

Defenders of democracy: Populist discourse and democracy in Italy and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of the use of “democracy” in the populist discourse, in Italy and the United Kingdom. The main hypothesis is that “democracy” is employed strategically as a container-term, in order to offer coherence and prestige to the narratives in the discourse.

I define a “container-term” as a concept that, in a discourse, performs the function of a hollow recipient in which the communicator will introduce various narratives that do not have a conceptual relation with the chosen term. As a result, the meaning of the container-term will be influenced by the narratives it will comprise, and the narratives will borrow from the reputation of the container-term. The heterogeneous narratives introduced in the container-term will aggregate in a unified and coherent tale. The first part tackles the political contexts of Italy and the UK. The next part defines the populist discourse, exemplifies the use of the container-terms and explains their role. Subsequently, we explain why “democracy” can be an effective container-term, and we analyse the use of “democracy” as a container-term in the populist discourse in both countries, using data obtained through monitoring the Facebook and Twitter accounts of a series of parties and political personalities in the two countries.

Used as a container-term, democracy becomes, up to a certain point, what it contains. At the same time, the narratives of the populist discourse benefit from the prestige that democracy carries. Hence, democracy can turn into a rhetorical weapon in the populist discourse. Understanding the way these processes take place is essential for learning how and why populists talk about democracy.

1 Political contexts

This study analyses the use of democracy as a container-term in the populist discourse, looking at two countries: Great Britain and Italy. The three months intervals chosen for both of them are centred each on a political event in the respective countries. For UK, it starts in May 2016, ends in June 2016, and features the EU membership referendum on 23rd June 2016, preceded by a divisive campaign. For Italy, it starts in March 2018, ends in May 2018, and features the general elections on 4th March 2018, followed by intense negotiations and the formation of the new government in May.

On 23rd June 2016, 72.2 percent of the UK citizens with voting rights went to the polls. 52 per cent of them voted to leave the EU, and 48 per cent to remain. Half of those who voted for Brexit stated as main reason the fact that decisions affecting UK should be taken in UK [Ashcroft, 2016]

The referendum results revealed long standing divisions, in terms of age, occupational status, education, standard of living, but also in terms of the level of optimism concerning the present and future in the UK. The groups within which more than 70 percent voted for Brexit were: those who had financial problems in daily life, those who considered that life in the UK was a lot worse than 10 years ago, and those who thought that things are not going in the right direction [Swales, 2016]. This suggests that for the older, poorer, more uneducated and more pessimistic voters who chose Brexit, the key to their choice does not hide in a certain message of the campaign, or in a particular argument, but in the reassuring certainty with which the Leave side offered Brexit as the universal solution for all the problems the British might have.

On 4th March, Italy had general elections. Lega, Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia formed a centre-of-right coalition led by Matteo Salvini, the leader of Lega. The coalition received 37 per cent of the votes. The most voted party was Movimento Cinque Stelle with 32 percent. The centre-of-left coalition led by former prime-minister Matteo Renzi, was on third place. No group had a majority, so the formation of a government was a difficult task. In May, Lega and Movimento Cinque Stelle formed what they have named “the government of change”.

The last decades in the Italian politics were marked by corruption scandals that eroded the public trust in politicians. Among them, remarkable was Tangentopoli scandal in the beginning of the nineties, when at some point more than half of the members of the Parliament were under indictment. Moreover, Eurobarometer starting from 1972 suggests a chronic dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and politics in Italy [Tarchi, 2008]. In present, the trust in politics and politicians is still very low, the concerns about immigration have intensified in recent years, and the last economic crisis left the Italians even more pessimistic. All these factors, together with others, make Italy a “fertile terrain for populism” [Tarchi, 2008]. The results of the last elections strengthen this assertion.

