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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Electoral and Executive Agenda in Time of Populism: A Solemn Oath or Coalition Politics as Usual?

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ABSTRACT

The translation of electoral pledges into the executive's agenda is all but a linear process. Parties that take office have to compromise on what issues will be prioritized in the governmental agenda, which never exactly matches parties' electoral platforms. Populists may further challenge this mechanism, as they pursue a more direct link with people and claim to be different from non-populist parties. This study, bridging the party mandate model and agenda-setting scholarship, analyses the congruence between electoral manifestos and the prime minister's investiture speech in Italy, both at the aggregate and individual-issue levels. By comparing the behaviour of parties in government (1994–2021), the analysis reveals that populist parties do not reinforce the 'transmission belt' from electoral pledges to the executive agenda.

KEYWORDS: Agenda-setting; Populism; Party Manifesto; Investiture Speech; Prime Minister

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1. Introduction

Satisfaction with democracy is a desirable function of a democratic political system and depends, to a certain extent, on the level of convergence between citizens' priorities and policy outcomes (Reher 2016). This connection manifests itself through the so-called 'promissory representation': representatives make promises to their constituencies during the electoral campaign and try to keep them if elected (Mansbridge 2003). Due to its relevance, scholars have spent a significant amount of time investigating the program-to-policy link and have demonstrated that the mechanism between pledges and policies (Froio et al. 2017; Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin & Thomson 2020), and even between party manifestos and policy agendas (Carammia et al. 2018), is all but linear. The path from pledges to outcomes is paved with many pitfalls, and despite the increasing role of executives in the demand and supply of public policies, finding a compromise on the policies to carry out and then actually implementing them seems a rather hard task for any kind of government. Recently, the increasing fragmentation of party systems has made the situation even more complex, after a number of parties have been able to increase their parliamentary representation.

Among these, populist parties represent a serious challenge for political science scholars in many respects, especially when they enter in government. Populist parties claims to be the 'true' representatives of the people, implying that politics must exactly correspond to the general will, or *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004). However, it is still unclear whether populist parties in government take into account the promises made during the electoral campaign more than non-populist parties when forming the executive's agenda. This is primarily due to the fact that governments composed exclusively of populist parties have been absent in Western Europe until very recently. Thus, scholars have had the chance to study their behaviour only in terms of coalition formation (de Lange 2012) and policy effects (Minkenberg 2001), mostly focusing on very specific policies (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015; Kaltwasser & Taggart 2016). Instead, the research on the agenda-setting process carried-out by populist parties in

government is still rather underdeveloped (with very few exceptions, see Borghetto 2018; Cavalieri & Froio 2021).

We aim to enter into this debate by studying the party mandate model through the agenda-setting perspective, where previous works have instead investigated this link from a positional perspective (see, for instance, McDonald & Budge 2005; Warwick 2011). Furthering previous studies, we analyse the link between party manifestos and executives' agendas in the Italian case over the last thirty years. We consider Italy an extreme case, in light of the level of populist party participation in its government. Indeed, populist parties have acted as main and junior partners in coalition governments, both in coalition with non-populist and other populist parties. Furthermore, Italy represents the perfect political system to look at since it has a long tradition of multiparty coalition governments, which are naturally forced to find a synthesis between different parties' electoral pledges when drawing the executive's agenda. We develop previous research on the Italian case (Borghetto & Carammia 2015) both by expanding the timeframe to the most recent years (from 1994 to 2021) and by focusing specifically on the behaviour of populist parties. Although exploratory, our analysis reveals that in terms of congruence between party pledges and government agendas, cabinets including populist parties do not differ from those formed by non-populist parties.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and presents our expectations, and Section 3 reviews the main changes in Italian politics during the period of analysis and justifies the case selection. Section 4 describes the research strategy, and Section 5 presents the data and methodology. Section 6 presents the results, and Section 7 concludes with the most relevant implications and future avenues for research.

2. Party mandate and populist parties: strengthening or weakening the 'transmission belt'

Political parties are elected based on their policy programs by voters who confer them a mandate (McDonald et al. 2004) that they are then expected to carry

out by implementing the policies advertised in their manifestos. Among the many actors involved in the policy-making process, the government surely has a preeminent role in driving national agendas (Rasch & Tsebelis 2013). In this regard, the party mandate model (Budge & Hofferbert 1990; McDonald et al. 2004) expects a certain degree of convergence between parties' pledges and policy outcomes (Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin et al. 2019; Naurin & Thomson 2020). The translation of electoral promises into a governmental agenda represents a challenging process as it is the synthesis between various government members' policy preferences. This is especially true for multiparty coalition governments (Strøm et al. 2008), which face the challenge of controlling coalition members who often hold divergent policy preferences and goals and who will also potentially compete against each other in the next electoral competition. Moreover, the institutional setting wherein political parties operate, the emergence of new information, swings of citizen preferences (Stimson et al. 1995), media attention (Vliegenthart et al. 2016) and the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010) force parties to adjust their strategies in a complex dynamic system where they act as 'agenda-setters' for most of the time but sometimes become 'agenda-takers' (Borghetto & Russo 2018).

Considering the crucial link between electoral pledges and the executive agenda, scholars have attempted to match the party mandate and the issue-attention models, exploring the degree of convergence between the government agenda and the promises made by political parties during the elections (Bevan et al. 2011; Bevan & Jennings 2014; Carammia et al. 2018). In this scenario, a novelty has emerged that may question the 'usual' system of transmission of electoral pledges into the governmental agenda: the takeover of populist parties in many Western democracies.

2.1. Governmental agenda of populist parties: Expectations

The logic of party mandate might be at odds with the conception of representation embodied by populist parties (Caramani 2017; Werner & Giebler 2019). Populist actors aspire to practice an unmediated style of representation by directly epitomizing the general will (*volonté générale*) and, thus, bypass the system of

checks and balances characterizing liberal-democratic polities (Meny & Surel 2002; Mudde 2004). At the theoretical level, their chameleonic nature (Taggart 2000) makes them more sympathetic to voter demands (Backlund & Jungar 2019; Kortmann et al. 2019) and more responsive to public opinion on the issues they own (Plescia et al. 2019) with respect to non-populist parties. Additionally, trying to give voice to widespread dissatisfaction with the existing representative system (Meléndez & Kaltwasser 2019), they promote a symbolic form of representation based on anti-establishment identities (Pitkin 1967; Werner & Giebler 2019), rather than a substantive representation regarding policy issues. Emphasizing their ‘difference’ from mainstream parties, populist parties are expected to maintain their focus on the ‘core’ issues that initially made their fortune, even when they enter a coalition government.

