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Re-Constructing “Populism” as a Signifier of the Changing Meanings of the Political World: The Italian Case

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Abstract: This paper investigates the concept of “populist attitudes” resulting from the emotional symbolization of the political world. While contemporary scholars link populism to individual attitudes or socio-economic shifts, we argue that understanding populism’s underlying dynamics offers a more nuanced perspective. Addressing these emotional symbolizations sheds light on how populist attitudes and structural conditions become salient and lead to a global rise. Using data from a nationally representative Italian survey, we studied the interaction between populist attitudes and three concepts often associated with populism, which we ascribed to the domain of the emotional symbolizations of the political world: alienation, powerlessness, and protest voting. Alienation reflects passive estrangement from politics, while powerlessness fuels citizens’ potential resentment, leading to protest voting as a reaction. By emphasizing the relationship between citizens and politics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and psychological drivers of populist attitudes, disentangling the concept of “populism” from the risk of reified stances. We underscore that approaching this phenomenon within its broader dynamic can provide an innovative perspective. We call for further contextual approaches to enhance theoretical insights and inform practical strategies to address populism’s disruptive effects.

Keywords: populism; emotional symbolizations; political alienation; political powerlessness; protest voting; reification; anti-populism



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1. Introduction: Populism in the Current Era

In recent decades, the phenomenon of populism has gained significant prominence in political agendas and academic discourse. The systematic study of “populism” emerged strongly in the mid-1990s, driven by influential works such as those by Betz [1], Kazin [2], Taggart [3], and Roberts [4], which explored its European and Latin American expressions. These foundational texts laid the groundwork for contemporary debates, which have expanded exponentially over the last decade. Notably, the number of scholarly works mentioning “populism” increased from 21,000 to 51,800 in a single decade [5], and in the last four years, it has almost doubled (42,800 results for 2021–2024, as searchable in Google Scholar). Seminal contributions by Canovan [6], Mudde [7], and Laclau [8] have reignited academic interest, inspiring further research by Müller [9], Mouffe [10], Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt [11], among others.

Contemporary scholarship on populism converges around four main approaches—defining it as ideology, strategy, discourse, or political style. These perspectives share a common focus on the dichotomy between “the people” and “the elites”. This distinction resonates beyond academic inquiry, as political and social developments, particularly in Western countries, have intensified public interest in populism. Events such as Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom have sparked debates about the potential threats that populist movements pose to democracy. Across the globe, from Italy to Hungary, France to the Netherlands, Brazil to the United States, and Argentina, highly personalized populist movements have risen, often centered on controversial leaders [12].

These movements typically polarize the social sphere, framing politics as a conflict between “the people” and “the establishment” (or “us” vs. “them”) and pledging to prioritize the people’s interests over those of entrenched elites [7,13]. However, using the term “populism” to describe political transformations rooted in such oppositions is not new. Its origins can be traced back to the early 19th century, with movements like the U.S. People’s Party and Russia’s Narodnik advocating for agrarian interests against the corruption and inequalities of industrialization [13].

What distinguishes modern populism is the intensity and simultaneity of its manifestations and the global attention it commands [12]. In contemporary Western political discourse, the label “populist” is frequently applied to actors who challenge established rules, often without regard to the principles underlying their critique [14]. Populism is now associated with various phenomena, including the crisis of traditional politics [15–18], financial inequalities resulting from globalization [19–21], and cultural backlash against progressive values [22].

The diversity of causes reflects populism’s heterogeneity across political systems, making it resistant to unified conceptualization [23]. Minimalist approaches, such as Mudde’s [24], address this challenge by defining populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that views society as divided into two antagonistic groups—“the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”—and posits that politics should express the “volonté générale” (general will) of the people.

This definition enables scholars to identify populist elements across the political spectrum, depending on the ideologies with which populism aligns [25,26]. However, minimalist definitions offer limited explanatory power, primarily capturing populism’s surface features. Moreover, the ideological opposition between “the honest many” and “the corrupt few” is not unique to populism; rather, it underpins many forms of political partisanship [12]. Consequently, populism has evolved as a concept [27], varying according to the background of the researchers as well as of the political context where it is approached. In Europe and the U.S., populism is often associated with the far-right, while in Latin America, it is linked to leftist movements [28]. This conceptual ambiguity has led some analysts to question the utility of the term [27,29,30].

