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**How Populism Shapes Policy: Evidence
from Italian Social Policy**

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Why should you read this research?

The electoral success of populist parties has made populism one of the most talked-about topics in contemporary media and political science literature. Most studies focus on the core ideology of populist parties or on the broad characteristics of their governance. This leaves one major question unanswered: **does a distinctly “populist policy” exist, and if so, what defines it?**

To approach this question, the thesis draws on **Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020)** ideal type of populist policy-making, originally tested on Hungarian post-2010 social policy reforms, and tests its generalisability. Accordingly, this thesis brings the framework to Italy, an entirely new geographical area that hosts a wide variety of populist parties across the political spectrum, from FdI and Lega on the right to M5S on the left, with FI as a borderline case. It also extends the framework to the policy proposal stage, absent from the original study, through an original coding scheme.

Given the well-established link between material deprivation and populist mobilisation, this thesis also centres its analysis on **post-2010 social policy**. Particularly, it focuses on an arena where the stakes for vulnerable populations are highest: social protection measures. Accordingly, the study of policy proposals for social protection measures was complemented with an in-depth qualitative study of M5S’ *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (Citizenship Income) and Meloni’s *Assegno di Inclusione* (Inclusion Allowance) and associated *Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro* (Support for labour and Training), Italy’s two most significant populist social protection reforms.

The thesis makes three main contributions:

1. **Empirically**, the thesis proves the generalisability of Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020) ideal type to another country, to policy proposals (not just reforms), and across the left-right ideological spectrum.
2. **Theoretically**, it finds that the *content* and *form* of populism play different roles at different stages of the policymaking process, with the former being more defining during electoral competition and the latter when populists are in power.
3. **Practically**, it finds that the threat populism poses to liberal democracy is not confined to high-profile acts of institutional capture. Rather, it is diffuse and embedded in everyday policy-making.

It therefore calls on policymakers to strengthen procedural safeguards, expand mandatory stakeholder engagement, reinforce the protection of minority rights, and move towards more universalistic welfare systems.

Whether you are a policymaker, a political scientist, or a citizen watching Europe’s democratic landscape shift, this thesis will help you understand what it means to have populist parties in government, both for their citizens and the institutions meant to protect them.

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1. Introduction

The increasing presence of populist parties in Europe (Rooduijn et al., 2023a) raises important questions about their governance and its effects on the political and democratic landscape. Research in this area identifies several key characteristics of populist governance, such as antagonistic politicisation, decisionism, majoritarianism, and populist frames (i.e., crisis-performance, emotional discourse, centrality of the leader) (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2021; Panizza et al., 2025; Pappas, 2019). Still, a major question remains mostly unanswered: do these characteristics result in a policy that is distinctly populist, independent of parties' core ideological attachments? To tackle this question, this thesis studies the post-2010 policies of leading populist parties in Italy, a country with a variety of populist parties spanning the political spectrum, all of which have alternated between government and opposition during the analysed period. Specifically, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Lega, and Forza Italia (FI) are selected as cases of right-wing populism and Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) as a case of left-wing populism (Zaslove et al., 2024). Given the relevance of welfare-related issues as drivers of electoral mobilisation and predictors of populist support (Adam and Ftergioti, 2025; Algan et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017), the social policy, and particularly the social protection reforms, of these parties are analysed.

On a theoretical level, this study builds on Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making, originally developed to study Hungarian post-2010 social policy reforms, with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. *Is Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making generalisable to policy proposals and to other contexts (e.g., geographical, ideological)?*
2. *Which of the elements of the ideal type are observable in post-2010 Italian social policy?*
3. *How do these elements vary across the different stages of the policy process (e.g., policy proposals, policy implementation)?*

In its empirical section, the thesis utilises such a framework to observe how populist *content* – i.e., the substance – and populist *form* – i.e., the way in which the substance is articulated and implemented – manifest in policy-making. Firstly, a longitudinal content analysis of the social protection policy proposals of FdI, Lega, M5S, and FI during post-2010 elections (i.e., 2013, 2018, 2022) is conducted via an original coding scheme based on Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type. This analysis is complemented by an examination of the Reddito di Cittadinanza and the subsequent Assegno di Inclusione and Supporto per La Formazione e il Lavoro, two key social protection reforms implemented by fully populist governments. Accordingly, the thesis sheds light on how the character of populist policy evolves across the policy-making cycle, from proposal to implementation, as well as how it is affected by ideological stances and coalition constraints. In this light, its hypotheses are:

- H1: The framework is entirely generalisable, meaning that the *content* and *form* of populism are both present in post-2010 Italian social policy at the proposal and implementation stages.
- H2: Majoritarian elements will be prevalent in the *content* of post-2010 Italian social policy; Manichean and emotional elements will be prevalent in its *form*.

- H3: The overall level of populism will be higher in post-2010 elections (i.e., 2013, 2018, 2022) than in the selected pre-2010 benchmark (i.e., 2006), rising progressively as successive crises unfold.
- H4: Social policy reforms will have a radical *content* and an anti-establishment implementation *process* (i.e., circumventing established policy institutions and limitation of policy stakeholders' participation).

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a conceptual overview of populism and Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of policy-making, along with the rationale for focusing on social policy and Italy. Chapter 3 details the operationalisation of the ideal type for the analyses of policy proposals and reforms, which are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the main findings and discusses their broader implications for policy-making and democratic institutions.

In brief, the thesis confirms that Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type is generalisable to both the Italian context and the policy proposal stage. Further, its hypotheses are also largely confirmed, with populism rising across time, and *content* and *form* both being clearly present throughout the policy-making process. Specifically, *content*-related elements are found to be particularly defining at the proposal stage, whereas *formal* elements prevail at the implementation stage. Based on these findings, the thesis recommends strengthening procedural safeguards, expanding stakeholder engagement, reinforcing minority rights protections, and moving towards more universalistic welfare systems to prevent populist governance from eroding democratic institutions.

2. Populism and Social Policy: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Insights

1. Conceptual Framework: from the Definition to the Practice of Populism¹

a. Defining populism

Populism is generally understood as a political phenomenon that seeks to restore power to “the people” – conceived as the rightful majority – from antagonistic “others” who are perceived as illegitimately holding or threatening it, often through personalised leadership². The conceptual definition of this phenomenon is widely debated, with Pappas (2016) identifying seven “main definitions of populism” (p. 14): political movement, style, ideology, discourse, strategy, political culture, and *omnibus* concept.

The Oxford Handbook of Populism (Kaltwasser et al., 2017) focuses on three of these. First, the ideational³ approach defines populism as a thin-centred ideology in which society is separated into Manichean groups – the “pure people” and “corrupt elites” which have morally and politically betrayed them – and politics is the “expression of the *Volonté Générale* of the people” (Mudde, 2017, p.29). Some tenets of this approach (e.g., Müller, 2016) specify that the “pure people” and “corrupt” elites are not only in opposition *inter se* but also constitute homogeneous groups *intra se*, conferring an essentially anti-pluralist character to populism. Second, the political-strategic approach defines it as a “top-down” political and rhetorical strategy in which “personalistic” leaders gain power through the “direct, unmediated” and “uninstitutionalized” support of the people, understood as a heterogeneous group of “unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2017, p. 50). Third, the socio-cultural approach, as defined by Ostiguy, understands populism as “the (antagonistic, mobilising) flaunting of the ‘low’” (2017, p. 78), capturing the performative, othering, and emotional characters of populism.

Though not discussed in depth in the handbook, Moffitt (2016) offers an insightful approach to populism that integrates all the key characteristics discussed above. Echoing Knight, Canovan, and Taguieff, he conceptualises populism as a political style⁵ with three core features: 1. appeal to “the people” as the “true holders of sovereignty” against antagonistic “others”, primarily elites or the establishment, but also ethnic or cultural minorities (p. 13); 2. crisis-mobilisation to gain momentum (see [section 1b](#)); 3. display of “bad manners” (a “disregard for ‘appropriate’ ways of acting in the political realm”) (p. 44).

Overall, the thinness and Manicheanism emphasised by the ideational approach, along with the antagonistic, crisis-driven, and emotional rhetoric highlighted by socio-cultural and stylistic approaches, resonate with the seminal discursive approach to populism of Laclau and Mouffe (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Within this perspective, populism is understood as a key political logic

¹ Part of the research in this section is drawn from Bottura (2023).

² Author’s definition based on prominent literature (see [Appendix Table 1](#)).

³ The ideational approach has been commonly adopted in the literature (Kaltwasser et al., 2017).

⁴ Defined as “slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, [...] bodily or facial expressions [...] raw, culturally popular tastes” (p.5).

⁵ Defined as “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations” (2013, p. 7).

that simplifies hegemonic struggles by separating society into “us” and “them” through a discourse that articulates “empty signifiers” – most notably “the people” and “the other” – via relations of equivalence and difference. These relations are developed through linguistic and symbolic elements (e.g., rhetorical ploys, imagery, performative acts, and organisational features). Owing to the proximity of the socio-cultural, stylistic, and discursive approaches, Ostiguy, Moffitt, and Panizza (2021) have developed a comprehensive discursive-performative framework, in which populism has two complementary components: a logico-discursive one (based on Laclau) and a socio-cultural or stylistic one (based on Moffitt and Ostiguy). These typically manifest together, especially in the populist leader.

These main approaches to populism can be categorised based on whether they view populism as binary or gradational and as an attribute or a practice (Moffitt, 2020; Osuna, 2021). The ideational approach treats populism as an attribute and binary concept, meaning that it is a characteristic that parties/leaders have, by being anti-elitist, Manichean, and anti-pluralist, or not. Instead, the strategic and discursive-performative approaches treat it as a practice and gradational concept, meaning that it is something that parties/leaders do to different degrees and in various ways (e.g., having a more or less personalised leader, using more or less “low” rhetoric).

The distinction of populism as an attribute or a practice parallels debates on its *content* and *form*. The *content* of populism aligns with its conception as an attribute and encompasses the ideological principles, beliefs, and values that define it (e.g., ideological thinness, opposition of people and elites, anti-pluralism, anti-establishment stances). The *form* aligns with its conception as a practice and concerns the articulation of these principles (e.g., language, symbols, aesthetics). This includes organisational features (e.g., strong leadership, mobilisation strategies) as well as general and specific stylistic elements (e.g., Manichean “us” versus “them,” people-centrism, crisis exploitation, and simplistic, emotive, and disruptive discourse) (Ballacci and Goodman, 2023).

According to Ballacci and Goodman, the “forms and styles [of populism] cannot be studied independently from its ideological content” (2023, p. 5)⁶. In their view, the communicative style chosen to convey an ideology is reflective of the ideology itself, which is especially true for populism as a thin ideology. Accordingly, form and content mutually shape each other, with populists using ideologically charged styles to mobilise the electorate in a non-conformist manner. Hence, the main features of populism – simplification, rejection of complex ideas, and dramatised action – should be understood as “content-forms” (p. 6). For instance, the simplistic and emotional rhetoric of populists, combined with their strong decisionism, reflects a deeply anti-technocratic, anti-pluralist, and radical democratic stance, also evident in their preference for action over theory. Further, the use of the “low” and “bad manners” to articulate the signifiers of the “people” and “the other”, as described by the discursive-performative approach, reflects an essentially anti-establishment ideological stance. This grants a political and conceptual weight to populist *form*, which underscores the importance of studying populism’s political and ideological spillovers. This thesis builds on and contributes to this debate by analysing how content and form manifest in populist policy, thereby testing the empirical relevance of these categories and their interrelation.

⁶ A similar view is taken by Olivas Osuna (2021).

In sum, the literature approaches populism from multiple angles, diverging on its *content* and *form*, its status as an attribute or a practice, and on whether it is binary or gradational. Depending on the definition and its strictness, more or fewer cases are identified. To capture these diverse manifestations, some scholars have combined approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the concept, as in the case of the discursive-performative approach. A similar method is taken in this thesis, which, rather than relying on one singular definition of populism, grounds its analysis on the core features of the phenomenon, recognised across the literature (see [Appendix Table 1](#)). These include societal polarisation (i.e., “antagonistic articulation of the people and others”), people-centrism, anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, crisis-performance (elaborated below), a simplistic and direct communication style, and a central and charismatic leader whose relationship with their supporters is unmediated.

b. The context of populism: crises and democracy

The relationship between crises and populism is neither linear nor unequivocal in the literature, with tenets of the ideological approach remaining sceptical of a causal link between the two. By contrast, authors such as Laclau (2005), Taggart (2004), and Brubaker (2017) identify such a link as an essential feature of populism. Some move even beyond simple causality and argue that populism and crises have a self-reinforcing relationship in which populists are both “products and creators” of crises (Diamanti and Lazar, 2020, p.22), a view best conceptualised by Moffitt’s “crisis performance” framework (2015; 2020). According to Moffitt, populists simplify and moralise the social conflicts and grievances that emerge with crises – whether real or rhetorically fabricated – using them as a basis for their moral and antagonistic articulation of “the people” and the “other”, for their portrayal of themselves as the protectors of the people, and to justify their urgent call for immediate and resolute action.

These mechanisms are particularly effective in situations of compound crises, where financial strain is heightened by political and socio-cultural dissatisfaction (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch, 2016; Guiso et al., 2017). In the twenty-first century, such conditions have increasingly emerged amid processes of hyper-globalisation (Arditi, 2022; Brubaker, 2017; Diamanti and Lazar, 2020; Rodrik, 2017, 2021). Globally, the 2008 Great Recession represents a critical juncture for the expansion of populist support, largely driven by rising economic anxiety and social injustice (see [section 2a](#) for more). Similarly, at the European level, the Eurozone crisis (2012) and the migrant crisis (2015) were pivotal, as populists strategically mobilised feelings of insecurity and neglect to generate political and cultural mistrust towards European and national elites, respectively portrayed as despotic and incapable, as well as foreigners and immigrants (on cultural grounds). Combined with a decline in electoral participation, this crisis mobilisation drove increases in populist support among voters who remained politically engaged, contributing to the gradual rise of populist parties to power (Algan et al., 2017; Berman, 2019; Funke, Schularick and Trebesch, 2016; Guiso et al., 2017; Manunta et al., 2022; Rodríguez, Terrero-Dávila and Lee, 2023).

Populism also has a paradoxical relationship with democracy. It has been widely regarded as a “symptom” of the legitimacy crisis that democratic systems have been undergoing since the post-

war era (e.g., Berman, 2019; Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2017, 2019). While for some this implies a positive redemptive potential (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005), in most of contemporary literature populism is considered as a “threat” to representative democracy, with some arguing that it its “shadow” (Müller, 2016, p. 12), “spectre” (e.g., Ardit, 2022, p.42) and even “parasite” (Urbinati, 2017, p. 5).

According to Urbinati (2019), populists aim to establish a regime of “direct representation” (p. 120), where legitimacy and moral authority are derived from the unbounded embodiment of the will of the people against a common enemy. Often, and for some essentially (Pappas, 2019a), this occurs through a personalised leader who is credited with an immediate understanding of the popular will and thus with moral superiority and full legitimacy compared to their political opponents. Populist representation is thus an illusion, where the people and their will are only formally central to the democratic process. In practice, they are absorbed into the singular figure of the leader, thus losing their plurality and diversity. Participation, deliberation, political competition, checks, and balances are, thereby, superfluous, which counters both the liberal (pluralistic) and democratic (representative and constitutional) pillars of contemporary democracy.⁷

Therefore, though populism emerges from liberal representative democracy, some see it as inherently linked to “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria, 1997; Rummens, 2017). For instance, Mudde (2021) has argued that “populism is essentially an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (p. 578). Similarly, Pappas (2016, 2019a, 2019b) famously considers populism as “democratic but never liberal” (2016, p. 13). In this light, Enyedi (2024) classifies populism as a “variety of illiberalism” (p.10), due to its bottom-up opposition of power-limiting institutions, majoritarian state partisanship, and its anti-pluralist tendencies. Finally, Müller (2016, p. 47) takes this stance even further, arguing that, because of its anti-pluralist core, populism is not merely a threat to liberal democracy or a variety of illiberalism, but “simply not a democratic perspective on politics” (p.47).

c. Populism in practice: governance and policy

The illiberal tendencies highlighted in the previous section manifest concretely once populists are in power, with populist governance having been empirically linked to democratic backsliding (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2021; Panizza et al., 2025). According to Muno and Pfeiffer (2021)’s ideal type of populist governance (Figure 1), the anti-pluralism of populist politics translates to a governance characterised by populist political communication, state capture, and measures against the political opposition. Populist political communication is utilised to establish a moral superiority of populist governance over that of institutional and political “others” (i.e., elites and minorities, respectively), which are framed as illegitimate and undeserving of representation, rights or political power. This status is enforced through measures against the political opposition and state capture. Accordingly, these dimensions result in a curtailment of minority rights, delegitimisation

⁷ Many authors support these claims: e.g., Abts and Rummens (2007); Ardit (2022); Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Brubaker (2017); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Müller (2016); Pappas (2019); Rummens (2017); Urbinati (2017, 2019), Zakaria (1997).

of institutional checks and balances, and abstraction of any effective popular agency from “the will of the people” (as it is expressed solely via the leader).

Figure 1 “Dimensions and subcategories of populist governance”, replicated from Muno and Pfeiffer (2022, p.7)

Populist political communication
Permanent electoral campaign
Demagoguery against opposition
Missionary relationship between charismatic leadership and followers
State capture
Patronage/Filling of key positions with followers
Clientelism
Populist Constitutionalism
Influence on Electoral System
Measures against the political Opposition
Discriminatory legalism
Avoidance of intermediary institutions
Curtailing/prevention of media freedom
Repression/obstruction of oppositional civil society
Source: Own elaboration.

Similar characteristics are also found in other accounts of populist governance. Notably, Pappas (2019b) ascribes four interrelated characteristics to populist governance: 1. extraordinary charismatic leadership; 2. pursuit of political polarisation; 3. drive to seize control of the state [...] and impose an illiberal constitution; and 4. systematic use of patronage to reward supporters and crowd out the opposition. In their Populist Governance Index, Panizza et al. (2025) summarise these characteristics in the two dimensions: antagonistic politicisation (i.e., “antagonistic rhetoric, [...] and/or targeted resources to the government’s social base”) and decisionism (i.e., transgression of “legal processes and/or scientific evidence, personalized decision-making, and/or fronted communications”) (p. 1317).

A conceptualisation of how such governance affects policy is provided by Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making. Consistent with most literature on this topic, the “ideal type” focuses on the policy reforms of these actors, emphasising that, rather than being characterised by a shared *stance* on policy issues, they are characterised by a common *approach* to making policy (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra, 2020; Caiani and Graziano, 2022; Panizza et al., 2025). As reported in Figure 2, the type is constructed around the content (or substance), process, and discourse of populist policy.

Figure 2 “Ideal type of populist policy-making”, replicated from Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020, p.75)

Policy content	Ideologically multifaceted and diverse Heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms Reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities Radical and paradigmatic policy reforms
Policy process	Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors Direct communication with the electorate
Policy discourse	Extensive use of discursive governance Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing Dominance of Manichean discourses

In terms of content, the type identifies ideological multifacedness and diversity, opposition to mainstream paradigms (i.e., policy heterodoxy, radical reforms) and exclusion of minorities (i.e., reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities) as core substantive features of populist policy-making. Importantly, the “ideologically multifaceted and diverse” element highlights the lack of a unique policy stance among and within populist parties, reflecting how populists often change different ideological stances across policy issues simultaneously as well as how they may adapt such stances according to the context at hand (e.g., a crisis). In terms of policy process, populist policy-making curtails dialogue with key policy stakeholders, such as civil society and experts, in favour of a direct relationship with voters. This often translates into decisionist implementation approaches that bypass institutional constraints, with populists favouring emergency policy-making instruments such as decrees over traditional legislative procedures. Finally, the discourse of populist policy-making is emotional and characterised by a recurrent use of crisis and Manichean framings.

In this light, populist policy-making reflects the core characteristics of populism (discussed in [section 1a](#)), as well as its *form*, *content*, and their interrelation. Its “content” component recalls the ideologically thin *content* of populism as well as its radicalness, majoritarianism, and anti-establishment stance. Likewise, the “procedure” and “discourse” components recall its *form*, with the former highlighting its decisionism and endorsement of direct democracy and the latter the prevalence of emotional, Manichean and crisis-driven communication. The majoritarian and Manichean features of populist policy link its form and content. From their majoritarian approach, populists ascribe a moral authority of their policies over those originating from elites or the establishment. This is then asserted through Manichean discourse, which is emotionally charged and crisis-driven. The result is a polarising type of policy that juxtaposes the needs of “the real, authentic people who are deserving of support” (Müller, 2016, p. 44) against the rest of the population, framed as “the others,” in both content and form.

In sum, key characteristics of populist governance are antagonistic politicisation (towards minorities and opponents), decisionism, state capture, majoritarianism, anti-establishment, and populist frames (i.e., crisis-performance, emotional discourse, centrality of the leader). These characteristics spill over to populist policy-making, as conceptualised by Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020), who argue that populist policy-making is heterogeneous in terms of policy orientations, but relatively homogeneous in the way this orientation is expressed through both content and form. The *content* of populist policy-making is found in its radical, heterodox, and majoritarian orientation. The *form* of populist policy-making is found in its implementation procedures – which favour direct communication with the electorate rather than a broader stakeholder involvement (e.g., experts, civil society) and are characterised by unconventional policy-making paths – and by its crisis-driven, Manichean, and emotionally charged discourse. Accordingly, Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making provides a comprehensive view of populist policy and, thus, offers a fertile foundation for analysing populist policy in its entirety, including its proposals. Hence, it will serve as the basis for the empirical analysis conducted in this thesis (see [Chapter 3](#)).

2. Case Study: the Rationale for Populist Social Policy in Italy

a. The link between social policy and populism

Policies are a set of goals and actions adopted by formal organisations, including governments, that are considered “social” when they aim to enhance citizens’ welfare; namely, the condition in which human needs, wants, and rights are met and respected (Blakemore and Warwick-Booth, 2013; Midgley and Livermore, 2008). This thesis relates to social policy as it focuses on social protection measures, namely: “all interventions from public or private bodies intended to relieve households and individuals of the burden of a defined set of risks or needs, provided that there is neither a simultaneous reciprocal nor an individual arrangement involved” (ESSPROS, 2019, p. 8). The European system of integrated social protection statistics (ESSPROS) defines the list of risks or needs that may give rise to social protection as follows: “1. Sickness/Health care 2. Disability 3. Old age 4. Survivors 5. Family/children 6. Unemployment 7. Housing 8. Social exclusion not elsewhere classified” (2019, p. 8). Given the context of the analysis conducted in this thesis, only proposals for the public provision of social support were analysed.

The reason behind such a choice is that social protection reforms address socio-economic anxiety, material illfare, and vulnerability, which have been identified as socio-economic drivers of populism on either end of the political spectrum (Adam and Ftergioti, 2025; Algan et al., 2017; Guiso et al., 2017). Particularly, perceptions of losses in political and economic power have been associated with support for right-wing populism, whereas those in material living standards and economic security have been associated with support for left-wing populism (Ferwerda et al., 2025; Zhirnov et al., 2024). These perceptual phenomena are referred to as “relative deprivation” or “nostalgic deprivation” and are underpinned by cognitive and emotional mechanisms such as fear, resentment, ressentiment, and anger. Accordingly, they heighten in-group identification and out-group stereotyping, increasing susceptibility to populist appeals (Hogg, 2021; Manunta et al., 2022; Rico et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Salmela and Von Scheve, 2018).

Building on these cognitive and emotional mechanisms, populists leverage Manichean, anti-establishment discourse to portray their leader as the defender of the “left-behind” and secure electoral support (Ferwerda et al., 2025; Manunta et al., 2022; Rico et al., 2017). This is reflected in populists’ social policies, which, as highlighted by Weyland (2013), often aim to bring immediate, large, and visible economic relief to social groups that were (supposedly) neglected by previous administrations (and often coincide with their direct electorate). The approach taken to define these target groups is influenced by the party’s core ideological positioning and, therefore, can be either inclusionary or exclusionary (Font et al., 2021; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Generally, inclusionary approaches are taken by left-wing parties, who aim to construct a broad political cleavage grounded on shared sentiments of marginalisation from ruling elites and desires for political and economic empowerment. Accordingly, left-wing populist social policy aims to increase cohesion within the electorate as well as establish and maintain political influence, often through mass welfare inclusion – especially of poorer sectors of society – and is often paired with anti-globalisation measures. This type of policy is most common to Latin American populism, though some instances of it have also been attributed to left-wing populist parties from countries

where the Eurozone crisis severely affected the electorate and where welfare states were comparatively weaker (as Podemos from Spain and Syriza from Greece) (Font et al., 2021; Saxonberg et al., 2024; Weyland, 2013).

Instead, exclusionary approaches based on principles of antagonism and identity are typical of conservative and nativist right-wing parties (Saxonberg et al., 2024). Literature on this type of policy is more frequent in European studies and is largely grounded in Ennser-Jedenastik's (2016, 2018) operationalisation of Mudde's (2007) Right-Wing Populism (RWP) theory. Such operationalisation defines RWP's social policy along three axes: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism – i.e., “xenophobic nationalism” (2016, p. 4) – posits that non-natives should have limited or no access to the welfare state, an approach also commonly referred to as “welfare chauvinism”. Authoritarianism – i.e., a hierarchical social order with a strong moral imperative – posits that only the “deserving” should receive social benefits and that the welfare state should be protected from the “undeserving”. Populism – i.e., people vs élites – posits that current welfare establishments favour national and global élites at the expense of the people, both in administration and redistribution.

