

The influence of media messages on populist attitudes: State of the art and insights from experimental research on the Italian case

Cristina Cremonesi

UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

Abstract

Despite the growing interest of political and communication scholars in populism in Italy, there is still little knowledge of Italian voters' populist attitudes and whether and how they are connected to media communication. The purpose of this article is to pave the way for the study of this salient topic also with reference to the Italian case. Thus, it both presents the main existing studies on the measurement of populist attitudes and the impact of populist media messages on them, as well as reconstructing the literature on the topic concerning Italy. Moreover, it shows the preliminary results concerning the Italian case of a comparative experimental study on the impact of media messages on voters' populist attitudes conducted within the framework of the Cost Action IS-1308 'Populist Political Communication in Europe'. The article is a first step towards the comprehension of the impact of populist media messages on Italians' populist attitudes. It contributes to the study of populist attitudes in Italy by providing a new operationalization which is reliable in the Italian context and offering a comparable measurement of the strength of populist attitudes among Italian voters.

1. Introduction

The rise of populism around the globe has attracted the attention of a growing number of studies aimed at understanding the spread of populist ideas among citizens (e.g. Norris, 2005; Norris and Inglehart, 2018; Tsatsanis, Andreadis and Teperoglou, 2018; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Andreadis, Stavrakakis, and Demertzis, 2018) and verifying whether political communication plays a role (e.g., Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2017; Matthes and Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017). It has already been ascertained that certain media outlets report or directly express populist messages (e.g. Mazzoleni, 2003; Mazzoleni, 2008; Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Brug, and de Vreese, 2013; Bos and Brants, 2014; Kramer, 2014) and the literature on media effects has highlighted that media messages may forge, activate and reinforce political beliefs (e.g. Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason, 2010). However, the impact of populist media messages on voters' populist attitudes is currently a debated research subject, especially because there is no agreement on how to operationalize populist attitudes (e.g. Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Hameleers and De Vreese, 2018) and how strongly these may be affected by populist political communication (e.g. Matthes and Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2018b).

This article aims to pave the way for the study of the effects of populist media messages on populist attitudes with reference to the Italian case. Thus, it both presents the main existing studies on the measurement of populist attitudes and the impact of populist media messages on them as well as reconstructing the literature on the topic concerning Italy. Moreover, it presents a comparative experimental study on the impact of media messages on voters' populist attitudes conducted in the framework of the Cost Action IS-1308 'Populist Political Communication in Europe' and shows its preliminary results concerning the Italian case.¹

2. State of the art on the influence of media messages on populist attitudes

2.1. Existing operationalizations regarding populist attitudes

In social science literature, populism has been conceived in different ways, but the recent and most relevant studies agree in considering it as a thin-centred ideology (or a set of ideas) about how politics should function (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Aalberg et al, 2017; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson, 2017). Following this view, populism can be embraced not only by politicians and the media but also by ordinary citizens, and it can be measured among them through opinion surveys investigating their attitudes.

In recent years, many efforts have been made to identify populist attitudes, but their operationalization has proved challenging. There is no full agreement either as to what the dimensions of populist attitudes are, or the best indicators to measure them. However, the main operationalizations of this concept may be grouped into two sets according to the definition of populism considered. In fact, while the central and undoubted characteristic of populism is the positive valorisation of the people, different definitions of populism consider other aspects to be part of the populist set of ideas, such as criticism of the elite, the Manichean opposition between these two groups, the need to guarantee the sovereignty of the people (e.g. Mudde, 2004), and also the exclusion of horizontal out-groups like immigrants (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007).

The first and most numerous group of studies that operationalize populism refers back to Mudde's (2004, p. 453) definition of populism as "*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*". For example, the operationalization of populist attitudes by Hawkins, Riding and Mudde (2012) individuated three dimensions of populism: 'Manichaeon view of politics', 'reified popular will' and 'belief in a conspiring elite' and defined a consequent set of indicators that were tested on a representative sample of the U.S. population during the 2008 electoral campaign. Stanley (2011) then applied the measure of populist attitudes to the context of the 2010 Slovak election, his

¹ The Italian participants in the Cost Action IS-1308 'Populist Political Communication in Europe' (for more information visit: <https://www.ntnu.edu/populistcommunication/populist-political-communication-in-europe>) were Giuliano Bobba, Cristina Cremonesi, Antonella Seddone (University of Turin) and Guido Legnante (University of Pavia). For this first and single authored publication, the scholars involved in the study agreed to disclose only the preliminary results of the study.

