

**Radboud University**



# Does Populism Promote Citizen Participation?

## A Case Study of Italian Parties

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S1028346

24<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Master Thesis

Comparative Politics

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Word count: 23,093

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Nowadays, Western European democracies are facing several challenges: electoral volatility and scepticism are increasing, while party membership and support in favour of politicians and institutions are decreasing (Dalton, Scarrow & Cain, 2004). Voters' attachment and identification with conventional political alternatives are waning, and mainstream parties are increasingly perceived as distant from the civic society and alike to one another in terms of ideology and policies (Mair, 2002). Citizens are demanding to expand their access to the political arena and the policy-making processes, asking for an improvement of the transparency of governance and a higher reliability of politicians (Dalton *et al.*, 2004). In particular, voters stress the importance of eliminating every form of intermediates between them and the policies, showing dissatisfaction towards representative democracy.

The weakening of party democracy provided fertile ground for the rise of populist parties (Mair, 2002). By pointing at mainstream parties' flaws and emphasizing the need of renovating representative democracy, populist charismatic leaders managed to mobilize the voters who had lost their trust in mainstream parties and to give a voice to the sectors of the electorate that no longer felt represented by the élites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Furthermore, citizens' request for a more direct form of participation has been addressed by populists' appeal for expanded direct democracy (Scarrow, 2001) and a broader use of new technologies as a tool to improve the relationship between public preferences and policies (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018).

Among the populist parties that emphasize the active role of the citizens and promote their direct participation through technology, the Italian Five Star Movement represents an example of a successful party that succeeded in mobilizing a broad sector of the society alienated by politics. This movement-based party constitutes an interesting case because, thanks to its populist rhetoric, it has woken up apathetic voters, achieving the support of 32% of the Italian electorate in the last national elections (La Repubblica, 2018). Of particular relevance is its attempt to renovate representative democracy by advocating a deliberative-participatory democracy model (De Blasio & Sorice, 2014). By encouraging the use of tools as referenda, petitions and online platforms, in which voters can propose initiatives, debate and vote, the Movement is endeavouring to boost citizens' involvement in politics.

Based on this assumption, one could expect the Five Star Movement's populist rhetoric, based on a fierce critique of the corrupted élite and a fostering of direct democracy by means of technology tools, to reconnect voters to the political realm and hence increase their participation. Therefore, I would like to draw the attention to the role played by the Movement in improving political involvement and answer the following question:

*Does the populist rhetoric of the Five Star Movement promote citizen participation?*

As a further step of analysis, I will compare how its call for citizens' participation, framed by a populist rhetoric, differs from the one of two other paramount parties in the Italian political scenario: the Democratic Party and the League. Both parties present analogies and differences with the Five Star Movement. The former constitutes the biggest mainstream left-wing party in Italy, and it is particularly relevant for this research because it has always pointed out the importance of citizens' participation and democratic values, and has recently stressed the relevance of technology tools and social media. On the other hand, the League, a radical right-wing party, shares with the Movement a populist political approach, a strong leadership and an intense use of social media. By implementing a content analysis of the parties' electoral programmes, websites, leaders' speeches and interviews held in the course of the electoral campaign that preceded 2018's national elections, I will analyse and compare how political participation is addressed by those parties.

Although concerns regarding the effects of populism on citizens' participation and representation are of significant importance for the political science field, we know little about the Italian case and in particular the puzzling example of the Five Star Movement. Furthermore, the existing literature lacks of a comparison among Italian parties regarding the way they frame and boost the idea of citizen participation. Given this gap in the literature, the aim of this paper is to study how Italian parties promote voters' participation, reflecting on the role played by a populist rhetoric, an appeal to traditional democratic values and charismatic leadership.

The thesis is structured as follows. In the next chapter, drawing from the existent literature, I will provide a theoretical framework. Starting from an analysis of the present state of European representative democracy and the challenges that it is facing, I will focus on the rise of populist parties and define populism and its characteristics, highlighting both the benefits and the drawbacks that it brings to democratic political systems. Moreover, I will put the spotlight on populists' call for an incremented use of technology tools and new media and their appeal to citizens' direct participation. Following the claim that a populist rhetoric could manage to mobilize the voters who had lost their trust in mainstream parties and hence strengthen political participation, I will conduct a qualitative case-study analysis, selecting the puzzling example of the Italian Five Star Movement because of its strong appeal to direct democracy framed by a populist rhetoric. Furthermore, by implementing a content analysis of the tools implemented during 2018's electoral campaign, I will compare how the idea of citizens' participation has been promoted by two other pivotal Italian parties, namely the Democratic Party and the League. The third chapter will hence present the research method and case selection. The fourth chapter will retrace the history and ideology of the three parties studied, focusing

on their leaders, the topics emphasized during 2018's electoral campaign and the results of the national elections. In the fifth chapter, the results of the empirical analysis will be presented and discussed. Finally, in the sixth chapter I will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the empirical findings, a critical analysis of the Five Star Movement and suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Populism, democracy and participation.**

*The theoretical framework begins with an analysis of the present state of European democracies and the challenges that representative institutions are facing nowadays. Among them, the rise and spread of populist movements and parties has been regarded by the existing literature as one of the most dangerous threats. The aim of the chapter consists of defining the concept of populism and identifying its core characteristics. Moreover, I will focus on the complex relationship between populism and democratic regimes, pointing out the benefits and disadvantages that it brings to representative democracies. Following, the spotlight will be put on populists' appeal for direct participation of the electorate, pursued by means of direct democracy tools and technology devices. Eventually, I will analyse the populist form of mobilisation, and I will conclude with the expectations that will orient my empirical analysis carried out in the Italian context.*

### *2.1 Challenges to European representative democracy*

Nowadays, Western European democracies are witnessing a crisis of legitimacy of their institutions and processes of democratic representation (Dalton, Scarrow & Cain, 2004). What has been defined as a “democratic malaise” (Dahl, 1998), a “politics of resentment” (Betz, 1994), an “erosion of party democracy” (Mair, 2002) or a “political anomie” (Mény & Surel, 2002), varies across well-developed post-industrial democracies (Kitschelt, 2002). However, several common features can be observed among Western European nations (Mény & Surel, 2002). In most of these countries, electoral turnout, party membership, popular engagement in the political process and identification with mainstream politics have decreased, while electoral volatility, mistrust of political institutions and leaders, cartelisation of parties and complaints of corruption have increased (Albertazzi & McDonnel, 2008; Alonso *et al.*, 2011; André *et al.*, 2015; Dalton *et al.*, 2004; Mair, 2002; Mény & Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2002). Although the support to democratic values, such as liberal and civil rights, has remained unchanged (Dalton, 1999; Klingemann, 1999), citizens are increasingly sceptical towards political élites and the way democracy works. In particular, citizens have expressed strong criticism towards representative democracy and its core institutions. Voters argue that elections are not sufficient and do not guarantee them the control over representatives and policies (Alonso *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, they claim that the exercise of power is disconnected from its rightful source, and have misgivings towards the accountability of politicians, who are accused to be driven by their personal interests (Wolin, 2004). Citizens demand a higher level of responsiveness and responsibility from policy-makers and a greater

transparency of political procedures. Furthermore, they have shown intolerance towards all the forms of intermediaries between their preferences and public policies, and they loudly request an expansion of their access to the political process, starting to seek for new unconventional forms of expression of their interests and opinions (Dalton *et al.*, 2004). Traditional forms of political representation are one of the main sources of citizens' dissatisfaction towards representative democracy. In particular, political parties have been accused of not being able to stick to the promises made during the electoral campaigns, to be excessively far from voters' needs, and to enact policy programmes that do not take into account the requests of a broad sector of the electorate (Mény & Surel, 2002). Parties' ideology and programmes are increasingly overlapping, and voters struggle determining the differences among them and to be loyal to a certain party. If in the course of the XX century political parties guaranteed representation, reliability and stability, nowadays European democracies are facing a weakening of the representative and partisan role of the parties (Mair, 2002). Moreover, the role of the party has been undermined by an increasing mediatisation of politics, characterized by new forms of communication that allow political leaders to establish a direct relationship with their voters (Kriesi, 2014). In addition, we are witnessing a growing personalisation of politics, in which politicians and their personal features are becoming more relevant at the expense of parties and collective identities (Renwick & Pilet, 2016). Therefore, modern democracies can no longer be seen as party democracies (Mair, 2002). Furthermore, Western representative systems are blamed for not performing according to their democratic values. Indeed, as pointed out by Alonso, Keane and Merkel (2011), social and economic inequalities have been increasing in OECD countries, minorities and immigrants are still excluded from the political process and women keep being underrepresented in the political institutions.

Among the other sources of popular discontent, current changes at the global and regional level, such as globalisation, internationalisation and Europeanisation, are playing a crucial role in rising citizens' scepticism towards their national governments (Canovan, 2002; Kriesi, 2014; Mair, 2002; Taggart, 2002). The global governance and the European Union are imposing further uncertainties and challenges to the democratic regimes: first, the increasing intervention of international institutions at the country level is leading to a denationalisation of politics and an erosion of state sovereignty (Canovan, 2002). National governments are indeed facing severe limitations in the extent of their political power (Mair, 2002). Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly harder to detect where the power lies. The growth of an international governance entails the development of longer chains of delegation characterized by reduced levels of transparency, accountability and legitimacy (Kriesi, 2002; Risse, 2004; Sinclair, 2012; Wilkinson & Hughes, 2002). The lack of a clear and visible structure in which decisions are made by non-electorally responsible politicians has exacerbated the relationship between citizens and their national governments.



Another source of decreasing political support is the increasing complexity of the political agenda (Webb, 2013). Nowadays it has become harder and harder for governments to meet all the needs of all the segments of the society most of the time. Eventually, other factors could lead to the rise of a sentiment of dissatisfaction: as argued by Kitschelt (2002), the decline of economic performances has severe consequences on institutional trust. Indeed, his empirical research demonstrated that a high unemployment rate has a negative effect on the satisfaction with the way democracy works. The 2008's financial crisis, and above all the technocratic approach by which it has been addressed (Müller, 2014), clearly had a substantially negative effect on the way democracy and its institutions are perceived. Furthermore, the level of trust is even lower in countries where clientelist politics and corruption scandals are present (Kitschelt, 2002).

To sum up, challenges posed by modernisation (Wiles, 1969), socioeconomic difficulties (Canovan, 2002), the increasing prominence of the international governance, the mediatisation and the personalisation of politics (Kriesi, 2014; Renwick & Pilet, 2016), as well as the flaws of the party system and the decline of the parties (Mair, 2002), have raised dissatisfaction and scepticism among citizens. As pointed out by Betz (1994), voters' concerns have been exacerbated by immigration, which is threatening the national identities, crime, which is said to be spreading everywhere, and a deterioration of Western democracies, which are not able to tackle global economic crisis and which have been discredited by numerous corruption scandals. The increasing sentiment of dissatisfaction among voters has been expressed in two different ways: while emancipated citizens aim to obtain more access in the political arena and want to have a say in the decision-making process (Dalton *et al.*, 2004), others feel increasingly powerless and alienated from the centres of power (Wiles, 1969). Webb (2013) has labelled the former as 'dissatisfied democrats', namely political committed citizens who are willing to participate more, and the latter 'stealth democrats', who also are unhappy with the current status of democracy, but are not prone to engage in the political process. Thus, voters either do not undertake to participate or become receptive to new, more radical and innovative politics (Mastropaolo, 2005).

## *2.2 The rise of populism in Western Europe*

Representative democracies have witnessed the rise of innovative and "unconventional politics" in recent times (Dalton *et al.*, 2004). Among these forms of politics that deviate from the mainstream conception of representative democracy, the ascent of populist parties undoubtedly constitutes one of the most relevant changes that Western European governments are facing nowadays. The success of parties such as the French Front National, the Italian League and Five Star Movement, the Austrian FPÖ, the British UKIP, the Spanish Podemos and the Scottish Socialist Party, demonstrates that their

strong presence is not marginal and temporary and cannot be attributed to specific national idiosyncrasies (Mouffe, 2005). Although the origin of the notion of populism dates back to the end of the nineteenth century (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), it is only from the early 1990s that populist parties have begun to obtain substantial support, becoming a regular characteristic of Western governments (Mudde, 2004). Today, we are witnessing what Mudde (2004) has labelled as a *populist Zeitgeist*: populist parties of both the radical left and the radical right are gaining support, and in response to their rise, mainstream parties are increasingly adopting a populist rhetoric. However, what can explain such a spread of populism in Western countries? According to Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008), four structural factors are responsible for the rise and success of populism. First, the features of party systems and the current separation between mainstream parties and voters have allowed populist politicians to persuade the electorate that, contrary to other parties, they represent something new and are willing to renovate representative democracy. Second, a crucial role has been played by the media, which are prone to favour the communicative style of populist politicians, encouraging personality contests and stressing the importance of topics dramatized by the populist rhetoric (e.g. immigration). Third, the politicisation of the socio-cultural dimension offers an opportunity for a greater populist mobilisation. Eventually, economic changes, especially linked to the globalisation, strengthen populist leaders who present themselves as saviours against external threats that undermine the national culture and power. They raise questions and criticism against those who want to take over the currently empty seats of power at the global level, and aim to preserve democracies from those who want to subdue national governments to the laws of the market or a technocratic reason (Panizza, 2005). Indeed, in a context where the mainstream discourse claims that there are no alternatives to the present neoliberal form of globalisation, those who feel powerless in front of international institutions and multinational corporations are prone to listen to populist politicians who claim that an alternative is possible, and that it implies the restitution of the power to the people (Mouffe, 2005). The external threats posed by external actors have therefore provided increasing opportunities for a populist rhetoric, based on the defence of people's rights, values, traditions and identities at the national level (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Furthermore, as argued by Mudde (2004), citizens have become more educated and emancipated, and have acquired substantial knowledge that allows them to criticize politicians' actions and to develop higher expectations.

