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To cite this article: Davide Angelucci & Davide Vittori (2022): Are All Populist Voters the Same? Institutional Distrust and the Five Star Movement in Italy, South European Society and Politics, DOI: [10.1080/13608746.2022.2028503](https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2028503)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2028503>

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 Published online: 24 Jan 2022.

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Davide Angelucci  and Davide Vittori 

ABSTRACT

Are all populist voters the same? We focus on a valence populist party case (Five Star Movement) to answer this question. We inquire whether faithful populist voters, new populist voters, populist defectors and non-populist voters all have the same level of institutional trust. Our focus is on the Italian political system, regarded as a promised land for populism. This paradigmatic case sheds light on whether the entrance of a populist party into the system works as a corrective to democracy, as populist voters find their voice represented in parliament, potentially increasing their trust in the institutions. Our main finding is that faithful populist voters are the most distrustful category – meaning that having parliamentary representatives is not enough for populist voters to gain trust in institutions.

KEYWORDS

Populist parties; anti-populist parties; democracy; Southern Europe; party politics; italian political system; M5S; non-populist voters

Populist voters, whichever their core ideological orientation, are on the rise in Europe. The electoral success of populist radical right and left parties (henceforth PRRPs and PRLPs) since the outbreak of the Great Recession (Rooduijn et al. 2019) has further increased scholarly attention to the determinants that attract voters to populist parties. In this context, Italy represents a paradigmatic case. In 2018, after an unprecedented electoral success, two populist parties with different ideological orientations coalesced to form a government, which for the first time did not include any non-populist party.

However, while PRRPs and PRLPs' voters have diverging attitudes towards both materialist (e.g. redistribution) and post-materialist (e.g. civil-rights and immigration) values, they share for the most part a common distrust in institutions (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2018) and, consequently, they are more dissatisfied with the political system (Werts, Scheepers & Lubbers 2013).¹ Analyses of populist voters usually focus on the comparison between populist and non-populist parties in a specific political system (among a vast literature Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014) or among the populist party families (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Rooduijn 2018). While recent analyses have focused

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 Supplementary data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2028503>

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on populist voters' loyalty and the role of political dissatisfaction in stabilising the populist vote (Voogd & Dassonneville 2020), far less has been done to investigate the extent to which faithful populist voters are less (or more) sceptical towards institutions than populist defectors and new members of the populist electorate.

This is a crucial question. Voters of populist parties are frequently analysed as a homogeneous group, to which scholars contrapose other groups, i.e. voters of other political parties. However, in increasingly unstable political systems (Chiaromonte & Emanuele 2017), a growing number of voters change their preference from t_0 to t_1 election. Furthermore, populist parties' voters can change after the institutionalisation of these parties. Like any political party, populist parties acquire and lose new groups of voters, thus it is crucial to investigate the differences among the various groups within the same party.

This paper aims to provide an analysis of these groups focusing on a paradigmatic political system, Italy, and a valence and eclectic populist case, M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle – Five Star Movement) (Mosca & Tronconi 2019; Zulianello 2020). Italy represents a promised land for populism (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016) and it is also historically characterised by low institutional trust compared to other countries (Holmberg, Lindberg & Svennson 2017; Segatti 2006). Recently, the populist 'promise' was fulfilled for the first time in 2013 by the most successful entrance of a genuinely new and populist party into the European political system (M5S); then in the following elections (2018), M5S and Lega (PRRP) together received more than 50 per cent of the vote. The presence of a party whose ideological core is based on valence issues such as anti-establishment appeals and anti-corruption campaigns (Zulianello 2020; Angelucci & De Sio 2021) is critical to assess the impact on their voters' institutional trust.² Has M5S represented a 'corrective' to voters' historically low institutional trust, or rather cemented distrust among its voters?

Our study allows us to draw a picture of 'faithful', 'new' and 'defector' populist voters, showing the extent to which the entrance of M5S into the political system impacted the institutional trust of its old and new voters. In order to analyse these groups, we rely on the 2013 and 2018 post-electoral waves of the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES).

The paper proceeds as follows: we first outline the determinants of the populist vote in Europe. Then, we formulate our main research question and propose our analytical framework. Third, we introduce our case study (M5S) and contextualise it in the Italian political system. In the following sections, we discuss the data. Finally, we provide some conclusions, focusing on the implications for Italy and, potentially, for other European countries.

Populist attitudes, distrust in institutions and the other determinants of the populist vote

Populism has been defined by the literature (Mudde 2004) as a thin-centred ideology, whose core is represented by a Manichaeian distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (anti-elitism) and by the idea that politics should reflect the general will of the people (people-centrism). In this regard, populist voters and parties share these minimal features, i.e. people-centrism and anti-elitism (among others Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014; Spruyt, Keppens & Van Droogenbroeck 2016), distrust in experts (Oliver & Rahn 2016), Manichaeism (Castanho Silva et al. 2020) and demand for popular sovereignty (Schulz et al., 2018). Regardless of the differences in the measurement of populist attitudes among voters (Castanho Silva et al. 2020), the literature has found a strong association between populist attitudes and populist parties (Zaslove et al. 2021; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel 2018).

However, populist attitudes tend to interact with core ideologies as well (Hawkins et al. 2019). From the interaction between the thin and the core ideologies, two important party families have emerged in the European political system, i.e. populist radical right parties and populist radical left parties. Admittedly, there are only a few attitudes which are shared among PRRP and PRLP voters (Rooduijn 2018). Rooduijn et al. (2017) in their analysis of radical left and radical right voters (both populist and non-populist) found that the radical left and right voter-bases strongly differ when it comes to their main voting motivations.

Yet, in a comparison of 15 different populist parties’ electorates, Rooduijn (2018) found that political distrust is shared by eight parties, belonging to right and left families, while other attitudes such as satisfaction with the economy, satisfaction with the government, and general left and right radicalism were shared by fewer parties’ voters. Distrust in institutions, rather than a cynical view of politics and political institutions, better explains according to Fieschi and Heywood (2004) the vote for PRRPs. Other authors (Ivarsflaten 2008; Werts, Scheepers & Lubbers 2013; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2018) agree on the fact that political distrust, whichever its operationalisation, is a powerful driver for either populist parties or third-party alternatives. The only exception appears to be PRRPs in Eastern Europe (Santana, Zagórski & Rama 2020). Overall, even though there is not a common unifying trait for *all* populist parties, a partial exception is political distrust (Akkerman, Zaslove & Spruyt 2017; Rooduijn 2018).

