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Relative deprivation, populist orientation and populist vote: A field research / Cena, L., Cavazza, N., Roccato, R.. - In: PSICOLOGIA SOCIALE. - ISSN 1827-2517. - 17:1(2022), pp. 25-34. [10.1482/103206]

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17/11/2026 20:59

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Cena, L., Cavazza, N., & Roccato, M. (2022). Relative deprivation, populist orientation and populist vote: A field research. Psicologia sociale, 1-10. DOI: 10.1482/103206

Relative deprivation, populist orientation and populist vote: A field research

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Abstract

Using data from a survey of a quota sample of the Italian population (N = 1,504), we analysed the relation between perception of relative deprivation and populism. Perceived relative deprivation showed a positive association with populist orientation and the vote both for a right-wing populist party and for a non-positional populist party. Strengths, limitations and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Populism; Voting behaviour; Relative deprivation

Relative deprivation, populist orientation and populist vote: A field research

Populism is a protagonist in the political landscape of many countries around the world. Leaders like Orbán, Le Pen and Salvini, to name a few, have come to the forefront of the political scene. Moreover, the present populist *zeitgeist* has dramatically affected politics and society in different ways—leading, among other things, to an increased polarisation across political parties, a diminishing of the perceived quality of non-populist governments and even to a potential hindering of economic growth over the long term (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020).

The core element of populism is a sharp and morally-connoted separation of society into two homogeneous groups: the Good People vs. the Corrupt Elite (Mudde, 2004). Consequently, populist ideology conceives good politics as the direct expression of the general will of the people. According to Mudde, populism is a thin-centred ideology, in that its core concept can attach to other stronger and more consistent ideologies to substantiate itself. Consistent with this, scholars distinguish among three types of populism: (a) right-wing populism (characterised by charismatic leadership, nativism and opposition to immigration and multiculturalism, examples of which are the Lega in Italy and the Rassemblement National in France), (b) left-wing populism (characterised by opposition to the political and economic establishment, with a focus on egalitarian redistribution of resources, examples of which are Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece), and (c) non-positional populism (a post-ideological or non-ideological orientation that refuses a left-right positional definition, focusing on issues such as education or fighting against corruption, as with the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy) (e.g., Zulianello, 2019).

Recently, many studies on the causes and characteristics of populism have been published (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2019). In this paper, we focus on the ‘demand side’ of populism. Briefly put, previous studies documented three interconnected roads leading to individual populist

orientation and votes: the political road, deriving from the perception of the failure of democracy to represent its citizens; the cultural road, deriving from the sense of disorientation caused by globalisation and changing values, identities and traditions; and the economic road, deriving from the fear and uncertainty provoked by changes in the productive system and by economic crises (Roccato et al., 2020). However, in respect of the economic road, previous studies focused almost exclusively on objective economic hardship, leaving relatively understudied the role of social comparison in eliciting feelings of relative deprivation. We carried out the present study to analyse populist orientation and populist voting as a function of perceived relative deprivation.

1. Relative deprivation

Relative deprivation is the subjective perception that one is unjustly worse off in comparison to some relevant others (Smith at al., 2012). This definition includes three essential steps: (a) an individual makes a comparison with some relevant standard; (b) a cognitive appraisal leads to perceive an imbalance in the distribution of resources and a disadvantaged position for the individual; and (c) this perceived disadvantage is viewed as unfair or illegitimate. This results in the main emotional component of relative deprivation: angry resentment.

To help us clarify this construct, we can differentiate between absolute and relative deprivation. The former is an objective lack of resources (like money, access to services or education, etc.), while the latter stems from a subjective comparison to a relevant standard. When the perception of imbalance is seen as problematic and unfair, it can elicit forms of action against the inequality, with the mediation of anger and resentment. Relative deprivation is associated with individual and interpersonal level outcomes when the referents are single subjects, mainly behaviours aimed to ameliorate one’s deprived condition or internal states such as anxiety, depression or lowering of self-esteem. Relative deprivation is also associated with group-level outcomes when referents are

other social groups, mainly behaviours or collective actions aimed to improve deprived group conditions or ethnocentric intergroup attitudes (Smith et al., 2012).

