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The demand for populism. A psycho-cultural based analysis of the desire for non mainstream political representation

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Abstract

Inspired by Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory, the study surveyed a representative Italian national sample (N=818) to test a culture-based model of populist voting. The model assumed that a set of socio-political orientations (i.e., support for democracy, civicism, egalitarianism, anti-elitism, confidence in institutions, and respect for diversity) would mediate the relationship between symbolic universes (i.e., generalized affect-laden sets of meanings) and mainstream vs. populist voting. The results supported the main hypotheses, revealing that populist voting was favoured by a combination of concern for democracy and distrust. As expected, symbolic universes affected socio-political orientations, while a structural variable such as socio-economic status proved to be irrelevant. Implications for the SCPT framework and for research on populism and voting behaviour are discussed.

Keywords: populism; non mainstream voting; psycho-cultural analysis.

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Introduction

The demand for populism and its triggers

In the last few decades the European political sphere has witnessed the increasing electoral success of so-called populist parties. According to the most widely used definition, populism can be defined as an ideology separating society into two opposing camps, the pure common people and the corrupt élite (Mudde, 2004). The core features of populist parties include anti-pluralism, that is a unitary conception of the people, and the belief that politics should be the expression of the general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). This very basic definition is flexible enough to be applied in very different contexts, where populist parties combine this Manichean view of society with a heterogeneous set of positions on the left-right axis as well as with the refusal to take a position on that dimension. In this regard, Taggart (2002) argued that populism is a chameleonic phenomenon.

Two broad narratives have been advanced to explain the growing popular support enjoyed by the populist ideology. One is the materialist argument, according to which in the last few decades the worsening economic conditions of large sectors of European societies have quite simply undermined the trust in the competence of the establishment (e.g. Rodrik, 2018). However, the credibility of this account is challenged by a large amount of survey data showing that the strongest support for populist parties comes from small proprietors rather than from low paid manual workers and that individual's economic status is a weak predictor of populist voting (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The second argument, based on culture, does not deny the effect of material factors but underlines that such factors act indirectly, by creating the conditions (e.g., economic inequality) that fuel citizens' feelings of insecurity and of revenge to which populism appeals (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2015). According to this approach, the rise of populist ideas, movements and parties can be understood in the light of the deep cultural changes underway in Western societies (Inglehart, 1989; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2015), which open up a space for the new social conflicts triggered by globalisation (Kriesi et al, 2008). This view has shown that the increasing support for populist ideas and movements throughout Western societies is the result of populism's capacity to meet the "cultural anxieties" of the losers of globalization (Krisi & Pappas, 2005).

This outlook has the merit of highlighting the need to take people's subjectivity into account in the analysis of political phenomena. On the other hand, it underestimates the autonomy of the cultural and political realm from material factors; in other words, it assumes that given certain material conditions, cultural and political responses cannot but follow.

A closer look at the cultural trends fueling the demand for populist political representation is worth pursuing, for both conceptual and practical reasons. First, it must be acknowledged that the possible co-occurrence of critical socio-economic conditions, affect-laden reactions, and demand for populism, is not enough to identify a causal linkage that linearly connects them. Second, it has to be stressed that only a deep understanding of the underpinning mechanisms mediating the link between structural conditions and cultural trends enables us to act upon it (Salvatore et al., 2019a).

Opening the black box. The Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory

In the family of theories that have modelled cultural processes, Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT; Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2014) provides the chance to take into account both cognitive (beliefs, opinions) and affective (feelings, attitudes) facets as well as their interplay.