Nevertheless, the widespread and persistent use of the term “populism” in academic and everyday discourse underscores its significance as a lens for analyzing political phenomena. We argue that this enduring relevance highlights the need to understand the collective dynamics underpinning the adoption of populism as a category, enabling us to make sense of contemporary political transformations.

1.1. The Pejorative Stances Underpinning Populism

The polarized political landscape currently characterizing Western democracies has imbued the concept of populism with a pejorative connotation [31]. As its usage has grown, populism has become increasingly associated with phenomena perceived as antithetical

to the foundations of democracy—xenophobia and demagoguery being among the most frequently cited [9,24,32–34]. This association has fostered an implicit pejorative framing of populism, contributing to a counter-narrative that delegitimizes populist movements and leaders [19,31], often portrayed as divisive actors and existential threats to democracy [9]. This negative framing, defined as “anti-populism” [19], underscores the usage of populism as a category for describing some of the most contentious phenomena shaping contemporary Western political systems. Anti-populism frames populism as a pathological deviation from democratic norms, reinforcing elite-centric governance [35–37]. Accordingly, anti-populist assumptions frequently inform media narratives and political establishments alarmed by the rise of new and controversial actors labeled as populists, aiming to discredit and marginalize them.

However, by perpetuating binary oppositions such as us/them, good/evil, and democratic/anti-democratic, anti-populism inadvertently mirrors the polarizing tendencies of populist rhetoric itself. While populism is inherently polarizing, anti-populist responses risk exacerbating political divisions too.

Critics have also argued that this pejorative framing of populism, largely propagated by the media [31], risks overshadowing its potential transformative capacity. Scholars have highlighted how populism provides an outlet for collective grievances that traditional political systems fail to address [8,10,38]. Similarly, it has been claimed that populism reflects a reaction to crises within dominant ideological discourses, translating these crises into calls for accessible resolutions [37]. In this sense, populism gives voice to diverse social demands, articulating the frustrations of disillusioned citizens seeking to reclaim agency in political and social life. These citizens often express a desire to replace a political establishment they neither trust nor feel represented by, emphasizing their will “to take things into their hands” [12].

These scholarly contributions are particularly significant in countering anti-populist perspectives as they underscore the importance of engaging with the social demands articulated through the populist phenomena rather than dismissing populism as a threat to be normatively countered. The emerging shortcoming of normative approaches is supplanting both theoretical inquiry and explorations of the historical, cultural, and contingent factors in which populist phenomena—be they political parties, leaders, or rhetoric—emerge.

We argue that the normative stances through which populism is assumed as a pathology affecting democracies [39] reflect a problem inherent in the lack of theoretical conceptualization of this phenomenon, which is replaced by its reified adoption from common sense language.

1.2. Reification and Ordinary Language Effects on Populism

“Anti-populism”, by framing populism as a threat, fosters a generalized representation of its manifestations, homogenized under a normative stance: populism must be countered. This dynamic, intertwined with the emotional engagement surrounding populism, leads to the issue of the reified assumption of this concept resulting from its adoption from ordinary language instead of a scientific one.

The difficulty in achieving a shared definition of populism and agreement on what that category encompasses [8] underscores this issue. Although populism is widely referenced by scholars, the media, and the general public, its conceptual reification is built on the implicit assumption that “populism” exists as a distinct phenomenon despite being associated with heterogeneous and often contradictory meanings [40]. Reification operates by ascribing socially constructed meanings to reality, thereby rendering it thinkable and accessible to human cognition [41]. By constraining the infinite possible interpretations of reality, reification constructs “reality” itself.

Social constructs—such as institutions, norms, or roles—are initially products of human interaction and agreement, yet they become perceived as objective, immutable realities rather than human-made creations. This perception reduces the need for constant negotiation or justification, facilitating societal stability and predictability [42]. Similarly, reification underpins common-sense knowledge, defined as the culturally embedded, everyday frameworks that shape individuals' understandings of reality [43,44]. Through the overlap of socially constructed categories with reality, reification enables individuals to interpret the world, navigate social interactions, and construct roles and organizations.

While reification, socially shared through ordinary language, provides a sense of stability to external reality, it can also hinder adaptation when structural changes—social, technological, political, or financial—transform the conditions of social interactions. Such changes can result in a mismatch between structural conditions of reality and their reified assumptions.