2 The use of the container term in the populist discourse

The theory of the container-terms is inscribed in the “ideational approach” [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017] in the study of populism. More specifically, populism is understood as a type of discourse. Scholars of populism have insisted on the constitutive ambiguity of populism [Meny and Surel, 2002]. Laclau discerned vagueness and imprecision as the essential components of every populist operation, but also as the qualities that make populism communication effec-

tive when trying to “operate performatively within a social reality which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating” [Laclau, 2005]. When scholars talk about vagueness referring to populism, they refer mainly to the concept of “the people”. Canovan explains how the appeals to the “people” cancel the political divisions and create new group identities. The imprecision of the concept makes the work easier for the populists: “the great charm of «the people» for a politician – and the fundamental source of exasperation for a political scientist – is that the term manages to be both empty of precise meaning and full of rhetorical resonance” [Canovan, 1981]. But the traits identified by Canovan – “empty of precise meaning” and “full of rhetorical resonance” are not only the characteristics of the “people”. They are the key traits of any container-term. In fact, “the people” is one good example of container-term.

I define a “container-term” as a concept that, in a discourse, performs the function of a hollow recipient in which the communicator will introduce various narratives that do not have a conceptual relation with the chosen term. As a result, the meaning of the container-term will be influenced by the narratives it will comprise, and the narratives will borrow from the reputation of the container-term. The heterogeneous narratives introduced in the container-term will aggregate in a unified and coherent tale.

Its role in the discourse can be discerned at three levels:

- At the level of structure, it acts as a connector: the disparate narratives introduced inside it will become a coherent macro-narrative, bounded by the common reference to the container-term.
- At the level of meaning, it acts as a frame: the narratives will become associated with the meaning of the container-term; in turn, the container-term will potentially be associated with them in various contexts. What happens could be described as a meaning contagion in both directions: from the narratives to the container-term and the other way around.
- At the symbolic level, it acts as a source of notoriety: the container-term will grant the narratives inside it with its prestige.

In order for a container-term to be effective, two conditions must be met:

- The container-term needs to be as vague as possible. Its flexibility increases with its abstractness and ambiguity.
- It also needs to be as prestigious and emotionally charged as possible.

Employing the theory of the container-term in the analysis of the populist discourse has, thus, several advantages. The first one is that it explains the structural ambiguity of populism, which goes beyond the imprecise meaning of “the people”.

One benefit of the discursive approach is that it is not actor-centred, but communication-centred. This means that we can avoid dichotomous divides between populist and non-populist actors, and acknowledge that populism is rather

a question of “strength, degree and type” [Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017]. This vision goes better with a nuanced reality where the intensity of populist elements can vary across the ideological spectrum and also in time [Aslanidis, 2015]. Additionally, populism is substantially “contextually-contingent”: populist discourse is highly dependent on the context in which it appears [Taggart, 2003]. The theory of the container-term helps explain these variations and emphasizes the importance of the demand side of populism, as well as its relation with the supply side. A concept can become a container-term or it can stop being one. Also, the same container-term can have different contents in various contexts, or its contents can change even in a short period of time: everything depends on the narratives introduced inside it.

Container-terms can explain processes of identity creation and demands aggregation. With the help of an effective container-term, the populist communicator can create solidarities, portray enemies [Taggart, 2003] and construct group identities [Panizza, 2017].

Various political scientists almost talked about container-terms, they used ideas related to it without going into depth. When Canovan described the characteristics of the “people”, she described a container-term. What was missing was how these terms are used in communication. Laclau talked about the “terrorism of words” when he was defending populism against its critics. He saw populism as being equal to democratic politics and he was opposing those who saw it as a danger to democracy. His argument was that the critics of populism have replaced analysis with ethical condemnation. Instead of explaining how populism works, he said, they condemn it, thus failing to understand the logic behind it. But, he added then, this also happens with terms that have positive emotional connotations:

"On the Left, terms such as «class struggle», «determination in the last instance by the economy» or «centrality of the working class» function – or functioned until recently – as emotionally charged fetishes, the meaning of which were increasingly less clear, although their discursive appeal could not be diminished." [Laclau, 2005]

A container-term is exactly this: a concept with an increasingly unclear meaning and an impressive emotional appeal.