The increased level of expectations is also due to historical reasons: after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, democracy has lost its main enemy, to which it used to be compared. Today, the absence of a valid alternative made the comparison between democratic governments and other regimes vain, hence democracy is now compared to its theoretical model, which allows to point out all the defects of its current status. The gap between the present status of representative democracy

and its ideal form legitimates the rise of populism (Canovan, 1999), which could be seen as a barometer of the health of democracy in Western countries (Mair, 2002). In particular, populism is an expression of dissatisfaction (Kitschelt, 2002) towards the erosion of the cornerstones of liberal representative democracy, namely political parties and popular participation (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Mainstream parties are accused of not being able to properly tackle all the challenges imposed by the Twenty-first century, such as globalisation, immigration, the financial crisis, the decline of ideologies and the transformation into a post-industrial society (Mudde, 2004). In times of transformations and crisis, voters might change their needs and preference, facilitating the success of populist parties (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Furthermore, old parties do not articulate the restructuring of the society along the new cleavage between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (Kriesi, 2014), and identify themselves mainly with the middle class (Mouffe, 2005). Politicians are perceived as corrupted, distant from the people, self-interested and alike to one another (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008), while populist leaders have been able to create new collective forms of identification within the context of modernisation (Mouffe, 2005). By doing so, populist parties have managed to involve alienated voters that no longer felt represented by mainstream parties, and have welcomed new popular demands that the institutional system was not able to accommodate (Laclau, 2005). Moreover, representative democracy has been blamed of not providing the citizens with any meaningful means of participation concerning important decisions (Mouffe, 2005). Therefore, the present literature assesses that the current loss of legitimacy of representative institutions has provided fertile ground for the rise of populist parties, which can be seen as a symptom of the severe crisis that has struck European representative democracies (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Kriesi, 2014; Mair, 2009; Müller, 2014; Taggart, 2002).

However, populism is not a mere response to a political crisis (Panizza, 2005) or a sign of democratic sickness (Mény & Surel, 2002). It is also the beginning of a new form of representation (Panizza, 2005), which provides citizens with the hope that they could have a voice in the political arena (Mouffe, 2005), and that this new form of representation would be more in line with the social order that characterizes nowadays’ Western societies (Kriesi, 2014).

### *2.3 Defining populism*

What is populism exactly and how could we define it? Although it is one of the most largely used concepts in the current debate in the political science field, it is a highly contested notion (Huber & Ruth, 2017) and scholars strongly disagree on its meaning (Panizza, 2005). In the course of the Twentieth century, the term has been applied to different contexts, including North American political movements, Latin American governments characterized by the presence of charismatic politicians and

authoritarian regimes in less developed countries. The notion of populism was therefore applied to all the forms of atypical mobilisation in which political leaders appeal to the people, and because of its wide use, the concept was stretched and lost its original meaning (Mény & Surel, 2002). Even narrowing the conceptual scope within the boundaries of Europe, one can notice that populism assumes different shapes and facets that make its conceptualisation hard (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). In recent years, it has become a catchword, especially in the media (Mény & Surel, 2002), and political scientists have defined it in several different ways. It has been described as a political movement (Lipset, 1960), an ideology (Mudde, 2004), a political strategy (Kriesi, 2015), a system of ideas, a number of several historical phenomena, a product of a particular social situation (Stewart, 1969), a political style (Hawkins 2003, Panizza 2005), a particular moralist imagination of politics (Müller 2014), a mode of identification (Panizza, 2005) or a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2016). Moreover, it is often clearer to understand what populists are opposing and criticizing rather than what they support and stand for (Taggart, 2002). Despite the deep disagreement concerning its meaning and the lack of transparency regarding its stance, it is possible to find a core on which the existent literature agrees (Huber & Ruth, 2017). An increasing number of scholars believes that populism should be defined as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ that sees the society in terms of an antagonist relationship between two homogeneous groups: ‘the people’ and ‘the élite’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 2002; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Kriesi, 2014; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2014; Panizza, 2005; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017; Wiles, 1969). Populism has indeed been described as an empty shell (Taggart, 2000) which has to be filled with different ideologies in order to become a ‘thick-ideology’ (Kriesi, 2014). Populism is chameleonic in nature, and assumes different characteristics according to the context in which it develops (Taggart, 2000), being conditioned by the structure of the political and party system, the main issues that affect the society and the adversarial or consensual style of politics (Mény & Surel, 2002). In the Nineteenth century, it took on the hue of rural radicalism commanded by farmers in the United States and of rural revolutionary romanticism of middle-class intellectuals in Russia, while a century later it took the form of urban mass movements in Latin America. Today, in European democracy it mainly presents itself as a radical-right movement (Taggart, 2002). As pointed out by Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008), a populist can be either right or left wing, a reactionary or a progressive, a reformist or a revolutionary. Furthermore, populism is compatible with diverse economic programmes, kinds of regimes and social bases (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008) and with all kinds of parties, movements and leaders (Taguieff, 1995). Nevertheless, populism is based on three core concepts, namely the ‘pure’ people, the ‘corrupted’ élite and the *volonté générale*, and two direct opposites, which are elitism and pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). The concept of ‘people’, however, assumes different meanings in diverse contexts (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004; Pasquino, 2008; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017).

The ‘people’ can be conceptualized in an economic, political or cultural way, being respectively seen as a class, a nation or as sovereigns. Right-wing populism emphasizes the cultural and political dimensions, perceiving the population as a community of blood that shares the same history, tradition and territory, and thus equating the people to the nation. Conversely, left-wing populists see the conflict in socio-economic terms, associating the people to the notion of class, and aiming to represent those left behind and exploited by the *élites* (Halikiopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Kriesi, 2014; Mény & Surel, 2002; Pasquino, 2008). Nonetheless, every populist understands the people as a homogeneous entity that shares common interests and a common will (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 2002; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2014; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017; Taggart, 2002; Wiles, 1969), and perceives the divisions within them as an artificial creation of the *élites* (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde 2004). The populist glorification of the people as an idealized community, a virtual location inhabited by a homogeneous community, defined by Taggart (2002) as the *heartland*, is clearly utopic, and crashes with the heterogeneity that characterizes contemporary Western societies. Populists hence reject the mainstream horizontal cleavages among the societies and promote a vision of the society as deeply united (Mény & Surel, 2002). The populist rhetoric describes the people as morally pure, innocent, good, simple, wise and hard-working (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 2002; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2014; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017; Taggart, 2002; Wiles, 1969), while the *élites* are seen as privileged, corrupted and selfish (Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mény & Surel, 2002; Müller, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017).

A common feature among different populist movements and parties is their conception of the people as sovereign, and their vision of a democratic governance as the expression of the popular will (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn *et al.* 2017). Democracy is understood as a mirror of the will of the people, but popular sovereignty has been undermined by the political *élites*, hence the intervention of populist parties is necessary in order to re-establish citizens’ primacy (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Populists claim to be the only ‘true democrats’, and believe to be the sole who can ‘save’ the people from the threatening ‘others’, namely all those who do not belong to what they perceive as ‘the pure people’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017). Populists blame the political *élites* for abusing of their position of power, being incompetent, focusing on their own interests, being corrupted, out of touch with reality and lacking of accountability (Canovan, 2002; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2014; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017). In addition, they accuse them of having unjustified control over citizens’ rights and welfare (Jansen, 2011). In particular, populism rejects every sort of intermediaries between the citizens and the policy-makers, accusing established parties to corrupt the link between politicians

and the electorate, to be unrepresentative, to have betrayed their voters and their needs and opinions and to be the source of the illness of contemporary democracies (Engesser *et al.*, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Pasquino, 2008). However, the host ideology plays a fundamental role in determining against whom the people should mobilize (Katsambekis, 2017). Populist radical left parties oppose ‘great powers’ in terms of institutions and corporations that feature the neoliberal globalisation (Halikiopoulou, 2012; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017), and aim to protect the workers from the exploitation of capitalists (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). Far right-wing populist parties reject politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals, but also attack those who are considered as ‘clients of the élite’ or ‘outsiders’, namely immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, welfare recipients, asylum-seekers and criminals that are accused to receive special treatments and to pose a threat to national cultures (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 2002; Müller, 2014; Panizza, 2005; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017). They exclude the very bottom of the society from their conception of *demos*, arguing that they do not truly belong to the ‘innocent people’, and blaming them for living off others (Müller, 2014). In their vision, peoples are more than *demos*: they are *ethnos*, namely a community of blood that shares the same culture and origin and inhabits the same territory (Pasquino, 2008). Therefore, extreme right populists design the social space in a new way, excluding those who belong to the top, namely the political élites, the bureaucrats, the intellectuals and the big corporations, and the foreigners who stand at the bottom of the social pyramid (Mény & Surel, 2002). Furthermore, the changes brought by the globalisation help redefine the society in terms of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (Kriesi, 2014), allowing populist parties to give a voice to all those who felt excluded by the new dynamics that are affecting our globe, and to protect them from the threat posed by the ‘dangerous others’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). This potential danger either comes from the élite, on the vertical dimension, or from outside or within the people on the horizontal dimension (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The essential core of the populist rhetoric is the antagonism between these two groups (Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mény & Surel, 2002; Müller, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Panizza, 2005; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2017; Wiles, 1969), and thanks to this opposition, populists can create new political identities (Panizza, 2005).

Another paramount feature of the populist rhetoric is the depiction of a permanent crisis (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2014), on which they rely to stress the necessity of going back to an old-fashioned vision of the world, dominated by a pure community, free of migrants, intellectuals, bureaucrats and external threats (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Taggart, 2002). Therefore, populist politicians promise the re-establishment of identity, security and prosperity (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). In other words, they claim that they will make democracy return in the hands of its legitimate owners, namely the citizens.

In order to build a democracy that perfectly mirrors the will of the people, populism relies on charismatic leaders, who are depicted as normal persons with incredible skills (Panizza, 2005), such as knowing exactly the interests and needs of the people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). As argued by Pasquino (2008), one key element above all will allow populism to rise and gain support: the presence of a populist leader that takes advantage of the current situation and triggers the anger and anxiety of the electorate. Populist leaders do not belong to the political arena, and claim to differ from mainstream politicians because they are not led by personal interests (Panizza, 2005), but are an integral part of the people (Pasquino, 2008) and hence are the sole spokesperson of the *vox populi* (Kriesi, 2014). They offer solutions and reassurance, and, most of all, they pinpoint those who are responsible for the current malaise (Pasquino, 2008). Populist leaders have the ability of providing simple solutions to problems that had been depicted as complex by the political élites (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008), building a new type of politics, simpler and more direct (Taggart, 2002), which allows them to re-establish the power in the hands of the people, who are the sole sovereign in the populist idea of democracy. Through the populist lens, democracy entails giving the first and the final word to the people (Mény & Surel, 2002), whose sovereignty is essential and unavoidable (Mastropaolo, 2005). The populist appeal to an unconstrained popular power is the key feature that allows populists to distinguish their idea of democracy from its liberal counterpart (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Populists aim to restore the power of the *demos* through mechanisms of direct election (Mény & Surel, 2002) and other tools of direct participation, such as referenda, plebiscites and citizen initiatives (Canovan, 1999), which allow voters to express their opinions without the adulteration of corrupted mainstream politics (Mastropaolo, 2005). At the same time, the populist idea of democracy implies the delegation of all the power to a leader (Caramani, 2017), who is supposed to have the ability to know and protect the popular will (Mény & Surel, 2002). In their ideal world, the people, who are a homogeneous group with a common interest, would live in harmony and without the conflicts created by the existing politics, while the populist leader, who has special knowledge and abilities, would be the only one that deserves a higher status (Pasquino, 2008). Their idea of democracy clearly conflicts with the present state of governance: the populist rhetoric accuses current democracies of hindering the full and direct expression of the popular will (Mény & Surel, 2002), blaming mainstream politicians for not representing the true will of the people (Pasquino, 2008). Indeed, its criticism targets especially the principle of representation and non-elected independent bodies that interfere in the national politics, such as central banks and international organisations (Mény & Surel, 2002). As highlighted by many scholars (Mastropaolo, 2008; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2014; Stewart, 1969), populists do not oppose democracy and representation *per se*, but its current state and its institutions and politicians.

## *2.4 Populism and democracy*

The relationship between populism and democracy is highly complex (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). At the theoretical level, populism is essentially democratic: both populism and democracy are rooted in the people (Pasquino, 2008), and are both concerned with their interests and needs and their place in democratic institutions (Mény & Surel, 2002). Despite this inextricable link, their relationship is characterized by an inherent tension (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pasquino, 2008). Indeed, as argued by Mastropaolo (2008), although populist movements and parties highly differ in different contexts, they are all involved in a paradoxical relationship with democracy. The present literature does not agree on the effect of the former on the latter: scholars are divided between those who perceive populism as a threat and those who see it as a corrective to democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). Populism can have both positive and negative effects on democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017), and opinions regarding the relationship between populism and democracy have differed over time and space (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Some authors have argued that, in order to understand this complicated relationship, an analysis of the sub-dimensions of democracy is necessary (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). According to Rovira Kaltwasser (2012), the lack of agreement on the consequences of populism on democratic governments depends on the normative assumptions and bias about the way democracy should work. Those who adopt a liberal approach see populism as a threat to minority rights and the system of checks and balances, and thus perceive it as a pathology that could undermine democratic regimes. Indeed, according to a populist point of view, key features of liberal democracy, such as the system of checks and balances and the constitutional protection of minorities, could hinder the implementation of the popular will (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Mudde, 2004). Populism has been defined as profoundly illiberal (Kriesi, 2014; Müller, 2014) because, by believing in the existence of a general will, populists reject pluralism, the rule of law and the protection of minorities, while their notion of popular sovereignty is at odds with the separation of powers that characterizes liberal democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2014). Their plebiscitary shift of politics hinders the legitimacy and power of political institutions and unelected bodies, which are crucial components of a well-functioning government (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Moreover, their concept of ‘people’ is potentially dangerous, especially when tied to a radical right-wing ideology, which implies a community that shares the same blood, culture and history (Pasquino, 2008), because it is used to demonize and exclude particular sectors of the society (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Taggart, 2002). Empirical findings have indeed demonstrated that the presence of far right populist parties is negatively associated to minority rights (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). Furthermore, populists, who claim to be the sole true representatives of the people (Huber & Schimpf, 2017) reject all kinds of legitimate opposition and public contestation



(Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, Müller 2014), making compromise and consensus nearly impossible (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Moreover, populists are perceived as anti-democratic because they argue that elections may be manipulated and useless, and in a worse scenario, they might never reveal the true will of the *demos* (Pasquino, 2008). Their claim to be the only true representatives of the *volonté générale* and the following rejection of every adversary demonstrate affinity with totalitarianism (Müller, 2014). For all these reasons, populism has been seen as a disturbing pathology of democracy (Mény & Surel, 2002) or an indicator of the latter's ill-health (Taggart, 2002), which cannot function as a corrective to the democratic malaise (Müller 2014), but rather as a threat to the quality and soundness of democratic institutions (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pasquino, 2008).

