as, the eventual fall of the 2011 Berlusconi government and the formation of the Mario Monti technocratic government. Interestingly, the arrival of M5S resembled the success of the Lega Nord in the 1980s: just as the LN was able to circumvent the traditional parties’ media dominance through using its own media outlets and by using graffiti, M5S succeeded in working around the mainstream media (those owned by the state and Berlusconi alike) by making use of new social media. M5S presents us with a third type of populism, which we will classify as populist left-libertarianism. To be sure, the ideological status of Grillo is more difficult to classify; although he often takes positions that could be classified as right wing, we label the M5S as a populist left-libertarian movement that combines a populist, anti-elitist discourse and environmentalism with left-wing economics (that is, opposition to “multinationals”). In the case of the M5S, its leader Beppe Grillo juxtaposes the notion of the “pure and honest Italian citizen” with the “corrupt Italian political class” and in particular the “mainstream” political parties. Ironically, this political class includes two populist parties, that is, FI and the Northern League.

All in all, the fragility of the First Republic, and the growing distance between the political parties and voters, produced fertile ground for populists. Under the Second Republic these feelings of dissatisfaction were fed by various political actors, which had to carve out their own niches in response to the emerging party system and the success of populist actors such as the Lega. The institutionalization of Berlusconi-Bossi populism created, in part, the breeding ground for a new anti-establishment populist movement, Grillo’s M5S. The unifying feature of these movements is populism, while what differentiates these movements is their associated ideologies: ranging from the populist liberal Forza Italia, the populist regionalist, radical right Northern League, and the populist left-libertarian Five Star Movement.

Explaining Italy’s populist-anti-populist dialectics

Based on the framework for analysis written by Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, below we identify several actors that had to meet the challenge of the rise of populism to power. More specifically, we will look at the response of political parties on
both sides of the political spectrum; the Italian president and the judiciary; the
media; civil society and social movements; and international actors. It is impor-
tant to take into account the disintegrating and subsequently reassembling socio-
political system in which these actors operate. As such institutional settings
provide opportunities and constraints, we have to explain the actors in their
proper institutional setting. In addition, we should remain aware that populism
may pose different challenges in different phases: when it entered government in
1994 (Berlusconi I), its short stint in power called the longevity of populism
into question; however, when it returned to power in 2001 and used its stability
to accomplish specific policies, its opponents had to reckon with an institutiona-
lized foe; by the time Berlusconi returned to government in 2008, populists had
arguably become the establishment.

Mainstream political parties
How have mainstream political parties reacted to the populists in government?
Given that populist parties have become mainstream actors on the centre-right in
the Italian party system, we pay attention not only to the traditional opponents of
populist government (that is, the centre-left), but also to the relationship between
the populist parties themselves and between populists and their non-populist
allies (that is, AN).

Towards the Second Republic
Populism versus populism. Essential for understanding the process of mutating
populism is the reaction of populist parties to fellow populist parties. As noted,
the rise of Forza Italia was in many respects a reaction to the successes of the
Northern League. As the Northern League expanded in the early 1990s and
became one of the most important parties in the north, attracting middle-class
voters, Forza Italia was also established in the lead up to the 1994 elections. As
a result, FI and the Northern League began to fish in the same electoral pond. Cleverly, Berlusconi forged two electoral pacts, one with the Northern League
and another with MSI (AN) for the 1994 elections in order to secure support in
both the north and south. However, the alliance with the Lega was short-lived,
in part due to competition between the Northern League and FI over specific
policy issues, but also over their electorate. These divisions and tensions began
to surface during the election campaign: Berlusconi became a target for the
LN. These tensions caused the centre-right government’s fall within a year,
and as a result the Lega competed in the subsequent elections (1996) from
outside the centre-right coalition.

Anti-populist parties. Initially, in part because traditional parties were in the
process of rebuilding and because the status and longevity of the new populist
kids on the block was not yet fully apparent, the responses of non-populist and
anti-populist parties were not always clear during the early years of the Second Republic. For example, left-wing parties even participated in the Dini technical government with the Northern League in 1995. In fact, in these early years, MSI (and later its successor AN) proved one of the LN’s staunchest opponents. This had to do with its strong objections to the policies of the Northern League, in particular regarding its demands to restructure the Italian state along federalist lines.