The key concept of deservingness is also captured by other theoretical frameworks, like welfare “producerism” or van Oorschot's (2000) “CARIN” criteria. According to the former, welfare is produced by “makers”, who are thus morally entitled to it, and usurped by “takers”, both vertically (similarly to welfare populism) and horizontally (similarly to welfare authoritarianism and nativism) (Abts et al., 2021; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019; Ketola and Nordensvard, 2018; Rathgeb, 2021). According to the latter, deservingness is defined according to 5 criteria: Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity, and Need. These criteria cut across frameworks, with identity being central to chauvinism and control, attitude and reciprocity to producerism (Abts et al., 2021). Finally, need, control (and even reciprocity) may also be associated with authoritarianism. Importantly, these frameworks often coexist. For instance, many RWPs deliver more or less cultural or ethnic accounts of producerism (Otjest et al., 2021). Consequently, RWP advocate for a dualistic welfare system in which different regimes apply to the “deserving” (proto-universalistic) and to the “undeserving” (neo-liberal, or at best contributory) (Chueri, 2022)

In sum, populist social policy, whether in its inclusionary (left-wing) or exclusionary (right-wing) form, is a particularly suited practical example of populist policy as it reflects the anti-establishment, anti-elite, majoritarian, and Manichean features of populism; a point also recognised by Bartha, Boda and Szikra (2020), who test their ideal type of populist policy-making on social policy reforms. Following the authors of the ideal type, this thesis also uses social policy not to analyse the ideological distinction between left- and right-wing populism, but rather to identify the common populist features that shape policy approaches across populist parties regardless of ideological orientation. More specifically, it restricts its focus to social support measures as these directly address economic anxiety, (relative) deprivation, and self-uncertainty, which are key drivers of populism and populist attitudes.

b. The diversity of Italian populisms

In addition to focusing on social policy, the thesis takes Italy as a case study. This choice is justified primarily by the country’s longstanding history of populism, which, starting in the twentieth century (e.g., fascism and Qualunquismo) and evolving in the twenty-first (i.e., Berlusconi, M5S, the Lega, and FdI), has granted Italy a central role in the literature on populism (Bottura, 2023; Pappas, 2019). Further, although most manifestations of populism in Italy have historically been on the right wing of the political spectrum, the country includes cases across the entire spectrum, including the notable case of M5S, which shifted from being non-ideological to being a key centre-left actor (Zaslove et al., 2024; Figure 3). Finally, Italy has been the scene of populist electoral success on various occasions throughout the 21st century (Figure 4), with the country having had numerous populists in government coalitions (Governo Italiano, 2025; Rooduijn et al., 2023b). The parties and their trajectories are discussed in depth in [Chapter 3.1](#).

Figure 3 Degree of populism (0 being not populist and 10 being extremely populist) of political parties according to POPPA expert survey data in 2018 (left) and 2023 (right) (Zaslove et al., 2024).

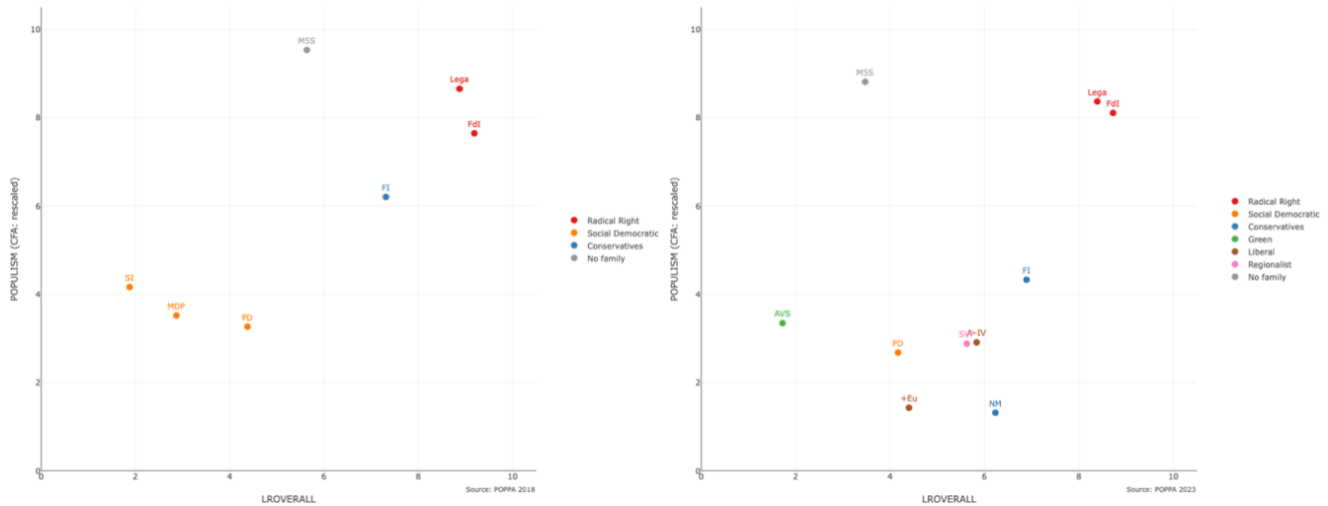


Figure 4 List of populist parties that have been in government in Italy and when (Rooduijn et al., 2023b)

	PO	FL	FR	EU	Best %	Last %	Government
DLSI	X				0.7 (2022)	0.7 (2022)	no
FdI	X		X	X	25.9 (2022)	25.9 (2022)	2022-today
FI	X			X	29.4 (2001)	8.1 (2022)	1994-1995 2001-2006 2008-2011 2021-2022 2022-today
LeU		X			3.4 (2018)	3.3 (2018)	2021-2022
LN/L	X		X	X	17.4 (2018)	8.7 (2022)	1994-1995 2008-2011 2018-2019 2022-today
M5S	X			X	33.3 (2018)	15.4 (2022)	2018-2019 2019-2021 2021-2022

Note: The “X” marks signal the party’s degree of populism (PO) and ideological stances – i.e., far left (FL), far right (FR) and Euroscepticism (EU) – with a faded “X” signalling lower degrees. List of acronyms: DLSI (De Luca Sindaco d’Italia), FI (Forza Italia), FdI (Fratelli d’Italia), LN/L (Lega Nord/Lega), LeU (Liberi e Uguali), M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle).

3. Data, Sources, and Methodology: Testing the Ideal Type of Populist Policy-making on Italy's Social Policy

As discussed in Chapter 2, populism is characterised by both *content*-related and *formal* components, with the former reflecting its definition as a thin ideology and the latter as a performative discourse or style. These elements affect the governance and policy of populist actors, as captured by Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making which defines the *content* of populist policy as ideologically thin, heterodox, majoritarian, radical, and its *form* as emotionally charged (i.e., Manichean and crisis framings), decisionist, and direct (i.e., the electorate is involved through surveys or referenda, for instance).

Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020) demonstrate the empirical relevance of such a type by utilising it to analyse Hungary's post-2010 social policy reforms. Though this application concerned only right-wing populist policy, the framework was built independently of ideological orientation and should therefore also apply to left-wing populism. Accordingly, the thesis applies the ideal type to Italy, a context with both right- and left-wing populist parties, thereby testing both its cross-country validity and its generalisability to different types of populism. Further, it expands the scope of Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) study by including the study of populist policy proposals alongside that of implemented policy reforms. Finally, given the strong relationship between social policy and populism (see Chapter 2), and following the authors of the ideal type, the thesis also focuses on post-2010 social policy.

Testing the type on Italy's post-2010 social policy brings a dual benefit. First, unlike in Hungary – where the one main right-wing populist party, Fidesz, successfully “seized” the state by consistently remaining in government from the 2010s until 2026 (Pappas, 2019) – in Italy, both right-wing and left-wing populist parties have been key actors in party competition in the last decades, serving in numerous governments as well as in opposition (Figure 4). Secondly, the two countries have different variants of Esping-Andersen's corporatist welfare regime, with the first being heavily influenced by its post-communist heritage and the second being fragmentary and heavily familiarised (as other Mediterranean welfare regimes).

In this light, the main hypothesis of the thesis (H1) is that *both the content and the form of populism will be present in post-2010 Italian populist social policy at the proposal and implementation stages* and, hence, that *the framework is entirely generalisable*. This choice is informed by the research presented in Chapter 2, particularly the studies finding that “populism fundamentally defines a mode of governance rather than policy content” (where “content” is intended as a common stance on policy rather than the substantive elements identified in our framework of reference) (Panizza et al., 2025, p. 1313; Bartha, Boda, and Szikra, 2020). Further, given the prevalence of right-wing populists in Italy, which pursue a dichotomising and identity-based approach to social policy, as also seen in Chapter 2, *it is expectable for majoritarian elements to be prevalent in the content of post-2010 Italian populist social policy and for Manichean and emotional elements to be prevalent in its form*; this constitutes the second hypothesis of the thesis (H2).

Finally, given the temporal scope taken for our analysis of social policy proposals, which includes several crises (i.e., the Eurozone crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis, and the Covid-19 crisis), *considerable and progressive increases in the overall levels of populism are expected between pre- (i.e., 2006) and post-2010 elections (i.e., 2013, 2018, and 2022)*. This expectation constitutes the third hypothesis of this thesis (H3). Similarly, given the history of the analysed reforms – the “Assegno di Inclusione” and “Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro” were implemented as a direct substitution of the M5S’s flagship “Reddito di Cittadinanza” – *a radical content and anti-establishment implementation processes (i.e., circumventing established policy institutions and limitation of policy stakeholders’ participation) are expected in these reforms*; this constitutes the fourth hypothesis of the thesis (H4).

1. Units of Analysis

a. Policy proposals and policy reforms

As mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), policy consists of a set of goals, actions, and means, adopted by formal organisations, to address a particular issue (Dunn, 2018; Howlett and Cashore, 2014; Midgley and Livermore, 2008). In politics, policy aims to address economic and societal issues (Peters, 2015). Accordingly, policy-making can be understood as the broader process through which policies are developed, analysed and implemented (Dunn, 2018). A further distinction can be made by defining public policy. Public policies are the policies designed and implemented by governments to change or maintain certain aspects of the status quo (Howlett and Cashore, 2014; Midgley and Livermore, 2008). Accordingly, this thesis conceptualises “policy proposals” as the alternatives outside of the public policy-making sphere and refers to public policies as “policy reforms”.

In making and testing their ideal type, Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020) focused primarily on right-wing Hungarian policy reforms. As already mentioned, this thesis extends this work in two ways: first, by including an additional facet of policy-making, namely policy proposals; and second, by applying the ideal type to both right-wing and left-wing populist policy. This choice enables the study of whether the character of populist policy, and the extent to which it is expressed, is consistent across the whole policy-making process or whether it diverges between policy proposals and public policy reforms. This question is particularly relevant considering the debate on whether and how populists change their approach when they govern (Caiani and Graziano, 2022). Once again, Italy serves as an especially appropriate case study for this analysis, as the country has repeatedly seen populist actors transition from opposition to government.

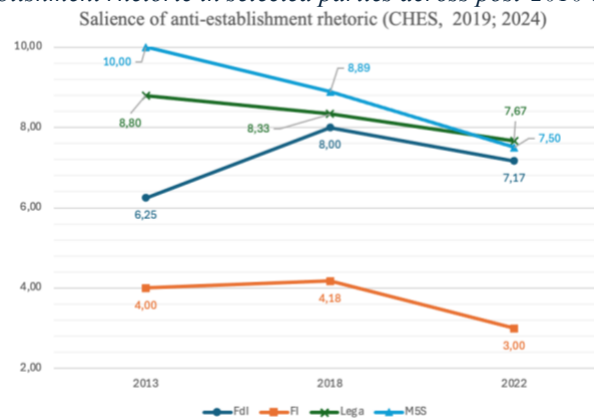
b. Prominent Italian populist parties⁸

The thesis focuses on the main Italian populist parties of the twenty-first century: Lega, Forza Italia (FI), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), and Fratelli d’Italia (FdI). This choice is informed by the

⁸ Part of the research for this section is drawn from Bottura (2023). Relevant sources: Agnew and Shin (2017); Caiani and Padoan (2021); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Dominijanni and Casarino (2014); Donà (2022); Forti (2022); Guiso

categorisation of all four as populists in the POPPA (Figure 3) and PopuList (Figure 4) expert surveys, which are specifically designed to study populist parties, and by their mid-to-high scores in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey's (CHES) “*anti_elite_salience*” variable (Figure 5), which has already been used as a proxy for populism in the literature (Vachudova, 2021). These expert surveys were also complemented by party histories and based on the relevant literature, as detailed in the rest of this section.

Figure 5 Levels of anti-establishment rhetoric in selected parties across post-2010 elections (CHES, 2019; 2024)



Note: “*anti_elite_salience*” indicates “How salient has ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT and ANTI-ELITE RHETORIC been to each party during 2024? 0 = not important at all; 10 = extremely important” (Rovny et al., 2025)

First, Lega (Nord) was founded in 1989 by Bossi as a party supporting northern federalism and re-branded by Salvini in 2018 as a “national” party. Accordingly, it has been a clear example of Italian ethno-populism, having a clear territorial definition of its “people” (first the inhabitants of the region “Padania” and then all Italians) and a strong anti-elitism, sentiments which were heightened by the Eurozone and 2015 migrant crises. The party has been a significant actor in Italian politics, particularly on the right, participating in various government coalitions.

Second, Forza Italia was founded in 1994 by Berlusconi in the aftermath of the “mani pulite” corruption scandal, gaining immediate electoral success. In 2008, it merged with the Alleanza Nazionale, heir of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, to form the Partito della Libertà (PdL). The PdL lost power during the EU sovereign debt crisis, leading to the fall of Berlusconi’s fourth government and the party’s support for the creation of the technocratic Monti Government in 2011. During his 9 years as prime minister, Berlusconi was widely regarded as a prototype of the populist leader, owing to his self-portrayal as the protector of “honest Italians” against political institutions and elites and his highly personalised and unmediated relationship with the electorate, particularly through his media channels. More recently, the party has adopted a more moderate profile, establishing itself as a “mediator” of right-wing forces. Accordingly, the party is considered borderline populist by most experts (Figures 3, 4, and 5). Still, given its central role in the history of Italian populism, its inclusion in the analysis remained relevant.

et al. (2017); Maccaferri (2022); Müller (2016); Pappas (2019); Puleo and Piccolino (2022); Rooduijn et al. (2023b); Ventura (2022).

Third, the M5S was launched by Grillo and Casaleggio in 2009 and has been in government from 2018 to 2022. The M5S has been defined as “technically populist” (p. 120) owing to its aversion to traditional ideologies and preference for direct and unmediated democracy, especially through social media (e.g., the movement’s “Rousseau Platform” as a means to gather voters’ opinions). Further, in its first years, the party displayed a high degree of personalisation around its leader, Grillo, and appealed to the Eurosceptic and anti-political sentiments caused by the Eurozone and migrant crises. Since then, the party has found its ideological place in the so-called “campo largo”, a term that has come to define a broad centre-left coalition in Italy (L’Espresso, 2025). This leftist shift is documented by both the CHES (Rovny et al., 2025) and POPPA (Zaslave et al., 2024), which recorded drops from 4.77 to 3.33 and 5.63 to 3.47, respectively, on a 0 (left) to 10 (right) scale (Figure 3).

Finally, FdI was founded in 2012 as the re-establishment of the Alleanza Nazionale by Meloni, La Russa, and Crosetto, who parted from the PdL due to their disapproval of the party’s support of Monti’s technocratic government. The party was not immediately successful in the polls but gained momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic and secured a strong majority during the 2022 elections. Though post-fascist in heritage, FdI has exhibited and maintained clear populist stances since its creation. The party consistently positioned itself against the political elite and left-wing political opponents, a stance that intensified during Covid-19, against the Conte I, Conte II, and Draghi governments, and persisted through the 2022 election. A similar attitude connoted the party’s initial Eurosceptic position, which, however, softened with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and once the party entered government (Bottura, 2023). Importantly, the party also displays a high level of personalisation and “flaunting of the low”, especially through Meloni’s strong media presence. Currently, Meloni’s government has become the third-longest-lasting government in the history of the Italian Republic (Governo Italiano, 2025).

2. Operationalisation of the Ideal Type

a. Application to the study of policy proposals

In terms of methodology and data, the study involved a qualitative content analysis of the social protection proposals present in the manifestos of our selected populist parties for all general elections between 2013 and 2022, plus one election before the Great Recession as a benchmark. 2006 was chosen for this purpose as it predates the Great Recession and its gradual economic impact. This resulted in a longitudinal perspective that shed light on how the populist character of policy proposals has evolved, particularly in response to relevant crises (i.e., the 2012 Eurozone Crisis, the 2015 Migrant Crisis, and the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic). The proposals were selected following ESSPROS’s definition of social protection (see Chapter 2) and the OECD Social Expenditure Database’s Manual (2019) (see Appendix) which provided illustrative examples across the key social protection areas (i.e. sickness/health care, disability, old age, survivors, family/children, unemployment, housing, and social exclusion not elsewhere classified). Sections of the proposals that did not correspond to this classification framework were excluded from the coding process. In total, the analysis covered 62 policy proposals drawn from 18 manifestos for

the 2006, 2013, 2018, and 2022 elections, comprising a total of 142 pages of text (see [Appendix Table 2](#)). For each election year, one manifesto from a non-populist party was included as a benchmark. For this purpose, the “Partito Democratico” (PD), Italy’s most prominent left-leaning party, was selected for each year apart from 2006, as the party had not been created yet. For that election, the manifesto for the left-wing alliance “L’Unione” was selected.

The rationale behind the use of manifesto data is that, being the primary means through which parties communicate their political agenda to the electorate (Harmel, 2018), manifestos have been used in the literature to capture parties’ policy preferences and ideological positioning, as notoriously done by the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2025). Further, they express parties’ positions before they are modified by institutional or coalition constraints, as often occurs once parties are in government (Caiani and Graziano, 2022). This makes their analysis an essential first step in the study conducted by this thesis. One limitation of manifesto data is, however, that the length, format, and topics of the policy proposals vary across manifestos. However, this is not a major concern for the present analysis, as the focus of this thesis is not on the salience of populism in party manifestos but rather on the presence of a distinctly populist character already at the policy proposals stage. Accordingly, the results of the coding process will be interpreted as averages or, if fitting, as percentages, which are by nature expressed relative to the total proposals in each manifesto and, thus, directly comparable across manifestos.

The above-described analysis was executed via an original coding scheme based on [Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s \(2020\) ideal type of populist policy-making \(Table 1\)](#). This process involved the operationalisation of the content and discourse components of the type into corresponding variables, with the former reflecting the *content* of populism and the latter its *form*, in line with what is presented in [Chapter 1](#). The procedural component, which refers to the way in which policy proposals are implemented, was omitted from this coding scheme as it is hardly present at the policy proposal stage (see [Appendix](#) for details). The variables were coded as binary (0 for no and 1 for yes), since, as previously mentioned, this analysis focuses on the presence rather than the salience of populist characters in policy proposals. Further, this reduces the degree of subjectivity this analysis naturally suffers from, since it is part of an MA thesis project, which did not allow the involvement of multiple coders nor the calculation of a robust statistical measure to assess inter-coder reliability, such as Krippendorff’s alpha. To mitigate this limitation and ensure transparency, the [Appendix](#) details the operationalisation of the ideal type into the coding scheme along with examples of cases coded positively for each variable. The full coding results (including excerpts justifying these decisions) can be found at this [link](#).

Regarding the interpretation of the results, a positive coding of a single variable does not automatically classify a social policy proposal as populist. For example, a policy proposal may be radical without necessarily being populist. At the same time, a proposal that is not coded positively across all variables may still be considered populist. Building on this logic, the results of the coding process were utilised to obtain average values for the *form*, *content*, and *overall populist character* of a party’s social policy proposals for a given election year. The average value for the *content* was computed as the arithmetic mean of the average values of the “majoritarian”, “radical”, and

“heterodox” variables in a given year. Similarly, that of *form* was computed as the arithmetic mean of the average values of the “direct”, “emotional”, “Manichean”, and “crisis” variables. Finally, the overall populist character of a party’s social policy proposals in a given year was calculated as the mean of these two averages. An example of how this was executed is also provided [Appendix Figures 1, 2, and 3](#).

Table 1 Coding scheme to analyse the overall populist character of parties’ policy proposals (Author’s adaptation of Bartha, Boda, and Szikra, 2020)

Result (mean of levels of analysis)	Levels of analysis (mean of base variables)	Base variables	Coding criteria (for each proposal)
Overall level of populism	Overall Content	Heterodox	Does it explicitly challenge mainstream policy and sectoral expertise?
		Ideologically thin	Does it combine policy tools and aims from different ideologies? Does it conflict with the party’s core ideology as defined by expert surveys (i.e., CHES, Manifesto Project)?
		Majoritarian	Does it define the “people” as the target population of the policy on majoritarian grounds (i.e., using criteria such as citizenship, belonging, origins, health, family, or socio-economic status to define deservingness)?
		Radical	Does it represent a radical shift from present policies? (e.g., abolishing a previous policy, radically changing established policy paradigms)
	Overall Form	Crisis	Is it crisis-performing (i.e. it appeals to or communicates a sense of crisis in the proposal)?
		Emotional	Does it use emotionally loaded language evoking feelings like rage, anxiety, fear, resentment, ressentiment or concepts like injustice, inefficiency, and dignity)?
		Manichean	Does it use demonising or antagonising language highlighting the moral superiority of a group compared to others (e.g., highlights purity and/or neglect)?

b. Application to the study of social policy reforms

Next, the analysis of implemented populist policies focuses on two salient examples of Italian social policy reforms adopted by different populist governments: the “Reddito di Cittadinanza”, passed by the Conte I government in 2019 (M5S-Lega coalition), and the “Assegno di Inclusione” and associated “Supporto per la Formazione Lavoro e il Lavoro”, passed by the Meloni government in 2023 (FdI-Lega-FI coalition). These reforms were selected both due to their relevance in the history of Italian populist policy and because their corresponding policy proposals were all rated as having a high overall populist character, which makes them particularly suitable cases for analysing the translation from populist proposals to populist policy-making. Further, the fact that these policies were enacted by different governments allows us to trace the evolution of the populist character of policy reforms in Italy over time.

Once again, these policies were analysed using [Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s \(2020\) ideal type of populist policy-making](#) as a guide. In this case, however, the framework required no adaptation, since it was originally developed for the analysis of policy reforms. Accordingly, the framework was applied as done by its original authors in section 5 of their study (p. 75) and also includes elements from the procedural component. In the interest of space, the framework is not restated here, as a detailed discussion can instead be found in [Section 1c of Chapter 1](#) of this thesis.

4. Results and Interpretations

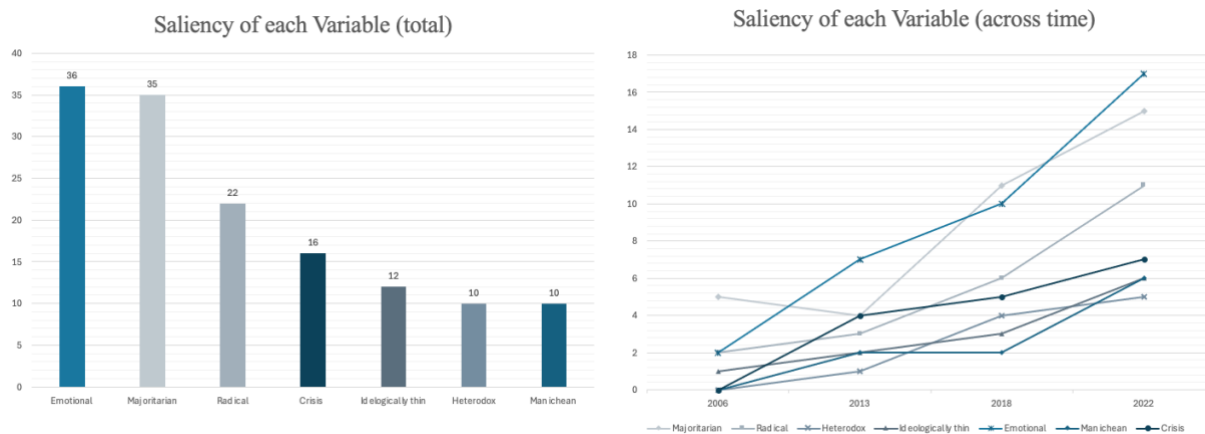
1. Results from the Study of Policy Proposals

This section presents and interprets the results of the coding process presented in [Chapter 3](#) and detailed in the [Appendix](#). The contribution of these results to the literature is twofold. First, and most importantly, they assess whether the core characteristics of populist governance and policy are already present at the policy proposal stage, a question that remains largely unexplored in the literature on populist policy (Caiani and Graziano, 2022). This partially answers the first research question of this thesis (RQ1) – investigating whether [Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s \(2020\) ideal populist policy-making type](#) is generalisable beyond implemented policies and to other geographical contexts – finding that, with minor adjustments, such as removing the procedural component, it remains broadly applicable across both dimensions. Second, they provide insights into the evolution of the populist character of the social policy proposal of leading Italian parties throughout the last decade (i.e., 2013-2022), findings that it has increased over time ([Figure 7](#)). Accordingly, they also provide an initial answer to the second research question of this study (RQ2), which inquires into how populist policy-making manifests in the Italian context. Overall, the levels of populism in the analysed proposals increased across years, with populist parties exhibiting higher levels than the benchmarks, particularly in *content*-related elements.

a. Main trends in the populism of Italy’s post-2010 social policy proposals

In relation to the generalisability of Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020) ideal type, all variables included in the coding produced observations across the entire sample, including the one non-populist party per year, thereby confirming their empirical relevance ([Figure 6](#)). The most present variable was “emotional” (*form*), followed by “majoritarian” (*content*) and “radical” (*content*). In terms of trends, all variables display an overall increase from 2006 to 2022. Specifically, “emotional” rose substantially in 2013, in coincidence with the Eurozone crisis. Similarly, “Majoritarian” rose sharply in 2018, coinciding with the aftermath of the 2015 migrant crisis and with the election that led to the Lega-M5S populist government (Conte I). Both variables continued to rise in 2022, along with “radical” in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis during which challengers of the incumbent Conte I and Draghi governments (most notably, FdI) strongly criticised their opponents for their technocratic policy approach and alleged “neglect” of the “people” (Bottura, 2023). Taken together, these findings indicate that, despite the prominence of emotional rhetoric, the substantive content of populist policy was more relevant than its formal features across the analysed sample.