The theory of the container-term might also contribute to the clarification of the relation between populism and democracy. Populism has been described as a “mirror of democracy” [Panizza, 2005], a “shadow” [Canovan, 1999] or even as a spectre [Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008]. What is clear for everyone is that there is a special relationship between populism and democracy. While more often populism is presented as the enemy of democracy (or, more specifically, the enemy of liberal democracy) [Reinemann et al., 2017], dissenting voices have defined populism as the only true form of democracy. One of these voices was, as we have seen above, Ernesto Laclau. However, there are also scholars who insist that replacing the passionate appraisal or condemnation of populism with a “more neutral and comprehensive understanding” [Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017] might have intellectual benefits. Aalberg, de Vreese, Canovan and others see

populism as a valuable sign of democratic malaise.

I argue that “democracy” is often used in the populist discourse as a container-term. “Democracy” fulfils both conditions. Its meaning is rather vague, while its discursive appeal – its prestige – is immense. This claim might give new insight on the relation between populist discourse and democracy. Rather than being the cause of the thin ideology of populism [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017], populism’s attachment to democracy might also come from the high potential that democracy has as a container-term. Arato talks about the theologization of profane political terms. Some concepts are theologized, therefore they become religious- political concepts [Arato, 2013]. In her theory of the two faces of democracy – the redemptive and the pragmatic – Margaret Canovan also acknowledges that democracy is “crowned with a halo of sacred authority” [Canovan, 1999]. One explanation of the source of sacredness that democracy possesses is the once mystical body of the sovereign king, which transferred into the sovereign body of the people [Kelly, 2017]. This particularity makes it a precious word for those looking for a good container-term in order to introduce narratives from the target groups of potential voters. In the next sections we will analyse the use of “democracy” as a container-term in Italy and UK.

3 Democracy as a container-term: two case studies

3.1 UK between April and June 2016

The data was gathered from the Facebook pages of key political actors and parties, monitored from April to June 2016, during the campaign preceding the referendum and a week after. The official pages followed were those of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Further, the official accounts of David Cameron, Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove were followed during the three months. The relevant posts that contained the word “democracy” were selected and used for the present analysis.

Almost three quarters of the total of media appearances during the referendum campaign were dominated by the top five personalities: David Cameron, Boris Johnson, George Osborne, Nigel Farage and Michael Gove. The stars of the campaign were David Cameron (24.9 percent) and Boris Johnson (18.9 percent). Nigel Farage was on fourth place, with 9.1 percent, and Michael Gove was on fifth place, with 8.1 percent of all media appearances related to Brexit [Deacon, 2016].

In a study from November 2015, YouGov identified what could be named the “Boris effect”. Asked what they would vote in the referendum if both Cameron and Johnson support Remain, most of the Conservative voters opted to remain, with 15 percent between Leavers and Remainers. However, asked what they would vote if Johnson supports Leave, the 15 points difference shrunk: 41 percent answered they would vote for Remain and 38 percent for Leave [Kellner, 2015].

The Conservative Party official page did not refer to democracy in any of the posts during the period analysed. In a similar vein, among the posts of David Cameron’s official account, only one in June mentioned the word “democracy”. The post was about the unbreakable values of democracy and was occasioned by the murder of Labour MP Joe Cox, who stood for them. This was an incident that raised questions about the dangerous consequences of such a divisive campaign. While Michael Gove had some references to democracy in his media appearances and was the one who famously declared that “people in this country have had enough of experts” [Behr, 2016], on his official account none of the posts contained any direct reference to democracy during April, May or June 2016.

Neither the official page of Labour Party had posts directly related to democracy, while Jeremy Corbyn, the reluctant remainer, only referred to democracy, like David Cameron, in the reactions triggered by the assassination of Joe Cox. However, Corbyn’s active participation in the referendum debate was scant and unclear.

The champions of democracy during the referendum campaign were Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and UKIP. Within their discourse during the interval analysed, democracy was mostly used as a container-term. At the structure level, it performed as a connector: “democracy” connected the disparate elements inside it. At the meaning level, it worked as a frame: the elements inside “democracy” were associated with its meaning. Finally, at the symbolic level, the container-term granted the content inside it with its prestige. In Boris Johnson’s discourse the referendum became the only solution for the preservation of British democracy. And not just the referendum generally, but the victory of the Leave side. Thus, Brexit was framed as the ultimate fight between the British people and the champaign loving elites. One important stake of this fight was democracy. The European Union was portrayed as a “narcotic tyranny” whose only aim is the creation of an European super-state at any costs. The process of European integration was equated to the incessant and insidious “erosion of democracy”, mainly because of the “anti-democratic nature” of the EU. Behind this unstoppable track hid the German and French interests and the financial elites from around the world. Therefore, voting to leave in the referendum became “the last chance, in our lifetimes, to take back control – of £350m a week [...] – and the last chance to take back control of our democracy.”. A series of narratives were introduced inside the container-term, detailed below. They are composed of various micro-narratives, some of them interrelated.

