Framing the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Study on Populist Narratives in Italy and the Netherlands

Estelle Mazzocchi 481767

M.Sc. International Public Management and Policy

Erasmus University Rotterdam

1st Reader: Asya Zhelyazkova

2nd Reader: Darren McCauley

27.06.2021

Word count: 19 980

SUMMARY

In March 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, an event that impacted every aspect and sphere of society. The political landscape has been central especially because its management was determined at the political level via local, national and supranational authorities. Politics was involved in the pandemic at every stage since the acknowledgement of its outbreak. This thesis will focus on the political dimension of the pandemic during the first wave in the European Union. Specifically, it will look at how populist parties in the opposition interpreted the pandemic and which arguments they used to counter the anti-Covid measures implemented by the national governments in order to gain public support. The main aim of this thesis is to determine how populist parties framed the pandemic in the EU and assess whether they predominantly used cultural, economic or political frames. This thesis will focus on two case studies – Italy and the Netherlands – which have been chosen mainly due to their different development of the pandemic. Two populist parties per country have been chosen: the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia for Italy, and Partij Voor Vrijheid and Forum voor Democraties for the Netherlands. The analysis consisted in a case-by-case analysis which has been conducted according to common themes on which then the cases have been compared. Overall, this study established the predominant use of cultural frames in both countries. This entails that during the first wave populist parties in Italy and the Netherlands framed the governmental response to the pandemic by leveraging on cultural values such as civil rights, traditional customs and societal values.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis marks the end of my studies. I am glad to conclude this chapter with a thesis which represents both my interests and identity. Being a Dutch/Italian girl with a strong interest in politics, writing a thesis on populist narratives in my two home countries has been very interesting and entertaining. I would like to thank my supervisor Asya Zhelyazkova for the support and help given me during the last six months. Moreover, I would like to thank all the people who have been by my side during these and have enriched this path. Finally, I would like to thank my family which, notwithstanding the distance, have always been there for me and supported me in every occasion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The outbreak of a pandemic has been a hot topic among scholars for several years. Rumours and predictions became reality on March 11th, 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020). The SARS-Cov-2 virus causing Covid-19 almost certainly originated in Wuhan by the end of December 2019 and rapidly spread first in Thailand and then in the rest of the world (Bassan, n.d.)

The pandemic brought crises all over the world, not only sanitary but also political, economic and social ones. The political response to Covid-19 varied across the countries with some governments implementing harder measures than others. Especially in the European Union, the majority of the governments adopted a crisis attitude and implemented restrictive measures (Mudde, 2020). The pandemic put every government under the spotlight and as such these were constantly analyzed and consequently criticized or praised. Every government had to deal with an unprecedented crisis and it had to do it at best in order to not endanger the population. Crises are central in populist agenda and thus the pandemic gave populist parties a chance to present themselves as the representors and defenders of the people (Vieten, 2020). Moreover, the novelty of the phenomenon allowed populist politicians to create and shape the public's opinion of what the pandemic was and whether the governments were tackling it correctly or not. However, this task has been challenging also for populist parties which had to renovate their agenda and exploit the crisis in their favour. Populist response to the pandemic has not been homogenous – this depended mainly on whether they were in power or in the opposition (Mudde, 2020). The majority of governing populist parties tended to exaggerate or at least interpret the pandemic as a serious crisis, such as Conte in Italy, Orban in Hungary or Morawiecki in Poland (Meyer, 2020). On the other hand, parties in the opposition were characterized by adopting an anti-governmental position aimed at challenging the establishment (Brubaker, 2020).

Given that the main aim of populists in opposition is to challenge the political class, they adopted the opposite stand and strived to counter the decisions of the governements. This entailed a rapid change in agendas and attitudes. (Vieten, 2020) Most of populist parties in Europe were the first to ask for restrictive measures such as the imposition of a ban on flights

from China, quarantines and later a lockdown (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). However, when the governments started implementing hard measures, populist parties stepped back and downplayed the crisis (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). According to Brubaker, the pandemic changed traditional populism as most of populist parties adopted an anti-crisis attitude and accused the governments of exaggerating the crisis (2020). This behavior is quite unnatural to populists as they usually tend to exploit crises in order to use uncertainty and turmoil in their favour. In this way European populist parties have created a pandemic agenda centered around countering the political decisions in order to appeal to a preoccupied and exhausted crowd (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). This entailed creating and shaping the public's understanding of the pandemic and of its management. This thesis strives to investigate the influence of populism on the framing of the pandemic but addressing the question: "What is the impact of populist parties in the framing of the EU pandemic?. However, since this thesis will specifically analyze how populist parties constructed the discourse surrounding the pandemic, this thesis will answer the question: *How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?.*

1.2 Theoretical & Social Relevance

This topic is undoubtedly relevant both scientifically and socially. This study would add to the academic debates dealing with pandemics and populism. The body of work on this topic is still very scarce given that pandemics are not common phenomena and it is difficult to assess populist behavior in an imaginary scenario. In fact, one may think the populist parties would have exaggerated this crisis, yet most scholars stress the opposite (Brubaker, 2020; Vieten, 2020; Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic opened the research in this topic and now it is starting to take off. This thesis would contribute in this field by presenting an empirical study on how the pandemic has been framed by populist parties in EU countries during the first wave. This study may serve as a starting point for further research. In fact, this research will focus on two countries: Italy and the Netherlands. Overall, this thesis will contribute to academia by starting a study which can be easily expanded both in space and in time in order to look at how the pandemic has been framed.

Moreover, establishing how populist parties framed the pandemic is also extremely relevant at a social level. The pandemic brought also chaos, fears and uncertainties shared by the majority of the people. Especially during the first wave, the population became vulnerable and sought reassurance and explanations (Krastev & Leonards, 2020). Populists saw this

moment as a chance to gain public support and extend their electorate. Hence, they exploited and leveraged on people's fears and uncertainties to influence their interpretation of the pandemic. From the beginning, they adopted an anti-governmental stand and criticized the measures by referring to common values and ideas (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). This study is socially relevant because it might shed light on how populist parties have influenced the public's opinion of the pandemic. Indeed, assessing how the pandemic was framed might lead the reader to learn about populists' approach to the pandemic and reflect on whether they have been influenced by populist arguments.

