Stylistic populist moderation? A study of political performative appeals of populist leaders in Italy and Spain

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Abstract

This article investigates how party-political strategies provide incentives for the moderation or radicalization of populist political style, an area still largely overlooked in existing research. It draws on X (formerly Twitter) posts from leaders of four populist parties in Italy and Spain: Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle, Podemos, and Vox. The article introduces a framework distinguishing populist from non-populist appeals across discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions. The findings suggest that parties moving from outsider to governing roles tend to moderate, while permanent insiders like Lega show mixed patterns, and support parties like Vox may radicalize. The study also highlights a potential link between political style and ideological orientation, with right-wing populist parties less likely to moderate.

Keywords:

Introduction

Across Europe, opponents have responded to the electoral rise of populist parties by promoting a wide range of initiatives aimed at curbing their influence, preventing the implementation of illiberal policies, reducing public support, or inducing moderation (Bourne,2024, p.311). One of the most developed themes in this literature is whether party-political strategies such as ostracism, policy cooptation or cooperation in government moderate or radicalize populist parties along the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions of party competition (Akkerman and Roodiujn 2015; Bourne 2023; van Spanje and van der Brug 2007), or in terms of loyalty to the liberal democratic system (Akkerman et al. 2016, p.7; Zulianello 2019).

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In this article we examine the unexplored effect of these party-political strategies on political style, conceived as the degree to which populists discursively and performatively conform to prevailing political norms or 'manners'. Populist style can have a significant impact on a political system as a whole (see especially Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2020). It has been argued that populists intensify aggressive language in political discourse (Hamdaoui 2021, p.8) and to fuel public polarization (Bernhard and de la Torre 2024, p.249). On the other hand, they have also been associated with increased political interest among previously disengaged citizens (Nemčok et al. 2023).

The article begins by reviewing the literature on moderation and radicalization in terms of ideology (e.g., Akkerman et al 2016). The following section argues for the advantages of analyzing moderation and radicalization of populism through the lens of political style instead. In the methods and data section, we introduce a framework that distinguishes between populist and non-populist appeals across the discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions of political style. Within this framework, moderation in conceived as a fall in the ratio of populist to non-populist appeals, and radicalization as the opposite. We develop this framework abductively, using categories drawn from the populism literature (especially Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2020) and refine it through an empirical study of posts on X (formerly Twitter) by leaders of populist parties in Italy and Spain. The study analyzes posts by Matteo Salvini (Lega), Beppe Grillo and Giuseppe Conte (Five Star Movement), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), and Santiago Abascal (Vox). These cases allow us to examine the leading hypothesis in the literature that moderation and radicalization is related to governing status. In the analysis section, our expectation that parties transitioning from outsider to governing insider would moderate was confirmed in the cases of M5S and Podemos, but not in the case of Vox, which radicalized despite governing at the regional level. For Lega, which became a permanent governing insider from the 1990s, we observed a form of 'mixed' moderation, which reflects more ambiguous findings generated in other studies. In the conclusion, we also point at a relationship between political style and political orientation, with the populist right-wing (PRW) parties being less likely to moderate than the non-PRW parties we studied.

The existing literature points to ambiguity on populist orientations to democracy and we acknowledge that an inquiry into moderation and radicalization is normatively complex (e.g., Mouffe 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016;). We believe critical reflections on the delegitimizing and stigmatizing effects of 'anti-populist' discourses and the extent to which they may be used to maintain a problematic status quo should be taken seriously

(Stavrakakis 2014; 2018). Nevertheless, our ambition in this article is to develop a framework for empirical analysis, leaving normative issues to one side.

Effects of Opposition on Populism as an Ideology: Moderation or Radicalization?

Moderation and radicalization are often defined in terms of ideology. According to Akkerman et al (2016, p.7), moderation and radicalization are conceived with reference to 'a centrist position on the classic left-right scale…that attributes importance to socioeconomic issues.' Akkerman and Rooduijn's (2015) also examine moderation and radicalization with reference to socio-cultural dimensions focusing on a 'cosmopolitan-nationalist' division. Moderation has also been 'defined on the basis of [a party's] loyalty to the political system,' in contrast to radicalization where parties adopt positions seeking to 'reform or overthrow the existing system and the norms and values on which it is based' (Akkerman et al 2016, p.7; Zulianello 2019).

A leading explanation for moderation and radicalization in the literature links populist party positioning tradeoffs between party 'vote,' 'office' and 'policy' goals (Müller and Strøm's 1999). Ostracism, which puts office goals beyond reach, may provide a breeding ground for ideological rigidity and radical policies, a strategy which helps keep radical supporters happy (e.g. Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015, p.1141; Betz 2002, p.212; Dézé 2003, p.20–21; Downs 2012, p.101; Mudde 2007, p.89; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007). On the other hand, populist parties 'interested in office…have incentives to demonstrate to their potential partners that they are reliable and credible allies – for example by toning down their anti-establishment rhetoric, obeying the parliamentary rules and 'sanitizing' their party' (Akkerman et al. 2016, p.15; see also Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015, p.1143; van Spanje and van Der Brug 2007, p.1023). Once in government, populist parties may also be under pressure to moderate because of the need to 'make policy compromises and shed some of their populist rhetoric when they enter government coalitions' (Akkerman and de Lange 2012, p.581). Populists in government are especially challenged by the disjuncture between the anti-elitist core of populist messages and participation in government (Akkerman et al 2016, p.16, p.46; Heinisch 2003, p.91–92; Zaslove 2012, p.424; Norris and Inglehart 2019, p.416), which may also provide incentives for moderation. At the same time, populist parties may be able to use a strategy of 'one foot in and one foot out of government' to resist such pressures and retain radical positions (Akkerman and de Lange 2012, p.595; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Zaslove 2012, p.431).