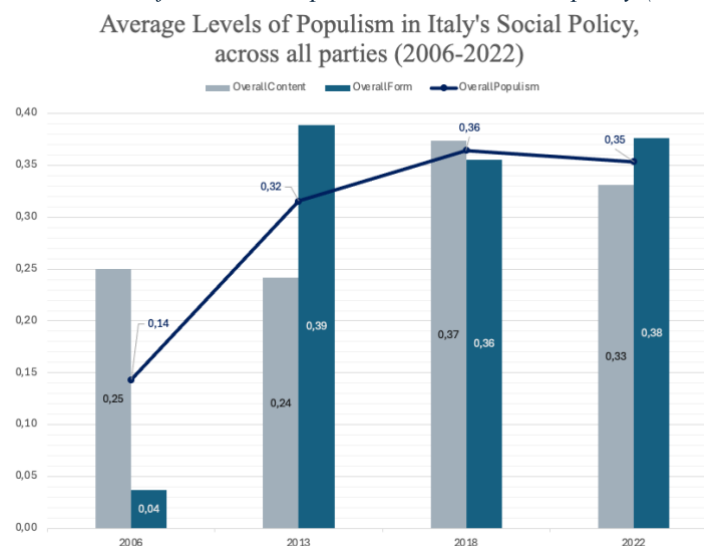
Figure 6 Mean populism, content, and form levels based on coded social policy proposals (N = 62; 2006-2022)



Note: Grey elements connote the *content* of populism and blue elements its *form*

In relation to how populist policy-making manifests in Italian policy proposals, the average level of populism – calculated as the mean of the overall level of populism scores for all parties in each year – increased slightly between 2013 and 2022 (Figure 7). Importantly, there is a marked increase between the benchmark election before the Great Recession (i.e., 2006) and the elections after such crisis (i.e., 2013, 2018, 2022), with the value nearly doubling. Regarding the average levels of *content*⁹ and *form*¹⁰ of populism across parties – computed using the same procedure – the content-related elements were, on average, clearly present already since 2006 and became most prominent in 2018 and 2022. Such a pattern is consistent with increases across all content variables in that period, particularly of the “majoritarian” and “radical” variables, as illustrated above (Figure 6).

Figure 7 Mean populism, content, and form levels in post-2010 Italian social policy (N = 62; 2006-2022).



⁹ As a reminder, the *content* of populism refers to its more ideological elements captured by the “heterodox”, “ideologically thin”, “majoritarian” and “radical” variables.

¹⁰ As a reminder, the *form* of populism refers to its discursive and stylistic elements – i.e. the manner in which populist substance is framed in practice – captured here by the “crisis”, “emotional”, and “Manichean” variables.

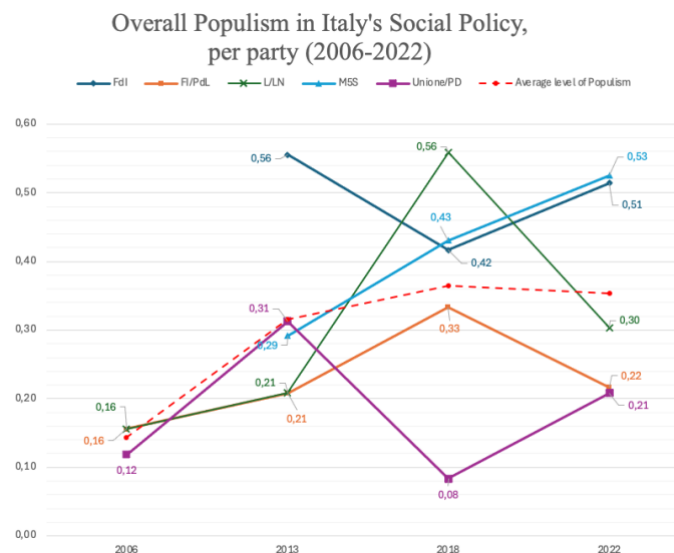
By contrast, form-related elements emerged starkly in 2013 and remained consistently high until 2022. Once again, this trend aligns with the peak in emotional rhetoric and with the rise in crisis framing noted above (Figure 6). Notably, 2022 also shows increases in Manichean rhetoric, likely linked to strong antagonistic discourse against previous elites and “non-deserving” groups, which, as mentioned above, rose during that time (Bottura, 2023).

When disaggregating these results by party, no uniform trends emerge for the overall level of populism in parties’ social policy proposals (Figure 8). Nonetheless, several noteworthy party-specific trajectories can be identified (see Appendix for [party-specific infographics](#)).

b. Party-specific findings: overall levels of populism in policy proposals

As illustrated above (Figure 7), the overall levels of populism in Italy’s social policy have been mostly stable in the analysed decade (2013-2022) but markedly higher than our benchmark year (2006). Behind this stability, however, lies substantial party variation, as evident in Figure 8. Most frequently, the parties with the highest degree of populism were FdI or M5S. One exception to this was 2018, the year in which Lega had the highest level of populism, reflecting a sharp and substantial increase compared to 2013. Such an increase may be justified by the fact that, before 2018, the party ran within electoral lists headed by Berlusconi (the Casa della Libertà in 2006 and the PdL in 2013), adopting a communal manifesto with associated parties that likely dampened both its populist and nativist stances. Additionally, 2018 was the first election after the 2015 migrant crisis, which may have caused Lega, a clearly ethno-nationalist party, to strengthen its populist stances. Finally, in line with expert surveys and the literature presented in Chapter 3, which identifies FI as a borderline case of populism, the party displayed moderate levels of populism compared to its fellow populist actors.

Figure 8 Overall levels of populism in Italian social policy disaggregated per party (N = 62; 2006-2022).



Note: the values for our non-populist benchmark (the “Unione/PD”) were considered together as L’Unione (2004-2008) was a broad centre-left coalition whose internal fragmentation drove its key parties to found the PD (2007) a few months before the coalition itself formally collapsed.

Overall, populist parties exhibited higher average levels of populism than our benchmarks, further confirming that populists have a distinctive approach to policy compared to non-populist parties, as noted in previous studies (Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 2020; Panizza et al., 2025) and hypothesised in H1 of this thesis. The gap between populist and non-populist parties was narrowest in the benchmark election (2006) and widest in 2018. 2013 was a notable exception to this trend, as PD, our non-populist benchmark, emerged as the second-highest. This result may reflect the electoral competition faced by PD in that year, as the party had to compete against various populist parties, including the well-established right-wing alliance of the PdL and Lega, and the newly created FdI (right-wing) and M5S (non-affiliated, at the time). This may have driven the party to mirror its opponents' *form*, as evidenced by the fact that its populist *content* was rather low in 2013 (Figure 9).

Another notable outcome for PD is that of 2022, the year in which the party's overall level of populism nearly matched that of FI. This result, however, is less surprising than that of 2013 since FI was already a borderline case of populism and both parties are quite distant from populist actors in that year (i.e., M5S and FdI primarily, but also Lega) (Figure 8). Similar drivers to 2013 may have operated in 2022, as the elections followed the fall of the technocratic Draghi government – at the hands of Lega, FI, and M5S – and the party's main competition was Meloni's FdI. Indeed, the levels of emotional and crisis-performing rhetoric in FdI and PD's social policy proposals were rather close. Once again, this could have been a way for PD to compensate for FdI's Manichean rhetoric, which, being one of the most essentially populist variables in our analysis, was completely absent in PD's inclusionary mainstream rhetoric¹¹.

The results for non-populist benchmarks highlight a key trend: at the proposal stage, populist parties express populism through both their *content* and *form*, while non-populist parties replicate only populist *form* without its *content*. This hints at the fact that non-populist parties may adopt discursive populist elements to remain relevant in electoral debates – as populists' more vivid style can be more emotionally appealing to the electorate (Wirz, 2018) – while still maintaining a rather mainstream content.

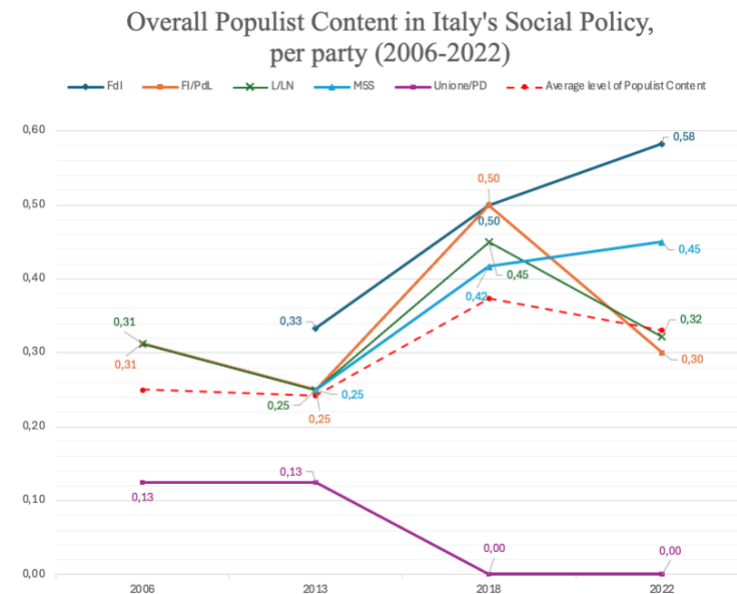
c. Content as a key driver of populism in policy proposals

Given its role as the key distinguishing factor between populist and non-populist parties, this section examines the evolution of populist *content* in the post-2010 social policy proposals in greater depth. On average, populist *content* was already clearly present in 2006, our benchmark year. Compared to this baseline, this average remained stable in 2013, peaked in 2018, and declined slightly by 2022 (Figure 9). Turning to the party-level comparison, populist parties consistently show higher levels of populist content in their social protection proposals than non-populist benchmarks. In fact, benchmark parties had no populist *content* in 2018 and 2022, and substantially lower levels in 2006 and 2013 (likely due to electoral competition, as noted above). By contrast, our populist cases (FdI, FI, Lega, M5S) display mid-to-high levels across the period

¹¹ Shares of proposals coded positively: “Emotional”, 83% (FdI) and 75% (PD); “Crisis”, 41% (FdI) and 37% (PD); “Manichean”, 25% (FdI) and 0% (PD). Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

(Figure 9). Accordingly, as mentioned above and given the overall level of populism for our benchmark case (PD) in 2013 (Figure 8), a key distinction between the *form* and *content* of populism in policy proposals is that non-populist parties may adopt populist *form* equally or even more than populist parties, possibly due to competition reasons, but they are not likely to adopt populist *content* in their proposals. This is confirmed when populist form is studied independently (as done in the Appendix) and may be a strategy to remain competitive whilst not changing the core policy substance of mainstream parties, as highlighted above.

Figure 9 Overall levels of populist content in Italian social policy disaggregated per party (N = 62; 2006-2022).



Note: the values for our non-populist benchmark (the Unione-PD) were considered together as L'Unione (see Figure 8).

Moving to party-specific trends, parties can be coupled according to their trajectories. First, FI and Lega had overlapping trends in 2006 and 2013, as the two parties were in coalition and used the same manifestos, which were both rather majoritarian¹². Following, both reached their respective peaks in 2018, with FI even surpassing Lega, and decreased back to similar levels in 2022. This result is particularly surprising since these elections followed the migrant crisis, which one could expect would trigger the nativist stances of Lega rather than the anti-elitist ones of FI. Even more surprisingly, FI displayed no “heterodox” proposals at all – signalling an absence of the party’s characteristic anti-elitism from its social policy proposals – while having a higher share of “majoritarian” ones than Lega¹³.

¹² The most present variable was “majoritarian” (with 62% of proposals being coded positively), followed by “radical” and “ideologically-thin” (with 25% of proposals being coded positively for both); no “heterodox” proposals were found. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

¹³ Not only did FI have a higher percentage of proposals that were coded as majoritarian across the 2018 and 2022 elections than Lega (85% vs 66%, respectively), but it also had no “heterodox” proposals at all (for which Lega had 25% of proposals that were coded positively). Overall, FI coded positively across fewer variables than Lega, but at consistently higher rates: while 57% of FI’s proposals were coded as radical compared to 25% of Lega’s, FI had no proposals coded for ideological thinness, compared to 33% for Lega. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

A plausible explanation for FI's strong populist content may be that the political environment of the 2018 election – the first since the fall of Berlusconi's fourth government (in 2011) and the dissolution of the PdL (in November 2013) – may have prompted the party to heighten its majoritarian populist stances to remain appealing to its voters. Interestingly, the type of majoritarianism used by the two parties in their manifestos is very similar, with both focusing on benefits for families, people with disabilities, and the elderly. Compared to FI, however, Lega also targets workers in its proposals, doing so with a rather workfarist tone, as exemplified by the following excerpt: *"If the former worker refuses the new job offered, even if temporary and relevant to their professional profile, they will forfeit their [unemployment] benefit"* (Lega, 2018, p.12). Finally, and rather unexpectedly, Lega's majoritarianism did not present any chauvinism; however, this does not entail that the party displayed no nativism in reaction to the Migrant crisis but rather that it did so in other policy areas, such as migration policy or international relations (Lega, 2018).

Second, M5S and FdI both increase throughout time, reaching their peak in 2022. Notably, FdI's levels of populist content were above those of M5S at all times, resulting in a consistent gap between the two parties, which slightly increased in 2022. A plausible explanation for this is that, whilst both parties were founded on the grounds of deeply anti-elitist sentiments, their proposed solutions to these sentiments diverged.

Indeed, FdI proposed a return to the values of Italy's post-fascist right, which had supposedly been betrayed by Berlusconi's PdL and, particularly, by its support for the technocratic Monti government (Bottura, 2023; Donà, 2022; Puleo and Piccolino, 2022). Accordingly, the party's roots lie in a deeply politicised anti-elitism, directed primarily at left-wing and technocratic governments, whose policy stances are fundamentally opposed to the party's political values. Such roots have remained key to FdI's policy proposals, as exemplified by this excerpt of FdI's 2022 manifesto: *"Stop to the automatic adjustment of retirement age to life expectancy. Renewal of the 'Opzione donna' measure"*¹⁴ (p.18). This translated into a higher percentage of proposals coded positively as majoritarian, radical and ideologically thin for FdI than for M5S¹⁵, which was born as an apolitical and essentially anti-ideological party.

By contrast, the M5S's anti-elitism was broadly directed against the "casta" (the political, economic and cultural elite) as the "enemy" of the people because they were perceived as distant and unaccountable to ordinary citizens (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018; Ivaldi et al., 2019). In fact, the M5S has deemed experts to be less political, more capable and, thus, more efficient than politicians at tackling societal problems. Importantly, however, especially in its earlier years under Grillo's leadership, the movement's understanding of "capability" and "expertise" remained deeply anti-systemic and anti-elitist as best testified by Grillo's 2013 claim that a *"housewife with*

¹⁴ The rejection of automatic pension age indexation – introduced by the Monti-Fornero reform – frames expert-driven technocratic policy as fundamentally at odds with the people's interests. "Opzione donna" is an early retirement scheme for women, introduced in 2004 but curtailed by the Fornero reform, whose renewal FdI presents as a restoration of workers' rights against technocratic pension reforms.

¹⁵ Shares of proposals coded positively: "majoritarian", 75% (FdI) and 22% (M5S), "radical" 58% (FdI) and 33% (M5S), ideologically thin 42% (FdI) and 0% (M5S). Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

three kids” would be more suited to be minister of finance than an “*economics professor*” (as Monti or Letta, the previous and present prime ministers at the time) (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018). Consequently, a higher percentage of M5S proposals were coded as “heterodox” – the variable accounting for positions against established policy knowledge, including that of mainstream (or elite) experts – compared to FdI proposals¹⁶. Such a stance is also evident in earlier party manifestos (especially that of 2013), which were rather short, direct, and largely composed of bullet-point proposals rather than expansive ideological statements; a format that has since evolved under Conte’s leadership, alongside the party’s repositioning toward the centre-left.

d. Overview of findings

In sum, populism was present in the post-2010 social protection proposals of Italian parties (specifically, in the 2006, 2013, 2018 and 2022 elections). As expected (H3), the overall levels of populism were, on average, lower in 2006 (the benchmark election) than in subsequent elections, which occurred amid several crises that significantly affected Italy (i.e., 2013 followed the Eurozone crisis, 2018 the Migrant crisis, and 2022 the Covid-19 crisis). Further, both populist *content* and *form* were identified (Figure 6), in line with the primary hypothesis of this thesis (H1). In particular, populist parties exhibited comparatively mid-to-high levels of both populist *form* and *content* (with some party variance), whereas our non-populist case exhibited various levels of populist *form* and low (2006 and 2013) to no populist *content* (in 2018 and 2022) (Figure 9 and Appendix Figure 4). Accordingly, though “emotional” (*form*) was the variable coded positively the highest number of times (Figure 6), the *content* of populism was the most defining distinction between populist and non-populist parties when it comes to policy proposals. Finally, H2, hypothesising that “majoritarian” would have been the most prevalent *content*-related variable and “emotional” and “Manichean” would have been the most prevalent *formal* variables, was mostly proven right; as the most frequently coded variables were indeed “emotional” and “majoritarian”, but “Manichean” was the least positively coded.

Moving to party-specific trends (Figure 8), M5S and FdI were most likely to be the parties with the highest levels of overall populism across our whole sample; FI displayed comparatively mid-to-low levels of populism across the whole sample (except for its populist content in 2018); and Lega had the most volatile trajectory with lower values at first – likely due to it using the same manifesto as FI in 2006 and 2013) – and peaks in 2018. Finally, L’Unione (our benchmark case for 2006) displayed low levels of populism, though not too far from Berlusconi’s Casa Della Libertà’s (here coded as FI/PdL and Lega) and PD (our benchmark for subsequent elections) provided some very interesting results, with it having the second most populist social protection proposals in 2013 and having similar scores in the *form* of their proposals to FdI in 2022. These results are likely due to reasons of electoral competition.

With methodological limitations in mind (see Chapter 3), the current findings provide empirical evidence that populism – particularly in its “emotional”, “majoritarian” and “radical”

¹⁶ Share of proposals coded positively: “heterodox”, 44% (M5S) and 25% (FdI). Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

elements – is already present in the policy proposals of parties and, so, that it is not just a product of their governance. Thus, with minor adaptations, Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s (2020) ideal type is suitable for the analysis of policy proposals in different contexts and for populist parties spanning the entire ideological spectrum. Further, the results highlight that crises trigger increases the average levels of populism, particularly for its *form*.

2. Results from the Study of Policy Reforms

This section builds on the preceding analysis by studying the populist character of two major social policy reforms in Italy, namely the “Reddito di Cittadinanza” (Citizenship income, henceforth RdC) (M5S-Lega) and its replacements, the “Assegno di Inclusione” (Check for inclusion, henceforth AdI) and “Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro” (Support for training and work, henceforth SFL) (FdI-Lega-FI). These reforms are particularly fitting cases for the study of populist social policy, as both were implemented by entirely populist governments; with the RdC being implemented by a coalition of inclusionary (M5S) and exclusionary (Lega) populist parties and the AdI and SFL a coalition of broadly exclusionary populist parties (FdI, Lega, FI).

Accordingly, this section provides further insights for the first two questions addressed in this study (RQ1 and RQ2), further confirming that: 1. The characteristics of populist policy-making – as identified by Bartha, Boda, and Szikra’s ideal type (2020) – are generalisable to other contexts and beyond the radical-right; 2. Most of these characteristics are present, at least to some extent, in the post-2010 social policy reforms of populist actors in Italy (Table 2).

Table 2 Characteristics of populist policy-making present in Italian post-2010 social policy reforms

Policy Content	Ideologically multifaceted and diverse	+
	Heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms	++
	Reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities	++
	Radical and paradigmatic policy reforms	+
Policy process	Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players	++
	Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties, and civil society actors	++
	Direct communication with the electorate	-/+
Policy discourse	Extensive use of discursive governance	+
	Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing	++
	Dominance of Manichean discourses	++

Note: Follows Table 3 in Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020, p. 78), which assesses the conformity of post-2010 Hungarian social policy with their ideal type. High conformity (++) was coded if both reforms clearly displayed the characteristic; moderate conformity (+) if only one did, or both displayed it partially; non-conformity (-) if both displayed opposite characteristics; and inconclusive (+/-) if neither reform displayed it. Reform-specific findings are reported in Table 3.

a. Italy's anti-poverty strategies: from proposals to reforms

The RdC has been a flagship proposal of the M5S since 2013, with it being central to Grillo's electoral rallies (e.g., 2012, 2013a) – particularly during his “Tsunami Tour” (2013b, 2013d, 2013e) – and to the Movement's social media outputs (e.g., Scarpa, 2013)¹⁷. Already at this stage, the proposal had a distinct populist character, as the following excerpts illustrate (see [Appendix](#) for more):

- “We will do a citizenship income for anyone, anyone! As a right, as a right to existence. From when you are born to when you are dead, you have an income. Then if you want to work, you work, and you add it to it. If you don't want to work, you don't work.” (2013f);
- “I want to put a citizenship subsidy, a citizenship salary, for f*ck sakes. [...] We have 100,000 people who cost us 13 billion euros that get a pension that goes from 10,000 euros a month to 90,000 euros a month, and I want to tell them, ‘Sir, this is an emergency, for f*ck sakes!’ [...]” (2013b).

Beyond Grillo's overall strongly populist rally language – clearly representative of Ostiguy's “flaunting of the low” (2017, p. 78), owing to its emotional and crisis-exploiting, anti-elitist, and Manichean elements – the 2013 proposal itself displayed several populist elements. Namely, the content of the proposal was radical and majoritarian, though not in an explicitly exclusionary manner, and its form was emotional, crisis-performing and Manichean. These elements persisted once the proposal made it to parliament for the first time, as D.D.L (Senate Bill) 1148 of 2013 (which was not approved) (Baldini et al., 2019; Senato della Repubblica, 2013). Similar characteristics were also present in the subsequent election. The proposal for the RdC¹⁸ present in the 2018 manifesto was coded as “majoritarian” and “emotional” (M5S, 2018). Notably, in 2013, the proposal was also charged with a high degree of crisis-performance, Manicheanism and some radical elements, which were not present in 2018. However, this is likely due to the nature of the 2018 manifesto, which consisted mostly of rather short bullet points compared to the detailed D.D.L. 1148/2013 and lively Grillo speeches.

Following the 2018 government contract between the M5S and the Lega (Di Maio and Salvini, 2018), the RdC was finally enacted through Decree-Law n. 4 of 28 January 2019, which was converted into law n. 26 of 28 March 2019 (Parlamento Italiano, 2019; Presidenza della Repubblica, 2019). The RdC served as the main anti-poverty measure in the country – especially during the Covid-19 pandemic – until December 2023, when the Meloni government replaced it with two separate instruments, the AdI and the SFL, through Decree-Law n.48 of 4 May 2023, which was converted into law n. 85 of 3 July 2023 (Baldini et al., 2019; Baldini and Toso, 2024;

¹⁷ It should be noted that the proposal was not part of the only available comprehensive version of the 2013 M5S manifesto (M5S, 2013), as the party mostly relied on rallies and blog posts for their electoral campaign, most of which are no longer available (e.g., <https://beppegrillo.it/iniziativa/movimentocinqustelle/Programma-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf>).

¹⁸ “*Reddito di Cittadinanza: let's put people back to work. Over 2 billion euros for the form of Employment centre: let us make the offer and demand of employment actually meet and guarantee continuous professional learning to those who lose their job. With flex security, enterprises are more competitive, and people come out of poverty conditions*” (M5S, p. 1).

Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Lufrano, 2025). FdI's aversion to the RdC was already clear during the 2022 elections, with the party's proposal for the abolition of the RdC in its manifesto¹⁹ being coded positively for "majoritarian", "radical", "Manichean" and "emotional".

To contextualise the qualitative analysis that follows, the key characteristics of the two reforms – alongside those of their predecessor, the Reddito di Inclusione (ReI) – are reported in [Appendix Table 4](#). The analysis was informed by the qualitative content analysis²⁰ of the relevant legislative texts based on Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type, and then complemented by relevant literature and politicians' speeches.

b. Populist content in the RdC, AdI and SFL

i. Majoritarian selection criteria

Majoritarianism was more prevalent in the AdI and SFL (c.l. 85/2023) than in the RdC (c.l. 26/2019)²¹. Indeed, in its original ideation, the RdC set out to support all those in poverty or deprivation as clearly stated in D.D.L. 1148/2013: *"No State, whose purpose is to take care of its citizens, should leave anyone behind: therefore, in a first phase, it must place at the centre of its political compass a guaranteed minimum income for anyone living below the relative poverty threshold [...] the ideal future and desirable level coincides with the implementation of a universal, individual and unconditional citizenship income, that is, one destined for all adult residents regardless of income and assets, not conditional on the occurrence of particular circumstances and not subordinated to the acceptance of any conditions"* (p.7). Accordingly, though the party was still a-political at the time ([Figure 3](#)), the policy reflects a quite left-wing populist approach to social policy, with "the people" constructed in inclusionary terms as all those that were "forgotten" by the elites.

Despite this original intent, the reform implemented in 2019 was rather reminiscent of authoritarian and exclusionary populist social policy, given the inclusion of several eligibility criteria and bureaucratic burdens reserved for foreigners (see [Appendix Table 4](#)) (Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024, p. 457; Lufrano, 2025; Marocco and Spattini, 2019; Stamati, 2020).

Firstly, in 2019, access to the RdC became strictly means-tested and the value of the benefit subject to an ad-hoc equivalence scale (article 2.4) (see [Appendix Table 5](#)). In practice, this excluded those who were near the poverty line but did not meet all the criteria and penalised families with more members, minors, and disabled individuals. Secondly, workfarist reciprocity was central, with article 1 defining the RdC as *"a fundamental active labour market policy measure guaranteeing the right to work, and combating poverty, inequality and social exclusion"*. Accordingly, it strengthened and formalised the conditionality of *"immediate availability to work"*

¹⁹ "9. For a real welfare state that forgets no one [...] Abolish the Citizen's Income to introduce a new tool that protects those without income, who are effectively fragile and unable to work or difficult to employ: disabled people, those over 60, and families with dependent minors. For those who are able to work, training courses and the enhancement of active labour policies. Raising minimum and social pensions." (FdI, 2022, proposal 9, p.17).

²⁰ The coding can be found [here](#).