1.3 Thesis structure

By researching: " How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?", this thesis will comprehend different chapters. The literature review will delve into the academic debates on framing, populism and pandemic. It will present what is meant with framing and how it is used in public policy, it will present populism in its definition and key features, and lastly it will introduce pandemics and their social and political dimensions. The theoretical framework will present the definitions of populism and framing employed in this thesis. Moreover, this chapter will show how these three topics are interrelated in this specific moment in history. The research design will guide the reader on how this study is structured and how it came together. It will present the criteria leading to the choice of Italy and the Netherlands as case studies, it will assess the criteria to identify the populist parties to be analyzed and it will explain the main methods employed to conduct this research. Thereafter, the empirical part of this study will start. There will be two chapters each conducting a case-by-case analysis, one on Italy and the other on the Netherlands. These two chapters will outline the populist approach to the pandemic and it will present examples on how they used cultural, economic or political frames to construct an interpretation of the pandemic management. The findings of these analyses will be compared and discussed in an additional chapter, which will lead to assessing the impact of populist parties on the framing of the pandemic and it will determine how it was framed. Finally, this thesis will be concluded by presenting the main findings and inviting further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section will present a review of the existing literature dealing with the most relevant topics tackled in this thesis. Given the research question *How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?,* it is pivotal to research into the topics of framing and populism. These two are extremely interdependent in the context of this thesis. In the first paragraph, the social-constructivist concept of framing will be tackled by looking at its definition and what it entails. Specifically, first, there will be a general explanation of the theory and then this will be applied to the case of public policy. Second, there will be an explanation of the notion of populism by looking at its definition and its main features. This will be done by taking into consideration the works of key scholars in the field – mainly Taggart, Mudde and Zaslove. The third paragraph will deal with pandemics. Specifically, it will outline what is meant with pandemics and it will discuss their political and social character.

2.2 Framing

Constructivism assumes that the world is a socially constructed reality (Bekkers et al, 2018). Individuals constantly engage in a sense-making process aimed at creating a shared awareness about the world (Bekkers et al, 2018). This is interpreted and shaped by interactions, values and experiences. There are two concepts which are needed to be explained in order to understand the constructivist perspective of the world: framing and the appreciative system.

Framing refers to 'a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting' (Rein & Schon, 1993, p. 146). Framing is at the center of social-constructivism and it is generally considered as the sense-making process per se. According to Bekker et al., framing leads to the creation of an interpretative context in which information, knowledge, beliefs and experiences gets a specific meaning (2018). Hence, the world is considered to be a product of people's experiences and knowledge. Everything is interpreted and shaped by the constant process of interaction between people and their values, experiences and knowledge (Bekker et al., 2018). The process of framing relies on an *appreciative system* which refers to the set of norms and values on which the frame is created (Rein & Schon, 1993). Simply put, the

appreciative system is the ground upon which individuals make sense of the world and interpret reality. It is important to note that the appreciative system varies across population, countries, social category and so on, and thus the appreciative system shapes the meaning of a reality based on who it pertains to. Indeed, a system needs to be shared in order to ease communication and mediation, and ultimately create meaning (Rein & Schon, 1993).

2.2.1 Policy Framing

Public policy is an example of how framing works. Through the use of language, symbols, and values, policymakers construct *frames* that allow the creation of shared understandings (Bekkers et al, 2018). In public policy, framing is employed to give meaning to specific policy challenges. Hence, it is used to construct public understanding and interpretation of policy issues by leveraging context-specific beliefs, ideas, and experiences (Bekkers et al, 2018).

There is a shared agreement among constructivists that public policy is shaped by policy frames but especially that the latter is aimed at influencing public opinion. Davitier (2007) further delves in this study by looking at how public opinion and political representation shape the agenda setting in the European Union (2007). According to Davitier, every aspect of policy making is constructed. The author argues that politicians engage in a constant framing and re-framing process aimed at highlighting policy issues that could benefit their voting turnouts (Davitier, 2007). Populist politicians strategically modify and manipulate the perception of phenomena in order to increase their support. For example, this manipulation of frames may lead to collaborations and new coalitions (Davitier, 2007).

2.2.1.1 Perspectives

This process is seen differently within the social constructivist perspective as for some it is more relevant than for others. There are mainly three perspectives: epistemic communities approach, critical frame reflection, and discourse coalition framework (DCF). First, the epistemic community stresses the influential role of experts in the policy process as they are considered accredited consultants (Hajer, 1993) . Second, critical frame reflection, instead of stressing the sense-making process, highlights the importance of the process of reflection (Hajer, 1993). In other words, this entails an evaluation of the consistency of the frames and of their relation with other frames, as this process of reflection is highly dependent on interaction, empathy, self awareness, willingness and trust. Third, the discourse coalition

framework stresses the pivotal role of discourses in the policy process (Hajer, 1993). A discourse consists in the underlying system of values and beliefs. As a consequence, discourses are more difficult to change and may count on the sustain of those people who recognize their own values in the values of that specific discourse (Hajer, 1993).

2.2.1.2 Types of frames

Although framing is usually described as an unconscious process undertaken by individuals to make sense of the world, Helbling et al. contextualize this process within policy making as a more conscious and orchestrated process (2010). According to Helbling et al., framing consists in defining a phenomena by emphasizing the aspects that are more appealing in order to shape public perception in their intended way (2010). The frames presented to justify their position are divided mainly in three categories: cultural, economic and other utilitarian frames. Cultural-symbolic frames refer to common identities, nationalities, and values and are usually used in order to foster conservative policies aimed at preserving traditions (Helbling et al., 2010). For example, cultural frames consist in stressing cultural superiority or stressing shared values such as civil rights, cultural notions or political social norms and customs. Economic frames are mainly employed for their threatening power and call for preservation of prosperity (Helbling et al., 2010). These refer to fear of unemployment, money loss, and financial implications of policies or treaties. Finally, utilitarian frames mainly refer to political frames and are used to evaluate the working of the political class. For example, they mainly refer to the efficiency and efficacy of the government (Helbling et al., 2010).