2. From relative deprivation to populism

Relative deprivation can foster the perception of economic vulnerability, interpreted in terms of moral injustice, that in turn could lead to behavioural strategies aimed at reducing the perception of imbalance, among which is a populist vote (Spruyt et al., 2016). We put forward the hypothesis that relative deprivation accounts for the individual vulnerability that derives from the perceived injustice and discrimination against the ingroup, the good people who never get what they deserve in society (Cena, 2021). This is linked with the fundamental characteristic of populism—the radical distinction between two opposing groups, the good deprived ingroup and the evil depriving outgroup. In this light, the allocation of resources is depicted as a zero-sum game, with the salient outgroups unjustly allowed to have near-exclusive access to the scarce available resources. Since people with feelings of relative deprivation are particularly likely to make disadvantageous comparison between them (the people) and significant referents (the elite), they should be more susceptible to the core ideology of populism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

The populist framing of inequalities leads to a perception of unfairness of the ingroup condition and to the development of ingroup favouritism, but it also absolves the ingroup from responsibility and promotes hostility toward the outgroup, which is seen as being responsible for the problems of the ingroup. Populist rhetoric uses this strategy to unify a large number of individuals under the same label, making them perceive an external threat and mobilize to cope with it (Hameleers et al., 2018). This may foster their motivation to act to ameliorate their relative condition through collective actions, such as supporting and voting for a populist party, based on the need to improve a negative group identity and to decrease feelings of relative deprivation (Bos et al., 2020).

The systematic use of emotions, for which populist rhetoric is recognized, is consistent with this (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017): by appealing to people's feelings of resentment, anger and collective hope, populist leaders can push citizens to vote for them (Obradovic et al., 2020). For example, Gaffney et al. (2018) found, through interviews with protestors in the United States, that prototypical anger (the extent to which people believe their own anger toward politicians is representative of all Americans' anger) predicts relative deprivation, which in turn predicts populism.

3. Goals of this study

The extant theorizations and results are fascinating. However, this literature has two main limitations. First, the role of relative deprivation has been analysed mainly by focusing on populist votes. Less is known about its association with populist orientation. This is undoubtedly a minus, in that individual political orientation can elicit behaviours broader than simply voting (e.g., selective exposure to information and participation in collective actions), even beyond the political sphere (Carney et al., 2008). Second, as stated above, the literature differentiates between right-wing, left-wing and non-positional populism. However, the overwhelming majority of research has focused on the link between relative deprivation and right-wing populist voting, neglecting other kinds of populist votes. This is problematic, in that thinking pessimistically about one's own relative economic situation may persuade citizens to vote for a populist party, independently of its placement on the left-right continuum (Urbanska & Guimond, 2018).

In this study, we have tried to address these limitations, predicting Italians' populist orientations and votes for right-wing and non-positional populist parties, to start testing the hypothesis that relative deprivation could be a universal correlate of populism.

4. Method

We pursued our research goals using data from the first wave of the COCO (COnsequences of COvid-19) project. The data have been collected via a questionnaire administered via email between 26 May and 1 June 2019, on a quota sample of the Italian adult population (N = 1,504, males = 49.3%, M_{age} = 49.83, SD = 14.56), stratified by gender, age, geopolitical area of residence and size of area of residence. The data collection was performed by the Bilendi research institute (https://www.bilendi.it/), on behalf of the COCO group. The data we have used for this study have been collected before the COVID-19 outbreak and were used by the COCO group as the baseline for the changes occurred after the onset of the pandemic. More details on the project are available at BLINDED.

5. Measures

Based on Elchardus and Spruyt (2012), we assessed relative deprivation using three four-category items (labels: Not true at all, A little true, To some extent true and Very true): (a) 'I never received what I did in fact deserve'; (b) 'It is always other people who profit from all kinds of advantage'; and (c) 'When an economic crisis strikes, people like me are always the first to be laid off'.