SCPT sees culture as the *ongoing dynamics of sensemaking* through which human beings give sense to experience, making it subjectively meaningful. Moreover, the theory states that the dynamics of sensemaking are conveyed by latent, generalized meanings - called "symbolic universes" (Salvatore et al, 2019b) - which are active within the cultural milieu. Symbolic universes work as embodied assumptions that frame and shape the interpretation of the experience of the social and physical space as well as of oneself - i.e., the sense of who one is, what the world is and why/how it appears as it does. A recent map of the cultural milieu of the European societies (Salvatore et al, 2018), has detected 5 symbolic universes:

Ordered universe: generalized positive attitude toward the world (institutions, services, future), perceived as trustworthy. Identification with transcendent values (e.g. justice, solidarity, etc.), and social commitment.

Interpersonal bonds: positive, optimistic vision of the world, reduced to the realm of interpersonal, affective bonds.

Caring society: vision of society and institutions as responsive to individual needs. Belief in the possibility of achieving personal goals via a support system.

Niche of belongingness: anchorage to primary networks, combined with a negative connotation of the outside world (pessimism, untrustworthiness of agencies and institutions). Primary networks as a shelter from an anomic, threatening environment.

Others' world: a negative, desperate vision of the world (generalized distrust, hopelessness, lack of agency).

For the sake of the current discussion, the following three characteristics of the symbolic universes are worth highlighting. First, symbolic universes are *affect-laden, a-semantic, meanings* (Ciavolino et al., 2017). A symbolic universe consists of a network of meanings that are associated by reason of their affective value (e.g. pleasantness/positivity), even if they have no semantic linkage. Second, symbolic universes are *generalised, holistic worldviews*. They do not refer to discrete objects or events; rather, they envelop the experience as a whole. This means that the sense-maker does not *have* a symbolic universe, she/he *is* the symbolic universe she/he partakes. Third, symbolic universes have a *regulative function* with respect to people's way of feeling and thinking, therefore influencing their choices and actions (Salvatore et al, 2019b; Veltri et al., 2019).

SCPT provides an interpretative framework for deepening the analysis of the cultural motives underpinning the demand for political representation. Indeed, different symbolic universes underpin different patterns of socio-political beliefs towards society and politics, which are the core of the choice between the mainstream vs. populist political offering (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). The individual socio-economic condition does not have a systematic effect on socio-political orientation (Salvatore et al, 2019b), and, therefore, on voting behaviour.

SCPT does not claim that socio-economic condition is by no means associated with socio-political orientations or with political choices, but that the form of the association has to be seen as variable and context-dependent.

Context of the Study, Aims and Hypotheses

The 2013 Italian national election marked the crisis of the party system based on two alternative coalitions, center-left and center-right. The Five Star Movement (FSM) emerged as a major political force gaining about 25% of the popular vote. Based on a radical critique of the Italian political class and advocating new forms of direct democracy, the ideology of this political movement resembles the ideal-typical definition of populism. By consistently refusing to take a position of the left-right axis, the FSM exemplifies the core element of populism more than any other case in Italy or in European politics (Ivaldi et al., 2017). This study intended to offer a culture-based explanation of voting behavior, and specifically of populist voting. To this end, we formulated the hypotheses below.

As FSM voters are more disaffected than voters in general, distrust institutions and the political elite (e.g., Pasarelli & Tuorto, 2016), and advocates “citizen democracy”, we expected that voting for FSM in the 2013 elections would be associated with a pattern of socio-political attitudes combining anti-elitism, distrust in institutions, support for democracy, and civicism.

We also expected that voting for the FSM would not be associated with socio-political attitudes such as intolerance of

diversity and social dominance, which typically characterize right-wing populist support (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018), since FSM derived many of its values and principles from the left ideology (Biorcio & Natale, 2013).

As to the influence of symbolic universes on socio-political attitudes, based on Salvatore and colleagues (2018; 2019b) who interpreted two symbolic universes – *others' world* and *niche of belongingness*– as those mostly prone to trigger identity-defensive attitudes, we reasoned that these symbolic universes would serve as the trigger of the socio-political attitudes mentioned above.

On this basis, we formulated the following hypotheses and proposed a predictive model of populist (FSM) voting (Figure 1).