These frames are used by politicians in order to construct a reality that encompasses the interest of as many voters as possible. Therefore, there is a constant competition between parties seeking to create the most appealing frame. Chong and Druckman's study shows that a frame is stronger when it is presented by accredited sources, reflects consensus and does not challenge established beliefs (2007). Moreover, the scholars stress the relevance of the degree of exposure of a frame, they argue that the more an individual is confronted and acquainted with a frame, the more this individual will recognize himself in it – no matter if it is not the most similar to him (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

2.3 Populism

Being a crucial topic in the political landscape, scholars have dedicated a conspicuous body of literature to its definition, its main features, its effects, and many other aspects. However, there still is not a shared definition of what it is and how it should be interpreted. Different scholars have presented their definition and have outlined what its main features are. This paragraph will present some of these definitions and descriptions in order to provide the reader with an overview on the academic debate surrounding populism.

2.3.1 Definition

There are mainly three definitions of populism within academia. Mudde defines it as a thin centred ideology lacking core values and as such it has to be coupled with other ideologies such as socialism or fascism (Mudde, 2004). Taggart agrees on the populist's lack of values but rejects its ideological nature and defines it as a feature of representative politics. Taggart argues that populism lacks an overarching set of characteristic beliefs which makes it very chameleonic and incomplete (2004). According to both Taggart and Mudde, populism is proper to right-wing parties (2016; 2004). Finally, Zaslove further delves into the debate concerning the definition of populism as a political ideology (2008). Yet, the author remains neutral on this debate and he limits his definition by placing populism into the broad liberal democratic ideology (Zaslove, 2008). According to the author, populism may be considered as an integral part of liberal democratic politics as it relies on some of its basic values such as democracy (Zaslove, 2008). Moreover, Zaslove rejects Taggart and Mudde's identification of populism as a mere right wing domain. As a matter of fact, the author argues that populism may be both a right and left-wing phenomenon (Zaslove, 2008)

2.3.2 Features

There is a shared agreement on the anti-elitarian feature of populism. Society is viewed as being constructed around an Us vs Them dichotomy, with the former being the pure people and the latter the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2016). This juxtaposition is central in populism. In fact, Taggart identifies as one of its main features its hostility to representative politics. This means that populism exists only when there are institutions and an establishment to fight (Taggart, 2004). Zaslove places this dichotomy at the center of populism and argues that the main strategy used by populist to challenge the political elite is to identify an enemy which is accused of being dangerous for the people (Zaslove, 2008). All the three authors share the idea that populism is existentially related to the creation of an enemy (Taggart, 2004; Mudde, 2016; Zaslove, 2008). The enemy becomes the center of their agenda and the ground to

challenge the establishment. Furthermore, populism tends to act mostly when confronted with extreme crises (Taggart, 2004). This means that it is an accompanying force to change, which rises when there is an establishment to fight and to blame for the current negative situation. According to Taggart, the polity of the heartland is considered as being a central feature of populism – this consists in the idealized and constructed depiction of the people they argue to defend (Taggart, 2004). The heartland refers to their community and specifically to their people, which adhere to a set of norms and values proper of an idealized and romanticized past (Taggart, 2004). This feature is usually called nativism and it refers to "an inherited entitlement to the common good and society" – meaning that by being nativist, populist politicians have the duty to defend the natives of the land from any enemy (Vieten, 2020, p. 4; Taggart, 2004). Finally, populist parties tend to use a very charismatic leader, capable of appealing to the crowds and increasing their visibility but yet lacking substance (Taggart, 2004).

Overall, populism is manifested in the face of crises which give politicians the chance to challenge the establishment with the claim of protecting their people from a mutative enemy.

2.4 Pandemics

Over the last decades, epidemics and their escalation into pandemics have largely spurred global concern among scholars, physicians and policy makers. The outbreak of a pandemic has been considered as a certainty by the vast majority of scholars. As a consequence there is a broad variety of academic works dealing with pandemics in all their aspects. This section will analyze available literature dealing with pandemics. Specifically, it will present what a pandemic is and then it will delve into its social and political dimensions.

2.4.1 What is a pandemic?

MacKellar conducted an extensive study on pandemic influenza by looking especially at their origin, how they are dealt politically and economically, and their impact on demography (2007). As argued by MacKellar, pandemic mostly regard influenza viruses, which break out during the winter and are transmitted via interpersonal contact (2007, p. 430). A seasonal influenza does not entail an epidemic or a pandemic. Indeed, a pandemic is an isolated event characterized by the international spread of a highly contagious disease (Rosenberg, 1989). According to Rosenberg, epidemics have an explicit modus operandi: they have a specific start, they spread, they cause crises and then they gradually disappear (1989, p. 2).

2.4.2 Political dimension

Although a pandemic is generally considered as a sanitary crisis, politics plays a great role in each of the stages.

MacKellar and Rosenberg agree that the start of an epidemic is among the most critical stages. Everything starts with physicians encountering patients with suspicious diseases which are then reported to the authorities (2007; 1989). There is a widespread reluctance to accept the outbreak of a pandemic. This is usually given by the conviction of politicians of being capable of curbing the spread without publicly admitting the severity of the situation and avoiding collective fear (Roseberg, 1989). This is generally the case due to the multiplicity of interests that could be endangered by the outbreak of a health crisis. The case of the SARS virus in China at the beginning of 2000, AIDS and lastly Covid-19 are striking examples of how epidemics are concealed until the very last moment possible.

The political dimension of a pandemic is particularly manifested in its management. There are different kinds of measures that may be implemented, but the most important feature of them all concerns their collective character (Greene & Vargha, 2020). In fact, pandemics are public phenomena that have to be tackled through collective action and collective measures. Historically, the most widespread collective methods of containment have been quarantine and several other practices, such as contact tracing, social distancing, surveillance and travel & trade restrictions (Fidler, 2020). Moreover, these measures have always been accompanied by the identification of the so-called patient zero (Greene & Vargha, 2020).