Several studies have proved instead that populism can also have positive effects on the quality of democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). As argued by Engesser *et al.* (2017), populists prioritize citizens' concerns and interests on their agenda, and try to build a closer relation between them and the electorate. Among those who perceive populism in a positive way, scholars who adopt the radical notion of democracy tend to consider populism as the purest form of democracy, which could improve the current status of democracy by strengthening political representation (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Indeed, under certain conditions, populism could work as a corrective to the dimension of inclusiveness (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Thanks to its mobilisation of excluded segments of the population, populism could enhance political participation (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). By giving a voice to those who no longer felt represented by mainstream politics, populism could improve their political integration, implementing policies closer to their needs, increasing democratic accountability, fostering the revitalisation of the public opinion and breaking down the cleavages created by established parties (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Populism could bring benefits in societies, such as in Latin America, in which the dimension of inclusiveness is substantially problematic (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), and could have stronger positive effects when it is in opposition (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). On the other hand, the same cannot be said about Europe, where populist radical right parties have instead excluded certain segments of the society, and are undermining crucial features of liberal democracy such as the system of 'checks and balances' and the protection of minority rights (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

The relationship between populism and democracy is hence highly complex and context-related: populism could function either as a threat or a corrective to democracy, depending on its host ideology, its position in government, the status of the democratic government, the composition of the society and citizens' perception of the mainstream politicians and institutions.

## 2.5 Populism and direct democracy

Despite all the criticisms highlighted so far, populists do not perceive themselves as a potential danger to democracy: their aim is indeed to renovate its present state, transforming the current relationship between representatives and represented in favour of more direct and unrestrained procedures that could bring politics back to the electorate (Caramani, 2017; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018). Populists claim that mainstream channels of representation should be supplanted by the tools of direct democracy, which would guarantee citizens to express their needs in a direct way and on a continuous basis (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018). Their aim is to abolish the principal-agent relation and to establish a new implementation of political choices in which voters are the principals of themselves (Kitschelt, 2002). Populists believe to be the sole who can restore the sovereignty of the people through an action for dismissing mainstream parties and all the institutions and representatives that function as intermediaries between them and the electorate (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). In contrast to liberal democracy, which controls the access of the voters to politics by means of institutional procedures and intermediate bodies, populist democracy pursues to establish a manner of access that is more inclusive (Scarrow, 2001), direct and unlimited (Kornhauser, 1959). On the demand side, citizens should be allowed to be directly involved into the formulation of the general will (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018), and should be consulted on particular political issues (Coppedge *et al.*, 2011). On the supply side, politicians should have a direct and unmediated access to citizens' necessities (Kriesi, 2014). The incremented use of direct democracy tools, such as referenda, citizen's initiatives and plebiscites (Canovan, 1999), would make it possible to strengthen the link between voters' preferences and policy outcomes on one hand, and tackle the problem of political alienation on the other (Webb, 2013). However, more sceptical scholars have pointed out that strategical reasons can be found behind the populist call for direct democracy: once elected, populists would act as if they received an imperative mandate (Müller, 2014), and would therefore shift the power from the voters toward the executive (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013). Direct democracy tools would be used merely to confirm the support to the charismatic leader (Urbinati, 2014), who would adopt a 'caretaker' attitude (Müller, 2014), asserting to be the only voice of the people, while actually not showing interest to the demands of the electorate (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018). According to this perspective, voters with populist attitudes play a passive role in the political arena (Müller, 2014), and are not willing to engage in any form of participation (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018). In stark contrast to this claim, Mohrenberg *et al.* (2018) argue that the existent literature has merged citizens with populist attitudes with stealth democrats. While the former are concerned with the correspondence between the political outcomes and the people's will, the latter evaluate policies on the basis of their capability to solve the issue at stake (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Furthermore, while populists perceive direct democracy as a means to guarantee direct involvement of the citizens

on decisions concerning public policies, stealth democrats see direct democracy as an instrument of control and focus on the mere outcomes of its implementation (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018). Their empirical analysis reveals that voters with populist attitudes, and in particular citizens who share people-centrism and anti-elitism stances, strongly support direct democracy, and not merely with the aim of calling the élite, but also to reaffirm their will. Further studies have proved that citizens who show dissatisfaction towards representative democracy are demanding for opportunities to commit directly in the political process (Dalton *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, voters with populist attitudes have shown a strong support for direct democracy tools as referendum (Zaslove *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, as underlined by Scarrow (2001), the populist attempts to renovate and improve representative democracy may lead to a greater use of direct democracy tools as a device to reinforce the relationship between politicians and voters.

## *2.6 Populism and technology tools*

The popular sovereignty can be restored only through the establishment of an unmediated communication between representatives and represented, which is nowadays favoured by the development of means of information communication technology (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018). Populist leaders foster the enhancement of a true direct democracy by means of digital technology and in particular social media, which provide a direct linkage to the citizens (Engesser *et al.*, 2017), and allow them to build a low-cost democracy free from the interference of political parties (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018) and journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). Particularly when moving their first steps, populist movements rely on this kind of “free” tools rather than on paid advertising or mainstream media (Mazzoleni, 2003). Nonetheless, even once they have achieved a significant electoral support, populist politicians keep extensively using social media, which are especially compatible with their communicative strategies (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, new media provide populists with the opportunity to use a strong language and to articulate their messages in a more personalized and sensationalistic way (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, as pointed out by Gitlin (1980) populist politicians and media need each other: as mentioned above, the communication style of populism suits with the channels supplied by new technology tools, and on their side, new media favour the spectacle and drama typical of the populist discourse. As pointed out by Mazzoleni (2008), the media, intentionally or not, have legitimated the populist claims and have boosted its spread. Also mainstream media, such as the television, have given populist movements the opportunity to enlarge their audience and spread their message. Despite the push given by the mass media, populists have shown scepticism towards journalists, accused of being ‘paladins’ of the élite (Mazzoleni, 2003), who distort their

messages and sugarcoat their harsh criticism of the mainstream politicians (Herkman, 2015). For these reasons, we can expect that populist politicians tend to promote the use of new technology tools, which allow them to establish a direct link with their voters.

### *2.7 Populism and participation*

The populist emphasis on direct democracy could be seen as an attempt to enhance citizen participation. Indeed, the rise of populist parties has been regarded as a response to the poor performance of representative democracies in terms of inclusiveness and participation (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Therefore, populists pursue to include the unrepresented segments of the society and aim to mobilize voters who show dissatisfaction with mainstream parties (Huber & Ruth, 2017). Populist leaders claim to speak in the name of the oppressed people and endeavour to make them aware of their oppression by fostering their mobilisation (Mudde, 2004). The populist mobilisation has been properly defined by Jansen (2011: p. 82) as “any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-élite, nationalist rhetoric that valorises ordinary people”.

The populist rhetoric sounds especially appealing to the less educated, poorest, excluded and formerly not mobilized sectors of the society, and potentially enhances their willingness to commit in political participation (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Jansen, 2011). Populists promote unconventional and non-institutionalized forms of participation in order to challenge the established élite, and emphasize the use of direct democracy tools with the aim of letting the electorate’s voice clearly heard (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018; Scherman, 1998). Empirical studies have demonstrated that individuals with populist attitudes are strongly in favour of referenda and direct forms of participation (Mohrenberg *et al.*, 2018; Webb, 2013; Zaslove *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, one may argue that the populist rhetoric and its emphasis on direct democracy could raise citizen mobilisation and engage voters in political participation.

However, critics have pointed out how the populist emphasis on a bottom-up form of participation is merely reduced to referenda, legitimation of populist leaders and the rejection of the ‘others’ (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018). Indeed, it has been argued that populists foster mobilisation with the sole goal of obtaining popular support, while neglecting the development of civic and deliberative skills and horizontal networks (Dzur & Hendriks, 2018). As argued by Mudde (2004), they prefer output over input and leadership over participation. Populist parties do not enhance any form of participatory or deliberative democracy, but only enhance the use of episodic and decisive referenda (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018). Furthermore, they do not emphasize direct democracy tools because they want to achieve

a more continuous participation, or neither because they want the electorate to have a say in politics. Populist leaders are the only ones who have the ability to discern the common good, and once in power, they assume a ‘caretaker’ attitude towards the people, who are seen as passive and unable to understand what is best for them (Müller, 2014). Moreover, the real-world practice of direct democracy shows different flaws. Although the link between populism and direct democracy has been proven to be strong, it is still unclear whether populist parties sincerely foster direct forms of participation in order to boost the participation of the electorate in the political life or if they strategically aim to strengthen their power.

### *2.8 Ideological key elements*

In light of this overview about the populist framework drawn from the existent literature, I came to identify four ideological key elements that will orient my empirical analysis carried out in the Italian context. First, given the divide within the present literature between scholars who perceive populism as a corrective and those who regard it as a threat to democracy, I will analyse whether populist parties depict themselves as the saviours of the current status of representative democracy. In particular, I expect that their host ideology, their position in government, the status of democratic government and the degree of popular dissatisfaction will play a crucial role in fostering the populist leaders’ description of themselves as correctors of democracy. Second, focusing on the charismatic leaders, I will analyse whether they portrait themselves as an integral part of the people, and if they claim to pursue the general interest. Third, concerning the dimension of inclusiveness, I aim to study if different parties exclude certain segments of the society, putting the spotlight on the role played by the host ideology and the populist rhetoric in determining inclusiveness and mobilisation. Following, I will analyse whether populists claim to give a voice to the citizens who felt excluded by mainstream politics. Therefore, the fourth indicator will measure if they promote and use more direct, inclusive and unlimited mechanisms of participation. First, I will research if they enhance the use of conventional direct democracy tools, such as referenda, plebiscites and citizen initiatives. Second, I will focus on their appeal to direct means of participation through technology devices, such as online voting. My primary objective is to analyse the complex relationship between the populist call for direct democracy and participation, taking into account the role played by charismatic and all-powerful leaders. My main expectations is that populist parties foster the participation of the excluded segments of the electorate by means of direct tools of participation. However, they maintain a top-down hierarchical structure of authority. Hence, the aim of my research is to understand whether the populists’ use of direct democracy and participation is actually strategic and symbolic, and pursued merely in order to confirm the support of charismatic

leaders, or if they sincerely want to achieve higher degrees of citizen participation. The empirical study will be conducted among populist and mainstream Italian parties in order to analyse the role played by the populist rhetoric in enhancing political participation.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

*In the following chapter, I will present the case-selection strategy and the methodology adopted in order to conduct my empirical research. In particular, I will explain the reasons why I decided to conduct my case-study in Italy, why I adopted a diverse-case selection strategy of its parties, why I chose a qualitative content analysis and how I operationalized the ideological elements drawn from the theoretical framework.*

### *3.1 Research approach*

In order to address my research question and investigate the expectations that I draw from the existent literature, a qualitative case-study methodology seems to be more suitable to the aim of studying the possible causal mechanism hidden between the populist rhetoric and citizen participation. The case-study approach, defined as an intensive analysis of a single unit, allows us to study in depth a specific case (Gerring, 2007) and to open the black box of causation (Beach and Pederson, 2013). Only a qualitative methodology could provide a ‘thick’ and holistic description of events filled with details and might offer insights into the intentions of the actors (Gerring, 2007), necessary in order to analyse the causal mechanism behind the populist call for popular participation. Moreover, the case-study research provides a stronger internal validity, allowing us to assess the exactitude of the causal relationship within the case selected and to take the context into account (Gerring, 2007). On the other hand, a large-N cross-case analysis would not fit with the goal of the research. A quantitative approach would be too broad and would not allow me to investigate in depth the causal mechanism that I am interested in researching. Furthermore, this methodology is hypothesis-testing oriented, while my research has to be considered an explanatory case, since I expect to find a link between populism and the enhancement of citizen mobilisation, but I do not know the causal mechanism that stands between the independent and the dependent variable.

### *3.2 Case selection*

With the aim of studying the relationship between a populist rhetoric and citizen participation, I have decided to focus my research within the Italian political context. The country that I have selected is particularly relevant for the purpose of my study because its political arena has witnessed the raise of several strong populist parties in the past few decades. Indeed, since the 1990s, populism has found its

'richest testing ground' in Italy (Zanatta, 2002: 286), and a populist rhetoric has been adopted by diverse political parties characterized by different host ideologies. The success of populism has been proven in the national elections of 2018, in which over one third of the electorate supported the populist Five Star Movement, and 17% voted for the populist far-right party *LeGa*. As a result of the preferences expressed by the voters, the two populist parties formed the coalition that is currently governing in Italy. The support that populist parties have obtained, and the fact that the populist rhetoric is combined with different host ideologies make the Italian political context particularly suitable to my research. Moreover, the expected presence of strong charismatic leaders and their call for a more direct form of participation by means of technology tools allow me to investigate the causal mechanism behind populism and popular mobilisation.

Furthermore, Italy has been selected for the fragile present state of its democratic institutions. Despite the strong support of democratic values among Italian citizens, data show that voters are highly distrustful of the representative institutions and their politicians. According to the evidence collected by the Eurobarometer (2018), only 27% of the Italians interviewed claims to trust the national Parliament, and the figure is just one percent higher as regards the Italian Government. Moreover, the level of trust decreased with regard to civil servants: merely 23% of the sample asserts to have confidence in the behaviour of public officials. Eventually, voters are highly dissatisfied with the pillars of representative democracy, namely political parties. Indeed, only 8% of the interviewees strongly trusts Italian parties (Osservatorio Demos&PI, 2018). Italy is nowadays facing serious challenges, such as the high rate of unemployment, the economic recession, the public debt, the incoming flows of migrants and the pensions, and voters blame political parties and representative institutions for having failed to tackle these issues properly. Hence, the prominent role played by populist parties in the Italian political context, the challenges that democratic institutions are facing today and the high level of popular dissatisfaction have brought me to reckon Italy as a case that would suit the purpose of my research.

### *3.3 Method and data*

Following the choice of a qualitative case-study approach, the present research intends to collect data through the content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis, defined as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1971: p.18), is "probably the most prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of documents" (Bryman, 2004: p. 392). This methodology implies the analysis of texts within their context of communication (Mayring, 2000), and allows me to use several different sources of evidence



(Yin, 2003) in order to achieve a holistic study of complex social phenomena (Kohlbacher, 2005). Furthermore, this approach fosters rigor, reliability and validity of case-study research (Kohlbacher, 2005).