However, different policy venues obey different dynamics. Some are more suitable for sudden and strategic shifts of attention on the basis of voter preferences and other parties’ attitudes (e.g. public debates or parliamentary discussions). Others are instead a snapshot of the policy intentions of parties at a very precise moment (e.g. prime minister’s investiture speech, which already presents the agreement among coalition partners; see Bevan et al. 2011). In either of the two, populist parties in government face the same constraints as non-populist parties in terms of governing responsibilities, which bind executives to focus on a rather narrow bundle of issues (those pertaining to the ‘core’ functions of the state; see Jennings et al. 2011). This explains the strong degree of path dependency in issue attention, even when a full turnover occurs (Mortensen et al. 2011). Another serious constraint for cabinet parties is the electoral cycle, which affects the degree of congruence between parties’ pledges and the executive’s agenda (Borghetto & Belchior 2019). More specifically, the government agenda more closely resembles party pledges when the cabinet is formed just after the elections, whereas cabinets formed at distinct points of the legislature have weaker links to parties’ electoral platforms (see also Brouard et al. 2018).

These pieces of evidence suggest that governing responsibilities force parties to adapt to their new role similarly, sometimes expanding their initial agenda (Greene 2015), despite the different ideological roots present in a coalition government. We imagine this to be even more true when populist parties are in office since they may try to show that they are as competent as policymakers of mainstream parties, releasing themselves from the image of inexperienced and incompetent politicians. Incidentally, previous studies on populist parties have found that they behave differently from non-populist parties when in opposition but not when in office (Louwse & Otjes 2019; Cavalieri & Froio 2021) and that other characteristics (e.g. anti-elitism and ideological heterogeneity) provide better explanations than populism for their behaviour (Otjes & Louwse 2021). Taking all these aspects into consideration, we expect that the congruence between parties' pledges and the executive's agenda is not affected by the populist/non-populist nature of the parties involved in government. This means that populist parties in government do not increase the convergence between the executive's agenda and the electoral pledges of those parties composing the coalition with respect to non-populist parties.

3. Case selection: Italian governments in the last thirty years

This article investigates whether populist parties have an effect on the transmission belt from party pledges to governmental agenda. We choose to focus on Italy because it represents an extreme case (Seawright & Gerring 2008) both in terms of populist party participation in government and the institutional context.

Since 1993, Italy 'has transformed itself into the site *par excellence* of populism's triumph over the classical parties' (Hermet 2001, p. 396). Scholars on populism have described the country as a 'populist paradise' (Zanatta 2002) or 'the promise land of populism' (Tarchi 2015). The success of populist parties has not been ephemeral or confined to the electoral arena, as it has produced several cabinets with populist parties in leading roles. Among Western European countries experiencing the participation of populist parties in government (Austria, Finland, Greece, Italy,

the Netherlands and Norway),¹ only two (i.e. Italy and Greece) witnessed the formation of full-fledged populist governments. Still, Italy represents an extreme case because governments with populist parties are not confined to one (or two consecutive) legislatures (as in Greece) but instead have directly and consistently participated in governments over an extended time frame (since 1994). Crucially, Italy shows the highest number of governments in Europe with the direct participation of at least one populist party (see Vittori 2021).

The second feature that makes Italy an extreme case when considering populist parties is the overall transformation of its institutional context in recent history, which has considerably affected the formation process of its executive agenda. Although the beginning of the 1990s and the transition from the ‘First’ to the ‘Second Republic’ is usually considered one of the most shattering moments of the Italian republican history, many other political shocks have characterized the past thirty years. Some fundamental changes altered the Italian political system, and these include changes to the electoral formula, the alteration of the patterns of government formation, and the transformation of the party system (Russo 2015), which eventually culminated in a moment of deep party system deconstruction and the ultimate transition to a tripolar pattern of competition (Chiaramonte & De Sio 2019).

The Italian tradition prior to 1994 saw a very vague process of coalition formation, which produced a misfit between what political parties promised during the electoral campaign and what they later implemented in government (Borghetto & Carammia 2015). After the new electoral law of 1993, which forced parties to form pre-electoral coalitions (D’Alimonte & Chiaramonte 1995), a bipolar season – imperfect, most of the time – was implemented and remained in place until 2013. This transformation increased the decisiveness of the elections, *de facto* providing clearer options for voters to choose from among a defined set of political alternatives. By introducing a credible sanction of government alternation, the new institutional setting strengthened the congruence between parties’ electoral platforms and the

¹ This count excludes parties giving external support to the cabinet.

executive's agenda, and the overall functioning of the party mandate model in Italy (Borghetto & Carammia 2015).²

Following the onset of the Great Recession and the resignation of the Berlusconi IV government, political parties appeared explicitly unable to manage the crisis, which forced the appointment of Monti's technocratic government. The following 2013 elections caused the thundering collapse of the party system and, for the first time since 1994, the election results did not provide a majority in both chambers. The rapid upsurge of a new challenger party, the Five Star Movement (M5S), transformed the bipolar mechanic into a new tripolar one. The credible threat of government alternation inaugurated with the 1994 election ceased to function and the 2018 election did not provide any clear majority either. The process of coalition formation appeared to resemble the pre-1994 standards: the lack of a clear majority in both chambers in 2013 brought to a consociational grand coalition (*larghe intese*). Similarly, after the 2018 election the tripolar pattern of the party system favoured the formation of the first Conte government – the first fully-fledged populist government in Italy (D'Alimonte 2019) – composed of M5S (the main electoral force, 34%) and the League (the top party within the centre-right coalition, 17%). The rising degree of conflict within the Conte I cabinet led to its early resignation, after the 2019 European Parliament election. Again, the coalition formula radically changed: the role of the prime minister (PM) was preserved though the new coalition was formed by the M5S and the Democratic Party, with minor leftist parties. Following the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the tension within the governing coalition provoked the end of the Conte II government and the formation of a new government led by the former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, and supported by all political forces except the Brothers of Italy and the Italian Left. The huge transformation of the Italian party system and changes in the pattern of the government formation suggest that, once again, the links between party pledges and

² This pattern of higher stability is reflected also by the longer average length of the executive tenure, which increased from the extraordinary evanescence of the Italian cabinets, lasting on average less than one year (322 days) from 1948–1992, to a survival of about one year and nine months (639 days) during the period of the quasi-bipolar dynamics (1994–2011).

government priorities might also have been weakened. In summary, when considering the inclusion of populist parties in government, it is possible to consider Italy as an extreme case. Across the timeframe of our analysis (1994–2021), Italy shifted from a bipolar logic of coalition formation to a multipolar one (since 2013). In this period, populist parties acted both as junior and main coalition partners and have formed governments both with non-populist and with other populist parties. This allows for the study of the impact of populist parties on the degree of congruence between party pledges and the executive's agenda independent from the institutional setting and the coalition formation formula.