Empirical studies on populist parties, moderation and radicalization point in several contradictory directions. Van Spanje and van der Brug's (2007) study of ten Western European anti-immigrant parties, including several major populist parties, found that those permitted to participate in government moderated their policy positions, at least along the left-right axis, and ostracized parties tended to remain radical. In contrast, Akkerman and Rooduijn's (2015) study, which examined changes along a cosmopolitan-nationalist ideological dimension, concluded that while ideological moderation sometimes followed cooperation in government, radicalization also occurred. They failed to observe the 'freezing effect' for ostracized parties observed in van Spanje and van der Brug's study and found that non-ostracized parties eventually radicalized to 'draw level with ostracized parties' (ibid: p.1149, p.1151-3). Bourne's (2023) study comparing patterns of moderation and radicalization of 21 populist parties either subject to long-term ostracism, on the one hand, and junior and senior governing populist parties across Europe along multiple policy dimensions showed limited ideological change for all party types in the medium to longer-term. However, ostracized parties were more likely to moderate than radicalize, especially on the socio-economic dimension, and senior governing parties were more likely to radicalize than junior governing partners.

Moderation and Radicalization of populism as a political style

While these studies provide insights into the ideological adaptation of populist parties to sustain electoral success, institutionalization, and governing roles, it tells us less about adaptation to prevailing norms on the performance of politics in a democratic society. This is an important shortcoming if populism is conceived as more than a speech-based mobilization of divisions between a 'good' people and 'corrupt' elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016), but also as culturally resonant political performance (Moffit 2016; Ostiguy 2020). We argue that populism can also be fruitfully studied as a political style. Political styles are shaped by repertoires of political appeals, intended as performances and speech used to mobilize an audience towards a political objective (Moffitt 2016). Ostiguy defined populism as a style "flaunting of the low," thus using transgressive political appeals to mobilize an audience. Populist political appeals perform a contrast between the virtues of the 'outsider' such as directness and a 'disregard for hierarchy and tradition' and the virtues of 'the establishment' such as seriousness or 'sensitivity to the position of others' (Moffitt 2016 p.44). In contrast to other approaches, this definition of populism emphasizes the relational feature of populism, including the leader's ability to embody the grievances of the people through the exhibition of disruptive performances.

Focusing on moderation and radicalization of populist political style, or adaptation to informal rules of politics such as practices of representation, modes of speech and argumentation, and even dress, are likely to add new, complementary insights to existing research. However, studying populist political style confronts several challenges. Firstly, theoretical constructs informing our approach, such as 'good' and 'bad' manners (Moffit 2016) and 'high' and 'low appeals' (Ostiguy 2020) are difficult to operationalize. Secondly, existing datasets, which typically rely on quantitative data, are poorly suited for studying the culturally embedded, performative, and symbolic character of populist political style. Consequently, our first task is to develop an operationalizable framework. Once the theoretical groundwork is in place, we can then turn to analyze moderation and radicalization of those populist parties and the effect of changing governing status.

Methods and Approach

The article explores the effect of party-political strategies on populist style by presenting a new framework of moderation and radicalization of populism. In the analysis, this new framework is used to study the political appeals used by populist leaders on their X social media profiles.

In our framework, we conceive of moderation and radicalization of populist style with reference to political appeals along three dimensions - discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural – informed by conceptual work in the literature (see Figure 1 below). To operationalize these abstract categories, we developed more concise conceptual constructs while analyzing speech and performances by populist leaders in Spain and Italy posted on X.

The legal framework and the political system in the two case studies provide comparable incentives to moderation for populist parties. Both countries include norms aiming at hindering extremist behavior, whether in relation to political violence like in Spain, or in relation to incitement of hate, violence or discrimination like in Italy (Bourne 2019; Ceccanti and Clementi 2009). Opponents to populist parties behave similarly in Italy as in Spain, preferring to treat populists tolerantly and providing them with the same rights and privileges as any other political actors and including them within the political system rather than excluding them (Campo 2024a; 2024b).

Social media is a valuable resource for studying political self-representation, and many populist leaders have used it extensively to convey closeness to the people and evade the constraints imposed by traditional media (Casullo and Colalongo 2022). In line with Ostiguy's (2020)

approach, we analyze both textual and audio-visual contents of a sample of posts, including both the content, reposts, and external links to articles, blog posts of videos. Audio-visual content included pictures and videos of three minutes length or shorter. Analysis focused on appeals in the form of speech, images, symbols, and demeanors used by political leaders.

For the analysis, we derived our data by a mapping of political appeals used by Spanish and Italian populist leaders on their X profiles. The process was methodologically inspired by political claim analysis, an offspring of protest event analysis which allows categorization of political claims through a process of increasing degrees of abstraction (e.g., Hutter 2014, Koopmans and Statham, 1999). In this article, we sampled posts on two separate days (Monday and Friday) in the two weeks prior to electoral contests of interest (see Table 1 below). The selection of days aimed at catching reactions right before and after elections, usually on weekends in both countries. This produced a sample of 402 posts with content relevant to populist style. Posts by Lega's Matteo Salvini constitute over half of the sample (261 posts), with the rest coming in similar proportions from other parties (M5S: 64 posts; Podemos: 54 posts; Vox: 44). This imbalance reflects our decision to develop the framework by first looking at speech and performances by Lega and our judgment that we had only achieved theoretical saturation after examining Posts before three electoral contests (i.e. 2014 European Parliament elections, 2018 and 2022 Italian general elections). Extensive use of X by Lega leader Salvini – indeed, Starita and Trilló 2022 called Salvini an 'influencer politician'- made this an appropriate starting point. The larger number of Lega Posts in our sample also reflects Salvini's much higher daily production of online content compared to the other parties we studied.

