



Article

The Response to COVID-19 by the Italian Populist Government: Is It Populism or Neo-Liberalism That Makes the Response to the Pandemic Inadequate?

Leila Simona Talani ^{1,*} and Fabiana De Bellis ²

¹ International Political Economy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Public Policy, King's College London, London WC2R 2LS, UK

² Independent Researcher, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland; fabiana.bellis@gmail.com

* Correspondence: leila.talani@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract: The COVID-19 crisis caused unprecedented disruption in terms of human losses, economic damages, social isolation, and general malaise. It seems that, although the advice of the scientific communities to adopt rigorous measures of track and tracing, mass testing, and lock down was often considered at odds with economic performance, eventually it was precisely that kind of advice that avoided the economic debacle. This article will try and find out the reasons why Italy was more efficient and effective in implementing the measures suggested by national and transnational scientific communities. The article will do so by answering the following questions: (1) What are the political determinants of the different state responses to the pandemic? (2) Why have epistemic communities' receipts to exit the COVID-19 crisis been ignored in some countries to follow a misguided economic logic? (3) Has the state response to the crisis anything to do with the importance of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal forces in the organization of the economy or have populist countries been less efficient than others as suggested in the recent literature on the subject?

Keywords: COVID-19 response; populism; neo-liberalism; Italy; epistemic communities



Citation: Talani, Leila Simona, and Fabiana De Bellis. 2021. The Response to COVID-19 by the Italian Populist Government: Is It Populism or Neo-Liberalism That Makes the Response to the Pandemic Inadequate? *Social Sciences* 10: 336. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10090336>

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 20 July 2021

Accepted: 26 August 2021

Published: 7 September 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis caused unprecedented disruption in terms of human losses, economic damages, social isolation, and general malaise. One year after the first news of the pandemic China's Wuhan province at the end of 2019, the situation is still uncertain amidst the fear of new variants of the virus that could make the vaccination campaign less effective. In the meantime, 117 million people around the world have been infected and more than 2.6 million have died.

Despite the pandemic having a global reach, its impact has been different on different nations. This applies to both its impact in terms of cases and losses and its economic impact. Although the virus first appeared in China, it seems that the country was also one of the few that succeeded in first controlling and then eliminating the virus from within its borders.

Similarly, countries such as South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia Viet Nam, and Taiwan managed to significantly reduce the number of COVID-19 cases (Costello 2020).

Those are also the countries that are predicted to have had a limited impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their economies.

The OECD, indeed, notices that China was the only country in the world, together with Turkey, to grow in 2020 (OECD 2021).

Pulled by China, the remaining countries of "Emerging Asia" are also predicted to recover more than the global average from the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic (Chudik et al. 2020).

On the other hand, Western countries did not manage to handle the pandemic in a systematic and effective way, alternating between periods in which they followed the advice of the scientific communities and periods during which the fear for the economic losses prevailed and made the imposition of rigorous approaches impossible. This was the case especially in countries such as the UK and the US, while Sweden decided for a long time that limiting the pandemic was not the right strategy and left the adoption of adequate measures to very late in time.

As a result, the US and the UK did suffer dire economic consequences from the pandemic in 2020. Additionally, the Euro area had a very negative performance. Even Sweden endured very serious economic consequences from the pandemic (OECD 2021).

It seems that, although the advice of the scientific communities to adopt rigorous measures of track and tracing, mass testing, and lock down was often considered at odds with economic performance, eventually it was precisely that kind of advice that avoided the economic debacle.

This article will try and find out the reasons why Italy was more efficient and effective in implementing the measures suggested by national and transnational scientific communities. The article will do so by answering the following questions:

- (1) What are the political determinants of the different state responses to the pandemic?
- (2) Why have epistemic communities' receipts to exit the COVID-19 crisis been ignored in some countries to follow a misguided economic logic?
- (3) Has the state response to the crisis anything to do with the importance of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal forces in the organization of the economy or have populist countries been less efficient than others as suggested in the recent literature on the subject?

2. Populism or Neo-Liberalism at the Roots of Pandemic Control Failure?

In an effort to identify the motivations for the inability of some states to tackle the pandemic properly, some of the literature suggests that populism is at the roots of the failure of international co-operation nowadays. Frieden (2021) in particular, notices that the post-World War Two era has been characterized by a notable tendency towards more global co-operation. This, however, seems to have stopped in recent times. As Frieden claims:

“Within both advanced industrial and developing nations, there has been an upsurge in ‘populist’ sentiment with an economically nationalistic tenor and an explicit hostility to ‘globalist’ approaches to economic cooperation. What is the future of international economic cooperation in a world in which domestic political pressures appear to be pushing the major powers apart, rather than together?” (Frieden 2021, p. 1)

This hostility towards co-operation would not only be limited to the field of economics but also health and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Frieden 2020, p. 5).

Indeed, for Frieden, the COVID-19 crisis is a paradigmatic case of intersection of politics and economics, as well as considerations relating to public health. In fact, public health experts had long warned that the world was going to face a major pandemic wave, but politicians have constantly failed to adopt the necessary measures to cope with such an event. Even as the virus was spreading around the globe, political response to the emergency has been notably influenced by political and economic considerations, in some cases hindering an effective response to the crisis as recommended by the scientific communities.