operationalization of populism being organised in four dimensions. Three of these ('positive valorisation of the people and denigration of the elite', 'popular sovereignty', 'antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites') were very similar to those of Hawkins, Riding and Mudde of 2012, while the fourth focused on a different aspect of populism: the perception of the people and the elite as two homogeneous groups. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) merged the two previously presented operationalization attempts, returning to a three dimension operationalization of populist attitudes ('sovereignty of the people', 'opposition to the elite', 'Manichean division between "good people" and "evil elite"'), without completely renouncing references to the homogeneity of the two antagonist groups by considering the indicator 'The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people'. This operationalization was firstly applied to a representative sample of the Dutch population in 2013 and was then adopted in several research projects such as the British and German National Election Studies.² Finally, Castanho Silva et al. (2018) elaborated a similar operationalization. They considered as dimensions of populism criticism towards the elites ('anti-elitism') and the Manichean conception of politics ('Manichaeian outlook'),³ and a third dimension named 'people centrism', which measured citizens' opinions of the fact that politicians should be close to the people and committed to realizing the people's will (just as Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove's (2014) dimension 'popular sovereignty' did). This operationalization was tested and proved reliable on seventeen samples belonging to thirteen countries, including Italy.

The second set of operationalizations regarding populist attitudes includes a small number of more recent studies that in addition to some elements of populism individuated by Mudde (2004)'s definition (i.e. 'sovereignty of the people', 'anti-elitism', 'Manichean division between good people and evil elite') consider also the exclusionist dimension of populism. This dimension is stressed both by the seminal definition of populism by Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 323): "When political actors talk about the people and combine this with an explicit anti-establishment position and an exclusion of certain population categories, one can talk of thick populism", and by the work of the Cost Action IS1308, that in the book 'Populist political communication in Europe' affirms: "the people' should be regarded as the key component of populist messages, with anti-elitism and anti-out-group stances serving as optional additional elements. These elements can be combined in various ways, resulting in different types of populism" (Reinemann et al.'s, 2017: 23-24). The operationalization proposed by Hameleers and De Vreese (2018) belongs to this group. According to them, populist attitudes are organised into two dimensions: 'anti-establishment' and 'exclusionism'. This operationalization was tested empirically on the Netherlands voters: it not only demonstrated a good fit with the data,

² For more information on these surveys see: Fieldhouse, E., J. Green., G. Evans., H. Schmitt, C. van der Eijk, J. Mellon and C. Prosser (2015) British Election Study Internet Panel Wave 10. DOI: 10.15127/1.293723; and Roßteutscher, Sigrid; Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger; Schoen, Harald; Weßels, Bernhard; Wolf, Christof; Bieber, Ina; Stövsand, Lars-Christopher; Dietz, Melanie; Scherer, Philipp (2018): Pre-election Cross Section (GLES 2017). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA6800 Data file Version 3.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.12990

³ It is important to highlight that Castanho et al. (2018) are the first authors that consider the populist Manicheism in terms of 'opposition between different political views', instead of 'opposition between the elite and the people', as all the previous theoretical studies have done (see Castanho Silva et al., 2018: 153).

but it also proved that differently from what is usually assumed in the literature, populist exclusionist attitudes do not coincide with nativist perceptions (Hameleers and De Vreese, 2018: 10-11). Last but not least, also the studies by Hameleers and Schumck (2018) and by Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese (2017a and 2018b) adopted the same two-dimensional operationalization for investigating the influence of media communication on populist attitudes.

2.2. The role of media messages in influencing populist attitudes

Among the factors that may impact the level of populist attitudes in the population, media exposure plays a relevant role. In fact, not only are populist attitudes associated with enduring factors such as socio-economic characteristics (i.e. being male, with a low educational level and a weak economic position), psychological traits (i.e. the feeling of relative deprivation), and ideological inclinations (i.e. the fact of being on the left or right margin of the political continuum) (e.g., Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Andreadis, Stavrakakis, and Demertzis, 2018; Tsatsanis, Andreadis and Teperoglou, 2018), but are also connected to the more mutable factor of media communication.