Hp1a. Voting for populist parties is associated with socio-political attitudes such as high support for democracy, high civicism, low trust in institutions, and negative attitudes towards elites.

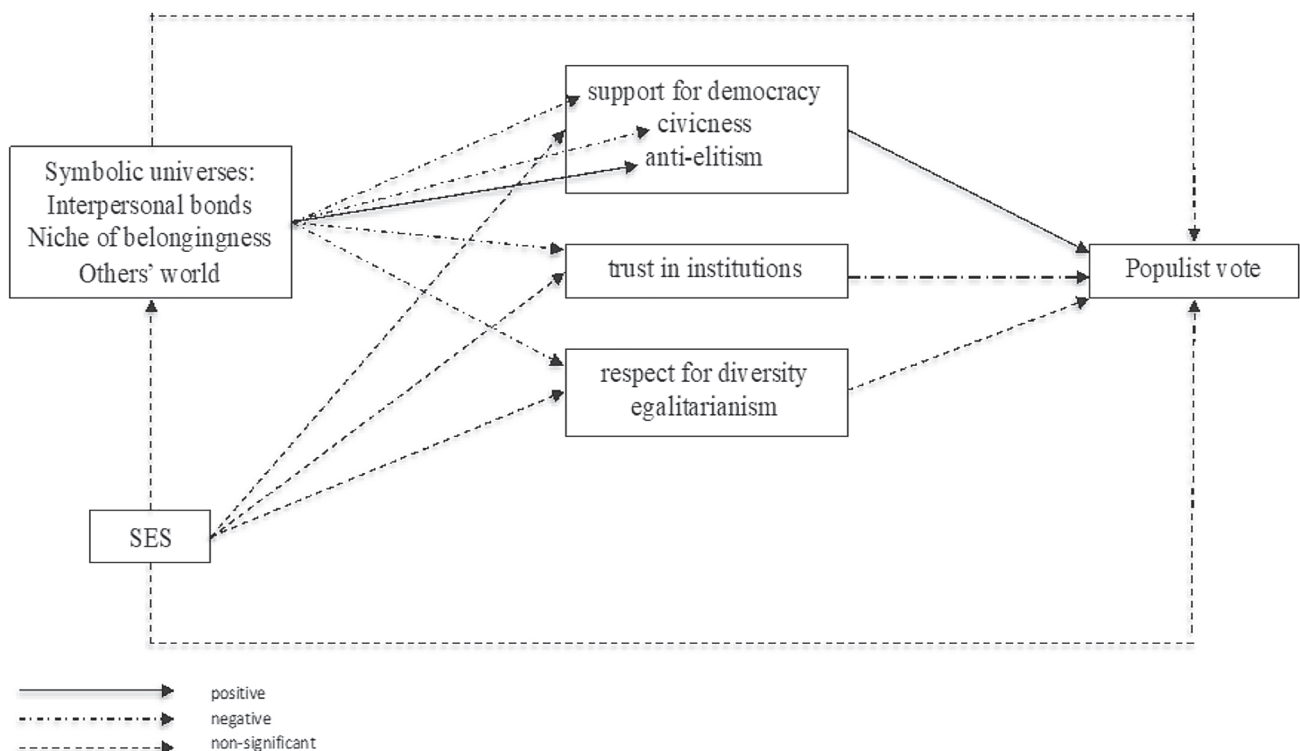
Hp1b. Voting for populist parties has no association with respect for diversity and social dominance orientation (nor with its reverse, i.e., egalitarianism).

Hp2. Voting is not directly affected by symbolic universes.

Hp3. Socio-political attitudes are affected by symbolic universes. Specifically, we expected that three symbolic universes, namely *niche of belongingness*, *others' world*, and to a lesser extent *interpersonal bonds* – compared to *ordered universe* and *caring society* – would reduce support for democracy, civicism, trust in institutions and respect for diversity, and would strengthen social dominance (i.e., reduce egalitarianism) and anti-elitism.