In particular, while the global nature of the pandemic required a high degree of co-ordination of the response at the international level, such collaboration has been particularly difficult for some states, thus limiting their ability to resolve the problem. This was especially the case where potent nationalist pressures prevailed, that is, where populism was in power.

The consequence is that populism is, for Frieden, the major factor behind the failure of governments to listen to their scientific communities and, therefore, fail to stop the pandemics (Frieden 2020).

While this seems to be the case looking at the handling of the pandemics by, for example, the Trump administration in the US or the Johnson government in the UK, this does not seem to apply to the Italian case, where the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party Government, led by Conte, was far more prone to listen to the advice of the scientific community and co-operate at both the regional and international level.

We need, therefore, to clarify what exactly we mean by populism before delving into the way in which Italy reacted to the pandemic.

So what do we mean by populism? Additionally, is it populism or neo-liberalism that hindered a prompt response to the crisis in some countries. This is what we will discuss in the next section.

2.1. What Is Populism?

There are many definitions of populism both in the past and current debates. There is a “popular agency” approach to populism, which minimally describes populism as a form of life organization based on popular political engagement. This mostly refers to the experience of the Populist Party in late 19th century America (Mudde 2017, p. 3).¹

The Laclauan approach to populism is currently en vogue in critical studies. It emphasizes the role of populism as an emancipatory force to overcome the limits of liberal democracies and substitute them with radical democracy. This would happen through the mobilization potential of populism and its ability to allow marginal sections of society to participate in political power, eventually overcoming the status quo (Mudde 2017, p. 3).

In the economist jargon, based on Dornbusch and Sachs understanding of the concept, populism is equated to irresponsibility in economic policy making, especially with respect to an extremely relaxed fiscal policy aimed at pleasing the electorate and keeping power. This is also known as the socio-economic approach to populism.

More recently, populism has been defined as a political strategy used by charismatic leaders, such as Ghaddafi, for example, to govern by relying directly on popular consensus. As such, populism cannot survive the death of the populist leader. Finally, some scholars consider populism to be just a political style, used to mobilize the masses (Mudde 2017, p. 4).

One of the most renowned and discussed definitions of populism is the one proposed by Cas Mudde, whose contribution to the debate is so substantial that it can hardly be ignored (Mudde 2007). His understanding of the concept is notoriously an “ideational one”, i.e., one that considers populism a true ideology, albeit a thin one, and not simply a political strategy or, even less, a style of leadership.

Although not a consensual definition of populism, the ideationalist approach has recently gained a lot of currency and has been applied to understand the rise of populism in the last years both in the Americas and in Europe.

In the words of the author himself:

“More concretely, we define populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. (Mudde 2017, pp. 5–6)

The thinness of the populist ideology allows the phenomenon to change shape and nature according to the different circumstances where it appears and, thus, create some “subtypes of populism”: the right wing one, the left wing one, the clientelistic one, and more variants. Despite its ability to adapt, populism is still an ideology containing some hard core elements which constitute its ontology. These are: the people, the elite, and the general will (Mudde 2017, pp. 8–9).

In Mudde’s conceptualization, the notion of “the people” can change but it usually refers to the people as sovereign, as the common people, and as the nation (Mudde 2017, p. 9). “The people” are morally and ontologically distinct from “the elite”, and therefore, even if they acquire power, they cannot become “the elite” in the ideationalist approach

to populism. This allows populist leaders to maintain their anti-establishment position even when they are in power. The establishment, from this perspective, is not represented by the elected populist leaders, but by some obscure illegitimate forces acting behind the back of the people (or the nation). The elite, in turn, can be defined in economic terms, most often, or sometimes even in ethnic ones. Finally, core to the populist ideology is Rousseau's notion of "the general will". The French philosopher, and the populist ideology after him, distinguished between "la volonté' general" (the general will) and "the volonté' de tous" (the will of all). This is a very well-known distinction in political theory between the common interest and the sum of the particular interests of the individuals. The idea here is that for the populist ideology, representative democracy cannot implement "the general will" or achieve the common interest for that matter (Mudde 2004, 2017). Only direct democracy of the people, in all its forms, including the most technological ones, can achieve the general will. It does not seem a mere chance here that the IT platform used by the Five Star Movement to run its technological project is indeed called Rousseau. (Gerbaudo 2018, 2019; Casaleggio 2011, 2012).

This latter element, however, easily leads to the dark side of populism, i.e., its authoritarian tendencies. Indeed, the will of the people does not easily encompass criticism, as the people cannot be wrong and when a similar idea becomes consensual, then criticism becomes more and more ostracized up to the point that the system becomes illiberal and authoritarian. The will of the people is, in a word, absolute (Mudde 2004, pp. 542–63; 2017, p. 18).

Norris and Inglehart share with Mudde the idea that populism can lead to authoritarian outcomes, but not his ideational definition (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In their opinion, populism is not an ideology, not even a thin one, but just a discourse aimed at bringing down the established sources of power and elected representatives in favor of the rule of the people. In the words of the authors:

"Populism is understood in this book minimally as a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with 'the people' not the elites. It remains silent about second-order principles, concerning what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made". (Norris and Inglehart 2019, pp. 372–73)

Any alternative definition of populism is rejected explicitly, including the definitions discussed above such as the socio-economic approach, the style of leadership approach, the definition referring to a party with a popular social base, and importantly, the ideological one, as proposed by Mudde. The latter, in the opinion of the authors, includes unnecessary elements, which are discarded in their definition of populism as a rhetoric. In particular, according to Norris and Inglehart, it is not a constituent part of populism the idea, proposed by Cas Mudde, of separating society in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and the notion that politics should express the general will of the people (Müller 2016).