Recent studies have revealed that both one-time consumption and repeated exposure to messages containing populist cues may affect people's political attitudes (e.g., Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2017a and 2017b; Müller et al., 2017). As regards one-time consumption, the experimental-design studies of Matthes and Schmuck (2017) and of Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese (2017b) are of primary importance. The former proved that political advertisements with a negative portrayal of immigrants strengthen voters' exclusionism attitudes. The latter demonstrated that political news items blaming the national or EU elites for citizens' problems foster both the citizens' perception that the ordinary people's will is not represented by politicians, and their belief that society is divided between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elites' (Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese 2017b: 890). Concerning repeated exposure, the real-setting research by Müller et al. (2017) showed that the influence of media messages displaying populism depends on media users' prior attitudes: when exposed to a larger amount of populist messages, citizens with anti-populist attitudes became less populist, while populist ones became more so (Müller et al., 2017: 984). Finally, in their studies on populist voters' media diets and selective exposure to populist communication, Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese (2017a; 2018b), found that populist attitudes both drive the selection of specific communication contents (such as tabloids and media that use populist frames) (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese 2017a), and influence the effects of populist communication, since voters with populist attitudes are more prone to being convinced by populist messages (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2018b).

Regardless of whether exposure is once-off or repeated and of the level of prior populist attitudes, the psychological mechanisms behind the influence of media messages on populist attitudes are the same. As explained by Hameleers et al. (2019) in the second (forthcoming) book of the COST Action IS-1308 'Communicating populism. Comparing interactions between politicians, media, and citizens across Europe', 'cognitive priming of social identity' and 'blame attribution' drive the impact of populist messages on voters' attitudes. According to the literature on trait activation and cognitive priming (Richey, 2012; Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2018b), the way media present a social group (as well as an event or a political actor, etc.) may influence audience's perception of it. For example, a media message that

focuses on the national aspect of social identity and praises the national-people may activate a positive evaluation of this group and of its homogeneity (Reinemann et al., 2017; Andreadis et al., 2019). As regards blame attribution, this rhetorical device has proven to activate in the audience a negative evaluation of the actors indicated as responsible for an undesirable situation (e.g., Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2017b; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2018a). Consequently, we can assume that this mechanism is at play in the effects of populist rhetoric that is centred on the depiction of the people's wellbeing as threatened by political elites and social out-groups (such as immigrants or the super-rich).

3. The influence of media messages on populist attitudes in Italy: preliminary results from comparative research

3.1. Current knowledge on the Italian case

The considerable and repeated success of populist forces in Italy (e.g. Bobba and McDonnell, 2015; Tarchi, 2015; Bobba and Legnante, 2016) – culminating in the formation of a populist government in March 2018 – has raised scholars' interest in Italian populism. However, while Italian populist parties and leaders have been investigated thoroughly (e.g. Boni, 2008; Biorcio, 2010; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013; Bracciale and Martella, 2017; Bobba, 2018), so far the populist attitudes of Italian voters have received almost no attention. Moreover, despite the fact that the Italian media are often accused of being accomplices in the success of populist political forces (as for example Berlusconi's Go Italy or, more recently, Salvini's League), the relation between populist media messages and populist attitudes in Italy has not been tested until now.

As far as the spread of populism among the Italian population is concerned, only Biorcio (2007) has addressed the topic. Biorcio elaborated and tested a measure of populist attitudes articulated in three dimensions: 'anti-politics' (similar to Akkerman, Mudde, Zaslove (2014)'s dimension 'opposition to the elite'), 'ethnocentrism' (like Hameleers and De Vreese (2018)'s dimension 'exclusionism'), and 'authoritarianism' (which can be interpreted as a sort of side-effect of the populist request for more popular-sovereignty – see for example Tarchi, 2015). Following this operationalization, Biorcio found that the penetration of populist attitudes in Italy was particularly strong in the sectors of the population distant from the democratic political life, with a weak economic position (e.g. self-employed, unemployed, pensioners, etc.) and a low level of education (Biorcio, 2007).

Although the studies on media populism stemmed from the research of an Italian scholar (Mazzoleni, 2003; Mazzoleni 2008; Mazzoleni 2014), hardly any research has investigated populism with reference to the Italian media. Only one recent contribution addressed the topic. It investigated how often the Italian press outlets mentioned populist stances and whether journalists simply reported or also supported them (Cremonesi, 2018). This study confirmed that some media outlets in Italy promote populism, but no research has addressed the topic of the impact of media populist messages on the populist attitudes of Italian voters. The study presented below is the first experimental design research investigating the topic with reference to Italy.