My purpose is to analyse and compare parties' electoral programmes, online platforms, leaders' speeches and interviews held in the course of the electoral campaign that preceded 2018's national elections. The time-period of my research will therefore focus on the two months that preceded the elections held the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, namely January and February 2018. The data of my empirical research will be drawn from: the electoral programmes that the parties have published on their official website; parties' online platforms, putting the spotlight on *Rousseau*, the platform of direct democracy launched by the Five Star Movement; political speeches and leaders' interviews on television broadcastings.

My analysis will include three different parties, which differ in terms of ideology, programmes and supporters, namely the Five Star Movement, the League and the Democratic Party. These parties have been selected according to the diverse case-selection strategy, which aims to achieve a maximum variance along a relevant dimension, with the intent of representing a full range of values of a variable (Gerring, 2008). The Democratic Party is historically the biggest mainstream left-wing party in Italy, and it suits the purpose of the present research because it has always advocated the importance of citizen participation, and it has recently increased its use of technology tools and social media. Furthermore, in the course of the electoral campaign that preceded 2018's national elections, it was led by a charismatic leader that attempted to differentiate his party from its populist adversaries. By contrast, the League is a radical-right party led by a strongly charismatic leader that mirrors the main features of the populist leader described in the second chapter. The party line adopted extreme stances that highly differ from those shared by the Democratic Party and partially from the perspectives held by the Five Star Movement. The Movement has maintained a more ambiguous position: it rejects the mainstream division of politics between left and right-wing parties, and can hardly be placed within any existent schema. However, it is also guided by a charismatic leader, whose populist rhetoric often enhanced voters' participation. Therefore, by selecting these parties, my attempt is to include both populist and mainstream parties, right and left-wing ideologies and a different use of means of communication, with the aim of researching how the idea of political participation is addressed by different parties.

### *3.4 Operationalisation*

In order to understand whether the Five Star Movement promotes citizen participation, I will analyse the four ideological key elements of a populist rhetoric identified in the second chapter. First, in order to study whether populist parties perceive themselves as a corrective or a threat to democracy, I will keep in mind the following question: “Do populist politicians depict themselves as saviours of democracy?”. Second, the role of charismatic leaders will be operationalized by the following questions: “Do strong leaders portrait themselves as an integral part of the people?” and “Do they claim to pursue the general interest rather than their personal interests?”. Third, the ostracizing of others will be measured by means of the question: “Do the authors of the text exclude any group of the society?”. Fourth, the appeal to direct participation will be split into the enhancement of traditional direct democracy tools and technology devices. Hence, the operationalisation of this dimension will imply the following questions: “Do the authors of the text call for an increased use of conventional direct democracy instruments, such as referenda, plebiscites and citizen initiatives?” and “Do they promote and use technology devices, such as online voting?”.

I will research how these ideological key elements are framed by the parties selected, and I will control for a different host ideology, the difference between populist and mainstream parties and parties’ position in government. Furthermore, it is important to keep the context central in the research and interpretation of the material: also the status of representative democracy and the degree of popular dissatisfaction and mistrust have to be taken into account.

### *3.5 Expectations*

In light of the theoretical framework devised in the second chapter, I have developed the following expectations: first, I foresee that populist parties will portray themselves as the saviours of democracy, arguing that they do not represent any threat, while the Democratic Party will describe them as a potential danger to democratic institutions. Moreover, I expect the DP to highlight the importance of democratic institutions and values more than the populist parties. Second, I foresee populist parties to be guided by strong leaders, who describe themselves as an integral part of the population and claim to pursue the common good. As regards the third indicator, which concerns the dimension of inclusiveness, I predict that a populist rhetoric will exclude certain sectors of the society, namely the élites and the lower classes, depending on the party’s host ideology. More specifically, I believe that the League will ostracize both the top and the bottom layers of the population, with a particular emphasis on the latter, while the Movement’s criticisms will address the élites of the society. Furthermore, I expect the DP to pursue the inclusion of all the segments of population to a higher

degree. Eventually, with regard to the promotion and use of participative tools, either direct democracy devices or technology instruments, I expect the Five Star Movement to highly enhance them in comparison with the Democratic Party and the League. Indeed, I foresee that the latter will not mention them at all, while I predict that the Democratic Party will address citizen participation in a traditional way, which does not entail the use of direct democracy tools such as those enhanced by the 5SM.

## Chapter 4: Italian politics

*The following chapter presents an analysis of the Italian political scenario, which since the early 1990s has been dominated by the rise and success of populist parties. After a brief introduction regarding the historical birth of populism in Italy, I will proceed by analysing the three political parties object of my research, namely the League, the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party. For each party, I will underline the context of emergence, the ideology, the topics emphasized and the electoral results. Eventually, I will analyse the results of 2018's national elections in terms of figures and implications.*

### *4.1 The rise and success of populist parties*

Over the past few decades, the Italian political arena has become the site *par excellence* of populism's victory over mainstream politics (Hermet, 2001 in Tarchi, 2008), providing a fertile ground for the rise of successful populist parties. Since the early 90s, Italy was governed by several populist coalition governments, becoming one of the strongest and most lasting markets for populism in Western European democracies (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015). The rise and success of populist parties in the Italian scenario is due to several structural and context-related factors, starting from the flawed and weak democratic system that governed the country since its establishment in 1946. The First Republic was indeed characterized by high levels of popular dissatisfaction. As reported by the Eurobarometer, between the 1972 and the 1994, the percentage of discontent citizens was almost as double as in other European countries (Morlino & Tarchi, 1996). Furthermore, the judicial investigation *Mani Pulite*<sup>1</sup>, conducted in the early 90s, revealed a wide and deep corrupted network within public bodies and mainstream parties, increasing popular mistrust and the gap between citizens and their representatives (Tarchi, 2008). The collapse of the main Italian parties, such as the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, coincided with the breakdown of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which suffered from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Communist ideology (Pasquino, 2014). Along with a political crisis, Italy experienced in the same years an economic crisis, due to its large public debt and the difficulties encountered in fulfilling the Maastricht criteria necessary to entry the new-born European Union (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015). Within this context of political and economic crisis, Italy witnessed the rise of new political parties and experienced a reform of its electoral system adopted by referendum: it was the beginning of the Second Republic.

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<sup>1</sup> Italian for "Clean Hands".

The new Italian political scenario was featured by the rise of two paramount parties, which still play a crucial role in today's politics: the *Lega*<sup>2</sup> and *Forza Italia*<sup>3</sup>. Both parties embedded the core characteristics of populism highlighted in the second chapter, such as strong leaders' claim to have the ability to understand the voters' will, their impatience with the rules of liberal democracy, their appeal to the 'common people' and their attacks to mainstream politicians, established parties and intellectuals (Tarchi, 2008). Over the course of time, both parties developed different stances: *Forza Italia* promoted a conservative centre-right market-based ideology, while the *Lega* combined its regionalism with a far-right ideology (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Moreover, populist traits kept characterizing the two parties in different ways. Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of *Forza Italia*, promoted an image of himself as a successful self-made man and 'political entrepreneur' (Pasquino, 2014). By using his own television channels as his main means of communication, he depicted himself as a man who belongs to the 'common people' and is willing to defend the popular will (Tarchi, 2008). The League's leader, Umberto Bossi, portrayed himself as the party, and claimed he would have defended the people from external threats and preserved their identities and traditions (Tarchi, 2008). For several years, the two parties kept playing a paramount role, both in government and opposition, until a new crisis hit Italy and favoured the ascent of a new non-right-wing populist movement: the Five Star Movement. Therefore, as happened in the 90s, the combined presence of a political and economic crisis led to the rise and success of a new populist actor (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015). As a result, more than 50% of the electorate supported a populist party in 2013's national elections, and this figure increased to over 60% in 2018's general vote (Italian Interior Ministry, 2018). All in all, populism represents a core figure of the Italian Second Republic. Since its foundation, populist parties hosting different ideologies and political programmes have dominated the political scenario, and the ongoing state of economic and political crisis has boosted citizens' demand for populism, which has been encountered by a broad supply of populisms (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Since the historical and contemporary relevance of populist parties in the Italian political arena is undeniable, I shall proceed by analysing the political parties relevant for my empirical research on populism and citizen participation. I will therefore present the main features, ideology and goals of three parties, namely the League, the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party.

A synthesis of the context of emergence, the topics emphasized and the electoral results of the three parties object of my research can be found in Table 4.1.

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<sup>2</sup> Italian for 'League'.

<sup>3</sup> Italian for 'Go Italy!'.

## 4.2 The League

The *Lega Nord* was founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi as the union of a broad range of autonomous movements established in Northern Italy since the 70s (Cedroni, 2007). The rise of the LN coincided with the years of *Mani Pulite* corruption scandals, and the following increase of voters' mistrust towards established parties. Bossi's party presented itself as an anti-systemic party and the only force constituting an alternative to mainstream politicians, which allowed it to quickly achieve a substantial support. During the first two decades of its existence, the party fulfilled all the criteria of an ethno-regionalist populist party (Mudde, 2007). Bossi's programme focused indeed on the so-called 'Northern question' (Diamanti, 1996), namely the increasingly broad economic and social gap between the rich North and the less developed South. The party aimed to promote and defend the existence of a Northern region, the so-called 'Padania', described as ontologically different from the rest of the country, and undermined by the centralisation of political power and economic resources (Spektorowki, 2003). In a typical populist manner, the League accused the élites, and in particular the politicians in Rome, to be the cause of the crisis that hit Italy in the early 90s, and advocated federalism as a solution to save the people from the North, seen as an homogeneous community of hard-working people (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). In terms of electoral results, the LN has always been one of the most successful regionalist parties in Europe. A year after its foundation, it obtained 8.7% of the national support, and this figure increased through the years (Italian Interior Ministry, 2018). Since 1994, it served rights-wing governing coalitions led by Silvio Berlusconi multiple times, being part of the coalition governments elected in 1994, 2001 and 2006 (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010). However, numerous scandals undermined the existence of the party in 2012, and Umberto Bossi had to resign from his historic leadership. In 2013, Matteo Salvini was elected as the new secretary of the party, beginning a process of transformation that has brought the *Lega* to its current success. Always relying on a populist rhetoric, the new-elected leader shifted the focus of the party from regional concerns to national issues: the 'internal enemies', such as the corrupted politicians in Rome and Southern Italians, were replaced by external threats, i.e. the EU and the immigrants (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). In order to get rid of its image of ethno-regionalist party and redesign itself as a nationalist far-right populist party, the *Lega Nord* has abandoned the adjective 'Northern' and has put the spotlight on its leader, changing its name to *Lega – Salvini Premier*. After its renovation and extension to the national level, the party focused its programme on the issues of security, enhancing the necessity of law and order as opposed to immigration and crime, and of morality, fighting against corruption and advocating the defence of the 'natural' family and national traditions. The goal of the party is to make the voice of the people heard, protecting them from external threats and advocating for their traditions and identities (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). Another remarkable change brought by Salvini concerns his way of

communicating with voters and in particular his extensive use of technology tools. By relying on new forms of communication, such as social media, the leader of the League has established a more direct way of communicating with the electorate, reconnecting with sympathizers and detached voters. The benefits brought by technology tools, namely immediacy and interactivity (Bobba, 2018), have helped Salvini to spread his messages to a broader audience and establish a direct link with voters that bypasses the party's organisation (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). As a result, the League obtained an unprecedented success in 2018's national elections. The party achieved the support of 17.4% of the electorate (Italian Interior Ministry, 2018), and most importantly, it gained votes in the whole country. For the very first time, the party did not merely perform well in the Northern regions, but it achieved a considerable success in the so-called 'red regions', i.e. Emilia-Romagna, Umbria, Tuscany and Marche, historically dominated by left-wing parties, and in the South and the islands (Cataldi, 2018).

To sum up, the *Lega* emerged as a reaction to the economic and political crisis that Italy experienced in the early 90s, and maintained an ethno-regionalist profile under the lead of Umberto Bossi, taking part in several government coalitions with the right-wing party of Silvio Berlusconi. After the corruption scandals that hit the party in 2012, the new leader of the *Lega*, Matteo Salvini, changed the party line and moved towards a national dimension, becoming what Mudde (2007) would define a radical right Populist party. Thanks to an extensive use of social media and the use of a populist approach, the leader of the League brought his party to be the first right-wing party after 2018's vote. The massive support obtained in the last national elections allowed the *Lega* to enter the government coalition that is currently leading the country, namely the one with the Five Star Movement.

#### 4.3 *The Five Star Movement*

The Five Star Movement represents a unique case of populist anti-system party, recognized as one of the most significant innovations in Italian politics in the past few decades (Tronconi, 2018). Started in the wake of Beppe Grillo's shows, a comedian who had ranted for years against politicians, banks and multinational companies, the Movement saw its beginning after the encounter between the comic and Gianroberto Casaleggio, a web marketing expert. After their meeting, the blog 'Friends of Beppe Grillo' was created, and it soon became a site for debate, where citizens could directly participate and discuss the topics brought up by the comedian. Along with the online platform, Grillo adopted an innovative approach also offline: by organizing the so-called V-days<sup>4</sup>, he spoke in the main squares of the country, using an aggressive language and strongly criticizing mainstream politicians. The success of the V-days and the visibility obtained thanks to mainstream media encouraged Grillo to participate

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<sup>4</sup> V is for *vaffanculo*, Italian for 'fuck off'

in the municipal elections held in 2008. The 'Friends of Beppe Grillo' list achieved the election of some representatives at the municipal level, obtaining modest but sufficient results that boosted Grillo's goal: a year later, the Five Star Movement was founded. The five stars belonging to the party's label and symbol represent the initial five pillars of Grillo's programme, namely public water, sustainable mobility, development, connectivity and environment (Ceri & Veltri, 2017). Thanks to the focus on these topics, and most importantly to a new way of communication established with the voters, based on the online interactions and the use of a strong populist rhetoric, the Movement slowly obtained an increasing electoral success. In 2012, the first mayor *pentastellato* was elected in the city of Parma, and the 5SM was ranked the first party in Sicily after regional elections. Meanwhile, the formation of a technocratic government led by Mario Monti, which was supported by all the established parties, allowed the Movement to prove that mainstream politicians were all subordinated to the directives of the banks and the European institutions (Tronconi, 2018). By strongly criticizing the existent system, and taking advantage from the economic and political crisis that struck Italy after 2008's financial crisis, the 5SM presented itself as the only real alternative to mainstream parties controlled by the economic logic of the EU. Therefore, Grillo's party initially attracted young and highly educated citizens, interested in the web and hostile to established parties (Natale, 2014). These voters were disappointed by traditional parties, in particular left-wing parties as the Democratic Party, and were attracted by a movement without representatives and a hierarchical structure, in which citizens could have a say and directly participate to the party's decisions through online platforms. As a result, the Movement obtained an unforeseen success in 2013's general elections, achieving 25.6% of the national support and becoming the third Italian party (Italian Interior Ministry, 2018). The success of the 5SM increased in the regional elections held in 2016, when 32 of its candidates were elected as mayors of some of the main Italian cities, such as Rome and Turin (Tronconi, 2018). In 2017, Grillo left the lead of the Movement in the hands of the winner of the primary elections, Luigi Di Maio, who has led the party to the greatest achievement in its history: in 2018's general elections, the 5SM obtained over 30% of the national support, becoming the first Italian political force. On the basis of the popular vote, the Movement agreed, together with the *Lega*, to become part of the current coalition government chaired by Giuseppe Conte.