Numerous scholars have observed that the collective identities underpinning political engagement in 20th-century democracies are undergoing profound changes [45–48]. Traditionally based on class or religious affiliation, these collective identities once played a central role in political mobilization, as political parties represented the struggles of these groups [49]. Structural transformations over the past century—such as globalization, the financialization of the economy, industrial decline, and the rise in digital communication technologies—have eroded the relevance of these identities. These changes have diminished their capacity to support collective action and, crucially, have not been replaced by effective alternatives. Phenomena of social polarization, intolerance of diversity, and rises in extremist positions can be seen as reactions aimed at enforcing the boundaries of the known reality and resisting its changing structural conditions.

In these processes, the scientific discourse—especially the one of social sciences—is called upon to provide an alternative to polarized reactions by fostering new interpretive patterns of changing scenarios.

Different from scientific language, ordinary language, with its intuitive appeals and grounding in everyday practices, tends to oversimplify complex phenomena. Therefore, when scientific and ordinary language overlap, the theoretical construction of phenomena is replaced with reified assumptions. This is particularly relevant for social sciences [50], as the phenomena they deal with easily overlap with one's subjective experience of everyday life (this is the case of concepts belonging to a common language and employed by social scientific discourse, such as: “well-being”, “group”, “participation”, and so on).

It is in order to avoid this shortcoming that “hard” disciplines—such as medicine, physics, and mathematics—have developed formalized languages and conceptual frameworks, marking a clear discontinuity from ordinary language and ensuring a stronger methodological rigor. While in social sciences, the conflation between scientific and ordinary language risks reducing complex phenomena to reified “pieces of reality”, when it comes to “populism”, this conflation between scientific and ordinary language has hindered a theoretically driven understanding of the phenomena encompassed by this concept, as well as the social demands which find a response in populist rhetorics.

This paper aims to address this potential shortcoming by integrating descriptive approaches to “populism”, such as scholarships focusing on leaders' populist rhetoric [51] or the causes of current populist waves [52], with an exploratory stance addressing populism's potential underpinning of symbolic dynamics, which are reified through the use of this category.

In other words, we advocate for addressing the concept of “populism” as reifying the emotional symbolization through which the political world is experienced by social actors. This symbolic dynamic constructs our relationship with the political world with the

emotional connotation acted out in political behaviors, in turn reinforcing the salience of affective symbolizations. In summary, we tackle “populist attitudes” as a reflection of a broader symbolic dynamic occurring in the relationship between citizens and politics.

We argue that the increasing use of the concept of “populism” is related to the psychological dynamics that allow us to make sense of these global transformations: “populism” reflects the critical components of the emotional symbolization through which we can make sense of the political world in contemporary societies. In the following sections, we further explore this issue by addressing “populist attitudes”.

1.3. Populism as a Signifier of the Emotional Symbolizations of the Political World

While social and political sciences have extensively explored the conditions facilitating the spread of populism [53] as well as the features of its rhetoric [54], basically focusing on its supply side, psychological tradition has prioritized the study of personality traits [55], attitudes [56] and socio-economic conditions [57–59] associated with populism and populist voting. This focus on both the structural causes and individual determinants of populism seems to have dominated field scholarships backed by studies overlooking the underlying dynamics fostering the collective demands for populist political supplies.

With this paper, we aim to integrate previous scholarships by providing a stance on the collective psychological dynamics underpinning the political phenomena encompassed by this category. We argue that structural conditions, as well as individual traits leading to populism, are made salient by deeper social–psychological dynamics constructing the meanings through which political reality is experienced.

We aim to analyze this aspect through the theory of emotional symbolization [60,61] as developed within recent psychoanalytic tradition [61–63]. From this perspective, the human mind does not merely process external reality but actively constructs it by generating socially shared emotional symbolizations. The dynamic of emotional symbolization always targets “objects”—whether they are internal or external to the subject—creating the basic conditions for the experience/perception of external reality to happen. In summary, by providing the “objects” of reality with emotional connotations through the dynamic of symbolization, the human mind makes them thinkable by letting them enter the field of experience [64–66].

As a result, emotional symbolizations are inherently situated and context-specific as they do not only concern individuals; rather, this process is inherent to the subject–object relation. Emotional symbolization enables us to collectively experience reality, communicate effectively, and behave consistently. In summary, they function as the psychological “signified” of every “signifier” of reality entering the field of experience: what we experience as “reality” is constructed by the dynamic of emotional symbolization.