²¹ With 9 (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12 and 13) versus 3 (i.e., 2, 4 and 7) out of 13 articles displaying some radical or paradigmatic characteristics, respectively. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

and of participation in projects of “*use to the community*” (already present in article 9, D.D.L. 1148/2013) for the reception of the benefit, effectively shifting the nature of the RdC from a universal welfare benefit to a conditional workfarist one.²²

The RdC’s original goal of universality was further hindered by Lega’s chauvinist contributions (Landini, 2021; Stamati, 2020). Specifically, in addition to the requirement of having either a short- or a long-term residence permit, Lega pushed for the inclusion of a minimum 10-year residence requirement for all recipients of the RdC (article 2.1). This was considerably stricter than comparable European standards and, effectively, represented an obstacle mostly for immigrants. Such a requirement conferred a chauvinistic character to the reform as well as excluded long-term homeless individuals from eligibility for the benefit (Landini, 2021; Modica Scala, 2019; Nugnes, 2022), thereby rendering RdC even more majoritarian. Lega’s nativist influence was even stronger once decree-law 4/2019 was converted into legislation, as the party added the following identity-based bureaucratic burden to article 2: “*Citizens of non-European Union member states [except for a few special cases, like refugees] must produce the appropriate certification issued by the competent authority of the foreign state, translated into Italian and legalised by the Italian consular authority [...]*” (section 1-bis).

By contrast, the AdI was directly conceived as a fundamentally authoritarian and majoritarian reform, with one of its primary objectives being to restrict access only to the “*fascie deboli*” (lit. “weak sectors”) (article 1.1). Such an objective was achieved through the introduction of additional eligibility criteria, a new equivalence scale (see [Appendix Table 5](#)), and case-specific exemptions (e.g., oncological pathologies and victims of domestic violence); all of which mainly relied on demographic factors²³. This nearly halved the beneficiary pool and conferred a distinctly familialist logic to the reform (Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023; Tripodina, 2023; Szikra and Autischer, 2025). Accordingly, for the AdI, deservingness relies on need and control, as illustrated by article 2: “*The Inclusion Allowance is granted [...] to guarantee the inclusion needs of members of households with disabilities [...] minor members or members aged at least sixty years, or members in a condition of disadvantage who are enrolled in care and assistance programs [...] certified by the public administration*”.

All those excluded from these categories – i.e., able-bodied individuals of employable age (18-59) who do not belong to an AdI-eligible family – may only apply to the SFL, a separate, and quite limited, training allowance (originally €350 a month for a maximum of 12 months) (article 12). Eligibility for the SFL is also conditional on need, as individuals need to have an ISEE²⁴ below €6,000 (stricter than for the AdI) and not be recipients of any other public social assistance scheme (article 12.2; Baldini and Busilacchi, 2023; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023).

²² Sources supporting the arguments in this paragraph: Baldini et al. (2019); Modica Scala (2022); Nugnes (2022); Sacchi et al., 2023; Saraceno (2024).

²³ For instance, the AdI also lowered the income threshold for renters from €9,360 to €6,000, capping primary residence value at €150,000, and abolishing the €150 monthly mortgage supplement introduced by the RdC.

²⁴ The Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalent (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator) is an indicator of household economic capacity combining household income, wealth, and composition calculated annually.

If part of an AdI-eligible family, these individuals are, instead, compelled to enrol in a “Personalised Plan of Social and Labour Inclusion” (article 6).

Finally, although Lega was also involved in this reform as a coalition partner of FdI, which is also highly nativist, the AdI appears to be less chauvinist than the RdC, at least on paper, as the residency requirements to obtain the benefit were reduced to five years (article 2.2a). However, rather than reflecting a genuine ideological shift of Lega and FdI, this may be attributable to the harsh criticisms that the 10-year requirement of the RdC had received (Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024), as well as to the need to comply with EU and constitutional regulations which also aligned with Meloni’s increasingly cooperative stance towards the EU ever since the 2022 elections (Bottura, 2023). Nevertheless, some chauvinism remained, as only non-EU citizens with long-term residency status are now eligible.

ii. Radical and paradigmatic substance

Regarding the radical and paradigmatic nature of the analysed reforms, the RdC’s legislative texts (c.l. 26/2019) were more paradigmatic than the AdI and SFL (c.l. 85/2023)²⁵. In fact, the universal eligibility, substantial generosity, and labour market conditionality initially planned for the RdC (Articles 1.2 and 3 of D.D.L 1148/2013²⁶) marked a first rupture with Italy’s traditionally conservative and familialist welfare system. Accordingly, much of the literature considers the RdC as “a historical turning point” and “paradigm shift” in Italy’s social policy (Baldini et al., 2019; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023; Modica Scala, 2022; Nugnes, 2022). Nevertheless, such a paradigm shift was not fully enacted once the reform was implemented in 2019.

Firstly, as seen above, the RdC’s main paradigmatic characteristic, its universal eligibility, was overridden by the introduction of various eligibility criteria in 2019. Additionally, since January 2018, Italy had already established a national social support system – the Reddito di Inclusione (ReI) – which in its 7th month had gained universal coverage. Hence, the implementation of the RdC was, arguably, less paradigmatic than originally intended (Modica Scala, 2022; Nugnes, 2022; Sacchi et al., 2023). Secondly, in relation to the RdC’s labour market conditionality, while the relevance of this component and the bureaucratic path²⁷ set out for its implementation were a novelty to Italy’s social protection schemes, the mandatory subscription to inclusion/labour pacts as an “activation” of the benefit was not, as it had already been introduced in the 2012 “Sostegno

²⁵ With 5 (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, and 8) versus 2 (i.e., 4 and 13) out of 13 articles displaying some radical or paradigmatic characteristics, respectively. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>.

²⁶ “The citizenship income is aimed [...] providing economic support and social inclusion for all individuals at risk of marginalisation in society and in the labour market” and “The citizenship income guarantees the beneficiary [...] of a net annual income calculated according to the European Union’s official monetary poverty indicator, equal to 6/10 of the equivalent median household income, quantified for the year 2014 at €9,360 annually and €780 monthly”.

²⁷ The reception of the RdC already counted as an automatic declaration for one’s availability to work and participation in “Projects of Collective Utility” (PUC). The RdC also shifted the responsibility of the Labour and Inclusion pacts from of municipal social services (unless strictly necessary) to Employment Centres (“Centri per l’Impiego”) and created apposite digital platforms and public roles for beneficiary reintegration (the “navigators”) (articles 4.4, 6.1, 9.3, 12.3). Finally, it strengthened controls and tightened the sanction rules (e.g., criminal penalties were added for false declarations) (art 7) and institutionalised substantial financial resources for the reform (article 12) (Baldini et al., 2019; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Giubboni, 2019; Nugnes, 2022).

per l’Inclusione Attiva” (Support for Active Inclusion, SIA)²⁸. While these were a first step toward the active labour market component of the RdC, they primarily served as a commitment to re-enter the labour market, as neither included an obligation to accept any job. Such an obligation was introduced by the REI in 2018, however, and only rendered more strict by the RdC in 2019²⁹ (Giubboni, 2019; Nugnes, 2022).

Similarly, the AdI can be considered radical and paradigmatic when compared to the RdC, but less so when compared to the broader history of Italy’s social policies. The AdI was explicitly ideated to “*abolish the Reddito di Cittadinanza to introduce a new instrument protecting individuals without income, who are genuinely vulnerable and unable to work, or hard to employ*” (FdI, 2022, p. 17) and, thus, effectively re-establish the conservative welfare paradigms that had characterised Italy’s social inclusion programmes until the ReI and RdC (i.e., conditional on demographic characteristics and strongly means-tested).

The most radical component of the AdI, compared to the RdC and the ReI, is its separation of the active labour market and social assistance components, which was achieved through the creation of the SFL (article 12). Still, though the SFL institutionalised a stricter workfarist and reciprocal logic than previous reforms, it also reverted to a management model based primarily on social workers, which was similar to the ReI and precedent social support schemes (Baldini and Busilacchi, 2023; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023; Saraceno, 2024). Finally, in line with the radical approach of the RdC, the AdI also tightened the obligation for recipients to accept a “congruent” job offer³⁰, with, however, exceptions for households with minors reflecting the policy’s familialist orientation compared to the RdC and its ties to the conservative welfare model it sought to restore (Sacchi et al., 2023).

iii. Other components: ideological thinness and policy heterodoxy

Both the RdC (c.l. 26/2019) and the AdI (c.l. 85/2023) display multifacedness, diversity, and heterodoxy. These stem from the way the two reforms combine workfarist and welfare principles, a hybridisation that resulted in contradictory principles, tensions with EU legislation, and criticism from experts.

In terms of ideological multifacedness, both reforms unite social-protection welfare stances with more paternalistic, actionist, and liberal ones. This is particularly the case for the RdC, whose core aim to introduce an unconditional form of basic income was tempered by rather pronounced

²⁸ First piloted in 2012 by the Monti government (d.l. 5/2012) and then extended nationally in 2016 by the Renzi government (l. 208/2015).

²⁹ The RdC tightened that of job acceptance by expanding the geographic scope of what counted as a “congruent” offer (art 6.8 and .9), which now included an offer within 100 km for the first 12 months, 250 km after that, and uncapped from the third offer or on renewal unless the household has a disabled member (always capped at 100 km from the second offer) or minor children (capped at 250 km on the third offer, for the first 24 months only).

³⁰ Regarding the AdI’s job offer criteria (article 9), congruency conditions are non-progressive, geographically unlimited, and binding from the very first offer, leaving recipients no room to refuse. Specifically, a permanent position must be accepted anywhere in Italy (provided it is at least 60% part-time and at the minimum collective wage rate), while a fixed-term position (under the same conditions) must be accepted within 80 km or 120 minutes by public transport. An exception applies where children under 14 are present, in which case the nationwide rule is dropped, and the 80 km/120-minute cap applies to all contract types.

producerist elements in 2019, like the reform's strong labour market conditionality and 10-year residency requirement, influenced by Lega's welfare authoritarianism and chauvinism (Landini, 2021; Stamati, 2020). By contrast, the AdI and SFL's producerism and welfare authoritarianism – evidenced by the differentiation between social support and active labour market components – are very much in line with the reform's aim to establish a categorical system based on needs and control-based deservingness, hence reflecting a greater ideological coherence than the RdC. Still, the literature highlights ideological inconsistencies in the AdI, as its equivalence scale – which reduces child coefficients and assigns zero weight to parents without children under three (see [Appendix Table 5](#)) – undermines its familialist objectives (Baldini and Busilacchi, 2023; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023; Saraceno, 2024). Ideological diversity is also more pronounced in the RdC than in the AdI, as the former was implemented by parties with fundamentally different ideologies and styles of populism (M5S and the Lega) and the latter by a coalition of more ideologically and stylistically aligned parties (FdI, Lega, and FI).

Concerning the heterodoxy of the RdC and AdI, both have drawn criticism from mainstream policy experts. Specifically, Busilacchi and Morlicchio (2024), Sacchi et al. (2023), Baldini and Toso (2024), and Saraceno (2024) highlight that the reforms' ad-hoc equivalence scales are quite arbitrary, especially their weighing of minors and rigid scaling caps. Similarly, Modica Scala (2019), Saraceno (2024), and Nugnes (2022) critique the workfarist and disciplinary approaches of both reforms, especially their rigid job-acceptance obligations. Despite this, the reforms are also criticised by Baldini et al. (2019), Busilacchi and Morlicchio (2024) and Sacchi et al. (2023) for creating possible work disincentives and poverty traps³¹. In addition, the lack of consideration of the difference in living costs and labour market conditions between the North and the South is also criticised in the literature (Baldini et al., 2019; Baldini and Toso, 2024).

Finally, both reforms collide with EU regulations, which are taken here as a benchmark of mainstream policy for member states. Particularly, the RdC's restrictive residency and chauvinist documentation requirements conflicted with the EU free movement and equal treatment directives³² and the AdI's highly selective and authoritarian eligibility criteria conflicted with the universal approach of the 2023 EU Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income (Baldini and Busilacchi, 2023; Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Saraceno, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023)³³.

³¹ This is particularly true of the RdC, which counted 80% of new earnings toward eligibility from employment entry (art 3.8), rising to 100% upon ISEE update, and of the AdI, which, despite a €3,000 earnings exemption, imposes a full reduction beyond that threshold (art 3.4).

³² Namely, 2004/38/CE and 2003/109/CE (free movement and equal treatment after 5 years of residency for EU and non-EU citizens, respectively); and 2011/98/UE (equal treatment for non-EU single permit holders for work and residency).

³³ These authors also highlight that the AdI's lowering of the renting threshold opposes Directives 2003/109/CE and 2011/98/UE, mentioned in footnote 32, as foreign citizens are often in rental housing.

c. *Populist form in the RdC, AdI and SFL*

i. *Policy process: circumventing institutions and stakeholders*

Regarding the policy-making process, both the RdC and the AdI were enacted as decree-laws, unlike their predecessor, the *Reddito di Inclusione*, which was introduced by legislative decree. Whereas the latter designates a process by which the executive is deliberately delegated by the parliament to legislate on a specific matter, the former indicates that the executive directly introduces a temporary legislative measure, with immediate validity, without the involvement of the legislative branch as customary. Owing to this executive origin and immediate validity, decree-laws can generally be considered to circumvent established policy institutions, downplay veto players and limit the participation of broader policy stakeholders (e.g., technocratic policy experts, opposition parties, and civil society).

In the Italian context specifically, these legislative tools are intended only for emergencies, as evidenced by the titles of the decrees: “*Urgent provisions on the citizenship income and on pensions*” (d.l. 23/2019) and “*Urgent measures for social inclusion and access to the work world*” (d.l. 4/2023). Further, decree-laws can be converted into permanent law only if both chambers of Parliament (the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies) approve them within 60 days, which constitutes the only window of opportunity for the opposition and other policy stakeholders to intervene on the legislative text. In addition to this window of time being rather limited, especially considering the transaction costs associated with the country’s bicameral parliamentary system, the executive may use this period to attach a vote of confidence to the decree, which ties the government’s survival to its approval without further amendments (Assemblea Costituente, 1948; *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 1988).

The placement of such a vote of confidence occurred both for the RdC and AdI (Camera dei Deputati, 2023b; Senato della Repubblica, 2019b). In both cases, it was introduced after opposition parties had expressed rather performative disapprovals of the reforms, suggesting the tool was used to downplay the veto power of the legislative and circumvent the opposition and other stakeholders rather than engage with them in democratic deliberation (Camera dei Deputati, 2023a; Senato della Repubblica, 2019a, 2019b).

In the case of the RdC, for instance, evident displays of disapproval from the FI and PD preceded the placement of the vote of confidence. Specifically, during the Senate discussion held on the 27th of February, the whole FI section wore worker hats and blue vests reporting the quote “*SI LAVORO NO BUGIE*” (lit. “yes work, no lies”) (Figure 10), a display promptly reprimanded by the Senate president (See Appendix for the complete transcription). On the same occasion, senators of the PD brought out banners that read “*#VERGOGNA*” (lit. *SHAME*) during a speech in which M5S senator Taverna was, rather provocatively, criticising the previous PD government and their social protection policies (2019a, 2019b) (See Appendix for the complete transcription).

Additionally, right before the vote of confidence was pronounced on the 27th of June 2019, the members of FI and PD involved in the discussions entirely abandoned their commission work in protest for not having enough time to revise the proposed amendments, as clearly expressed by a FI deputy in this quote: “[...] we are given only [...] a mere quarter of an hour to analyse and

carry out our work as an opposition [...] with the confidence vote that we know to be already imminent, is a colossal mockery of Parliament. We have therefore decided to interrupt our work in Committee as we are in a position of complete impossibility to work, but above all, we have absolutely no intention of lending ourselves to this yet another farce” (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019).

Figure 10 FI senators protest during the Parliamentary discussion for the RdC (Romano, 2019)



In the case of the AdI and SFL, protests from the opposition occurred both before (Senato della Repubblica, 2023) and after (Camera dei Deputati, 2023b) the vote of confidence was called. Amid various provocations between the government and opposition parties (See [Appendix](#) for the complete transcription), Conte (M5S leader) and his party vividly expressed their disapproval as follows: *“The Government has introduced a true and proper counter-reform, which has dismantled an important piece of our welfare system, to which you then chose to add a measure that has elevated lifelong precarity to a rule and legitimised it. [...] you have condemned a wide range of citizens to social hardship and have knowingly poured petrol on the fire of a country pushed into a surreal race to the bottom between the last and the second-to-last. [...] I announce the vote against – firmly against – of the MoVimento 5 Stelle [...] ([...] The deputies of the MoVimento 5 Stelle group display a banner reading ‘#BastaVitePrecarie’ [lit “#enoughwithprecariouslives”] and wave utility bills)”* (Figure 11) (Camera dei Deputati, 2023b).

Figure 11 M5S group displays banners during discussions on the AdI and SFL (Cangemi, 2023; Senato della Repubblica, 2023)



Note: The slogan “#BastaVitePrecarie” had been central to popular protests against the abolishment of the RdC organised by M5S across the country in June (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2023). Similar banners had been displayed in other parliamentary discussions as shown in the right image of this figure (Senato della Repubblica, 2023).

The opposition was not, however, the only sidelined stakeholder during the implementation of these reforms. Neither the Conte I nor the Meloni government considered the critiques raised by the “Alleanza contro la povertà” (Alliance Against Poverty) – established between the executive and 35 civil society organisations for the development of the Reddito di Inclusione – or by academic experts regarding the strong conditionality of their reforms (Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024; Sacchi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the M5S resisted calls to revise its long-standing political promise of a €780 minimum threshold – dating back to article 3 of D.D.L 1148/2013 – and instead adopted an equivalence scale, widely deemed arbitrary, to meet this commitment (Baldini et al., 2019; Sacchi et al., 2023). The M5S also resisted the recommendations of the scientific expert group established by Minister Orlando under the Draghi government to assess the RdC. Similarly, the Meloni government only selectively incorporated these recommendations, notably disregarding the committee’s core proposal to strengthen rather than replace the RdC (Lufrano, 2025; Sacchi et al., 2023).

Finally, neither reform incorporated processes of direct popular participation – such as government-mandated opinion polls or consultative referenda of the kind conducted in Hungary (Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 2020) – rendering the “direct communication with the electorate” element largely absent from both reform processes. Nevertheless, both measures had been explicitly framed as electoral promises by their respective executives, who thus sought to derive legitimacy for the legislative path used to implement these reforms by presenting them as a fulfilment of their electoral mandate. This was specifically the case for the AdI and SFL, as such a framing was used to emphasise the perceived urgency of the near-immediate abolition of the RdC, as illustrated by this Meloni statement: “*I can only say that I have always been consistent with my approach*³⁴ [...] *I was, and we were, voted for because this was written in our program.*

³⁴ “*Fratelli d’Italia was the only political force in the entire parliament [...] that never voted in favour of the Reddito di Cittadinanza.*” (Giorgia Meloni News, 2022).

This is what we will do, and the left and the M5S will oppose [...]” (Agenzia Italia News, 2022) (see [Appendix](#) for the complete transcription).

ii. *Policy discourse: emergency, deservingness, and fairness*

The discourse surrounding these policy reforms was highly emotional in both cases. Specifically, through a high use of Manichean frames and discursive governance, both reforms were framed as urgent and exceptional solutions to perceived situations of injustice.

Especially in its original formulation during the 2013 elections and, subsequently, as D.D.L 1148/2013, the RdC was framed as a solution for the lack of a structured national anti-poverty and labour market activation program in a context of growing precarity, such as that of post-Eurozone crisis Italy. The absence of such a measure was recurrently framed as a situation of emergency by the leader of the M5S through highly emotional and crisis-performing speeches, for instance: *“We are in a state of emergency... f*ck, we are in a state of emergency. Nobody should be left behind. [...] We need to act with urgency. We need to act immediately. We need to make a citizenship income right now. A citizenship income. Those who lose their jobs should neither kill themselves nor accept humiliating jobs!”* (Grillo, 2013d)³⁵. Accordingly, the main Manichean enemy of the people was found in political, economic, and cultural elites who *“had replied insufficiently”* (D.D.L 1148/2013, p. 7) to the crisis at hand and were harshly criticised for their idle spendings, for instance: *“The Council Presidency costs us 242 million a year [...] they have 18 gardeners! [...] Let’s take away 3 billion from electoral refunds [...], 1 billion from the refunds to newspaper editors, they are f*cking us over with our own money. If you want to misinform us, use your own money to do it!”* (Grillo, 2013a).

In addition, several symbolic elements were deployed to reinforce the discourse surrounding the reform. Firstly, the very name of the reform itself evokes inclusionary social protection tools such as the Universal Basic Income. Though this may have been coherent with the 2013 version of the scheme, it is rather misleading for the means-tested minimum income version implemented in 2019 (Modica Scala, 2022). Secondly, despite the reform’s significant distance from its original universal ambitions, when the budget law for 2019, which introduced the fiscal plans for the RdC, Di Maio (then leader of the M5S and Minister of Economic Development and Labour) declared on the television show *“Porta a Porta”*: *“we [the M5S], decisively, with this budget, with this budget law, will have abolished poverty”* (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2018). A few days later, this was followed by theatrical celebrations for the approval of such budgetary law, with him shouting *“We did it! We did it!”* when addressing journalists and M5S supporters from the balcony of Palazzo Chigi (seat of government) (La Repubblica, 2018) (Figure 12).

³⁵ A similar, but less radical, sentiment was displayed also in D.D.L 1148/2013 (p. 7): *“A State whose purpose is to take care of its citizens must leave no one behind: [...] Every citizen must be able to count on a minimum income indispensable for living with dignity [...]”*.

Figure 12 Luigi di Maio and M5S members addressing journalists and supporters in 2018 (La Repubblica, 2018)



Once the RdC was implemented in 2019, the discourse surrounding it became largely shaped by Lega's producerism, which reflected both the welfare chauvinist and authoritarian stances of the party. When commenting on the reform, members of Lega framed the RdC as a tool capable of fighting welfare abuses through strongly Manichean "*anti-furbetti*" (lit. "anti-scroungers") rhetoric (Landini, 2021). These "*furbetti*" were mostly, but not exclusively, associated with foreigners, as done in this instance by Salvini: "*All those people who declare false properties and lower incomes just to obtain entitlement to the RdC, if caught, have to go to prison – no ifs, no buts! I refer especially to migrants from outside the EU. I know that many of them are behaving this way, and I want to stop them!*" (reported by Landini, 2021, p.120). Appealing even more strongly to identity criteria, Salvini also stated that "*The League does not want to give away money for free to those people who are not Italian citizens, wander the country without working or making any effort to get employment in Italy*" (reported by Landini, 2021, p.120).

Similar rhetoric was used by Lega to frame the RdC as a reform that would also fight "laziness-induced" unemployment. To this purpose, "*anti-divanisti*" (lit. "anti-couch potato" or "anti-sofa") rhetoric was widely used by Lega members, as in this instance: "*With this measure, we guarantee that all the beneficiaries of the RdC will be people who are totally obliged to follow a path, who will not sit on their couch and live merely on the money received, as some deputies of the Democratic Party do*" (Camera dei Deputati, 2019, p. 27). Though this rhetoric reflected rather right-wing populist approaches to social policy grounded on reciprocity and attitude, it soon influenced the overall discourse around the RdC, with even Di Maio describing it as an "*anti-couch*" reform on numerous occasions (e.g., Rai, 2019). In his words, "*we [...] ensure that people living in poverty can have a work reintegration programme supported by an income that helps them get back into employment; because nobody will be sitting on the couch, they will have to train and do community service work [...]*" (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2018). In a separate occasion, he even stated that "*nobody will be able to abuse the income*" (Stefanoni, 2019).

A similar, but more pronounced, line of emotional and workfarist discourse had been used by FdI to oppose the RdC ever since 2018, when party members famously referred to the RdC as a "*methadone of the State*" (Camera dei Deputati, 2018). FdI doubled down on this position once it got to power in 2022 (Sacchi et al., 2023; Saraceno, 2024; Szikra and Autischer, 2025). For instance, before the vote of confidence for the Meloni government, the prime minister herself emphasised FdI's intent to "*maintain and, where possible, improve the necessary economic support for those who are effectively fragile and not in a condition to work*". In the same occasion,

she cited Pope Francis' quote *"Poverty is not fought with welfarism; the door to a person's dignity is work"* – an appeal to her Catholicism – and concluded that *"for others, for those who are able to work, the solution cannot be basic income, but work, training and accompanying work [...] because, as it has been thought out and implemented, the RdC represented a defeat for those who were able to do their part for Italy, as well as for themselves and their families"* (Senato della Repubblica, 2022) (see [Appendix](#) for the complete transcription); thus effectively consolidating FdI's authoritarian desire to protect only the "deserving poor".

Interestingly, however, compared to the RdC, there was little use of "anti-couch" rhetoric in reference to the AdI and SFL, attributable to other members of FdI rather than Meloni herself (i.e., Il Mattino, 2023; Zucconi, 2022) (see [Appendix](#)). Instead, Meloni's discourse was frequently centred on the numerous cases of fraud that occurred during the implementation of the RdC, which, though differently from "anti-couch" rhetoric, still appeals to the value of reciprocity. For instance: *"the RdC was a total failure despite having had an exorbitant cost to the state of approximately 9 billion euros a year... [and we can] overlook the thousands and thousands of scams it generated by also favouring drug-dealing mafia criminals"* (Giorgia Meloni News, 2022) (See [Appendix](#) for the complete transcription).

Similarly, references to undeserving migrants were limited. This is seemingly surprising given the Lega's role in shaping the AdI and SFL, but less so in light of the legal criticisms directed at the RdC's residency and bureaucratic requirements introduced by the party. When present, they were xenophobic towards incoming labour migrants and authoritarian towards undeserving nationals rather than nativist and producerist as Lega's were. For example, as part of the *"Appunti di Giorgia"* (lit. "Giorgia's notes") series, a collection of short videos which she publishes on her social media platforms, Meloni stated: *"I've also heard someone saying 'Meloni is taking the [Citizenship] Income away and forcing us to steal'. [...] Several companies are asking the government, under the immigration flows decree, to let in some immigrants who they need to do jobs [...] I think that, between basic income [and] going to steal [referred to Italian recipients of the RdC], choosing to do a very decent job of any kind – for which it seems that we are asking for immigrants to enter Italy because the Italians who want to do them cannot be found – is definitely better"* (Corriere della Sera, 2022a).

d. Overview of findings

In sum, though starting with contrasting objectives – the RdC as a universal form of support and the AdI as a categorical one – both reforms clearly displayed elements of populist policy-making, as summarised in Table 3, which further supports the primary hypothesis of this thesis (H1) that populist policy is characterised by a shared mode of governance rather than a common policy direction.