Not all populist parties are equal: the composition of the populist parties’ electoral bases

The extant literature on populist voters has thus far tended to consider them as a static whole. However, voters of a given political party change over time. As populist parties are increasingly institutionalising in political systems (Mudde

2013) and are more frequently involved in coalition governments than ever before (Vittori 2021), it is worth enquiring into the dynamic of electoral gains and defections in relation to distrust in institutions. As populist parties are now a stable presence in many countries in Western and Eastern Europe (Rooduijn et al. 2019), the analysis of the different groups composing the populist electorate is crucial, since electoral institutionalisation might lead these voters to lose or weaken their populist trait. Yet, this analysis is still underdeveloped.³

In the previous section, we highlighted that populist voters are more distrustful than voters of other parties; however, the analysis of the different groups of populist voters is still incomplete. Thus, as a first step we build a theoretical framework aimed at categorising different populist voters. We maintain that populist voters are more distrustful than other groups of voters: while we pre-test this assumption, our theoretical framework does not explain further why populist voters are more distrustful.

Our framework discriminates instead between four groups of populist voters: we use as a point of reference an election t . To reduce all possible alternatives to meaningful categories, we focus on the behaviour of voters in the election $t-1$ and t , maintaining that the political system does not radically change from $t-1$ to t election. We simplify the vote behaviour, focusing on a binary outcome in election t and in the election $t-1$, i.e. vote for a populist party and not voting for a populist party. Crossing the different outcomes, we obtain four different groups:

- (1) faithful voters, i.e. voters who voted for a populist party in $t-1$ election and voted the same party in election t ;
- (2) new voters, i.e. voters who did not vote for a populist party in $t-1$, but decided to switch to a populist party in election t ;
- (3) defectors, i.e. voters who voted for a populist party in $t-1$, but decided to switch to another party in election t ;
- (4) non-populist voters, i.e. voters who did not vote for a populist party in either election $t-1$ or election t .

We are aware that those broad categories 'hide' other important and relevant choices. Among new populist voters, for example, it is crucial to evaluate where the new voters come from, since switching over from a non-populist party, from another populist party (when present), or from outside the system (abstention) to a populist party would imply different expectations regarding trust. The same line of reasoning holds for defections from populist parties and for non-populist voters. A brief example: in a multiparty political system with one populist party, two non-populist parties and another challenger non-populist party, the non-populist group alone would include at least 16 subgroups.⁴ Such a matrix, which comprises all combinations, would be hardly meaningful, as several cells might end up having too few N . To make the categories intelligible we summarise the

main four options in [Table 1](#), and we include the new voters and defectors' sub-categories to show a more refined version of our framework.⁵ Overall, depending on the group to which a populist or a former populist voter belongs, we should expect different levels of trust.

Populism and trust in institutions: threat or corrective?

Why so? Mainly because of the (dis)loyalty that populist parties build among their voters once they enter government and because of the role that populist parties are theoretically expected to play in democratic systems. In this regard, populism has been analysed either as a threat or a corrective for (liberal) democracy (Kaltwasser 2012). Populism is seen as a threat to (liberal)democratic values for its anti-pluralist stance and for its people-centric vision, which entails a contempt for diversity, an essential part of liberal-democratic ideology (Abts & Rummens 2007; Pappas 2016). Nonetheless, other scholars have a less sceptical position on the role of populism for (liberal)democracy: their argument is that populism might work as a corrective for democracy, allowing disenfranchised voters to enter the system, providing a non-mainstream option for those who do not feel represented by traditional actors and raising neglected issues in the political debate (Laclau 2005). Regardless of the impact of populism on (liberal) democracies, the populist vote has been regarded as a 'protest' vote (Morlino & Raniolo 2017), which voters for populist parties mainly cast due to their dissatisfaction with the institutions.

Theoretical exploratory expectations: populist groups and distrust in institutions

To empirically test the theoretical framework, we advance a set of exploratory expectations related to the previous theoretical framework. If voting for a populist party is due to dissatisfaction with institutions (along with other attitudes), it is fair to assume that there might be differences among those who have already voted for the very same populist party in election $t-1$ and those who decide not to vote for the party. If voters confirm their preference for a populist party, we might expect that after expressing dissatisfaction in election $t-1$, they have found their own political 'representative' and, thus, they might evaluate more positively (even slightly so) the institution to which the populist party belongs. If populism works as a corrective to democracy, then it might not only bring dissatisfied voters into the system, but also improve the perception of the system. This mechanism is all but automatic. In fact, populist voters might decide to confirm their choice because they are still dissatisfied with the way institutions work and regardless of the presence of populist parties in the political system. If populist

Table 1. Populist voters and defectors: expectations related to trust in institutions.

Category	First election t-1	Second election t	Trust: expectations
a. Faithful voters	Vote for a populist party	Vote for a populist party	More distrustful than d); less than b) and c)
b. New voters	Did not vote for a populist party	Vote for a populist party	More distrustful than a)
b1) Non-populist new voters	Vote for a non-populist party	Vote for a populist party	More distrustful than a)
b2) Populist new voters	Vote for a populist party	Vote for a populist party	More distrustful than a)
c. Defectors	Vote for a populist party	Defect from populist party	Mixed expectations
c1) Mainstream new voters	Vote for a populist party	Defect from populist party	Less distrustful than a) and b)
c2) Other populist new voters	Vote for a populist party	Defect from populist party	More distrustful than a)
d. Non-populists	Did not vote for a populist party	Did not vote for a populist party	Less distrustful voters than other groups. Yet, different directions depending on the outcome (party choice in election t)

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

parties are relegated to the margin of competition, their voters might safely assume that the system is not improved with the presence of their representatives.