Clearly, our case selection influences the generalizability of our result. An extreme case method is explorative and aims to probe the possible effects of an independent variable in 'an open fashion' (Seawright & Gerring 2008, p. 302). In our article, we ascertain the potential impact of populist party participation on the congruence between party pledges and the executive's agenda. In light of both the strong involvement of populist parties and the variety of coalition formation logics, our results provide important insights for those European countries characterized by the routine participation of populist parties in the process of government formation (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Poland, Hungary). Still, for those contexts characterized by a more episodic involvement of populist parties in cabinets the current study provides important input to stimulate further comparative research.

4. Research Strategy

Our study builds on previous works regarding the transmission belt between parties' electoral pledges and government agendas by additionally comparing populist parties in government with non-populist parties. In this section, we discuss the sources used to measure party pledges and policy priorities expressed in the executive's agenda. Then, we clarify our ideational understanding of populism, discussing which political parties can be labelled as populist in the Italian political landscape and listing the governments that we consider populist.

A government's agenda can be studied by looking at different documents (i.e. coalition agreements, bills, investiture speeches), among which the PM's investiture speech is considered of notable interest and importance for the agenda-setting process, as it signals the policy priorities of the incoming government and helps uncover the effect of partisan characteristics and electoral mandates (Mortensen et al. 2011; Borghetto et al. 2017). The investiture speech is standard in almost all liberal democracies. In these speeches, the PM outlines the goals that the government intends to accomplish during its mandate. Because of the very nature of coalition governments, the PM's speech must provide a synthesis of the policy programs of parties composing the coalition (Mortensen et al. 2011; Green-Pedersen et al. 2018). The investiture speech serves the function of signalling the salience of the most important issues for the cabinet and provides a roadmap for the program that the cabinet aims to implement during its mandate (Jennings et al. 2011). Furthermore, the agenda that is represented in the prime minister's investiture speech indicates a set of priorities de-linked from the elections and the institutional calendar (Jennings et al. 2011). In Italy, the investiture speech is addressed to both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate before a new government asks for a confidence vote. In this respect, a government is first appointed by the President of the Republic and then must obtain positive votes of confidence from both houses of parliament.

In this work, priorities stated in the PM's investiture speech are compared with party manifestos. It has been argued that few voters actually read electoral manifestos. However, party manifestos represent the most comprehensive and authoritative documents containing information about parties' ideological profiles and issue priorities at the time of the electoral campaign. Through their manifestos, political parties assign a different degree of attention to their favourite issues, emphasizing selected issues as a tool for political competition.

In our analysis of the congruence between governmental agendas and party pledges, we explicitly adhere to a salience-based understanding of party competition (Budge & Farlie 1983). In terms of the formation of governmental agendas, a cabinet is guided by a problem-solving rationale and addresses the problems that appear the

most salient and urgent (Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Froio et al. 2017). We assume that political parties emphasize their favourite issues in order to preserve them as top priorities of the political agenda (Budge 2015).

As our main focus is on populist party behaviour, we need to clarify which political parties are considered populist in the Italian case. Here, we follow an ideational approach to populism, referring to a set of ideas or beliefs that conceives the society as divided into two homogeneous and mutually antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2004). A starting point to identify populist parties in Italy is provided by ‘The PopuList’ dataset (Rooduijn et al. 2019), which combines the expertise of several scholars with specific backgrounds in both populism and specific countries. In this respect, within the timeframe of our analysis the Italian populist parties in government³ are the following: Go Italy/People of Freedom (*Forza Italia/Popolo della Libertà*, FI/PdL),⁴ the Northern League/the League, and M5S.

The inclusion of the League and M5S within the populist category is undisputed by the literature. Since its inception, the League has been the collector of northern malaise, pitting the (northern) people against the political elites and fighting to alter the Italian territorial structure (Biorcio 1991). After its process of nationalization, the regionalist framing decreased but the (new) League⁵ continued to display a high degree of populism, moving the target from the national political class (often labelled through the heuristic: *Roma Ladrona*, literally ‘Roma the Burglar’) to the European Union institutions and embracing a nativist agenda (Albertazzi et al. 2018). M5S emerged in the 2013 election by politicizing a harsh antagonism against the whole political class (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013). M5S’s polyvalent ideological

³ Italy of Values (IdV) is also a populist party with governmental experience (Prodi II) (Tarchi 2015). However, its weight in terms of policy influence within the *Unione* coalition has been marginal.

⁴ Following the creation of the Democratic Party (PD), National Alliance (AN) and FI started a conflation process. In the 2008 election they presented joint electoral lists, and in 2009 they officialised the PdL’s birth. Despite the inclusion of the post-fascist AN political elite, the PdL has been also considered Berlusconi’s personal party (McDonnell 2013).

⁵ Starting with the 2018 elections, the Northern League also filed candidates in southern regions. The party dropped the word ‘north’ from the electoral list and has been relabeled ‘Lega Salvini Premier’.

repertoire makes the party hardly categorizable within the classic left/right political spectrum, constituting an expression of eclectic populism (Pirro 2018).

Conversely, the inclusion of FI/PdL within the populist category requires some clarification. Since its appearance in the political arena, both Silvio Berlusconi and his political creature, Forza Italia, have been labelled by scholars, pundits, and political rivals as populist (Tarchi 2008). Indeed, Berlusconi portrayed himself as the sole and authentic defender of the *volonté générale*, wholly separate from political elites responsible for the country's dysfunctionalities (Tarchi 2015). Despite the fact that no scholar would doubt that Silvio Berlusconi can be classified as a populist leader, some hesitations might be found when weighing whether Forza Italia can be considered a populist party. As a matter of fact, the populism characteristic of FI is almost exclusively due to its leader (Tarchi 2008), while the party itself has always been characterized by a conservative ideological stance and includes among its ranks several politicians originally from other dissolved parties. However, the overall political weight of FI (and of the PdL from 2007 to 2013) as an organization independent from Berlusconi's will has always been negligible, making FI an almost ideal example of the type of personal party that is indissolubly linked to the leader's personality (McDonnell 2013).

In light of this discussion of Italian populist parties, we consider the following as populist governments: Berlusconi I, II, III, IV and Conte I. It could also be argued that the Conte II government should be included, since M5S remains the main party of the coalition. However, when forming the Conte II cabinet together with the PD, the M5S continued the process of progressive moderation and institutionalization within the party (Tronconi 2018; Bordignon & Ceccarini 2019). Furthermore, the PD represents the actor that more readily represents politicized anti-populist motifs, evidenced by both its unequivocal support for EU institutions and its constant emphasis on financial responsibility (Giannetti et al. 2017).