From an ideological standpoint, the outbreak of a pandemic may alter political conformations as well as shaping new political ideologies and party's views. Crises have always been considered as turning points in history. Francis Fukuyama, by comparing pandemics to wars, argues that a global health crisis may alter the leadership of the current global order and promote radical ideologies such as fascism (2020). Moreover, crises have always been at the center of populist agendas. Populism is characterized by a strong tendency to create and construct crises in order to challenge the establishment by adopting a people vs elite discourse (Brubaker, 2020)(Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Therefore, health crises such as pandemics are considered to be safe havens for populist parties seeking votes by leveraging on people's fear, frustration and anger (Brubaker, 2020). However, Brubaker and Vieten recently analyzed the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on populism (2020; 2020). They both

found that the last pandemic changed traditional populism. Indeed, in a moment in which the establishment adopted a crisis-attitude, populist parties, in order to challenge the elite, adopted an anti-crisis behavior and accused them of exacerbating and constructing a useless crisis (Brubaker, 2020). Historically, containment measures and strategy have been outlined by experts and implemented by the governments. As a consequence, especially over the last decades, there has been both a scientization of politics and a politicization of science (Brubaker, 2020).

2.4.3 Social dimension

The previously mentioned identification of the patient zero sheds light on the pandemic's social character. Humans tend to find an explanation to the phenomenon and they usually identify in the patient zero some features to explain contagion. According to Rosenberg, in these cases individuals use the *framing and blaming* framework– framing societal values and beliefs to eventually blame the infected (Rosenberg, 1989). Over the past centuries, mortal illnesses were framed as a punishment sent by God to the sinners. Historically, immorals have been identified as the scapegoats of the spread of the virus – as in the case of smallpox, AIDS or colhera. Besides immorality, social stratification has also been involved in the identification of the probable vectors. Indeed, lower classes were considered to be the spreaders and they were the only targets of collective measures during the diphtheria epidemic in London (Roseberg, 1989). By using a set of values, beliefs and experiences as guidelines to avoid contagion, men and women find answers and reassurance.

2.5 Conclusion

This section reviewed the existing literature on three main topics: framing, populism and pandemics. First, it has researched social constructivism and framing. Second, the academic debate regarding the definition and description of populism has been presented, as there is no clear definition of this concept but many scholars agree on what are its main features. Finally, it has presented key studies dealing with pandemics and it has outlined their social and political dimension.

These three topics may be considered extremely interrelated in the current Covid-19 context. This chapter showed how politicians use frames to construct their own understanding of a policy issue. Populist parties construct and share their own interpretation of policy issues through language, values and traditional customs in order to appeal to the public (Scholten,

2017). Thus, they constantly frame issues by using a broad variety of values from cultural to economic to political. A pandemic makes vulnerable and influenceable individuals which eventually turn to populist parties for reassurance (Vieten, 2020). It is clear that all these three concepts are proper to the current global context. Yet, the available literature lacks a comprehensive study on how populist parties have framed the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it lacks a study investigating how they have used their characteristic Us vs Them dichotomy in the framing of the pandemic. This thesis strives to fill this gap by conducting a study aimed at answering the research question: *How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?*

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This section will outline the theories employed in this thesis in order to answer the research question: *How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?*. First, populism will be defined and outlined in its main features. Second, the theory of framing will be explained together with the Discourse Coalition Framework. Finally, populism, framing and the Covid-19 pandemic will be theoretically linked in order to create the thesis hypothesis.

3.2 Populism

Some scholars define populism as a political ideology and some others reject this definition by identifying it as a political feature (Mudde, 2013; Taggart, 2004). In this thesis, populism will be defined by combining the arguments of two key scholars in the field: Mudde and Taggart.

3.2.1 *Definition*

This thesis adopts Mudde's definition of populism as being:

> an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. (2013)

This ideology is considered to be thin-centred as it lacks core values and thus has to be coupled with other ideologies, such as socialism, fascism or communism (Mudde, 2013). The principal features identified to define populism in this thesis are drawn from Mudde, Taggart and Zaslove. This thesis interprets populism as aimed at challenging the elite through mutative enemies with the purpose of defending the people (Mudde, 2013: Taggart, 2004; Zaslove, 2008).

3.2.2 *Populism – features*

Pivotal in this thesis is Mudde's Us vs Them dichotomy. This will help establish the role of Covid in the populist political agenda. Specifically, this thesis will investigate how populist parties employed this dichotomy in challenging the establishment in their response to Covid.

Populist parties tend to divide society into two separate groups, the in-group and the out-group (Mudde, 2013). They place themselves in the in-group which is claimed to be composed by native inhabitants, the people. Therefore, their goal is to foster and protect the values and interests of their people against the out-group. The latter is not defined, but although it changes according to the situation, it generally refers to the establishment (Mudde, 2016). The other is thus portrayed as an enemy which threatens the values and interests of the in-group. An enemy is defined by Mudde as being the discourse upon which the ideological identity of the in-group is constructed (Mudde, 2016). Therefore, the central Us vs Them dichotomy is coupled with nativism and the identification of enemies (Mudde, 2016). Moreover, central for populist propaganda is the use of a charismatic leader capable of appealing to a large crowd and making the people recognize themselves in him/her (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).. This is considered to be extremely important as the leader has to be one of the people but at the same time their defender. Thus, a populist leader has to place himself among the people in his habits, lexic, and values (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).

Simply put, populist parties construct a moral and political antagonism between the people, which they represent, and the establishment (Wojczewski, 2019). Populist parties are characterized by having a charismatic leader capable of appealing to the crowd and constructing an enemy to fight in order to defend the native people.

3.3 Framing

This thesis seeks to delineate populist framing of the Covid pandemic. Therefore, it is crucial to outline what it is meant with framing and how it is interpreted in this paper.

3.3.1 *Framing*

Framing is a social constructivist theory which claims that the world is a social construct shaped and created by the people through a sense making process (Bekkers et al, 2018). Framing may be considered as the sense-making process per se. This thesis will adopt the definition by Rein and Schon who define framing as 'a way of selecting, organizing,

interpreting and making sense of complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting' (1993, p. 146). This theory is crucial in this thesis as it will help in establishing how the language and symbols used by populist parties to interpret Covid have shaped the public perception of the pandemic.