Although emotional symbolizations through which social groups experience the same reality are not always homogenous—rather, they can vary across individuals and sub-groups—they are always related to each other, as their interaction allows for the construction of shared reality.

Building on this theoretical perspective, we aimed to address “populism” not as a phenomenon existing “per se” independently from the subject–object relationship where this concept is “experienced”. Rather, the goal was to explore “populist attitudes” as a “signifier” [8] of a specific “signified” concept, consisting of the emotional symbolizations of the relationship between citizens and politics. In other words, to explore the collective demands expressed through “populist attitudes”, we explored the broader relational dynamic where these attitudes stem from: the emotional symbolizations of the political world.

Moreover, by exploring the genetic dynamics of “populist attitudes”, this approach is expected to potentially tackle the shortcomings resulting from reified “anti-populist” stances and the conflation of “populism” with other concepts that have led some scholars to reject its adoption as a political category [67–69]. By inscribing “populism” in the broader framework of the relationship between citizens and politics, the focus shifts from countering populist behaviors and rhetorics, making this relationship evolve beyond its critical conditions.

To test this theoretical hypothesis, we conducted a study where we chose three main emotional symbolizations of the political world which, consistent with previous scholarships, we assumed to be potentially intertwined with “populist attitudes” and, therefore, assumed to have potential “symbolic ground”: political alienation [70], powerlessness [71] and protest voting [72].

We then explored the relationship between these emotional symbolizations and populist attitudes in Italy, a country where populism has historically found significant political success.

2. Case Study

2.1. *The Italian Political Scenario*

Italy is widely recognized as a precursor to the contemporary right-wing populist wave in Europe and the United States. According to Vercesi [5], the collapse of the major postwar parties created an opening in the Italian political landscape, allowing populist movements to gain traction. It was in the aftermath of the dissolution of the “First Republic” that Silvio Berlusconi emerged as a dominant political figure. Often considered one of Europe’s earliest populist leaders to achieve national electoral success in the 1990s [7,73,74], Berlusconi introduced a strong anti-establishment rhetoric aimed at addressing widespread public discontent. His brand of populism is credited with paving the way for figures such as Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Marine Le Pen in France. Yet, Berlusconi’s movement was only one among many—these movements have been diverse in their ideological stances but united by deep-seated mistrust and skepticism toward elites and representative institutions. More recently, the Italian political landscape has seen a rise in new or rebranded populist actors, including the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), Lega Nord (Northern League), and Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), the latter currently leading the national government.

Several explanations have been proposed to account for the proliferation of populist parties in Italy, often described in the literature as a “populist paradise” [75]. Historical and territorial determinants have been highly accounted for in explaining this predominance. Historically, anti-parliamentary sentiments date back to the unification of Italy in 1861, further reinforced by the fascist regime’s rhetoric, which framed “the people” as a pre-political entity. The “Tangentopoli” corruption scandal (1992–1994) further eroded trust in political institutions, leading to the near-total dismantling of the traditional party system and fostering an enduring climate of skepticism [76]. These historical legacies, combined with Italy’s deep regional diversity, have resulted in highly differentiated, territorially rooted expressions of populism [5].

Despite various attempts to explain the phenomenon, Italy remains an outlier. The economic, cultural, and political factors typically used to account for the rise in populism in other European countries fail to fully capture the complexity of the Italian case. This, alongside the prominence of “populism” in Italian political discourse and the country’s persistent mistrust of elites and institutions, makes Italy a crucial case for studying populist attitudes and the emotional symbolizations of the political world.

2.2. Objective and Methodology

We conducted this study to explore the potential impact of three emotional symbolizations of the political world on Italians' populist attitudes. We, therefore, identified three ways of making sense of the political world that, to different extents, the field of literature links to "populism": political alienation, political powerlessness, and protest votes.

The overarching aim was to contribute to scholarship in this field by addressing individual traits or attitudes [55,56] or the socio-economic conditions [15,34,77] related to "populism" by providing a theoretical perspective addressing its collective symbolic underpinnings. "Populist attitudes" have been addressed as stemming from these collectively shared emotional symbolizations of the political world. Emotional symbolizations, constituting the way in which external reality is dynamically shaped and made meaningful, make these individual and structural variables salient in predicting populism.