Despite this, faithful voters have expressed their resentment *earlier* than new populist voters by voting for a populist party in $t-1$. New voters, in turn, find the populist option as a viable alternative only in election t , while in $t-1$ they opted for another choice. Thus, assuming that a vote for a populist party is a protest vote related to distrust in institutions, these voters should be in general even more distrustful than faithful voters, even though this might change depending on the choice made in $t-1$. As explained in the theoretical framework, this trend might diverge when considering voters who made different vote choices in $t-1$: for example, voters coming from another populist party in the same political system are expected to be less trusting than those coming from non-populist parties. A more refined version of Table 1, which includes all subcategories for new voters, defectors and non-populists can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2028503>. On the other hand, those who defect from populist parties but decide to stay within the system might be reasonably dissatisfied with populist parties. Yet, their choice to opt for a non-populist party instead of exiting the system might be a symptom of greater confidence in the institutions, at least compared to those who are faithful to the populist party.

The contrary should be true for those who defect from populist parties and decide to exit the system, as we interpret these choices as a sign of dissatisfaction with the capability of populists to convert their protest into a tangible challenge to the system. Finally, those who do not vote for a populist party in two consecutive elections are theoretically the most satisfied group among the four groups, as we assume that this group is composed mainly of non-populist voters in election $t-1$ and t . Table 1 summarises the groups of populist voters and defectors and the expectations related to their trust in institutions.

Against this backdrop, we formalise four hypotheses. First, we test the assumption according to which populist voters are more distrustful than any other group. Thus, we expect that:

- (1) populist voters are more distrustful than any other group of voters regardless of the timing of the election.

Second, among populist voters, faithful ones should be less distrustful than new voters if populism has worked as a 'corrective' for the faithful voters. Although the contrary might also be true, we use the corrective thesis as a point of reference. Thus, our second hypothesis compares faithful and new voters and assumes that:

- (2) faithful voters are less distrustful than new voters, who should exhibit the highest distrust among all groups of voters.

The third hypothesis is related to defectors from populist parties. In this regard, we propose two hypotheses, the first of which assumes a general pattern of higher institutional trust among the whole category of populist defectors, even though we have already highlighted the possibility of finding different behaviours, depending on the choice made in election t . We thus expect that:

- (3) populist defectors are less sceptical towards institutions than new voters and faithful voters.

Accordingly, we also expect that:

- (4) non-populist voters are less distrustful than faithful voters, regardless of their origin.

Before moving to the empirical analysis, however, it is important to clarify better why M5S is a paradigmatic case study.

The case study: the entrance of a new prototypical populist party in an unstable political system

M5S ascendancy

Four years after its official foundation (2009), M5S became the most voted party in the 2013 Italian legislative elections. While Italy has been described as a promised land for populist forces (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016), with the presence of populist parties characterising the political landscape since the aftermath of WWII, the magnitude of M5S's success was nonetheless unprecedented.

M5S was founded by a successful comedian Beppe Grillo and by an ICT entrepreneur, Gianroberto Casaleggio. Since its genesis, the party presented a clear-cut top-down organisation, coupled with the frequent usage of online direct democratic tools for internal decision-making (Deseriis and Vittori 2019; Vittori 2020). M5S has been defined as web-populist or techno-populist (Bickerton & Accetti 2018), eclectic populist (Mosca & Tronconi 2019), valence populist (Zulianello 2020) and as a protest party (Morlino & Raniolo 2017). The literature has highlighted the people-centric and anti-elitist nature of the party: since its foundation the party has ostensibly rejected the labels 'left' and 'right', considering them as outdated concepts, since according to M5S left-wing and right-wing parties are indistinguishable (Vittori 2019).

What united the disparate policy positions of M5S was a marked populist stance, which has represented the core of M5S's political message since its foundation (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2013). In a country characterised by one of

the lowest institutional trust scores (Holmberg, Lindberg & Svensson 2017), M5S successfully used its entrepreneurship to convey an anti-establishment discourse against the political class.

Mosca and Tronconi (2019) show that M5S voters stand in between the main centre-left and centre-right parties when it comes to issues such as immigration and the economy, but they show much more marked anti-establishment attitudes compared to other parties; more importantly, M5S voters tend to reject left-right positioning much more often compared to other voters. M5S, thus, can be considered the prototype valence populist party (Zulianello 2020: 329), since it campaigned on predominantly non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity. Overall, while other populist parties in Italy, such as radical-right parties like Fdi (Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy) and Lega (League) all have a core (right-wing) populist connotation (Zulianello 2020), M5S is the only valence populist party.

Moreover, in a recent study about issue determinants of vote inflows in six European countries (2017–2018), it has been shown that M5S, more than any other Italian populist party, has been able to attract voters for its credibility on purely valence issues and, in particular, on its credibility on renovating Italian politics (Angelucci & De Sio 2021). Thus, more than in other populist cases, it is critical to disentangle the nature of the institutional trust of its electorate, which is the main driver of M5S's mobilisation capability.

The Italian political system from 2013 to 2018

The electoral trajectory of the party is quintessentially linked with the abrupt changes that occurred in the Italian political system in 2013. Indeed, the 2013 elections marked a watershed in the Italian political system (Chiamonte & De Sio 2014): while corruption scandals were not even close to the ones that preceded the rise of the centre-right FI (Forza Italia – Go Italy) in 1994, the consequences were to some extent comparable (Vittori 2020). Furthermore, on both occasions a genuinely new party (FI in 1994 and M5S in 2013) became the new dominant actor in the political system.

While FI entered the government in 1994, M5S had this possibility in 2013, but eventually discarded it, rejecting the alliance with non-populist centre-left PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party). Nonetheless, M5S won 25.6 per cent of the vote in 2013 and increased its vote share to 32.7 per cent in the 2018 elections (Table 2). Both performances marked a new record: with the exclusion of the first democratic elections in each country, they were the highest vote share ever registered in Europe for a genuinely new party at its first and second elections.

Table 2. Election results in Italy, 2008–2018.