Table 3 Main characteristics of populist policy-making present in post-2010 Italian social policy reforms, by reform

		RdC	AdI and SFL
Policy	Ideologically multifaceted and diverse	++	+
Content	Heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms	++	++
	Reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities	++	++
	Radical and paradigmatic policy reforms	+	+
Policy	Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players	++	++
process	Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties, and civil society actors	++	++
	Direct communication with the electorate	-/+	-/+
Policy	Extensive use of discursive governance	+	+
discourse	Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing	++	++
	Dominance of Manichean discourses	++	++

Note: As Table 2, this is based on Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020, Table 3). Legend: “++” high conformity; “+” moderate conformity; “–” non-conformity; “+/-” inconclusive (p. 78).

Regarding the *content* of these reforms, and in line with part of H2 (i.e., majoritarian elements will be prevalent in the content of post-2010 Italian social policy), majoritarianism was clearly present, especially in the AdI and SFL, as the RdC was originally developed to be universalistic and grounded in a populist “people vs elites” logic rather than a majoritarian one. However, this intent was overridden by the introduction of various eligibility criteria (e.g., means-testing, ten-year residency requirement), a penalising equivalence scale (especially for large families and families with minors), and strict labour market conditionalities (i.e., the Labour and Inclusion Pacts); all of which conferred a majoritarian, and at times chauvinist, character to the reform once it was implemented. By contrast, the AdI and associated SFL were directly designed to be majoritarian, with “deservingness” being defined by demographic factors like being a caregiver, disabled, non-self-sufficient, over 60, under-18, or having bio-psycho-social hardships. Accordingly, the RdC was more ideologically diverse than the AdI and SFL, which is reflective of the government coalitions that implemented the two reforms. In fact, whilst the AdI and SFL were developed by a coalition of mostly exclusionary populists (FdI, Lega, FI), the RdC entailed the cooperation of an inclusionary (M5S) and exclusionary (Lega) populist party, the latter of which was the promoter of increased chauvinist (e.g., the 10-year residence criteria) and producerist (e.g., the Labour and Inclusion Pacts) elements in the reform. Still, both reforms were

found to be quite multifaceted as they join social-protection welfare stances with rather strong workfarist principles, though this applies more to the RdC.

The analysed reforms were also less paradigmatic and radical than expected, hence disproving part of H4 (i.e., the reforms be radical in *content*). Indeed, though intended as a strongly paradigmatic measure in 2013, especially because of its universality, the RdC's exceptionality was diluted by the implementation of other social support measures before the 2019 decree (e.g., the Reddito di Inclusione in 2018) and the addition of eligibility criteria. This was particularly true of its national coverage and labour conditionality, which had already been introduced by the Reddito di Inclusione a year prior. Still, the RdC was the first to fully formalise these elements, hence making it at least somewhat radical. By contrast, the AdI and SFL were conceived to be radical rather than paradigmatic, as their main aim was abolishing the RdC and restoring the conservative, familialist tradition of Italian social policy. To this end, they established a markedly workfarist regime in which active labour market components and social assistance – embodied by the AdI and SFL respectively – were strictly separated unless the individual belonged to a household which met the demographic conditions to qualify for the AdI.

By contrast, both reforms were highly heterodox and challenged mainstream paradigms. Firstly, they often overlooked experts' opinions, especially regarding their arbitrary equivalence scales (particularly the weighting of minors and rigid scaling caps), overly workfarist conditionalities (especially rigid job-acceptance obligations), paradoxical work disincentives and poverty traps, and failure to account for North-South disparities in living costs and labour market conditions. Secondly, they often clashed with EU directives.

Regarding the *form* of the RdC, AdI and SFL, both utilised rather anti-establishment implementation processes, meaning that they circumvented established policy institutions and limited policy stakeholders' participation; hence proving the remainder of H4 (i.e., the reforms will have an anti-establishment implementation process). Indeed, as the reforms were implemented via decree-law with a vote of confidence, they both circumvented established policy-making institutions (as the executive usurped the legislature's drafting role) and the veto powers of opposition parties (as neither Parliamentary chamber could add any amendments following the placement of the vote of confidence). Similarly, once the vote of confidence was called, technocratic experts and civil society actors were neither involved in the initial drafting of the reforms nor able to influence amendments. Further, expert criticisms raised during the conversion of the decrees into permanent legislation were not considered. Specifically, the M5S rigidly protected its €780 benefit against all expert advice and Meloni selectively ignored the recommendation of the expert committee established during the Draghi government to strengthen rather than abolish the RdC. In both cases, this was justified by an "electoral mandate" argument, whereby parties claimed their actions fulfilled their electorate's preferences. Unlike Hungary, however, this did not translate into any direct consultation of said electorate.

Finally, the discourse around the RdC, AdI, and SFL was highly emotional and Manichean, supporting the remainder of H2 (i.e., Manichean and emotional elements will be prevalent in the form of post-2010 Italian social policy). Particularly, the RdC was framed as an urgent response

to rising poverty and unemployment, which were highly relevant to the post-Eurozone crisis context in which it was conceived. Accordingly, at this stage, elites were cast as the primary Manichean enemy. Once the reform was implemented in 2019, performative elements and discursive governance accompanied these frames, with the leader of the M5S repeatedly, and even theatrically, announcing that the reform would have abolished poverty. In the same period, Lega's discourse on the RdC appealed to grievances against both welfare abuses and rising migration. This not only conferred a rather chauvinist and producerist character to the already emotionally charged and Manichean discourse surrounding the RdC, resulting in the reform being framed as an "anti-sofa" policy, but also in the addition of the 10-year residency requirement and of bureaucratic burdens for non-EU nationals. By contrast, the AdI's Manichean discourse was distinctively authoritarian, as it was grounded on a clear distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving poor" informed by the fact that *"a just state does not place on the same level of assistance those who can work and those who cannot"* (Meloni reported by the Corriere della Sera, 2022b) (see [Appendix](#) for the complete transcription). This rhetoric was also used to justify the clear and direct abolition of the RdC, which was framed as a fraudulent and costly policy enabling criminals.

5. Conclusion: Discussion and Policy Pathways

1. Overview: the Evolution of Populist Policy from Proposals to Implementation

This thesis investigates whether a distinctly populist policy exists and, if so, what defines it. To do so, it takes Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making as a theoretical reference. Such a framework defines three main axes for the analysis of populist policy: content, process, and discourse. The first identifies ideological thinness, heterodoxy, majoritarianism, radicalness and being paradigmatic as the core substantive features of populist policy. The second identifies the circumvention of established policy institutions, downplaying of veto players and broader policy stakeholders (e.g., experts, civil society), and direct communication with the electorate as core procedural features. The third identifies discursive governance, emotional and crisis framings, and Manichean rhetoric as core discursive features. This theoretical framework was developed for the analysis of policy reforms – as most studies on populist policy (Caiani and Graziano, 2022) – and only tested on one policy area in one country, namely, post-2010 Hungarian social policy. Accordingly, this thesis explores whether the ideal type is generalisable to other national contexts and ideological settings, as well as to the entire policy-making process, including the policy proposal stage (RQ1).

Given the relevance of social policy in the field of populism (see Chapter 2), as Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020), the thesis also focuses on post-2010 social policy but instead takes Italy as its case study. This choice is motivated, firstly, by the fact that, unlike Hungary, Italy has hosted both left- and right-wing populist parties across government and opposition (Rooduijn et al., 2023b). Accordingly, the parties selected for the analysis include exclusionary (FdI and Lega), inclusionary (M5S), and borderline (FI) cases of populism. Secondly, Italy has a different welfare state regime than Hungary, with the former being characterised by typically Mediterranean features (e.g., fragmentary, familialist). In this perspective, the thesis explores which characteristics of the ideal type are present in Italy's social policy (RQ2) and how these evolve from policy proposals to implemented reforms (RQ3).

To do so, and in line with theoretical debates around populism as an ideology or a practice, the ideal type was reorganised across two main dimensions: *content* and *form*. The first captures the substantive elements of the ideal type, whereas the second captures the discursive and procedural ones. These dimensions served as the basis for the qualitative content analysis of both policy proposals and reforms. It should be noted that the two analyses are not fully symmetrical. Firstly, procedural elements were excluded from the study of policy proposals since, as expected and confirmed by the first trial runs (see Appendix), their dynamic nature could not be captured at this rather static stage of the policy-making process. Further, the analysis of policy proposals considers all social protection proposals, as defined by ESSPROS (2019), made by the parties across the elections studied, whereas that of policy reforms only considers the Reddito di Cittadinanza (RdC) and the subsequent Assegno di Inclusione (AdI) and Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro (SFL), which were both implemented by fully populist governments.

In terms of findings, the study of both policy proposals and reforms confirms that Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type is generalisable to other contexts and ideological orientations, in

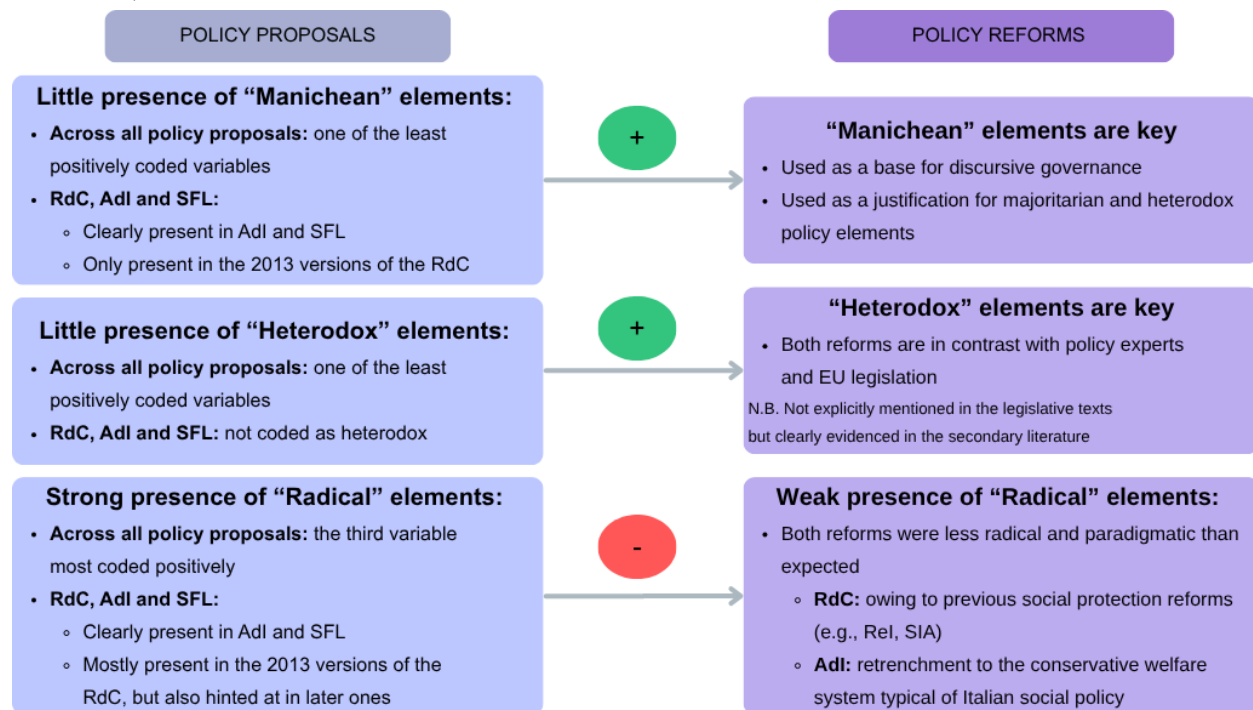
this case that of Italy's various types of populist parties, as well as to the entire policy-making process, including the policy proposal stage; thus identifying a positive answer to RQ1. Further, hypothesis 3 (H3), suggesting that the major crises of the 2010s would lead to increases in the overall level of populism, was proven right as the average level of populism – considering both its form and its content across all parties – was considerably higher, and had a rising pattern, across the selected elections (i.e., 2013, 2018, and 2022) compared to the benchmark case (2006).

Following, the first hypothesis of this thesis (H1), which posits that both content and formal elements would be present across the entirety of the policy-making process, was also proven right. Specifically, the study of policy proposals, which considered both our selected populist parties and one non-populist benchmark (the Unione/PD), reveals that populist *content* was decisive in the distinction between populist and non-populist parties' overall levels of populism, as the non-populist case showed variable levels of populist *form* but low-to-no populist *content* (see Figure 9 and Appendix Figure 4). Similarly, 9 out of 10 elements of the ideal type were picked up in the study of the RdC, AdI and SFL (see Table 2). This study, which included the procedural dimension of populist policy, revealed that the latter is particularly relevant in populist reforms, as the circumventing of established policy processes and the limiting of broader stakeholder participation were among the most markedly populist characteristics of the RdC, AdI and SFL, as hypothesised by hypothesis 4 (H4 i.e., social policy reforms will have radical content and an anti-establishment implementation process). Overall, and answering RQ2, the most frequently observed elements across both social policy proposals and reforms in Italy were a majoritarian *content* and an emotional and crisis-performing *form*, which partially proves H2 (i.e., Manichean and emotional elements will be prevalent in the form of Italy's social policy, and majoritarian elements will be prevalent in its content).

The presence or absence of Manichean rhetoric is a primary difference between policy proposals and policy reforms, offering initial insights into how populist elements vary across stages of the policy process, as explored by RQ3 and summarised in Figure 13. In the study of policy proposals, "Manichean" was the variable that received the fewest positive codes, along with "heterodox". By contrast, Manichean frames were not only very frequent in the analysis of policy reforms but even formed the basis of the discursive governance of the parties involved, who often deployed them to justify majoritarian and heterodox policy choices. Still, when considering only the proposals directly related to the analysed reforms, the picture becomes more nuanced. Manichean elements are absent from the 2018 M5S manifesto proposal for the RdC – likely a reflection of the genre conventions of their manifestos rather than an ideological shift – whereas they were already present in the earlier 2013 M5S D.D.L. related to the same reform. In the case of the AdI and SFL, Manichean elements were already prominent in the 2022 FdI manifesto. This suggests that, in the case of the RdC, Manichean framing was not a stable feature of the proposal stage but rather a discursive strategy deployed in the longer texts and speeches surrounding the reform's implementation process. By contrast, the Manichean character of the AdI and SFL proposals may have been more intrinsically linked to the authoritarian and majoritarian nature of those reforms from the start.

Further differences between proposals and reforms were identified regarding the “radical and paradigmatic” and “heterodox” policy elements. In fact, whereas the first was very present in the overall study of social policy proposals – including the 2013 one for the RdC³⁶ and the 2022 one for the AdI and SFL – it was comparatively weak in the actual reforms. For the RdC, this was largely due to constraints arising from the coalition of an exclusionary and an inclusionary populist party. For the AdI and SFL, the reforms ultimately represented a return to the categorical and familialist paradigms typical of the Italian welfare state, rendering them less radical when considered against the broader trajectory of Italian social policy. By contrast, whereas policy proposals displayed relatively low levels of the “heterodox policy elements” dimension, this was one of the most prominent elements in the reforms themselves. Notably, however, such heterodoxy was not explicit in the text of the reforms but was instead identified through secondary literature.

Figure 13 Summary of the evolution of populist elements throughout the policy-making process (Author’s own elaboration)



³⁶ This was not the case in 2018, however, likely due to the nature of that manifesto, which consisted largely of brief bullet points. Nonetheless, given that the RdC’s radical and paradigmatic character had been central to the debate since 2013 (Busilacchi and Morlicchio, 2024) it can reasonably be inferred that it was intended as such in 2018 as well.

2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

These findings provide both theoretical and practical implications related to populist governance and policy-making. Firstly, in terms of theory, the thesis aligns with research highlighting that populism is defined by a shared mode of governance, rather than communal policy stance (e.g., Bartha, Boda, and Szikra, 2020; Munro and Pfeiffer, 2021; Panizza et al., 2025; Pappas, 2019b). In this regard, the thesis provides insights into the relevance of both the substantive and formal components in such a mode of governance, finding that *content* is key at the policy proposal stage, whereas *form* is particularly relevant at the policy implementation stage.

Accordingly, the thesis contributes to the theoretical debate on the nature of populism as an ideology and as an attribute. Specifically, the role of majoritarian, radical, and heterodox elements as a defining difference between populist and non-populist policy proposals lends support to the ideological understanding of populism. However, the spillover of populist rhetoric and frames to non-populist parties, also evident in the analysis of policy proposals, speaks to the relevance of populism as a discursive-performative practice. The two accounts are thus complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Whereas the ideological understanding may be most fitting for parties that are inherently populist (as in the cases of FdI, M5S, and Lega), the discursive-performative one can better capture the broader diffusion of populist frames across the political arena. This may be particularly salient in the domain of social protection policy, as non-populist parties may feel compelled to strategically adopt populist rhetoric to remain responsive to the emotional states and expectations of an increasingly deprived electorate.

Secondly, the empirical findings of this thesis offer insights relevant to policy-making, shedding light on how populist governance can drive democratic backsliding and illiberalism and, thus, on which measures may be needed to prevent this.

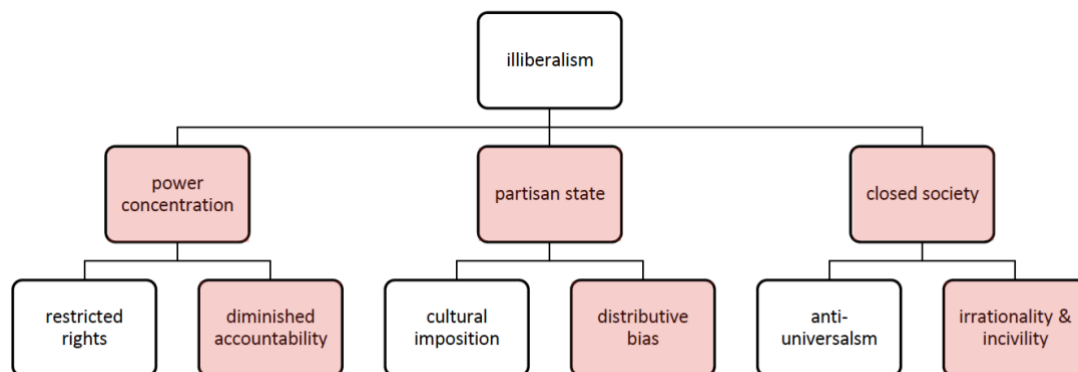
Regarding its *form*, populist policy-making poses clear risks for liberal democracies both before and after populists reach power. During electoral competition, populist discourse can spill over into mainstream party rhetoric, as illustrated in the analysis of policy proposals, where PD (non-populist) adopted emotional and crisis frames, likely in response to electoral pressures. This mainstreaming of crisis and emotional rhetoric risks serving populists' "illiberal project" (Pappas, 2019a, p. 210) – in which polarisation is deliberately cultivated to erode moderate alternatives – by legitimising their crisis-performance and providing fertile ground for their moral-antagonistic framing of society. Once in government, this materialises concretely: populists embed social antagonism in their policy reforms to pave the way for an "enfeeblement of check-and-balance institutions" (p. 210). This is evidenced by the prevalence of emotional and Manichean frames in both the RdC and AdI, which heightened polarisation and foreclosed moderate dialogue. This framing, in turn, provided justification for circumventing established policy institutions and marginalising stakeholders through executive-led decree-laws coupled with votes of confidence.

The *content* of populist policy proposals also warrants attention, though its implications are more subtle than those of its *form*. In fact, the marked radicalism present at the proposal stage was considerably diluted at implementation for both reforms, with the RdC being a modest improvement on existing schemes and the AdI a retrenchment to existing welfare paradigms, rather

than genuine policy ruptures. Still, both social protection reforms were majoritarian and heterodox in practice, which could raise concerns. Though strongly influenced by parties' core ideologies, such majoritarianism is reminiscent of "patronage politics" (p. 204), in which redistribution is used to consolidate electoral support, a practice that populists may use to further consolidate their position in power (Pappas, 2019a). Similarly, the heterodoxy of both reforms – i.e., their disregard for expert opinion and their conflict with EU legislation – reinforced the narrative of the populist executive acting as the sole protector of the electorate's will against established national and international elites (Vachudova, 2021), further deepening social antagonism and polarisation.

Overall, the trends suggest that populist social policy has illiberal inclinations both at the proposal and implementation stages. Referring to Enyedi's definition of the concept (Figure 13)³⁷, the prevalence of majoritarianism and radicalness in populist proposals foreshadows the "state partisanship" – and especially of the "distributive bias" – of their governance. Similarly, the emotional and crisis-performance rhetoric present in populist proposals, which concerningly spills over to mainstream parties, echoes the "irrationality and incivility" associated with illiberalism. Though these characteristics are further confirmed in the implementation stage by the increase in Manichean rhetoric and heterodoxy, the most clearly illiberal character of populist policy lies in its process, which explicitly "diminishes political accountability" and, thus, points to a "concentration of powers".

Figure 14 Elements from Enyedi's conceptualisation of illiberalism found in populist policy



While seemingly still democratic, the illiberal characteristics of populist policy identified above should still raise concerns regarding democratic backsliding (Muno and Pfeiffer, 2022), understood as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). Particularly, the clear presence of "power concentration" increases the risk for processes of "executive aggrandisement" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 10) and "power seizure" (Pappas, 2019a, p. 190) which, as Müller (2016) and Bermeo (2016) warn, may go undetected precisely because they unfold through legal channels and under the cover of a democratic mandate. The confirmation of these illiberal characteristics within the analysed social protection reforms strengthens the theoretical considerations linking populism to democratic backsliding, especially given that social policy – unlike the judiciary or media (Bermeo, 2016;

³⁷ A similar argument can also be made on the ground of Mudde (2021), Rummens (2017), Osuna (2021).

Pappas, 2019a) – is rarely considered a site of democratic backsliding. This suggests that the illiberal and backsliding tendencies of populist governance extend beyond the areas most commonly associated with democratic backsliding and, thus, may be embedded even in its most ordinary policy-making.

In this light, some precautions must be taken in to prevent populist policy-making from gradually eroding democratic institutions. Hence, based on the findings outlined above – and in line with the conclusions drawn by the Council of Europe’s (2017) World Forum for Democracy: “Is Populism a problem?” – this thesis recommends the following with the intent of strengthening checks, balances, and institutions:

1. **Strengthening procedural safeguards during policy-making to ensure that parliament and opposition are not easily circumvented.** In the Italian case, this could be done, firstly, by revisiting the decree-law process and tightening the conditions under which it is applicable – especially for the vote of confidence that can be attached to it – to prevent any abuse of it in cases which are not of actual urgency. Secondly, the role of the Constitutional Court could be reinforced by granting it a more active role in checks and balances, for instance, by involving it in a form of preventive review process before a law’s enactment to ensure its full compliance with the constitution and EU law, rather than limiting it to a reactive body that can only act when appealed to.
2. **Expanding mandatory stakeholder engagement** during policy-making to limit executive enlargement. This should encompass both civil society and expert involvement – for instance, through the mandatory involvement of expert advisory groups – as well as deliberative democratic processes to foster dialogue and reduce polarisation. Crucially, such deliberative processes must be representative of the population as a whole, both demographically and ideologically, to ensure that diverse perspectives are genuinely included.
3. **Reinforcing the protection of minority rights by strengthening the enforceability of existing international and EU fundamental rights frameworks** – such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights – to ensure that majoritarianism does not translate into the effective exclusion of vulnerable groups, as was the case for non-EU citizens under the RdC. While politically challenging, such enforcement mechanisms would provide a crucial safeguard against the majoritarian tendencies of populist governance.
4. **Moving towards more universalistic welfare systems**, where feasible. Evidence suggests that stronger welfare states can reduce the electoral appeal of populist radical right parties by buffering economic vulnerability (Adam and Ftergioti, 2025); though it is acknowledged that such structural reforms would be difficult to implement in the current political climate.

3. Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

To conclude, it is important to note the limitations in this analysis, which primarily concern the study of policy proposals. For this section of the analysis, an [original coding scheme](#) was created, as described in [Chapter 3](#) and detailed in the [Appendix](#). This coding scheme was then implemented to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the social protection policy proposals present in the manifestos of selected parties for selected elections (i.e., 2006, 2013, 2018, 2022). A first limitation of this approach is that the length, content, and format of party manifestos differ widely on a party and year basis. However, as the present analysis' main aim is to test the operationalisation of [Bartha, Boda and Szikra's ideal type](#), this limitation does not pose a substantial obstacle. Still, to ensure comparability across manifestos, the thesis interprets the result as averages (see [Appendix](#)) or, where suitable, as percentages.

Secondly, owing to the nature of this written piece, which required solo authorship, there was only one coder involved in this analysis. To address this limitation as much as possible, the results for particularly tricky cases were reviewed by the supervisor of this thesis. While this solution still leaves substantial issues for the robustness of the coding results, it does not dismiss their relevance. Indeed, as the level of populism in parties' policy proposals remains a largely unexplored question in the research on populist policy-making, the coding process in this thesis testifies that frameworks on populist policy-making can produce interesting results when extended to the proposal stage. Accordingly, further research may build on this by either refining and applying the coding scheme developed in this thesis or by developing a similar one based on other theories of populist governance (e.g., Muno and Pfeiffer, 2021; Panizza et al., 2025; Pappas, 2019) and involving multiple coders to produce more robust and generalisable results.