5. Data & Method

In this study, we measure the congruence between the investiture speeches (1994–2021) and the electoral manifestos (1994–2018) of those parties supporting the cabinets (see Appendix A1). Our analysis provides both aggregated and issue-level measurements of congruence, employing the widely used Duncan index. The government priorities expressed by the PM in the investiture speech are coded using the Comparative Agenda Project's (CAP) codebook (Baumgartner et al. 2019). In this respect, we expand upon an already existing dataset (Borghetto et al. 2017) by adding the last four investiture speeches in Italy (Gentiloni, Conte I, Conte II, Draghi). The CAP codebook is structured across 239⁶ minor topics grouped into 21 major topics. In coding the investiture speeches, we consider only those quasi-sentences containing explicit policy content, excluding those with a rhetorical scope. The parties' electoral manifestos are measured through the Manifesto Project Database (MARPOR, Volkens et al. 2020). MARPOR covers over the issue preferences of 1000 parties from 1945 until today in over 50 countries on five continents. The dataset offers party issue salience by coding party manifestos and assigning each quasi-sentence to one of 56 categories. In order to match the CAP and MARPOR coding schemes, we apply the aggregation framework proposed by Conti, Pedrazzani, and Russo (2019). This means that we aggregate MARPOR's 56 categories and the CAP's 239 minor topics into 18 policy domains (see Appendix A2).⁷ By doing so, we can compare the policy issue salience of investiture speeches with the one presented by governing parties in their electoral manifestos.

The governments analysed are all supported by more than one party. As a consequence, we follow three distinct models of parties' priority aggregation derived from the literature on coalition politics: the formateur, the veto-player, and the pure

⁶ The original CAP codebook consisted of 231 minor topics (Baumgartner et al. 2019). However, the Italian section of the CAP provides an adapted codebook that counts 239 minor topics (Borghetto et al. 2017).

⁷ The marginal differences between the coding scheme presented in Table A2 and the one provided by Conti et al. (2019) are due to the fact that the latter employs the standard CAP coding scheme (Baumgartner et al. 2019), while we follow Borghetto et al. (2017), who employ the Italian version of the CAP scheme.

mandate models (see Borghetto & Carammia 2015). The formateur model assumes that the party leading the coalition formation (i.e. the PM's party) holds an advantageous position to stress his/her own priorities within the governmental agenda (Baron & Ferejohn 1989). Therefore, it is measured by employing the priorities expressed in the manifesto of the PM's party. The veto-player model argues that all parties forming a coalition have equal importance in determining the priorities of the coalitional agenda, regardless of their actual size (Tsebelis 2002). It is assessed by calculating the average position of the manifestos of parties supporting the cabinet. Finally, the pure mandate model asserts that the leverage held by each party in shaping the executive's agenda is proportional to its size. This means that while smaller parties contribute to influencing the agenda, their impact is lower than that of larger parties (Warwick 2001). This is measured through the weighted⁸ mean of the manifestos of the parties supporting the cabinet.

To measure the congruence between parties' priorities and the executive's agenda, we rely on a widely used measure in these kinds of studies, that is, the Duncan Index of dissimilarity (Duncan & Duncan 1955). We compare the priorities exhibited in the investiture speech (at time t) with the priorities expressed in the electoral manifesto of the first election prior to government formation (i.e. time $t-1$) of: a) the PM's party (formateur model); b) all parties supporting the government by calculating the mean of the priorities (veto-player model); c) all the parties supporting the government by calculating the weighted mean of the priorities (pure mandate model). This can be mathematically expressed by the following formula:

$$1/2 \sum_{i=1}^{18} |m_{(i-1)} - is_i|$$

where, $i = 1 \dots 18$ indicates the issue domains of our coding scheme; $m_{(i-1)}$ represents the percentage of quasi-sentences contained in the party manifesto associated with an issue domain i at $t-1$ (with respect to the PM's investiture speech); is_i indicates the

⁸ The weights are constructed on the basis of parties' parliamentary seats.

percentage of quasi-sentences contained in the investiture speech associated with the issue domain i . The Duncan Index shows a lower bound of 0 when the investiture speech and the party manifesto are identical, that is, when an investiture speech focuses its attention on exactly the same issues emphasized by supporting parties during the electoral campaign. The maximum value of the index is 100 and indicates that there is no congruence at all between the investiture speech and party manifestos, which would indicate that the investiture speech addresses issues that are totally unrelated to the ones stressed by parties in their manifestos.

To investigate issue-level congruence on the 18 issue domains, we use a different indicator than the aggregate Duncan Index employed for the cabinet-level congruence. For this analysis, we calculate the absolute distance between the mean of the manifestos of all parties supporting the cabinet and the investiture speech on each issue by subtracting the emphasis of the latter from the former.

6. Results

We start by showing the aggregated congruence across governments through Duncan Index scores (Table 1). Although discrepancies among the three models are negligible, the veto-player model reveals a higher average congruence (lower value) compared to both the pure mandate model and the formateur model.⁹ In this respect, the distance between the veto-player and the party-mandate scores is more pronounced in the post-2013 phase, potentially signalling a more consociational trend in coalition building. Because of the (historical) characteristics of the Italian party system, which assigns disproportionate power to smaller political allies, we refer to the veto-player model hereafter.

⁹The presence of several coalition-wide manifestos makes the calculation of the pure-mandate or veto-players model substantially equivalent (i.e. Berlusconi II, Berlusconi III, Prodi II).