	CLASSIFICATION OF THE PARTY	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	DIFF. 2008–2013 (%)	2018 (%)	DIFF. 2013–2018 (%)
M5S	Valence populist party		25.6	25.6	32.7	7.1
PD	Mainstream left	33.2	25.4	–7.8	18.8	–6.7
PDL/FI	Mainstream right	37.4	21.6	–15.8	14.	–7.6
Lega	PRRPs	8.3	4.1	–4.2	17.4	13.3
Fdl	PRRPs		2	2	4.4	2.4

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Note: The results refer to the Chamber of Deputies results (Val d'Aosta is excluded from the count).

After being the main opposition party to all the governments formed during the 2013–2018 legislature, M5S underwent a series of internal and ideological transformations aimed at toning down its radical criticism of the political system (Vittori 2020). Despite this, the 2018 electoral campaign was framed along the lines of the establishment vs. anti-establishment conflict, in which M5S embodied the party outside the left-right dimension (Chiaramonte et al. 2018).

As a matter of fact, in both elections the party competed against two non-populist parties, PD and FI,⁶ and two radical-right populist ones, Lega and Fdl (plus other minor radical-left and centrist parties). After winning a relative majority in the 2018 elections, M5S entered government in the context of two different alliances. First, it coalesced with Lega. Then, when Lega left the coalition in 2019, M5S allied with PD and other left and centrist parties. In the 2019 European Parliament elections, held when M5S was in power with Lega, the party struggled to maintain its electoral appeal (Table 2, see also Table A2 in the online Appendix).

Data

We test our hypotheses using the data from the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES), an ongoing survey which dates back to the late 1960's and collects information about Italian voters extracted from representative samples of the population. ITANES is by now a consolidated source for studying public opinion in Italy (see Bellucci & Maraffi 2008; Vezzoni 2014) and it nicely fits the purposes of our study, as it includes information about voting choices in national elections (both vote intention and vote recall) as well as batteries of questions intended to measure trust in institutions.

We consider the first election contested by M5S (2013) and the most recent election held in Italy (2018). In both cases, we rely on post-electoral surveys. The two surveys have been pooled together in order to have one single data matrix. The 2013 survey was fielded between 21 March – 4 May 2013 (N = 1508, Computer-assisted personal interviewing). The 2018 survey was carried out between 23–29 March 2018 (N = 2573, Computer-assisted web interviewing).

The dependent variables

First, we construct a vote choice (*votechoice*) variable as a nominal variable which distinguishes three groups of voters: those who voted for M5S, those who voted for a non-populist party, and those who voted for a populist party other than M5S (respectively in 2013 and in 2018).⁷ This variable is constructed from the pooled dataset and then used to estimate a simple vote choice model.

However, as outlined in previous sections, we are also interested in analysing the patterns of inflows and outflows of voters in relation to M5S between 2013 and 2018. To this end, we focus here on the 2018 survey. The dataset contains a vote recall variable, measuring the vote choice of respondents in the 2013 elections, and a vote recall variable recording the electoral choice in 2018. Combining the distributions of these two variables we assess the different patterns of voting concerning M5S. Thus, we first construct a nominal variable distinguishing the different profiles of M5S voters in 2018, with respect to the 2013 election (*Profiles of M5S voters between 2013 and 2018*). This variable includes the following groups: 1) Faithful voters (i.e. those who voted M5S both in 2013 and 2018); 2) new voters (i.e. those voters who did not vote for M5S in 2013, but decided to switch to M5S in 2018); 3) defectors (i.e. those voters who voted for M5S in 2013, but decided to switch away from M5S in 2018); 4) non-M5S voters (i.e. those voters who never voted for M5S and who would fall into the non-populist category of [Table 1](#)). We report the distribution of this variable in [Table 3](#), part 1.

Second, we build two other variables focused on defectors and new voters. In particular, we build up two dichotomies which respectively distinguish new voters (*Inflows*) coming from a centre-left or a centre-right party ([Table 3](#), part 2) and defectors (*Outflows*) moving towards a centre-left or a centre-right party ([Table 3](#), part 3). Finally, we construct an indicator which contrasts faithful M5S voters with the non-M5S voters who voted either for a non-populist party or for a populist party other than M5S. In other words, this variable is made up of three categories: those who voted for M5S both in 2013 and 2018, those who never voted for M5S and cast a vote for a non-populist party in 2018, and those who never voted for M5S and cast a vote for another populist party⁸ in 2018. All details can be found in [Table 3](#), part 4 (*non-M5S voters and faithful M5S voters*). (See [Table A3](#) in the online Appendix for the indicators used, operationalisation, and sources).

The independent variables

Our focal predictor is an indicator of trust in institutions. We built it as an additive index starting from a set of four questions included both in 2013 and 2018. The questions refer respectively to trust in the Italian Parliament, political parties, the President of the Republic, and the EU. However, while in 2013

Table 3. Distribution of the dependent variables: descriptive statistics.

	<i>1. Profiles of M5S voters between 2013 and 2018</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Faithful	406	22
New voters	233	13
Defectors	115	6
Non-M5S voters	1097	59
Total	1851	100
	<i>2. Inflows</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
From centre-right	53	29
From centre-left	129	71
Total	182	100
	<i>3. Outflows</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Towards centre-right	45	61
Towards centre-left	29	39
Total	74	100
	<i>4. Non-M5S voters and faithful voters of the M5S</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Non-M5S Mainstream	602	47
Faithful	406	31
Non-M5S populist	283	22
Total	1291	100

Source: ITANES 2013 and 2018.

Note: Inflows from centre-right parties include inflows from: Scelta Civica, UdC, PDL/Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia; inflows from centre-left parties include inflows from: Rivoluzione Civile, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, Partito Democratico; outflows towards centre-right parties include outflows towards: Forza Italia, Lega, Fratelli d'Italia; outflows towards centre-left parties include outflows towards: Liberi e Uguali, Partito Democratico, Più Europa.

respondents were asked to indicate whether they trusted the specific institution on a conventional Likert-scale (ranging from 1 = 'A lot' to 4 = 'Not at all'), in 2018 the same questions were asked using a different 0–10 scale (where 0 = 'No trust' and 10 = 'Complete trust').⁹ To make these indicators comparable, we standardised them.