3.2. Research design

In order to shed light on the diffusion of populist attitudes in Italy and to test the influence of media messages on them, Italy took part in a Comparative Research study that involved 16 European Countries conducted within the framework of the Cost Action IS 1308 ‘Populist Political Communication in Europe’.⁴ The aim of the study was to explore the effects of populist communication on voters and in particular to verify whether, and to what extent, media messages with different populist elements (i.e. people centrism, anti-elitism, right-wing or left-wing anti-outgroup cues) could affect voters’ populist attitudes. The research study adopted an experimental design, asking respondents (14,499 overall)⁵ to read a manipulated version of a short news item on the economic crisis and then to answer a series of questions regarding their populist attitudes.

As far as Italy is concerned, the data were collected in April 2017, by the polling firm Research Now. A sample of 858 respondents, representative of the Italian voting population, was selected and interviewed through an online survey. The survey included three phases. First, participants were asked to give their informed consent and to fill in a pre-test questionnaire about their socio-demographic characteristics and general political opinions. Second, respondents were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions⁶ and were instructed to read a news article (the stimulus of this experimental study) for at least 20 seconds. Third, participants had to answer a series of questions about their political attitudes and behaviours, as well as about their level of agreement with the news, and also to some questions (manipulation checks) aimed at verifying their understanding of the news article (for an in-depth description of this experimental study and of the variables included in the survey, see Hameleers et al, 2018: 525).

The news item given to the respondents differed slightly for each condition. In fact, while all the stimuli presented the same story and visual elements, the text for six of them was altered, and various combinations of populist elements inserted. The first and basic control stimulus consisted of a piece of news allegedly published in a fictional online newspaper (news.com) created on the model of euronews.com. The news story was about the future decline of purchasing power in the country and presented the picture of an empty wallet (Figure 1). The second stimulus used as a control condition was created by adding to the text the sole blame attribution to politicians, i.e., national politicians were accused of being responsible for the decrease in purchasing power in the

⁴ The comparative experiment design study was coordinated by the Cost Action’s Working Group ‘Citizens and populism’; Cristina Cremonesi (University of Turin) was in charge of the Italian version of the experiment; the Department of Political and Social Science of the University of Pavia financed its realisation. The other countries involved in the comparative experiment were Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

⁵ After a data cleaning procedure, low-quality responses were removed from the original sample counting 17,597 cases. As better detailed in Appendix C of the article ‘Start Spreading the News: A Comparative Experiment on the Effects of Populist Communication on Political Engagement in Sixteen European Countries’ (Hameleers et al., 2018), the criteria applied for individuating the low-quality responses were: 1) completion time, 2) straightlining, 3) item nonresponse, 4) incorrect answers to manipulation checks. As regards the Italian case, 198 low-quality responses were excluded from the analysis.

⁶ A randomization check shows that the eight conditions do not differ significantly with regards to age ($F=0.277$, $p=0.963$), gender ($F=0.447$, $p=0.872$), education ($F=0.678$, $p=0.690$) and ideology ($F=0.749$, $p=0.631$).

country. While no element of populism was inserted in these control stimuli, in the six treatment conditions either single populist elements or combinations of them were introduced.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the news item administered to the Italian respondents as experiment stimulus (control condition with no populism elements)



In this way, six populist versions of the news item were created, mirroring the different types of populism individuated by Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) definition. They are: (1) positive valorisation of the people (i.e. empty populism), (2) positive valorisation of the people and blame attribution to politicians (i.e. anti-elitist populism), (3) positive valorisation of the people and blame attribution to immigrants (i.e. right-wing populism), (4) positive valorisation of the people and blame attribution to both politicians and immigrants (i.e. complete right-wing populism), (5) positive valorisation of the people and blame attribution to the super-rich (i.e. left-wing populism), (6) positive valorisation of the people and blame attribution to both politicians and super-rich people (i.e. complete left-wing populism)⁷ (Table 1).

Regarding the measurement of populist attitudes, the experiment adopted a four-dimensional operationalization combining the classical dimensions of populism derived from Mudde's definition (2004) – 'popular sovereignty', 'people homogeneity', 'anti-elitism' – with the dimension 'exclusionism' taken from Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) conceptualization of thick populism. In order to measure the level of populism in each of these dimensions, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed, on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) with a series of statements. Table 2 reports the items employed for measuring participants' attitudes towards these dimensions and indicates for each of them the average level of agreement of the Italian respondents.