First, there is a war between the resilient, underestimated British people and the vast clerisy of lobbyists and corporate affair gurus, Davos people, fat cats, Brussels authorities, FTSE 100 chiefs, the international complacent elite of politicians, businessmen, lobbyists and bureaucrats protecting their vested interests (Narrative 1.1). Among these diverse groups there is a thorough coordination. The war is suggested through words like: “bombing”, “oppression”, “losers” and “winners”, “defence”, “troops”.

"So I gather they think it's game over. The Breainers think they have bombed us into submission [...] they now believe the British people will file meekly to the polls in two months time and consent to stay in the EU; and thereby to the slow and insidious erosion of democracy in this country."

The secret engine of the European Union is Germany (Narrative 1.2). The whole Union serves its national interest at the expense of other nations and of democracy. Old antipathies are brought again to surface, comparing the EU with other past attempts to gain control over the whole continent.

Related to this last narrative is the one referring to the European law constantly undermining the British interest, leading to the making of a federal Europe (Narrative 1.3). The national parliament has become almost useless, a facade institution. Westminster power has gone to Brussels, and the life of the British people is not controlled by their own representatives, but by faceless bureaucrats imposing absurd rules, at their best incapable to understand the British way of being and at their worst planning to make the British nation disappear, swallowed by the European super-state.

"They want to go on with the work of building a unitary state, in a way that is anti-democratic and ultimately very dangerous, since it will one day provoke real public anger. [...] Inch by inch, month by month, the sausage machine of EU law-making will extrude more laws – at a rate of 2,500 a year, or perhaps even faster, once the referendum is out of the way. What is the Remain camp offering? [...] nothing but the steady and miserable erosion of parliamentary democracy in this country. If we vote Remain, we stay locked in the back of the car, driven by someone with an imperfect command of English, and going a direction we don't want to go."

A powerful narrative is blaming the European Union for the uncontrolled immigration, which causes the destruction of the British social service – especially the NHS – and, less obviously stated, but still present, causes the destruction of the British culture (Narrative 1.4).

In a post dating from May 2016, Boris Johnson imagines a page of a British history book teaching the future generations about Brexit. The chapter identifies immigration as the main reason for which the British decided to leave the EU:

"Thanks to an unexpected wormhole in the space-time continuum, I have come across the following passage from a historical textbook a few decades hence. It is a chapter called "Brexit" [...] Thanks largely to the decision to keep the pound, and the flexibility that went with an independent monetary policy, the UK was a zone of relatively high growth – a comparative El Dorado of job creation. This meant that the UK experienced substantial waves of immigration by people in search of work, partly from Eastern Europe but also from the southern countries that had been devastated by the euro. The British were traditionally welcoming, but they could see the pressures of uncontrolled immigration on the NHS and other services.

They were alarmed that the influx was about 330,000 a year, unsure that they wanted this surge to help push national population to a predicted 70 or 80 million."

The narrative of the referendum as the one last chance of the British to take back control of basically everything – including democracy – (Narrative 1.5) is ever-present in the discourse of Boris Johnson during the campaign, and is also introduced in the container-term “democracy”: “The only safe way to take back control of our borders and our democracy is to Vote Leave on June 23”.

In the description of an apocalyptic scenario of the day after the vote with a favourable outcome for the Remain camp, dated from 6th of June, the referendum is presented as the lost chance to regain control:

"Now, and now only, was the time to call a halt to the endless erosion of democracy. [...]Yes, you were going to take back control. You were about to strike your own small but vital blow for freedom and democracy – when you suddenly bottled it [...]you found yourself momentarily oppressed by the sheer weight of the Remain propaganda – all that relentless misery about this country and its inability to stand on its own two feet."