3.3.2 *Discourse Coalition Framework*

Discourse Coalition Framework stresses the relevance of discourses in the policy process. With discourse is meant a set of ideas, concepts and categories used to make sense of a phenomenon (Hajer, 1993). In this thesis, discourses and frames will be interpreted as the same as they are both means to construct reality (Scholten, 2017).

When more individuals share the same discourse, this is called a *discourse coalition.* It is important to note that in DCF experts and intellectuals are placed within discourse coalitions. By stressing the role of language in the sense-making process, Hajer claims that the way in which a politician linguistically presents a phenomenon may influence its interpretation (1993). As a result, the linguistic construction of a problem might alter the public perception of the phenomenon per se, but might also influence individuals on its causes and consequences, and on the way it should be tackled (Hajer, 1993).

This thesis will consider populist parties as a discourse coalition and will explain the discourses used by populist parties to frame the pandemic and evaluate how they have influenced public perception.

3.4 Populism, Framing & the Covid pandemic

The purpose of this thesis is to establish how populism framed Covid and thus influenced its interpretation.

Given their nativist purpose of defending the people, populist parties always seek a new element to challenge the establishment (Vieten, 2020). Currently, the biggest threat is the Covid pandemic and its related sanitary, social, economic and political crises. Given their innate tendency to exploit crises, one may hypothesize that populist parties have identified Covid as their enemy. However, Covid is an invisible threat and as such it may not be framed as an enemy. Most importantly, populist's enemies usually relate to the out-group, such as the migrants, or to the establishment, such as the corrupted and inefficient politicians (Mudde,

2016). The virus and the pandemic are apolitical and certainly not a concrete and feasible enemy that can be countered, insulted or spontaneously be eliminated. Hence, Covid has to be considered as the general context in which the Us vs Them dichotomy has been constructed. Populist parties do not consider Covid as the threat, rather they frame the political response of the establishment as the new enemy of the people.

Several scholars stressed a change in traditional populism during the pandemic (Brubaker, 2020; Vieten, 2020). The most striking difference relates to their approach to crises. Given the novelty of the phenomenon, populist parties had the chance to construct the interpretation of the pandemic in such a way to shape its public understanding. Populist parties took a different stand of the establishment and framed covid differently (Vieten, 2020). The health crisis had already been addressed by the national governments, through the implementation of various restrictive measures such as lockdown, curfew and social distancing (Brubaker, 2020). Hence, populist parties exploited the widespread fear and turmoil to construct an anti-elitist interpretation of Covid and accused the elite of exacerbating the crisis for their interests (Brubaker, 2020; Vieten, 2020).

Populist parties usually use a broad set of values and beliefs – discourses– to frame a phenomenon and ultimately create a shared understanding (Scholten, 2017). As outlined in the literature review, they have used mainly three types of frames: cultural, economic and political (Helbling et al., 2010). In other words, populist parties have used three different categories of frames in order to promote their own definition of the Covid pandemic and consequently challenge the establishment and gain public support. This thesis will look at how populist parties used these frames in shaping Covid's interpretation and challenge the elite. It is important to note that these frames are country-specific as they all have different cultures, economic situations, and governments. This is explanatory of how populist parties rely on a mutative set of values and beliefs that not only vary across countries but sometimes even within the same country.

3.4.2 Cultural Frames

Cultural frames are identity-related and refer to the underlying values of a specific society (Helbing et al, 2010). They are usually nationalistic as they are constructed with the claim of preserving the national identity. Given their nativist sentiment, many populist parties use cultural discourses to challenge the elite. During the Covid pandemic many populists have

used national traditional values in order to counter the anti-covid measures implemented by the governments. For example, the implementation of a lockdown has been framed as threatening the freedoms and rights of the population, such as the right to work, to move, to exercise religion and expression (Brubaker, 2020). Also in other cases, populist parties repeatedly appealed to personal freedoms, civil rights and social traditions to challenge the governmental implementation of restrictive measures.

Simply put, by using cultural notions, populist parties depicted the anti-Covid measures as a threat to the cultural integrity of their people.

H1: Populist parties predominantly used cultural frames to construct an anti-elitarian public understanding of the pandemic management.

3.4.3. Economic Frames

Economic frames are normally used in the face of an economic crisis. In framing the pandemic, populist parties stressed the far more reaching necessity of tackling the economic crisis created by the pandemic than the pandemic per se (Wondreys & Mudde). Populist parties have been stressing the negative impact of the pandemic management on the national economies. For example, many populist parties addressed the economic and financial costs of the restrictive measures (especially the lockdown) and argued that these were contributing to unemployment and money loss (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Therefore, they used economic discourses to frame the pandemic and gain public support in order to challenge the governments.

Hence, by leveraging on widespread economic fears, populist parties accused the government of implementing anti-Covid measures contributing to people's economic instability.

H2: Populist parties predominantly used economic frames to construct an anti-elitarian public understanding of the pandemic management

3.4.4. Political Frames

Finally, political frames refer to the functioning of the political system and its work and results (Helbling et al, 2010). For instance, political frames refer to the political efficiency and efficacy of the work of the government and are employed to evaluate its work (Helbling

et al, 2010). Populist parties in opposition took an anti-governmental stand by addressing the inefficiency of the national management of the pandemic and by criticizing the inefficacy of the anti-Covid measures. For example, they first accused the government of doing too little, too late and too slow, and once restrictive measures were enforced, they blamed the government of being too strict and implementing useless and inefficient measures (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Simply put, populist parties stressed how the measures and policies implemented were not efficiently combating the pandemic, and they have often accused the establishment of exacerbating the pandemic in order to fulfill their own interests.

In other words, it may be argued that populist parties continuously criticized the work and functioning of the governmental pandemic management in order to challenge the establishment.

H3: Populist parties predominantly used political frames to construct an anti-elitarian public understanding of the pandemic management

3.5 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has outlined the main theories and concepts employed in this thesis: framing and populism – in order to study the impact of populists' framing of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the previous subsection has articulated the process leading to the creation of this thesis' hypotheses.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Methodology

This section will detailly explain the design of this study. First, it will explain the general research method employed: qualitative. Two main qualitative approaches will be presented and discussed in order to identify the one that suits this thesis best. Second, the case study selection criteria will be outlined. Third, the analysis method of the cases will be presented. Fourth, the populist parties will be operationalized through the creation of a selection criteria. Fifth, the populist parties chosen for the two case studies will be discussed. Sixth, cultural, economic and political frames will be operationalized. Finally, there will be an overview on the data collection process.