Although data have been collected at the individual level (survey), our theoretical standpoint was to address data as expressing a shared component, although individual, of emotional symbolizations. In other words, they express the ways politics are collectively experienced within a given context: Italy.

2.3. Definition of Variables and Operationalization

In this section, we explain how the measures for the dependent (populist attitudes) and the independent variables (emotional symbolizations of the political world: political alienation, powerlessness, and protest votes) were identified.

2.3.1. Populist Attitudes

To measure populist attitudes, we drew on the minimalist approach proposed by Mudde [24] (p. 23), focusing on the following two core characteristics of populism:

Antagonism between the people and the elite. This dimension emphasizes a conflictual relationship between ordinary citizens and political elites. We operatively implemented this through the following two items:

- "Citizens could find better solutions to the country's problems than current politicians".
- "The majority of politicians aren't interested in what ordinary citizens think".

Emphasis on popular sovereignty. This aspect underscores the primacy of the will of the people in democratic governance. We operatively implemented this using the following two items:

- "In a democracy, the views of ordinary people should prevail over the views of the political elite".
- "Government should change its policies in response to the will of the people".

2.3.2. Political Alienation

Political alienation is defined as a state of estrangement in which citizens perceive the political system as unresponsive, ineffective, or unfair [78]. The binary opposition between "the people" and "the elite," central to populist rhetoric [8], often capitalizes on this sense of alienation by framing populist leaders as champions of marginalized voices. Modern populist movements, particularly right-wing variants, frequently emphasize the restoration of popular sovereignty, often in a nationalistic framework (e.g., "America First!").

We defined political alienation as the expression of emotional symbolization conveying the deep estrangement of citizens from the whole political sphere. Consistently, building on this perceived insurmountable gap between the layman and politicians, the potential relationship between citizens and politics is denied [79–81].

To capture this emotional symbolization, we used the following items:

- “I see politics as the activity performed only by politicians, government and parliament”.
- “I see politics as the activity performed only by those who hold political power”.

2.3.3. Political Powerlessness

We used political powerlessness to identify the emotional symbolization of citizens' relationship with politics, where citizens perceive that they have no influence over collective decisions [82]. Unlike alienation, which reflects a sense of estrangement, powerlessness highlights the frustration and anger stemming from the experience of having no power, as control is perceived to rest entirely in the hands of politicians.

Therefore, we assumed political powerlessness to express an emotional symbolization in relation to the political world where political decisions are uncontrollable. Political power is completely in the hands of the ruling élites, leaving citizens as passive recipients. It is worth noting that in the Italian, the verb used is “subire”. We have hereby translated it as “passively suffer”, albeit the English version fails to fully capture the inherently relational aspect of “subire”, which posits that someone is at the receiving end of injustice or harm, often inflicted by external forces, positioning them as passive yet affected by an ongoing imposition or abuse.

To measure this construction, we operatively investigated political powerlessness using the following item:

- “I believe that citizens can only passively suffer political decisions”.

2.3.4. Protest Vote

Protest voting is a prominent phenomenon in Europe, driven by dissatisfaction with traditional political parties and governance systems. It involves casting ballots for candidates or parties as a symbolic rejection of the status quo, represented by mainstream parties, rather than an endorsement of specific policies presented by the opposition. Protest votes have been strongly associated with the rise in populist parties [20,83].

We defined protest vote as the behavioral expression of anti-establishment sentiments expressing a reaction against politics symbolized as disconnected from the needs of “the people”. In this view, protest voting is not based on an agreement with a political position or ideology of a party. Rather, it serves to express one's discontent and anger against the political system.

To capture this construction, we operatively investigated protest votes using the following items:

- “Voting serves to replace the political establishment”.
- “Voting serves to change what does not work in the country”.

2.4. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. *Political alienation will predict populist attitudes.*

Populist attitudes are influenced by a feeling of detachment from the political world. Populist leaders, through people-centric rhetoric, present themselves as alternatives to the existing political establishment. When the relationship between citizens and politics is characterized by a sense of estrangement from the political system (alienation), populist narratives provide an alternative relationship with politics.

Hypothesis 2. *Political powerlessness will predict populist attitudes.*

Feelings of frustration and perceptions of being subjected to the political elite are likely to intensify populist attitudes. This frustration often manifests as anger, which aligns with populist rhetoric emphasizing the restoration of popular sovereignty and the reclaiming of power from elites.