All in all, the Movement has gone through substantial changes since its foundation in 2009. Despite it started as an anti-system movement that rejected any party label and any form of institutionalisation, in the course of the years it has experienced a process of normalisation, it has abandoned some of its radical stances and aspirations and it has partially modified its initial ideology. Nevertheless, the Movement carries some peculiar features that distinguish it from other political parties. Regarding its ideology, it has never stopped fighting corruption and pursuing political transparency. Moreover, it has



always attempted to achieve a participatory democracy in which voters can directly and continuously express their views. By launching the online platform *Rousseau* in 2016, the 5SM has claimed to have established an unprecedented endeavour to engage citizens in political institutions' activities (Tronconi, 2018).

Despite the attempt to involve activists and establish a bottom-up mobilisation, the Movement has kept being led by strong and charismatic leaders, who rule the organisation through a vertical control and speak to the masses by making use of a populist rhetoric.

In conclusion, the Five Star Movement is a complex, at times incoherent and undoubtedly innovative party. Born within a context of crisis, it was able to collect the public dissatisfaction towards the traditional parties and transform it into votes. The 5SM has shaken Italian politics by putting an end to the traditional cleavage between left and right-wing parties and hence threatening the bipolar nature of the Second Republic (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Analysing its history and ideology in a limited space is a hard task, however, for the purpose of my research, it is important to keep in mind that the 5SM has framed its ideology within a populist rhetoric, and it has made an innovative use of the web with the aim of enhancing participatory direct democracy.

#### *4.4 The Democratic Party*

The Democratic Party was founded in 2007 as the union of several centre-left parties, belonging to both the Communist and the Catholic traditions. The formation of the party responded to the need to reunify a fragmented Left and renew the link with its voters (Bordignon, 2014). Among the targets of the party programme, the DP emphasized the importance of progressivism, social cohesion, integration of minorities, environment and Europeanism. However, the presence of different stances within the party has always undermined the party's unity. In particular, social democrats stressed the relevance of social and labour issues, the Greens focused on the environment, the former members of the Communist party held radical perspectives and the Christian democrats maintained a more conservative ideology. The lack of cohesiveness within the party hence hindered the political strength of the party. Moreover, while the Democratic Party maintained a mainstream strategy, its adversaries appealed to the anger and fears of the voters by using an aggressive language, which seemed more compelling in the eyes of the voters. As a result, the DP was defeated during 2008's national elections against the right-wing coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. While the Right was gaining another legislature thanks to Berlusconi, and the charisma of Grillo was making the Five Star Movement blowing, it was clear that the Democratic Party was lacking of a strong leader who could bring together the different factions within the leftist voters. The turning point for the party arrived when Matteo

Renzi, the former mayor of Florence, gained the primaries held in 2013 and took the lead of the party. The approach adopted by Renzi significantly differed from the strategies of the party's former leaders. In particular, he adopted a popular, simplified, informal and frank language that could be easily understood by the nationwide electorate. Moreover, he transformed political events into media events, increasing the dramatisation of the facts and endeavouring to appeal to the emotions of the voters. Eventually, his personality and charisma played a crucial role in raising his popularity and creating an emotional link with the leftist electorate (Bordignon, 2014). By presenting himself as the personification of change (D'Alimonte, 2013) and using his strong personal characteristics and communication skills (Salvati, 2016), Renzi renovated the image of the party, and received the commission to forming a government in 2014. Despite his initial success, the defeat he experienced after 2016's constitutional referendum undermined his strength and brought him to resign as Prime Minister<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, he was re-elected as Secretary of the party and led the DP towards 2018's elections. However, the national vote confirmed Renzi's *debacle*, and after his resignation, the Democratic Party had to face again the challenges that are hindering its success: the lack of internal cohesion and of a strong leader that could reconcile the different factions.

#### 4.5 2018's national elections

In summary, 2018's general elections witnessed a competition among three main opponents: the right-wing coalition, formed primarily by the mainstream party *Forza Italia* and the reformed *Lega*, the left-wing coalition, led by the Democratic party, and the Five Star Movement. Each party led an electoral campaign focusing on different issues: while the DP emphasized cultural topics such as integration of the immigrants, the League conducted a fierce campaign against migration flows and in favour of a reinforcement of law and order. FI maintained a more conservative stance, focusing on the taxes and the small-businesses, and the 5SM put the spotlight on socio-economic issues and the protection of the weakest (Emanuele & Paparo, 2018). The electoral results clearly showed that the majority of the voters was more concerned with economic matters and held a conservative perspective concerning migrations. Indeed, the right-wing coalition obtained the highest number of votes, gaining 37% of the national support. On the other hand, the left-wing coalition achieved only 23% of the electoral support, obtaining its lowest result since the birth of the First Republic. Eventually, the biggest surprise regards the success achieved by the 5SM, which was supported by 32% of the voters (De Lucia, 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> The constitutional referendum put forward by Matteo Renzi was held the 4th of December 2014. Italian voters were called to express their opinion concerning a reform of the Italian Constitution related to the composition of the Parliament and the division of power between the state, the regions and the provinces. 59.12% of the electorate voted against the constitutional reform, hence the referendum was repealed, Renzi resigned and Paolo Gentiloni was designated as the new Italian Prime Minister.

Despite the widespread success of populist parties is not new in the European context, the results of the Italian national elections have brought a few elements of absolute innovation that cannot be compared to any other country of the continent. In particular, the exceptional success obtained by the 5SM and the League has brought the two parties to form the first governing coalition composed only by anti-establishment parties. On the other hand, another element of innovation concerns the massive loss of vote that mainstream parties have experienced. Both FI and the DP have lost a substantial amount of votes since 2013's elections and, for the first time in the Second Republic, neither of them belongs to the governing coalition (Emanuele & Paparo, 2018).

In conclusion, 2018's elections undoubtedly represent a turning point in Italian politics. The voters have clearly expressed concerns regarding their economic and social conditions, and their preferences reflect their fears and worries concerning immigrants and criminality. While the populist discourses of Salvini and Di Maio have appealed to citizens' preoccupations, mainstream parties have maintained a more traditional strategy, which has not struck the Italian electorate.

**Table 4.1: Parties' overview**

	<b>Leader</b>	<b>Context of emergence</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Topics emphasized</b>	<b>Results national elections 2008</b>	<b>Results national elections 2013</b>	<b>Results European elections 2014</b>	<b>Results national elections 2018</b>
<b>L</b>	Matteo Salvini	- 90s corruption scandal <i>Mani Pulite</i>  - Collapse of the First Republic	Radical right populist party	- national traditions and identities - law and order - criminality and security - anti-migration - anti-EU	Chamber of Deputies: 8.30%  Senate: 8.06%	Chamber of Deputies: 4.09%  Senate: 4.34%	6.15%	Chamber of Deputies: 17.35%  Senate: 17.61%
<b>5SM</b>	Luigi Di Maio	- Economic crisis following 2008's financial crisis  - EU austerity policies  - Mario Monti's technocratic government	Anti-establishment populist party	- anti-corruption - anti-élites and mainstream politicians - anti-EU - social and economic conditions of the weakest	Chamber of Deputies: N/A  Senate: N/A	Chamber of Deputies: 25.56%  Senate: 23.80%	21.16%	Chamber of Deputies: 32.68%  Senate: 32.22%
<b>DP</b>	Matteo Renzi	- founded as the union of different left-wing parties with the aim of renovating the left	Centre-left mainstream party	- work and family - cultural integration - pro-immigrants and inclusion - pro-EU	Chamber of Deputies: 33.18%  Senate: 33.69%	Chamber of Deputies: 25.43%  Senate: 27.44%	40.81%	Chamber of Deputies: 18.76%  Senate: 19.14%

Source: Italian Interior Ministry

## **Chapter 5. Empirical analysis: Content analysis.**

*In the following chapter, I will present the findings obtained from the content analysis conducted over different data sources. Starting with an explanation of the research method, I will highlight the differences between the different data sources and I will comment the results emerged from the study in light of the expectations pointed out in the methodological chapter.*

With the aim of studying whether the populist rhetoric of the Italian Five Star Movement enhances citizen participation, I have conducted a content analysis of different materials related to the electoral campaign that preceded 2018's national elections. First, I have analysed the electoral programmes, which were selected for two reasons: first, they provide a clear overview of the parties' stances and priorities; second, they allow for comparison among different parties. Following, I studied party leaders' interviews on television broadcastings, in order to analyse their language and behaviour and in particular the way they portray themselves and describe their political adversaries. For the same motivations, I have focused my research also on campaign speeches. I have therefore selected twelve interviews and twelve political meetings, four for each party, that took place during the last two weeks of electoral campaign, namely from the 17<sup>th</sup> of February until the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2018. Eventually, I have analysed the parties' official websites, with the purpose of researching the slogans and the topics they highlight, focusing in particular on *Rousseau*, the platform of direct democracy launched by the Five Star Movement. The data sources are reported in Appendix A.

I included in my research not only the 'usual suspect' mentioned above, which I expect enhancing citizen participation, but also the Democratic Party, a mainstream left-wing party, and the League, a populist radical-right party. The reason for involving these parties is to use them as a control group in order to check whether a populist rhetoric associated to a different host ideology, as with the League, or a mainstream leftist stance, as in the case of the DP, can also promote citizen participation.

For the analysis of the data, I proceeded in several steps: first, I drew from the theoretical framework four indicators that I used in order to orient my research. Second, I set up a codebook, and I identified different categories that relate to each indicator. Following, I assigned summative or evocative labels to the sub-dimensions of each of the four main indicators. I conducted the analysis of the data selected by looking for every possible reference to the codes that I had established, and I have hence quantified

the codes by counting their frequency.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I interpreted the broader context while coding, taking into account the latent content, the behaviour of the audience and the language of the leaders.

### 5.1 Populism and democracy

The first indicator, concerning the relationship between populism and democracy, has been broken down into three sub-categories. First, the label *democracy/institutions* regards any content related to the importance of democratic institutions and values. Second, the code *threats* concerns comments and accusations to other parties perceived as a potential danger to the country. Third, the sub-category *saviours* implies parties' claims to be the correctors of the present state of the institutions and the country.

Table 5.1.1 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on the electoral programmes concerning the first indicator.

**Table 5.1.1: Populism and Democracy – Electoral Programmes**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>DEMOCRACY/ INSTITUTIONS</b>	<b>THREATS</b>	<b>SAVIOURS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	18	1	0
<b>L</b>	5	0	1
<b>DP</b>	12	4	7

The analysis of the entire political party programmes has as unit of analysis the electoral programme, available on the official websites of the three parties selected for my research. The study of the electoral programmes allows us to have a general overview of the core topics of 2018's electoral campaign and to observe the differences in terms of content between the different parties. The Democratic Party focused its electoral campaign on welfare, Europe, work and culture; the Five Star Movement put the spotlight on work, constitutional affairs, green economy and families; and the League highlighted the issues of immigration, security, taxes and work. Furthermore, by analysing the electoral programmes, it is possible to compare the differences regarding the style adopted by these three parties. While the DP's programme is concrete, serious, technical and focused on the small results achieved in the previous mandates, the League's programme is enriched by slogans, and the spotlight is put on the

<sup>6</sup> My analysis does not take into account the relative frequencies of occurrence of the indicators.

reason of its success: its leader Matteo Salvini. On the cover on the party programme we indeed find a giant picture of the smiling leader, accompanied by the slogan “Salvini Premier. The revolution of the common sense”<sup>7</sup>. The Five Star Movement adopts instead a less peculiar style: its programme is not as specific and technical as the one of the DP, and it does not highlight its political leader or insert slogans as the League did. Nevertheless, some populist elements can be found in it.

The findings are noteworthy: although it was expected that the DP would have mentioned democratic institutions and values significantly more often than the other parties, the results show that the 5SM has inserted in its electoral programme contents related to democracy and institutions more than any other party. Moreover, the findings are in contrast with my expectation that populist parties would have described themselves as a corrector to the present state of the institutions. Conversely, the mainstream party has mentioned several time in its programme to be committed to improving Italy’s conditions and planning better institutions. Indeed, it is clear from its electoral programme that the DP perceives itself as the only credible alternative against populists and extremists, as the data confirm. Furthermore, it has accused its adversaries to be ‘smoke sellers, slogans professionals and fake news lovers’<sup>8</sup> (100 cose fatte, 100 cose da fare, 2018: p. 2).

Table 5.1.2 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on leaders’ interviews on television broadcastings concerning the first indicator.

**Table 5.1.2: Populism and Democracy – Interviews**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>DEMOCRACY/ INSTITUTIONS</b>	<b>THREATS</b>	<b>SAVIOURS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	3	3	5
<b>L</b>	2	0	1
<b>DP</b>	3	8	4

In order to analyse the populist rhetoric and the style adopted by the leaders of the three parties studied, I have randomly selected four interviews for each party held on public and private channels of the Italian television during the last two weeks of electoral campaign. The study of interviews allowed me to research how leaders behave in television broadcastings, when they have to respond to journalists’ trick questions and have to appeal to a broad audience.

<sup>7</sup> Original: Salvini Premier. La rivoluzione del buon senso.