⁷ The exact wording (in English and Italian) of the media messages used as stimuli for this experiment is reported in the Appendix 1 'Wording of the treatment messages' included with this article

Table 1. Experiment conditions

Conditions with Populism (Pro-heartland is a constant)		
	No anti-elite	Anti-elite
No outgroup	(1) empty populism	(2) anti-elitism populism
Outgroup 'immigrants'	(3) right-wing outgroup populism	(4) complete right-wing populism
Outgroup 'The wealthy 1%'	(5) left-wing outgroup populism	(6) complete left-wing populism
Control Conditions		
No heartland	(control 1) no populism/ rational	(control 2) only anti-elitism

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Populist Attitudes Items among the Italian respondents (1 - completely disagree; 7 - completely agree)

Dimension/Items	N	Mean	SD
<i>Popular Sovereignty</i>			
The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums	852	5.52	1.69
The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken	851	6.07	1.22
The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people	852	5.56	1.64
<i>People Homogeneity</i>			
Although the [country members, e.g. British] are very different from each other, when it comes down to it, they all think the same	852	4.35	1.79
Ordinary people all pull together	852	4.64	1.61
Ordinary people share the same values and interests	852	4.56	1.66
Ordinary people are of good and honest character	852	4.59	1.60
<i>Anti-elitism</i>			
Politicians in government are corrupt	857	5.58	1.46
Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people	858	5.64	1.42
Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think	858	5.83	1.44
MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people	857	6.11	1.24
The people instead of politicians should make our most important policy decisions	857	5.13	1.75
The ordinary people should have more influence in political decision making than large corporations	857	5.45	1.44
The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people	858	5.77	1.32
People like me have no influence on what the government does	858	5.71	1.49
Poor people should have a greater voice in politics	858	5.28	1.53
International financial institutions have colonized our country	855	5.44	1.40
A bunch of rich families are really running this country	855	5.17	1.56
Big corporations accumulate wealth by exploiting the people	858	5.57	1.42
<i>Exclusionism</i>			
Immigrants are responsible for a lot of our nation's problems	851	4.20	2.04
People who are not originally from our country should have no rights to our social benefits	852	4.04	1.99
Immigrants are threatening the purity of our culture	852	4.42	2.08
Immigrants cost our country a lot of money that should rather be invested in our own people	851	5.02	1.97

3.3. Preliminary Findings

In order to verify the validity of the proposed operationalization of populist attitudes for the Italian case, I investigated the internal consistency of the indicators of each dimension and of the whole set of items through a reliability measure (Cronbach's alpha). The positive result of this check (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70)⁸ allowed me to create four additive indices of populist attitudes ('popular sovereignty' index; 'people's homogeneity' index; 'anti-elitism' index; 'exclusionism' index) and an overall aggregate index of Populism; all the indexes were normalized resulting in five continuous variables ranging from 0 to 1. Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics of these indices.

From these data, all types of populist attitudes proved to be widespread in Italy: among the Italian respondents the mean value of the populism index was 0.68, and all the indexes measuring the specific dimensions of populist attitude presented a mean value higher than 0.5 (Table 3). Particularly strong among Italians were the populist attitudes referring to the dimensions 'popular sovereignty' and 'anti-elitism': the indexes of these dimensions showed a mean value equal respectively to 0.79 and 0.76. This is revealing of the Italian voters' dissatisfaction with the country's economic and political establishment and of their perception of elected politicians as being out-of-touch and insensitive to Italian citizens' requests, as if they had failed in their representative function.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Populist attitudes indexes (0-1) among Italian respondents

Index/populism dimension	N	Mean	SD
Popular sovereignty index	851	0.79	0.23
People's homogeneity index	852	0.59	0.25
Anti-elitism index	851	0.76	0.17
Exclusionism index	850	0.57	0.30
Populism index	842	0.68	0.18

Besides looking at the populism indexes on the whole sample, I also conducted a preliminary analysis aimed at revealing the impact on the respondents' level of populism of the different media populist messages used as stimuli. In Table 4, I report the mean value assumed by the indexes of populist attitudes among the respondents exposed to each of the six experimental conditions and to the two control conditions (Table 1). I noticed that the mean values of the indexes did not change markedly according to the conditions and a one-way ANOVA test confirmed this perception: none of the populist attitudes' indexes differed in a statistically significant way between the experiment conditions (Table 4).

This preliminary result contrasted with those of previous experimental studies, which found that a single populist message may have a relevant effect on voters' populist attitudes. Based on these studies, the media messages containing the blaming of the elite

⁸ Popular Sovereignty (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.885); People Homogeneity (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.913); Anti-Elitism (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.905); Excluding Outgroups (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.916); Populism Index (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.921).