Devoid of any ideological content, the notion of populism proposed by Norris and Inglehart can acquire any shape, from the conservative to the socialist and from the authoritarian to the progressive (Norris and Inglehart 2018). This rhetoric makes two core claims about how to govern society: (a) it attacks "the establishment" and, with it, the elected representative of liberal democracies; (b) it claims that the only source of democratic legitimacy is given by the "people". These are the only two components of the populist discourse recognized by the authors (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

These two elements are also what make the populist narrative very compelling, as it recognizes the will of the majority as the only legitimate source of authority in a democracy, thus delegitimizing any established representative institutions and minorities. However, again, the dark side of populism is that leaders using this discourse can easily justify on its basis authoritarian outcomes by claiming that they, and only they, represent the will of the people.

As clearly stated by the authors (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 2019), this is not a necessary outcome of populist discourse, nor are all authoritarian leaders necessarily populist. However, there is a tendency in the rhetoric style associated with populism to undermine the legitimacy of democratically elected institutions, leaving the door open to the consolidation of authoritarian systems. In turn, Norris and Inglehart (2019) define the notion of “authoritarian” not as a political regime, but as a cluster of values, which gives primacy to the idea of collective security of the group as opposed to the freedom of the single individual. An authoritarian system of values is based the following three elements: (1) the security element, articulated in various ways against foreigners, migrants, terrorists, and anyone else defined as “the Other” (2) the conservative element, articulated in a way as to preserve the in-group values from external attacks; (3) the identification of the leader as the protector of the group and its values.

In this “authoritarian conception”, the group, driven by a “politics of fear”, is a “tribe” that needs a leader to protect it from external attacks to its way of life in exchange for loyalty and obedience (Wodak 2015). Here, the idea of tribe can be represented by “the nation”, the community of citizens, but also by other signifiers such as socio-economic status, race, sex, gender, ethnicity, location, or generation. A tribe is defined as a cohesive community of values, perceived as being threatened by an out-group, often a scapegoat and, therefore, needing to be protected by a leader (Tajfel and Turner 1985).

What ensues is a “cultural backlash” against the perceived threatening groups (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The sequence of events leading to an “authoritarian” cultural backlash led by a populist leader is as follows. First, the social group in question needs to have experienced in the course of the years a significant deterioration of its socio-economic condition. Second, this deterioration of socio-economic conditions leads to a change in cultural values. Third, the in-group cultural values become more conservative and prone to the authoritarian backlash. Fourth, the existence of an increased social diversity accelerates the conservative backlash. Fifth, the conservative backlash brings votes to authoritarian populist leaders. Sixth, this translates into seats for the authoritarian leaders in democratic elections. Seventh, the democratic system is threatened by the cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 2019).

This thesis is demonstrated by looking at how the cultural backlash against socially liberal and egalitarian values prevalent in progressive urban areas has led to the election of populist and sometimes also authoritarian leaders around the world (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 2019). As western societies become more liberal, those who are left behind by this social revolution are, allegedly, expected to react. Those who feel more estranged are, according to Norris and Inglehart, the older generations, especially, in their words:

“... non-college graduates, the working class, white Europeans, the more religious, men, and residents of rural communities. These groups are therefore most likely to feel that they have become estranged from the silent revolution in social and moral values”. (Norris and Inglehart 2019, Kindle Locations 624–28)

Thus, especially older, white, uneducated men, who used to be the dominant groups until recently in Western societies are likely to become increasingly hostile to and react strongly against the new, inclusive, and progressive liberal values. However, what kind of reactions are envisaged? Amongst the many possible reactions to a similar threat to their cultural value and social position, Norris and Inglehart (2019) identify, as the one that has been widely adopted, the so-called populist authoritarian reflex.

What is most important in Norris and Inglehart’s analysis is that the populist authoritarian reflex is not provoked by the growing ethnic diversity of western societies, the increase in migration and refugee flows, or by anti-immigrant attitudes due to the perceived cultural threat posed by foreigners. In the opinion of the supporters of the “cultural backlash”, the following gives an explanation for populism:

“The authoritarian reflex is not confined solely to attitudes toward race, immigration, and ethnicity, but also to the rejection of the diverse lifestyles, political

views, and morals of ‘out-groups’ that are perceived as violating conventional norms and traditional customs, including those of homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia. Moreover, these sentiments are strongest among those groups, such as homogeneous rural communities and older citizens, who feel the most threatened by the spread of multicultural diversity”. (Norris and Inglehart 2019, Kindle Locations 694–700)

Hence, they propose and support the argument that voting for populist parties is characteristic of older generations of less educated voters, mostly males, more religious and belonging to the ethnic majority.