<sup>8</sup> Original: Venditori di fumo, professionisti degli slogan, amanti delle false notizie.

The findings slightly resemble those obtained from the analysis of the electoral programmes. Starting from the first sub-indicator, it is possible to notice that all leaders have seldom referred to democratic institutions and values. However, it is important to notice that Renzi, the DP's leader, highlighted that "In Italy there is a democracy that works. [...] Today the democracy cannot be afraid of the fascist danger incoming because we have strong and rooted institutions"<sup>9</sup> (Renzi, 2018). Nevertheless, he also pointed out the risk of having a government led by the League or the Movement. In particular, he claimed that "We can't leave the country in the hands of swindlers, who want to leave the EU and who do not believe in vaccinations"<sup>10</sup> (Renzi, 2018). Indeed, he underlined the danger of the anti-EU sentiment expressed by both its adversaries, arguing that voting for them represents a threat to our economy and to the stability of the country. The DP's leader believes that his party is the only hope for Italian politics, the only one giving solidity and concreteness to the country. Nonetheless, he admitted that, although the League represents a threat to our economy, it does not jeopardize our democracy. Salvini himself underlined indeed to be a true democrat, an anti-violent and a pacifist, who does not represent any menace to the democratic institutions of the country. Similarly, the leader of the 5SM, Luigi Di Maio, argued that his party does not represent any danger to the country. Indeed, he claimed that:

"While in Europe many parties are appealing to the fears of the voters, in Italy our Movement, even if it is composed by angry members, believes that this country can change only by means of democracy and laws. We are against any kind of extremism."<sup>11</sup> (Di Maio, 2018).

In the course of an interview, he underlined that his party is neither populist nor Eurosceptic and hence does not represent any threat, but rather it would improve the current status of democracy. Indeed, by avoiding to candidate any accused, previous offender or convict, and by being the only party that presented during the electoral campaign who would be in charge of the Ministers, he argued that the Movement "raises the quality of politics and increases the transparency and the fairness of the elections"<sup>12</sup> (Di Maio, 2018). Conversely, according to Di Maio, his adversaries are not trustworthy: the League is a true danger because of its Eurosceptic and populist stance, while "voting for mainstream parties, such as the DP and FI, means allowing them to build coalitions, which will probably end soon

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<sup>9</sup> Original: In Italia c'è una democrazia che funziona [...] Oggi la democrazia non può essere preoccupata per l'imminente pericolo fascista perché abbiamo istituzioni forti e radicate.

<sup>10</sup> Original: Non possiamo lasciare il paese in mano a degli imbroglioni, che vogliono lasciare l'Europa e non credono nei vaccini.

<sup>11</sup> Original: Mentre in Europa molti partiti fanno leva sulle paure degli elettori, in Italia il nostro Movimento, anche se è composto da membri arrabbiati, crede che il cambiamento del nostro Paese possa avvenire soltanto attraverso la democrazia e le leggi. Siamo contrari ad ogni tipo di estremismo.

<sup>12</sup> Original: Eleva la qualità della politica e migliora la trasparenza e la correttezza delle elezioni.



and hence means undermining the solidity of the country”<sup>13</sup> (Di Maio, 2018). Overall, in line with my hypothesis, the leader of the 5SM has described his party as a corrector to the present status of democracy, and has defended it from any criticism, rejecting any accuse of populism. On the other hand, as expected, Renzi has severely criticized its adversaries, describing them as a danger to the democratic institutions and the solidity of the country. To a lower degree in comparison with the Movement, the League’s leader has also claimed that he could be the saviour of our country, arguing that he does not represent any threat to our democracy.

Table 5.1.3 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on political speeches concerning the first indicator.

**Table 5.1.3: Populism and Democracy – Political Speeches**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>DEMOCRACY/ INSTITUTIONS</b>	<b>THREATS</b>	<b>SAVIOURS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	1	2	7
<b>L</b>	0	2	10
<b>DP</b>	4	15	7

The study of political speeches allowed me to analyse how the parties’ members and leaders interact with their supporters. In contrast to the interviews conducted on television broadcastings, where candidates speak to a broad audience and maintain a calm and professional behaviour in front of journalists, they use a stronger language and make harsher accusations when it comes to political meetings. Furthermore, the analysis of political speeches allowed me to compare the differences between the supporters attending the meetings. Indeed, a very different atmosphere characterizes the political meetings of the three parties. While those of the DP are quiet, serious and devoid of any interaction with the public, those of the Movement and the League are characterized by interventions and shouts from the audience. Moreover, Salvini’s language is extreme, offensive, enriched by several jokes and interactions with the public, including selfies and repartees. As for the interviews, I randomly selected four political meetings for each party that took place in the most important Italian cities during the last two weeks of electoral campaign.

In line with my expectations, the results show that the DP’s members mentioned democratic values and institutions more often than their adversaries. Moreover, they accused several times the Movement

<sup>13</sup> Original: *Votare per il Partito Democratico o Forza Italia significa dar loro la possibilità di formare delle coalizioni, che probabilmente cadranno presto e significa quindi mettere a repentaglio la solidità del paese.*

and the League to represent a threat to our country. In particular, Renzi claimed that we should be afraid of those candidates, because they do not respect the institutions, they question the vaccines and the EU and promote a politics based on fear. Furthermore, he argued that:

“They have created a climate of tension, have spread fake news, used verbal violence and insults on social media. [...] This violent and barbarian way of doing politics is bad for the soul, bad for Italy and bad for them.”<sup>14</sup> (Renzi, 2018).

In his political speeches, Renzi is committed to distinguish his party from its adversaries, claiming that:

“We are not those of the fear. We are not those of the nostalgia. We believe that the future is hard to face, but we have the tools to do it. We have concrete ideas, we don’t talk about random indicators. [...] But most of all, what makes us better is sharing values. We will never be so inhuman that we frighten the electorate to obtain votes. [...] We are a community of people that does politics on the proposals and not on the protests, on the courage and not on the fear, on the hope and not on the anger. We mainly care about cultural and civil values. [...] We are a community of men and women, not a personalized party”<sup>15</sup> (Renzi, 2018).

The League and the Movement argued instead that there is nothing to be worried about: Salvini (2018) claimed that “they are afraid of us because we are stronger”<sup>16</sup>, while Di Maio (2018) asserted that “They are afraid of us because they are worried to lose the system of power they have created”<sup>17</sup>. The leaders of both parties believe that they could be a corrector for the problems of the country. Salvini claimed that a victory of the League would “give back pride and hope to millions of Italians who have lost it”<sup>18</sup>, allowing them to go back to live in a safe country and have a decent job, giving a voice to those who have lost it and strengthening the country. In his, strong, words: “Either we win the elections, or we die”<sup>19</sup> (Salvini, 2018). The Movement’s candidates put instead the spotlight on the change that their party would bring to the party system, arguing that they would dismantle the system of power and would empower the citizens: “If we win, we will give you back the keys of the institutions of this country, so you can have a say on public policies”<sup>20</sup> (Di Maio, 2018).

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<sup>14</sup> Original: Hanno creato un clima di tensione, hanno fatto circolare notizie false, usato violenza verbale e insultato sui social media. [...] Questo modo violento e barbaro di fare politica fa male all’anima, all’Italia e fa male a loro.

<sup>15</sup> Original: Noi non siamo quelli della paura, non siamo quelli della nostalgia. Crediamo che il futuro sia duro da affrontare, ma abbiamo mezzi per farlo. Noi abbiamo idee concrete, non parliamo di indicatori a caso. [...] Siamo un gruppo di persone che fa politica sulle proposte e non sulle proteste, sul coraggio e non sulla paura, sulla speranza e non sull’odio. A noi importa principalmente della cultura e dei valori civici. [...] Siamo una comunità di uomini e donne, non un partito personalizzato.

<sup>16</sup> Original: Hanno paura di noi perché siamo più forti.

<sup>17</sup> Original: Hanno paura di noi perché temono di perdere il sistema di potere che loro hanno creato.

<sup>18</sup> Original: Ridare orgoglio e speranza a milioni di italiani che li hanno persi.

<sup>19</sup> Original: O vinciamo le elezioni o moriamo.

<sup>20</sup> Original: Se vinciamo, vi ridaremo le chiavi delle istituzioni del nostro paese, così potrete esprimervi sulle politiche pubbliche.

Overall, the data collected from the analysis of the political speeches reflect my expectations: parties described themselves as the saviours of the country, while the mainstream party portrayed the populist parties as a danger to our democracy.

Table 5.1.4 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on parties' websites concerning the first indicator.

**Table 5.1.4: Populism and Democracy – Websites**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>DEMOCRACY/ INSTITUTIONS</b>	<b>THREATS</b>	<b>SAVIOURS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	3	0	13
<b>L</b>	9	0	8
<b>DP</b>	58	1	5

The analysis of parties' official websites allowed me to study how they present themselves, and hence to visualize the contents highlighted, the language adopted and the images displayed. The differences among the three parties can already be noticed by looking at the homepage of their websites. The DP highlights sentences as: 'The DP is on the side of those who need help the most'<sup>21</sup> and 'The democrats are here: we are the only alternative to the government'<sup>22</sup>; the League exposes several images of its leader, called 'the Captain', and puts the spotlight on its slogan 'Italians first'; the Movement highlights the possibility to participate to the draft of laws through its direct democracy platform. The study of the websites allows me indeed to analyse *Rousseau*, the 5SM's technological tool, defined by the party itself as:

"The platform of the Five Star Movement where you can express your ideas and endure the challenges in which you believe, by suggesting draft laws, voting the laws proposed by other users and bringing topics of general interest to the attention of our spokespersons."<sup>23</sup> (*Rousseau*, Sistema operativo del Movimento 5 Stelle).

As regards the first indicator, in line with my expectations, on the DP's website we can find content related to democracy and institutions to a significant extent. It is indeed argued that the DP is committed to "promote and spread a political culture attentive to democratic values",<sup>24</sup> and that the goal of the

<sup>21</sup> Original: Il PD dalla parte di chi ha più bisogno di aiuto.

<sup>22</sup> Original: I democratici ci sono: siamo l'unica alternativa al governo.

<sup>23</sup> Original: La piattaforma del Movimento 5 Stelle dove puoi esprimere le tue idee e sostenere le sfide in cui credi, proponendo disegni di legge, votando le leggi proposte dagli altri utenti che ritieni più utili o urgenti, e portando tematiche di interesse collettivo all'attenzione dei nostri Portavoce.

<sup>24</sup> Original: Promuovere e diffondere una cultura politica attenta ai valori democratici.

party is to “guarantee to Italy a free and strong democracy: a democracy understood as participation, inclusion, solidarity, self-government”<sup>25</sup> (Sito Ufficiale Partito Democratico).

Concerning the sub-indicator *threats*, as for what I found in other sources, the DP denounces the potential danger brought by its adversaries, stating that:

“A political vacuum has emerged, and it has given space to the populist demagogy, to the arrogance of restricted oligarchies and to opaque powers that tend to escape the control of the law and the democratic institutions”<sup>26</sup> (Sito Ufficiale Partito Democratico).

As expected, all the parties believe that they can improve the conditions of the country, but the populist parties describe themselves as a corrector to the state of democracy to a higher degree. In particular, the Movement claims that by implementing technology tools of direct democracy, it is possible to enhance citizen participation and hence improve the quality of representative democracy. As explained by Davide Casaleggio, the son of the founder of *Rousseau* Gianroberto Casaleggio:

“Representative democracy was probably the best model we could have until a few years ago, but with the use of the internet and the set of tools that can be used through the internet, today participation is probably the best democracy that we can have. [...] In Italy we used a set of online tools that go under the name of *Rousseau*, and through these tools, over 140,000 people are actively participating in the life of the 5SM.” (Rousseau, Sistema operativo del Movimento 5 Stelle)

Overall, the results meet my expectations: the DP mentioned democratic institutions and values more often than its adversaries and points out the danger of populism, while populist parties describe themselves as the saviours of democracy.

## 5.2 Leadership

The second indicator, concerning the leadership, puts the spotlight on two core characteristics of populist leaders identified in the theoretical chapter. First, the sub-category *integral part* relates to the leaders’ claim to be part of the society and hence to be ‘normal’ persons. Second, the voice *general interest* regards politicians’ assertions to pursue the ‘common good’, while accusing other parties to merely focus on the personal interests of their members.

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<sup>25</sup> Original: Il Partito Democratico vuole assicurare all’Italia una democrazia libera e forte: una democrazia intesa come partecipazione, inclusione, solidarietà, autogoverno.

<sup>26</sup> Original: Si è creato così un vuoto politico molto pericoloso, che ha dato spazio alla demagogia populistica, all’arroganza di ristrette oligarchie e anche a poteri opachi che tendono a sottrarsi al controllo della legge e delle istituzioni democratiche.

Table 5.2.1 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on electoral programmes concerning the second indicator.

**Table 5.2.1: Leadership – Electoral Programmes**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>INTEGRAL PART</b>	<b>GENERAL INTEREST</b>
<b>M5S</b>	0	4
<b>L</b>	3	4
<b>DP</b>	0	0

With regard to the second indicator, as expected the DP does not mention any of the core features that characterize a populist leader. Conversely, the Five Star Movement and the League claim to be committed to pursuing the ‘common good’. Furthermore, the latter’s leader is also described as an integral part of the society. In its electoral programme, the League has indeed reported the need to elect a strong leader, a ‘defender of the people/an advocate of the people, who defends the citizens from the abuses of the big private enterprises and from the abuses of the public administration’<sup>27</sup> (Programma Elettorale Lega – Salvini Premier, 2018: p. 21).

Table 5.2.2 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on leaders’ interviews on television broadcastings concerning the second indicator.

**Table 5.2.2: Leadership – Interviews**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>INTEGRAL PART</b>	<b>GENERAL INTEREST</b>
<b>M5S</b>	1	3
<b>L</b>	1	3
<b>DP</b>	1	0

As for the case of the electoral programmes, the second indicator allows to draw a line between populist and mainstream leaders. Although Renzi (2018) claimed to be “a farm boy, not a strategist”<sup>28</sup>, and hence described himself as a common man with a poor background, Di Maio and Salvini highlighted their ‘normality’ and their interest in the common good to a higher extent. More specifically, the

<sup>27</sup> Original: Un difensore del popolo/avvocato del popolo, che difenda i cittadini davanti agli abusi delle grandi imprese private e agli abusi della pubblica amministrazione.