(conditions 2, 4, and 6) and of immigrants (conditions 3 and 4)⁹ were expected to have an impact on the corresponding subcomponent of populist attitudes, i.e. ‘exclusionism’ and ‘anti-elitism’ (Matthes and Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2017b).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Populist attitudes indexes (0-1) according to the experiment conditions and connected ANOVA test results

Index Condition	Popular sovereignty		Homogeneity of the people		Anti-elitism		Exclusionism		Populism index	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
(1) empty populism	0.84	0.20	0.60	0.24	0.77	0.16	0.59	0.30	0.70	0.17
(2) anti-elitism populism	0.77	0.25	0.62	0.26	0.77	0.17	0.59	0.30	0.69	0.19
(3) right-wing outgroup populism	0.80	0.23	0.58	0.25	0.75	0.17	0.60	0.28	0.68	0.17
(4) complete right-wing populism	0.80	0.22	0.58	0.25	0.76	0.18	0.59	0.33	0.68	0.18
(5) left-wing outgroup populism	0.78	0.24	0.61	0.25	0.76	0.18	0.56	0.31	0.68	0.19
(6) complete left-wing populism	0.79	0.22	0.60	0.24	0.78	0.17	0.57	0.30	0.68	0.17
(Control1) No populism/rational	0.77	0.24	0.55	0.25	0.74	0.18	0.52	0.30	0.65	0.18
(Control2) No populism/only anti-elitism	0.74	0.24	0.58	0.24	0.75	0.15	0.54	0.29	0.66	0.18
	F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig
One-way ANOVA between conditions	1.442	0.185	0.675	0.694	0.681	0.689	1.029	0.409	0.935	0.479

In order to better understand this unexpected result, I also tested whether at least significant single item differences existed between respondents assigned to control groups and treatment conditions. The one-way ANOVA test performed on the 23 items of populism confirmed that all the indicators of the dimensions ‘exclusionism’ and ‘anti-elitism’ did not vary significantly between conditions, confirming the lack of impact of a single media populist message on these indexes (Table 5). However, the same test also revealed that the item “The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people” which belongs to the populism dimension ‘popular sovereignty’, differed significantly between treatment conditions (Table 5). Therefore, I checked the average level of agreement with this statement among the respondents exposed to the different stimuli. The values reported in Table 6 suggest that the media message most effective in activating this populist trait was the one containing the positive valorisation of the people (Condition 1).¹⁰ It lets us hypothesise that in the case of Italy the positive priming of national identity does not influence Italians’ perception of themselves as a homogeneous group (Hameleers et al., 2019), but directly triggers the Italians’ request for a political class that truly takes care of them. It probably occurs because of the long-lasting fracture between politics and citizens in Italy.

⁹ For the wording of the media messages used as stimuli for these conditions, see Appendix A ‘Wording of the treatment messages’ included with this article.

¹⁰ For the wording of this treatment message, see Appendix A ‘Wording of the treatment messages’ included with this article

Table 5. ANOVA test results of populist attitudes items according to experiment conditions

Dimension/Items	F	Sig
<i>Popular Sovereignty</i>		
The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums	0.72	0.65
The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken	1.51	0.16
The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people	2.09	0.04
<i>People Homogeneity</i>		
Although the [country members, e.g. British] are very different from each other, when it comes down to it, they all think the same	1.30	0.25
Ordinary people all pull together	0.48	0.85
Ordinary people share the same values and interests	0.66	0.71
Ordinary people are of good and honest character	0.57	0.78
<i>Anti-elitism</i>		
Politicians in government are corrupt	0.38	0.92
Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people	0.93	0.49
Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think	0.25	0.97
MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people	0.83	0.56
The people instead of politicians should make our most important policy decisions	1.49	0.17
The ordinary people should have more influence in political decision making than large corporations	0.73	0.65
The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people	0.42	0.89
People like me have no influence on what the government does	0.59	0.77
Poor people should have a greater voice in politics	0.87	0.53
International financial institutions have colonized our country	1.47	0.17
A bunch of rich families are really running this country	1.61	0.13
Big corporations accumulate wealth by exploiting the people	0.75	0.63
<i>Exclusionism</i>		
Immigrants are responsible for a lot of our nation's problems	1.19	0.31
People who are not originally from our country should have no rights to our social benefits	0.79	0.60
Immigrants are threatening the purity of our culture	0.74	0.64
Immigrants cost our country a lot of money that should rather be invested in our own people	1.41	0.20