Importantly, however, this does not appear to be true in the case of Italy, where the vote for the Five Star Movement was mostly concentrated amongst the young, technologically literate, and educated generations. There is a certain degree of consensus in the literature that the Five Star Movement displayed many of the characteristics of a populist, anti-establishment party whose attitude was not anti-immigrant at the onset (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Tarchi 2014). However, more than relying on the resentment of older white men estranged by the liberal revolution of western societies’ values, it fostered the collective identity of young, digital voters left behind by the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 (Gerbaudo 2018, 2019; Canestrari and Biondo 2018, 2019; Mosca and Tronconi 2019).

Indeed, the argument that the Five Star Movement gained much consensus from creating a strong collective identity of young generations of technologically educated voters left behind by the crisis of 2008 and 2009 is well established and convincing. Chronologically, the Five Star Movement first appeared on 9 September 2009. It has been one of the most successful populist parties in the world, not only winning the elections both in 2013 and in 2018, but also managing to keep in power after the crisis of August 2019 and the demise from the government of Salvini’s Lega. It achieved this result by shifting its alliance to the opposite political party, the Democratic Party of Zingaretti. The populist credentials of the Five Star Movement are undisputed in the literature and so are its authoritarian tendencies especially as related to the use of the digital platform Rousseau (Canestrari and Biondo 2018, 2019; Casaleggio 2011, 2012; Mosca and Tronconi 2019).

With the results of the 2013 elections, the Five Star Movement became the first party in Italy, with 25.5% of the votes for the House of Commons.² The Democratic Party came second, with 25.4% of the votes, essentially making the Italian political system a tripolar one, with the center-left coalition achieving 29.5%, the center-right coalition 29.1%, and the Five Star Movement 25.5%. The success of the Five Star Movement was based on its almost standard populist stances, relying on a very thin ideology, a clearly personalistic leadership by ex-comedian Beppe Grillo, its evident anti-establishment sentiments, and its support by “the people” (Mosca and Tronconi 2019; Conti and Memoli 2015; Corbetta 2017; Tronconi 2018). Importantly, while remaining pretty elusive on migration before the 2013 elections, during the electoral campaign of 2013 and even more in its aftermath, its position became more and more anti-migrant to the extent that in 2014 it even signed an agreement with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to form a joint political group in the European Parliament (Mosca and Tronconi 2019).

This is in line with Mudde’s understanding of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004, p. 544). Eventually, this allows the party to gather votes from all sides of the electorate, adapting to the changing sentiments of the people, similar to a classic “catch-all party”. Indeed, although the Five Star Movement was not born as an anti-migration party, it moved towards more anti-migration positions, which allowed it to gather a greater consensus and win the 2018 elections by a landslide.³ On 4 March 2018, the Five Star Movement emerged from the polls as by far the biggest Italian party, with 32.7% of the votes for the House of Commons. The Democratic Party, coming second, only achieved 18.7% and the Lega came in third with 17.4%. This electoral success paved the way for the formation of the first populist government coalition between the 5SM and the Lega in May 2018 led by Giuseppe Conte. This was then followed, in September 2019, by the

second 5SM government, this time in coalition with the Democratic Party, again led by Giuseppe Conte.

Thus, the Five Star Movement was an incredibly successful populist party, which did not seem to rely on the support of the cultural communities identified by the cultural backlash approach. The electoral base of the Five Star Movement, in the electoral turnout of 2018, was very far from the white, old, uneducated men predicted by the theory. To start with, both men and women voted in almost exactly the same percentage for the Five Star Movement, with 32.8 of male valid votes and 32.9% of female ones. More to the point, the Five Star Movement achieved the highest percentage of votes amongst the youngest generations, with 35.3% of the valid votes of those aged between 18 and 34 years. Then, the percentage of votes decreases with the increase in age: 35.4% of valid votes of the age class between 34 and 49, 34% from of those between 50 and 64, and only 27.1% of the over 65. This is exactly the opposite demographics predicted by [Norris and Inglehart \(2018, 2019\)](#). Even more surprisingly, in the Italian case, it is mostly very educated people that voted for the Five Star Movement. In fact, 29.3% of valid votes of the electors with a degree or higher voted for the 5SM and 36.1% of those with secondary education. Finally, in social terms, retired people voted the least for the Five Star Movement (26.4% of their valid votes); while the highest percentage was from among the unemployed with 37.2% of their valid votes.⁴

Overall, it seems fair to claim that the electoral base of the Five Star Movement is composed of young, educated men and women who have however had problems in finding employment at their level of education in the post global and economic crisis environment. This is also confirmed by analyses showing an inverse relationship between the number of votes to the FSM in the 2018 elections and the unemployment rate by Italian region.⁵

Building on these observations, it seems possible to claim that the cultural backlash theory is not holding in the case of Italy and the spectacular success of the populist wave in 2018, while considerations relating to economic and job insecurity seem to prevail.

[Rodrik \(2017\)](#) famously proposes fears of economic insecurities as an alternative view of the origins of contemporary populism. However, the connection to the experience of white, blue-collar, well-paid, male communities losing their centrality in the political economy of their countries still seems to prevail in his narrative of the populist phenomenon ([Rodrik 2017](#)).

The case of Italy seems to demonstrate a completely different demographics of Italian populism, and this might explain why they adopted a much more positive attitude towards listening to the advice of the scientific community when it came to addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is what we will ascertain in the next section of this article.

2.2. *The Case of Italy with the Five Star Movement Government by Conte*

Italy was the first European country to officially declare a medical emergency due to the coronavirus disease,⁶ dealing with political decisions to face the pandemic.