The analysis examined the role of changing governing status in the moderation and radicalization of populist style in the leaders of four populist parties. Populist parties in Italy and Spain share important similarities, both in terms of electoral success and access to government. Non-right-wing populist parties reached government in similar circumstances. In Italy, the Five Star Movement (M5S), founded by Beppe Grillo in 2009, became the largest party with 32% of the vote in 2018 and governed under Giuseppe Conte in coalitions with Lega (2018–2019), the Democratic Party (2019–2020), and the Draghi unity government (2020–2022). In Spain, leftist Podemos, led by Pablo Iglesias and founded in 2014, formed the United We Can coalition in 2016, winning 21% of the vote and later joining the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government as a junior partner (2020–2022). Populist right-wing parties also share similarities. In 2013, Matteo Salvini turned the former regionalist Northern League into a successful Italian nationalist radical right party. Lega became the third largest party in

2018 (17%) and peaked at 34% in the 2019 European elections. It joined governments with M5S (2018–2019), Draghi (2020–2022), and is currently part of the Brothers of Italy-led far-right government. Founded in 2013 after splitting from the People's Party (PP), Spain's radical right Vox reached 15% in the 2019 general election but has not governed nationally. Regionally, it has backed several PP governments and became a junior coalition partner in Castilla y León in 2022.

The parties also exhibit differences which allow us to draw inferences about change in governing status on moderation and radicalization of populist style. Among Italian and Spanish populist parties we find two theoretically relevant case types; that is outside to inside transitioner parties (Podemos, Vox and M5S) and permanent insider parties (Lega). The earlier are new parties which were first ostracized (Podemos and Vox) or explicitly excluded themselves from governing (M5S) and later accepted as a governing partner. Propositions from the literature cited above suggest transition from outsider to insider status has a bearing on moderation and radicalization. That is, as new parties unlikely to be accepted as coalition partners, transitioners initially had no incentives to moderate. However, as their electoral fortunes grew and they became coalitionable, they had incentives to moderate their populist appeals. As coalition partners, the parties had additional incentives to moderate to facilitate compromises with coalition partners or address disjuncture between anti-establishment critiques and governing. As Table 1 below shows, we would thus expect M5S, Podemos and Vox to moderate along discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions between their first breakthrough elections and later electoral periods prior to or after a period of governing.

Permanent insiders are established parties whose experience of governing has given them a 'status as legitimate coalition partners [which] will not readily change,' and exposure to 'long-lasting socializing effects of government' (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015, p.1145). Lega, which was never ostracized and has participated in coalition governments since the 1990s, typifies such parties. The theory suggests moderation and radicalization for such parties will be mixed. On the one hand, Van Spanje and van der Brug's study argues that non-ostracized parties like Lega will moderate, but their data shows both radicalization and moderation for Lega (2007, p.1036). Akkerman and Rooduijn's study shows no difference between radical right parties with or without government experience, and that while some non-ostracized parties became more radical, data on for Lega shows no change (2015, p.1150). As Table 1 below shows, we examine the impact of governing status on moderation and radicalization for

permanent insiders, by looking at change between national elections in 2013 and 2018 (Lega 1), and 2018 and 2022 (Lega 2).

Table 1: Governing status of new populist parties and theoretical expectations regarding moderation and radicalization

| **OUTSIDER TO INSIDER TRANSITIONERS**			
Party	**Acquired government status**	**Electoral periods studied**	**Expected outcome**
Podemos	2019-2023 (national)	National 2015- Madrid 2021	Moderation
M5S	2018-2022 (national)	National 2013-National 2022	Moderation
Vox	2018-2022 (regional)	National 2015-Andalusia 2022	Moderation
PERMANENT INSIDER			
Party	**Government or opposition**	**Electoral periods studied**	**Expected outcome**
Lega 1	2013-2018 Opposition (national)	EP 2014-National 2018	Mixed
Lega 2	2018-2019 (national) 2021-2022 (national)	National 2018-National 2022	Mixed

Conceptualizing Moderation and Radicalization of Populist Style

As noted earlier, this article introduces a new analytical framework for discursive, performative political appeals. The framework distinguishes between populist and non-populist political appeals, which vary along discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions. Following Moffit (2016) and Ostiguy (2020), we define populist appeals as those that aim to disrupt commonly accepted norms of political behavior, to perform 'closeness to the people', and create a direct relation between the leader and audience. We conceive the commonly accepted norms of political behavior against which populists react as non-populist. According to Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009), non-populists formally support conventional conceptions of liberal democracy, promoting standard rules, practices, and customs of established liberal democratic systems. Without wanting to reify conventional forms of liberal democratic politics, which in practice may vary in their ability to deliver just and effective political solutions, we adopt this definition of non-populist appeals as it captures entrenched features of the political system in which populist parties, for better or worse, mobilize their appeals. For similar reasons, we resist identifying non-populism with 'anti-populism,' even

though for several of the authors we base or work on these categories are conceptually similar (especially Hamdaoui 2021; Moffit 2018; Ostiguy 2020). We argue that while non-populists may be anti-populists (as defined by Stavrakakis 2014, for example), they are not necessarily so.

As Figure 1 below shows, the three dimensions of political style are conceived as a continuum, with an ideal-type populist category on one pole and non-populist category on the other.