Thirdly, regarding the analysis of policy reforms, it would have been preferable to formally include previous non-populist reforms – such as the *Reddito di Inclusione (ReI)* – as a benchmark for non-populist social protection reforms, to more clearly capture the distinctive features of populist policy reforms compared to those of mainstream parties. This was not possible, however, owing to the length constraints of this piece. To partially account for this, the ReI and previous reforms were nonetheless considered in the analysis to contextualise the study of the RdC, AdI and SFL within the broader trajectory of Italian social protection reform. Further research could address this by conducting a qualitative analysis of the ReI and other previous reforms along the lines of that presented in [Chapter 4.2](#).

Finally, the findings of this thesis regarding the role of populist policy-making in democratic backsliding invite reflection on a deeper question for future research: is the substantive nature of populist policy a danger to liberal democratic policy-making in itself, or is it rather the way such substance is shaped by the party's core ideology? Are the residence requirements of the RdC, for instance, illiberal because they are majoritarian or because they were implemented with a nativist agenda? This warns against treating populist policies as uniformly illiberal and highlights the importance of proper policy evaluation procedures to assess their actual effects on the population and democracy.

Moreover, the recurrence of substantive populist elements in policy proposals, coupled with the current electoral success of populist parties, warrants attention beyond the parties themselves, namely, to whether voters are supportive of populist policy as such, or of the core ideology which it expresses. In the field of social policy, and following Saxonberg (2024), a promising avenue would be to further investigate the relationship between voters' attitudes towards redistribution, social protection, and labour market policy and their endorsement of populist values, particularly in light of successive crises since the Great Recession and their potential to reshape both electoral demand and party supply. Additionally, extending this analysis to other policy areas likely to entail more markedly populist stances – such as economic, migration, family, and culture policy – would further contribute to understanding how populist policy manifests across the policy landscape, and ultimately, what it means for the sustainability of liberal democracy.

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7. Appendix

1. Overview of the key features of populism

Table 1 Core features of populism as described in the literature (Author's elaboration).

Core feature	Underlying approach	Referred authors
Antagonistic or Manichean separation of society ("people" vs "other") and people-centrism	Ideational, discursive-performative	Brubaker (2017); Canovan (1999); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Laclau (2005); Moffitt (2013; 2016; 2021); Mudde (2017); Ostiguy (2017; et al., 2021); Osuna (2021).
Anti-establishment, -institutionalism; -system, -elitism or -technocracy (including preference for radical forms popular sovereignty)	Ideational, politico-strategic, discursive-performative	Abts and Rummens (2007); Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Brubaker (2017); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Laclau (e.g., 2005); Moffitt (2013; 2016; 2021); Müller (2016); Ostiguy et al. (2021); Osuna (2021); Taggart (2004); Urbinati (2017).
"Bad manners" and performance of the "low"	Discursive-performative	Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Brubaker (2017); Moffitt (2013; 2016; 2021), Ostiguy (2017, et. al, 2021); Osuna (2021).
Crisis-driven, simplifying, and mobilising rhetorics	Discursive-performative	Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Canovan (1999); Laclau (e.g., 2005); Moffitt (2013; 2015; 2016; 2021); Ostiguy et. al (2021); Osuna (2021); Taggart (2004).
Majoritarian/anti-pluralist	Ideational, discursive-performative	Abts and Rummens (2007); Brubaker (2017); Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Canovan (1999); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Müller (2016); Ostiguy et al. (2021); Osuna (2021); Rummens (2017); Taggart (2004).
Personalisation of politics / central role of leader	Politico-strategic, discursive-performative	Canovan (1999); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Ostiguy et al. (2021); Osuna (2021); Taggart (2004); Weyland (2017).
Thin-ideology / manifests in different ideological contexts	Ideational, politico-strategic, discursive-performative	Abts and Rummens (2007); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels (2017); Laclau (2005); Moffitt (2016, 2021); Mudde (2017); Ostiguy et al. (2021); Taggart (2004).
Unmediated relationship and communication between leader and electorate (e.g., through social media)	Politico-strategic, discursive-performative	Ballacci and Goodman (2023); Brubaker (2017); Canovan (1999); Diamanti and Lazar (2020); Ostiguy et al. (2021); Osuna (2021); Urbinati (2017; 2019).

Note: References listed reflect the bibliography of this thesis and are not intended to be exhaustive

2. Analysed manifestos

Table 2 List of analysed manifestos

Year	Manifesto Project ID	Full Party Name	Acronym	Title of manifesto	N of proposals	N of pages
2006	32630	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI	Party did not exist	/	/
	32610	Forza Italia	FI	Programma elettorale 2006, La casa della Libertà	4	3
	32720	Lega Nord	LN			
	32956	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	Party did not exist	/	/
		L'Unione	U	Per il bene dell'Italia	6	20
2013	32630	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI	Le sfide per l'Italia	3	3
	32720	Lega Nord	LN	Programma Elezioni Politiche 2013	4	2
	32061	Popolo della Libertà	PdL			
	32956	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	Programma. Stato e cittadini Energia Informazione Economia Trasporti Salute Istruzione	1	3
	32440	Partito Democratico	PD	L'Italia giusta. Programma	2	2
2018	32630	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI	Il voto che unisce l'Italia	3	1
	32610	Forza Italia	FI	Un programma per l'Italia. Per la crescita, la sicurezza, le famiglie e la piena occupazione	2	1
	32720	Lega	L	Salvini Premier. La rivoluzione del buonsenso	5	6
	32956	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S ³⁸	Programma elettorale Movimento 5 Stelle capo politico Luigi di Maio	3	8
				M5S – Lavoro (2018a)		
				M5S – Salute (2018b)		
	32440	Partito Democratico	PD	Più forte. Più Giusta. L'Italia	2	5
2022	32630	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI	Pronti a risollevare l'Italia	6	8
	32610	Forza Italia	FI	Oggi più che mai una scelta di campo	5	7
	32720	Lega	L	Programma di governo	7	20
	32956	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	Dalla parte giusta. La persona al centro, programma per un nuovo umanesimo	5	50
	32440	Partito Democratico	PD	Insieme per un'Italia democratica e progressista	4	8
Total number of manifestos: 18 (14 from populist parties, 4 from non-populist parties)						
Total number of pages: 147 (122 from populist parties, 25 from non-populist parties)						
Total number of proposals: 62 (48 from populist parties, 14 from non-populist parties)						

³⁸ In this case, three documents were used: a short summary manifesto published by the M5S, supplemented by extended policy documents on labour and health.

3. Thematic areas of social support measures according to the OECD (2019, p. 8)

1. Old age: pensions, early retirement pensions, home-help and residential services for the elderly
2. Survivors: pensions and funeral payments;
3. Incapacity: related benefits, care services, disability benefits, benefits accruing from occupational injury and accident legislation, employee sickness payments
4. Health: spending on in- and out-patient care, medical goods, prevention;
5. Family: child allowances and credits, childcare support, income support during leave, single parent payments;
6. Active labour market policies (ALMP): employment services, training, employment incentives, integration of persons with disabilities, direct job creation, and start-up incentives;
7. Unemployment: unemployment compensation, early retirement for labour market reasons;
8. Housing: housing allowances and rent subsidies;
9. Other: non-categorical cash benefits to low-income households, and/or other social services.

4. Creation of the coding scheme based on Bartha, Boda and Szikra's ideal type: operationalisation process and examples

As outlined in [Chapter 3](#) of the thesis, the qualitative content analysis of social policy proposals employed an original coding scheme designed to capture the content and form of populist proposals, based on Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's ideal type. Because this scheme was originally developed to analyse implemented policy reforms rather than proposals, it required adaptation, as discussed below. All specifications for the mentioned examples are summarised in Table 2.

In terms of the *content* of populist policy, the coding operationalises the substantive component of the ideal type through four variables: heterodox, ideologically thin, majoritarian, and radical.

1. **Heterodox:** This variable corresponds to the "Heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms" element of the framework. A proposal was coded as "heterodox" if it advances solutions that diverge from mainstream policy and expert opinion. While similar to the "radical" element discussed below, this component specifically refers to the refusal of mainstream policy as a guiding discipline, rather than the opposition to currently implemented policies per se. The proposal to halt linking the retirement age to life expectancy, present in most populist manifestos, is a telling example as it represents a departure from previous policy and stands in fundamental contrast to expert opinion.
2. **Ideologically thin:** This variable corresponds to the "Ideologically multifaceted and diverse" element of the framework. A proposal was coded as "ideologically-thin" if it entailed the plan to concurrently use policy tools that are normally associated with diverging ideologies or if it included a policy stance which is in opposition to the party's

main core ideology as defined by expert surveys on a scale from left to right. Specifically, the coding relied mostly on the Manifesto project's (Lehmann et al., 2025) "rile" index, which aggregates the scores of each party across 24 socio-cultural and economic categories (12 on the left wing of the spectrum and 12 on the right)³⁹. As the data for this variable was not available for 2022, CHES's "Irgen" variable, which measures "each party's overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right)" was used for this election (Rovny et al., 2025). To ensure the compatibility of the two measures with each other they were both standardised on a scale from 0 (left-wing) to 1 (right-wing)⁴⁰.

An example of the first case can be found across in the policy proposals for social protection in the area of family policy from FdI, FI, and Lega across the years, where fiscal cuts for families are associated with an increase in in-cash benefits for families. An example of the second can similarly be found in the manifestos of FdI, FI, and Lega across the years, where, for instance, conservative stances in a party's proposals for family policy (e.g., incentivising mothers to take care of children) coexist with more progressive ones in their labour market proposals (e.g., incentivising mothers to enter the labour market).

3. **Majoritarian:** This variable corresponds to the "Reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities" element of the framework. A policy proposal was coded as "majoritarian" if it prioritised the interests of the majority at the expense of minorities or other unpopular groups. Importantly, this majority corresponds to the definition the populist party attributes to "the people", according to their core ideology. Because this element closely overlaps with party ideology, its relevance for identifying populist policy-making lies in its exclusionary logic: a policy proposal may be classified as majoritarian *only* if it benefits some whilst *marginalising others*. For example, being right-wing and mostly conservative, Lega and FdI appeal to the lower-middle class with traditional social values and, accordingly, focus their policy proposals on economically active individuals, opposite-sex families, and those economically inactive due to illness or disability, while largely excluding work-capable economically inactive individuals and non-traditional households.
4. **Radical:** This variable corresponds to the "Radical and paradigmatic policy reforms" element of the framework. A policy proposal was coded as "radical" if it suggests a

³⁹ *Left-wing RILE categories:* 103 Anti-Imperialism; 105 Military: Negative; 106 Peace; 107 Internationalism: Positive; 202 Democracy; 403 Market Regulation; 404 Economic Planning; 406 Protectionism: Positive; 412 Controlled Economy; 413 Nationalisation; 504 Welfare State Expansion; 506 Education Expansion; 701 Labour Groups: Positive. *Right-wing RILE categories:* 104 Military: Positive; 201 Freedom and Human Rights; 203 Constitutionalism: Positive; 305 Political Authority; 401 Free Market Economy; 402 Incentives: Positive; 407 Protectionism: Negative; 414 Economic Orthodoxy; 505 Welfare State Limitation; 601 National Way of Life: Positive; 603 Traditional Morality: Positive; 605 Law and Order: Positive; 606 Civic Mindedness: Positive.

⁴⁰ The formula used to standardise the RILE index was: $=(\text{value}+100)/200$ because the index is defined on a -100 to +100 scale; adding 100 shifts the minimum (-100) to 0 and dividing by 200 (the total width of the original scale) rescales it to range from 0 to 1. The CHES Irgen variable, originally measured on a 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) scale, was standardised by dividing by 10, which rescales the fixed 10-point interval to run from 0 to 1 while preserving relative distances.

paradigmatic policy reform, meaning that it aims to change the underlying goals of policy and/or the means through which they are achieved relative to the existing policy order. An example of this is FdI's (2022) proposal to abolish the "Reddito di Cittadinanza", rather than just reforming it, to substitute it with an entirely new instrument that would "protect individuals without income, who are effectively unable to work or difficult to employ, such as people with disabilities, those over 60, and households with dependent children" (p. 17).

In terms of the *form* of populist policy, the coding scheme operationalises the discursive components of the ideal type. Given that the coding could only rely on the language and style involved in the drafting of the policy proposal, rather than in the populist "discursive governance" identified by Bartha, Boda, and Szikra (2020), some adjustments were necessary. Accordingly, the emotional discourse used by populists is captured by the variables "crisis", "emotional", and "Manichean".

1. **Crisis:** This variable corresponds to the "Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing" element of the framework. A policy proposal was coded as "crisis" if the language in the proposal was aligned with Moffitt's conceptualisation of populist crisis performance (2015, 2020). Building on Taggart's insight that the perception and representation of a crisis matter more than its objective presence, Moffitt argues that crises are never neutral phenomena and must be "performed" by political actors to acquire political value. In the case of populism, its actors perform a "spectacularisation of failure" through specific steps: 1. identification; 2. elevation to a crisis; 3. framing of "the people" against those deemed responsible (i.e., the "others"); 4. propagation of the performance (e.g. through the media); 5. presentation of simple solutions requiring strong leadership; and 6. propagation of the crisis, which enables the maintenance of relevance and authority (Moffitt, 2015, p.198).

Although elements of this performance are not exclusive to populism – particularly within crisis politics more broadly – steps three and six are specific to populist crisis performance, as they underpin the essential link between crises and the articulation of populist discourse and leadership (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2025; 2020). Further, this performance is particularly salient for populism, as it is directly used to compensate for its ideological thinness, which is inherently marked by the absence of a fully articulated definition of "the people" (Ballacci and Goodman, 2023).

Examples of crisis-performing language in policy proposals can be found, once again, in Lega's and FdI's 2022 manifestos. For instance, the focus of family benefits on heterosexual couples is justified on the grounds of protecting against "gender ideology" and addressing the "fertility crisis" that Italy is currently facing.

2. **Emotional:** This variable corresponds to the "Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing" element of the framework. A policy proposal was coded as "emotional" if it utilised a language that evoked emotions that have been associated with populism in the literature – e.g., like rage, fear, resentment, and frustration – or similar concepts like injustice, inefficiency (e.g., of the state), and/or dignity (Ballacci

and Goodman, 2023; Müller, 2016; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2017). Example of this type of language can be found, for instance, in Lega’s manifestos with expressions such as “threat”, “condemn”, “fight against”, “protect”, “attacks”, “omissions”, “excluded”, “ashamed”, and “dignified” are used in a variety of proposals (Lega, 218; 2022).

3. **Manichean:** This variable corresponds to the “Dominance of Manichean discourses” element of the framework. A policy proposal was coded as “Manichean” if it appealed to a morally charged societal dichotomy through criteria such as deservingness, purity, or neglect. Importantly, although this variable captures aspects similar to the “emotional” and “majoritarian” variables, it differs in requiring a strong moral element and a reference to an opposing group viewed as morally negative. For example, both Lega and FdI propose revising or even annulling the “Reddito di Cittadinanza” by highlighting the undeservingness of certain recipients of the benefits and claiming that only those “effectively unable to work” or who “make themselves available to the community by performing useful work” were deserving of social support (FdI, 2022, p. 17; Lega, 2022, p. 116). Similarly, FdI (2013) proposes a ‘revolution’ of the welfare system specifically aimed at curbing welfare abuse.

For each variable, Table 3 reports illustrative positively coded excerpts that were discussed in the preceding paragraphs. Most of these excerpts were positively coded on more than one dimension. The full coding process can be accessed [here](#).

Table 3 Illustrative examples of positive coding by variable (Author’s elaboration)

Result	Levels of analysis	Variable	Excerpt example (translation from Italian to English)	Justification
Overall level of populism	Overall Content	Heterodox	“Stop the automatic adjustment of the retirement age to life expectancy.” (FdI, 2022, p. 18)	Against mainstream policy expertise of adapting RA to the life expectancy (OECD, 2025)
		Ideologically-thin	“Child income benefit of €400 per month for the first six years of life for each dependent minor. Introduction of a family tax quotient. Tax deductibility of domestic work. Parental leave covered up to 80% of salary and equalisation of protections for self-employed women. Incentives for companies hiring new mothers and women of childbearing age. Protection of working mothers and incentives for companies to provide workplace childcare facilities” (FdI, 2018, p. 2)	FdI is a right-wing conservative party (Donà, 2022) who has often argued for traditional family values and roles, thus their pro-family proposals are in contrast with their core ideology. Additionally, the proposal suggests income benefits paired with tax cuts for families, which are policy tools normally associated with opposing ideologies.
		Majoritarian	“Concrete financial support for those who are unable to work for objective reasons: children,	Uses criteria of deservingness (i.e., those who are “unable to work”)

			people with disabilities, and over-sixties without income.” (FdI, 2018, p.4)	to define the “people” worthy of support.
		Radical	“Abolish the Citizens’ Income and introduce a new measure to protect individuals without income who are genuinely vulnerable and unable to work or hard to employ: people with disabilities, over-60s, and families with dependent minors.” (FdI, 2022, p. 17)	Proposes to fully abolish a policy established by the previous government (in a quite a stark and explicit manner).
	Overall Form	Crisis	“All available data depict a social emergency that threatens the right to life now and in the future. The severe crisis Italy is experiencing affects citizens in different ways, widens social inequality, and prevents young people from planning ahead, leaving them uncertain on multiple fronts, including the prospect of starting a family” (FdI, 2018, p. 20)	Creates an extreme sense of crisis in relation to Italy’s consistent level of sub-replacement fertility.
		Emotional	“The Lega aims to implement policies that support the family, protect it from ideological attacks, and create the conditions for it to thrive and fulfil its multiple functions” (Lega, 2022, p. 69) “Without excesses or omissions, without situations in which there are sometimes ‘big beneficiaries’ (able to request or access all channels and resources) and sometimes ‘big excluded’ (who are too ashamed to ask and/or do not know where to turn or what to request).” (Lega, 2018, p. 56) “A pension reform is needed that reduces the types of benefits and, above all, makes the pension the ‘key instrument’ for ensuring a dignified life for people with significant disabilities.” (Lega, 2018, p.57)	Use of emotionally charged language which evokes feelings of anxiety, rage and injustice (e.g., “protect”, “attacks”, “omissions”, “excluded”, “ashamed”, “dignified”)
		Manichean	“The measure is also effective in countering abuses, such as those by falsely disabled people.” (FdI, 2013, p. 14)	The proposal uses language that explicitly points out morally “wrong” elements such as welfare abuses and being “falsely” disabled.

Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets>

Finally, as noted in Chapter 3, the procedural component of the ideal type was omitted from the coding scheme as it was originally designed to capture the process by which a policy proposal is implemented, which is a dynamic step of the policy-making process. Accordingly, very few, if any, results were expected from the operationalisation of this component for the analysis of policy proposals, which are a rather static step of the policy-making process. Still, to test this expectation, two tentative variables were used in a trial run of the coding scheme, namely “**sidestepping**” and “**direct**”. Because of the discrepancy between the dynamicity of the implementation process and

the static nature of policy proposals, these variables attempted to capture the intention of enacting populist policy implementation processes. In particular, “sidestepping” – which refers to the “Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players” and “Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors” elements of the framework – aimed to capture whether the discourse used in the analysed policy proposal downplayed the relevance of established policy-making processes and broader policy stakeholders – including supranational institutions (e.g., OECD or EU), and experts (e.g., academics or research institutes). “Direct” – which refers to the “Direct communication with the electorate” element of the framework – aimed to capture whether the proposal presented the intention to directly reflect the will of the people, unlike expert or mainstream policy.

As expected, these variables yielded little to no results, with “sidestepping” only being coded 2 out of 62 times and “direct” 0 out of 62 times. In particular, the two excerpts positively coded as being “sidestepping” – i.e., “Timely issuance of the implementing decrees of the Family Act” (FI, 2022); “Immediately, a super deduction on labour costs will be introduced for companies that increase employment compared to previous years.” (FdI, 2022) were borderline. Indeed, rather than defining the actual steps planned for their implementation, they only made references to the “immediate” or “prompt” intention to implement the proposed policies, which reflected the perceived urgency of the proposals and only vaguely implied a preference for decisionist implementation approaches.

Accordingly, this test confirmed the expectation outlined above and justified the removal of the procedural dimension from the coding scheme for analysing policy proposals. Further, these findings align with the literature on Italian populism, where populists typically direct their anti-establishment rhetoric at previous governments or ruling élites – whether national or European (i.e., “la casta”) – rather than at legislative processes themselves (Bottura, 2023; Ivaldi et al., 2019; Ventura, 2022). However, applying this coding scheme to other contexts where open attacks on institutions are present already at the electoral stage, for instance, as it occurred during Trump’s campaign, may require the inclusion of the procedural component and its related variables in the analysis.

Regarding the results of the coding process, three main levels of analysis are taken into consideration for each party at each election year: the overall form, the overall content and the overall level of populism. As mentioned in the main body of the text, these variables result from the arithmetic mean of the relevant base variables in the cases of the overall content and form, and from the mean of content and form in the case of the overall level of populism, as illustrated below with the example of the coding for FdI’s 2022 manifesto:

$$1. \text{ Overall content} = \frac{\Sigma \text{heterodox, ideologically thin, majoritarian, and radical}}{\text{total n of analysed variables (i.e., total n of analysed proposals x 4)}} = \frac{0+1+1+1+0+1+1+1+0+0+1+1+1+0+0+1+1+0+0+1+0+1+0+1+1+0}{24} = \frac{14}{24} = 0,58$$

Figure 1 Computation of the overall level of populist content in a party's manifesto at a given year

party	year	0-1 left-to-right-wing scale (CHES, 2022;)	policy proposal	Policy area	includes sub- proposal	Heterodox	Ideologically thin	Majoritarian	Radical	Crisis	Emotional	Manichean
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"1. Sostegno alla natalità e alla famiglia" (p.5)	More than one area	no	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"6. Sostenere la dignità del lavoro" (p.12)	ALMP	no	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"9. Per un vero Stato sociale che non dimentichi nessuno"	one area	no	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"10. Il diritto a una vecchiaia serena" (p.18)	Old age	no	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"11. Una sanità al servizio della persona" (p.19)	Health	no	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"12. A difesa della libertà e della dignità di ognuno" (p. Other	no	no	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	average for content and form				=AVERAGE(G71:J76)				0,444	
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	overall level of populism				0,514					

$$2. \text{ Overall form} = \frac{\Sigma \text{ crisis, emotional, Manichean}}{\text{total n of analysed variables (i.e., total n of analysed proposals x 3)}} = \frac{0+1+0+0+1+1+0+1+1+0+0+0+1+0+0+1+0}{18} = \frac{8}{18} = 0,44$$

Figure 2 Computation of the overall level of populist form in a party's manifesto at a given year

party	year	0-1 left-to-right-wing scale (CHES, 2022;)	policy proposal	Policy area	includes sub-proposal	Heterodox	Ideologically thin	Majoritarian	Radical	Crisis	Emotional	Manichean
		→										
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"1. Sostegno alla natalità e alla famiglia" (p.5)	More than one area	no	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"6. Sostenere la dignità del lavoro" (p.12)	ALMP	no	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"9. Per un vero Stato sociale che non dimentichi nessuno"	one area	no	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"10. Il diritto a una vecchiaia serena" (p.18)	Old age	no	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"11. Una sanità al servizio della persona" (p.19)	Health	no	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"12. A difesa della libertà e della dignità di ognuno" (p. Other	no	no	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	average for content and form				0,583				=AVERAGE(K71:M76)	
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	overall level of populism				0,514					

$$3. \text{ Overall level of populism: } \frac{\Sigma \text{ overall content, overall form}}{2} = \frac{0,58 + 0,44}{2} = \frac{1,02}{2} = 0,51$$

Figure 3 Example of the computation of the overall level of populism in a party's manifesto at a given year

party	year	0-1 left-to-right-wing scale (CHES, 2022;)	policy proposal	Policy area	includes sub- proposal	Heterodox	Ideologically thin	Majoritarian	Radical	Crisis	Emotional	Manichean	
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"1. Sostegno alla natalità e alla famiglia" (p.5)	More than one area	no	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"6. Sostenere la dignità del lavoro" (p.12)	ALMP	no	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"9. Per un vero Stato sociale che non dimentichi nessuno"	one area	no	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"10. Il diritto a una vecchiaia serena" (p.18)	Old age	no	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"11. Una sanità al servizio della persona" (p.19)	Health	no	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	"12. A difesa della libertà e della dignità di ognuno" (p. Other		no	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	average for content and form				0,583				0,444		
Fdi	2022	0,84666662	overall level of populism				=AVERAGE(G77:M77)						

5. Party-specific graphs from the study of social protection policy proposals

Figure 4 Overall levels of populism, populist content and form in FI/PdL and Lega's social policy (2006-2022)

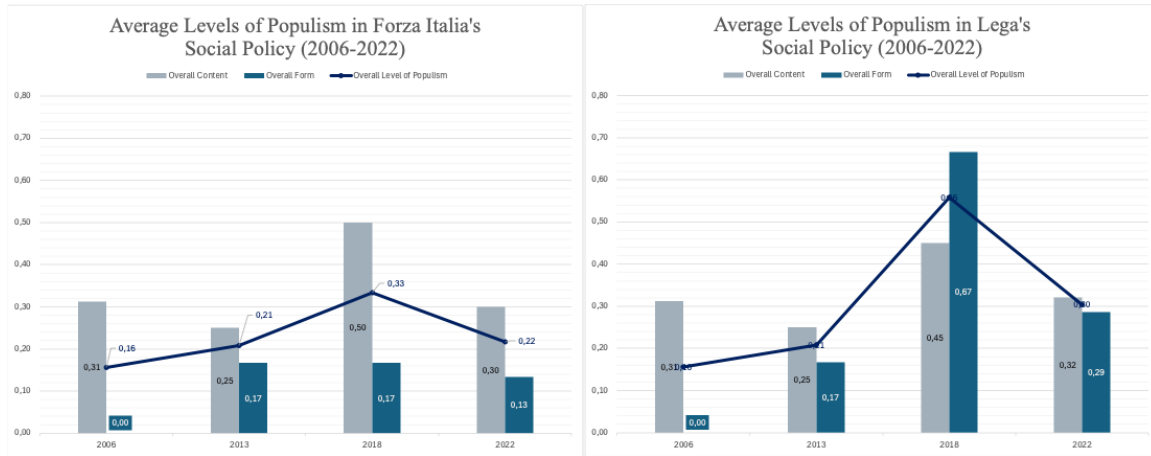


Figure 5 Overall levels of populism, populist content and form in M5S and FdI's social policy (2013-2022)