This narrative proved successful as well after the referendum, when the event was presented as a historical moment when the British people spoke up for democracy. Later, during the failing negotiations, it converted into the claim that elites are betraying the people and are trying to steal from them the one and only victory of the referendum.

While in the case of Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party, the discourses perpetuated in social media are completely different, at least concerning democracy, this is not the case when we get to UKIP and Nigel Farage, its leader during our interval of analysis. UKIP discourse on democracy in April-June 2016 is a mirror of Farage's. His claims and interventions are reproduced, followed or preceded by questions like: “Do you agree with Nigel Farage?” or “Have you read the last statement of Nigel Farage?” etc. Therefore, we shall treat both as one.

In the discourse of Nigel Farage, Narrative 1.1 is present in an expanded version. The war between the people and the elites is not reduced to the British, but extends across the whole continent. In April 2016, Netherlands had a referendum on a treaty between EU and Ukraine. Farage announced his support for the rejection of the treaty, seen as a victory of the people: “Let's hope the Dutch vote No this week and we follow in their footsteps in June! The people's army will prevail over anti-democratic EU.”

With the same occasion, Farage uses Narrative 1.3, stressing the danger of an ever-expanding European Union: “I'm not here to tell the Dutch how to vote. But obviously I'm aligned. Everyone knows this isn't really about a trade deal, it's about the empire expanding”. Again, UKIP or Farage's version of Narrative 1.3 is broadened. The incessant expansion of the European super-state will engulf not only the British nation, but all European nations and peoples.

“The anti-democratic EU, far from bringing countries together, has divided Europe. As they continue to drive through the failed Euro single currency project, it is the lives of ordinary citizens across Europe who suffer at the hands of the EU nationalists who refuse to contemplate anything than deeper, total and complete EU integration.”

Narrative 1.5 is used in the same way as we encountered in Johnson’s discourse. The referendum is the one and only chance for the British people to take back virtually anything, including their democracy. It is also combined successfully with Narrative 1.4, establishing an even more direct relation between immigration, EU and democracy. Nigel Farage closed many of his speeches advising the British public “If you want your borders back, if you want your democracy back, Vote to leave”, or describing the referendum retrospectively as the day when “the British people voted to take back control of our borders and our democracy”.

An additional narrative introduced in the container-term of democracy by UKIP and its leader is that the present political system of UK is a hoax, a theatrical democracy mimicked by the elites, behind which hide their vested interests (Narrative 1.6). Narrative 1.6 is often combined with Narrative 1.5, when stressing that the only chance to have an authentic democracy, not a travesty, is through voting to leave in the referendum: “Britain should be a proper democracy and the only way that can happen is Brexit.”

3.2 Italy between March and May 2018

The data for this section was gathered from the Facebook pages of the major political parties and the official accounts of the most popular politicians. The time interval during which the pages were monitored starts in March, prior to the general elections, and goes until the end of May, after the formation of the new government. The parties followed were: Lega, Forza Italia, Fratelli D’Italia (FdI), Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), and Partito Democratico (PD). Furthermore, the political actors followed were: Matteo Salvini, Silvio Berlusconi, Georgia Meloni, Luigi di Maio and Matteo Renzi.

More than 40 percent of Italians consult the internet every day for political news, and their focus is on social media as a source of information. The 2018 campaign in Italy was shifted almost totally to social media. While in 2013 at the last elections, M5S was the party that went online, later all the parties oriented towards Facebook and Twitter as means of communication and campaign. In 2018, Lega, together with its leader, Matteo Salvini, were the most active on social media [Scherer, 2018].

During the interval analysed, the official page of Lega had many posts that included references to democracy. Most of them were aimed at attacking the critics of the party and dismissing their actions. One way of doing this was accusing them of nefarious behaviour accompanied or even caused by a lack of understanding of what democracy truly means. The targets, in this case, were

usually groups of citizens who were accusing Lega of fascism and hate-speech, and they were labelled as “comrades”. Another way was dismissing them directly as anti-democratic. In this second case, the targets were elites from various environments. Democracy was often related to security, immigration, national interest, and those who opposed or criticised the actions of Lega were deemed as anti-democratic. In the discourse of Lega, democracy becomes a container-term, and this is the case also for its leader, Matteo Salvini. Several narratives are introduced inside “democracy”, operating upon the meaning that the concept takes in public debate.

As in the British case, one first narrative that can be identified is that of a war between the down to earth Italian people and the powerful, old caste comprising political and financial elites from inside and outside the country. They want to maintain Italy in poverty, and they are trying to stop the politicians who are on the side of the people (Narrative 2.1).

In May 2018, the president of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, used his prerogatives in order to reject the proposal submitted by the government M5S-Lega of Paolo Savona for the role of Minister of Economy and Finances. Paolo Savona is an economist and professor well known for his euro-scepticism, who repeatedly stated that Italy has to exit from the Euro. The two parties refused to submit another proposal, forcing the prime-minister to quit and planning to trigger another round of elections. Finally, they managed to agree that Savona could become the Minister of European Affairs. The prime-minister took back his position and an associate of Savona became Minister of Economy and Finances. The president’s action was portrayed as the betrayal of the people, and the event as the “most horrid page in the history of democracy”.

“This is not democracy, respect for the popular vote is vanished. This is just a backlash of the powerful who want a weak, poor and precarious Italy. The next elections are going to be a plebiscite, the People and the real life against the old caste and the Lords of the Spread”

Related to the first narrative we can identify another one, which refers to the foreign interests, the European elites, who impose their will on the Italian people, at the expense of democracy (Narrative 2.2). Brussels, for example, persists in not wanting to understand and to take seriously the message that the Italian people transmitted on election day: “For Their Majesties democracy is a mere detail. The commissioner Avramopoulos [...] raises his voice on the subject of immigrants, pretending he did not understand what the Italians said very clearly in the polls”.

Another narrative is that the attacks upon those who defend the interests of the people are always shameless, disgraceful and anti-democratic (Narrative 2.3). Common sense and reasonability become marks of democracy. All criticism is dismissed as attack, and if it is oriented towards the recipients of the popular will it becomes an attack upon democracy. In a post from March, Lega reported an anti-racist manifestation, during which a Sudanese shouted that “Salvini sows hatred each time he appears in television and he should be on trial”[Ilp, 2018]: “the very special democracy of the Leftists: yet another

disgrace of the «comrades»: [...]they just started a witch hunt against the inexistent “fascists”. And against the *leghisti...*”.

The fourth narrative identified makes a direct reference to immigration, a concern among the Italian public and a central focus in the Lega discourse: the security of the Italian people is compromised by foreigners coming in their own country, supported by the anti-democratic forces (Narrative 2.4). Within this narrative, the democratic forces must represent the counterbalance, stopping foreigners from coming. As in the British case with social services, the emphasis is on security and order, but it is also about culture and the concern that the Italian identity and way of being will fade. In May, a regional administrative court allowed the Islamic communities from Cantu to celebrate Ramadan, after the mayor and part of the population denied them the gatherings for prayer. Lega defended the mayor and accused the court of defying democracy:

"The mayor from Lega and the assembly express the will of the people from Cantu and deny the celebration of Ramadan to 5 Islamic communities! But the regional court CANCELS this democratic decision and AUTHORIZES for 1 month prayers in the building on the Milano Street, legitimizing in fact an ILLEGAL MOSQUE [...] Is this DEMOCRACY??? Is this SECURITY???"

Salvini uses democracy as a container-term in a similar way. An example comprising Narrative 2.1, Narrative 2.2 and Narrative 2.4 represents his reaction when Mattarella refused to appoint Paolo Savona as Minister of Economy. Salvini and the government “of change” were prevented from doing their job by the powerful enemies of the Italian people:

"What a bad day for Italy and for Democracy. Everything was ready, I was ready to take care of immigration and security, but it was not possible, someone today said NO. The government of change could not come into being, the Lords of the Spread and of the banks, the Ministers of Berlin, of Paris and of Brussels disagreed."

The communication of Forza Italia on Facebook was mainly focusing on Berlusconi. The use of democracy is more unidimensional than in the case of Lega. First of all, what is healthy for democracy according to Forza Italia or Berlusconi is highly dependent on what represents an advantage for the party at that very moment. For example, in March Silvio Berlusconi warned that another round of elections would be a terrible signal for the Italian democracy, while in April he stated that there are only two options that respect democracy: “either we make a right-of-centre government, or we go again to the polls”. Maurizio Gaspari, another voice of FI, explains with more details why the only democratic options were those two, bringing in also Narrative 2.4:

"Italy needs a centre-right government that immediately takes decisive measures to counter illegal immigration and the NGOs that favor it [...]The NGOs have dumped on Italy illegal immigrants [clandestini], costs, chaos and illegality. A decisive government serves urgently. Democracy is worth more than those who make wrong and devastating decisions for the whole of Italy."

A new narrative, which is in fact a sort of personalistic variation of Narrative 2.2, is introduced in our container-term in the discourse of FI and Berlusconi between March and May 2018: a political leader representing a certain number of citizens is responsible only towards them. Any attempt to intervene between the people and their legitimate representative is anti-democratic (Narrative 2.5), no matter the reasons of the attempt.

The same narrative is encountered in May 2018, when a court decision allows Berlusconi to enter the Parliament. The official page of FI becomes, for some days, the forum where notable members of the party are able to express their gratitude for the return of *Il Cavaliere*, which they equate to the return of democracy.

"Silvio Berlusconi returns as a candidate and Italy returns to being a normal democracy, where the voters decide whether the most voted man in the history of our country should or should not have the highest positions in the Republic. President Berlusconi's rehabilitation is excellent news not only for Forza Italia but also for our democracy. In recent years, in fact, millions of Italians have been deprived of the possibility of seeing their leader represent them in Parliament. Today justice is also done for them (Andrea Mandelli)"

The case of the other major party of the centre-of-right coalition, Fratelli D'Italia, is slightly different. The concept of democracy is mainly used to criticize the other parties and, through a process of elimination, to declare themselves, implicitly or explicitly, the true defenders of democracy. For example, in a post from May, FdI criticize the online democracy that M5S promotes, or the electoral tents of Lega, in order to argue further that the only form of true democracy is the election of the president through popular vote, a measure supported only by FdI.

Movimento Cinque Stelle, when employing the container-term democracy, uses preponderantly Narrative 2.1 – the war between the Italian people and the elites, Narrative 2.2 – the foreign elites imposing their will at the expense of democracy, Narrative 2.3 – the disgraceful and anti-democratic attacks on the defenders of the interests of the people, and Narrative 2.5 – the anti-democratic nature of any attempt to stay between the people and their representatives. After the elections, in March, Luigi di Maio warns that an alliance that would exclude M5S from government and send it to opposition would represent a “clamorous insult of democracy”, urging its supporters to be very active on social media, in order to show their preference to be led by M5S, because only M5S can generate a total renewal and create the “Republic of the Citizens”.

In May, when Mattarella denied Paolo Savona the position of Minister of Economy, the reaction of Luigi di Maio was taken over further by the party. His message employs the same narratives as the message of his partners in government, Lega. A slight difference comes in the fact that the M5S supporters are repeatedly urged to use the hashtag *IlMioVotoConta*, Facebook frames and other tools in social media in order to fight for democracy.

"Yesterday was the darkest night of Italian democracy. The president of the Republic, Mattarella, has decided to override his con-

stitutional prerogatives and not to let the government go to a political force, the MoVimento 5 Stelle, which took 11 million votes. [...] God forbid if you dared to criticize Europe. The vote of the Italians has been totally emptied of its value. And this is not acceptable.[...]After all that happened, Italy needs a President of the Republic who chooses the citizens and not the ratings, the banks or the German interests."

In the episode stated above, all narratives found until now were employed by M5S and by its leader, except for Narrative 2.4. In fact, Narrative 2.4 was not identified in the discourse of M5S, neither in that of its leader, at least between March and May 2018 on social media. Another thing to notice is the difference between the use of Narrative 2.5 by the M5S and its use by FI: in the case of M5S, the personalistic imprint is weaker. Luigi di Maio is not for M5S what Berlusconi is to FI.

The last party to which we will refer is Partito Democratico, the party that lost the biggest share of votes in the 2018 elections. Its use of the democracy is different from what we have seen before in this section. None of the narratives identified until now can be found in its discourse. Rather, democracy is associated repeatedly with words like: "opposition", "rules", "law", "constitution", "institutions", making clear references to what is known as "liberal democracy". At least in the interval analysed, "democracy" was not used as a container-term. The government formed by M5S and Lega is criticized by members of PD for their unrealistic promises, with M5S ridiculed as "the knights of democracy".

3.3 Democracy as a container-term: how and why?

Until now, we have identified the following narratives:

- UK: a supposed alliance between elites at the international level (Narrative 1.1); the German ambition hiding in the structures of the EU (Narrative 1.2); the claim that the EU authorities want to create a monstrous super-state (Narrative 1.3); the destructive effect of immigration (Narrative 1.4); voting Leave as the only way for British people to take back control of everything (Narrative 1.5); the allegation that the whole political system of UK is a sham (Narrative 1.6);
- Italy: a war between the Italian people and the powerful old caste who want to maintain Italy in poverty (Narrative 2.1); the European elites imposing their will on the Italian people at the expense of democracy (Narrative 2.2); the disgraceful and anti-democratic attacks upon those who defend the interests of the people (Narrative 2.3); foreigners supported by anti-democratic forces compromising the security and the way of being of Italians (Narrative 2.4); the anti-democratic attempts to intervene between the people and their legitimate representative (Narrative 2.5).

We can find similarities between the two sets of narratives. For example, Narrative 1.1 is similar to Narrative 2.1, and the same thing can be said about

Narrative 1.2. and Narrative 2.2, or about Narrative 1.4 and Narrative 2.4. At the same time, even if they are similar, we can notice different nuances, and these nuances also come from the differences between the contexts in which they have been articulated.

Although some of the narratives found in the two countries are quite similar, and in some occasions they differ, we don't have to rush to think that they are part of a supposedly fixed populist ideology. Both the similarities and the differences between different sets of narratives in various national contexts indicate a high degree of flexibility. What seems constant, though, is the mechanism behind the use of democracy in the populist discourse: in multiple ways, with slightly different aims, adapted to various contexts, but pursuing the same logic. These two sets of narratives enter in the space provided by the container-term "democracy".

At the level of structure, they became related simply through their association with the concept of democracy. The narratives identified were created by the communicators through the agglutination of various micro-narratives, which can be not only facts or opinions, but also emotions, feelings of disaffection, world views, intuitions, loyalties or antagonisms etc.

Further, through their introduction in the same container-term, they unite into a coherent narrative framed by the container-term. This is the level of meaning where these stories and the outcomes related to them are judged as being democratic or anti-democratic. They become about democracy and, simultaneously, democracy becomes about them. The contamination of meanings happens in both directions. Do I think that Germany wants to conquer the whole continent and at the same time I am afraid that British culture will disappear because of immigration? That means I am concerned about democracy. Or the other way around: do I care about democracy? That means I have to take into account also the secret ambitions of the bureaucrats trying to build an European super-state at any cost, or the risk of disappearance of the British.

Finally, the question could be posed as such: Do I think that any attempt to intervene between a group of voters and their legitimate representative is anti-democratic or do I consider that some interventions, such as judiciary for example, might be welcome? If I choose the latter, this might mean for someone that I am anti-democratic, and the normative stance of this claim is as powerful as our container-term is. This is the symbolic level of action: the prestige carried by the container-term "democracy" and the high emotional potential it possesses spill over onto its contents, raising their value and increasing their importance in public debate.

Conclusions

The theory of the container-terms could find application beyond the study of populist discourse, and we could not tell by now that the use of the container-terms is a mark of populism. Additionally, vagueness and prestige are necessary conditions, but do we know if they are sufficient? The question of how, why and when a concept starts to be used as a container-term needs further research.

However, until now it seems that there is a certain affinity between populist discourse and the use of “democracy” as a container-term. Used as a container-term, democracy becomes, up to a certain point, what it contains. At the same time, the narratives of the populist discourse benefit from the prestige that democracy carries. Hence, democracy can turn into a rhetorical weapon in the populist discourse. Understanding the way these processes take place is essential for learning how and why populists talk about democracy.

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