4.1.1 *Small-N Study*

Qualitative research is considered to be advantageous for the aim of this thesis as it allows linking theoretical concepts to empirical observations (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Small-N studies are based on a limited number of cases in order to conduct a more in-depth and detailed analysis. Hence, this thesis will provide the reader with a clear analysis of the impact that populist parties had on the framing of the pandemic in the EU. Indeed, conducting a thorough analysis of a limited number of cases will result in providing the reader with a broad variety of empirical observations. Ultimately, the reader will have the possibility to acquire a broader knowledge and understanding of the cases and grasp the link between theory and reality. Simply put, by recurring to empirical case studies, Small-N studies are the most successful tool to understand theories. Thus, studying how populist parties framed the pandemic in two specific countries will help the reader to generally understand the populist use of framing.

4.1.2. Co-Variational Approach

Among the various *Small-N* designs the most used is the Co-Variational Approach (COV). This approach is employed in studies seeking to determine the effect of one factor over another, specifically, of the independent variable over the dependent variable (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Being a Small-N approach, COV is based on a case study analysis. The case studies have to vary as much as possible in their independent variable and be as similar as possible in the control variables (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Being EU countries the main unit of analysis, these should vary in their presence of populist parties and be similar in the

way in which the pandemic has been framed. This means that in order to ensure variation in X, the cases selected there should be one country with populist parties and one country without. This criteria does not suit this thesis as by choosing such cases the results and the research per se would be weak and flawed.

4.1.3 *Congruence Analysis Approach*

Among the Small-N designs, Congruence Analysis Approach (CON) is employed in studies seeking to 'provide empirical evidence for the explanatory relevance or relative strength of one theoretical approach in comparison to other approaches' (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 144). Hence, it is aimed at establishing whether a theory better explains a phenomenon than the other or to demonstrate that one theory provides the best explanations of a phenomenon.

This thesis will investigate the applicability of one broad theory through three competing hypotheses. Drawing on the social-constructivist theory of framing, each of the three hypotheses claims that one of the categories of frames has been predominant in populist pandemic agenda. The pluralist aspect of the thesis increases its internal validity. Indeed, each hypothesis avoids confirmation bias when researching as data will be collected in order to determine which kind of frame is predominant and not to verify the predominance of one of them. Specifically, the internal validity of this thesis is controlled by a vertical and horizontal element. The vertical control entails the deduction of the hypothesis from theories and their comparison (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). This study deducted three competing hypotheses from one broad abstract theory. The horizontal control comprises the verification of the empirical applicability of one theory but also the verification of its higher explanatory power in comparison to the others (Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

While selecting the cases, the author has to answer the question "How is the case related to the theories?" and then identify cases that are most likely explanatory of the theories (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 175). Therefore, the countries selected in this thesis have to represent crucial cases. Hence, they serve the purpose of determining which category of frames prevailed in the EU framing of the pandemic.

4.2 Case Studies

This thesis strives to determine the effect of populist parties on the framing of the pandemic by taking as case studies two countries that show different characteristics. This increases the

external validity and the strength of the findings. In case this thesis would result in assessing the predominant use of the same category of frames in both countries, these findings could be generalizable to countries showing similar features to the cases in analysis. However, generalizability is not the main aim of this paper, as it is mainly concerned with investigating an important current social phenomenon.

In order to guide the country choice, a criterion has been created and it has ultimately led to the selection of Italy and the Netherlands as case studies. The criteria are the following:

I.   Populist Parties

Given the aim of this thesis, it is crucial that case studies have populist parties. Hence, that the countries analyzed are democracies and thus ensure debates and political opposition.

Italy and the Netherlands are democratic countries which present populist parties. The populist parties chosen for each country will be presented in section 4.5.

II.   Dissimilar economies

Analyzing two cases with dissimilar economies increments the external validity of this study. Economic conditions may influence the development and outcome of the pandemic and its management. This is given by the different amount of resources and the different responses that the people could have.

The two cases have different economic situations in 2020. GDP per capita is higher in the Netherlands than in Italy, this means that on average a Dutch citizen earns more than an Italian citizen (Country comparison, n.d). Moreover, Italy has a higher debt than the Netherlands (Country comparison, n.d). Finally, both have experienced important GDP losses in 2020 as a result of the pandemic (Country comparison, n.d).

Table 1: Economy

	Italy	*The Netherlands*
GDP per capita	31,605 $	52,405$
Debt (%GDP)	155,80%	54,50%

Deficit	-9.50 %	-4.30%

IV. Dissimilar development of the pandemic

Investigating two countries showing a different development of the pandemic increases the validity of this study as it might change the populist framing of Covid.

Italy and the Netherlands show very different features both in their figures and in their management. Italy has been the first EU country hit by the pandemic and one of the hardest hit in the world (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). It presents a very high number in cases and a high death rate. On the other hand, the virus arrived later in the Netherlands and it presents a lower death rate. The main differences may be found during the first wave, but due to a lack of database focusing on the first wave, the table below presents the figures of the whole pandemic until June 2st, 2021 (Worlometer, 2020). Moreover, the number of cases and deaths reported by the countries are not a completely reliable source. Especially during the first wave, low test capacity and different categorizations of Covid deaths altered the real rates. Although not 100% reliable and explanatory, these data provide a general overview on the situation across the two cases.

Table 2: Covid-19 figures (Worldometer, 2020)

	Italy	*The Netherlands*
Population	60, 36 M	17, 38 M
Death/ 1 M people	2 108	1 302
Total cases	4 252 976	1 679 983

Strikingly different has been the management of the pandemic. In Italy there has been a hard lockdown consisting in a shutdown economy and population (Bassan, n.d.). In the Netherlands, there has been the so-called intelligent lockdown where staying at home was encouraged but the economy was still functioning at almost its normal rate (Darroch, 2020).