Figure 1: Moderation and radicalization of political appeals
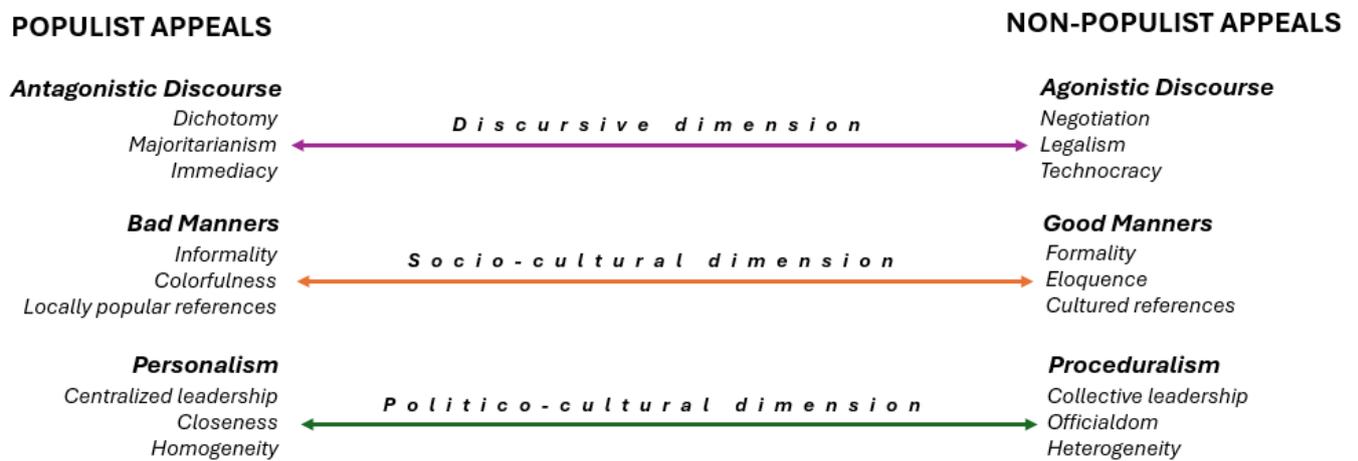
The discursive dimension classifies speech-based political appeals expressed through wording and text. This dimension categorizes political claims, or what political leaders say. Socio-cultural and political-cultural dimensions are performative, focusing on what political leaders do. The socio-cultural dimension reflects the leader's public exhibition of taste, while the political-cultural concerns the leader's expressed preferences in decision-making.

On the discursive dimension, the populist ideal type, described as antagonistic, groups three types of political appeal. Dichotomic appeals divide the political space between two actors. They exalt the 'virtuous' people, making people-centrist appeals, and denigrate political, economic, or cultural elites, and/or other social group like immigrants, ethnic or sexual minorities. Majoritarian appeals reflect definitions of politics as expression of what Mudde (2004) calls the volonté generale. It includes appeals referring to ordinary 'common sense' as a policy-making criterion, call for popular sovereignty and greater autonomy from international

institutions, and promotes the use of tools of direct democracy such as referenda (Mudde 2007). Immediacy appeals criticize slow procedure-based approaches to political-decision-making, they mobilize political crisis and present populist leaders as the only ones who can provide a timely solution (Caiani and Graziano 2019), often making references to bread-and-butter issues to appeal to everyday citizens.

The non-populist ideal type on the discursive dimension, described as agonistic, encompasses three appeals directly contrasting with the dichotomous populist one. Negotiation appeals derive from Mouffe's (2000) conception of tolerance toward political adversaries as a core liberal democratic value. Negotiation appeals acknowledge heterogeneity of political views and political pluralism (see also Mudde 2004; Müller 2016; Stanley 2008), as well as pleas for political kindness, courtesy, and moderation in political discussions (see also Hamdaoui 2021). Legalist appeals involve celebration of the public institutions and the rule of law, including calls to respect constitutional values, correct application of the law, respect for public institutions such as the courts or international organizations like the EU and appeals against radicalism. Technocratic appeals claim competence and technical expertise as central values for managing contemporary complexity (Hamdaoui 2021; Moffitt 2016).

The second socio-cultural dimension shown on Figure 1 above, concerns the leader's public exhibition of taste (Ostiguy 2020), expressed bodily representation, such as the leader's demeanor, poses, choice of clothing, way of speaking and use of cultural references (see also Casullo and Colalongo 2022). The populist ideal type on this dimension is named after Moffit's 'bad manners,' and refers to the use of unceremonious, culturally popular traits. Informality involves acts challenging customary codes of behavior in use, of body language, demeanors, and clothing. Colorfulness includes the use of wording, demeanors, or tone of voice to perform playful, coarse, or folksy behavior. It includes the use of humorous language to ridicule adversaries or to engage the audience, but also derogatory language, swear words, insults, or threatening language. Local popular references invoke local identities through the use of symbols, emotions, and quotations. They include displays of flags, banners, and regional dress to show belonging to a local community.

Non-populist style on the socio-cultural dimension, is named after Moffit's 'good manners' and refers to use of self-contained, institutionalized forms of appropriate behavior. Formality concerns customary ways of 'being' in politics, such as wearing formal clothing like a suit and tie or expressing professionalism through body language. Eloquence focuses on wording and

articulation, including use of a rich vocabulary, complex syntax, or long exposition of political reasoning. Cultured references include quotes connected to poetry, classical literature, fine arts, and reference to historical figures. Cultured references also include references to cosmopolitan values and identities.

The political cultural dimension conceptualizes expression of preferences in decision-making through performance, such as leadership styles and forms of mobilization. The populist ideal type on this dimension is personalist. Centralized leadership is performed by putting the leader in prime position vis-à-vis the party, for example by using the leader's name in a party hashtag or using the leader's image in campaign material. Performed closeness expresses the leader's similarity with, or proximity to ordinary people, or the idea that the leader is 'one of the people,' through for example presenting images of party representatives sitting among party members at public events. Homogeneity involves representation of the people as a whole to exhibit social unity, such as staging of mobilization of the 'masses' at populist rallies.