Hp4. Socio-economic status is associated neither with symbolic universes, nor with socio-political attitudes nor with voting choice.

Fig. 1. Model of voting behavior



Method

Sample

The study is based on a subset (n= 818) of a representative Italian national sample (n=1,300) - stratified for gender, age (Table 1) and territorial areas (Nielsen areas: North-Western [26.5%], North-Eastern [18.8%], Southern [20.2%], Centre [24.1%], Islands [10.4%]) – comprising those who voted to 2013 elections and declared their vote orientation in response to the related questionnaire item.

With respect to the representative sample, the n=818 sample presents a higher proportion of males (chi square [df=1]: $p < .007$; standardized residual: 2.7), a higher proportion of 51-65 year and a lower proportion of 18-34 respondents (chi square [df=3]: $p < .000$; standard residuals: 3.3 and -4.2, respectively). No difference as to geographical area.

Tab. 1. Sample: Age*Gender

Age	Gender		Total	
	M	F	N	%
18-34	91	79	170	20.8
35-50	142	115	257	31.4
51-65	126	133	259	31.7
66-75	67	65	132	14.6
Total	426	392	818	100
%	52.1	47.9		

Respondents were either contacted by phone for a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI; N=132, composed of the 66-75 year segment) or completed a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI; N=686, composed of the 18-65 year segments). Interviews were performed in February 2018, a few weeks before the national political election held in March 2018. Respondents were asked about their voting intentions in the upcoming elections and on their past voting behaviour in the 2013 elections. The sample presented a higher level of education compared to the Italian population (Table 2).

Tab. 2. Sample: Education

	N	%
Lower secondary (or less)	89	10.9
Upper secondary	443	54.2
Tertiary	286	35.0
Total	818	100

Measures

Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire including the following measures, along with socio-demographic information.

A short version of the *View of Context* (VoC) questionnaire (Ciavolino et al., 2017) ($\alpha = .72$), aimed at detecting the *symbolic universe* which is the most representative of each respondent’s worldview. The questionnaire is composed of 29 items assessing how individuals perceive their social and institutional environment, the future of their community as well as their beliefs about the overarching rules organizing societal life; response format ranging from 1=totally disagree to 4=totally agree.

Support for democracy was measured with a single item with four response modes drawn from Norris (1999): “Having a democratic political system” is “very negative/almost negative/ almost positive/very positive”.

Trust in institutions ($\alpha = .82$): as in the European Social Survey (2012), respondents were asked to rate how much, from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“very much”) they personally trusted the following institutions: European Parliament, National government, bank system, judicial system, church, political parties, and local political authorities (mayor).

Civicness ($\alpha = .90$): seven Likert-type items, from 1 (“never acceptable”) to 10 (“always acceptable”), drawn from Sciolla (2004) were used to assess respect for common goods and rules that protect common goods (e.g., “Trying to obtain undue benefits from the state”). In order to make scores more interpretable, they were reversed.

Respect for diversity ($\alpha = .93$): an adapted version of the Intergroup Empathy, Valuing diversity and Intergroup Helping subscales was used (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013). Six Likert-type items with response format ranging from 1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree, measured attitudes of openness and acceptance of diversity (e.g., “If I was given the chance, I would help my fellow citizens regardless of their nationality”).

Social dominance ($\alpha = .87$): The eight-item Italian version of the Social Dominance Orientation scale (SDO) (Di Stefano & Roccato, 2005) was used to measure the belief that some social groups have the right to dominate other groups. Response format ranged from 1=totally disagree to 6=totally agree. For the analyses the scores were reversed so as to obtain a measure of egalitarianism (henceforth, *egalitarianism*), intended as the opposite of social dominance.

Anti-elitism ($\alpha = .84$): an adapted version of the 6-item Populist Attitude Scale by Andreadis and Ruth-Lovell (2018) was used. Response format ranged from 1=totally disagree to 6=totally agree.