We measured populist orientation using Roccato et al.'s (2019) POPulist ORientation (POPOR) scale, a balanced scale of six five-category, forced-choice items (example items: 'Some people think that the Parliament as a whole best represents the interests of society. Others think that the will of the people can be carried out only by having a strong leader. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?' and 'Some people say that most politicians in Italy today are corrupt. Others say that only a minority of politicians are corrupt. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?'). A semantic differential-like 5 set of response categories was entered between the two opposite opinions.

Based on the data from the PopuList project (https://popu-list.org/), we recoded participants' votes at the 2019 European election (asked via the item: "Which party have you voted for in the European elections in May 26th 2019?") into a three-category variable: (a) vote for a right-wing populist party (Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, $n = 399$), (b) vote for a non-positional populist party (Movimento 5 Stelle, $n = 240$), and (c) vote for a non-populist party ($n = 408$). We excluded from analysis 457 respondents who reported they did not express a valid vote. We used vote for a non-populist party as reference category.

Due to the composition of the dataset, much more heterogeneous than the samples typically used in social-psychological research, we partialled out the effects of participants' socio-economic status, using gender (1 = woman; 0 = man), age, education (scores ranging from 1 = elementary school diploma to 6 = post-lauream diploma), urbanization (scores ranging from 1 = less than 10,000 residents to 4 = more than 100,000 residents) and occupational status (1 = employed; 0 = not employed) as control variables.

6. **Data analyses**

A measurement model, consisting in the simultaneous confirmatory factor analysis of the POPOR scale and of our measure of relative deprivation, showed that these two measures had the expected structure (see Table 1). Like Roccato et al.'s (2019) validation study and in subsequent administrations of the POPOR scale (Roccato et al., 2020), the POPOR scale had a suboptimal alpha ($\alpha = .47$), plausibly due to the acquiescent response set. We corrected this response bias by resorting to the correlated uniqueness approach (Marsh, 1989), i.e., freeing the bivariate correlations between all of the POPOR scale's con-trait items (see Table 2). There was no need to do the same correction to the relative deprivation measure ($\alpha = .78$). The resulting model showed a satisfactory fit, $CFI = .96$, $TLI = .93$, $SRMR = .04$.

After testing the measurement model above, we performed a multivariate multiple regression aimed at predicting POPOR and vote as a function of relative deprivation (using vote for a non-populist party as the reference category). All analyses were performed using MPLUS 8 using the MLR estimator.

7. Results

Four preliminary unconditional models (detailed results available from the corresponding author) showed that our dependent variables did not show variability across the Italian counties and across Italian regions.[1] Thus, there was no need to resort to multilevel modelling, and we used only Level-1 variables in our analysis. Table 3 shows the results of our predictive model. As regards the control variables, age and education showed a negative association with POPOR. Negative associations were found between education and voting for a non-positional populist party, and between urbanization and voting for both types of populist party. More interestingly for our goals, relative deprivation showed a positive association with populism, both at the attitudinal level (POPOR) and at the behavioural level (voting for a right-wing populist party and for a non-positional populist party). The model explained 49% of the POPOR variance. The R^2s for the two dummy dependent variables were not available from the software.

8. Discussion

In this study, we showed that relative deprivation is positively associated with populist orientation, and with voting either for a right-wing or for a non-positional populist party. These findings are among the first to suggest that relative deprivation could be a fundamental state leading, among other things, to populist outcomes independent of the host ideology and of their attitudinal vs. behavioural nature.

At a first glance, the lack of contextual variability of our dependent variables could suggest that populism depends on individual variables only. However, the data we have analysed probably had a

suboptimal data nesting, i.e., the Italian counties ('provinces') and regions. Efficient multilevel analyses generally use data nested in narrower contexts (typically, the neighbourhood) or in wider contexts (typically, nations). One future development could be to repeat this study with a more satisfying nesting of data, to test the possible contextual variation of the individual tendency to populism. Moreover, since we have performed a correlational study, we could not probe causal links between our independent and our dependent variables. An experimental replication of this study could be interesting. Additionally, we used participants' vote to the 2019 European elections as one of our dependent variables. Like all second-order elections, European elections are not directly linked to Italian situation (as could be for Italian political election instead); they also refer to an overarching category (i.e., Europe) to which Italian people can feel some distances. A replication aimed at analyzing populist votes in Italian general elections could be used to test the robustness of our results. Finally, even though Italy is often considered a privileged observatory for the analysis of different types and forms of populism (Blokker & Anselmi, 2019), it lacks a genuine, left-wing, populist party. An interesting development could be the replication of this study in a different national context that allows the comparison between right-wing, left-wing and non-positional populism.