Hypothesis 3. *Voting behavior framed in terms of distancing from—instead of supporting—the political class will be correlated to stronger populist attitudes.*

When individuals' emotional symbolizations of the political world are shaped by alienation and/or powerlessness, voting may be perceived as a direct way of regaining influence over politics and expressing dissatisfaction.

2.5. Participants

This study involved 1000 participants (483 females, 517 males) in a nationally representative survey¹ aimed at examining Italians' socio-psychological constructs related to social and political participation. Data were collected through a web-based survey conducted in February 2023 with the assistance of a panel provider. Given the breadth of the survey, which included numerous measures beyond the scope of the present study, the analysis here focused specifically on items related to populist attitudes and emotional symbolizations of the political world.

Demographics are shown in Table 1. The sample is representative of the Italian population based on gender and age according to the 2022 Italian Census and geographic distribution according to Nielsen Areas. Age distribution included 155 participants aged 18–30, 216 participants aged 31–45, 283 participants aged 46–60, and 346 participants over 60 years of age. Participants were compensated for their participation. No exclusions were made following data collection.

Table 1. Demographics.

Sex	Frequency	%
Male	483	48.3
Female	517	51.7
Age	Frequency	%
18–30	155	15.5
31–45	216	21.6
46–60	283	28.3
Over 60	346	34.6
Education	Frequency	%
Middle School Diploma (Low)	115	11.5
High School Diploma (Medium)	519	51.9
Bachelor's Degree (Medium)	125	12.5
Master's Degree (High)	208	20.8
PhD (High)	33	3.3

Table 1. Cont.

Income	Frequency	%
Low	110	11.0
Medium/Low	261	26.1
Medium	503	50.3
Medium/High	80	8.0
High	4	0.4
I prefer not to answer	42	4.2
Political Orientation	Frequency	%
Left	141	14.1
Center	443	44.3
Right	201	20.1
I prefer not to answer	215	21.5

2.6. Design and Procedure

This study employed a two-step analytical approach to investigate the relationships between the variables within a nationally representative sample.

Step 1—A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the initial associations between the independent variables (political alienation, powerlessness, and protest vote) and the dependent variable (populist attitudes).

Step 2—A regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive relationships and to determine the extent to which the independent variables accounted for variance in populist attitudes.

All participants responded to the same survey items, ensuring consistency in the data used for both correlational and regression analyses.

3. Results

3.1. Correlation Analyses

The initial correlation analyses assessed relationships between populist attitudes, demographics (age, gender, education, and income), and political orientation. While age, education, and political orientation were significantly correlated with populist attitudes, gender and income were not (see Appendix A, Table A1). Specifically, the following was obtained:

- Level of education: $r = -0.07$, $p = 0.032$;
- Age: $r = 0.07$, $p = 0.027$;
- Political orientation (left to right): $r = 0.009$, $p = 0.004$.

The correlations between populist attitudes and the independent variables were overall positive and notably stronger than those with demographics:

- Alienation: The perception that politics is restricted to a detached elite was positively correlated with populist attitudes ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$).
- Powerlessness: The perception of being a passive recipient of political decisions strongly correlated with populist attitudes ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$).
- Protest Vote: Viewing voting as a mechanism to replace the political elite and drive change was positively associated with populist attitudes ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$).

3.2. Regression Analyses

Guided by the correlation results, a stepwise linear regression analysis was conducted using demographics, alienation, powerlessness, and protest voting as explanatory variables and populist attitudes as the outcome variable (Appendix A, Table A2).

- Model 1: This includes the socio-demographic variables significantly correlated with populist attitudes (age, education level and political orientation). This model was not statistically significant ($R = 0.09$, $F(3, 781) = 2.048$, $p = 0.11$, $R^2 = 0.008$, R^2 Adjusted = 0.004).
- Model 2: Alienation was added as a regressor. The model achieved significance ($R = 0.14$, $F(4, 780) = 3.59$, $p = 0.002$, $R^2 = 0.019$, R^2 Adjusted = 0.014), with alienation significantly predicting populist attitudes ($\beta = 0.10$, $t = 2.95$, $p < 0.01$).
- Model 3: Powerlessness was added, significantly increasing the explanatory power ($R = 0.36$, $F(5, 779) = 19.88$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.13$, R^2 Adjusted = 0.12). In this model, powerlessness was the only significant predictor ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 9.98$, $p < 0.001$), while alienation lost significance ($\beta = 0.06$, $t = 1.70$, $p < 0.09$).
- Model 4: Protest voting was added, further improving the model ($R = 0.38$, $F(6, 778) = 21.33$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.141$, R^2 Adjusted = 0.135). Powerlessness remained the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 10.05$, $p < 0.001$), followed by protest voting ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 3.18$, $p < 0.01$).