In addition we introduce a set of socio-demographic and political variables as controls: gender, age, education, occupation, interest in politics, ideological self-positioning (for the operationalisation see Table A4 in the online Appendix).

Institutional trust as a main driver for the populist vote?

Our discussion proceeds in four steps. We first analyse the effect of institutional (dis)trust over the likelihood to vote for M5S in 2013 and 2018. Second, we assess the inflow/outflow patterns between 2013 and 2018 for M5S, and whether and to what extent institutional (dis)trust relates with them. Third, and as a further robustness check of hypotheses 2 and 3, we dig into the

composition of inflows (towards M5S) and outflows (from M5S). Finally, we compare faithful M5S voters with non-populist and populist electorates outside M5S in the two elections.

Institutional (dis)trust and the populist vote

Table 4¹⁰ reports the results of a multinomial logistic regression where our dependent variable is the declared vote choice for M5S in 2013 and 2018, compared to the vote choice for non-populist parties and other populist parties. (We exclude non-valid responses and non-voters.) Our focal predictor is our standardised index of institutional trust. Since the analysis includes both (2013 and 2018) ITANES waves, we include a dummy variable to control for the effects of time (0 = 2013; 1 = 2018). We use as a baseline category the vote for non-populist parties, to which we contrast the declared vote for M5S and other populist parties.

Model 1 in Table 4 shows the effect of institutional (dis)trust. The coefficient, negative and highly significant for both M5S and other populist parties, confirms that even controlling for a set of sociodemographic and political variables (see Table A5 in the online Appendix for the fully specified models), those who are more distrustful of political institutions are more likely to cast a vote for M5S and other populist parties than for non-populist parties. This is fully in line with our first expectation. However, when we compare the coefficient of (dis)trust of M5S (logit = -0.730 , $p < 0.001$) with that of other populist parties (logit = -0.506 , $p < 0.001$), it is clear that institutional (dis)trust provided a source of electoral advantage for M5S more than for other populist parties. M5S emerged as a genuinely new protest party, with a clear appeal to a discontented electorate.

Table 4. Different electoral profiles of Italian voters in the 2013 and 2018 general elections.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	M5S Voters	Other Populist	M5S Voters	Other Populist
Trust Index	-0.730^{***} (0.0595)	-0.506^{***} (0.0791)	-0.715^{***} (0.0985)	-0.0359 (0.173)
Left/Right	0.0394 (0.0568)	1.446 ^{***} (0.0900)	0.0393 (0.0568)	1.440 ^{***} (0.0900)
Interest in politics	0.108 (0.114)	0.200 (0.159)	0.108 (0.114)	0.192 (0.159)
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year (2018)	1.015 ^{***} (0.125)	1.963 ^{***} (0.201)	1.050 ^{***} (0.126)	1.993 ^{***} (0.201)
Trust Index * Year			-0.0449 (0.123)	-0.586^{**} (0.194)
Intercept	0.0483 (0.235)	-2.748^{***} (0.365)	0.0439 (0.236)	-2.719^{***} (0.366)
N		2228		2228
pseudo R ²		0.194		0.196

Source: ITANES 2013 and 2018.

Note: Entries report the coefficients as derived from a multinomial logistic regression (SE in parentheses) using as a baseline the vote for a non-populist party. Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Model 2 includes an interaction term between trust and time. We do not find evidence of a ‘normalisation’ of the M5S electorate over time, as the coefficient of the interaction term is not significant (logit = -0.0449 , $p > 0.05$): the effect of distrust on vote choice for M5S has remained substantially the same over the 2013–2018 electoral cycle (see also [Figure 1](#)). On the contrary, we find a significant effect of the interaction term among other populist voters: compared to non-populist voters, other populist voters have been mobilised significantly more on their distrustful feelings between 2013 and 2018.

All of this suggests that, even after its first electoral success in 2013, M5S was still relying on the diffused institutional distrust of its electorate: five years as the main opposition party were not sufficient to downplay the distrustful feelings of its electorate.

Overall, we can confirm our first hypothesis: populist parties’ voters (and M5S voters in particular) remained among the most distrustful. Further, the presence of a genuinely new populist party from 2013 to 2018, did not increase trust in institutions among these new populist voters.

Institutional (dis)trust and different groups of M5S voters

In the second part of our empirical analysis, we test our second and third hypotheses. Specifically, we focus here on M5S’s electoral fluxes between 2013 and 2018, using the vote recall question in the 2013 and 2018 surveys. We first contrast what

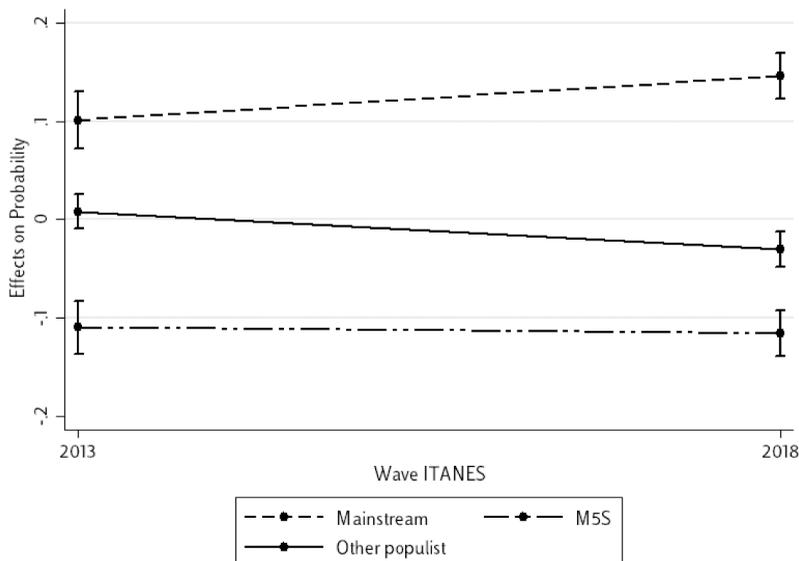


Figure 1. Average marginal effect of (dis)trust on vote choice at different time-points with 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: ITANES 2013 and 2018.