Table 1 – Duncan Index scores of congruence

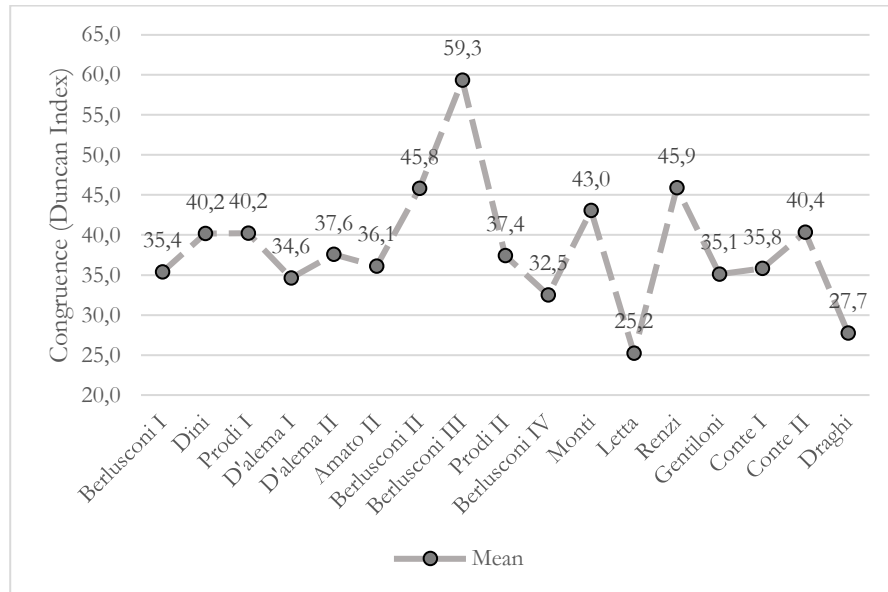
Cabinet	Model		
	Formateur^a	Veto Player	Party Mandate
Berlusconi I	32.7	35.4	29.9
Dini	–	40.2	34.9
Prodi I	–	40.2	37.3
D'Alema I	38.9	34.6	34.3
D'Alema II	41.6	37.6	37.7
Amato II	–	36.1	34.2
Berlusconi II	45.8	45.8	45.8
Berlusconi III	59.3	59.3	59.3
Prodi II	37.4	37.4	37.4
Berlusconi IV	34.6	32.5	29.6
Monti	–	43	41.8
Letta	48.4	25.2	33.5
Renzi	62.7	45.9	57.7
Gentiloni	41.2	35.1	37.4
Conte I	46.2	35.8	38.6
Conte II	50.4	40.4	38.3
Draghi	–	27.7	29.1
Average	44.9	40.8	41.1

^a *Missing values in this model refer to technocratic governments (Dini, Monti, Draghi) or to governments with a PM that is not associated with any political party (Prodi I and Amato II). Source: authors' own elaboration.*

At the aggregate level, the degree of congruence between the mean of the supporting parties' manifestos and the investiture speeches (i.e. the veto-player model) across governments (Figure 1) displays a relatively stable congruence throughout the whole period and an increase in congruence post-2013.

During the years of centre-left/centre-right alternation, the congruence values are relatively high and stable. The peak of incongruence can be seen during the Berlusconi III cabinet. This government followed the collapse of the Berlusconi II government after a disappointing electoral result in the 2005 regional elections, which triggered internal disputes and rapidly escalated into a governmental crisis. However, the new cabinet maintained the same coalition formula and PM, and the investiture speech was almost entirely tailored to simply leading the government towards the 2006 polls.

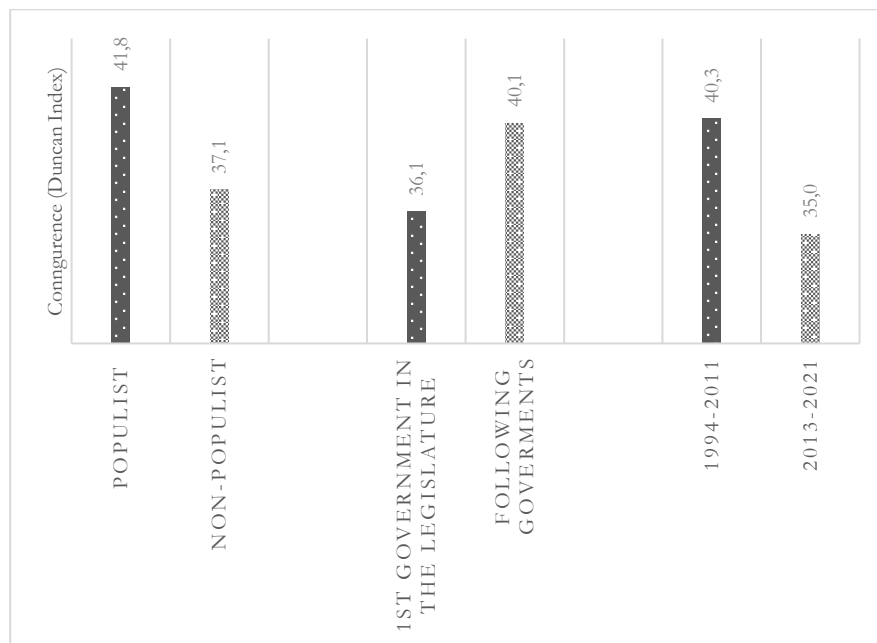
Figure 1. Veto-player congruence across governments



Note: Higher values indicate a lower degree of congruence.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Figure 2. Congruence across populist/non-populist; first/following; pre/post-2013 governments



Source: authors' own elaboration.

In the post-2013 phase, the average congruence is higher than in the ‘Second Republic’ phase, with the exception of the congruence value represented by the Renzi government. Appointed as the secretary of the PD after the 2013 elections, Renzi took office in 2014 after the fall of the Letta government. In this case, the fact that the electoral manifesto of the PD was drafted following the social-democratic profile endorsed by the former secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, the coalition formula based on a grand-coalition architecture (*large-intese*) and Renzi’s leader-centric approach to agenda formation all contributed to this low degree of congruence. A surprising finding is the high degree of congruence registered by the Draghi cabinet, which was inaugurated to cope with political parties’ dysfunctionalities during the pandemic crisis.¹⁰ This is surprising, not only because of its technocratic nature – usually considered almost unresponsive to electoral preferences (Caramani 2017) – but also because it is the third cabinet of the legislative term. In fact, governments formed at later stages of the legislative term tend to be less congruent than those formed immediately after elections (Conti et al. 2019), as highlighted also by our data (see Figure 2 and Table 2). The Draghi cabinet’s peculiarity can be understood by considering the cabinet’s composition. Different both from the Dini and Monti technocratic governments, entirely formed by technocratic ministers, the Draghi government is a ‘technocratic-led partisan government’ (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014), which has pulled together eight technocratic and fifteen partisan ministers. The complexity of the government’s composition, epitomized by the willingness of almost all parliamentary parties to jump in, pushed Draghi to carefully emphasize all the core issues of each of the political parties supporting his cabinet in his investiture speech, as is evident also from the high degree of heterogeneity in the issues discussed.¹¹ To

¹⁰ After the governmental crisis stimulated by Italia Viva (IV) (a PD splinter party born during the XVIII legislature led by Renzi), which forced Conte to resign, the president of the republic urged the formation of a ‘high profile government not identifiable with any of the existing political formulas’ (quoted in Garzia & Karremans 2021, p. 107).

¹¹ To verify this stance, we calculated the entropy score of the PM’s speeches using the Shannon Index (Shannon 1948). In our sample, the Draghi cabinet shows the highest value of attention dispersion across policy issues (0.92).

dig deeper into the analysis of congruence, Figure 2 splits governments according to their ideological nature, electoral cycle, and party system.