<sup>28</sup> Original: Sono un ragazzo di campagna, mica uno stratega.

League’s leader pointed out that he is “a normal person, not a genius”<sup>29</sup> (Salvini, 2018), while Di Maio declared to be proud of the humble jobs that he did in the past as many other young people. Furthermore, he highlighted that the purpose of the Movement is to work for the common good of the people outside the institutions, and not for those inside as other politicians do. Following a similar rhetoric, Salvini argued that his work reflects the needs of 60 million Italians, and not the interests of financiers or bureaucrats. These claims clearly reflect the populist rhetoric described in the second chapter: populist leaders commit to separating ‘the people’ from ‘the élite’, arguing that they will take responsibilities for the needs of the entire population.

Table 5.2.3 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on political speeches concerning the second indicator.

**Table 5.2.3: Leadership – Political Speeches**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>INTEGRAL PART</b>	<b>GENERAL INTEREST</b>
<b>M5S</b>	6	7
<b>L</b>	8	6
<b>DP</b>	0	0

The data collected through the analysis of political speeches confirm the results obtained by the study of electoral programmes and interviews: the leaders of the Movement and the League manifested a populist attitude compared to the leader of the DP. The 5SM’s candidates pointed out to be ‘normal people’, ‘citizens exactly like you, with all the virtues and flaws as many Italians’<sup>30</sup> (Di Battista, 2018). Salvini adopted instead a paternalistic attitude, arguing for instance:

“I will make the interests of the Italians. As a father, I will give my food to my child if he is hungry. [...] I will take by the hand 60 million Italians that only want certainties and future.”<sup>31</sup> (Salvini, 2018).

Table 5.2.4 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on parties’ websites concerning the second indicator.

<sup>29</sup> Original: Non sono un genio, sono una persona normale.

<sup>30</sup> Original: Siamo cittadini esattamente come voi, con pregi e difetti come molti italiani.

<sup>31</sup> Original: Farò gli interessi degli italiani. Come un padre, darò il mio cibo a mio figlio se ha fame. [...] Prenderò per mano 60 milioni di italiani che vogliono solo certezze e futuro.

**Table 5.2.4: Leadership – Websites**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>INTEGRAL PART</b>	<b>GENERAL INTEREST</b>
<b>M5S</b>	3	0
<b>L</b>	14	5
<b>DP</b>	1	3

The analysis of the second indicator conducted on the websites provides results that slightly differ from those obtained from the previous data sources. In contrast to what I found so far, the DP party mentioned the pursue of a common good on its official website. Nevertheless, the most interesting material has been found on the League’s website: Salvini portrays himself as a part of the people, claiming that he is the only one that stays among people, and that after the elections, he will continue to shop groceries himself, take the train, go to the playground with his children and talk with other parents (Salvini Premier). Furthermore, following a populist attitude, he pursues a return to the past. Indeed, he argues that: “My goal is to give the next generations the same country that my grandparents left to me”<sup>32</sup>. In addition, he appeals to the emotions of the voters, asking them: “Choose with your head, but most of all choose with your heart and your instinct.”<sup>33</sup> (Salvini Premier)

### 5.3 Inclusiveness

The third indicator, namely the dimension of inclusiveness, regards the ostracism of others, which can entail both the élites and the lower classes. Hence, the sub-indicators relate to the *exclusion of the top layers* and the discrimination of the *bottom layers* of the society.

Table 5.3.1 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on electoral programmes concerning the third indicator.

**Table 5.3.1: Inclusiveness – Electoral Programmes**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>EXCLUSION OF TOP LAYERS</b>	<b>EXCLUSION OF BOTTOM LAYERS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	29	1
<b>L</b>	17	23
<b>DP</b>	1	0

<sup>32</sup> Original: Voglio dare ai miei figli l’Italia che mi hanno lasciato i miei nonni.

<sup>33</sup> Original: Scegliete con la vostra testa, ma prima ancora scegliete con il cuore e con l’istinto.

As demonstrated by the findings, the League highly ostracizes certain sectors of the society, belonging to both top and bottom layers of the population. In line with my expectations, Salvini's party strongly discriminates any external threat that could undermine the national sovereignty and the national identity. In particular, an extended part of the League's electoral program concerns the topic of immigration, which is seen as "a threat to national security"<sup>34</sup> and a danger to "the stability of our country from a social perspective"<sup>35</sup> (Programma Elettorale Lega – Salvini Premier, 2018: p. 23). Among the sectors of the society who are discriminated by the far-right party, Muslims are extensively ostracized. In particular, the programme clearly states that: polygamy is forbidden, students who refuse to attend mandatory courses will fail the year, it is forbidden to occupy the public soil to pray, different treatments linked to religious rules in public services, such as hospitals, canteens and public administration will not be applied, no financial help will be reserved to Muslim minorities, and no political parties that only appeal and make the interests of Muslims or other minorities will be authorised (Programma Elettorale Lega – Salvini Premier, 2018: p. 8). Moreover, the League is also highly critical of the élites, and in particular of bureaucrats, technocrats, international organisations such as the UN and the WTO, judges, multinational corporations and the EU. The latter is accused to be a giant bureaucratic structure, which is doing the interests of Germany and multinational corporations, while undermining the full and legitimate exercise of national sovereignty at the expense of the physical and economic protection of the citizens of the member states (Programma Elettorale Lega – Salvini Premier, 2018: p. 9). As expected, similar criticisms have been raised by the Five Star Movement, which claims that the European Union is influenced by a limited number of states in a way that undermines its democratic nature (Programma Nazionale del Movimento Cinque Stelle – Sezione Unione Europea, 2018: p. 2). Furthermore, the Movement attacks the political class, the markets, corrupted publishers, multinational corporations and international organisations such as the NATO. On the other hand, as foreseen, the rhetoric of the Movement does not entail a rejection of lower classes. In addition, in line with my expectations, results show that the Democratic Party does not exclude any segment of the population. Conversely, it is claimed in its electoral programme that they aim not to leave anyone behind.

Table 5.3.2 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on leaders' interviews on television broadcastings concerning the third indicator.

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<sup>34</sup> Original: Una minaccia alla sicurezza nazionale.

<sup>35</sup> Original: Destabilizza il nostro paese dal punto di vista sociale.



**Table 5.3.2: Inclusiveness – Interviews**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>EXCLUSION OF TOP LAYERS</b>	<b>EXCLUSION OF BOTTOM LAYERS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	3	0
<b>L</b>	10	14
<b>DP</b>	0	0

The study of inclusiveness conducted on interviews also shows a difference between populist and mainstream parties. While Renzi’s rhetoric does not exclude any segment of the society, Salvini severely addresses different sectors of the population. In particular, he draws a line between the interests of the Italians and those of everybody else. His motto “Italians first”<sup>36</sup>, is often repeated during the interviews. In addition, he addresses especially immigrants, described as drug dealers, rapists or thieves who “cost the state 35€ every day and end up dealing or robbing”<sup>37</sup> (Salvini, 2018). Moreover, he blames banks, multinational corporations, leftist intellectuals, politicians, the EU, and in particular Germany, to have damaged our country. On the same line but to a less extended degree, Di Maio accuses other politicians to be corrupted and to have stolen citizens’ money. Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews allowed me to research how the leaders turn to the electorate: Renzi refers to the people as ‘my people’ or families; Di Maio talks about citizens, family and elderly people; while Salvini addresses to 60 million Italians, Italian families and businesses, ‘normal citizens’, ‘real people’ and workers. Overall, as expected, the DP does not exclude any sector of the population, the 5SM criticizes the top layers of the society and the League excludes both the élites and the foreigners.

Table 5.3.3 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on political speeches concerning the third indicator.

<sup>36</sup> Original: Prima gli italiani.

<sup>37</sup> Original: Costano allo stato 35€ ogni giorno e finiscono per spacciare o rubare.

**Table 5.3.3: Inclusiveness – Political Speeches**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>EXCLUSION OF TOP LAYERS</b>	<b>EXCLUSION OF BOTTOM LAYERS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	28	0
<b>L</b>	11	14
<b>DP</b>	2	0

The analysis of political speeches clearly demonstrates that the parties adopted a different attitude in terms of inclusiveness. The 5SM strongly opposed the élites, and in particular the ruling class, the media, the corrupted politicians, and the big companies. During his political meetings, Di Maio used stronger expressions compared to the language used during television interviews, claiming for instance that his adversaries are traitors of the country, and that Mafia and Camorra only exist because the establishment is corrupted and attached to the power. Salvini pointed all his criticisms towards the EU, the banks, the media, the superpowers and the multinational corporations, and argued that he will protect his citizens from the Europe of bureaucrats, of the Euro, of the banks and of the finance. Furthermore, he discriminated the lower classes of the society, and in particular illegal immigrants, foreign prisoners, foreign shopkeepers, Roma and Arabic, keeping underlining that the needs of Italians come first. Conversely, the DP's members assured they will not leave anyone behind.

Table 5.3.4 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on parties' websites concerning the third indicator.

**Table 5.3.4: Inclusiveness – Websites**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>EXCLUSION OF TOP LAYERS</b>	<b>EXCLUSION OF BOTTOM LAYERS</b>
<b>M5S</b>	1	0
<b>L</b>	54	38
<b>DP</b>	3	0

The findings emerged from the study of the websites are partially different from those obtained from different data sources. Indeed, while the Movement barely criticized any layer of the society, the League kept excluding both the élites, and in particular European institutions, supranational organisations and economists, and the immigrants. Indeed, it is clearly stated on its website that Italian citizens will be the priority of the party, while all the others will be helped in the second place.

Conversely, the DP highlighted the importance of inclusiveness, describing pluralism as an added value and emphasizing the contribute brought by foreigners.

#### 5.4 Participatory tools

The fourth indicator focuses on the enhancement and use of participatory tools, which are distinguished between *traditional tools*, such as referenda, citizen initiatives and petitions, and *technology tools*, such as online voting. Moreover, the code *participation* refers to every content related to the involvement of citizens to the political life. Eventually, I have taken into account the frequency to which I could find any reference to *social media*.

Table 5.4.1 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on electoral programmes concerning the fourth indicator.

**Table 5.4.1: Participatory Tools – Electoral Programmes**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>TRADITIONAL TOOLS</b>	<b>TECHNOLOGY TOOLS</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA</b>
<b>M5S</b>	9	8	36	0
<b>L</b>	2	0	2	0
<b>DP</b>	0	0	3	0

In line with my hypothesis, the 5SM refers several times to the enhancement of citizen participation and to the use of participatory tools, both traditional and technological. In particular, it is mentioned several times in the programme that the main goal of the Movement is to interrupt citizens' dissatisfaction towards institutions by bridging the gap between representatives and represented, ensuring voters an access to decisional processes and hence boosting citizen participation. It is argued that the Movement aims to build a democracy that is as participative as possible, in which everyone is called to commit and manage the common good. As stated in the programme, “the more the public choices are far from the voters, the less they are democratic, and they might be taken by individuals who are not responsible towards the collective.”<sup>38</sup> (Programma Nazionale del Movimento Cinque Stelle – Sezione Affari Costituzionali, 2018: p. 12). Furthermore, it is mentioned in the programme that, in order to give citizens a voice, it is necessary to enhance direct democracy tools and to introduce new ones. As explained by the authors of the programme, traditional direct democracy instruments

<sup>38</sup> Original: più si allontanano le scelte pubbliche dai cittadini, più queste vengono sottratte ai procedimenti democratici, rischiando di essere prese da soggetti sempre meno responsabili verso la collettività.

such as referenda have allowed people to win crucial battles, generating results that parties alone could not have achieved. In addition, the revolution introduced by the web has increased the possibility of popular participation, allowing everyone to participate and to be actively interested in the political life of the country. Moreover, it is underlined in the electoral programme that the Movement’s proposals are guided by the suggestions emerged from the online vote. In particular, citizens have expressed their preferences and opinions in the field of justice, environment and security by means of the online platform *Rousseau*. Nevertheless, the members of the 5SM are aware of the so-called ‘digital divide’, namely the risk that certain sectors of the society, such as elderly and disabled people, might not have access to these technology tools. Therefore, they commit to extending the possibility of access to the web through inclusive policies addressed to those disadvantaged segments of the population. In contrast with my expectations, even if to a lesser degree compared to the 5SM, the League also mentions the importance of direct democracy tools, asserting that they could correct the flaws of representative democracy. Contrary to what hypothesized, the Democratic Party refers to citizen participation to a limited degree in its electoral programme.

Table 5.4.2 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on leaders’ interviews on television broadcastings concerning the fourth indicator.

**Table 5.4.2: Participatory Tools – Interviews**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>TRADITIONAL TOOLS</b>	<b>TECHNOLOGY TOOLS</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA</b>
<b>M5S</b>	0	1	1	1
<b>L</b>	0	0	0	1
<b>DP</b>	0	0	0	0

Conversely to what emerged from the analysis of electoral programmes, in the course of the interviews candidates seldom mentioned the importance of citizen participation and direct democracy tools. However, the 5SM still scored better than its adversaries. Indeed, Di Maio encouraged people alienated from politics to come closer to the political realm, asserting: “I want to say to the young people who used not to vote: participate to politics, take part of the political activities!”<sup>39</sup> (Di Maio, 2018).

Table 5.4.3 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on political speeches concerning the fourth indicator.

<sup>39</sup> Original: Mi rivolgo ai giovani che non votavano: partecipate alla politica, prendete parte alle attività politiche!

**Table 5.4.3: Participatory Tools – Political Speeches**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>TRADITIONAL TOOLS</b>	<b>TECHNOLOGY TOOLS</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA</b>
<b>M5S</b>	1	4	19	0
<b>L</b>	0	0	4	0
<b>DP</b>	0	0	2	2

The analysis of the political speeches also shows that the 5SM stands out for its enhancement of political participation. While its adversaries encouraged the public merely to engage in a dialogue concerning the content of the electoral campaign and to persuade the undecided voters, the Movement’s candidates went beyond this request. As argued by Di Maio (2018):

“You don’t fight the abstentionism merely saying ‘Go vote’, but going to all those people that are rightfully disappointed with politics and not asking them to vote, but to participate to a new idea of country, that we build all together, that entails a path of participation before the vote and after the vote. We have always been there, not just during the electoral campaigns. The other parties disappear after the elections, but we were always there, and we will be even more present”<sup>40</sup>

The importance and the responsibility to participate were underlined also by Di Battista, who claimed:

“I address to the young generations: it’s your responsibility to help raising this country, and this can be done only participating to the political life. [...] Young people! Let’s raise this country! Let’s worry about our existence, the present and the future.”<sup>41</sup> (Di Battista, 2018).