Note: The dotted line refers to the vote for mainstream parties; the dashed-dotted line refers to the vote for M5S; the solid line refers to the vote for other populist parties.

we call the non-M5S voters (i.e. those who did not vote for M5S in 2013 and in 2018) with a) new voters, b) defectors, and c) faithful voters. To assess whether and to what extent institutional (dis)trust distinguishes these different groups, we performed a multinomial logistic regression, using as a baseline category the group of the non-M5S voters and including the same controls of the previous analyses.

The results in Table 5 show two important findings. First, compared to non-M5S voters, the effect of (dis)trust is negative and statistically significant for both the new M5S voters (logit = -0.280 , $p < 0.01$) and faithful M5S voters (logit = -0.611 , $p < 0.01$) (see Table A6 in the online Appendix for the fully specified model). This means that M5S remained the main recipient of disaffected voters over the electoral cycle. Indeed, those who distrust political institutions more are also more likely either to enter M5S for the first time or to not abandon the party in 2018 (after they already voted for it in 2013). On the contrary, our index of trust produces a significant effect for those who leave M5S in 2018 only at a more generous $p < 0.1$. In other words, lower/higher levels of institutional (dis)trust do not help us explain the exit from the party in 2018. Finally, faithful M5S voters have the highest effect of distrust, meaning that the party's entrance into government has not substantially modified the protest nature of M5S's core electorate (a finding in line with the interaction model presented in Table 4). These patterns can be better appreciated by looking at Figure 2, where we plot the average marginal effects of distrust derived from our multinomial logistic regression.

The figure shows the strong positive effect of trust in predicting the permanence of voters outside M5S; conversely, a strong and negative effect is found in relation to faithful M5S voters. As for the inflows towards/outflows from M5S, lower levels of trust are associated with both new entrances and defections from the party. However, the effects are weak and significant for the inflows only. In addition, the differences between these two groups are substantially non-existent: institutional trust does not help to distinguish between them.

Table 5. Profiles of M5S voters.

	M5S Profiles		
	New voters	Defectors	Faithful voters
Trust Index	-0.280^{**} (0.0917)	-0.232 (0.128)	-0.611^{***} (0.0822)
Left/Right	-0.247^{**} (0.0863)	0.104 (0.122)	-0.307^{***} (0.0764)
Interest in politics	0.00859 (0.188)	-0.248 (0.251)	0.196 (0.172)
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intercept	-1.109^* (0.443)	-0.977 (0.610)	-0.244 (0.401)
<i>N</i>		1458	
pseudo R^2		0.035	

Source: ITANES 2018.

Note: Entries report the coefficients as derived from a multinomial logistic regression (SE in parentheses) using as a baseline the non-M5S voters. Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

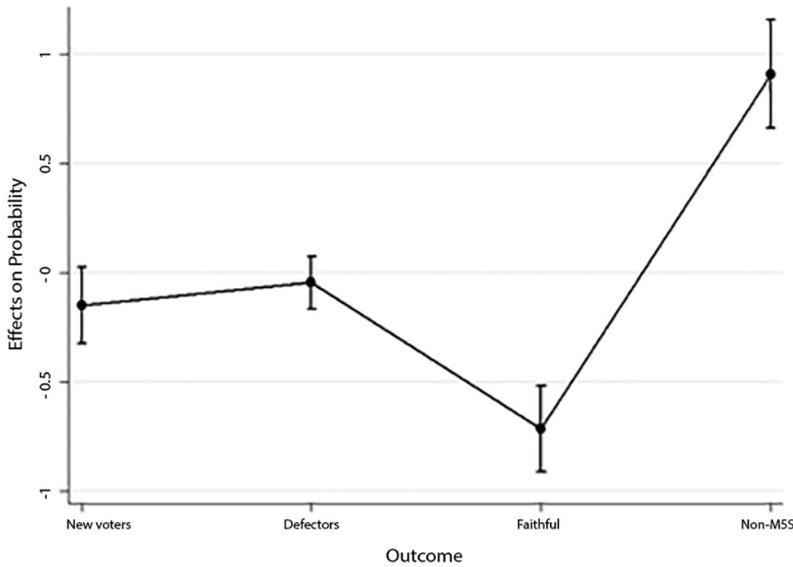


Figure 2. Average marginal effect of (dis)trust with 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: ITANES 2018.

Note: The figure shows that faithful M5S voters represent the most distrustful group, especially when compared to those voters who did not vote for M5S either in 2013 or in 2018 (Non-M5S voters).

Based on these findings, we reject our second hypothesis, where we expected to find a higher level of distrust among new M5S voters, compared to faithful M5S voters. Even if institutional distrust appears to be a significant factor mobilising new voters towards M5S, it does not represent the lion's share. Overall, these findings corroborate what we sketched in the first models about the 'populism-as-threat-or-corrective' thesis: faithful M5S voters have not improved their perception of political institutions since their party has entered the system. On the contrary, this group is the most distrustful, thus suggesting that M5S's populism has either stabilised or amplified rather than 'corrected' the group's distrust in institutions.

As for our third hypothesis, results are mixed. While it is true (as expected) that M5S defectors are more trustful compared to faithful voters, they do not differ much when compared to new voters. New voters and defectors are somewhat distrustful towards institutions, but to a far less extent than faithful voters. Most importantly, our results provide only weak evidence of the effect of (dis)trust in predicting outflows from M5S.

Where do (dis)trustful voters come from? Where do they go?

These results raise some intriguing questions about the internal composition of new voters and defectors. Indeed, the small effects of (dis)trust might well be due to a 'compensation' effect derived from the broadly differentiated

ideological composition of new voters and defectors. In particular, in [Table 1](#), we already noted that the potentially divergent trajectories of populist voters and defectors in election t (2018 in our case) depend on the choice made in $t-1$ (2013). To corroborate the previous findings, we inquire to what extent former centre-right voters now entering M5S are more distrustful than former centre-left voters. Along the same lines, we inquire whether M5S defectors who voted for a centre-right party in 2018 were motivated in this choice by a higher degree of distrust compared to those who opted for a centre-left party. We have not set formal hypotheses about these trends, as our aim is to explore these segments of the electorate and find confirmation of hypotheses 2 and 3.

