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The Effects of Fighting Populism on the Populist Dynamic

KEY MESSAGES

- **Populism is on the rise globally and poses an existential threat to mainstream political parties**
- **Traditional parties may try to debunk the populist rhetoric or fight back using populist tactics**
- **A field experiment during the 2020 referendum in Italy shows that fighting back may be effective**
- **Political ads blaming populist politicians demobilized their electoral base at low economic cost**
- **Fighting populists backfires in the medium term as new populists benefit from the increased abstention**

Populism is still on the rise in Western democracies. Populist politicians may be feared, admired, praised, or even demonized – but they are never ignored. This is not surprising, since populist parties tend to portray society as divided into two antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The populist rhetoric also features anti-expert sentiments, anti-globalization stances, and aggressive communication styles on social media (De Vries 2018). This polarizing narrative thus pushes people to take a clear stand: in favor or against populism.

A large literature has analyzed the causes that have led to this rise in populism. The demand for populism is pinned down to two main determinants: economic and socio-cultural factors (Guriev 2018; Margalit 2019). Losers from many economic phenomena of the last decades, such as globalization, automation, financial crises, austerity policies, and welfare state retrenchments, have demanded protection and turned away from traditional parties (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022). The “silent revolution” (Inglehart 2015) promoted

by the progressive elites that supported the rise of progressive and post-materialist values in Western democracies met with the strong disapproval and dissatisfaction of social conservatives, leading to polarization over cultural issues. These voters turned away from traditional, particularly center-left, parties. Hence, both these socio-cultural and economic determinants of the

demand for populism eroded the support for traditional parties and led to a new political offer by the populist parties.

An open debate is taking place on the consequences of this rise of populism. The ability to articulate the economic and socio-cultural grievances of segments of the population within Western democracies and to advocate for their concerns within the political sphere is a notable aspect of populist parties. On the other hand, populist parties are often criticized for their extreme views on social and economic policies and for polarizing the political debate. However, regardless of one’s perspective on the role of populist parties, it is clear that traditional parties are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with them.

An old perspective (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991) suggests that populism could be self-defeating. By adopting “poor” economic policies, populist parties sow the seeds of their own political downfall, as voters may remove them from power when economic conditions deteriorate. This prediction hinges on the belief that politicians are accountable to voters and that elections serve as an effective mechanism for holding them accountable. But it also assumes that populist parties are less competent than traditional parties and will implement detrimental economic policies. Reality, however, may be more nuanced.

Voters might hold populist parties accountable for different actions compared to traditional parties. Populist parties often pledge straightforward and easily verifiable policies to their potential supporters instead of seeking a broad mandate (*carte blanche*), as traditional parties do. Consequently, voters may primarily hold populist parties accountable for fulfilling their promises. Furthermore, populist parties may opt to focus on non-economic issues such as law and order or immigration, which are harder for voters to assess. Even if populist parties clearly fail to deliver on their promises, voters may not necessarily return to traditional parties but instead turn to other populist alternatives.

If populist parties are here to stay, it’s imperative for traditional parties to devise a more effective political strategy. This is not only crucial for the survival of traditional parties but also for fostering broader democratic representation, diverse electoral choices, and enriching political discourse. What steps should mainstream parties take to effectively combat populism? Several key considerations come into play. Should they avoid engaging with populist-friendly issues such as anti-establishment or anti-immigration sentiments? Or should they directly confront these issues? If traditional parties are compelled to address these popu-



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list-friendly issues, how should they approach them? Should they adopt a fact-based approach aimed at refuting populist rhetoric and persuading voters? Alternatively, could they adopt elements of the populist playbook themselves, using similar tactics to portray populist politicians as a new opportunistic and corrupt establishment? Essentially, should they fight fire with fire?

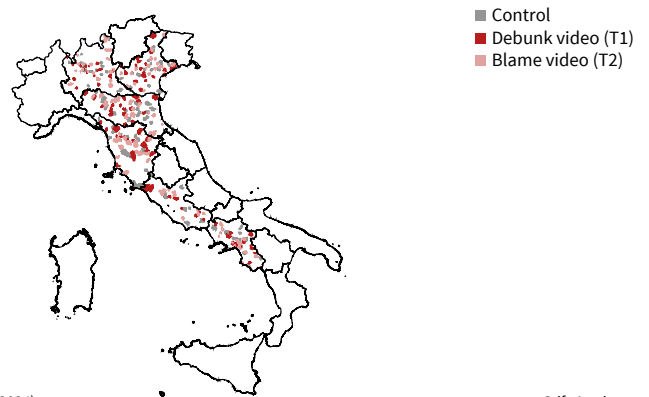
In our recent study (Galasso et al. 2024), we explore various strategies for traditional parties to counter populism and examine their short- and long-term implications. Our primary objective is to analyze how the political responses of traditional parties may influence the political dynamics surrounding populist parties. The previous questions serve as the focal point of our paper's analysis.

OUR FIELD EXPERIMENT IN THE 2020 ITALIAN REFERENDUM

In 2020, we conducted a randomized controlled trial in Italy during the electoral campaign for a constitutional referendum aimed at reducing the number of Members of Parliament (MPs). This issue carried significant appeal to populists, stemming from widespread skepticism or outright aversion towards legislative bodies, and was championed by two populist parties, the Five Star Movement and the League. The referendum sought to ratify a constitutional reform slashing the number of MPs in the Lower House from 630 to 400 and in the Senate from 315 to 200. Initially, polls in early 2020 forecast a 90 percent–10 percent victory for the “Yes” vote, endorsing the reduction of MPs, over the “No” vote, which sought to maintain the status quo. However, in September 2020, the “Yes” vote emerged victorious by a margin of only 70 percent to 30 percent, with a turnout rate of 51 percent.

Traditional political parties approached the issue with varied strategies – some refrained from taking a stance, while others faced internal divisions. Our experiment was conducted in collaboration with a national committee advocating for the “No” vote, associated with the Democrats. Utilizing *programmatic advertisements*, we delivered almost one million video impressions to Italian voters residing in 200 small to medium-size municipalities in six regions. Figure 1 shows the locations of these 200 municipalities and of the control municipalities used in the empirical analysis. Two 30-second video ads endorsing the “No” vote were employed in the campaign. These videos were deployed as pre-load rolls and placed before a regular content video as a 30-second advertisement, which could not be removed or skipped. They were placed on a host of websites, such as online newspapers, sport, entertainment, travel, health, etc. Although differing in tone and message, both ads were identical in length and graphics. The first video – randomly assigned to 100 municipalities – aimed at debunking the populist claims that cutting the number of MPs

Figure 1
Italian Municipalities in the Field Experiment



Source: Galasso et al. (2024).

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would lead to large cost savings with no consequences for democratic representation. The second video – assigned to another 100 municipalities – featured a direct attack on populist politicians, who were criticized for their opportunism and corruption.

Overall, 59 percent of the recipients watched the videos until the end, and 74 percent watched them for at least 15 (out of 30) seconds. Yet, the more assertive “blame” ad proved slightly more effective in capturing the viewers’ attention. Both videos influenced voting behavior in the same direction: diminishing the share of the “Yes” vote – namely those in favor of reducing the number of MPs. This effect is mostly driven by discouraging voters and increasing abstention rates. The “blame” ad produced also stronger effects than the “debunk” ad. The increase in abstention ranges from 1.3 to 1.8 percentage points, translating into a marginal effect of 4.6 percent relative to the average abstention (see Table 1). The persuasion rates of the randomized video ads (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010) range between 8.7 and 14.7 percent for the blame video and are in line with the existing literature (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Enikolopov et al. 2011; Gerber and Green 2000). The entire persuasion effort is explained by convincing potential “Yes” voters to abstain rather than convincing someone to switch to the “No” vote. Moreover, this dissuasion effect is cheap. The monetary cost of convincing an eligible voter, who would have otherwise gone to the polls to vote “Yes,” to abstain is EUR 1.66 per (demobilized) person. In fact, a campaign that costed EUR 17,500 managed to persuade 10,541 citizens to not vote “Yes” by keeping them at home. This cost is an order of magnitude lower than the cost of get-out-the-vote efforts as estimated in the literature (Green and Gerber 2008), which ranges from USD 31 for door-to-door campaigns to USD 91 for direct mail campaigns.

Given the socio-cultural and economic cleavage highlighted in the literature on the determinants of populism, we expected the effects of the electoral campaign to differ based on the socioeconomic and political characteristics of the municipalities. Indeed, consistent with the demobilization explanation, the

Table 1

Main Outcomes: 2020 Referendum in Italy

	Not Voting Yes		Abstaining		Voting No	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
T1	0.002 (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)	0.003 (0.008)	0.007 (0.008)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.004)
T2	0.011* (0.006)	0.016*** (0.006)	0.013* (0.008)	0.018** (0.008)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)
T1 = T2	0.143	0.132	0.170	0.185	0.663	0.687
T1 + T2	0.235	0.026	0.258	0.072	0.639	0.744
Sample	Triplets	Quadruplets	Triplets	Quadruplets	Triplets	Quadruplets
FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs	300	400	300	400	300	400

Note: Estimated WLS regressions: $Y_i = \alpha_1 T1_i + \alpha_2 T2_i + \gamma_k + \epsilon_i$, where $K \in \{T, Q\}$, γ_T are triplet fixed effects, γ_Q are quadruplet fixed effects. T1 = T2 reports the p-value of the Wald test for the null hypothesis: $H_0: \alpha_1 = \alpha_2$. T1 + T2 reports the p-value of the Wald test for the 0 hypothesis: $H_0: \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 = 0$. Robust standard errors are in parenthesis. Significance at the 10% level is represented by *, at the 5% by **, and at the 1% by ***.

Source: Galasso et al. (2024).

effects were more pronounced in municipalities with lower rates of college graduates, higher unemployment levels, and a history of supporting populist parties. In essence, in areas where some peripheral voters feel disconnected from politics and are already less inclined to participate, demobilization emerges as an effective strategy for thwarting the electoral ascendance of populist parties. This body of evidence suggests that countering populism, even through the use of similar tactics, can provide immediate advantages for traditional politicians at a relatively low economic expense. However, is there a political toll to be paid? Certainly, exacerbating polarization in political discourse carries a clear cost for democratic functioning. But are there other, more explicit, direct consequences that traditional parties might face if they choose to adopt populist rhetoric? The literature on negative campaigning suggests that in addition

to a “receiver effect,” which penalizes the subject of the negative advertisement, there may also be a “sender effect” that penalizes the sender, potentially benefiting other politicians who abstain from negative campaigning (Galasso et al. 2023). Could the current electoral gains for traditional parties that adopt populist-fighting tactics be followed by future electoral setbacks?

THE NEXT POPULIST IN TOWN?

The anti-populist campaign did have unforeseen consequences in the long term. In the subsequent national election of 2022, municipalities targeted by the campaign witnessed a surge in support for a burgeoning populist party, Brothers of Italy. Brothers of Italy was the new populist kid in town. During the previous term, Brothers of Italy was the only major party not to

Table 2

Dynamic Outcomes: 2022 National Election in Italy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Turnout	Democrats	Populists	Centrists	Brothers of Italy
T1	0.002 (0.004)	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.009** (0.004)
T2	0.004 (0.004)	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.013*** (0.004)
T1 = T2	0.608	0.907	0.775	0.931	0.364
T1 + T2	0.346	0.011	0.295	0.067	0.000
Controls	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Sample	Quadruplets	Quadruplets	Quadruplets	Quadruplets	Quadruplets
FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs	400	400	400	400	400

Note: Estimated WLS regressions: $Y_i = \alpha_1 T1_i + \alpha_2 T2_i + \gamma_k + \epsilon_i$, where $K \in \{T, Q\}$, γ_T are triplet fixed effects, γ_Q are quadruplet fixed effects. T1 = T2 reports the p-value of the Wald test for the null hypothesis: $H_0: \alpha_1 = \alpha_2$. T1 + T2 reports the p-value of the Wald test for the 0 hypothesis: $H_0: \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 = 0$. *Democrats* stands for “Partita Democratico” (PD); *Populists* for “Lega – Matteo Salvini Premier” plus “Movimento 5 Stelle” (M5S); *Centrists* for “Forza Italia” (FI); *Brothers of Italy* for “Fratelli d’Italia” (FdI). Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance at the 10% level is represented by *, at the 5% by **, and at the 1% by ***.

Source: Galasso et al. (2024).

provide political support to the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi. This decision, together with other stands on social issues, led to a large electoral success. Brothers of Italy largely increased its vote share in all Italian municipalities, won the election, and was able to unseat the Prime Minister. However, in the municipalities previously treated by the “de-bunk” video, this populist force gained an additional 0.9 percentage points more than the control group (+3.3 percent with respect to the average), and in the municipalities treated by the “blame” video, it gained 1.3 points more (+4.8 percent). Simultaneously, in the treated municipalities, there was a decline in support for both traditional political parties and the “old” populists who had championed the 2020 reform (see Table 2).

A follow-up survey conducted in 2023 confirmed these findings and revealed further significant shifts. Residents of municipalities exposed to the 2020 campaign demonstrated heightened political engagement, diminished trust in political institutions, and a rise in anti-political sentiments. Surprisingly, countering populism using similar tactics appeared to have favored the new populist party rather than the traditional political parties. While we don’t attribute these effects directly to the 2020 campaign, considering the two-year gap since the dissemination of the video ads, we suggest that the campaign acted as an external shock that initially influenced voting behavior. These changes may have persisted due to path dependence and the formation of habits in political beliefs. It appears that engaging in tit-for-tat with populist parties may not be the most effective strategy for mainstream parties.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

What can we learn from our findings? They caution against the enduring efficacy of negative campaigning by traditional parties against populist movements, underscoring the necessity for forward-thinking strat-

egies – such as positive narratives that won’t boomerang over time – in combatting populism. While our study didn’t delve into the internal and external obstacles traditional parties face in embracing forward-thinking strategies, addressing these challenges is essential to reinvigorating political participation and confidence in political institutions. Party leaders who find themselves in weak positions may be tempted to gamble for resurrection and fight populists with fire. However, engaging in tit-for-tat risks unraveling the delicate tapestry of our democracies. Hence, a prudent approach is paramount.

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