However, this study has also some strong points. From the methodological point of view, it is based on a wide, national, quota sample of the Italian adult population. Thus, the representativeness of its result is much higher than that of standard social-psychological studies. From the conceptual point of view, our findings show that support for populism is not only associated with different kinds of subjective perceptions of vulnerability, but also stems from social comparison processes. People characterized by a strong feeling of political distrust, people who experience the world as unfair and feel that they do not get what they deserve in comparison to others, are good candidates for developing a populist orientation and for supporting populist policies. In this sense, using

relative deprivation among the correlates of populism helps to understand the importance of subjective perception when individuals appraise social situations. From an applied point of view, our findings suggest that invoking a sense of unfairness and injustice through political communication (i.e., to foster the perception of relative deprivation) can be a means to promote populist orientations and votes (Bos et al., 2020).

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Footnote.

1. The *ICC*s of the models predicting the POPOR were respectively .01 (data nested at the county level) and .00 (data nested at the region level). The *ICC*s of the model predicting the vote were not available from the software.

Table 1. Measurement model: Factorial loadings

Item	Factor loading: POPOR	Factor loading: relative deprivation
There are those who say that the difference between left and right in politics is still important today. Others say that the difference between left and right in politics doesn't make sense any more. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?	.34***	
Some people say that politicians, journalists, and financial experts are all part of the same corrupt system that has led Italy into crisis. Others say that it's not right to lump those groups all together, because they have different responsibilities. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)	.37***	
Some people say that most politicians in Italy today are corrupt. Others say that only a minority of politicians are corrupt. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)	.28***	
There are those who say that ordinary people could easily enter the Parliament and do the job. On the other hand, other people think that political matters are complicated and need to be dealt with by professionals. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)	.21***	

Some people think that the Parliament as a whole best represents the interests of society. Others think that the will of the people can be carried out only by having a strong leader. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?	.39***	
There are those who say that conflicts among people are inevitable because it's just part of human nature. On the other hand, others think that ordinary people are basically good and honest and that it's only because of those in charge that people are set against each other. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?	.28***	
I never received what I did in fact deserve		.78***
It is always other people who profit from all kinds of advantage		.80***
When an economic crisis strikes, people like me are always the first to be laid off		.64***

Note. Standardized parameters are displayed. *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Measurement models: Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Some people say that politicians, journalists, and financial experts are all part of the same corrupt system that has led Italy into crisis. Others say that it's not right to lump those groups all together, because they have different responsibilities. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)	1	.37***	.14***		
2. Some people say that most politicians in Italy today are corrupt. Others say that only a minority of politicians are corrupt. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)		1	.18***		
3. There are those who say that ordinary people could easily enter the Parliament and do the job. On the other hand, other people think that political matters are complicated and need to be dealt with by professionals. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions? (R)			1		
4. POPOR factorial score				1	.66***
5. Relative deprivation factorial score					1

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 3. Prediction of populist orientation and populist vote

	POPOR			Vote for a right-wing populist party			Vote for a non-positional populist party		
	B	*S.E.*	Beta	*B*	*S.E.*	Beta	*B*	*S.E.*	Beta
Female gender	.06	.04	.06	-.18	.17	-.18	.07	.15	.06
Age	-.00**	.00	-.14	.00	.01	.05	.00	.01	.07
Urbanization	.01	.02	.02	-.16*	.07	.36	-.14*	.07	-.28
Education	-.06**	.02	-.16	-.16	.09	-.32	-.30***	.08	-.56
Occupational status	-.08	.04	-.09	-.14	.16	.03	-.14	.16	-.12
Relative deprivation	.47***	.06	.67	.72***	.17	.84	.69***	.15	.75
N	1,504			1,047					
AIC	39822.674								
BIC	40088.468								

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.