In the following pages, we will investigate and analyze the strategies and the policies adopted by the Italian government to respond to SARS-CoV-2.

We will retrace the most significant steps of the last twelve months by highlighting the key factors that explain the approaches adopted by the Italian Government and the guidance of the scientific community.

In particular, we will consider the experiment that took place in Vo' Euganeo, a small town in the Veneto region, where the most of the inhabitants were tested at the beginning of the pandemic. This pilot study produced important results to eradicate the new coronavirus disease, providing instructive advice for Italy and other countries involved in the control of the spread.

Because the social, political, and health scenario is constantly changing, this prevents us from gaining an exhaustive and conclusive picture of the situation.

2.2.1. The First Contacts with the Novel Coronavirus

The outbreak of the novel viral disease⁷ was confirmed in Italy on 31 January 2020 when two Chinese tourists, hospitalized at Spallanzani Hospital in Rome, tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. One week later, the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) confirmed the third case, a man repatriated from Wuhan. The Italian Health Minister, Roberto Speranza, had an extraordinary meeting with the EU on 13 February 2020 with an exchange of views on the virus and the possible health emergency actions that could be taken. On 21 February, new cases of coronavirus have been confirmed in Castiglione d'Adda, a northern village in the province of Lodi, Lombardy. It seemed that the first case was a thirty-eight year old man who had not recently travelled to China. The Lombardy region and the Minister of Health issued a joint ordinance that required ten municipalities in the province of Lodi to suspend public events and unnecessary work activities, and to allow trains only to pass through without stopping in these areas. On the same day, a seventy-seven year old man from Vo' Euganeo died of pneumonia at the Schiavonia Hospital (Padua) due to SARS-CoV-2 infection. The regional authorities imposed a strict fourteen-day lockdown on the whole municipality.

This was the beginning of one of the saddest pages in recent Italian history. On 23 February, in fact, Italy, with more than 100 cases, already held the record for the highest number of infections in Europe, and two days before the World Health Organization declared the pandemic, the country had already announced a national quarantine, limiting unnecessary travel.⁸

The Italian scientific community urgently studied the new SARS coronavirus to identify its nature, hypothesize its impact on its citizens, experiment with containment measures, and further develop therapies leading to a vaccine.

2.2.2. The Vo' Euganeo Experiment

In this scenario, the study performed by Andrea Crisanti, full professor of Microbiology at the University of Padua,⁹ was particularly significant, either because of his successful experiment in the battle against the new coronavirus disease, and more specifically, to deeply understand the interactions between the scientific approach and the political answers, support, and disagreements. His experiment, at the beginning of Europe's coronavirus crisis, has stopped all new cases of infection in the small Italian community of Vo' that at the beginning of the pandemic, was one of the most affected by the outbreak, giving strong political backing to the Italian and international scientific community (Lavezzo et al. 2020).

Professor Crisanti and his team started by collecting information on the demography, clinical presentation, hospitalization, contact networking, and the presence of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Between 21 and 29 February, just after the detection of the first case, they tested 2812 out of 3275 people (85.9% of the inhabitants of Vo') with nasopharyngeal swabs in order to detect the spread, anticipating the path of the new virus. Crisanti was convinced that he would find people infected by the virus while not showing any symptoms of the disease, a perspective that broke with the initial World Health Organization (WHO) guideline, which was advising to only test people with manifest symptoms of the virus.

They eventually repeated the screening a second time, at the end of the two weeks of lockdown (7 March), testing 2343 people (71.5% of the inhabitants). This practice revealed notable results, considering that from the first survey to the second, the prevalence of infection dropped from 2.6% (a total of 73 out of the 2812 participants) to 1.2% (29 total positive cases, eight of which were new cases) (Lavezzo et al. 2020). The lockdown reduced SARS-CoV-2 transmissibility on average by between 82% and 98%, showing the successful strategy of the social distancing measures and the lockdown in interrupting the transmission chain of the infection.¹⁰ The regional health authorities applied the early isolation strategy to all the cities in the Veneto region. On 21 March, the number of infected people in this region had reached about 4500, and 170 had died. This lethality rate of 4% was much lower compared to the neighboring region of Lombardy (Lavezzo et al. 2020).

None of the children (234 ranging from 0 to 10 years of age) had ever tested positive, or experienced any symptoms.¹¹ The experiment also revealed that 42.5% (95% CI: 31.5–54.6%) of the confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infections detected in the area across the two surveys were asymptomatic and that they had the same viral load as the symptomatic cases (Lavezzo et al. 2020).

The containment measures have contributed in an exemplary way to abate the epidemic. It was also possible to understand the dynamics of the infection. For its validity, this model was found to be applicable for subsequent outbreaks.

The meaningful responses were also the basis for the establishment of the third study in Vo' with the aim to do a genetic screening of the inhabitants and, in particular cases, the genome sequences to verify if there was a link between the resistance or the susceptibility to the virus with the presence of certain genetic markers.

Meticulous contact tracing has been carried out; networking testing,¹² which has an efficiency of 100%, was applied, and the Veneto Region has channeled all its efforts in trying to look for patient zero in the village of Vo'.

In addition to the genetic analysis and the tracking system, there was the study of antibodies.