Populist vs. Mainstream voting: was assessed by asking respondents for whom they had voted in the previous national political elections (in 2013). Response alternatives included: (a) parties positioned within the right-left political spectrum (extreme left, center-left, center, center-right, extreme right); (b) parties falling outside the right-left political spectrum (with FSM provided as explicit example); (c) unable to respond (d) declining response.

Data analysis

Preliminarily, we performed some operations on the variables measured.

First, in order to reduce the number of variables entered in the model, we subjected all variables assessing social and political orientations (i.e., all scales but VoC) to a Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

Second, we transformed voting in a dichotomous variable. We merged responses positioning parties in any of the points of the right-left political spectrum into one category (i.e., mainstream voting), while we kept responses positioning parties outside the right-left political spectrum in a separate category (populist voting). Respondents who were unable to position the party voted for or declined to respond were excluded. The final sample size amounted to 818 eligible participants.

Third, we computed an indirect indicator of socio-economic status (SES), combining two parameters: (a) the respondent's level of education and (b) the level of Gross Product of the region where the respondent lives. Table 3 reports how the two parameters were combined.

Tab. 3. Levels of SES

Regional Gross Product	Education		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	Low SES	Low SES	Medium SES
Medium	Low SES	Medium SES	High SES
High	Medium SES	High SES	High SES

Forth, we classified respondents into the symbolic universes. Each respondent was assigned to the most representative symbolic universe of her/his response profile in accordance to the VoC Fisher's Classification Functions (FCF). FCF were computed on the Italian sub-set (N=447) of the multi-country VoC normative sample (Ciavolino et al., 2017; Salvatore et al, 2019b).

As the second step, in order to test the interplay of relationships among variables, we used Structural Equation Models (SEM). In estimating SEM, we adopted the parametric approach, with the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method developed by Jöreskog (1973).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Preliminary factor analyses performed on the measures of socio-political orientations confirmed for each of them their unidimensional structure. Descriptive analyses are displayed in Table 4. The level of these measures does not differ between the n=818 sample used for the following analysis and the n=1,300 national representative sample.

Descriptive analyses for socio-political orientation measures

	N	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev.
Support for democracy	818	1	4	3.13	.0927
Trust in institutions	818	7	28	14.28	3.92
Civiness	818	7	70	56.89	13,469

	N	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev.
Respect for diversity	818	6	42	26.04	9.55
Anti-elitism	818	5	35	27.09	6.236
Egalitarianism	818	8	56	33.07	6.782

The distribution of symbolic universes within the sample (Table 5) revealed that the largest symbolic universes were *niche of belongingness* and *interpersonal bonds*.

Tab. 5. Distribution of symbolic universes within the sample

	N	%
Ordered universe	101	12.3
Interpersonal bonds	211	25.8
Caring society	17	2.1
Niche of belongingness	320	39.1
Others' world	169	20.7
Total	818	100.0

A share of 81.2% of the n=1300 original sample reported voting in 2013 political elections; among those who voted and were able to position the party voted for either inside or outside the right-left political spectrum (N = 818, 77.5% of voters), 86.1% reported voting for a party included in the right-left political spectrum (mainstream voting); 13.9% of the sample reported choosing parties falling outside this spectrum (populist voting).

Principal Component Analysis

PCA applied to measures of political beliefs and attitudes resulted in two factors, explaining 30.86% (factor 1) and 23.23% (factor 2) of the total variance. Factor 1 was saturated by support for democracy, civiness, anti-elitism, and egalitarianism; Factor 2 was saturated by trust in institutions and respect for diversity. Accordingly, we named Factor 1 *Democratic concern*, as it brings together support for democratic government systems, egalitarian attitudes towards social groups, concern for the preservation of common goods, and concern about being robbed, as citizens, of their own powers. We named Factor 2 *Trust*, as it includes not only overt confidence in a variety of institutions, but also openness and acceptance of diversity, which implies social trust (Lauring & Selmer, 2012).