In contrast, non-populist appeals on the political cultural dimension are proceduralist. Collective leadership performs the importance of party over leader, through for example the showcasing of several leaders, rather than just the party figurehead, at public events. Officialdom concerns the representation of the party in official spaces and public institutions. This commonly includes portraying images of party representatives in institutional events, such as state visits. Showing heterogeneity includes performances celebrating the variety of political voices, whether among political actors or social groups. Political leaders do so, for example, by showing support to trade unions, social movements, or participating in congresses of other political parties.

Using this framework, we can measure moderation and radicalization of populist appeals by observing the extent to which an individual populist party's political appeals accumulate at the populist or non-populist poles of the discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions of Figure 1 above, and how these change over time. More specifically, we can measure moderation and radicalization of populist appeals by observing change in the ratio of populist to non-populist appeals. For moderation, the proportion of populist appeals decreases relative to non-populist appeals, and for radicalization, the proportion of populist appeals increases relative to non-populist appeals. Parties with a ratio higher than or equal to one enact populist style, whereas parties with a ratio lower than one exhibit non-populist political style.

Analysis: Moderation and Radicalization of Populist Style in Italy and Spain

In this section we apply the conceptual framework in an analysis of political appeals observed in posts on X by political leaders of Lega (Matteo Salvini), Five Star Movement (Beppe Grillo and Giuseppe Conte), Podemos (Pablo Iglesias) and Vox (Santiago Abascal). These cases and the time periods compared allow us to examine whether outcomes are related to changes in governing status (see Table 1 above).

Overall Populist moderation: from aggregate to party level

Our data shows that all parties continue to exhibit populist style despite changing governing status (see Table 2 below). For each period examined, all parties pursue more populist than non-populist appeals. Nevertheless, the aggregate data supports the moderation hypothesis. For both the group of transitioners (M5S, Podemos and Vox) and the two permanent insider periods (Lega 1 and 2) the proportion of populist to non-populist appeals decreased from the first to second period studied. Among the transitioners, the ratio of populist to non-populist appeals declined from 3.4 to 2.5, while for the permanent insider, it dropped from 5.2 to 4.3.

However, we observe notable variation at the party level. For M5S, the proportion fell significantly—from 4.8 times more populist than non-populist appeals to 1.4. In contrast, Podemos saw a more modest decline, from 2.4 to 1.8. On the other hand, Vox exhibited a trend toward radicalization: the ratio increased from 3.5 to 5.3 between the two periods. Thus, while M5S and Podemos align with our expectation of moderation, Vox does not. For the permanent insider, Lega, we also observe a consistent decrease in the ratio of populist to non-populist appeals across two election cycles. In the first period (Lega 1), the ratio declined from 6.9 to 4.7, and in the second (Lega 2), it fell further from 4.7 to 3.3.

Table 2: Aggregate Populist and Non-Populist Appeals: Governing Status Case Types

	OUTSIDER TO INSIDER TRANSITIONERS								PERMANENT INSIDER					
	M5S		Podemos		Vox		Total		Lega 1		Lega 2		Total	
Election	2013	2022	2015	2021	2015	2022	E1	E2	2013	2018	2018	2022	E 1	E 2
Populist	77	33	57	49	52	85	186	167	145	339	339	79	484	418
Non-populist	16	24	24	27	15	16	55	67	21	72	72	24	93	96
pop/non-populist ratio	4,8	1,4	2,4	1,8	3,5	5,3	3,4	2,5	6,9	4,7	4,7	3,3	5,2	4,3
Moderation/ Radicalization	Moderation		Moderation		Radicalization		Moderation		Moderation		Moderation		Moderation	

Overall Moderation: M5S and Podemos

While both M5S and Podemos continued to prioritize populist over non-populist style, they nonetheless reduced their use of populist appeals over time, resulting in overall moderation. Moderation is also evident in both the discursive and socio-cultural dimensions for both parties; somewhat surprisingly, however, the politico-cultural dimension shows signs of radicalization. Figure 2 illustrates the change in the ratio of populist to non-populist appeals over time. The figure clearly shows the marked moderation of M5S, as non-populist appeals outnumbered populist ones in both the discursive and socio-cultural dimensions.

Figure 2: M5S and Podemos: Ratio of populist to non-populist appeals on discursive, socio-cultural, and politico-cultural dimensions
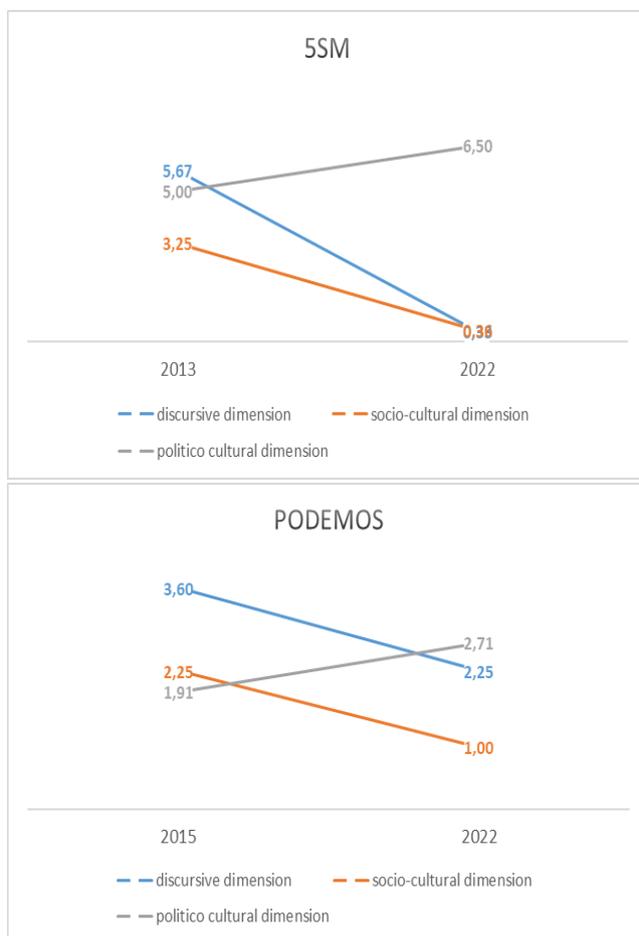
In terms of discourse, leaders of both parties used a wide range of populist claims in 2013. Famously, both Beppe Grillo in Italy and Pablo Iglesias in Spain frequently antagonized a corrupt elite, using the term 'la casta.' Beppe Grillo also often employed majoritarian appeals, defining his supporters as 'the honest majority,' while Pablo Iglesias frequently celebrated ordinary people during his speeches. By 2020, however, the leaders of both parties visibly detached themselves from populist appeals. M5S's new leader, Giuseppe Conte, explicitly