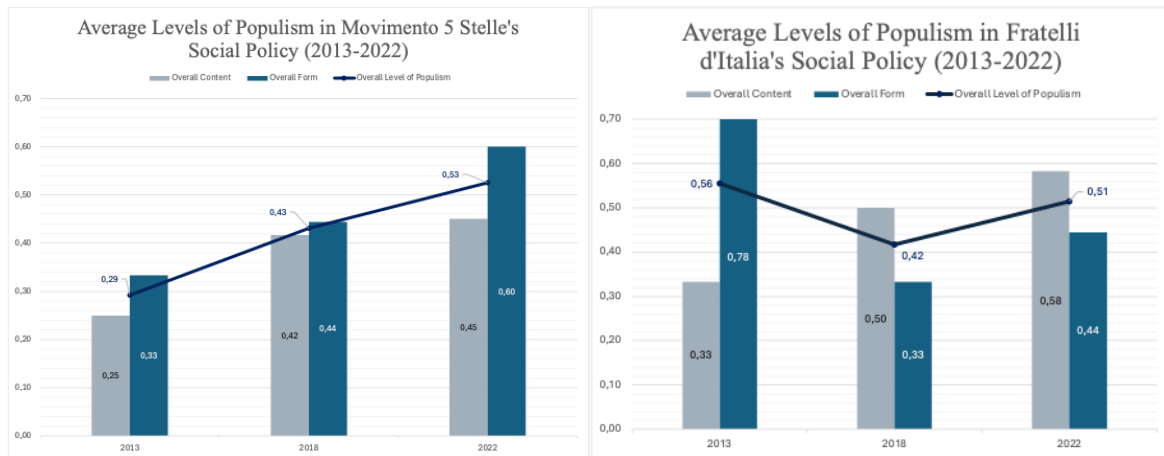
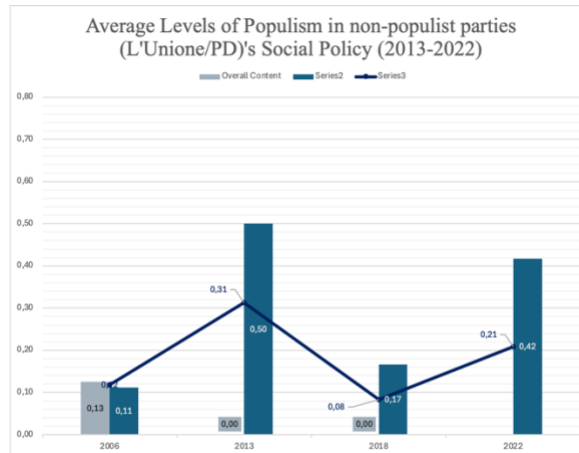


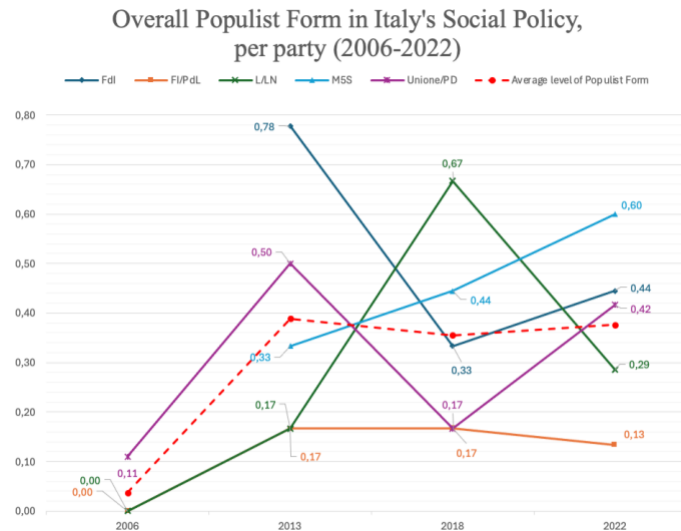
Figure 6 Overall levels of populism, populist content and form in L'Unione/PD's social policy (2006-2022)



6. Insights into the overall level of populist form in the post-2010 social policy proposals of major Italian parties

As the average level of populist content (see Main text [Figure 9](#)), the average level of populist form also follows an upward trend. Unlike its content, however, the formal dimension of populism was largely absent in 2006, emerging only from 2013 onwards and remaining broadly stable thereafter ([Appendix Figure 7](#)).

Figure 7 Overall levels of populist form in Italian social policy disaggregated per party (N = 62; 2006–2022).



When comparing our populist and non-populist parties, another key difference between form and content is that populist parties do not consistently score higher than non-populist parties, particularly in the earlier years of the analysis. First, in 2006, FI and Lega (which presented a joint manifesto for this election) displayed virtually no levels of populist form. As a result, the small amount of populist form in L'Unione (the benchmark) – driven primarily by 33% of its proposals being coded positively in the “emotional” variable – appears comparatively higher. Second, in 2013, PD emerged as the party with the second-highest level of populist form in its social policy proposals. Though considerably lower than FdI, which ranked first with the highest score in the whole analysis, PD was also substantially higher than all other parties in our sample that year. Similarly, in 2022, the party was the third highest in terms of populist form after M5S and FdI.

In this regard, PD and FdI interestingly follow nearly parallel trends, with both reaching their highest value in 2013, lowest in 2018, and middle in 2022. Notably, the gap between the two narrows throughout time, with their 2022 values being quite close to one another. Such a high level of populist form in PD may have been driven by electoral competition, since, as already discussed in [Chapter 4.1](#), in these years the party faced numerous populist opponents and may have therefore needed to adjust its rhetoric to remain competitive. This is particularly relevant for 2022 as the party's main political opponent was FdI, with Meloni establishing herself as the leader of the centre-right coalition.

Finally, shifting the focus to the rest of our sample, no other clear trends emerge apart from FI maintaining rather low levels of populist form throughout the whole time period. By contrast,

Lega's populist form increased sharply in 2018, the year in which the party prepared its first individual manifesto in this analysis. Strikingly, though election followed the 2015 migrant crisis, Lega's populist discourse was not strongly influenced by the party's nativism, but rather by themes of neglect and lack of dignity (80% of policy proposals positively coded as "emotional") which were blamed on previous administrations (60% of proposals positively coded as "Manichean") and on the situation of crisis Italy was in (60% of proposals being positively coded as "crisis"), especially given its demographic shortcomings. Lastly, the M5S's populist form increased rather linearly, with its discourse focusing mostly on emotional frames, especially in 2018 and 2022⁴¹ (all proposals coded positively).

7. Relevant Excerpts on the Reddito di Cittadinanza

a. *Additional excerpts from Grillo's speeches*

- **2013c:** "Nobody should be left behind! Nobody should be left behind" Nobody should have to kill themselves to find work! Nobody should die while they are working! Enough! Nobody should be left behind! That's why we have simply [...] put the Reddito di Cittadinanza at the centre. [...] a citizenship income so that if someone loses their job, they can still survive. We have this duty towards people, not cars, not fridges, people!"
- **2013e:** "Here, people kill themselves when they lose their jobs. So I give you a subsidy, call it what you want, a citizenship income. You lose your job; I let you live! [...] because those who lose their jobs and have nothing become desperate and have no other choice but to become delinquents. [...] Either we help each other out, or we give each other a hand. So when we say that we do an income, I will [...] offer you three jobs you're at home with 1000 euros, then we will come in with the relocation offices, we will be there with the whole network, everything will be transparent. We will offer you three jobs; if you don't accept, you lose the subsidy. Like in the Netherlands, like in Germany. But at least you don't die!" "There is no money, 'Gargamel', there is no money... there is no money, 'demagogue', 'billionaire'... There is no money. So let's start getting them where there is money. There is money. Let's start getting a billion euros from electoral reimbursements with retroactive effect immediately from parties, around a billion 'eh'. They all make laws, they all make laws, they say they don't want them anymore. It would be sufficient to make a check and give them back as we did. We did not take them! [...] They tell you that you need money for politics [...] Us, in three years without 1 euro [...] with the snow with the tempests [...] without any money in 3 years we have become the third... the second... the first political force in the country!"
- **2013f:** "I have seen some losers here [lit: lasts and second to last] [...] that survive on 5, 6, 700 euros a month, and that cannot survive. I refuse to live in a country where we speak of bullshit from morning to night, and you have to live with 10000 poor individuals. So, the Reddito di

⁴¹ The small number of proposals analysed in 2013 might be a plausible reason for which no levels of emotional rhetoric were found in M5S proposals. Indeed, the party's overall rhetoric in that time was quite emotional (see Ivaldi et al., 2017).

Cittadinanza, I don't care where we will get the money, we will get it from somewhere! [...] We need to consider income and work separately [...] growth will take away work [...] in 20 years, only about 10% of people, because work will be done by machines. [...] then why not say, we will do a citizenship income for anyone, anyone! As a right, as a right to existence. From when you are born to when you are dead, you have an income. Then if you want to work, you work, and you add it to it. If you don't want to work, you don't work"

b. Excerpts from the preamble of D.D.L 1148/2013:

- **P.5:** "No one should be left behind! Currently in Italy, too many people and families have an income that does not allow them to live with dignity"; "The global crisis underway is not contingent but systemic and structural. It is a point of no return with which global capitalism must reckon."; "It is necessary to act immediately with a change of direction and to place the wellbeing of citizens at the centre of political action, recognising their basic rights first and foremost."; "We must become aware that, with the measures adopted by the current political class, there will never again be stable and guaranteed work for all. The consequence of all this is a progressive and irreversible exclusion of many from the social fabric, and thus a general impoverishment of society, a progressive loss of inclusion and community, the counterpart of which is an increase in insecurity, social risk, and urban violence – sources of anger and individual entrenchment of a few privileged individuals in their acquired positions."
- **P.6:** "The State has so far responded inadequately to the implementation of social policies aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion. The introduction of the shopping card has not constituted, and does not constitute, an adequate response to the situation of serious social emergency."
- **P.7:** "A simplification of the social assistance system is deemed necessary to make it at once more reliable and essential, more concretely present in the lives of citizens, many of whom are forced to survive the employment crisis while simultaneously confronting a system that is excessively fragmented and unable to provide certainty. A general rationalisation of employment services is also necessary, through a comprehensive reform of existing structures, enhancing and expanding the centrality of public institutions starting from the role of labour and social policies, avoiding duplication and overlapping of functions through a clear division of competences."; "A State whose purpose is to take care of its citizens must leave no one behind: therefore, in a first phase, it must place at the centre of its political compass a guaranteed minimum income for anyone living below the relative poverty line. Every citizen must be able to count on a minimum income indispensable for living with dignity."; "The ideal, future, and desirable level coincides with the implementation of a universal, individual, and unconditional citizenship income, i.e. intended for all adult residents regardless of income and assets, not conditional on the occurrence of particular circumstances and not subordinated to the acceptance of conditions. We will be able to reach this level only following a radical reform of the tax system and the social system, aimed at a better redistribution of the tax burden, with the dual objective – certain and no longer deferrable – of eliminating the scourge of tax evasion"

and reducing the tax and contributory burden.”; “The purpose of this bill is to achieve, at a first and not yet ideal level, the introduction of the citizenship income, namely those social and economic measures aimed at realising the objective – repeatedly affirmed by the European Union – of redefining the model of collective wellbeing adopted by the Italian State, abandoning once and for all the current fragmented and welfare-dependent organisation and directing political choices towards the adoption of a system aimed at reducing social exclusion and increasing the development opportunities of each individual within modern organised society.”

- **P.9:** “The rights to information, education, work, and culture are protected through the establishment of the citizenship income across the entire national territory with the aim of...”; “The definition of citizenship income is provided, consisting of the set of measures aimed at income support for all residents in the national territory living below the poverty risk threshold.”; “The bill provides that for all Italian citizens, European citizens, and foreigners from countries that have signed reciprocity agreements on social security [...]”
- **P.10:** “For persons who, in the twelve months prior to submitting the application, received an income greater than four times the annual reference citizenship income, paragraph 4 of Article 3 provides that the disbursement of the citizenship income be deferred, unlike persons in more critical income situations. The calculation of the waiting period, quantified in number of months, is determined through a mathematical formula included in the annex.”; “Article 4 defines who is entitled to the citizenship income. It is inspired by principles of universality, albeit linked to economic and financial sustainability. Therefore, the measure is extended to all resident European citizens and to foreigners from countries that have concluded reciprocity agreements on social security.”; “For this reason, for younger people – i.e. adults up to the age of twenty-five – possession of a professional qualification or a secondary school diploma, or alternatively enrolment in a corresponding course of study or training, is established as a necessary and fundamental requirement for accessing the citizenship income.”
- **P.11:** “Article 9 governs the obligations of the beneficiary. The general obligations, which must be respected by all beneficiaries, provide that the beneficiary, of non-pensionable age, is required to register with employment centres, to declare their availability for work, to undertake, within seven days, pathways for labour market insertion, and to promptly communicate, within a pre-established deadline, any change in their income situation, so that the exact amount of the benefit to which they are entitled can be recalculated.”
- **P.12:** “Another general obligation established by Article 9 is that of making a small contribution to the community, in line with one’s qualifications and inclinations, by making part of one’s time available for participation in projects in the cultural, social, artistic, environmental, educational, and common goods protection spheres, to be carried out in the municipality of residence. It will be the municipalities that establish and manage the projects for the use of this special resource.”; “Article 11 indicates the obligations to be respected in relation to labour market insertion. Among these, the most important is the obligation to

declare availability for work at the territorially competent employment centres. Other obligations include: following the pathway for labour market insertion; actively engaging in job searching through an individual action plan; following the instructions indicated by the competent services; following, if necessary, a training pathway; attending interviews or selection tests for work activities relevant to certified competences.”; “Article 12 defines the grounds for forfeiture of the benefit in cases of non-compliance with the obligations set out. In particular, forfeiture occurs when the beneficiary of non-pensionable age and capable of work attends more than three interviews with an evident intention of obtaining a negative outcome, or refuses the third consecutive job offer deemed suitable, or withdraws without just cause from an employment contract on two occasions during the calendar year.”; “Mothers, up to the third year of age of their children, or fathers, if requested or in the case of a single-parent household, are exempt from the obligation to seek employment.”

*c. Selected speeches related to the **Reddito di Cittadinanza***

- **Di Maio at “Porta a Porta” on the 25/09/2018 (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2018):** “I am also sorry that we are talking about decimal points when perhaps the decimal points are just the starting point, not the end goal. I spoke of a people’s budget because with the citizen’s pension and the citizen’s income that we will introduce in this budget law, history may judge me – you may say that I was not a good minister, that the Five Star Movement was not a good political force, I don’t know – but we, decisively, with this budget, with this budget law, will have abolished poverty. Because when we bring all minimum pensions up to 780 euros a month and we ensure that people living in poverty can have a work reintegration programme supported by an income that helps them get back into employment – because nobody will be sitting on the sofa, they will have to train and do community service work – we will have created a completely different cultural impact in our society. That is to say, all those people, and allow me to express just this one concept in a few seconds, all those people who continually live in a state of humiliation at the hands of the state, who go to an employment centre and find no answers, who look for work and send out CVs and find nothing, who are pensioners but have to go to the soup kitchen – all those people will finally be able to start walking with their heads held high again. That is the goal, together with the flat tax and the overcoming of the Fornero pension reform: we promised it and it will be abolished, we absolutely must overcome it, this is what needs to be done, a courageous budget law but one that keeps the accounts in order. Now you ask: how much of a deficit will we run, how much won’t we? I tell you instead that we are doing it, we are now in the final stretch, these are important days of economic meetings with the government united around a table to quantify all the resources and spending provisions that must come first and foremost from cuts, because I have not forgotten the promises I made to Italians: unnecessary spending must be cut, tax breaks for polluting industries like oil drilling must be eliminated. It is not just – and perhaps Renzi – and the parliamentary allowances that we cut this summer, and today Cirino Pomicino, thanks to us, receives a pension based on the contributions he paid, no longer the privileged kind that the old allowances were, but also many cuts to the machinery of the state that serve no purpose. Then what remains after the cuts can

be financed through deficit spending. And you were saying: do you want to do what Macron did? Well, France has shown us one thing – that all these European dogmas are outdated, austerity is over. We instead went along with it more than anyone else, meaning the forecast for this year by the previous government was 0.8, of what was agreed at European level – goodness knows what they negotiated – we sometimes shot ourselves in the foot without anyone even asking us to. What we want to do is not blow up the accounts or send the spread soaring, we want to be courageous, meaning: instead of thinking about the little numbers first, let us think about the citizens first. That is right, and then based on that, we are pleased that even France is telling us that what was agreed with the European Union can also be renegotiated. On the matter of Autostrade, on what happened: there is a very damning report produced by the commission appointed by Minister Toninelli, and we will see.”

- **FI [addressing M5S] (Senato della Repubblica, 2019a, 2019b):**

BERNINI (FI-BP). I request the floor for a vote declaration.

PRESIDENT. You have the floor.

BERNINI (FI-BP). Mr President, colleagues, we have said a great deal about this measure over these past days. I must say that I was particularly struck by the way in which colleagues from the majority intervened during the general debate. I very much appreciated the fact that, this time, they did participate; indeed, I apologise for having cast doubt on their participation in my opening remarks, but it was past precedent that made me suspicious. This time our colleagues did intervene, and it gave us great pleasure, because at least they spoke. I hope that on future occasions they may also listen to the voice of the minority and perhaps make good use of our suggestions. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). –

Indeed, colleagues, as has been rightly noted by those who spoke before me – who very correctly outlined the scope of this measure – this big decree [lit. “one-one”] is becoming a little decree [lit. “ino-ino”] (Applause from the FI-BP Group), because the pool of beneficiaries and the available funds are being reduced. President Di Maio, you who went to Brussels as real men, banging your fists on the table, and tried to pass a budget law – on which this measure is founded – worthy of a man who never asks for anything, the “Denim” man who tears off his shirt and says “I am here only to bring results home” (Applause from the FI-BP Group), in reality you were mistaken: you did not go to Brussels, you went to Canossa. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). And unfortunately you brought home a very poor result for Italy.

This measure has been described by everyone in idyllic terms, as the abolition of poverty, as a moment of happiness for this Parliament. All Five Star colleagues, or a good number of them, intervened saying: “We are happy to be able to tell Italians that we have kept our promises”; colleagues, Italians will come to realise that these promises are lies, illusions. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). They are already waking up from the anaesthesia of empty words, propaganda, and slogans. Italians are already waking up from the torpor, the lethargy, the illusion of poverty abolished on “Porta a Porta”, Minister Di Maio. Poverty is abolished through facts. In this Chamber

we must never forget the massive doses of reality that our economic situation requires us to bring here, for the benefit of all. (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

Colleagues, as has been said in the interventions before mine: everything that should be growing is falling, and everything that should be falling is growing! (Applause from the FI-BP and PD Groups). Public debt, the deficit, and unemployment are growing; industrial production, business and consumer confidence, and exports – which have been our crown jewel and have sustained our businesses – are falling. (Applause from the FI-BP and PD Groups). And you are happy? You are happy? You say this will be a wonderful year? I heard someone say “yes, 2019 will be wonderful, but we’ll see you in 2020”. Colleagues, it is Italy that will find itself dramatically exposed in 2020, with increasingly serious problems that this big decree [lit. “one”] will not solve. A category of people who truly require serious, significant solutions – solutions that go beyond the arrogance, ignorance, and recklessness of those who believe that measures are built on slogans, the arrogance of those who believe that work is created by decree – will be turned into something else entirely. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). Colleagues, we do not need navigators from a shipwreck that was announced in advance: they are announced castaways, people who have no professional skills whatsoever, no capacity to find jobs. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). Colleagues, jobs are not found by navigators, sailing and sinking; jobs come from growth, development, the reduction of the tax wedge, and the family quotient. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). Poverty is fought with the dignity income – what we did – the social card, the baby bonus, and real tax relief. And our Lega colleagues remember this well, because they were with us when we approved real measures.

Do you know what the mistake is? The real illusionism – which is actually sorcery, colleagues, stop playing at being Maga Magò, enough with the sorcery! (Applause from the FI-BP Group) – is trying to convince 5 million poor people – Italian poor, people in absolute poverty – firstly, that they will receive a citizenship income, and secondly, that they will escape poverty, by mixing irreconcilable things, such as income support, which is nonetheless a duty. Any government, as its first measure, must address the issue of poverty and its eradication. (Applause from Senator Pichetto Fratin).

Friends, I heard surreal things in this Chamber, such as the question: “what do you have against the poor?”, which I see claimed by colleague Pesco, who is the one who denied live streaming in the Committee during the examination of the budget law because he was afraid of transparency. I congratulate you once again, Senator Pesco. (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

Colleagues, we do not want to fight growth and development but poverty, in order to lift the poor out of a condition that is not a value but a suffering! You want to create the poor and the State parasites, who depend on you, on us, and on our pockets and our public coffers, and when our money – because it belongs to us – runs out – which it will – they will find themselves even poorer than before. (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

Colleagues, another matter concerns a recurring claim I have heard made in this Chamber over these past days: “we have overcome the Fornero law.” I reiterate that I do not wish to deliver sad news to the colleagues who said this, but Quota 100 confirms the Fornero law, because it is

absolutely founded on its framework: it is nothing other than a voluntary and temporary reduction – hinged on a window that opens and closes over three years – that pensioners apply to their pension on the basis of a bank loan, the interest on which they themselves will also pay. (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

Let us tell Italians the truth: this is Quota 100, namely the absolute confirmation of the Fornero law's framework. Let us not tell lies to Italians: enough with sorcery; enough with arrogance; enough with slogans! Let us tell Italians that the citizenship income is paid for with the deficit, that is, with the future debt of Italians and all of us, taken from our pockets, and that the citizenship income is also paid for with Italians' pensions, which will not be index-linked. (Applause from the FI-BP Group). And these are certainly not golden pensions: 1,300 euros net per month that will not benefit from the increase due to the rise in the cost of living. For you this will be nothing, friends – I see you so calm and relaxed when it comes to taking money from pensioners – but it amounts to 30 to 60 euros less per month, which matters to a pensioner. You send people into retirement and to cover the citizenship income you take money from pensioners: what a fine operation, congratulations! I would call it Quota Zero, or rather, zero sum, not Quota 100. You give and you take, you take and you give. (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

There is then another thing, friends, that struck me greatly: it was a beautiful family image described by some colleagues, especially from the Five Star Movement but also from the Lega, who spoke of grandparents who, being able to retire early, would find themselves at home looking after their grandchildren. But, colleagues, if the generational lift stops working, the house will be very crowded indeed: there will also be the children without jobs, not just the grandparents looking after the grandchildren! (Applause from the FI-BP Group).

So, enough lies and enough arrogance. We are dismayed by your arrogance: you are selling your souls, because you know perfectly well – I repeat – that jobs are not created by decree and poverty, Minister Di Maio, is not defeated on “Porta a Porta”.

We say yes to work, yes to infrastructure, yes to investment, yes to the TAV! No to lies, no to this Government's decree-law, which steals the future from Italians! (Senators from the FI-BP Group put on blue jackets bearing the words “yes to work, no to lies” and protective helmets of the same colour bearing the words “yes to TAV”).

PRESIDENT. Senator Bernini, this kind of performance does not belong in this Assembly or in the dignity of its institutions – it belongs in the piazzas. Stop it, have everything removed, now!

I suspend the sitting. (The sitting, suspended at 10:43, resumed at 10:46).

The sitting has resumed.

I would like to remind members that performances of this kind do not belong in the Senate Chamber, but only in the piazzas. (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd'Az Groups).

- **M5S being interrupted by PD (Senato della Repubblica, 2019a, 2019b):**

TAVERNA (M5S). I request the floor for a vote declaration.

PRESIDENT. You have the floor.

TAVERNA (M5S). Mr President, colleagues, today a circle closes that opened approximately six years ago, when I took the floor in this Assembly to recount the end of a merciless Italian story that contributed to the moral and economic decline of the country.

This time I speak, instead, on behalf of the entire Five Star Movement, of which I am honoured and proud to be a member, to mark the beginning of a new story – one rooted in our Constitution – that finally tears down those economic and social obstacles which, through the negligence and indifference of an old political class, have until now prevented citizens from being equal and free in equal measure. (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd’Az Groups).

Today our Constitution – the one the PD wanted to reduce to tatters – is being given effect. Today the State looks to those who have been left behind, far behind, in a corner; to those who have been made to feel like failures and to stop hoping for the future. Today the Senate Assembly approves the citizenship income. (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd’Az Groups. Comments from the FI-BP Group).

Everyone will be given the conditions to start again and to believe in themselves and in their own future. The time of “we’ll let you know” is over; the time of “a job? These days you couldn’t find one if you paid in gold” is over. Also over is the time of well-meaning advice dispensed by the former Minister of Labour and Social Policy, who said “go and play a game of five-a-side football, maybe you’ll meet someone who’ll offer you a job!” (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd’Az Groups).

The citizenship income is indeed much more than financial support. Everything was done to make people believe otherwise. There was talk of subsidies and welfarism, and I even heard it called charity by those who truly handed out charity – in instalments of 80 euros, and in some cases asking for it back. (Applause from the M5S Group. Protests from the PD Group).

Everyone now knows that the income is much more than that. Everyone knows that the citizenship income is an instrument of active labour policy. When I look back, when I think of all the extraordinary things that a movement of citizens... (Repeated protests from the PD Group).

PRESIDENT. Colleagues, please allow Senator Taverna to continue. Everyone may say what they wish. You will then express your dissent through the vote.

TAVERNA (M5S). When I look back, when I think of all the extraordinary things that a movement of citizens has done... (Comments from Senator Laus).

Senator Laus, must I also call you to order when I am not presiding? (Applause from the M5S Group). Shall I call you to order from here too? Your discourtesy and your rudeness... (Repeated comments from Senators Laus and Marcucci).

PRESIDENT. Senator Marcucci, please, sit down. Let the speech finish. Everyone may say what they wish – we are in a free Parliament. (Protests from the PD Group).