4.3 Case Study Analysis

In order to investigate how European populist parties framed pandemic, this thesis will conduct a case study comparison. Specifically, this thesis will conduct a cross-sectional comparison as it will analyze two cases during the same time frame but in different spatial contexts (Blatter and Haverland, 2012).

The analysis will be divided in three chapters, one per each case and one for their comparison. The analysis chapters will be introduced by a section explaining the course of the virus in the country, then there will be the analysis conducted according to common themes and then the main findings will be presented. The themes in analysis are: the virus, the lockdown, the lockdown reopening, EU intervention, migration, and general anti-Covid measures. These themes were selected during the data collection (4.7.2) as these were the main topics addressed by populist parties across the cases. The virus consists in how populists generally interpreted the news of Covid and dealt with its origin. The lockdown refers to populist parties' opinion on its implementation. Lockdown reopening deals with how they requested to lift the lockdown. EU intervention entails their approach to EU deals. Migration analyzes how they integrated migrants into the pandemic agenda. Finally, the general anti-covid measures see how they interpreted the use of face-masks, social distancing and other measures. Although these themes are common to both countries, they will be divided into sub-themes which may sometimes vary across the cases. Each case has, indeed, country-specific sub-themes which consist in the arguments and discourses used to frame specific moments, events or phenomenon within the topic analyzed.. This does not represent a limitation as the general themes are the same, but only the argument used to frame the themes may differ.

Finally, the comparison will be conducted according to the themes discussed in the case-by-case analysis which will lead to a discussion on the main findings.

4.4 Operationalizing populist parties

Being the independent variable of this thesis, populist parties will be at the center of the case by case analysis. This section will outline the criteria used to choose the populist parties to be analyzed. This criteria will draw on a combination of theoretical concepts and empirical features needed for the purpose of this thesis.

I.   Us vs Them

Populist parties need to be anti-elitarian. The purpose of this thesis is to establish how populist parties framed the pandemic to challenge the establishment. Therefore, without this feature the party in analysis would not serve the purpose of this study.

II.   Polity of the Heartland and the People (Nativism)

Being a central feature of populism, the parties selected have to hold a nativist sentiment - thus they have to show a peculiar attachment to their people (Taggart, 2004; Vieten, 2020). Especially during a global crisis, such as the pandemic, these features serve the parties to appeal to a broader public by claiming to be their representative and strive to defend and protect their citizens (Vieten, 2020).

III.   Changing enemy

Another distinguishing feature of populism regards their tendency to continuously change their enemy. Although maintaining an anti-elitarian sentiment, they always leverage on a different enemy to challenge the establishment (Zaslove, 2008).

IV.   Charismatic leader

Populist parties rely on a very charismatic leader in order to appeal to the public (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).The people have to trust their leader, but most importantly they have to recognize themselves in him/her. By claiming to be with the people and one of the people, they may not appear as being superior. As such, populist leaders reject the elitarian nature of politicians. These features confer trust to the people who start seeing them as their 'man of destiny' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).

V.   Opposition

Given that the hypotheses to test in this thesis claim that populist parties constructed an anti-elitarian public understanding of the pandemic management, populist parties that are in charge of the government will not be taken into account. As part of the establishment, ruling parties cannot challenge the government. Therefore, if the prime minister of a country should be the member/leader of a populist party, that same party will not be considered in this thesis. Hence, the party has to be in the opposition.

Table 3: criteria

Party name	Yes	No
Us vs Them	X	
Nativism	X	
Changing enemy	X	
Charismatic Leader	X	
Opposition party	X	

4.5 Populist Parties

This subsection will present the parties chosen for both Italy and the Netherlands by following the criteria outlined in sub-section 4.5.2 of this chapter. Moreover, the populist context of the countries will be briefly presented.

4.5.1 Italy

The Italian populist landscape has always been very dense. The critical view of politics and politicians held by the italian people created a very fertile terrain for the rise of populist parties (Tarchi, 2008). The Italian electorate does not recognize itself in the establishment which is considered to be corrupt and harmful for the Italian society. The heyday of populism in Italy came in the 90s with the rise of Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Lega Nord. The Italian context in the 90s was characterized by several crises and scandals. Amongst these the increasing immigraion flows, the decreasing economic growth rates, the loosening ties with the church accompanied by the Tangentopoli scandal, spurred distrust of politics among the people (Tarchi, 2008). Populist parties presented themselves as the solution to their disappointment and presented political agendas aimed at defending their people, their country and their values.

Lega/ The League

La Lega is a historical Italian right-wing populist party. The League was originally named Lega Nord (Northern League) as it advocated for the independence of the Northern part of Italy in order to create the *Repubblica Federale Padana* (Tarchi, 2008). The League has always been an anti-establishment party – it has always addressed how the inefficiency and

degeneration of the political class came at the expenses of the well being of the people (Tarchi, 2008). Being a populist party, the League holds a very strong nativist sentiment which is manifested in its self-appointed role of protector of the people. Peculiar in the League's agenda has always been the identification of the enemy. In fact, it has continuously changed its enemy: the south of Italy, the EU, and the migrants (Tarchi, 2008; Dennison & Geddes, 2021). All these phases were characterized by very charismatic leaders, such as Bossi, Maroni and finally Matteo Salvini. The latter is the one that upgraded the charisma of the League's leaders as he has always presented himself as one of the people both through his colloquial speeches and his dress codes. He made the latter an integral part of his figure as he usually joins official and unofficial meetings dressed with military uniforms or sweaters with the names of the cities written on them (Dabramo, 2019). Finally, this party has been chosen because it was not part of the government in the timeframe analyzed.