called for tolerance toward political adversaries, sought to present his party as experienced and competent in managing public affairs, and, on one occasion, expressly criticized the Hungarian government for its lack of commitment to liberal democratic values. Similarly, Iglesias called for political kindness in dealings with adversaries, respect for democracy, and adherence to Spanish constitutional values.

A similar pattern can be observed for both on the socio-cultural dimension. In 2013, both Grillo and Iglesias performed bad manners, usually by wearing informal clothing, using coarse language, comedy and irony to engage the crowd. In more recent elections, bad manners were widely reduced. In 2022, Conte often used eloquent wording in his speech, and almost always wearing a jacket or a tie, even at informal events. Similarly, Iglesias also opted for more good manners, generally appearing more serious and formal in public contexts.

On the political-cultural dimension, leaders in both parties consistently made great efforts to display 'closeness to the people.' Both Grillo and Conte often represented themselves meeting the audience, while Iglesias often organized public assemblies, taking up positions in the middle of the audience and leaving an open microphone inviting audience interventions. Over time, the leaders' personas became more central in the appeals of both parties. While posts in the first electoral period tended to include other party representatives more frequently, often to introduce them to the audience, by the second electoral period studied, the data generally showed fewer representations of party leaders other than Conte and Iglesias. The increase of populist politico-cultural seem to illustrate the centralization of party leadership over time in both parties. Iglesias' position was confirmed at all successive Podemos congresses, leading to the departure of competitors and increasing his autonomy over the party agenda (Caiani et al. 2022, Chazel and Vázquez 2020). Similarly, Conte's rise to m5S leadership coincided with significant statutory changes expanding the powers of the leadership in party management (Crulli 2022).

Radicalization of Vox

Unlike other transitioner parties, our data showed that Vox radicalized, disconfirming our expectation that transition from outsider to governing insider would lead to moderation. On all three dimensions, data on Vox's appeals show a general pattern of radicalization. As Figure 3 below shows, change in ratio of populist to non-populist appeals over increased on the discursive and socio-cultural dimensions, but did not change substantially on the politico-cultural dimension.

Figure 2: Vox: Ratio of populist to non-populist appeals on discursive, socio-cultural and politico-cultural dimensions
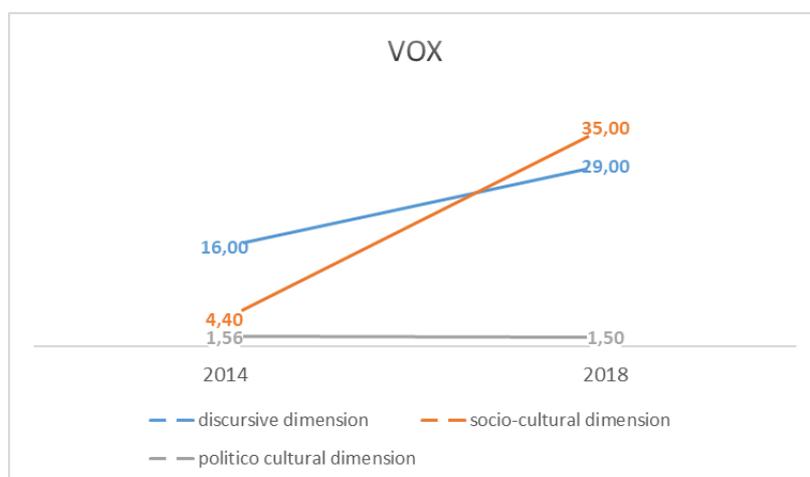
On the discursive dimension, posts by Vox leader Santiago Abascal consistently antagonized several social groups. In 2013, the party commonly labeled the PSOE, Podemos, and even the right-wing Popular Party (PP) as corrupt, criminal, fraudulent, and fearmongering. By 2022, the party demonized governing left-wing parties, describing them as liars and complicit in illegal immigration, as well as environmentalist movements, which Abascal labeled as 'climatic fanatics' promoting a 'Greta dictatorship,' referring to the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