We assess the level of distrust within these two groups, differentiating between inflows from/outflows towards centre-left and centre-right parties. Thus, our dependent variables are two dichotomies: the first contrasts inflows from centre-right parties (=0) with inflows from centre-left parties (=1). The second instead contrasts outflows towards centre-right parties (=0) with outflows towards centre-left parties (=1). Given the nature of these two dependent variables, we use a binary logistic regression.

As for the new voters, our model ([Table 6](#), first column) shows no significant effect for our index of institutional trust, meaning that trust does not discriminate between inflows from centre-left and centre-right (see [Table A7](#) in the online Appendix for the fully specified models). The only significant predictor is, not surprisingly, the ideological self-positioning of voters (right-wing voters are more likely to come from a right wing-party).

In sum, those who vote M5S for the first time (independently of their past electoral choices) have the same level of disaffection towards the political system. This seems to confirm once again the strong protest and valence nature of the party: M5S's electorate has a multifaceted nature ([Vittori 2020](#)), but the lack of trust in institutions is the main unifying trait.

Looking now at the outflows (and their direction) ([Table 6](#), second column) we do find a significant effect for our index of institutional trust. In this case, the more former M5S voters trust in institutions, the more likely they are to move towards a centre-left party. On the contrary, centre-right parties have been more likely to attract former M5S voters with lower levels of institutional trust. This finding is consistent with the broader picture we have tried to sketch so far and with the idea that other populist parties (Lega and FdI) are the main recipients of the M5S protest vote component. Indeed, defections towards centre-right parties have occurred almost exclusively to the advantage of Lega and FdI.¹¹ And with respect to all Italian populist parties, we have already shown that, besides M5S, they have been the main electoral beneficiaries of institutional distrust. This suggests that relatively more distrustful (former) M5S voters still prefer to vote for a populist party, rather than a centre-left, non-populist party. This might be in line with the outcome of the 2019 European elections,

Table 6. Binary logistic regressions (SE in parentheses) of inflows/outflows from/towards centre-left parties.

	Inflows from centre-left parties	Outflows towards centre-left parties
Trust Index	-0.458 (0.354)	1.422* (0.672)
Left/Right	-4.090*** (0.747)	-4.317** (1.324)
Interest in politics	-1.002 (0.723)	-2.167 (1.364)
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes
Intercept	1.071 (1.740)	-1.187 (2.680)
<i>N</i>	151	61
pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.545	0.682

Source: ITANES 2018.

Source: DVs: 1 = Inflows from/Outflows towards centre-left parties; 0 = Inflows from/Outflows towards centre-right parties.

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$. The reference category in the first model is 'Inflows from centre-right'; the reference category in the second model is 'Outflows toward centre-right'.

when the populist coalition as a whole did not lose votes but Lega became the first party at the expense of M5S. Our data, however, does not allow us to go beyond a general speculation.

Faithful M5S voters

Finally, we analyse the differences between the faithful M5S voters and non-M5S voters, both non-populist and populist. We rely on a multinomial logistic regression, distinguishing between faithful M5S voters, non-M5S non-populist voters, and non-M5S populist voters. Our baseline category is faithful M5S voters. Thus, this analysis helps discriminate between faithful M5S voters and other populist voters (who, however, never cast a vote for M5S). The results, presented in Table A8 in the online Appendix and in [Figure 3](#) below, show two findings. First, institutional trust is positively and significantly linked to the vote for non-populist parties. However, and more important, higher levels of institutional trust are also positively and significantly linked to the vote for other populist parties, when compared to the group of faithful voters for M5S.

[Figure 3](#), which plots the average marginal effect of (dis)trust on the different patterns of voting behaviour, is particularly interesting in the Italian context, in which several populist parties participated in the 2013 and 2018 elections. The results suggest that, although united under the same 'populist' label, these parties differ greatly in terms of their electoral sources: granted the fact that populist parties get rewarded more than non-populist parties by high levels of distrust, M5S emerged as the most powerful and stable mobiliser of voters' institutional distrust between 2013 and 2018.

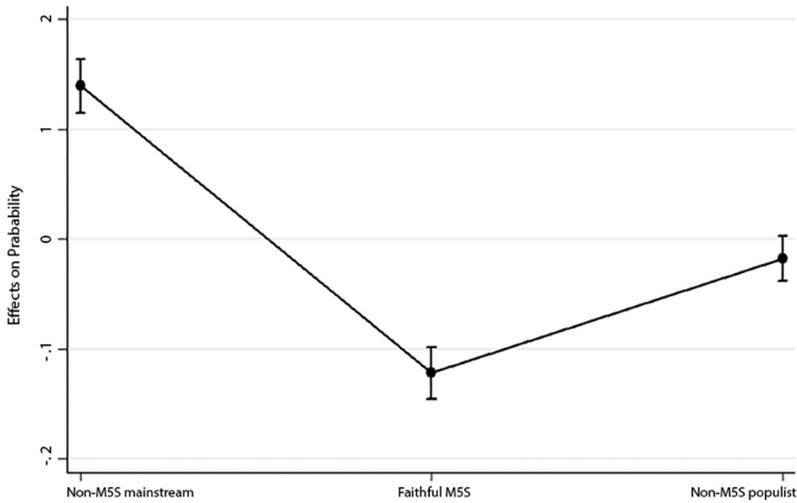


Figure 3. Average marginal effect of (dis)trust with 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: ITANES 2018.

Note: The figure shows that (dis)trust in institutions is a more powerful predictor of being a M5S faithful voter than being both a Non-M5S mainstream and Non-M5S populist voter.