Structural Equation Model

The two factors extracted via the PCA (i.e., *democratic concern* and *trust*) were entered the model as mediators of the relationship between symbolic universes and voting behavior.

The variables entered in the model as antecedents were: (a) socio-economic status (SES). The groups of respondents

with medium and high levels of SES were entered in the model, while the group with low level was used as reference category. (b) Symbolic universes. Due to the small number of respondents in the *caring society* symbolic universe, this group was merged with the group of respondents falling in the *ordered universe* symbolic universe, with which it shares several characteristics. The groups of respondents belonging to the symbolic universes of *interpersonal bonds*, *niche of belongingness* and *others' world* were entered in the model, while the other two, which were merged, were used as reference category.

Voting behaviour, the dependent variable, was operationalized as a dichotomous variable: mainstream voting (= 0) vs. populist voting (=1).

Table 6 and Figure 2 outline the main SEM results. The model obtained acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2 = .097, p = .755$; CFI > .95; TLI > .95; RMSEA = [0; .063].

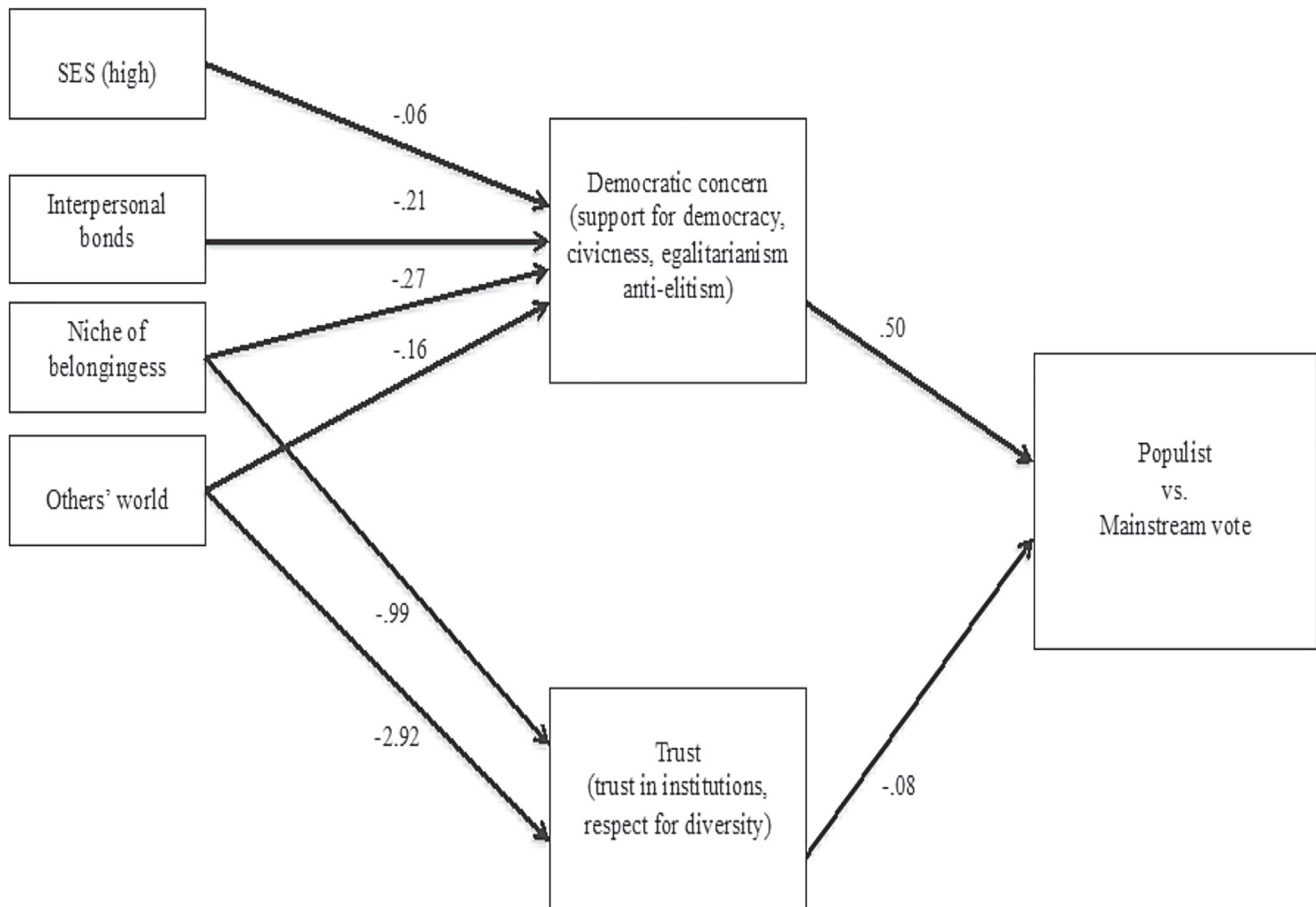
Belonging to the symbolic universes *niche of belongingness*, and *others' world* was likely to decrease both *democratic concern* (*niche of belongingness*: $\beta = -.270, z = -6.735, p = .000$; *others' world*: $\beta = .168, z = -4.986, p < .000$) and *trust* (*niche of belongingness*: $\beta = -.656, z = -3.216, p < .001$; *others' world*: $\beta = -2.692, z = -4.316, p = .000$); *interpersonal bond* proved to be associated negatively only with *democratic concern* ($\beta = -.212, z = -5.072, p = .001$). No symbolic universe directly affected voting.