On the socio-cultural dimension, Vox increasingly displayed bad manners over time. In 2013, Abascal generally maintained good manners, appearing more formal in dress and using cultured references. By 2022, however, the posts of the party leader featured more coarse language when addressing his political adversaries. For example, he accused the left of having 'culturally and socially' destroyed Andalucía and claimed that Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez pardoned 'coup plotters.' Similarly, Vox's candidate in the Andalusian elections, Macarena Olona, described the Sánchez government as illegitimate and referred to competing candidates as 'the same politicians as always, those of cocaine, of brothels.' The party also used locally popular references to elevate the local community, describing the audience as 'the true Spaniards.'
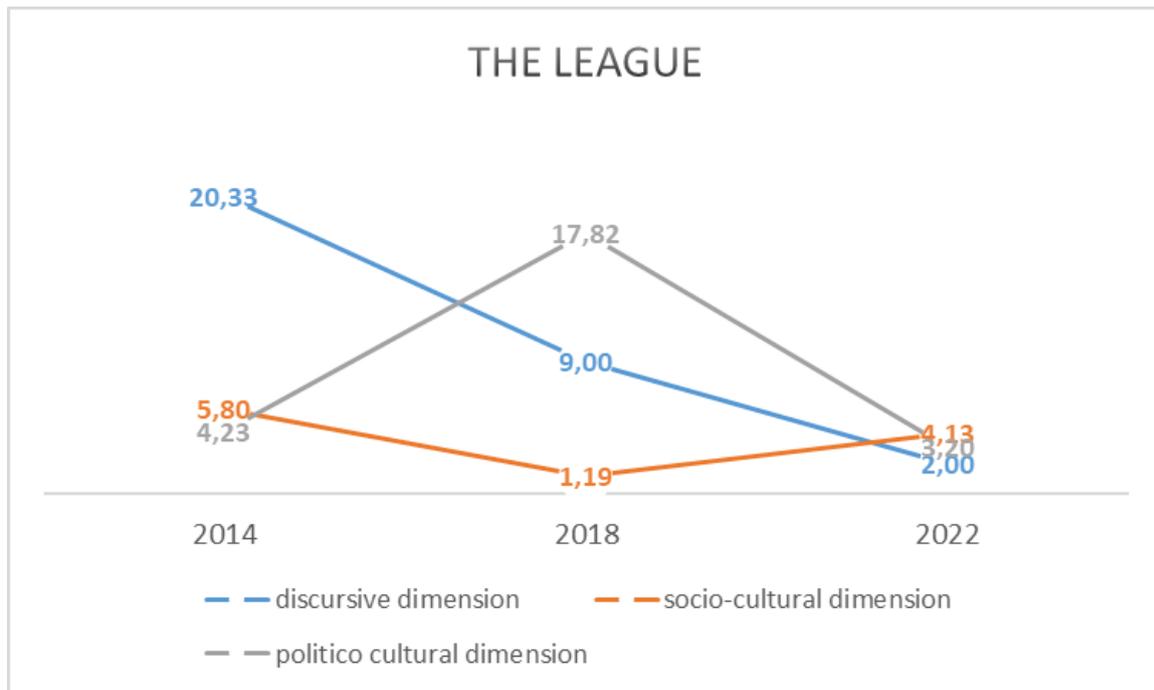
On the political-cultural dimension, the content of Abascal's posts remained stable, with relatively more populist than non-populist appeals. In 2013, Abascal demonstrated closeness to the people by engaging with his audience or speaking directly to his voters. Over time, his

posts included more representations of the people, showing the audience participating in party rallies as a homogeneous crowd. Even though populist appeals still dominated, Abascal's posts differentiate him from other party leaders through his less personalistic use of X. Unlike M5S and Podemos, which increasingly portrayed the leader as the main party figure, Vox's imagery tended to exhibit collective leadership during the 2022 Andalusian elections. This is evident, for example, in Abascal's regular reposting of other Vox representatives' content, celebrating party successes in local areas, and conceding space in rallies and video content to Macarena Olona.

(Mixed) moderation of Lega

While the aggregate data shown in Table 2 indicates moderation for Lega, our analysis of appeals across the three dimensions reveals a more mixed pattern of both moderation and radicalization. As illustrated in Figure 4, we observed moderation, defined as a decrease in the proportion of populist appeals relative to non-populist appeals, on four occasions: on the discursive dimension between 2014 and 2018, and between 2018 and 2022; on the socio-cultural dimension between 2014 and 2018; and on the politico-cultural dimension between 2018 and 2022. However, we also observed radicalization, an increase in the proportion of populist relative to non-populist appeals, on the socio-cultural dimension between 2018 and 2022, and on the politico-cultural dimension between 2014 and 2018. This pattern suggests that while the overall trend points to moderation across both periods, it is driven by moderation on different dimensions. Specifically, for Lega 1, moderation is driven by the discursive and socio-cultural dimensions, while for Lega 2, it is driven by the discursive and politico-cultural dimensions. This also suggests that Lega may have compensated for moderation in some dimensions by radicalizing in others.

Figure 3: Lega Ratio of populist to non-populist appeals on discursive, socio-cultural and politico-cultural dimensions

THE LEAGUE

20,33

17,82

9,00

5,80
4,23

4,13
3,20
2,00

1,19

2014   2018   2022

— — discursive dimension   — — socio-cultural dimension

— — politico cultural dimension

The discourse of Lega leader Matteo Salvini employed mainly populist appeals in all three elections. These included the antagonization of undocumented immigrants, European institutions, portrayed as tyrannical and exploitative, and Italian political parties, frequently labeled as incompetent or corrupt. In 2014, populist claims also included majoritarian appeals calling for more autonomy in relation to European institutions and withdrawal from the Eurozone in the name of popular sovereignty. In 2018, immediacy appeals, calling for the cessation of the so-called invasion of undocumented immigrants reaching Italy through the Mediterranean, also became prominent. Although Salvini's populist appeals declined over time, the use of non-populist appeals did not increase significantly until 2022, when Salvini's posts sought to emphasize the party's competence, referring to past governing experience in migration and security management.