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Popular Sovereignty indicator "The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people" (1 - completely disagree; 7 - completely agree), according to experiment condition

Condition	Mean	St. Dev.
(1) empty populism	6.46	0.84
(2) anti-elitism populism	5.94	1.33
(3) right-wing outgroup populism	6.10	1.29
(4) complete right-wing populism	6.08	1.25
(5) left-wing outgroup populism	6.06	1.27
(6) complete left-wing populism	6.08	1.16
(Control1) No populism/rational	5.96	1.31
(Control2) No populism/only anti-elitism	5.88	1.19

4. Conclusions

Despite the growing interest of political and communication scholars in populism in Italy (e.g., Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013; Tarchi, 2015; Bobba and Legnante, 2016; Bracciale and Martella, 2017), there is still little knowledge of the populist attitudes of Italian voters and whether and how they are connected with media communication. The purpose of this article was to pave the way for the study of this salient topic (e.g., Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2017a and 2017b; Müller et al., 2017) also with reference to the Italian case. For this reason, the article presented the preliminary results concerning Italy of a European comparative experimental study investigating the effects of different populist media messages on voters' populist attitudes.

The findings revealed the presence of strong populist attitudes among Italian citizens but provided only limited support to the commonplace that the media are accomplices of the success of populism in Italy. The analysis revealed that a single populist media message does not activate the populist attitudes of Italian voters. In fact, only the news item containing the positive valorisation of the Italian people (stimulus 'empty populism') affected the respondents, and only with reference to their agreement with the statement "The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people". The other stimuli included in the experiment proved to have no effect on the indexes of populist attitudes.

While this result came as unexpected, being in contrast to previous experimental studies on the topic (Matthes and Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2017b), two interpretations may explain it. On the one hand, it could be that only specific segments of the Italian electorate are affected by the populist messages. Even if on the whole sample the impact of populist messages is not significant, voters with certain political and psychological traits may be particularly prone to their influence (e.g. Hameleers and De Vreese, 2018). In order to verify this, further studies should test the impact of populist media messages while considering the moderating effect of a series of characteristics, such as ideology, level of prior populist attitudes, and perception of relative deprivation (see for example Hameleers, Bos and De Vreese, 2018b, and Hameleers and De Vreese, 2018). On the other hand, the lack of effect may be due to the high level of populist attitudes registered among the Italian respondents: a single populist message may not affect Italian voters since they are already strongly populist. In this case, a comparative study should verify whether the effect of populist media messages varies between countries according to their citizens' prior level of populist attitudes.

While further research is needed to clarify the impact of media populist messages on Italians' populist attitudes, this article is a first step in this direction. Moreover, it contributes to the study of populist attitudes in Italy by providing a new operationalization with regard to populist attitudes that has proved reliable in the Italian context and offering a comparable measurement of the strength of populist attitudes among Italian voters.

Appendix 1.

Condition 1 - Empty populism

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power of [nationals] will decline – foundation FutureNow releases new report Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.' Read more...
ITA	Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto degli Italiani si ridurrà – la Fondazione FuturoOra rilascia un nuovo rapporto Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere della nostra gente'. Leggi di più...

Condition 2 - Anti-elitism populism

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power will decline for [nationals] – foundation FutureNow blames politicians in new report Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. It is obvious that politicians are to blame. They have been too short-sighted, self-serving, and corrupt in recent years. They don't care about anyone but themselves and are too detached from the people. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.' Read more...
ITA	Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà per gli Italiani – Il nuovo rapporto della Fondazione FuturoOra incolpa i politici Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. È ovvio che la colpa è dei politici: negli ultimi anni sono stati troppo miopi, opportunisti e corrotti. Non si preoccupano di nessuno se non di loro stessi e sono troppo distanti dal popolo. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere dalla nostra gente'. Leggi di più...

Condition 3 - Right-wing outgroup populism

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power will decline for [nationals] – foundation FutureNow blames immigrants in new report Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. It is obvious that immigrants are to blame. They are too demanding, they exploit our system and are hard to integrate. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.' Read more...
ITA	Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà per gli Italiani – Il nuovo rapporto della Fondazione FuturoOra incolpa gli immigrati Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia, ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. È ovvio che la colpa è degli immigrati: sono troppo esigenti, sfruttano il nostro sistema e si integrano con difficoltà. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere dalla nostra gente'. Leggi di più...