TAVERNA (M5S). When I look back, when I think of all the extraordinary things that a movement of citizens has achieved in these years for the people of this country, the first images that come to mind are those of the two marches from Perugia to Assisi, where we stood alongside thousands of people calling for an opportunity to get back in the game – rights, social justice – calling for no one to be left behind any longer. It was there, listening to the many voices of those forced to live on the margins and to watch their children emigrate abroad while the usual suspects grew ever richer (Comments from Senator Malpezzi), that I understood that it is the story of each one of us that writes the history of an entire country. After all, it is from the stories of ordinary citizens that the Five Star Movement was born. But I cannot forget how much effort it has cost us. It has not been easy. (Comments from Senator Bellanova). The Five Star Movement made it its most important battle. It was the first point of the programme already at the 2013 elections. Since then we have never stopped fighting in Parliament for it to become reality, and I particularly wish to thank my colleague and friend Nunzia Catalfo, today President of the Labour Committee, for the tireless commitment with which she dedicated herself to drafting and promoting the bill. (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd'Az Groups).

LAUS (PD). Take back the 80 euros!

TAVERNA (M5S). It was October 2013 when we tabled it here in the Senate – how could one forget? At that time I was Group Leader; it was the period when the Senate was voting on Berlusconi's disqualification from office, because, you see, colleague Saccone, we are proud to have a political leader who is thirty-two years old, with no criminal record, who did humble jobs before becoming a Minister like all young Italians – and it is certainly not for me to remind you of the history of your own political leader. (Applause from the M5S Group. Ironical applause from the FI-BP Group. Senators from the M5S Group rise to their feet).

PRESIDENT. Please, remain seated.

TAVERNA (M5S). Only five years ago Italy found itself with a convicted man still sitting in Parliament, after twenty years in government to the tune of laws written for himself alone; a technocratic government had just ended that wrote laws only for Europe, and another was about to begin that wrote laws for friends, banks, friends' banks, and banks' friends. (Applause from the M5S and L-SP-PSd'Az Groups. Protests from the PD and FI-BP Groups).

PRESIDENT. Is it possible to listen without this uproar? Enough!

TAVERNA (M5S). And then we arrived, and from opposition we immediately began fighting in Parliament for a measure to combat poverty.

Now the roles have been reversed: we are in government and you are in opposition, still united – this time against the citizenship income. (Applause from the M5S Group).

But how can one sit in Parliament and oppose the only measure capable of dismantling social inequalities in our country?

For too many years this country has been diminished, humiliated, eaten away piece by piece...

LAUS (PD). Take back the 80 euros! Shameful!

TAVERNA (M5S). Senator Laus, you have said that seven times!

MALPEZZI (PD). Do it then! Do it! These are just words!

TAVERNA (M5S). ...by that right and that left which, without a shred of shame, today go around brandishing their intention to collect signatures for a referendum against the citizenship income.

MALPEZZI (PD). But who?

TAVERNA (M5S). It was not enough for them to destroy the welfare state by creating an abyss between rich and poor. No, now these same poor people – children of their own policies – these individuals have even decided to declare war on. The left, the left. But where is the left? You have renounced even yourselves in order to oppose the citizenship income. (Applause from the M5S Group. Protests from the PD Group).

MARCUCCI (PD). You cannot address us directly – you must address the Assembly!

TAVERNA (M5S). They tried everything.

PRESIDENT. It is not possible to continue in this manner.

TAVERNA (M5S). And then came the time of the funding arguments... (Protests from the PD Group). (Senator Marcucci approaches the M5S Group benches and addresses Senator Taverna. The Senate Questors intervene.)

PRESIDENT. Please, Senator Taverna, I do not wish to suspend the sitting. Please, everyone return to their seats.

TAVERNA (M5S). President, shall we send them to sit down? (Senators Bellanova and Laus hold up signs reading “#SHAME”).

PRESIDENT. Senator Taverna, please confine yourself to making a calm vote declaration. (Applause from the PD Group. Comments from the M5S Group).

TAVERNA (M5S). That is precisely what I am doing, to the extent permitted by the disorderly conduct of the Democratic Party in the front benches. (Applause from the M5S Group).

PRESIDENT. Senator Taverna, please continue. You have four minutes remaining.

- **PD and FI deputies’ declarations after leaving their post (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019):**

- **FI:** “After two weeks in which we worked day and night, today – as has already happened in the past with other measures – after having repeatedly postponed the Chamber’s proceedings, we are given a mere quarter of an hour to analyse 15 complex

amendments, in the most complete disorganisation of the work, including on a technical level,” the members of the Labour and Social Affairs Committee wrote in a statement. “A mere quarter of an hour to analyse and carry out our work as opposition, by no later than 7pm today, with a confidence vote that we know to be already imminent, is a colossal mockery of Parliament. We have therefore decided to suspend our work in Committee, as we find ourselves in the complete impossibility of working – but above all, we have absolutely no intention of lending ourselves to this yet another farce”.

- **PD:** “It is a disgrace the rapporteurs cannot even explain the amendments they have signed. We asked the government and the majority for clarification on the content of the new provisions, but no one is able to provide answers. We are in total chaos and the funding figures for the measure indicated by the government do not even add up”.
- **Meloni criticising the RdC on several occasions:**
 - **From Agenzia Italia News (2022):** “As for the opposition taking to the streets, I have nothing to say – I think they are doing their job, I respect the opposition’s choices even if I do not share them. I do not know if Enrico Letta has said he wants to take to the streets to defend the citizenship income, but I would note that, if I am not mistaken, they too voted against the first version of the citizenship income. Look, I can only say that I have always been consistent with my position and I think this way. We were voted for because this was written in our programme, and this is what we will do. The left and the Five Star Movement will go into opposition – I obviously understand Conte’s point of view on the citizenship income and on the 110% bonus. During the electoral campaign he held press conferences saying “thanks to us you have had your homes sorted out for free, for free” – how do you say it – there is a 40-billion-euro hole in the public finances, for free. No, because the State never does anything for free – it is always Italian citizens’ money. So I understand that for those with a different outlook, making choices that are right, that are not bonuses, that are not, shall we say, small acts of sabotage, but are choices of vision, may not be to everyone’s liking. Our vision is certainly not that of our opponents – otherwise we would be the same thing. So I understand that they do not share it. I have nothing to say, I respect their choices. As if I am someone who gets frightened by street demonstrations – I have taken part in millions of them in my life; in fact they make me – I mean, I believe they are an important part of democracy and democratic debate, so let the street demonstrations come.”
 - **Corriere della Sera (2022b):** “With this budget law we are keeping our commitments also on the citizenship income. We have always said that a just state – that the citizenship income was a wrong measure – because a just state does not place on the same level of assistance those who can work and those who cannot. It is exactly from this philosophy that we proceed. We would obviously have needed more time to carry out a comprehensive reform of this matter, which we will do – in one month we were

not in a position to do so. But in the meantime, faithful to our principles, we establish that those who cannot work will continue to be protected: the disabled, the elderly, families without income with dependent minors – we are adding pregnant women. But for the others, for those who are in a position to work, the citizenship income will be abolished at the end of this year – at the end of 2023, I beg your pardon, next year – and in 2023 it will not be able to be received for more than eight months in total, and in any case it lapses upon refusal of the first job offer. Why have we made this choice? We have made this choice because, not yet having put in place all the tools with which we want to transform welfare into work, we have given ourselves a transitional period to accompany our choices. You have already seen that one choice has been made – because, shall we say, the zeroing of contributions for those who hire citizenship income recipients is a measure in this direction. But we had also explained, for example, how the European Social Fund can intervene in a very serious way to train these people and find them a job. So we have chosen, shall we say, to maintain a transitional period to accompany what will be the end of the citizenship income for those who are in a position to work. Because I believe – and I continue to believe, and no one will get this objective out of my head – and obviously some will tear their garments, I see political forces already calling people to the streets, fine. But I would like to know whether those who conceived the citizenship income, when they conceived it, imagined it as a tool with which the State should look after people from the age of 18 to 60 – because I would humbly point out that there are people who have been receiving it for three years without interruption of more than one month. So evidently it has not worked as it was supposed to work, or we have established the principle that for some Italians the State looks after them indefinitely. I believe the State should look after them by finding these people work, by helping them to have a job and to be able to improve their condition, rather than keeping them in that condition of difficulty. Incidentally, forgive me, I forgot an element that I think is fundamental – among the elements we are introducing, there is also the obligation of physical presence on national territory for those receiving the income, because I would point out that there are very many cases of people receiving the citizenship income in Italy who are not in Italy – so I think this too must be verified.”

- **Corriere della Sera (2022a):** “On the citizenship income – among the things I have heard said, I also heard someone say ‘Meloni is taking away our income and forcing us to go and steal – we are already organised, we have nothing, we have to steal by Tuesday.’ The income and stealing – the option of going to work is perhaps one you should also take into consideration. And yes, it is true that work is difficult in Italy, but perhaps it is not quite as difficult as some think. I mean, there are various companies that are asking the government, within the framework of the immigration flow decree, to allow certain migrants to enter the country to do jobs they need done. And I asked what contracts these irregular migrants – whom we want to allow into Italy – would be

working under, and I was told: a national collective agreement. Now, a national collective agreement is a contract that has, shall we say, all the guarantees – it is a contract that normally provides a dignified wage because there are minimum rates, sick pay, holidays, a thirteenth month salary, and severance pay. I think that between the citizenship income, going to steal, and choosing to do a perfectly dignified job of any kind – for which it seems we are asking migrants to enter Italy because Italians cannot be found who want to do them – the latter is decidedly better.”

- **Giorgia Meloni News (2022):** “The citizenship income has been a total failure. Despite having cost the State an exorbitant sum of approximately 9 billion euros per year – drawing a veil of pity over the thousands upon thousands of frauds it generated, also benefiting criminals, mafia members, and drug dealers – it failed as a tool for combating poverty, which was supposed to be abolished but instead reached record highs; and it failed as an active labour market policy measure, given that very few of the citizenship income recipients ultimately found employment or a dignified job. It is yet further proof that we were right when we said that resources for active labour policies should be used to help businesses hire. Today almost everyone says this, yet it remains the case that Fratelli d’Italia was the only political force in the entire Parliament during the last legislature that never once voted in favour of the citizenship income. This is why we believe that a just state does not place those who can work and those who cannot on the same level. A protective instrument is needed for those who are not in a position to work – for the over-60s, for the disabled, for families without income who have dependent minors. But for the others, what is needed is training and the tools necessary to facilitate hiring. Because the truth is that the only way to combat and abolish poverty and to allow those in difficult circumstances to improve their condition is not achieved by keeping people in the same reality in which they find themselves – it is achieved by enabling them to have a job: a dignified job, a well-paid job, that can help them grow regardless of the condition they come from. That is what a just state does.”
- **Other members of FdI criticising the RdC**
 - **Il Mattino (2023) reporting Minister of Agriculture Lollobrigida:** “In the countryside there is a need for labour,” the Fratelli d’Italia minister confirmed, “and young Italians must know that going to work in agriculture is not degrading. On the contrary, what is not a model of civilised behaviour is not going to work, sitting on the sofa and burdening others with the citizenship income”.
 - **Zucconi (2022):** “The citizenship income has not abolished poverty but has encouraged fraud and absurd profiteering, and has fostered a culture of sofa-sitting at the State’s expense. Now, thanks to an amendment by Fratelli d’Italia – of which I am the lead signatory – approved last night as part of the Aiuti Decree, we have laid the groundwork for abolishing the logic of clientelistic sofa-sitting. We have established that an employer will be able to propose hiring directly to a citizenship income recipient who,

in the event of refusal, will lose one of the two conditions that allow them to receive the benefit. It is the classic simple solution – a common-sense answer – which yesterday was recognised as such by the majority and the government. A breach has been opened in the wall of the citizenship income: a very important first step that signals how the majority of political forces, with the exception of the Five Stars, recognise the resounding failure of the RdC, necessarily laying the groundwork for its complete overhaul. With the resources saved thanks to this amendment, the Government must now commit to reducing taxation on workers' pay packets.”

8. Selected Excerpts related to the AdI and SFL

- **M5S leader Giuseppe Conte commenting the AdI and SFL (Camera dei Deputati, 2023b):**

PRESIDENT. Deputy Giuseppe Conte has requested the floor. You have the floor.

GIUSEPPE CONTE (M5S). Mr President, honourable colleagues, Minister, on 17 June last, 20,000 people marched through the streets of Rome and sent a clear message to this Government, which takes sadistic pleasure in ignoring the cry of suffering of those who cannot make ends meet, of those who are forced to tighten their belts ever further; 20,000 people cried out: enough with precarious lives! And this is not a slogan – it is a cry born of a concrete need, shared by the vast majority of our fellow citizens, who are held hostage by an Executive that, in these months, has shown itself to have a truly singular conception of patriotism. In 8 months, this Government has demonstrated a complete lack of respect for work and for its dignity, which are nonetheless at the very foundation of our constitutional architecture, beginning with Article 1 of our Constitution.

The Government has introduced a veritable counter-reform that has dismantled an important part of our welfare system, to which you then chose to add a measure that elevated lifelong precariousness to a rule and legitimised it. There is something profoundly hypocritical and contradictory in your politics, because on the one hand you present yourselves as the guardians of family and natality, while on the other you deprive the young and the not-so-young of the very possibility of building a family and planning a future. (Applause from the M5S Group). With this counter-reform you have condemned a wide swath of citizens to social hardship and have knowingly poured fuel on the fire of a country pushed into a surreal race to the bottom between the last and the second-to-last.

President Meloni, since taking office, has championed one concept: the principle of meritocracy. But we too are in favour of meritocracy, if it means recognising everyone's possibility to express their own abilities and talents. But the use you make of this principle is completely distorted. What meritocracy can you demand of those who do not even have enough money to eat and meet their basic needs of life? (Applause from the M5S Group). Your meritocracy sounds like a cruel joke to those who are left behind, a mockery of the most vulnerable, and appears even more distorted when we consider that the rich and powerful enjoy your favour. You demonstrate this with tax evaders, with the corrupt, with people who deal in cash, with your entrepreneur friends who can obtain public contracts even without competitive tendering. (Applause from the M5S Group).

Let us call things as they are: your meritocracy is social Darwinism. Yours is a politics that destroys the democratic principle of the law being equal for all, in order to build a system that reinforces the privileges of the few and reserves indifference for the many who are left behind.

With this measure, today, the Government returns Italy to year zero. As is well known, ours was the last country on the continent to introduce this social protection measure for those in need. The citizenship income represented concrete help – but do not overlook this – also a glimmer of hope for millions of citizens: young and old, elderly, young people, children. We ourselves, from the very beginning, acknowledged that this is a complex reform that could not be accomplished with the stroke of a pen, by writing a new regulation. We teach this even in university lecture halls: reforms must be allowed to settle into the social, economic, and institutional reality. Time is needed. We condemned abuses rigorously from the outset, with severe penalties. We relied on the cooperation of the regions to involve the employment centres, on the cooperation of the municipalities to engage recipients in projects useful to the community. To our willingness to cooperate – can we say this clearly? – we were met, with rare exceptions, with a wall of rubber. (Applause from the M5S Group).

Our colleagues in the majority call themselves patriots, defenders of the national interest. But I ask you: how much of what a Government does is patriotic when, merely to attack a political force, it turns on the most vulnerable? (Applause from the M5S Group). What is patriotic about a Government that dismantles a measure that also supported 200,000 working poor?

I would like to address President Meloni directly. I address you, Minister: what patriotic feeling ran down your spine like a shiver when you planned to spit on the sacrifices of those who relied on the citizenship income (Applause from the M5S Group) to supplement a starvation wage? (Applause from the M5S Group and from members of the PD-IDP Group). And what is your sensitivity towards starvation wages, when you say – as President Meloni said – that a statutory minimum wage is a lure for larks? And when, at the start of the year, you promised training courses that never got off the ground, what were you thinking? That you were making fools of the Five Star Movement, or that you were making fools of those living on the edge of despair? (Applause from the M5S Group).

Have you read what the Parliamentary Budget Office certified just one week ago? With your decree, the pool of citizenship income recipients will be cut in half, and 100,000 families – including those with disabled members, minors, and the elderly – will also lose their social safety net. Minister Calderone, on 31 January you stated, verbatim: “no one will be left behind; those in objectively difficult circumstances will in any case be supported by a new social inclusion measure.” And what is this measure? The exclusion allowance? Let us call things by their proper name! (Applause from the M5S Group). Forgive my frankness, but do you feel no shame (Comments from Deputy Rizzetto) for having given false hope to so many families in serious hardship? And tell us, explain to us: does the distinction between those who are employable and those who are not seem so clear, so abstract, so easily drawn with a line of a pen on a decree? Does it also seem coherent to you that, depending on whether someone has a family member aged 17 or

18, their ability to eat changes accordingly? That if they have an elderly relative aged 59 or 60, their life prospects change?

You have also unleashed your ideological fury to make employment contracts more precarious and to liberalise the use of vouchers, turning back the clock. Moreover, if I may, you have resorted to recipes from years and decades gone by that had already proven inadequate – and this at a time, incidentally, when the labour market is showing considerable dynamism. You certainly cannot take credit for those results. Tell us, then, a single measure of yours that has promoted employment. (Applause from the M5S Group).

On 17 June, here in Rome, that demonstration was an alternative space offered to those who are not listened to. We gathered many testimonies, including from young people suffering this social hardship. You do not want to listen to them, but we will force you to listen. Sara, 28 years old, in her own words: they offered me a contract for 16 hours a month against the 200 I actually worked, for a total of 1,000 euros a month – 5 euros an hour; the Government often tells us to start a family, to think about a future, but with a contract like this, I cannot do so, I cannot buy a home, I cannot have a dignified future. So tell me: is Sara being capricious, or is she asserting the dignity of work, social dignity? (Applause from the M5S Group). Vincenzo, 28 years old, a university student living away from home: we work for 600 to 700 euros, if we're lucky, to pay rent that, with bills, will come to 400 to 500 euros a month; how can we study if we spend 50 or 70 hours a week working just to pay the rent? These are the voices and the reality of a country you refuse to hear. They are asserting the dignity of work, social dignity, the hope of living in a better country. President Meloni and many colleagues in this majority often invoke the concept of freedom, but this is a concept that becomes an empty and even sad word when it is used to balance the books on the backs of our most vulnerable fellow citizens – when those who bring home starvation pay packets and those who live every day in precariousness are ignored.

PRESIDENT. Deputy, you must conclude.

GIUSEPPE CONTE (M5S). Freedom, dear colleagues – I conclude – also means guaranteeing everyone the possibility of freeing themselves from the yoke of exploitation and crime. (Applause from the M5S Group).

For these reasons, Mr President, I announce the firmly contrary vote of the Five Star Movement, also on behalf of the suspended colleagues who likewise associate themselves with this vote against. (Applause from the M5S Group – Members of the M5S Group display a banner reading “#EnoughPrecariousLives” and wave utility bills).

- **Meloni addressing the Parliament (Senato della Repubblica, 2022):** “There is a theme of rampant poverty that we cannot ignore. His Holiness Pope Francis, to whom I extend an affectionate greeting, recently reiterated an important concept: ‘Poverty,’ he said, ‘is not fought with welfare handouts – the door to a man’s dignity is work.’ It is a profound truth that only those who have known poverty up close can truly appreciate. This is the path we intend to follow: we want to maintain and, where possible, improve the necessary financial support for

those who are genuinely vulnerable and not in a position to work – I am thinking of pensioners in difficulty, of the disabled, whose level of protection must be increased in every way, and also of those without income who have dependent minor children. They will not be denied the State's due assistance. But for the others – for those who are able to work – the solution cannot be the citizenship income, but rather work, training, and support into employment, also making full use of the resources and opportunities made available by the European Social Fund. Because, as it was conceived and implemented, the citizenship income represented a defeat for those who were capable of playing their part for Italy, as well as for themselves and their families.”

9. Comparative tables

Table 4 Characteristics of Italy's nationally implemented anti-poverty schemes (Author's own elaboration)

	Government/ Law	Approach	Reach	Beneficiaries/ ISEE ⁴²	Required residency	Max monthly benefit	Labor link	Key Change
REI (2017- 2019)	Gentiloni (left-wing coalition with PD) Legislative decree n. 147/2017	National integrated social inclusion (cash support, “personalised plan”) ⁴³	Categorical until July 2018 ⁴⁴ , then universal ⁴⁵	Families with an ISEE below €6,000 ⁴⁴	2 years ⁴⁴	~ from €168 (per individual) to €485 (large families) ⁴⁶	Present, but less structured than other reforms ^{43,47}	First national structural welfare measure ⁴⁸
RdC (2019- 2023)	Conte I (M5S-Lega) Decree-Law n. 4 of 28 January 2019, converted into law n. 26 of 28 March 2019	Minimum/basic income + workfare ⁴⁹	Mean-tested ⁵⁰ but no demographic criteria except for the “Pensione di Cittadinanza” ⁵¹	Families with an ISEE below €9,360 ⁵⁰	10 years ⁵⁰ (plus requirement of specific documents for non-EU citizens)	€780 per person (adapted with equivalence scale) ⁵²	More structured and mandatory (“Patto per il Lavoro”) ²⁷	Funding boost ⁵³ and finalisation of universal reach
AdI / SFL (2024- Present)	Meloni (Fdi-Lega-FI) Decree-Law n.48 of 4 May 2023, converted into law n. 85 of 3 July 2023	Targeted protection for fragile units ⁵⁴ to combat welfare dependency and welfarism	Categorical ⁵⁵ (high selective targeting based on demographic conditions)	€9,360 ⁵⁵	5 years ⁵⁶	€500-630 ⁴⁸ (single) + rent supplement	SFL for non-recipients ⁵⁷ ; Personalised Plan for able-bodied AdI recipients ⁵⁸	~ 45% reduction in beneficiaries ⁴⁸

⁴² The Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalent (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator) is an indicator of household economic capacity combining household income, wealth, and composition calculated annually.

⁴³ Art. 2.1, 6 and 7 (d.lgs 174/2017).

⁴⁴ Art. 3 (sections 1 and 2) (d.lgs 147/2017).

⁴⁵ Amendment introduced by the 2018 budget law (L. n. 205 of 25 December 2017), which abolished the household composition requirements (Tripodina, 2023).

⁴⁶ Art. 4 (d.lgs 174/2017). This was below European standards at the time (Busilacchi & Morlicchio, 2024).

⁴⁷ Less stringent obligation of job acceptance (e.g., no geographic indications like RdC and AdI) but strict sanctions for those who did not comply with the activities involved in the personalised pact. Mostly managed at the municipal level and based on specific evaluations of social workers (Art. 7 and 12, d.lgs. 174/2017) (Nunges, 2022).

⁴⁸ Busilacchi & Morlicchio (2024), Nunges (2022), Sacchi et al., (2023), Tripodina (2023)

⁴⁹ Art. 1, 4 and 7, c.l. 4/2019 (Also highlighted in (Busilacchi and Marlocchio; 2024; Nunges, 2023).

⁵⁰ Art. 2, c.l. 4/2019. Non-EU citizens must provide certified documentation from their country of origin, translated into Italian and legalised by the Italian consular authority.

⁵¹ “Households composed entirely of members aged 67 or over receive the RdC under the name “Citizenship Pension”, following the same rules as the RdC (Art. 1.2, c.l. 4/2019).

⁵² Art. 3, c.l. 4/2019.

⁵³ Art 28, c.l. 4/2019.

⁵⁴ “[...] national measure to combat poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion among “fasce debili” (lit. vulnerable groups)” (Art. 1.1 c.l. 85/2023)

⁵⁵ Art 2, c.l. 85/2023.

⁵⁶ Art 2.2a, c.l. 85/2023.

⁵⁷ With strict conditions: Art 12, c.l. 85/2023.

⁵⁸ Art 5, c.l. 85/2023.

Table 5 Comparison of the RdC and the AdI's equivalence scales (Author's own elaboration)

Category	RdC (art 2.4)	AdI (art 6.1)
First member (Base value)	1	1
Additional minor child	+0.4 each (capped at the maximum)	+0.15 (up to 2); +0.10 beyond that
Member over 60	–	+0.4
Bio-psycho-social hardship	–	+0.3
Disabled/non-self-sufficient	Raises ceiling to 2.2	+0.5
Caregiving responsibilities (children under 3, 3+ minors, or dependent members)	–	+0.4
General maximum	2.1	2.2
Maximum with disability	2.2	2.3

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How Populism Shapes Policy: Evidence from Italian Social Policy

Beatrice Bottura

Abstract

The increasing presence of populist parties in Europe raises an important question: does a distinctly populist policy – i.e., independent of its core ideological attachments – exist? If so, what defines it? The thesis tackles this gap by testing the generalisability of Bartha, Boda, and Szikra's (2020) ideal type of populist policy-making – originally developed for post-2010 Hungarian social policy reforms – to Italy's social policy via in-depth qualitative content analyses of parties' social policy proposals from 2006 to 2022 and of the implemented *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, *Assegno di Inclusione*, and *Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro*. This brings two novel contributions. First, the thesis develops an original coding scheme, based on the ideal type, for the study of policy proposals. Second, Italy hosts populist parties across the full ideological spectrum: exclusionary (FdI, Lega), inclusionary (M5S), and borderline (FI). The findings confirm the generalisability of the ideal type to both the Italian context and the proposal stage and identify a systematic variation across the policy cycle: substantive elements – majoritarian, radical, and emotionally charged – are most relevant for populists at the proposal stage, whereas formal and procedural elements – heterodox choices, institutional circumvention, and Manichean rhetoric – predominate at implementation. Normatively, the thesis argues that populism's threat to liberal democracy is embedded in the ordinary conduct of policy-making. Based on these findings, the thesis recommends strengthening procedural safeguards, expanding stakeholder engagement, and reinforcing minority rights protections to prevent populist governance from eroding democratic institutions.

Key words: Populism, Policy, Social Protection, Italy, *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, *Assegno di Inclusione*

In this thesis, artificial intelligence was used for editorial assistance (identifying synonyms, condensing phrasing), translation of legislative texts and political speeches, and the production of summary tables and infographics, all under the author's careful review.