Tab. 6. Regressions: Parameter estimates

	Voting (populist vs. mainstream)			
	Estimate	Std. Err	z-value	P(> z)
Democratic concern	.616	.151	4.065	.000
Trust	-.055	.024	-2.352	.019
SES medium	.108	.141	.762	.446
SES high	-.065	.136	-.477	.633
SU IB	-.124	.194	-.639	.523
SU NB	.206	.172	1.198	.231
SU OW	.286	.188	1.523	.128

	Democratic concern (support for democracy, civicism, egalitarianism, anti-elitism)			
	Estimate	Std. Err	z-value	P(> z)
SES medium	-.003	.027	-.105	.917
SES high	-.051	.025	-2.038	.042
SU IB	-.219	.038	-5.809	.000
SU NB	-.261	.036	-7.279	.000
SU OW	-.171	.034	-4.986	.000

Fig. 2. Empirical model



Note. All parameters are significant at $p < .00$

Trust (trust in institutions, respect for diversity)				
	Estimate	Std. Err	z-value	P(> z)
SES medium	.298	.199	1.497	.135
SES high	-.127	.181	-.703	.482
SU IB	.292	.234	1.244	.214
SU NB	-.656	.204	-3.216	.001
SU OW	-2.692	.251	-10.714	.000
Intercepts				
	Estimate	Std. Err	z-value	P(> z)
Voting	.000			
Democratic concern	.921	.140	6.578	.000
Trust	3.634	.860	4.225	.000

Note. SU = Symbolic Universe; IB = Interpersonal Bonds; NB = Niche of Belongingness; OW = Others' World; SES = Socio-Economic Status

In turn, *democratic concern* increased the likelihood of populist voting ($\beta=.508$; $z=3.103$, $p=.002$), while *trust* decreased it, though with a weaker impact ($\beta=-.084$, $z=-3.463$, $p=.001$), in that both proved to mediate the relationship between symbolic universes and voting behaviour.

Finally, we found that SES had no significant effects on any of the other variables included in the model (with the partial exception of the effect of the high level of SES on *democratic concern*) ($\beta=-.069$; $z=2.449$; $p=.014$).