The evidence supports our expectation that populist parties in office do not increase the congruence between electoral promises and the executive's priorities; in fact, their congruence is lower compared to that of non-populist parties. Because the majority of non-populist governments have not been formed immediately after elections but during later stages of the legislative term (9 out of 12), we control for the government's temporal location in the legislative term to reveal any potential mismatch between populist and non-populist governments. Following previous studies that showed higher congruence during the 'Second Republic' (in respect to the 'First') – the consequence of a credible alternation in government that has incentivised parties to implement promises made during the electoral campaign once in government (Borgetto & Carammia 2015) – we look also at congruence from a temporal perspective. The previous trend in congruence observed in the transition from the 'First' to 'Second Republic' suggests that congruence would decrease after the end of the bipolar logic and with the tri-polarization of the political space. However, our data show the opposite, which, as we argue in the conclusion, signals the greater willingness of governments formed after 2013 to accommodate all preferences expressed by political parties during the electoral campaign.

When controlling for the government's timing within the legislative term, the alleged difference between populist and non-populist governments vanishes. Table 2 reveals that if we compare populist governments formed immediately after elections (Berlusconi I, Berlusconi II, Berlusconi IV, Conte I) with non-populist ones (Prodi I, Prodi II, Letta), we register an almost identical degree of congruence. When we look at governments formed at later stages of the legislative term, the mismatch of the congruence value is high; however, it only considers one particular cabinet (Berlusconi III), which lasted just one year (375 days) and bridged the former Berlusconi government and the 2006 elections.

Table 2 – Congruence across populist and non-populist governance by the timing in the legislature

		Duncan	N
Populist	1st Government of the legislature	37.4	4
	Following governments	59.3	1
Non-Populist	1st Government of the legislature	34.3	3
	Following governments	37.8	9

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Table 3 – Congruence across populist and non-populist governance by periods

		Duncan	N
Populist	1994–2011	43.3	4
	2013–2021	35.8	1
Non-Populist	1994–2011	38.4	7
	2013–2021	34.9	5

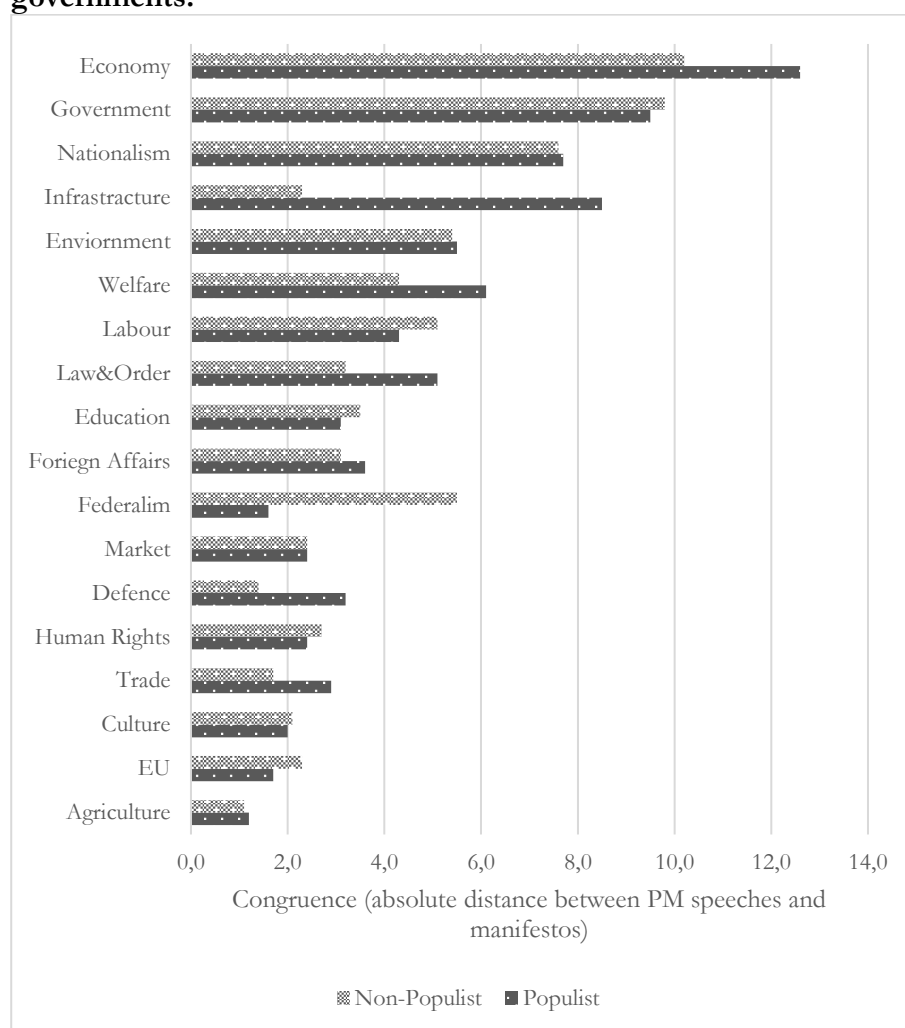
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Table 3 disentangles the impact of populism by controlling for different phases of the Italian party systems. Focusing on the ‘Second Republic’ (1994–2011), we register higher congruence for non-populist parties than for populists. This means that the average congruence of the centre-left government combined with two technocratic executives (Dini and Monti) is higher than the congruence displayed by Berlusconi’s governments. In the post-2013 phase, the congruence of the fully-fledged populist cabinet, Conte I, is almost identical to the average of the non-populist ones (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni, Conte II, and Draghi).

All things considered, the exploration of the aggregate congruence between party pledges and the executive’s agenda reveals that in terms of party mandate, populist parties do not strengthen the transmission belt, in support of our expectations. Yet, it could be argued that aggregate congruence might hide a more substantive congruence occurring at the issue level. In this respect, populist governments could be more congruent for policies that are clearly associated with populist parties. To explore the 18 issue domains in our dataset, we leave the Duncan Index and look at the absolute distance between the mean of the manifestos of all

parties supporting the cabinet and the investiture speech for each issue. The difference is displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Average issue-level congruence across populist and non-populist governments.



Source: author's own elaboration.