The case of Vo' Euganeo was considerable; it was more than an epidemiological photograph. All possible actions have been taken here to study and defeat the new virus and to control the risk's possibility. For Professor Crisanti and his team, in fact, considering the value of the risk was crucial. It consists of a factor that we can measure in order of its intensity and possibility. If we cannot control its intensity, due to its high levels, we can definitely act on the factor of possibility that depends on the number of contacts, allowing us to manage the spread.¹³ The Vo' experiment was a valid example in this direction.

As anticipated, we reported this study not only because of its uniqueness or because the results achieved (that are however remarkable), but for the effectiveness entrusted to a strong team, which has met the support of the Veneto Region and the mayor, the collaboration of the citizens, and the national and international financial funds,¹⁴ all elements that made the feasibility of the project and its success reachable.

At the same time, it is possible to recognize the subsequent change of path following the disagreements between Professor Crisanti and Luca Zaia, President of Veneto, a mediatic *battage* that eventually pushed the President to move the direction of the study from Padua to Treviso, a decision strongly criticized by Professor Andrea Crisanti.

In the months after, Italy had to deal with the difficulties of testing the population.

Assuming that each person infected with coronavirus comes in contact with approximately ten to fifteen people, as cases increased, the amount of swabs needed to test them considerably grew. It meant that it was necessary to use more swabs for monitoring those who fell ill.

The positive cases, in fact, have accumulated day by day, forcing medical professionals to use a large number of swabs intended for surveillance (monitoring) for the new patients and contributing, in this way, to weaken the system of control.

2.2.3. The Handling of the Pandemic in Italy

As we have seen, from the first cases recorded in Italy to the first decisions that prevented the movement of people within specific northern areas, only a few days have passed. Crucial days, which, with such a rapid spread of the virus, required immediate decisions and, above all, the recognition by political leaders of this catastrophic event, an awareness that was timely identified in Vo', but not immediately applied throughout the whole country.

Pisano et al. (2020) recognize, in this first Italian response to the epidemic, the failure to act swiftly and decisively (Pisano et al. 2020). The new coronavirus was seen with the skepticism that often accompanies news that is uncomfortable to us.

In this perspective, a massive intervention is considered as an excess of zeal, preventing a rapid and massive response to a given problem.

Furthermore, during the first weeks the lack of coordination between regions and central government prevented the problem being addressed adequately.

Just to give some indicative examples, on 22 February, Massimiliano Fedigra, president of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region and a member of the Lega party, asked the central government to close the region's borders. The governor started very strict actions to simplify the purchase of goods, services, and supplies to support the region residents without consulting the central government. A few days after, Luca Crescioli, president of the Marche region and a member of the center-left party in the majority coalition, opposed the Italian government's decision to declare a state of emergency only in the northern regions, imposing the closure of schools and to suspend all public activities in the entire region (Nicola 2020).

Another example was the Government decision, which required the closure of the Lombardy region—a decree approved by the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in the night between 7 and 8 March.¹⁵ The consequences proved harmful, bringing a massive exodus of southern citizens resident in the north of Italy to the south regions. This action increased infections, transferring the virus where it was less widespread or not previously present.

This fateful beginning that contributed to bring Italy to the podium of the western countries most affected by the coronavirus disease, was followed by the Prime Ministerial Decree of 9 March¹⁶ according to which all unnecessary travel was banned, sporting activities, demonstrations and events suspended, museums, and places of culture throughout the country were closed.

In agreement with scientific advice, and counting on the support of the regional governors, further restrictive measures came into force with the decree "Io resto a casa" (Stay at home). Published on 11 March,¹⁷ it provided for the suspension of common retail commercial activities, catering services, religious celebration, and prohibited gatherings of people in public places or places open to the public, all of these measures that were relaxed later in May and June.

In addition to rigorous lockdown and quarantine, the strategy adopted by Italy during these months basically consisted of lowering the level of circulation of the virus increasing the capacity of medical and hospital facilities (while moving towards the creation of new hospital wards able to accommodate increasingly growing lists of patients), encouraging the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in any setting including outdoors, and by adopting social and financial recovery strategies to combat the economic crisis followed the coronavirus pandemic.

This example, subsequently adopted by other countries of the European Union, provided what has been considered the Italian model to fight COVID-19, (Nicola 2020) which proved effective and successful in addressing the onset of the pandemic.

More than a year after the beginning of the pandemic, the cabinet of the Prime Minister, Mario Draghi,¹⁸ has given the green light to a decree that will categorize regions as being in high-risk "red zones" if they have more than 250 weekly cases per 100,000 residents, approving, once again, strict new COVID measures.¹⁹

New lockdowns are being applied in Italy to cope with the new waves and variants. This is a condition that involves not only Italy but most of the western countries, forcing us to deeply understand all the reasons that led to the mistakes and successes of the policies implemented in response to the coronavirus.

Although the initial lack of organization was responsible for incidents that could have been avoided, Government decisions were made in consideration of the warnings from the scientific community. The subsequent coordination between central, regional, and municipal governments worked as an example to other states, and the Italian populist government gained considerable results.

Starting from this first experience in facing the pandemic, we should seek ways to cooperate in common purpose and perspectives (Nicola 2020).

It is necessary to carry on with target strategies to deal with public health, social, and economic problems and all those that follow a crisis as remarkable as this.