On the socio-cultural dimension, Salvini often used his own bodily representation to send messages to the electorate. During the 2014 electoral campaign, the Lega leader frequently attended local promotional events wearing sweaters that indicated the name of the locality he was visiting. He also often stood out in pictures and videos as the only person dressed casually at official events. He frequently used colorful language against antagonists, as in 2014, when he openly expressed his desire to see former Minister of Labor Elsa Fornero cry. In 2018, Salvini's posts included more formal appeals, with him wearing formal clothing during television shows and debates. However, this changed again in 2022, when the leader presented

himself wearing an open shirt exposing a tau cross, a T-shaped cross commonly associated with the Franciscan order and more generally considered a Christian symbol for peace, to express the party's position against supplying weapons to Ukraine.

On the politico-cultural dimension, populist appeals increased in Lega 1 but decreased in Lega 2. This increase occurred as Salvini became a signifier for the party as a whole, with his face, name, and body becoming widely used in party communications. This trend intensified particularly after 2017, when the party's official name was changed to *Lega per Salvini Premier* (Albertazzi et al., 2018). More than any other leader in this study, Salvini performed closeness with his audience. His posts regularly depicted him taking selfies, hugging and caressing people, replying to other users, sharing his everyday life, and calling his followers 'friends.' Non-populist appeals on this dimension included posts featuring politicians other than Salvini, such as popular Lega regional presidents of Lombardia and Veneto, Attilio Fontana and Luca Zaia.

Conclusions

In this article, we have developed a new approach to the study of the moderation and radicalization of populist style and applied it in a study of populist leaders in Italy and Spain. We selected cases to examine the effects of change in governing status on populist style, based on the leading explanation in the literature. On an aggregate level, we conclude that governing status plays a significant role in parties' moderation of political style, with parties transitioning from outsiders to government insiders tending to moderate more clearly than parties with prior governing experience, which are more likely to show a mixed pattern of moderation and radicalization.

On a party level, we observed substantial moderation in the cases of M5S and Podemos, and a mixed pattern in the case of Lega. Vox, which radicalized, disconfirmed the hypothesis. Several other factors may help explain why the party did not moderate its political style over time. One possible explanation is that Vox's role in the Andalusian government was limited to that of a support party, rather than a formal coalition partner. In such a position, the party may have had fewer incentives to adopt a more moderate stance and greater strategic advantage in maintaining a distinct identity from governing partners. Additionally, Vox may have radicalized because of changes in the political opportunity structures favoring radicalization of a radical right-wing party. As Mendes and Dennison (2021) argue, Vox intensified its radical rhetoric following the 2017 Catalan independence referendum and in response to the rise in

immigration flows in 2018. Similarly, Osuna and Rama (2022) suggest that the party became increasingly radicalized during the COVID-19 pandemic. These events created opportunities for Vox to mobilize support by polarizing public opinion through populist appeals.

The observed patterns of stylistic moderation and radicalization further suggest a potential link between political style and political orientation: the populist right-wing (PRW) in our study (Vox and Lega) exhibited the lowest levels of moderation, whereas the non-PRW parties (M5S and Podemos) demonstrated more pronounced tendencies toward moderation.

Our analysis also points to other relevant factors that may influence patterns of moderation and radicalization observed in the article. Internal party changes may explain the higher degree of moderation of M5S compared to Podemos (see Figure 2). While Podemos maintained the same party leader throughout the two elections, M5S's changed 'political chiefs' from Grillo to Conte. Grillo's background as a comedian led him to use more disruptive performances, while Conte's background as lawyer may have led him towards a more self-contained style

In the case of Lega, we might also explain the party's mixed strategy with reference to contingencies of party history and electoral strategy. Salvini may have used his political appeals to distinguish his leadership from internal and external competitors. The radicalization of political-cultural appeals between 2014 and 2018 coincided with Salvini's strategy of personalizing the party around his leadership and distinguishing it from that of former leader and party founder Umberto Bossi (Albertazzi et al. 2018; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). Similarly, the radicalization of socio-cultural appeals between 2018 and 2022 may be attributed to the Lega's need to distinguish itself from the post-fascist Brothers of Italy, which, from 2020 onward, gained support at the Lega's expense (Martella and Roncarolo 2023). The strategy of mixed moderation also reflects longer-term strategies. As Albertazzi and McDonnell (2005) observed, in the 2000s Lega successfully maintained a 'one foot in and one foot out' of government, combining its participation in Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing government, with an anti-establishment message.

The analysis provides other takeaways concerning the populist use of political appeals. Firstly, we observed that changes along the discursive dimension were often matched by similar variation in socio-cultural appeals, while changes on the politico-cultural dimension were more likely to point in the opposite direction. Socio-cultural appeals provide performative, audio-visual evidence of a new style, and leaders appear to embody radicalization or moderation to convey shifts in discursive stances to their audience. Change in manners may be less costly

than changes in discourse, which are constrained by the political agendas of other parties and external events. Manners are also less bound, and more easily adapted to different goals in different contexts. In contrast, politico-cultural appeals appear more tightly dependent on internal party structure. Indeed, we observed increases in populist politico-cultural appeals for M5S, Podemos and Lega in periods of internal changes facilitating personalization by a new leadership. The tendency for appeals on the socio-cultural and politico-cultural dimensions to move in opposite directions may also represent a strategy of compensation, where changes on one dimension are used to soften the impact of changes on another.

At the non-populist pole of the politico-cultural dimension, it is also notable that we found extremely limited performance of officialdom or heterogeneity appeals, suggesting that populist leaders fear this may damage their populist purity. On one hand, they may prefer to avoid being represented in official events to avoid the appearance of elite connection, and distance from the people. On the other, showing the audience as heterogeneous may undermine the core element of populist style portraying the discursive unity of the people. Another explanation for the lack of such appeals may be that leaders simply find officialdom and heterogeneity less effective than appeals showing the leader close to the audience and the people as a whole.

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