Even in this case, we do not find considerable differences in issue congruence between populist and non-populist governments. This suggests that relatively high incongruence on some specific issues (i.e. the economy, nationalism,

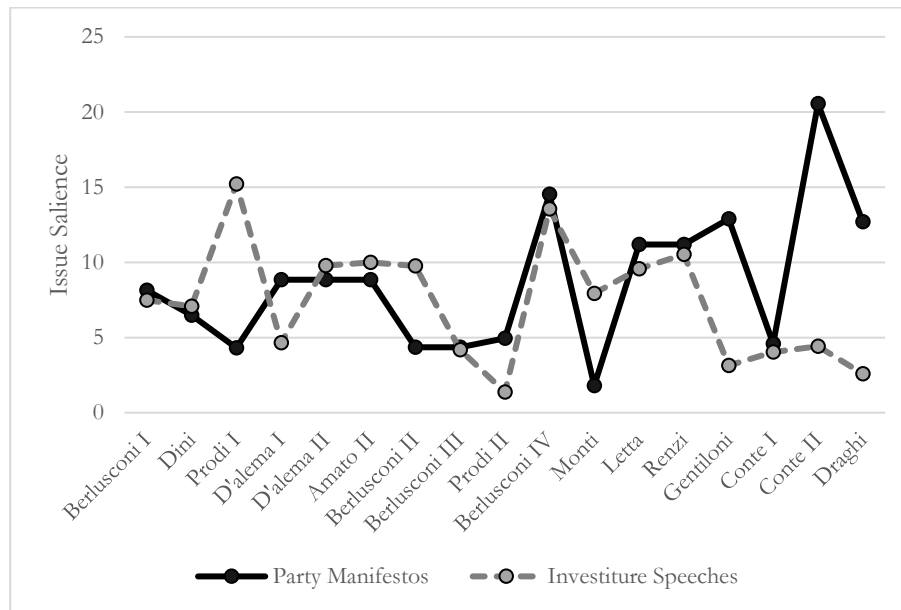
the environment)¹² exists, regardless of the executive's populist or non-populist nature. The only issue signalling a high mismatch between populist and non-populist government congruence is 'Infrastructure', which is mainly explained by FI's 2001 overemphasis on public works (*grandi opere pubbliche*), especially in the field of connective infrastructural projects.¹³

To better grasp the issue-level congruence for issues 'owned' by populist parties, we use longitudinal data on 'Federalism', 'Nationalism', and 'Environment', usually associated with the main populist parties in the Italian party system. More in depth, the Northern League (LN) – prior to its nationalization – together with FI exhibited a clear ownership of territorial issues and federalism (Basile 2015). Later, when turning into a radical-right populist party the League developed a nativist agenda and a consequential ownership of nationalist issues (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Finally, since its rise M5S has been characterized by specific attention to environmental protection and green energy. Starting from 'Federalism' (Figure 4), we notice that parties owning a federalist issue (i.e. LN) are able to minimize the distance between their electoral pledges and their government agenda. An almost perfect congruence value for federalist issues is exhibited by the Berlusconi I, Berlusconi III, Berlusconi IV, and Conte I governments. Furthermore, the average absolute distance between party and government salience on federalism issues is higher for non-populist governments (5.5) rather than populist ones (1.6).

¹² Another issue prone to incongruence is represented by the 'Government' issue. However, here the incongruence is explained by an over-emphasis on this issue in party manifestos. Following our coding scheme, the government policy issue refers to the following MARPOR items: per303 ('Governmental and Administrative Efficiency'), per304 ('Political Corruption'), per305 ('Political Authority'). These items have been identified by MARPOR specialists as prone to miscoding and overemphasis by coders (see Klingemann et al. 2006; Mikhaylov et al. 2008). In our dataset, the incongruence is shared across almost all of the executives.

¹³ Even though the issue alone occupied 16% of the centre-right coalition manifesto, it covers only 4.7% and 4.1% of the Berlusconi II and Berlusconi III investiture speeches.

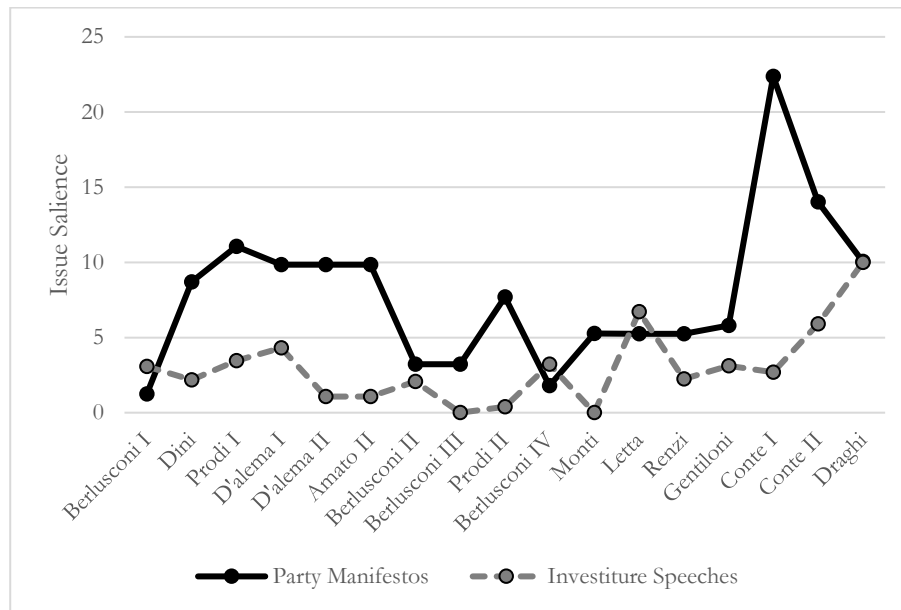
Figure 4. Party and investiture speech emphasis on ‘Federalism’



Source: author's own elaboration.

When focusing on ‘Environment’ (Figure 5), our attention is focused mainly on the Conte I cabinet, a fully-fledged populist cabinet, where the pro-environmental protection party M5S represents the majority shareholder of the government. Surprisingly, the distance between the emphasis of governing parties (M5S and the League) and investiture speeches on the topic is the highest of our sample (19.7%). The environmental issue has been traditionally under-emphasized by Italian governments in their agendas and, although it gained momentum when M5S competed in the polls, the party failed to politicize the issue within the cabinet, in contrast to the ability of the League to successfully strengthen the congruence of ‘Federalism’.

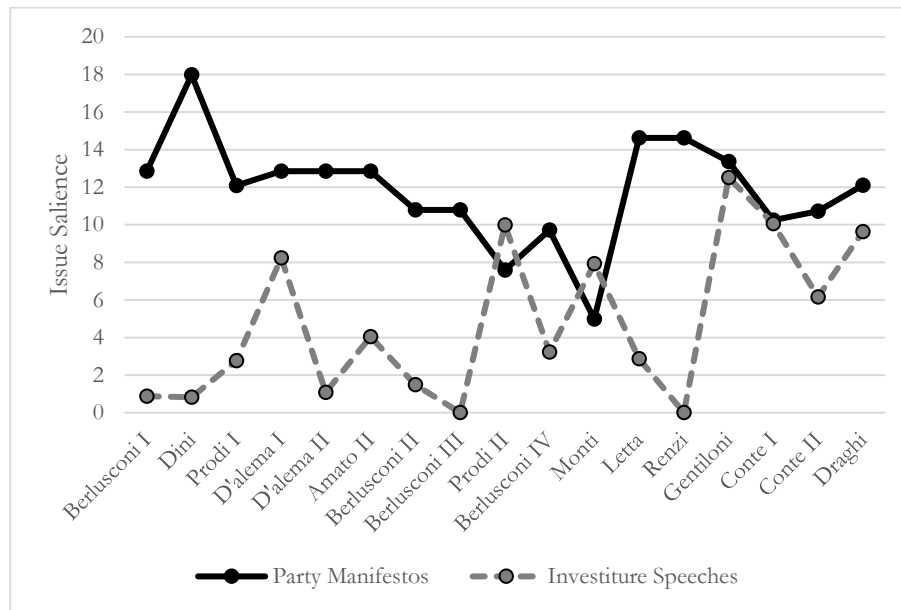
Figure 5. Party and investiture speech emphasis on ‘Environment’



Source: author's own elaboration.