A battle of such proportion, Crisanti argues, must be fought on the territory before patients are even in the hospitals.²⁰ It needs the necessary infrastructure to fight the pandemic and all the political support and policies aimed at supporting the scientific community.

Any approach, in fact, even if based on the proportionate use of powers, is totally useless—if not harmful—if there is no cooperation between all the actors, regions, and local authorities, involved in the main strategy implemented by the Government (Vese 2020).

Although the incremental approach may be a correct application of the principle of proportionality, given the Government's proportionate use of emergency powers in dealing with the pandemic, it is the result of an ineffective sharing of administrative regulatory powers between the Government, Regions and local authorities. Indeed, the progressive enforcement of lockdown areas, which from time to time increased the extent and severity of the emergency measures, demonstrates the difficulty of governing the spread of the virus in the red zones rather than the effective implementation of a proportionate administrative strategy. And this is mainly due to the lack of effective cooperation between the Government and the Regions in exercising their respective emergency powers (Vese 2020).

In view of this context of the pandemic, it becomes even clearer that the answer to the problem should be global in nature (Frieden 2020).

Even if the vaccination campaign has started in various states, single polices, differences in actions, especially if not aimed at protecting public health, can hardly prove to be successful against a virus that knows no boundaries. National and international positions, economic logic, and conflicts come into play and collide with each other, sharply deviating from a common logic, often reflecting a tension between the public health and political powers.

The bill that this pandemic is presenting to us is also and above all linked to a system of agreements, disagreements, and demagogies that do not work, or at least do not work for defeating this pandemic that, in a state of exception such as this, needs to be orientated by the scientific community and to be led through in common polices, as it happened in the case of Italy.

3. Conclusions

Concluding, it is possible to claim that Italian populism is not only a rhetorical strategy, as in the case of Trump or Johnson, but a true ideology, albeit a thin one as stated by Mudde, based on the support of an entirely new demographic.

Moreover, the response of Italian populism to the pandemic, as demonstrated in this article, followed the measures suggested by the scientific community and was overall very strict.

On the other hand, the British and American cases concealed neo-liberal governments just adopting the rhetoric of populism and did not follow strict policies against the virus.

Thus, it seems that neo-liberalism, and not populism, is behind the adoption of an inadequate response to the pandemic.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization L.S.T. and F.D.B.; methodology, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; software, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; validation, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; formal analysis, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; investigation, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; writing—original draft preparation, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; writing—review and editing, L.S.T. and F.D.B.; Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Lawrence Goodwyn's Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America.
- 2 https://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2013/elezioni/camera/riepilogo_nazionale.html (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 3 <https://elezioni.repubblica.it/2018/cameradeideputati> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 4 https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-03-06/genere-eta-professione-identikit-nuovi-elettori-cinque-stelle-190100.shtml?refresh_ce=1 (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 5 <https://www.money.it/voti-movimento-5-stelle-regioni-disoccupazione-pil> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 6 It was the first nation to declare a coronavirus case.
- 7 Official name, COVID-19, previously known as "2019 novel coronavirus", given by The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses, announced on 12 February 2020. It is important to clarify that COVID-19 is a name for the disease. The virus that causes the disease is SARS-CoV-2, Martin Enserink, "Update: 'A bit Chaotic'. Christening of new coronavirus and its disease name create confusion", *Science*, 13 February 2020.
- 8 The pandemic was declared on 11 March, as Italy's quarantine started on 9 March.
- 9 Andrea Crisanti, trained in Immunology and Biotechnology in Rome, was professor of Molecular Parasitology at Imperial College London. The most reputable sources on his studies on the coronavirus disease will be hereby considered, as well as remote online interviews with him on 2 April 2020, 21 January 2021, and the interview with him for Tele Londra/IETV UK on 23 March 2020.
- 10 The early isolation of symptomatic patients reduced the average duration of the disease (Lavezzo et al. 2020).
- 11 Even if in this experiment none of the children have never experienced any symptoms, the course of the virus has shown us that children can be infected even if it is less likely and often in a less invasive way.
- 12 The contact tracing procedure does not work effectively: people can omit some important information because they are reticent or elderly and, therefore, forgetful. In these cases, network testing, where all people with interaction network are tested, is a valid alternative strategy (Lavezzo et al. 2020).
- 13 Remote online interview with Andrea Crisanti and the PD section in London on 2 April 2021. This work was supported by the Veneto Region and was jointly funded by the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) under the MRC/DFID Concordat agreement and is also part of the EDCTP2 programme supported by the European Union. I.D. acknowledges research funding from a Sir Henry Dale Fellowship funded by the Royal Society and Wellcome Trust [grant 213494/Z/18/Z]. L.O. and G.C.D. acknowledge research funding from The Royal Society. We thank F. Caldart, M.D., G. Castelli, M.D., M. Drigo, M.D., L. Fava, M.D., B. Labella, M.D., M. Nicoletti, M.D., E. Nieddu, M.D. for assistance in data collection and consistency check, F. Bosa and G. Rupolo from the Italian Red Cross for the support in patient samplings.
- 14 The cost of this study was approximately two million euros funded by national and international institutions and donations by supporters. Andrea Crisanti at a conference with Luca Zaia, President of Veneto, Stefano Merigliano, full Professor of Surgery at School of Medicine University of Padova, Rosario Rizzuto, Rector of the University of Padova, on 21 April 2020 at the Protezione Civile di Marghera.
- 15 DPCM of 8 March 2020. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/08/20A01522/sg> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 16 DPCM of 9 March 2020. www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2020/03/09/62/sg/pdf (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 17 DPCM of 11 March 2020. www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2020/03/11/64/sg/pdf.pdf (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- 18 President of the Council of Ministers since 13 February 2021.
- 19 On Friday 13 March, Italy registered 26,824 new COVID-19 infections and 380 deaths.
- 20 Remote online interview with Andrea Crisanti and the PD section in London on 2 April 2021.