This leads us to confirm our fourth general hypothesis, according to which non-populist voters are more trusting of political institutions than faithful M5S voters. Also, the effect of distrust over time (see [Table 4](#)) and our appraisal of defection patterns towards the centre-left and the centre-right ([Table 6](#) and [Figure 3](#)) have clearly shown that the role of ‘distrust mobiliser’ played by M5S in both elections was partially challenged by right-wing populist parties in 2018, as these parties were the main recipients of M5S distrusting defectors.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed some light on the variegated nature of populist voters, focusing specifically on the Italian case of M5S. While the literature on the issues fostering the populist vote is abundant, less has been said on the differences between groups of voters. Since the literature has shown that institutional trust is one of the main unifying factors behind the populist choice, we use institutional trust as a point of reference for analysing populist voters and, indirectly, to show whether populist parties improve the institutional trust of their voters once they enter the political system.

First, we find strong confirmations that institutional trust is in general a crucial driver for the populist vote (hypothesis 1). At the same time, non-M5S voters, regardless of their origin, are more trusting in institutions (hypothesis 4). Also, we show that *populist* non-M5S voters are more distrustful than *non-populist* non-M5S voters.

Second, and contrary to the populism-as-corrective thesis, we find that faithful M5S voters remain the most dissatisfied group. New voters, i.e. those who defect from other parties and vote for M5S, are driven by distrust in institutions, but their level of distrust is not significantly higher compared to faithful voters. On the other hand, those who left M5S are in no way different from new voters, while being more trusting than faithful voters.

Third, we do not find significant differences between defectors and new M5S voters, thus further disconfirming hypothesis 2. However, what is relevant here is to whom defectors end up defecting: when looking within the new M5S voters' group, we do not find differences in institutional trust, but we do find important differences among defectors. Those who defect from M5S towards right-wing parties (including two populist parties, Lega and FdI), are more distrustful than those who defect to the left.

Overall, these results have important implications for the Italian system. The success of M5S, a party whose main goal since its foundation was to renovate the institutions, did not contribute to the 'normalisation' of the Italian electorate (traditionally characterised by low levels of institutional trust) nor of the Italian political system as a whole: M5S attracted dissatisfied new voters, but its 'old' base was equally dissatisfied with institutions. And the mobilisation of protest voters has not triggered any stabilising effect for the political system. Indeed, already in the general election of 2018, it was clear that the other 'discontent' mobilisers were Lega and FdI. These two populist parties have been able (most probably) to attract former (distrustful) voters of M5S in the subsequent European Parliament elections of 2019, with the immediate consequence of inaugurating a steady electoral decline for the Movement.

From a more general perspective, our results also have broader implications for the literature on populists' success in general, and their role as 'correctors' of democracy, more specifically. The 'populism-as-corrective' thesis states precisely that populism might indeed provide representation for the unrepresented, give them a voice and, potentially, improve the perception that political institutions are able to deliver for them. Using M5S as a most-likely case, we provide important findings which run against the second part of the 'corrective' thesis.

If distrust in institutions can be regarded as a powerful driver for populist voters, not all populist voters share the same level of distrust, the faithful voters being the most distrustful. In this perspective, the most striking result is that populist voters can hardly improve their perception of political institutions when their party enters the system. True, with our data we could not assess whether faithful voters would have opted to exit the system in the case that M5S would not have entered the system. If this was the case, our finding against populism-as-corrective would have been softened, but not substantially altered.

Further research is nonetheless needed in this respect: first, to extend the scope of the investigation to other political systems; second, to check whether, once populist parties are in government, populist voters tend to become more trusting in institutions; third, to explore in detail the interaction between the (populist) demand and supply side. Our paper has focused only on the side of voters, without taking into consideration how demand-side factors might have been affected by the (possible) changes in the supply side (especially when a populist party enters the political system or even joins a governing coalition). Only then, might we expect to have a more defined framework to assess the ‘populist-as-corrective’ thesis.

Notes

1. For a different perspective on Eastern European countries, see Santana, Zagórski and Rama (2020).
2. It is worth mentioning here that in the 2013–2018 period M5S entered Italian Parliament for the first time, without holding any governmental position. Although it is plausible that the party’s shift into government after the 2018 elections might have further affected its voters’ institutional trust, it is also important to notice that in most cases populist parties have entered the political system *without* taking governing positions (being, substantially opposition parties) (Vittori, forthcoming). In this respect, the case of M5S in 2013–2018 is paradigmatic. Furthermore, even when just becoming relevant in the political system (without entering government), populist parties produce relevant political effects, e.g. turnout (especially in Eastern Europe) (Leininger & Meijers 2021) or influencing the agenda-setting (Minkenberg 2001). As a consequence, we assume that even the simple entrance into Parliament might have produced significant effects on voters’ institutional trust.
3. For a notable exception, see the contribution by Voogd and Dassonneville (2020).
4. Four options in t-1 multiplied for the four options for each party, as voters can be faithful to their previous choice or opt for the other three.
5. In empirical terms, testing all subcategories would be unfeasible in a survey, with the potential exception of multi-country surveys where parties are clustered in party families, as the matrix of the potential outcomes would have too few N in ‘niche’ categories.
6. Although FI/PdL has been considered a populist party for most of its political trajectory, in this paper we assume that the ‘label’ of populist party attached to FI is less relevant since the formation of a grand coalition cabinet with Monti in 2013 and with the further steps towards a more moderate profile that the party adopted in the following years. Accordingly, voters also (our unit of analysis for this paper) present a more moderate profile on several issues compared to Lega (Corbetta et al. 2018; Emanuele, Maggini & Paparo 2020).
7. Populist parties include: Lega, Fdi, La Destra (The Right), and RC (Rifondazione Comunista, Communist Refoundation) in 2013; Lega and Fdi in 2018. Non-populist parties are all those parties not falling in the populist category. As RC is a borderline case (Rooduijn & Akkerman 2017), we run a further analysis for 2013 without including RC; the results are robust.
8. See note 6.

9. Scale reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) is 0.71 in 2013 and 0.87 in 2018.
10. Full model specifications for this and all other tables are available in the online Appendix, Tables A5, A6, A7, and A8.
11. For example, based on the ITANES data from 2018, among those who claimed to have voted for M5S in 2013, roughly 6 per cent declared they had voted for Lega in 2018. In comparison, only 3 per cent of former M5S voters declared they had voted for PD in 2018.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 773023).

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