4. Discussion

The results of the correlation analysis with socio-demographic variables indicate that education, age, and political orientation are associated with populist attitudes. Specifically, education is negatively correlated with populist attitudes, while these attitudes are positively associated with older age brackets (46 years and above) and a right-wing political orientation. However, the correlation values were minimal, and the regression analysis in Model 1 revealed that these socio-demographic variables lack explanatory power in predicting populist attitudes.

For the primary variables of interest, the findings support Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, underscoring the roles of political alienation, political powerlessness, and protest voting in explaining populist attitudes. Among these, political powerlessness emerged as the most significant explanatory variable. While Model 2 demonstrated that political alienation positively predicts populist attitudes, its explanatory power was absorbed by political powerlessness when introduced in Model 3. Furthermore, the inclusion of protest voting in Model 4 slightly increased the model's explanatory power (R^2 Adjusted = 0.135), yet political powerlessness retained its primary role.

These findings suggest that political powerlessness represents the emotional core underpinning populist attitudes. The diminished explanatory role of alienation in Model 3, when powerlessness was accounted for, highlights a critical distinction: when politics is perceived as a force to which one is passively subjected, alienation—defined as emotional estrangement from the political world—loses its significance. Alienation may, thus, be conceptualized as a passive reaction to the deeper emotional experience of powerlessness.

In contrast, protest voting appears to function as an active reaction to political powerlessness, as evidenced by the improved explanatory power of Model 4. When individuals feel powerless in the face of political decisions, voting is represented as a means of expressing frustration and reclaiming a sense of agency. Protest voting thus becomes a symbolic tool with which to address perceived disempowerment, imbuing the act with the potential to restore a sense of influence over political outcomes.

In summary, alienation reflects a denial of the relationship with the political world, perceived as distant and controlled by inaccessible forces. Powerlessness encapsulates the sense of having no influence over political events, positioning citizens as passive subjects of political decisions: political power is something that one is unjustly and painfully subjected to. Lastly, protest voting represents a reaction aimed at expressing one's discontent towards these unjust conditions. While alienation is akin to apathy [78,84], powerlessness

is aligned with anger. Together, these symbolic representations of the political world foster a motivational drive, championed by populist rhetoric, to restore popular sovereignty by transferring political power back to “the people,” purportedly usurped by elites.

5. Conclusions

This paper sought to contribute to the scholarly research on populism by providing a stance on the collective symbolic dynamics underpinning populism’s current global success. Both political and academic agendas have frequently associated populism with disparate phenomena, relating it to either individual attitudes or reactions to changing structural and macro-social conditions. Despite a large body of scholarship describing the causes of the current success of populist politics, the scientific field still appears fragmented as a shared understanding of what exactly populism refers to is to be achieved.

We addressed this shortcoming by analyzing populism—and specifically populist attitudes—not as a phenomenon existing “per se”. Rather, we ascribed it to a broader context where these attitudes are generated from the emotional symbolization of the political world. We sought to detach the term populism from moral and evaluative judgments to avoid anti-populist biases while constructing the concept within the broader interpretative framework of emotional symbolizations of the relationship with the political world. This perspective draws on psychological theories, where emotional symbolizations provide shared meanings that shape individuals and social groups’ experiences of external reality, translating into behaviors, beliefs, roles, and broader social structures.

To operationalize this perspective, we conducted a study aimed at exploring how populist attitudes relate to variables reflecting some specific emotional symbolizations of the political world. From the analysis of previous scholarships, we identified three variables that we felt could express some critical emotional symbolizations of the political world characterizing current Western societies: political alienation, powerlessness, and protest voting. By adopting this approach, we expected to critically address the concept of “populism”—and “populist attitudes”—not as a phenomenon “per se”, but rather as expressing a crisis in emotional frameworks through which the relationship with politics is experienced. Specifically, we associate political alienation and powerlessness, respectively, with feelings of estrangement and anger, while protest voting was ascribed to a reaction to these feelings.