The Second Republic

By the mid-1990s, once it had become clear that there was no returning to the old days of the First Republic, populist and anti-populist reactions to populism became key in the process of institutionalizing the new Italian party system. Berlusconi, after the fall of his government in 1994, began to further institutionalize his political party, succeeding in making Forza Italia the key political party on the right.

Since the Lega had left the alliance, AN became Berlusconi’s main coalition partner, further facilitating the entrenchment of the Northern League in its strongholds in north-eastern Italy, reinforcing its emphasis on a northern Padanian identity and completing its move towards a nativist, anti-immigration party. Thus, FI became more institutionalized in the Italian party system as a mainstream liberal populist party, whereas the LN embraced its niche as a regionalist but also populist radical right party.

These developments led to further reinforcement of the bipolar nature of the Italian party system. From the 1996 elections onward, for the first time in Italian history we find an alternation between the left and the right. This was further reinforced in 2001, when the Lega rejoined the centre-right coalition (creating the Casa delle Liberte’). Structurally, the bipolar but fragmented Italian system meant that FI needed a party like the Northern League as a coalition partner, a party with secure roots in important strongholds in the north in order to win elections and form governments. Similarly, the Lega needed FI to compensate for its declining electoral results. While the alliance between the two populist allies, Berlusconi and Bossi, allowed the centre-right to govern, it also permitted Bossi to present himself as an insider and outsider at the same time. Without a populist adversary such as Berlusconi this would not have been impossible, but certainly more difficult.

The “Berlusconi effect”, especially since 2001, and the emerging bipolar nature of the Italian party system, also had important implications for how the non-populist left responded to the populist right, leading to a combination of paralysis and imitation. Since the alliance between FI and AN helped create a bipolar party system, the left was also forced to join and forge alliances with a large number of smaller parties, from the ex-communists to the ex-Christian Democrats. This led to a series of centre-left alliances and eventually to the founding of the Democratic Party (PD) in 2007. The centre-left quest for unity has nevertheless been plagued with fragmentation, having important implications for its opposition to Berlusconi in government: its repeated, often unsuccessful search for a leader who could overcome internal divisions (particularly between former communists and Christian
Democrats) often seemed to result in paralysis. As Campus points out for the 2001–2006 period, frustration with the centre-left’s inability to successfully address Berlusconi meant that left-wing movements (such as the Girotondi) and trade unions were Berlusconi’s most vociferous opponents (on the centre-left). 21

The centre-left also had to cope with the increased personalization of politics. Although not linked with populism per se, both populist parties on the right, Forza Italia and the Northern League, reflect this trend, as they were highly centralized parties built around their individual leaders. 22 Although it tried to imitate or mimic these developments, the centre-left found it difficult to compete with the centre-right populists in this regard. In order to defeat the centre-right, the centre-left started to emulate their opponents; for instance, it adopted primaries.

The end of the Second Republic?
The continued presence of populist parties in government contributed to another unexpected outcome: the rise of a new populist force, M5S. Having been in government between 2001 and 2006 and again between 2008 and 2011, Berlusconi and, to a lesser degree, Bossi were increasingly identified with the establishment, creating in part the conditions for the rise of this new populist party. 23 M5S was, however, a different type of populist party. The origins of Grillo’s populism were his reputation as a comedian, his street protests, that is, his so-called V-days (vaffanculo-days), and his use of the internet, that is, via his blog. 24 In the 2013 elections, Grillo’s became the largest single party in the Chamber of Deputies: although his party could be characterized as centre-left libertarian populism, in the 2013 elections he also succeeded in stealing centre-right voters, even from FI and the Northern League. 25 The sudden success of M5S must be placed within the context of the fragmented nature of the left (within the party itself and between the party and civil society) and of growing anti-political sentiments. 26 In addition, Grillo’s rise coincided with growing internal divisions within the populist right: Berlusconi faced fierce competition for leadership from Gianfranco Fini and, primarily after the 2013 elections, from former loyal lieutenants such as Angelino Alfani; while the Lega suffered its own legitimacy crisis due to corruption allegations. The wheel has come full circle. Just as in the early 1990s, when the populists were instrumental in bringing down the First Republic, M5S is challenging the bipolar nature of the Second Republic. It thus has been one of the key instigators of the reforms currently proposed by the intriguing alliance between current Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi (Patto del Nazareno).

Presidents and judges
Presidents. The emergence of the Second Republic has effectively changed the room for manoeuvre for an Italian president: the weakening grip of parties of the First Republic on the political system since 1992 implied that the president
would no longer be “owned” by the party (or faction) that had fielded the candidate. At the same time, Italian presidents under the Second Republic faced a strengthening of the powers of the prime minister, a policy initiated by the centre-left under Prodi but from which Berlusconi in his subsequent governments seemed to profit. The Italian constitution grants its presidents few powers, but assertive presidents, such as socialist Sandro Pertini (1978–1985), had already succeeded in enlarging the margins of discretion before the transformation of the 1990s. Italian presidents can exert influence through their right to dissolve parliament, to not sign a law and to appoint a certain number of senators for life during their term of office. Also, their speeches can set the moral tone for policymaking. On the one hand, the Italian presidency has been effectively strengthened as a result of the new Italian party system. On the other hand, its tangible impact still depends on the individual occupying the Quirinal Palace. A president’s everyday choices may make him not just a political but even a politicized actor, in turn affecting the status of the presidency.

The change to a bipolar system of party alliances, implying the real possibility of government alternation, posed a challenge to Italian presidents using their right to dissolve parliament and to call for new elections when confronted with a cabinet crisis. Under the First Republic, presidents would effectively leave such a decision to the political elite. The Second Republic, with its suggestion of alternating governing coalitions, implied that a president could reinforce that principle by dissolving parliament when a government had lost confidence in parliament. At the same time, such an act ran the danger of politicizing the presidency. Seeking to reinforce the impartiality of the institution, presidents of the Second Republic (Scalfaro (1992–1999); Ciampi (1999–2006); Napolitano (2006–2015)) hovered between such parlamentarismo and presidenzialismo. Inevitably, their choices favoured one over the other. Scalfaro’s decision in 1994 not to dissolve parliament after the fall of Berlusconi I helped bring in the technocratic government of Dini. Similarly, Scalfaro resisted the dissolution of parliament when Romano Prodi had to resign in October 1998 but also seemed instrumental in preventing Prodi from forming a new government, thus ushering in Massimo d’Alema as the new prime minister. Napolitano’s decision not to dissolve parliament after the fall of Berlusconi IV in 2011 prevented a highly conflictual election, while his nomination of non-partisan Mario Monti as senator for life was part of an attempt to steer Italy – once more – towards a technocratic government.

Italian presidents in the Second Republic sought to strengthen the status of the presidency by using speeches and ceremonial duties and hammering on issues such as national unity. This was a response to the increased polarization of Italian society under the new republic. Ciampi used this strategy as a way to counter the Lega’s emphasis on federalism and even northern independence under Berlusconi II and III (2001–2006), when the Lega had insisted on devolution as its price for joining a new government. Here the president seemed an explicit opponent of a certain type of populist rule (that is, regional populism).
Ciampi used the president’s right to refuse signing a bill and regularly openly disagreed with the government’s policy. His presidential activism seemed particularly directed towards the Berlusconi II/III governments. Ciampi sent back five bills to parliament, most famously the law which seemed to protect Berlusconi’s media interests, especially the survival of the Retequattro national network. He also openly disagreed with Berlusconi’s support for the war against Iraq, contributing to the broad Italian opposition to the war and causing Berlusconi to water down Italian support.33

All in all, it seems fair to conclude that Italian presidents proved important in decisive moments of populist rule: Scalfaro’s refusal to dissolve parliament in 1994; Ciampi’s battle against Berlusconi’s media power and symbolic campaign against the Lega’s separatism; Napolitano’s strategy in preventing instability after Berlusconi’s 2011 resignation. At the same time, it would be wrong to see this as purely anti-populism. Rather, the three post-1992 presidents were carving out a new institutional role in a political system which seemed to ask for alternation, an enlargement of the powers of all prime ministers (not just Berlusconi) at the expense of the president as a symbol of national unity in the face of a polarizing community. The presidents also acted against centre-left coalitions, particularly those led by Prodi, thus seeking a new institutional balance.

The judiciary. The Italian judiciary has been a major catalyst of political change through its Clean Hands (mani pulite) campaign against corruption of a political class which by the 1990s was commonly described as bribe-city (tangentopoli). Combined with the heroism of brave mafia fighters like Giovanni Falcone, the judiciary embodied the civic Italy, reinforced by its seeming impartiality in indicting corrupt politicians of every political breed. In the early 1990s mani pulite reinforced the position of the Lega, which had long campaigned on an anti-corruption platform and, initially, seemed relatively clean. By 1994, the judiciary had obtained much more autonomy vis-à-vis the government than it had held in the previous decades.34

In the past, the fact that the members of the highest judicial organization, the Corte Superiore della Magistratura (CSM), were elected on the basis of judicial groupings along ideological lines ensured that the separation between the political class and the judiciary was never complete.35 In the Second Republic, however, the judiciary’s position worsened when it decided to investigate charges of corruption and fraud against Silvio Berlusconi, which the prime minister sought to avoid by introducing regulation that would guarantee legal immunity for politicians. In fact, the following years witnessed a strong politicization of the courts. Basically, the often political nature of the Italian judiciary system allowed Berlusconi to accuse the judges of political bias against him and present himself as a victim of the courts, a populist message which went down well with his voters. The politicization of the judiciary was particularly acute under Berlusconi II, when judges urged citizens to rebel against the government’s incursion on the rule of law and organized a general strike of the judiciary. The origins of this conflict lay in the
government’s reform proposal, which was presented as a technical reform of the judiciary, but in reality sought to change the presumed centre-left bias of the judges.36

Although it is tempting to consider Italian judges as major antagonists of populist rule, we should be careful, as always in the case of Italy. Though the opposition parties were pleased with the difficulty the judges posed to Berlusconi, the judiciary went along with many of Berlusconi’s policies: members of many parties who were charged with corruption had a stake in immunity and were glad that Berlusconi took much of the heat. Interestingly, Berlusconi’s success in posing as a victim of judiciary bias allowed him to tighten his grip on his coalition partners, Lega Nord and AN, which officially ran a strong anti-corruption platform, but had been glued together in a coalition with FN.37

Media: structure and actors

The changing nature of Italian media in the 1980s and the 1990s, and the politics of this process, plays an important role in the evolution of Italian populism and the opposition to populist forces. Berlusconi is, naturally, a key player in this dynamic. He was the founder of a publishing empire and a key factor in modernizing Italian public broadcasting; his channels competed with, and often surpassed, the publically owned channels in terms of viewers. Berlusconi was a key figure in breaking the state monopoly on television broadcasters, taking advantage of the changing legal structure in the 1970s. However, and perhaps ironically, the Italian media landscape became a duopoly, that is, between Berlusconi’s media and the state-owned media.38

With Berlusconi’s entrance into politics, the link between populism and the media became highly important in the Italian context. First, Berlusconi introduced a new form of political mobilization, using his marketing experts for his political campaigns.39 He also used his image as media mogul to present himself as a new man from outside the political establishment and as a person who represented the new values of a changed Italy; Berlusconi projected an optimistic view of Italy’s future, often referred to as “telepopulism”.40

Berlusconi’s position as a media mogul in power became important for two further reasons. First, once in power he took charge of state-run communication venues as well, thus controlling most of Italy’s communication outlets.41 Although he claimed that he did not intervene in the content of the state-run networks, there is evidence that a sort of soft censorship was practiced.42 Second, it became difficult for other political actors to compete with Berlusconi’s political message. Although Berlusconi came close to controlling televised media, it is important to emphasize that he did not hold such sway over print media: the non-Berlusconi press, that is, the main dailies with the largest readership, such as Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Messaggero and Il Sole-24 Ore, has not been pro-Berlusconi and has often been critical of him.43

Having a media mogul such as Berlusconi in government proved important in mobilizing the opposition (see below). Interestingly, these developments were also
important for setting the context of the new populist contender M5S. A major source of mobilization for Grillo has been his website and new forms of media. In fact, Grillo forbade party members from participating in televised talk shows. M5S’s resistance to the public media and to Berlusconi’s media empire thus mimics the Lega’s circumvention of the publicly owned media in 1980s: the Lega used alternative forms of media and mobilization to counter what it felt was systematic exclusion from public debate. As a result, it used street graffiti, the internet, its own television and radio station, and a party newspaper to get its message out. M5S has followed a similar strategy.

Social movements and civil society

Civil society is a breeding ground for both populists and anti-populist movements. On the one hand, populism has its origins within civil society in Italy. For example, in the 1990s non-aligned social movements advocating for safer cities and often opposing immigrants began to emerge, while populist movements such as the Northern League and M5S also both grew out of civil society. On the other hand, civil society organizations are at the core of opposition to populism. More broadly speaking, as James Newell notes, two dynamics worked hand in hand. First, civil society became increasingly diverse: growing levels of individuation and changing patterns of consumption created a space for individuals to seek more autonomy from more traditional forms of organization and association, for example, from the family. As a result, there was a growth of alternative voluntary organizations. Second, this coincided with chronic low identification with the state. To be sure, this is a chronic Italian problem, stemming from corruption and clientelism, while low identification with the state continued with Berlusconi in government. One consequence was that protests increased. A prime example is the no-global protests in Genoa at the G8 summit in 2001: although the protests were not exclusively directed against the newly elected Berlusconi II cabinet, the strong reaction by the government effectively solidified tensions between the populists in government and the left-wing social movements. This in turn further radicalized the left-wing social movements, as a number of “social forums” surfaced: by 2003 there were some 170. On the one hand, the newly formed social movements became increasingly dominated by the more organized and traditional social movements, such as the unions and parties on the left (that is, Rifondazione Comunista), increasing their anti-capitalist focus and attendant opposition to the Berlusconi government. While on the other hand, resistance to the government’s policies (such as manifold conflicts of interest and the de-penalization of accounting fraud) included broader segments of civil society, drawing on the new educated middle class and often including the cultural sector, such as film directors, actors, musicians, and authors. Although it is difficult to draw a direct link between these social movements and populism, these developments were part and parcel of the growing disenchantment with political parties (on the left as well as the right) and with populists in government. It was this type of supporter that M5S was able to tap into, especially in
the initial phases of its development, for example, higher educated, younger voters who were disillusioned with the traditional parties.55

International actors

Whereas globalization and Europeanization, through the perceived insecurity they create for citizens, may feed the demand for populism, they also render populist governments more sensitive to their international environment.56 Indeed, the populist governments led by Silvio Berlusconi met with serious criticism abroad. Two issues of contestation seem particularly relevant in this regard: Italy’s relations with global financial markets and Italy’s standing with the European institutions.

Global financial markets and the European monetary union. The transformation from the First to the Second Republic coincided with major changes in European monetary relations, themselves in part a response to the financial globalization that had been accelerating in the 1980s.57 Negotiations to establish a European monetary union (EMU) and to determine its future members strained the existing European arrangement to establish monetary stability, the European Monetary System (EMS). Financial markets, strengthened by globalization that technically enabled them to move money with little governmental interference and perceiving the Italian economy to be insufficiently adapted to a future monetary union, forced the lira to leave the EMS system in 1992 (as they had in the 1980s). In the summer of 1994 the Berlusconi government faced a lira crisis due to currency speculation. Although Treasurer Lamberto Dini pacified the markets, Germany openly doubted whether Italy qualified for EMU membership.58 In response, Berlusconi I took a defiant position on European monetary integration, ushering in a broader critical stance on European integration and breaking with the traditional highly pro-European Italian attitude. This in turn worried many political and economic stakeholders in the EU, who expressed their concern with the Berlusconi government’s position. Indeed, it took the technocratic governments of Dini and Ciampi (1994–1996) and the highly pro-European Prodi I government (1996–1998) to soothe the European partners and help Italy steer towards meeting EMU criteria.59

In 2011 the EU and the global financial markets played an important role in presenting the Berlusconi IV government as detrimental to Italy’s survival in the economic and financial crisis that had been raging in Europe since 2008. In the summer and autumn of 2011 the markets drove up the interest rates Italy had to pay, allowing France and Germany to explicitly link Berlusconi to economic disaster. This contributed to discrediting his domestic reputation so much that the Lega pulled out and President Napolitano could parachute technocrat Mario Monti, a man expected to be trusted by Europe and the financial markets, into Italian politics.60

European institutions. Italian populism has caused players in the EU (member states, organized interests, and media) to worry not just about Italy’s economic credentials, which have always been subject to scrutiny irrespective of the political
colour of Italian governments, but increasingly also about the country’s democratic credentials. This is particularly true for the Berlusconi governments, which to some observers seemed to be composed of media monopolists charged with corruption, xenophobic regionalists, and guardians of the fascist legacy. The international and European community, especially the European media, including The Economist, Le Monde, and El Mundo, proved to be important watchdogs of the Berlusconi governments. They focused particularly on Berlusconi’s grip on Italian media and the Lega’s rejection of immigrants; both characteristics were interpreted as conflicting with the democratic principles on which the EU was based, as embodied in Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union. Indeed, during the 2001 electoral campaign these international actors campaigned so explicitly against Berlusconi that the election was described as the first internationally contested Italian election. On 4 May 2001 The Economist famously depicted Berlusconi as “unfit to lead Italy”. These media outlets indirectly reinforced Italy’s domestic opposition via Italian media.

During the Berlusconi II government, a highly tense relationship developed between Italy and the European institutions, particularly the European Parliament, fuelled by a notorious debate in the European Parliament on 2 July 2003 between Berlusconi (speaking as rotating President of the Council of Ministers) and social democratic speaker Martin Schultz. Informed by non-governmental organization reports, the European Parliament issued its own report on how reduced freedom of the press in Italy contradicted the ideals of the EU. This led to the passage of a non-binding resolution condemning Italy. The European Court of Justice condemned media concentration in Italy in 2008, not because it threatened democratic values, but because it conflicted with EU free market rules regarding services. Interestingly, the EU Council never condemned Italy for infringing EU democratic values, even though it had done so and imposed sanctions in the case of Austria in 1999, when radical right-wing populist FPÖ joined the government. The effect of European pressure on populist rule in Italy was thus mainly felt via domestic Italian channels, although the origins were often Berlusconi’s tarnished reputation in Europe. Obviously, we should keep in mind that this notoriety would be partly made up for by Berlusconi’s effective strategy of presenting himself as a man who is globally recognized as a world leader by countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia.

Conclusion
This contribution sought to investigate the responses to Italian populism in power. As noted in the introduction to this special issue, the literature identifies several possible strategies for responding to populism. The case of Italy is, however, complicated for several reasons: first, populism should not only be seen as a threat to democracy, for example, both the LN and M5S, arguably, have also sought to unblock a stagnated political system (and to a certain extent succeeded). Second, we see that by the turn of the millennium populists had become institutionalized
within the political system. As a result, we argue that in the Italian case, it is not sufficient to look only at parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opponents of populists in power. Rather, because of the diversity of populists and the repeated presence of two populist parties in government (FI and LN), it is also necessary to scrutinize the interaction between populist parties, between populist coalition members and their non-populist allies. The rise of M5S complicates matters even further, given that the elites in power also are populists.

All in all, in Italy the demand for populism was met with a wide supply of populisms. These varieties of populism provoked a different set of reactions from domestic and international players. Reflecting on the possible strategies that non-populist actors use to deal with populist forces, we do not see some of the stronger responses noted in the introduction to this special issue: for example, we do not see a purging of populists, nor do we see a strong demand for education, that is, an attempt to counter populism by focusing on democratic beliefs and values. This may be in part due to the ubiquity of populism and what may be seen by many as the need for a populist voice to change the Italian system. At times, it may seem that actors such as the president and the judiciary have acted with a sort of militancy, that is, acting in a proactive fashion to protect democracy. On the whole, however, we should be careful to interpret all responses as an intended and direct response to the rise of populism. All actors had to adjust to the changing conditions of the Italian Second Republic and different roles they sought to carve out for themselves: presidents had to find a new role for themselves; trade unions had to work out a new attitude towards politics now that neoliberal economics and rejection of the First Republic changed the old system of concertation; the judiciary found themselves as the new heroes of Italian society but had to cope with a political class reluctant to embrace the implications of the judges’ enhanced reputation; and political parties had to adjust to a world in which communism was no longer a threat and in which globalization and European integration was becoming increasingly prevalent. At the same time, populist rule, or the prospect of populists returning to power, was the background against which these actors tried to find their new position in the Second Republic. Presidents, judges, and societal actors clearly attempted to curb populist rule. However, we need to remain cautious and not over interpret these actions since at the same time they often acted similarly towards non-populists.

The international environment also had to cope with Italy’s transformation. Initially, the international financial markets did not respond differently to populism as they had to those political actors in the First Republic whose policies seemed to run against the interests of the markets. However, in the summer of 2011, pressure from the markets clearly set the stage for Berlusconi’s fall and the entry of Mario Monti. The EU had also contributed to this development through the exploitation of domestic political actors of Italy’s tarnished reputation as a liberal democracy at the European level. At no moment, however, has the EU officially sanctioned Italy as it previously has Austria. At the same time, frustrations with populist actors by European actors and what was often broadly perceived as the failure of Italian
political actors to tame Berlusconi (and the frequent surprise if not shock and dismay at his repeated return to government) led to increasing frustrations and at times what amounted to a soft disciplining by the international community, in particular during his last term in office.

Interestingly, responses to populists in power differed during the three Berlusconi governments. In 1994, the Lega was still approached as an actor that might facilitate the end of the postwar party system, while Berlusconi’s sudden rise was looked upon warily. Under Berlusconi II/III, relations between populists in power and their opponents soured. However, due to the centre-left’s fragmentation, opposition was partly relegated to societal actors such as the judiciary, the unions, and civil society organizations. With Berlusconi’s fourth government, the populists in power became indistinguishable from the establishment, leaving room for an alternative response (M5S) and limiting the effectiveness of the traditional opponents. Hence, the 2013 electoral results in which M5S became the single largest party in the lower house.

As a final observation, it is important to emphasize that the picture of populism and responses to populism are more complicated than they may initially appear. First of all, (as noted above) populism in Italy has been partly functional to democracy in helping bring down the First Republic, in contributing to establish more contestation, and thus in bringing Italy closer to a Dahlian polyarchy.69 This may be surprising to opponents of populism, but is important to keep in mind, especially if one wants to assess to what extent the demand for populism is rooted in a protest against a long-established, closed shop of political elites and a fear of communism. This relates to a second important conclusion: to understand the demand for populism in Italy it is essential to appreciate the extent to which Italians have internalized and passed on to successive generations their experiences of the First Republic. This notion also makes one realize that a demand for populism remains, once populist parties have become a part of the political establishment. This was the case when Berlusconi became prime minister again in 2008, thus setting the stage for the populism of M5S.

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Notes

1. Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, “Introduction to this special issue.”
5. Ibid.
13. Corbetta and Vignati, “Left or Right?”
21. Campus, “Defeat and Divided.”
23. Fella and Ruzza, “Populism and the Fall of the Centre-Right.”
27. Pasquino, “Italian Presidents.”
33. Davidson, “In and Out of Iraq.”
36. Ibid., 135–145.
37. Ibid., 146.
39. Ibid., 32.
40. Ibid., 37.
41. Ibid., 32–45.
42. Ibid., 41.
43. Ibid.
44. Cullura, “Expelled Senator.”
46. Della Porta, “Immigration and Protest.”
48. Ibid., 24.
51. Ibid., 84.
52. Ibid., 84.
53. Ibid., 87.
54. Ibid., 88–9.
57. Strange, “Casino Capitalism.”
59. Telò, “Italy’s Interaction.”
61. Cf. Downey and Koenig, “Is there a European Public Sphere?”
64. Downey and Koenig, “Is there a European Public Sphere?”
66. Giacomello, Ferrari, and Amadori, “With Friends like These.”
68. Ibid.

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