Condition 4 - complete right-wing populism

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power will decline for [nationals] – foundation FutureNow blames politicians and immigrants in new report
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Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. It is obvious that politicians and migrants are to blame. Politicians have been too short-sighted, self-serving, and corrupt in recent years. Migrants are too demanding, they exploit our system and are hard to integrate. And still, politicians only take care of the migrants instead of our own people. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.' Read more...

- ITA Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà per gli Italiani – Il nuovo rapporto della Fondazione FuturoOra incolpa i politici e gli immigrati
 Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. È ovvio che la colpa è dei politici e degli immigrati: i politici negli ultimi anni sono stati troppo miopi, opportunisti e corrotti. Gli immigrati sono troppo esigenti, sfruttano il nostro sistema e si integrano con difficoltà. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere della nostra gente'.
 Leggi di più...

Condition 5 - Left-wing outgroup populism

- ENG Headline: Purchasing power will decline for [nationals] – foundation FutureNow blames wealthy in new report
 Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. It is obvious that the super-rich are to blame. They have been too egotistic, self-serving and corrupt in recent years and do not care about anyone but themselves. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.'
 Read more...
- ITA Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà per gli Italiani – Il nuovo rapporto della fondazione FuturoOra incolpa i ricchi
 Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. È ovvio che la colpa è dei ricchi: negli ultimi anni sono stati troppo egoisti, opportunisti e corrotti, e non si preoccupano di nessuno se non di loro stessi. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere della nostra gente'.
 Leggi di più...

Condition 6 - Complete left-wing populism

- ENG Headline: Purchasing power will decline for [nationals] – foundation FutureNow blames politicians and the wealthy in new report
 Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power in [country] will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'The common citizens in [country] need to be made aware of the fact that they will have less money to spend. So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off. It is obvious that politicians and the super-rich are to blame. Politicians and the super-rich have been too short-sighted, self-serving, and corrupt in recent years. And still, politicians only take care of the super-rich instead of the common people. Action has to be taken now to address this threat to the well-being of our people.' Read more...
- ITA Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà per gli Italiani – il nuovo rapporto della Fondazione FuturoOra incolpa i politici e i ricchi
 Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, in Italia il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà nei prossimi anni. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'I cittadini italiani devono essere informati del fatto che avranno meno soldi da spendere. In Italia così tanta gente lavora duramente ogni giorno per avere una vita migliore. È profondamente ingiusto che questi sforzi non siano ripagati. È ovvio che la colpa è dei politici e dei ricchi: i politici e i ricchi negli ultimi anni sono stati troppo miopi, opportunisti e corrotti. Inoltre, i politici si curano solo dei ricchi anziché delle persone comuni. Bisogna agire ora per affrontare questa minaccia al benessere della nostra gente'.
 Leggi di più...

Control 1 - No populism/rational

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power will decline – foundation FutureNow releases new report Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'We have to raise awareness about what this prospect means. There will be less money to spend. Action has to be taken now to address this threat.' Read more...
ITA	Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà – la fondazione FuturoOra rilascia un nuovo rapporto Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, nei prossimi anni il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'Noi dobbiamo aumentare la consapevolezza su ciò che questa direzione comporta: ci saranno meno soldi da spendere. Bisogna agire ora per far fronte a questa minaccia.' Leggi di più...

Control 2 - Only anti-elitism

ENG	Headline: Purchasing power will decline – foundation FutureNow blames politicians in new report Text: According to a new report by FutureNow purchasing power will decline in the coming years. A spokesperson for the independent foundation that has been monitoring economic developments for years comments on the report: 'We have to raise awareness about what this prospect means for [country]. There will be less money to spend. It is obvious that politicians are to blame. They have been too short-sighted, self-serving, and corrupt in recent years. They don't care about anyone but themselves and are too detached. Action has to be taken now to address this threat.' Read more...
ITA	Titolo: Il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà – il nuovo rapporto della Fondazione FuturoOra incolpa i politici Testo: Secondo un nuovo rapporto di FuturoOra, nei prossimi anni il potere d'acquisto si ridurrà. Un portavoce di questa fondazione indipendente che da anni monitora l'andamento dell'economia ha commentato così il rapporto: 'Noi dobbiamo aumentare la consapevolezza su ciò che questa direzione comporta per l'Italia: ci saranno meno soldi da spendere. È ovvio che la colpa è dei politici: negli ultimi anni sono stati troppo miopi, opportunisti e corrotti. Non si preoccupano di nessuno se non di loro stessi e sono troppo distanti. Bisogna agire ora per far fronte a questa minaccia.' Leggi di più...

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