Moreover, they put the spotlight on the importance of direct democracy and technology tools, as testified by these claims:

“We want to govern in order to foster transparency, but most of all to activate the mechanisms of direct and participatory democracy that allows you to decide not merely on the ‘who’ but also on the ‘what’. It is our first objective, indeed today we have tools of direct democracy as the online platform *Rousseau*”<sup>42</sup> (Di Maio, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Original: Non si combatte l’astensionismo dicendo semplicemente ‘Andate a votare’ ma andando da tutte quelle persone giustamente deluse dalla politica e chiedendo loro non di votare, ma di partecipare a una nuova idea di paese, che costruiamo tutti insieme, che implica un processo di partecipazione prima e dopo il voto. Noi siamo sempre stati qui, non solo durante la campagna elettorale. Gli altri partiti spariscono dopo le elezioni, ma noi siamo sempre stati qui, e saremo ancora più presenti.

<sup>41</sup> Original: Mi rivolgo alle giovani generazioni: è vostra responsabilità aiutare a far rialzare questo paese, e questo può essere fatto solo partecipando alla vita politica. [...] Giovani! Rialziamo questo paese! Preoccupiamoci della nostra esistenza, del presente e del futuro!

<sup>42</sup> Original: Vogliamo governare con l’obiettivo di migliorare la trasparenza, ma prima di tutto per attivare il meccanismo di democrazia diretta e partecipativa che ti permette di decidere non solo il ‘chi’ ma anche il ‘cosa’. È il nostro obiettivo primario, e infatti oggi abbiamo un meccanismo di democrazia diretta come la piattaforma online Rousseau.

“We achieved so much thanks to a method, the so-called *Rousseau*. It is not merely a technological innovation, but mainly a cultural one, which has allowed us to put the citizens in the middle of political decisions. [...] It gives the possibility to choose our candidates, to vote a parliamentary law, to learn online.”<sup>43</sup> (Raggi, 2018).

Table 5.4.4 shows the results of the content analysis conducted on parties’ websites concerning the fourth indicator.

**Table 5.4.4: Participatory Tools – Websites**

<i>Content related to:</i>	<b>TRADITIONAL TOOLS</b>	<b>TECHNOLOGY TOOLS</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA</b>
<b>M5S</b>	9	47	83	0
<b>L</b>	0	0	4	5
<b>DP</b>	13	4	55	0

The analysis of the websites allowed me to find the most relevant results concerning the fourth indicator. Indeed, it allowed me to analyse the different ways in which parties relate to citizen participation. The League seldom boosts the electorate to participate, if not for encouraging them to vote the day of the elections. The DP promotes the political participation of young generations, of women and of the whole electorate by asking them to vote for the primary, to run for public offices and to join the Forum and the Circles. These political spaces allow people to participate to the public life, to inform the electorate, to include the voters in the drafts of political proposals and hence to take part of the party’s life. They are open to everyone, but only the party members have the right to vote (Sito Ufficiale Partito Democratico). On its website, the 5SM highly promotes the enhancement of a participatory democracy based on the implementation of direct democracy by means of the web. Direct democracy is defined as:

“A new relationship between citizens and their representatives, an evolution of the democratic system rather than its overcoming. Currently, democracy functions through the principle of the mandate, and not of direct participation: after the vote, the relationship between the electorate and the candidates with the decisions that will be taken terminates.”<sup>44</sup>(Rousseau).

<sup>43</sup> Original: Abbiamo ottenuto così tanto grazie a un metodo, il cosiddetto Rousseau. Non è una semplice rivoluzione tecnologica, ma una culturale, che ha permesso di porre i cittadini al centro delle decisioni politiche. [...] Dà la possibilità di scegliere i candidati, di votare leggi parlamentari, di imparare online.

<sup>44</sup> Original: Un nuovo rapporto tra i cittadini ed i loro rappresentanti, un'evoluzione del sistema democratico più che un suo superamento. La democrazia attuale opera sul principio di delega, non di partecipazione diretta: con il voto si esaurisce il rapporto degli elettori con i candidati e con le scelte che verranno da questi attuate.

In order to overcome the flaws of representative democracy, the Movement promotes the use of the web as an instrument to boost participation. As stated on *Rousseau*:

“The Western idea of democracy, based on representation, is flanked by the web, which extends in a connective and collaborative way the possibilities of our action, through the access to data and online participation.”<sup>45</sup>

According to the 5SM’s philosophy, the platform *Rousseau* allows people to redefine the relationship between representatives and represented, allowing the latter to have a say on political decisions that is not limited to the election of the candidates. Thanks to several applications, citizens can participate, tell the Movement in which direction it needs to go and which people should be elected (Casaleggio, 2018).

But does the Movement actually enhance citizen participation? According to what stated on its website, everyone can have access to *Rousseau*, but only those registered to the Movement can actively participate. However, registering to the party is simple, free and only requires to provide a valid identity document. Once registered to the portal, users can propose their own laws, vote on others’ proposals, intervene directly, and suggest modifications, integrations and corrections to draft laws. As reported on *Rousseau*, 5,000 draft laws have been exposed to the judgment of the registered people, and 1,500,000 opinions have been expressed on the online platform. As regards 2018’s elections, the users chose Di Maio as the leader through the online vote, and the electoral programme has been oriented by the opinions of the registered people, who expressed more than 2,500,000 votes. Furthermore, the 5SM organized a three-day meeting where all the citizens could participate in view of the elections, so they could gain a better knowledge concerning the Movement’s programme, which had been voted on the platform *Rousseau* in the previous months.

Overall, the study of the websites confirmed my expectations: the 5SM is strongly committed to enhancing citizen participation through an online form of direct democracy. As regards its adversaries, the DP promotes participation in a traditional way, fostering debate forums and pursuing new party members<sup>46</sup>. Conversely, the League does not promote citizen participation at all, but leaves all the power in the hand of its leader.

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<sup>45</sup> Original: L’idea occidentale di democrazia, basata sulla rappresentazione, è affiancata dal web, che estende in maniera connettiva e collaborativa le possibilità del nostro agire, mediante l’accesso ai dati e alla partecipazione online.

<sup>46</sup> However, no figures concerning the number of participants and no data about the frequency of the forums have been found in the course of the research of DP’s website.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In light of my main research question on whether the populist rhetoric adopted by the Five Star Movement enhances citizen participation, the findings emerged from the content analysis bring me to consider my theoretical expectations as valid. The data collected show indeed that the Movement boosts the participation of voters by means of its online platform of direct democracy *Rousseau*. As emerged from the study of electoral programmes, *Rousseau*'s users have expressed their preferences and opinions concerning the topics of the electoral campaign, and the need to increase political participation has been highlighted in the course of the political speeches of the Movement to a greater extent compared to its adversaries. The League has in fact adopted a very different approach: although its style is also characterized by a strong populist rhetoric, the participation of the voters is not contemplated in its programme or in party members' statements. All the responsibilities and powers are put in the hands of its leader, who portrays himself as a 'normal citizen', but on the other hand adopts a 'caretaker attitude' (Müller, 2014), promising he will take charge of all the problems of the Italians and protect them from external and internal threats. In light of the results emerged from my analysis, we could reckon the League's voters as 'stealth democrats' (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), namely dissatisfied citizens who are unhappy with the current state of democracy, but are not willing to engage in the political process and hence delegate responsibility to their party leader. The Democratic Party has demonstrated a more ambiguous relationship with participation: on a theoretical level, it is committed to enhance democratic values, entailing inclusion of all the layers of the society and participation of the voters to the political life. Nevertheless, its leader does not concretely invoke citizen participation, and the party's slogans and rhetoric do not appeal to a greater involvement of the electorate in the political arena.

What differentiates the Movement from its adversaries is not merely its fostering of a greater citizen participation, but also the way voters are called to engage in politics. The 5SM endeavours to bridge the gap between dissatisfied citizens and flawed institutions by means of the web, which guarantees the electorate an access to the political arena, a greater control over the agenda and an improved relationship between public preferences and policies. Furthermore, its attempt to boost participation is characterized by the use of a populist rhetoric, which appeals to voters by means of simple and effective discourses. The use of catchy slogans, the severe criticisms to the establishment and the way democracy works, the several calls for a greater use of direct democracy tools and the endeavour to employ the web to bridge the gap between representatives and represented, are all elements of a new politics, which entails the enhancement of citizen participation by means of a different strategy. The relevance of



conducting a research on the 5SM lies in its innovative way of doing politics, which pursues citizen participation by adopting a populist rhetoric and implementing a charismatic leadership. In line with my main expectation, the Movement fosters the involvement of alienated voters in the political life by means of direct forms of participation; however, the party maintains a hierarchical structure of authority, in which the directives are laid down by a strong leader that shows the core characteristics of a populist leadership.

In light of the findings drawn from the content analysis, populism might not be considered necessarily bad: the results of my research show that the Movement's willingness to boost citizen participation, combined to the use of a populist rhetoric, enhance voters' involvement more than a traditional approach, as the one adopted by the DP. Indeed, by promoting the use of technological tools of direct democracy, the 5SM allows voters to express their opinions and preferences, thus bridging the gap between citizens and policies, which as a result should be closer to the electorate's needs. Moreover, the Movement attempts to boost the involvement of those who no longer felt represented by established parties, hence tackling political alienation, revitalizing the public opinion and pursuing a participation that goes beyond the mere election vote.

In view of these considerations, populism might be seen as a potential corrector rather than a threat to democracy. However, before drawing any conclusion about the relationship between populism and democracy, we have to take into account that the context plays a crucial role in affecting the effect of the former on the latter. Indeed, as explained in the theoretical chapter, populism is an empty shell (Taggart, 2000), which can assume several different shapes according to the ideology to which it is associated. Furthermore, several context-related factors, such as the party's position in government, the status of the democratic institutions, popular dissatisfaction and the composition of the society, might influence the role played by populism with regard to democracy. In addition, as argued in the existent literature, populism may have positive effects on certain aspects of democracy, while jeopardizing other features of the democratic institutions.

In my analysis, I decided to focus on citizen participation, one of the pillars of contemporary democracy which is currently going through a crisis and is bringing many to question representative democracies. My study within the Italian context shows that the populist rhetoric adopted by the Five Star Movement enhances the involvement of voters in the political life to a greater extent compared to another populist party, namely the League, and an established left-wing party, i.e. the Democratic Party. This research demonstrates that the willingness to include citizens in the political arena, combined to the call for technological tools of direct democracy and an appealing populist rhetoric, promote citizens' political participation, and enhance it to a higher degree in comparison with a mainstream approach or a populist politics accompanied by a different host ideology.

Nevertheless, the results of this study should only be considered in light of the Italian political scenario, and cannot be extended to different contexts. The 5SM carries indeed a truly peculiar and innovative way of doing politics, which hardly resembles any other party in Western Europe. Moreover, Italy is living in a singular condition, characterized by significantly high levels of popular dissatisfaction, a multitude of corruption scandals, a poor economic condition and a high degree of mistrust towards politicians and democratic institutions. In addition, it has to be taken into account that the Movement has achieved particularly good results while in opposition, but it is still too soon to evaluate its actions within the current coalition government.

The innovative politics brought up by the Movement has some positive effects, among which the fostering of citizen participation. However, it is still unclear to what extent its promotion of participation has contributed to the party's success in 2018's national elections. In this regard, I believe that the support gained during the last elections could be rather due to the strong criticisms that the Movement advanced towards the establishment and its ability to present itself as the only alternative to the obsolete and corrupted ruling class. Furthermore, the poor results achieved by the 5SM in the course of one year of government might lead one to argue that its ability to criticize and oppose mainstream parties allows it to be a strong opposition party, while it lacks the capacity and the experience necessary to govern the country. As shown by the results of 2019's European elections, the Movement has lost a substantial amount of votes, while its ally of government, the League, has achieved an unprecedented result, becoming the first party in Italy with 34.26% of the national support (Italian Interior Ministry, 2019).

Despite its current decline, the Five Star Movement is undoubtedly one of the most successful examples of ground-breaking party that has brought innovative politics within the Italian institutions and has attempted to reform the flawed state of representative democracy. By using a populist rhetoric, enriched by simple discourses, slogans and fierce criticisms of mainstream politics, the Movement has attracted many dissatisfied citizens who had lost their faith in institutions. Moreover, my research has shown that during the electoral campaign that preceded 2018's national elections, the 5SM has appealed to citizen participation within its electoral programme, its official website, its leader's interviews and its party members political speeches. In addition, the comparison with its political adversaries has furtherly highlighted the Movement's commitment to enhance political involvement of the voters in politics.

This study could be considered as the beginning of a deeper analysis of the 5SM's fostering of participation. In particular, future researches could focus on the features of *Rousseau*'s users. Indeed,

the people registered to the platform could be the same voters that would engage in the political life anyhow. Hence, it is important to research whether the technology tools launched by the Movement do actually increase political participation, spreading the willingness to commit to the political process to a broader part of the electorate. The risk of implementing technological devices lies indeed in the possibility of creating an even wider gap between those who are committed to engage in politics, and thus take advantage of the online platform, and the disadvantaged sectors of the society, that are less willing to participate and do not own the means to have access to pieces of technology. Another suggestion for further researches implies the study of the effect of the Movement's call for citizen participation on its electoral success. Indeed, although its appeal to participation undoubtedly constitutes one of its core features, I believe that the electoral support achieved in 2018's elections might not be linked to its attempt to boost voters' involvement in political life, but rather to its severe criticisms of established politics.

Overall, this study brings me to stress two conclusions. First, the Five Star Movement has attempted to increase citizen participation to a greater extent compared to its political adversaries, namely the Democratic Party and the League. Second, I believe that its promotion of participation is particularly effective thanks to the use of a populist rhetoric, which allows them to attract voters' attention because of its straightforward messages and its appeal to voters' sentiments. Although populism tends to have a negative conception and to be seen as a threat to democracy, I believe that in determinate contexts it could function as a corrective to the present state of democracy. Indeed, my study shows that a populist rhetoric, combined to a certain host ideology as the one driven by the Italian 5SM, may help improve one of the biggest lacks of representative democracy, namely citizen participation.

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## Appendix A

### Data Sources

Electoral programmes:

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