References

- Bickerton, Christopher, and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti. 2018. 'Techno-populism' as a new party family: The case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos. *Contemporary Italian Politics* 10: 1–19. [CrossRef]
- Bobba, Giuliano, and Duncan McDonnell. 2015. Italy—A Strong and Enduring Market for Populism. In *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Edited by Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Canestrari, Marco, and Nicola Biondo. 2018. *La supernova*. Florence: Ponte alle Grazie.
- Canestrari, Marco, and Nicola Biondo. 2019. *Il Sistema Casaleggio*. Florence: Ponte alle Grazie.
- Casaleggio, Gianroberto. 2011. *Siamo in Guerra*. Milan: Chiarelettere.
- Casaleggio, Davide. 2012. *Tu sei rete*. Milan: Casaleggio.
- Chudik, Alexander, Kamiar Mohaddes, M. Hashem Pesaran, Mehdi Raissi, and Alessandro Rebucci. 2020. Economic Consequences of COVID-19: A Counterfactual Multi-Country Analysis. October 19. Available online: <https://voxeu.org/article/economic-consequences-covid-19-multi-country-analysis> (accessed on 9 March 2021).

- Conti, Nicolò, and Vincenzo Memoli. 2015. The emergence of a new party in the Italian party system: Rise and fortunes of the Five Star Movement. *West European Politics* 38: 516–34. [CrossRef]
- Corbetta, Piergiorgio. 2017. *M5s. Come cambia il partito di Grillo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Costello, Anthony. 2020. Paediatrician and World Health Organization training director. *The Guardian*, March 15.
- Frieden, Jeffry. 2020. *Pandemics and Politics with Jeffry Frieden, PHD and Thomas Frieden, MD—Jeffry Frieden*. Cambridge: Harvard University, September 24; Available online: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/programs/growthpolicy/pandemics-and-politics-jeffry-frieden-phd-and-thomas-frieden-md> (accessed on 10 March 2021).
- Frieden, Jeffry. 2021. International Cooperation in the Age of Populism. Available online: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/jfrieden/files/international_cooperation_in_the_age_of_populism_0.pdf (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2018. *Il partito piattaforma*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2019. One Person, One Click: Is This the Way to Save Democracy? *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/13/digital-political-parties-democratic-m5s> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- Lavezzo, Enrico, Enrico Lavezzo, Elisa Franchin, Constanze Ciavarella, Gina Cuomo Dannenburg, Luisa Barzon, Claudia Del Vecchio, Lucia Rossi, Riccardo Manganelli, Arianna Loregian, and et al. 2020. Suppression of a SARS-CoV-2 outbreak in the Italian municipality of Vo'. *Nature* 7821: 425–29. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Tarchi, Marco. 2014. Dieci anni dopo: L'Italia populista e il caso Beppe Grillo. *Quaderni di Sociologia* 65: 31–49. [CrossRef]
- Tronconi, Filippo. 2018. The Italian Five Star Movement during the Crisis: Towards Normalisation? *South European Society and Politics* 23: 163–80. [CrossRef]
- Mosca, Lorenzo, and Filippo Tronconi. 2019. Beyond left and right: The eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement. *West European Politics* 42: 1258–83. [CrossRef]
- Mudde, Cas. 2004. The populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39: 542–63. [CrossRef]
- Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, Cas. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Edited by Kindle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 3.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nicola, Fernanda G. 2020. Exporting the Italian Model to Fight COVID-19. *The Regulatory Review*, April 23.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald F. Inglehart. 2018. Paper for presentation at the Panel on 'Populism in Advanced Capitalist Democracies' in Boston. August 14. Available online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3222901 (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash (Kindle Locations 2039–2043)*. Edited by Kindle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- OECD. 2021. Economic Outlook. Available online: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/34bfd999-en.pdf?expires=1615309114&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=123CADA23AB2DACE3C591837A562D96B> (accessed on 9 March 2021).
- Pisano, Gary P., Raffaella Sadun, and Michele Zanini. 2020. Lessons from Italy's Response to Coronavirus. *Harvard Business Review*, March 27.
- Rodrik, Dani. 2017. Populism and the Economics of Globalization. Available online: https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/files/dani-rodrik/files/populism_and_the_economics_of_globalization.pdf (accessed on 25 August 2021).
- Tajfel, Henry, and John C. Turner. 1985. The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour. In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Edited by Worchel Stephen and William G. Austin. Chicago: Nelson Hall, pp. 7–24.
- Vese, Donato. 2020. *Managing the Pandemic: The Italian Strategy for Fighting COVID-19 and the Challenge of Sharing Administrative Powers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, September 3.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage.