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## Power or partisanship? Populist parties in power and social concertation. The case of the Italian yellow-green government, 2018-2019

### 1. Introduction

How do populist parties behave when they enter government? Various tenets of populist ideology question and subvert established understandings of several features of liberal democratic governance, including established concepts and practices of *representation* (Padoan 2021, p. 9). In some cases of populist parties coming to power, the «populist challenge» has also extended to questioning the broader edifice of liberal-democratic constitutional arrangements (Blokker 2018). Yet, as Askim *et al.* (2021) remark, we still know little about how including populist parties in government *actually* affects governance practices. This paper contributes to the emerging literature on how government is affected by the inclusion of populist parties (cf. Blokker 2018; Peters and Pierre 2019; Askim *et al.* 2021) by investigating a specific aspect of populist governance and understanding of representation: the relationship between populists in power and organised producer groups in policymaking. How do populist parties in power

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manage relationships and processes of interest intermediation with representatives of organised interests in the process of policymaking? Do they engage in social concertation, do they marginalise it, or do they opt for novel forms of interaction altogether?

The question goes to the core of contemporary debates about the ongoing reconfiguration of systems of democratic governance and of representation of societal and class interests in Western Europe. The uncertain fate of social concertation and established systems of tripartite system intermediation in the contemporary age of organised labour weakness, permanent austerity and recurrent economic crises has been widely documented (Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt 2021). Bar a few exceptions (cf. Rathgeb and Klitgaard 2021; Meardi and Guardiancich 2021), the literature has however not yet fully explored how a parallel and consequential political development – the growth of «anti-system» (Hopkin 2021) or anti-neoliberal (Padoan 2021) populist parties and their coming to power in many countries in Western and Southern Europe – affects dynamics of interest intermediation with organised producer groups, and the political influence that organised labour and capital are able to exercise. Does the coming to power of populist parties accentuate the exclusion of organised producer groups from policymaking and their declining social weight and political influence, or does it provide a possible window of opportunity for their renaissance?

This question is also theoretically relevant for debates in political science about the behaviour of populist parties in power and the implications of populism for governance patterns. As succinctly put by Askim *et al.* (2021, p. 2) we can distinguish between two main perspectives on this issue. On the one hand, the «normality» perspective assumes that governing has a normalising or «mainstreaming» effect on populist parties. This implies that when populist parties come to power, they behave like any other party in government. On the other hand, the «exceptionalism» perspective holds that populist ideology continues to affect how populist parties govern when in power, with significant implications for how they approach the administrative-political establishment as well as the parties around them and also – by logical extension – organised interest groups. The question at hand, therefore, is whether we can detect a *specific* and *exceptional* approach towards social

concertation and the involvement of social partner organisations in policy-making on part of populist parties in power, in light of their ideological orientation; or whether we observe a *normalised* approach vis-à-vis social concertation, akin to that of governing parties of other ideological orientations.

Based on the ideological orientation and the normative-programmatic content of populist parties' agendas, we would expect a populist-specific, «exceptional» approach to social concertation to be associated with a principled and consistent *rejection* of social concertation on ideological grounds, i.e. for being associated with an un-democratic, elitist approach to policymaking which dilutes the direct relationship between governed and governors and gives undue weight to «establishment» interests. On the other hand, defining what would a «normalised» approach with regard to government behaviour towards social concertation is not straightforward, given that the activation of social concertation in the last decades has not been routine but rather a politically contingent phenomenon driven by a complex combination of conditions (Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt 2021). However, a consistent finding from the literature is that governing parties are more likely to engage in social concertation when weak (e.g. Baccaro and Simoni 2008). Hence, a «normalised» approach to social concertation from populist parties could consist in being open to engage in social concertation strategically when weakened or faced with credible opposition threats.

This paper tackles this question by studying the approach that populist parties in government have adopted towards social concertation and social partner organisations in Italy. As in the rest of Southern Europe, the Eurozone crisis unleashed profound disruptions both in the structure of the Italian party system and in extant patterns of social concertation. Italy is also a paradigmatic case for the study of populism, as «the only country amongst consolidated constitutional democracies in which various populist political forces co-habit simultaneously» (Blokker and Anselmi 2020, p. 4). In 2018-2019, two different «varieties» of populist parties (cf. Caiani and Graziano 2019), the «inclusionary» M5S and the «exclusionary» Lega, governed together in the so-called «yellow-green» government led by PM Giuseppe Conte. Italy is thus an ideal case study to investigate in an exploratory fashion how populist parties relate to social concertation under conditions of political volatility. The paper

investigates this question focusing on the case of the 2018-2019 Italian «yellow-green» government. First, I summarise the main established insights about the determinants of social concertation, and outline some theoretical expectations about the behaviour of populist parties in power in this regard. I then present the empirical case; discuss the findings in light of the theory; and conclude, drawing out the implications of the findings.

## 2. What drives governments' approach to social concertation?

In the industrial relations literature, the concept of social concertation has been traditionally used to denote macro-political forms of cooperation between the state, unions and employers' organisations in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Baccaro and Simoni (2008, p. 1323) define it as instances of policy-making where governments «share their policy-making prerogatives with trade unions and employers' associations, not just informally by incorporating their inputs but also formally by setting up a bargaining table and engaging in negotiations with them over public policy». As Ornston and Schulze-Cleven (2015, p. 4) highlight, concertation is therefore a conflict-focused and power-driven process of negotiation between the state and representative organisations, amenable to state intervention and sensitive to shifts in partisanship and power relations, rather than reliant on institutional micro-foundations.

Tripartite cooperation between governments and social partners in the political sphere can be conceptualised as underpinned by mechanisms of *political exchange*. In its original formulation by Pizzorno (1978), political exchange denoted a strategy of resolution of cross-class distributional and power conflicts which involved the trading-off of policy influence *vs.* consensus between social-democratic governments and unions. The concept has since been applied more broadly to indicate exchanges over policy, institutional power, and consensus (Molina and Rhodes 2002; Regini 2003).

The question that this paper tackles pertains first and foremost to the issue of government choice. How do populist anti-system parties behave with regard to social concertation when they come to power? Among the many factors discussed in the literature, two appear as especially important for our

analysis of the attitudes of anti-system parties vis-à-vis social concertation when in power. The first factor is *partisanship and ideological orientation*. Left incumbency and the presence of strong linkages between unions and political parties were historically identified as important determinants of cooperation, but since the 1990s concertation has shown to be compatible with diverse ideological configurations, including centre-right or technocratic governments. Centre-right governments, in fact, might have incentives to engage in social concertation exactly to dilute the potential opposition of unions to their reform agendas, as in the case of the Aznar government in Spain in the late 1990s, while centre-left administrations may have their own reasons to explicitly pursue the marginalisation of social concertation, as with the Renzi government in Italy in the mid-2010s (Tassinari and Sacchi 2021). Alongside partisanship, the second factor that might shape governmental attitudes to social concertation is *power*. The literature on social pacts emphasised the role of «governmental weakness», rather than partisanship, as a crucial factor explaining governments' willingness to share their policy-making prerogatives with social partners (Baccaro and Lim 2007; Hamann and Kelly 2007; Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Rathgeb 2018).

### 3. Populist parties and social concertation: Theoretical expectations

We can then draw two distinct expectations about the attitudes of anti-system populist parties towards social concertation when in power. On the one hand, we might expect them to be driven by their specific *ideological* or partisan orientation – therefore maintaining an «exceptional» approach to social concertation. On the other, we might expect contingent power dynamics – i.e. whether they command or not strong parliamentary majorities – and strategic consideration to be the primary drivers of their attitudes vis-à-vis the social partners in policymaking – in line with a more «normalised» approach to policymaking.

In some respects, the historical experiences of «populist» regimes such as Peronist Argentina highlight that populist politics can be compatible with the corporatist integration of labour in the state apparatus. Peron's populist regime in

Argentina is indeed taken in the literature as the primary example of an «inclusionary state corporatist system» that relied on inducements (Collier and Collier 1979) and selective constraints to encourage and reward labour cooperation with government (Buchanan 1985, p. 62). This brand of corporatism, that Schmitter named *authoritarian* or «state corporatism», is however conceptually distinct from social concertation. Indeed, corporatism refers to a specific *structure* for the organisation of interest representation in society (Schmitter 1982, p. 262) and in the authoritarian version, the incorporation of labour is designed to bring the labour movement under state control, rather than to institutionalize cooperation as in cases of democratic corporatism (Katzenstein 1985). Conversely, the concept of social concertation (cf. Schmitter 1982, p. 262) denotes a specific *mode* and *process* of interaction between governments and organised producer groups – i.e. a particular way of managing their conflicts and antagonistic interests through coordination of their actions in the political-policy-making sphere.

There are various reasons why we could assume populist parties to be ideologically averse towards social concertation. Mudde (2004, p. 543) defines populism as «a [thin-centered] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, «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.» The centering of «the people» as the core political subject whose will should be enacted directly in the political sphere is usually accompanied by a preference for «disintermediated» or unmediated modes of communication and interaction between «the people» and the leaders (cf. Weyland 2001, p. 14), direct communication between leaders and the electorate, and by a general attitude of anti-elitism.

Intermediary organisations – such as trade unions and employer organisations, just like established political parties, can be considered by populists as part of the elite strata that can corrupt the link between the people and political leaders, create divisions within the «homogenous people», and prioritise their own organisational interests over those of the people (Mudde 2004, p. 546). Furthermore, the policymaking style of populist parties in power has also been characterised in the literature as presenting features at odds with the lengthy

processes of deliberation or consultation that social concertation can involve. In sketching out their «ideal type» of populist policymaking, Bartha *et al.* (2020, p. 74) note indeed that populist parties in power tend to limit the role of epistemic communities and established institutions, policy networks and expert consultations. As a consequence, «policymaking under populist governance tends to have a significantly faster tempo and a shorter duration with frequent episodes of accelerations and an unpredictable timing» (*ibid.*) – all features not easily compatible with the requirements of social concertation. On this basis, we could expect populist parties in government to consistently reject social partnership and social concertation in favour of disintermediation, thus substituting structured, institutionalised interest intermediation with direct, unmediated consultations with the people (Bartha *et al.* 2020; cf. also Meardi and Guardiancich 2022).

This general expectation requires some nuances. Following Caiani and Graziano (2019), we can distinguish between two «varieties» of populist parties (Caiani and Graziano 2019): «exclusionary» populist parties, mainly associated with the radical right party family; and «inclusionary» populist parties, either belonging to the radical left party family or to the «techno-populist» variety.

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) with an «exclusionary» ideology tend to display strong ideological aversion to organised labour, for both ideological and strategic-electoral reasons, which can translate into an exclusionary attitude towards unions. In terms of ideology, the appeals of radical right populist parties to nativism and authoritarianism (Otjes *et al.* 2018) can conflict with the ideals of solidarity and democracy espoused by the labour movement. In strategic-electoral terms, PRRPs might see themselves as competing with unions for the same voters, especially when unions have strong organisational ties with social-democratic parties. In these cases, aversion can translate into explicit attacks against unions' involvement in policymaking – for example, by undermining corporatist institutions through hostile institutional reforms (Rathgeb and Klitgaard 2021). A fitting example has been the approach adopted by the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, whose policymaking style entails an explicit marginalisation of social dialogue institutions (Bartha *et al.* 2020). Meardi and Guardiancich (2021) argue, however, that whilst being averse

to social concertation, right-wing populist parties are not necessarily anti-unions, as this might be electorally costly, but may instead opt for the co-optation of conservative or apolitical unions. This is a fitting description for example for Poland, where the Law & Justice government has been pursuing a strategy of «patronage corporatism» (Olejnik 2020) with a close alliance with ideologically close unions.

Populist parties of the «inclusionary» variety (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Font *et al.* 2021) instead stress equality, social justice and a rejection of the neoliberal order (Hopkin 2021), and are not inherently hostile towards organised labour (Padoan 2021). We could expect populist parties of the radical left to reject social concertation on ideological grounds, due to its association with an integrationist approach to trade unionism which privileges the upholding of social unity and social peace over the pursuit of social justice and inclusive class struggle (Tassinari *et al.* 2021). However, relationships with the labour movement might become more cooperative if unions adopt a more «conflictual» approach and position themselves as allies in the pursuit of populist radical left parties' policy agendas (cf. Padoan 2019).

The broad label of «inclusionary» populist parties also includes what Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti (2021) call «techno-populist» parties, such as for instance the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S). Such parties exhibit features of anti-system populist ideology, including a rejection of corrupt and elitist forms of governance. For techno-populist parties, which reject class-based readings of societal cleavages, this is to be ideally replaced however not with radical left forms of economic and social governance, but rather with a specific brand of technocratic problem-solving that overcomes the social divisions entrenched by partisan politics to enact the will of «the people» (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021). This is why, like in the case of the M5S, «techno-populist» parties often portray themselves as being neither right nor left in their ideological orientation. In the case of the Italian M5S, unions are, accordingly, portrayed in their discourse as bureaucratic and representatives of «particularistic» interests which interfere with the party's ideals of promoting direct democracy and technical, «enlightened» problem-solving; as well as with the party's ambition to act as the sole legitimated structure of political aggregation (Padoan 2019, p. 156). From



these parties we could thus expect a *competitive* relationship with unionism and an aversion to social concertation on both ideological and strategic grounds – as these parties would aim to *substitute* pre-existing systems of interest intermediation by directly meeting the needs of the underrepresented «people» via their technocratic policy agendas and solutions.

On this basis, we can thus draw a general expectation that, despite their differing ideological grounds, populist parties of both the radical right, the radical left and the «techno-populist» variant would converge towards a principled rejection or at least marginalisation of social concertation on ideological grounds. This stance might take however different «flavours» and emphasis depending on the party's ideological placing: more explicitly hostile towards organised labour in the case of radical right populist parties, and more geared towards competition through imitation or differentiation of policy agendas in the case of «inclusionary» populist parties, withholding from straightforward attacks.

At the same time, as the «normality» perspective on populist parties holds (cf. Askim *et al.* 2021), the very fact of coming to power and having to confront the realities and challenges of governing might lead populist parties to adapt their ideologically-informed stances towards social concertation and behave more like «normal», mainstream parties. In line with the literature on social pacts and government strength recalled above, we could thus expect the «power» considerations of populist parties in government to trump their «partisan» orientations when choosing how to approach social concertation. In particular, we might expect power considerations to «trump» ideology when populist parties come to power either as a minority cabinet or as part of a divided coalitions; and/or when they face strong opposition or competition towards their policy agenda from one or both sides of organised labour or organised capital. Under such circumstances of governmental weakness, populist parties in power might engage strategically in social concertation in *ad hoc* fashion to pursue their power interests. The strategic use of social concertation could help governing parties in different ways: to gain power and leverage vis-à-vis coalition partners, to tame the opposition of organized producer groups to their policy agendas through various inducements and concessions, to gain legitimacy and credibility in specific policy areas deemed to be of their competence in the eyes of the public.

TABLE 1. *Theoretical expectations about populist parties and social concertation*

	Explanation of concertation	Expected outcomes
Exceptionalism thesis	Ideology	Consistent disintermediation
Normalisation thesis	Governmental power interests	Tactical, contingent use of concertation

*Source:* author's elaboration.

The distinct expectations of the two perspectives are summarized in Table 1.

In the case study that follows, I accordingly investigate which of these two drivers of government action – ideology or power considerations – guide the approach that populist parties adopt towards social concertation when in power. Do they stick to a principled rejection of social concertation, as an «exceptionalist» perspective would hold, or do they adapt their stance and engage in social concertation flexibly if power dynamics – especially governmental weakness – make this an expedient strategy, as would be predicted by the «normalisation» perspective?

#### 4. Case selection and methodology

The paper investigates this question by analysing the strategies adopted vis-à-vis social concertation by different types of populist parties in power in Italy in 2018-2019. The spectacular electoral success of the «techno-populist» Five Star Movement in the 2013 General Elections completely reconfigured the Italian party system, giving it a tri-polar configuration. In the 2018 General Election, the Five Star Movement became the largest party in Italy, attracting 32.6% of the vote, whilst the Lega came third with 17.4%, right after the centre-left Democratic Party (PD). The first full-blown «populist» government was eventually formed in May 2018 – a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the Lega, the so called «yellow-green» government, led by a hitherto unknown academic outsider close to the M5S, Giuseppe Conte. The analysis will focus on this cabinet, the so-called Conte I, which was in power until August 2019. This can be defined as a «weak» coalition government (following, e.g., Rathgeb 2018), because it was

an ideologically divided coalition, comprising an inclusionary techno-populist party (the M5S) and an «exclusionary» radical right populist party (the Lega). This case selection allows to study the behaviour in power of populist parties of different «variants» and with different locations on the left-right spectrum.

The case history draws on a combination of qualitative sources – newspaper articles, documentary evidence and a corpus of 33 qualitative interviews conducted by the author with politicians and representatives of peak-level unions and employer organisations between 2017 and 2022 in Italy. The corpus of interviews includes interviews conducted with representatives of cabinets including «populist» parties (Conte I and Conte II), as well as of cabinets that did not involve «populist» parties [Berlusconi IV (2008-2011); Monti (2011-2012); Letta (2013-2014); Renzi (2014-2016); Gentiloni (2016-2018)]. The paper draws on the whole corpus to draw comparisons between the approach towards social concertation adopted by the populist cabinet under analysis, and by the non-populist parties that preceded them in power in the previous decade.

The corpus of newspaper articles used to inform the case history was compiled through targeted keyword searches of the online archives of four Italian broadsheet newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *La Nazione*) and of two Italian news agencies (ANSA and AdnKronos) for the period ranging from April 2018 until September 2019, accessed through the online databases Nexis and Factiva. The search strings were built combining the names of the Prime Minister and the two deputy prime ministers («Conte» OR «Di Maio» OR «Salvini»), the main governmental actors, and at least one of the following keywords: «union\*» («sindacat\*»), «employer\*» OR «employer organisations» («imprese», «organizzazioni datoriali»), «CGIL», «CISL», «UIL», «UGL», «Confindustria», «Confcommercio». The results (over 3,500 unique articles) were filtered manually to extract the newspaper articles of relevance to the topic of the article (around 380) that were then analysed in depth. Additional news articles covering the same episodes were integrated in the analysis to provide particularly illustrative quotes when these were not directly available from the qualitative interviews.

## 5. Experiments in populist concertation: Italy's «yellow-green» cabinet of 2018-2019

### 5.1. *M5S and Lega's ideological positionings towards social partners and social concertation*

Before the ascent to power of the «yellow-green» cabinet in 2018, the practice of social concertation in Italy already stood upon an uncertain footing. After the season of «social pacts» in the 1990s, tripartite social dialogue in Italy had become an eminently political practice, increasingly often rejected by cabinets to be re-activated at times of weakness and social contestation (Tassinari and Sacchi 2021). In public opinion, social concertation had not enjoyed much legitimacy since the beginning of the EMU, as it was, on the one hand, criticised by neoliberal corners for having partly hampered the depth of liberalisation, and on the other, contested by the left as having paved the way towards excessive wage moderation.

The positions of the M5S and Lega towards social concertation before the 2018 elections were not explicitly set out, and the issue not explicitly mentioned in their election manifestos. As we would expect based on their ideology (cf. Padoan 2021), the M5S manifesto described established unions and «large confederal unions» as being excessively bureaucratic – part of the establishment elites whose privileges and influences had to be scaled down. It did not, however, express antagonism towards unionism per se. As the 2018 manifesto stated, «large unions must be helped to de-bureaucratise themselves, cutting back on useless privileges so as to bring them back to their essential function: the defense of labour» (Movimento 5 Stelle – Programma di Governo Elezioni 2018). The manifesto also included calls for the introduction of more forms of direct democracy at work and opening up space for a plurality of labour voices and union channels. The diffidence towards large bureaucratic unions and the sympathy expressed instead towards more grassroots, independent forms of labour voice can be traced back to ideological proclivities of the M5S, and to the role played in developing this part of the M5S manifesto by Giorgio Cremaschi, a former official in the main metalworkers' union, FIOM-CGIL, which had exited in the 2017 in protest against its excessively bureaucratic and compromise-prone strategies, and who had then gone on to

take up a leadership position in rank-and-file union USB. The M5S manifesto did not mention directly any of the employer organisations or their role, but included some policy measures in favour of micro and small enterprises (especially with regard to fiscal measures) and a promotion of «Made in Italy» exports led by SMEs, generally seen by the Movement as the «healthy» part of Italian capitalism in opposition to large firms and multinationals (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). The positive view of the role of SMEs in the Italian economy was also repeatedly mentioned in interviews with the author by representatives of the M5S, who for instance highlighted the high incidence of SMEs as a «distinctive characteristic of the Italian economy (...) which has allowed it to excel in the world and has to be valorized and supported»<sup>1</sup>.

The Lega's manifesto did not mention explicitly any of the social partner organisations, although in a few passages it let transpire a skeptical and hostile attitude towards their role. For instance, in a programmatic point calling for the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, the manifesto mentions that this should be set «independently of national collective bargaining agreements and of what has been agreed upon by the *so-called* social partners» [author's emphasis] (Lega – Programma di Governo Elezioni 2018). The Lega adopted an explicitly pro-business position on some policy issues (e.g. lowering taxes and labour costs), despite these being steeped within a broader discourse with anti-neoliberal undertones. As Meardi and Guardiancich (2021) note, the Lega also attempted to establish a relationship with the labour movement in January 2018, in the run-up to the elections, when it signed an agreement of collaboration with a small right-leaning union, UGL (Unione Generale del Lavoro), which had its roots in neofascist union CISNAL. UGL, which despite its small membership and low representativeness had enjoyed a moment of political relevance under the centre-right Berlusconi government of 2008-2011, was drafted in to contribute to the labour section of the Lega's 2018 manifesto, as well as to support the expansion of the party in Southern Italy by making use of the union's organizational infrastructures. Some

<sup>1</sup> M5S Senator and former Minister of Labour (Conte II) cabinet, interview with author, November 2021.

of UGL's top officials went on to be elected as Members of Parliament with the Lega and take up roles of responsibility in the government (in particular the union's former deputy secretary, Claudio Durigon) (Toscano 2022). However, the relationship with the UGL was never managed through the channels of social concertation or formalized dialogue, but rather through direct organizational linkages.

Overall, the attitude and approach that the yellow-green government adopted towards social concertation remained oscillating and ambivalent, as the next sections will seek to show.

## *5.2. From ideology to government: Power-driven experiments in populist concertation*

In the 2018 General Elections which eventually led to the formation of the «yellow-green» government led by PM Giuseppe Conte, the two «populist» parties attracted a non-insignificant share of the vote of union members (12.9% of union members voted for the Lega in 2018, and 29.5% for the Five Star Movement) (Mattina 2019). Thus, maintaining relationships with the working class (and unionized) component of their electorate, disappointed by the «traditional» centre-left, became an important task for both parties in the new cabinet. At the same time, both parties were the most voted also among the owners of small enterprises, 30% of whom voted for the M5S and 23% for the Lega according to electoral survey data (Termometro Politico 2018). Hence, the government as a whole faced the challenge of balancing the interests of these two diverse constituencies, whilst the two parties in the coalition competed with one another to maintain and consolidate their support among them.

Initially, the government avoided any formal relationship with social partners' organisations – in line with its constituent parties' ideological inclinations. The first government policy measure in the field of labour law – the so-called «Dignity Decree» – of June 2018, promoted by the M5S, was a unilateral intervention on fixed-term work. It partly re-regulated the usage of temporary contracts by placing strong limitations on their activation, whilst also de-regulating other forms of on-call work. This move attracted strong opposition from employer organisations (Nutti 2018) (because of its substance, which

limited organizational flexibility and increased their labour costs); and, to a lesser extent, from unions (both because of the unilateral method of implementation, and because of aspects of the content) (*Corriere della Sera* 2018a).

With regards to the issue of method, a CGIL national officer observed the complicated dynamic of competition with, and seeming ambition to substitute the union movement that the M5S adopted in its first governing phase.

This was a government with whom the setting of relationships was very complicated... especially with the Five Star Movements, there was always this difficult dichotomy to live through – for example, take the Dignity Decree. Beyond the immense propaganda against it, it was objectively a measure in strong discontinuity with the [liberalizing] measures that had been implemented before. But it also advanced this idea and this attitude that they [the M5S] had, as the party that implemented measures that solved all the problems, and it made clear their difficulty in living constructively the relationship with the social partners, but rather always with a dynamic of saying «you have never done anything»...<sup>2</sup>.

The substantive re-regulation in labour market policy implemented by the Dignity Decree, and the threat of further similar measures, set the tone for a hostile relationship, which lasted for the successive fourteen months, between the employers' front – especially Confindustria – and the M5S wing of the yellow-green government, perceived as an enemy of business interests. This rift put the government in an uneasy spot. Being ready to openly contradict business preferences was part of the narrative – strongly pushed by the M5S – of the Conte government as the «government of change». At the same time, governing against open business opposition threatened the broader viability of the governmental coalition and its policy agenda; especially as segments of Northern employers with ties to the «governmental» wing of the Lega put strong pressures on Lega ministers to mitigate the anti-business stance of the M5S and to dilute the reach of its re-regulatory measures, especially for what concerned the regulation of atypical employment forms (*La Nazione* 2018). Hence, the government had to partly moderate its stance to more conciliatory positions so as to appease business opposition. The strategic use of social concertation became part of this balancing act.

<sup>2</sup> CGIL Confederal Secretary, interview with the author, April 2022.

In light of the irritation that the move on the «Dignity Decree» caused among unions and, especially, employers, the M5S' Labour and Economic Development Minister Di Maio refrained from intervening unilaterally by law to regulate employment relations in the gig economy, as he had originally threatened. Instead, he organised in summer 2018 some large dialogue tables with several social partner organisations on this and other issues of his competence, such as large industrial crises. The range of actors invited was very wide. Over sixty organisations were invited to the dialogue table over the re-industrialisation plans for the steelwork plant ILVA in Taranto. In the case of the gig economy table, the range of actors invited included both traditional unions alongside the riders' self-organised collectives, «old» employer bodies and the newly constituted association of employers in the gig economy delivery sector (Assodelivery) (*Corriere della Sera* 2018b).

In this phase, employer organisations, especially Confindustria, were vocally expressing open opposition against the government's plans in the field of labour market, welfare and fiscal policy. Besides the Dignity Decree, the unwanted measures included the introduction of a Citizenship Income and major policy reversals in pensions policy (including the reintroduction of seniority pensions for workers with more than 40 years of contributions, and the introduction of «Quota 100» to allow earlier retirement – cf. Afonso and Bulfone 2019, p. 248). Tensions between the government and the employers front also grew high over the M5S's stance on large infrastructural projects, such as the fast railway line Turin-Lyon (the so-called TAV), strongly advocated for by northern employer organisations and to which the M5S had historically been opposed. In repeated instances, representatives of Confindustria and other employer organisations expressed disconcert for the «anti-entrepreneurial spirit» manifested by the cabinet (*La Stampa* 2018)<sup>3</sup>.

In Autumn 2018, ahead of the negotiations for the 2019 Budget Law – characterised by high tensions and competition between the two coalition partners – Confindustria warned publicly that the proposed measures in welfare policy could lead to tax hikes and worsen the public deficit and

<sup>3</sup> Similar remarks as those reported in the press were expressed by a representative of Assolombarda in interview with the author in November 2021.



debt situation (and lamented a general lack of attention in the government budget plans to firms' needs. Confindustria's then President Boccia even quipped, «I would not want to be the first president that bring employers to the squares» (Confindustria 2018), asking the government to shift from a phase of «adolescence» to one of «maturity» in its approach to fiscal policy.

The yellow-green's cabinet approach towards EU fiscal rules became another front of tension with employer organisations. When, in October 2018, EU authorities formally expressed concerns to the Italian government about the planned deviation from budgetary rules in the draft 2019 Budget Law, Confindustria voiced worries about the impact that a breach of the EU fiscal policy guidelines would have on Italy's position on international markets, calling upon the government to «respect the rules» (La7 2018). In repeated occasions over the winter months, various employer organisations, including representatives of SME associations such as Confartigianato, reiterated the importance of avoiding an infringement procedure over the budget law (*Corriere della Sera* 2018c). On their part, the main unions also expressed opposition towards various aspects of the government's 2019 Budget Law, which they judged insufficient with regard to social protection expenditure and support for workers and economic development (Pogliotti 2018).

A coalition of various employer organisations also mobilised over November and December 2018 in favour of the TAV fast railway project, that the M5S wanted to discontinue. The relative success of the employers-led «pro TAV» demonstrations, which in November gathered over 30,000 people and firm owners in Turin, heightened the pressure on the Lega to stand by its entrepreneurial northern base (*Corriere della Sera* 2019a).

The growing tension and impatience from unions and, most importantly, from the main employer' organisations towards the government's policy agenda and 2019 Budget proposals led to a partial change in attitude towards the social partners over the successive months. In light of the upcoming European Parliamentary elections of spring 2019, both parties became concerned about the loss of support from organised producer groups and about the need to widen the spectrum of societal support for governmental action. The leaders of the two governing parties, Salvini and Di Maio, accordingly

started competing with one another to rekindle relationships of dialogue and consultation first and foremost with employer organisations, whose opposition they feared the most. This was an especially pressing concern for the Lega, who had among employers and SME owners in particular one of its historical strongholds of support (Bulfone and Tassinari 2021, pp. 519, 531), more recently contested by the rise of the M5S in this segment of the electorate in the 2018 elections.

To achieve this goal, in December 2018, Lega leader Salvini invited fifteen employer organisations for a consultation meeting at the Ministry of the Interior – a highly unusual move, as the Ministry of Interior is not usually a social dialogue partner (Perrone and Picchio 2018). On its part, M5S leader Di Maio counterattacked only two weeks later by inviting thirty employer organisations and business associations for consultations to the Ministry of Economic Development, to listen to their requests (Perrone 2018) whilst praising the values of social dialogue, thus far shunned. In this occasion, Salvini remarked that «firms will always be at the centre of our government action. It has been a great moment of dialogue and listening that will become permanent» (*Il Gazzettino* 2018). The shift in approach was also noted by the employer organisations, with one representative of Confartigianato remarking in interview with the author that «in that period we went from no dialogue to suddenly having ten tables in two days»<sup>4</sup>. In December 2018, the main unions CGIL, CISL and UIL, alongside UGL and two other minor organisations, were also invited to consultation over the 2019 Budget Law with Prime Minister Conte. Overall, however, their demands remained disregarded.

Both sides of the social partners expressed concern around the «broadening» of the arena of social concertation implemented by the yellow-green cabinet. In December 2018, various representatives of employer organisations voiced dissatisfaction for the excessive number of bodies invited to the dialogue table, with one representative from service sector employers Confcommercio declaring that «social concertation is positive, but with too many people around the table, it is difficult to find a point of synthesis. It is necessary to give more con-

<sup>4</sup> Representative of Confartigianato, interview with author, December 2021.

sideration to the most important associations» (Il Gazzettino 2018). This skeptical point of view was echoed by a senior deputy director of Confindustria, who argued that

These broadening of the arena of interlocutors are useful only if you [as a government] have a clear idea in your head and the strength of bringing it forward, because ultimately you listen to everyone and they tell you everything and the opposite of everything... a strong government can do that, but with a weak government it's useless<sup>5</sup>.

In interview with the author, the then leader of the CGIL union, Susanna Camusso, also expressed concern about this ambivalent approach of the government towards established practices of representation.

In a formal sense, there is a lot of confusion on the theme of representation... the Minister of Economic Development organises a dialogue table [...] and invites 60 associations to talk about the workers... it's a real issue: whilst the previous idea of «disintermediation» was centred around an idea of non-existence of intermediate representative bodies, these [i.e. the yellow-green government] have a problem in defining what is the practice of representation and representativeness<sup>6</sup>.

The disproportionate attention given to employer demands by the government had the effect of uniting the three union confederations, which rekindled unitary action and, in the following months, organised a number of joint demonstrations (first in February 2019, then in June 2019), demanding the resumption of concertation and more attention to the needs of labour. The intensification of union opposition focused not only on the government policy agenda. It also contested government inaction and lack of intervention capacity vis-à-vis the growing number of industrial crises, such as the cases of ILVA or Whirlpool, at risk of closure. At the same time, Confindustria became increasingly impatient with the government's limited action on the economic front, especially with the Lega which was supposed to represent the interests of northern employers in the governmental coalition. After predicting a scenario of «zero growth» for the Italian economy in March 2019, Con-

<sup>5</sup> Deputy director of Confindustria for industrial relations, interview with author, April 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Former CGIL General Secretary, interview with author, September 2018.

findustria president Boccia stated on national TV that unless the government was able to overcome its inner paralysis and take decisive action to rekindle economic growth, early elections would have been desirable (Rai News 2019).

This scenario of heightened tensions, both within the governing coalition and with the social partners, continued after the European elections, from which the Lega emerged boldened after a resounding victory, whilst the M5S experienced a steep fall in its vote share compared to 2018. The difficult political climate between the coalition partners led to an effective stalemate in socioeconomic policymaking, which heightened Confindustria's impatience towards the cabinet. Tensions also emerged within the employers' front over the Lega's proposals to introduce a flat tax: a move that angered especially service employers' confederation Confcommercio because of the potential knock-on effects on VAT increases, whilst Confindustria continued demanding a more comprehensive fiscal reform and a reduction of the tax wedge on labour costs without compromising fiscal stability and augmenting the deficit (*Corriere della Sera* 2019b).

In this context of intra-coalitional difficulties, Salvini rekindled again its instrumental use of social concertation. In mid-July 2019, he convened once again, with much public fanfare, an enlarged meeting with forty-six employer organisations and unions at the Ministry of the Interior to illustrate Lega's flat-tax proposals and gather their proposals for the Budget Law for the following Autumn. This move angered considerably both the Prime Minister and the M5S leader Di Maio, which slammed it as «institutionally incorrect» because it stepped onto the field of competences of the Prime Minister's office and of the Ministry of the Economy. This move by Salvini had various motives: to appease the employers' front and undermine the other coalition partner by seeking to position the Lega as the effective leading party in the field of economic policy; but also, as it has been suggested by Nespoli (2019a), to signal an opening towards unions so as to consolidate the Lega's support among that significant share of union members – 26%, according to a IPSOS survey, that voted for the party at the 2019 European elections.

The trade unions' willingness to participate in this «façade» concertation with clear political-power objectives rather than substantive content was strongly criticised in various corners of

the media as legitimating Salvini's strategy – and was indicative of the difficulties faced by unions in navigating interest intermediation with a nominally hostile right wing populist party (cf. Nespola 2019a; 2019b). Although a follow-up meeting was already planned for early August 2019, less than a month later the Lega-M5S experiments with social concertation came to an abrupt halt as the executive entered into crisis and eventually dissolved (leading to the formation of the «Conte II» cabinet, this time supported by a composite majority comprising the M5S and the centre-left PD).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the case of the Italian M5S-Lega populist government indicates an ambiguous relationship between populist parties in power and social concertation. The aversion towards the institutionalized dynamics of interest representation implied by the main tenets of the M5S' and Lega's ideological positioning, and by their respective variants of populist ideology more broadly, was not reflected in the practices followed when in power. Rather, the populist government's approach towards social concertation appeared to be driven more by power-strategic considerations than by ideology. In line with the expectations of much extant literature (Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Avdagic 2010; Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt 2021), under conditions of increased governmental weakness – i.e. when faced with heightened opposition from the front of unions and, especially, employer organisations, or when dealing with strong intra-coalitional divisions – the cabinet pursued an instrumental activation of social concertation-style channels of dialogue with unions and employer organization. This was however not driven by the Prime Minister but by the party leaders of the two populist parties and leading Ministers in the governing coalition, Salvini and Di Maio. Interestingly, the instrumental activation of social concertation was pursued both by the «inclusionary» M5S and by the «exclusionary» Lega.

The analysis highlights that the populist parties in power aimed to achieve three types of «power-related» objectives by activating social concertation: first, to gain leverage vis-à-vis coalition partners by increasing visibility and seeking to

bring societal forces on side; second, to circumvent or induce organized producer groups that could act as veto powers or opponents to their policy agenda – in particular to appease employers’ organisations; and third, to gain legitimacy, credibility and issue ownership in specific policy areas deemed to be of specific social partners’ competence.

The first use of social concertation for «competitive» purposes – i.e., the activation of concertation channels by specific ministries or party leaders to gain dominance, leadership and visibility within the coalition to the detriment of the coalition partners – is a partly novel dynamic, not previously observed in the Italian case in the same guise. Regan (2016) argued that social pacts had been used in Italy in the pre-crisis period to enhance prime ministerial executive autonomy vis-à-vis parliamentary opposition and partisan competition dynamics. The yellow-green government is instead a case of parties within a very divided coalition using social concertation to *undermine* the Prime Minister’s executive authority and vie for primacy with one another in setting the government’s agenda, using interlocutions with the social partners as a means to gain lateral support or at least visibility for their policy proposals.

The second use of social concertation pursued by the ministers in the populist cabinet – to appease the opposition of the social partners to their policy agendas when this became more intense – is instead more aligned with a «conventional» logic of political exchange as the driving force of social concertation. What is interesting to note, however, is that the primary constituency from which the M5S and Lega Ministers were seeking to extract consensus or appease opposition by activating concertation channels were first and foremost the employer organisations, rather than the unions. Employer organisations were seriously concerned about the unpredictable policy style and about the economic and social policy agenda of the yellow-green cabinet. They especially feared labour market re-regulation that could hurt competitiveness (Bulfone and Tassinari 2021), and the negative signals that a perceived «irresponsible» fiscal stance could send to international markets; and did not hesitate to make these concerns known, making repeated appeals to «responsibility» in governmental action. The government – especially the M5S – on the one hand did not hold back from occasionally playing up this «oppositional» element, to bolster its image

as a «path-breaking» cabinet. On the other, occasional rapprochement with business groups – partly achieved through concertation – was necessary to maintain broad consensus, pave the way towards desired policy goals and bolster the cabinet's credibility. Although no explicit agreements were concluded, as a result of interlocution with employer groups some of the government's policy proposals in various aspects of economic, fiscal and labour policy were eventually amended to appease their preferences or at least grant concessions that would moderate their opposition.

Third, activating channels of social concertation allowed the populist «newcomers» to government – in particular the M5S and their Minister of Labour and Economic Development, Di Maio – to gain legitimacy and credibility in specific issue areas related to socio-economic and labour market governance. The lack of government and policymaking experience was one of the main criticisms leveraged against the M5S as they ascended to power in 2018. By enlisting the expertise and inputs of social partner organisations in specific dialogue tables on salient policy issues such as the regulation of the gig economy or the management of severe industrial crises, the «new kids on the government's block» aimed to signal and increase their competence, credibility and professionalism in these policy areas, so as to appear as a more «credible» government force.

From this analysis, we can observe a mix between «exceptional» elements and «normalising» elements in the Italian yellow-green government's approach to social concertation. On the one hand, there are some clearly «populist» traits identifiable. The yellow-green cabinet's way of managing social concertation deviated in some important respects from the informal and unwritten past rituals of the game, which had in the past only included the main and most representative unions and employer organisations. In contrast, inviting the whole spectrum of large and small employer and business associations, traditional and «new» unions to the dialogue table signalled a certain disregard for the usual criteria of representativeness and «weight» used to grant access to the policymaking machinery to organised interests. Furthermore, the personalisation of social concertation channels – activated almost «at will» by the individual Ministers rather than as part of a broader governmental strategy – aligned with a populist style of unconventional, personalised and partly unpredictable

able leadership and communication, unbound by institutional formalities and norms.

On the other hand, social concertation also acted as an instrument of *normalization* and *negative integration* (Zulianello 2020) for populist parties in power. By activating social concertation channels and presenting a dialogical stance, the M5S and Lega could present themselves as «reasonable» government forces and strengthen at least partly their integration in the metapolitical system. This not only reinforced their credibility in public opinion in general. It also helped to appease preoccupations among powerful business groups – and, by extension, international market actors – about the perceived (and, especially in the M5S case, also self-declared) «anti-system» nature of the cabinet. As it had happened in other South European countries during the Eurozone crisis (Tassinari 2021), social concertation – at least in its «symbolic» element – was thus used strategically to send occasional reassuring signals to capital and market actors about the government’s «responsibility» and readiness to align its policy agenda at least partly with their needs and expectations, especially with regards to fiscal policy and labour market policy.

Interestingly, this «normalised» approach to government persisted also in successive cabinets where the two parties were included. For the duration of the successive Conte II cabinet, M5S Minister of Labour Catalfo pursued an active and fairly constant practice of social dialogue with the social partners, especially on specific aspects of the COVID-19 crisis management (Meardi and Tassinari 2022). The Minister herself reclaimed proudly this distinctive component of her governing style, as «the Minister who had more dialogue with the social partners of the last twenty years»<sup>7</sup> – signalling just how entrenched the «normalised» approach to social dialogue had become within the M5S within only two years of entering government, as a marker of a «responsible» governing style. Both M5S and Lega have then been part of the coalition supporting the Draghi cabinet since February 2021, engaging in all the ordinary consultation and negotiation rituals of a grand coalition technocratic government.

<sup>7</sup> M5S Senator and former Minister of Labour (Conte II) cabinet, interview with author, November 2021.



What does this analysis of the Italian yellow-green government tell us about the governance approach of populist parties in power more generally? The main take-away point is that, when confronted with the realities of governing, populist parties might leave behind at least some of their ideologically-derived aversions to institutionalized practices of interest intermediation with organized producer groups, and engage in practices of dialogue and negotiation strategically to pursue their power interests. In this respect, their behaviour does not deviate substantively from that of «mainstream» parties. This behaviour, aligned with the concept of «systemic integration» of populist parties (Zulianello 2020), supports the argument advanced by for example Pappas and Kriesi (2015, pp. 303-325), who argue that inclusion in government can lead populist parties to a moderation of their discourse and to the adoption of behaviours more similar to those of mainstream parties. In the case of the M5S and Lega, their approach was fully reflective of a pattern of «negative integration» as theorized by Zulianello (2020) – i.e., adopting patterns of behaviour that are broadly cooperative with the broader metapolitical system, whilst still ideologically questioning one or more crucial features of the *status quo*. The findings of this paper however advance and nuance our understanding of the possible pathways towards negative integration, by showing how engagement and interaction with organized interest groups can also be a channel for populist parties to achieve partial «systemic integration» – an aspect thus far overlooked in the literature.

This, however, is not necessarily good news for social concertation and for the power and influence of social partner organisations on the policy process. The very instrumental and erratic use of social concertation and the lack of formalized agreements indicate that far from being a substantive re-activation of social dialogue, the populist approach towards social concertation represents yet another instance of «governmentalisation» of the practice, which becomes subordinated to the pursuit of government's objectives with fairly limited outcomes for the social partners besides a superficial visibility and occasional policy concessions. It remains therefore to be seen what, exactly, do social partners – and unions in particular – gain by engaging in these ritualistic practices with hostile governmental forces.

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**Power or partisanship? Populist parties in power and social concertation. The case of the Italian yellow-green government, 2018-2019**

*Summary:* The ascent to power of anti-system populist parties poses a potential challenge to social concertation and established systems of interest intermediation between the state and the representative bodies of organised labour and capital. Indeed, populist parties hold ideological anti-elite positions that potentially negate the role of representative «intermediate» bodies such as unions or employer organisations. But how do populist parties actually behave vis-à-vis social concertation with organised producer groups once in power? Do they stick to their ideological guns and opt for disintermediation, or do they engage in social concertation strategically, according to their power interests, as the literature on social pacts and government weakness would predict? This paper tackles this question by investigating the attitudes and practices towards social concertation of Italy's 2018-2019 coalition government between two different variants of populist parties – the Lega and the Five Star Movement. The paper finds that upon entering government, these populist parties adopted a rather «normalised» approach towards social concertation when in power, although with distinctive traits. Under conditions of government weakness and intra-coalitional divisions, they activated channels of social concertation to achieve various «power related» objectives: to gain leverage and power vis-à-vis rival coalition partners; to appease the opposition of organized producer groups, especially employer organisations, to their policy agenda; and to gain credibility and issue ownership in policy areas deemed to be of specific social partners' competence. Selective engagement in social concertation thus emerges as a potential channel for populist parties to achieve negative integration in the metapolitical system.

JEL Classification: J58 - Labor-Management Relations, Trade Unions, and Collective Bargaining; Public Policy; P11 - Capitalist Economies, Planning Coordination and Reform; P16 - Capitalist economies, Capitalist Institutions/Welfare States.

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