A different story stands out when looking at ‘Nationalism’ (Figure 6). The issue has become crucial for the League since Salvini’s leadership, and the ethno-regionalist and populist stances adopted by the League also consistently emphasize anti-immigration sentiments and oppose the idea of a multicultural society (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2010). Furthermore, the opposition to migration flows has been a topic fiercely emphasized by all centre-right parties (Massetti 2015), which have all nevertheless failed to translate this focus into prioritization within the executive’s agenda. However, an almost perfect congruence for this issue is realized by the Conte I government. This apparent tension can be explained by the overall high and ubiquitous political attention on migration ever since the migration crisis in 2015, which sprung the topic into the circle of the core issues within the Italian party system. This rationale is supported by the almost identical degree of congruence reached by the Gentiloni cabinet. In a nutshell, for ‘Nationalism’ as well, populist governments do not ultimately show any divergent trends relating to congruence than when compared to non-populist parties.

Figure 6. Party and investiture speech emphasis on ‘Nationalism’



Source: author's own elaboration.

7. Conclusion

Political parties that take office after elections have to translate their electoral pledges and policy stances into the executive's agenda, bargaining with each other before drawing up the governmental agenda. In this study, we have investigated how the 'transmission belt' (Carammia et al. 2018) works in the Italian context, looking at the congruence between the PM's investiture speech and the party manifestos of the parties that composed each respective government during the last three decades. Building upon previous research on this topic (Borghetto & Carammia 2015; Carammia et al. 2018), we have improved our knowledge of the party mandate model by focusing on the potential impact of populist parties in government. More precisely, we investigated whether the presence of populist parties in government in Italy has increased the congruence between electoral manifestos and the government's agenda, in the name of an unmediated relationship with the electorate, or, in contrast, whether their presence has a negligible effect on congruence as they need to share and manage the same burden of governing responsibilities that non-

populist parties do. In this regard, we conducted a twofold analysis that looked at the congruence at both the aggregate level and the single-issue level.

At the aggregate level, we found that populist parties in government do not strengthen the party mandate, meaning that the overall congruence between party pledges and the governmental agenda does not increase when populist parties take office, which is in line with our expectations. This is probably due to the fact that even those parties that present themselves as ‘different’ from mainstream ones and that pursue an unmediated relationship with voters ‘succumb’ to coalition dynamics and governing responsibilities, just like non-populist parties. The negligible difference in terms of congruence when populist parties are in office or not signals that they need to cover a wide spectrum of issues in their governmental agenda, compared to the policy stances emphasized in their electoral manifestos. This is in line with previous research, which has uncovered a ‘governing effect’ on political parties that forces them to expand their issue agenda once they take office (Greene 2015) and a learning process of populist parties when they move from opposition into government (Cavaliere & Froio 2021). At the issue-level, the analysis dug deeper into specific policies to check if there is greater congruence exhibited by issues that populist parties usually own. However, we did not find a considerable difference between populist and non-populist parties in government at the individual issue level, which contrasts with other studies on the topic (Plescia et al. 2019).

Our results also shed light on context-specific factors, such as the transition from the ‘Second’ to the ‘Third Republic’ in Italy. The 2013 elections represented a true shock for the Italian party system and politics at large, with the collapse of the (almost) bipolar system in favour of a tripolar one. However, the higher number of actors and, in some way, the higher complexity of the system, has not eroded the already poor ability of political parties in government to translate their electoral pledges into the governmental agenda. Conversely, congruence increased overall after 2013. Although this may appear counterintuitive, we suspect that the peculiar nature of M5S, the sole party not previously present in the party system, has affected the behaviour of all political parties, which since the transition have tried to show a higher

degree of congruence towards their previous commitments. In this respect, we suggest that such a higher congruence might be interpreted as a political parties' reactions to the horizontal – and allegedly participatory – M5S techno-populism (Bickerton & Accetti 2018).

All in all, the literature on the varieties of populism underline how populist actors might differ not only on the basis of their host ideology but also in the way they frame the direct link between the people and the political process (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). In this respect, the plebiscitarian tele-populism embodied by Berlusconi involved a passive relationship between the people and their leader, mediated by the television medium, and anchored the concept of an audience democracy (Manin 1997; Taguieff 2002). The transparency between electoral promises and governmental actions was assured by the mere presence of the leader standing on the television screen. Conversely, the techno-populism of M5S involves an agonist struggle against the rituals of the political class. From this perspective, all political solutions can be found by following 'common sense', and new technologies allow the people to actively control the political elites (Bickerton & Accetti 2018). In the name of transparency, M5S promised to unveil all of the secret bargaining that occurred behind closed doors. This willingness to broadcast coalitional talks after the 2013 elections adheres precisely to their worship of political transparency. Still, all of the post-2013 governments have been formed in parliament, among parties that fiercely competed with each other during the electoral campaign. In this respect, the higher congruence after 2013 might be due to more binding post-electoral coalitional bargaining. A conclusive assessment of the potential ability of populist parties to increase the overall congruence of the party system should be conducted through a comparative design, selecting cases on the basis of the presence of relevant populist actors in government and focusing on the different pathways taken during coalition formation.

Although limited to the Italian case, the results of our analysis improve previous knowledge both on populist party behaviour in government and on Italian politics. As previously discussed, analysing an extreme case allows us to refine a

hypothesis deductively derived from the literature. Considering the variety of populist participation in government characterizing the Italian case, we conclude that our findings are likely to apply to other contexts where populist actors are well-integrated within the party system, which ultimately transforms their role in government from outsider to participant in ‘business as usual’. Future studies on the topic should expand on our work by using more fine-grained tools and by also considering the policy positions of parties on the single-issue level to shed light on more specific dynamics of coalition politics. Crucially, subsequent research should verify whether our findings also apply in cases characterized by a more ephemeral rise of populist actors.

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