The results demonstrated a strong relationship between these emotional symbolizations and populist attitudes, particularly highlighting the central role of the powerlessness symbolization: when the political world is symbolized as functioning in a self-referential way regardless of the will of citizens, populist attitudes, with their “people-centric” rhetoric, are embraced with the expectation of restoring citizens’ power over untouchable political power.

In summary, our findings challenge the view that populist attitudes only arise as a pure reaction to societal transformations or from specific personality traits. Instead, these attitudes reflect broader emotional symbolizations that, in turn, shape individuals’ experiences of the political world and consistent behaviors. Therefore, whether the aim is to counter the rise in extremist populism and the resulting social and political polarizations, one cannot avoid accounting for these emotional symbolization dynamics shaping the way we make sense of politics.

Limitations and Future Directions

We acknowledge that this study, although presenting a potentially innovative perspective on populism, may entail specific limitations. The main one relates to the selection of variables that address the emotional symbolization of the political world. We acknowl-

edge that, although these variables have been identified from scholarships addressing the current transformations of the relationship between citizens and politics, this choice can sound arbitrary. However, we have also followed the emotional connotations through which we, as researchers but also as citizens, experience the political world, building on the hypothesis that symbolizations, consistent with their socially determined nature, reflect broader collective dynamics. At the same time, we acknowledge that a more exploratory approach, building on qualitative methods, could further expand this argument and the structure of the emotional symbolization of the political world.

The measures used in this study were partially adapted from prior research (populist attitudes) and partially designed to align with our conceptual framework (alienation, powerlessness, and protest voting). Future studies should further validate and refine these measures to ensure their reliability and consistency in capturing variables of interest.

Also, our research focused exclusively on Italy, which is a country with historically low trust in public institutions [85]. Although it was not the goal of this study to generalize the results, we aimed to provide a theoretical adoption of the emotional symbolization theory to populism—extending this research to other geographical and cultural contexts, which could help further expand and refine our findings.

To summarize, we invite future scholarships to expand this field of research with the adoption of more situated approaches that can explore the multifaceted nature of the phenomena labeled “populism”. Such studies could deepen our understanding of the transformations underpinning this phenomenon and support both academic and political actors in addressing its constructive components instead of merely trying to contain populism’s violent drifts. By engaging in the symbolic dimensions of populism, we can foster a more nuanced and actionable understanding of this complex and constantly evolving political phenomenon.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Means, standard deviations and correlations between variables.

Measures	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Populism	2.76	0.74	-	0.07 *	0.04	−0.07 ***	−0.04	0.01 **	0.13 **	0.37 ***	0.13 ***
Age				-	−0.19 ***	−0.19 ***	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.09 **	0.15 ***
Gender					-	−0.05	−0.07 *	−0.03	0.08 *	−0.01	0.05
Education	2.53	1.05				-	0.27 ***	−0.10 **	−0.06	−0.04	−0.05
Income	1.70	0.62					-	0.05	0.01	−0.01	0.02
Political Orientation	3.66	1.21						-	0.15 ***	−0.01	0.02
Political Alienation	4.72	1.44							-	0.09 **	0.23 ***
Political Powerless	3.23	0.71								-	0.08 *
Protest Voting	4.83	1.69									-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A2. Regression analysis of populist attitudes.

Model 1	β	Adj R ²
Age	0.062 ns	0.004 ns
Education	0.035 ns	
Political Orientation	−0.002 ns	
Model 2	β	Adj R ²
Age	0.062 ns	0.014
Education	−0.011 ns	
Political Orientation	−0.045 ns	
Political Alienation	0.10 **	
Model 3	β	Adj R ²
Age	0.033 ns	0.124
Education	−0.049 ns	
Political Orientation	−0.002 ns	
Political Alienation	0.058 ns	
Political Powerlessness	0.34 ***	
Model 4	β	Adj R ²
Age	0.018 ns	0.135
Education	−0.046 ns	
Political Orientation	−0.001 ns	
Political Alienation	0.034 ns	
Political Powerlessness	0.34 ***	
Protest Voting	0.11 **	

ns: not statistically significant, ** $p < 0.005$, *** $p < 0.001$. Multicollinearity was not a problem as the highest VIF value was lower than 1.5.

Notes

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