Discussion

Preliminarily, it has to be highlighted that our index of populist voting underestimated the incidence of this kind of voting – the sample's percentage of populist voting (13.9%) is considerably lower than the FSM electoral results at the 2013 national elections (25.6%) –. This is probably because, according to the data of the Italian National Election Survey, about half of FSM voters place the party either in the left or in the right camp. Therefore, some respondents may have considered FSM to as part either of the left/center-left or right/center-right family. However, respondents declaring to have voted for a party falling outside the left/right spectrum have a very high probability to be FSM voters.

As to the main results, they proved to be consistent with the hypotheses:

- As expected, symbolic universes did not exert influence on populist voting directly (Hp2).
- Symbolic universes affected socio-political attitudes (Hp3). More specifically, as expected, the three symbolic universes portraying anomic feelings and/or identity motives (i.e., *niche of belongingness*, *others' world*, and to a lesser extent *interpersonal bonds*) were associated with low support for democracy, low civicness, low respect for diversity, low trust in institutions and low egalitarianism. However, they were also associated to low anti-elitism.

c) In turn, socio-political attitudes were associated with voting (Hp1a and Hp1b). However, the pattern of socio-political attitudes that proved to be associated with populist voting was partially different from the one hypothesized. Indeed, as we expected, voting for the FSM proved to be triggered by the expected pattern of socio-political attitudes (i.e., high support for democracy, high civicness, anti-elitism, and mistrust in institutions). However, differently from our hypothesis, voting for the FSM was also associated with egalitarianism and low tolerance of diversity, the former as part of the pattern of socio-political attitudes we labeled *democratic concern*, and the latter with the pattern labelled *trust*.

d) Moreover, as expected, the socio-economic status affects neither symbolic universes nor socio-political attitude or vote (Hp4).

To sum up, taken as a whole, results are fully consistent with the core SCPT claim of the mediated role played by symbolic universes: symbolic universes do not exert influence on populist voting directly, but indirectly, via their capacity to affect socio-political attitudes, in turn associated with the voting choice. The lack of relevance of socio-economic status complements the picture outlined above. Indeed, it is consistent with the interpretations that focus on the predominance of identity motives (which are transversal to diverse social groups) over socio-economic motives in shaping political and electoral orientations (for a similar view, e.g. see Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018).

To conclude, our findings showed that in the Italian political landscape the demand for populism (in the FSM version) seems to be characterized by the radical enhancement of the societal bond, intended as a unique, idealized body, defined by its opposition to the political establishment. Accordingly, support to this form of populism was fostered by a combination of positive (support for democracy, civicness, egalitarianism) and negative (anti-elitism, low trust in institutions) socio-political attitudes. In this context, it is worth highlighting the role played by tolerance of diversity, which was negatively associated with the populist vote. This result, which was unexpected according to our hypothesis and the overall ideological profile of the FSM, is indeed consistent with the general connotation of the populist wave in many countries (Brubaker, 2017), and supports the idea that identity motives are a structural part of the populist ideology, rather than being an additional component of the right-wing ideological anchorage often referred to by the "thin" populist ideology (i.e., Inglehart, 1989; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2015). More generally, it could be argued that the reactive feelings toward institutions and identity motives generally considered at the core of the demand for populism originate – at least in the Italian context – from the perception of the weakening of democratic, civic, and egalitarian values. In a way, this interpretation suggests that voting populist parties may have the meaning of a pro-democracy, civic act, a reaction to the wound inflicted to democratic and egalitarian values, rather than the marker of an affective reaction to anomy.

However, though interesting, the findings presented above have to be taken with caution. Indeed, some significant limitations need to be highlighted: the over-representation of

educated people, the indirect way of measuring populist voting (left-wing vs. neither-left-nor-right) as well as SES. Finally, as the sample of the study is country-specific and time-specific, further data and research is needed in order to generalize the model of the demand for populism that was sketched in the current study.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest

The author declares that he/she has no competing interests.

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Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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