Table 4: League

Lega	Yes	No
Us vs Them	X	
Nativism	X	
Changing enemy	X	
Charismatic Leader	X	
Opposition party	X	

Fratelli d'Italia/ Brothers of Italy
Fratelli d'Italia is a right-wing party created in 2012 by Giorgia Meloni. This party has shown its anti-elitarian feature since its onset as it was created by those members of Berlusconi's Forza Italia who criticized their leaders' decision to support the technical government of Mario Monti (Bruno & Downes, 2020). Their nativist sentiment is visible in the name of the party and in their intention of defending the values and interests of all the brothers of Italy. As every populist party also FdI has a dynamic set of enemies. Due to its short history, FdI does not have clearly defined phases, but drawing on their strong nationalist sentiment, its main enemies are the migrants and multiculturalism (Tarchi, 2018). The rising success of FdI is certainly due to its highly charismatic leader: Giorgia Meloni. She has always depicted

herself as an Italian woman proud of her roots and ready to defend them. Very famous is her speech in which she proudly declares of being 'Giorgia, a woman, a mother, an Italian, and a catholic' as opposed to the multicultural Italian population that is being created by the inefficient governance (La Repubblica, 2019). Finally, this party has been chosen as it was not part of the government in the period analyzed.

Table 5: Brothers of Italy

FdI	Yes	No
Us vs Them	X	
Nativism	X	
Changing enemy	X	
Charismatic Leader	X	
Opposition party	X	

4.5.2 The Netherlands

Populism has never been a relevant feature of Dutch politics until the early 2002 with the rise of Pim Furtuyn's party (Lucardie, 2008). Before the populist rise, dutch politics was highly pillarized. Every ideological organization – pillar – had its own party, which ensured very close ties between the political class and the people (Lucardie, 2008). The secularization of politics led to a depillarization process that distanced the people from the political class (Lucardie, 2008). Moreover, this general distance between the people and politics was further accentuated by the increasing migration flows from former Dutch colonies, North African and Middle Eastern countries that sparked widespread fear and resentment among the Dutch population and favoured the rise of populism (Lucardie, 2008).

Partij Voor de Vrijheid/ Party For Freedom

Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV) is a right-wing party founded in 2005 by Geert Wilders (Hameleers et al., 2016). The PVV extremely emphasizes the existential opposition between the people and the elites. The parliament is claimed to be fake as it does not reflect and respect people's demand and as such it is accused of eroding Dutch society and culture (Hameleers et al., 2016). The key enemies on which they construct the Us vs Them

dichotomy are migrants and Muslims (Hameleers et al., 2016). The Islamic population grew exponentially over the last decades and they are accused of destroying the Dutch integrity and culture. However, over the last year Wilders has added as his enemy the EU which he claims to be negative for the Dutch prosperity and integrity and thus sustains Nexit (Otjes, 2021). The PVV presented itself as the response to this existential crisis and ready to defend the Netherlands from supranational institutions. The popularity of this party is certainly given by its charismatic founder and leader Geert Wilders (Hameleers et al., 2016). His charisma is manifested in his speeches which he delivers by positioning himself among the people and by using a very straightforward language aimed at insulting the establishment and exalting the Dutch values (Hameleers et al., 2016). Finally, the PVV was not part of the government in the time analyzed.

Table 6: Party for Freedom

PVV	Yes	No
Us vs Them	X	
Nativism	X	
Changing enemy	X	
Charismatic Leader	X	
Opposition party	X	

Forum voor Democratie/ Forum for Democracy
Forum voor Democratie (FvD) was founded by Thierry Baudet in 2015 as an eurosceptic think tank which was soon turned into a successful right-wing party (Otjes, 2020). FvD is extremely anti-establishment and criticizes the very structure of the Dutch parliament. In fact, Baudet called for its modification by following the Swiss style of direct democracy (Otjes, 2020). The nativist senthiment of the party directly comes from his very nationalistic leader who calls for the implementation of stricter immigration policies in order to preserve the native inhabitants of the Netherlands. Baudet not only counters the Islamic community or the illegal migrants, he also stresses his desire to live in a white-dominated country and not feel an ethnic minority (Otjes, 2020). Moreover, Baudet adopts very conservative views on gender equality and he sustains women's inferiority (Otjes, 2020). FvD has an eurosceptic nature and

as such it continuously counters the EU and favours Nexit (Otjes, 2020). The very diverse electorate reached by the FvD is given by the charismatic capability of its leader, Thierry Baudet, to mobilize a conspicuous amount of people who previously lost faith in politics and the political class (Otjes, 2020). Finally, Forum voor Democratie has been chosen as it was not governing in the time frame in analysis.

Table 7: Forum for Democracy

FvD	**Yes**	**No**
Us vs Them	X	
Nativism	X	
Changing enemy	X	
Charismatic Leader	X	
Opposition party	X	

4.6 Operationalizing Frames

In order to assess how the various populist parties have constructed the perception of Covid, it is crucial to define the different categories of frames. Specifically, this section will present a table outlining the main discourses pertaining to each category. This categorization and operationalization have been created by combining the works by Helbling et al. and Msughter & Philipps. The article by Helbling et al. has been essential to differentiate the frames into three broad categories: cultural, economic and political (2010). The general guidelines provided by Helbling et al. have been enriched by the work by Msughter & Philipps. The latters wrote an article on the framing of Covid in Nigerian media by using a broad set of frames (2020). Some of these frames have been used in this thesis by placing them in one specific category.

Table 8: Frames Operationalization

Frames	Explanation
Cultural	*Civil rights and political culture*
	- "Equality or inequality with which laws, punishment, rewards and resources are applied or distributed among individuals or groups. Also, the balance between the rights or interests of one individual or group compared to another individual or group" (Msughter & Philipps, 2020, p. 593).
	- Policies may undermine national independence and thus national institutions (Helbling et al., 2010)
	- democracy
	- symbolic political values
	Preservation of national boundaries and cultural homogenous society (Helbling et al., 2010)
	- fears of mass immigration
	- xenophobic attitudes
	Cultural identity and Morality
	- "The social norms, trends, values and customs constituting culture" (Msughter & Philipps, 2020, p. 593)
	- "Any perspective or policy objective compelled by religious doctrine or interpretation, duty, honour, righteousness or any other sense of ethics or social responsibility" (Msughter & Philipps, 2020, p. 593).
Economic	*Labour and social security frames*
	- "fears of unemployment, decreasing wages, retrenchment of the welfare state and social security" (Helbling et al., 2010, p. 501)

> *"The cost, or monetary or financial implications of the issue (to an individual, family, community, or to the economy as a whole)"*
> (Msughter & Philipps, 2020, p. 593).

Political	*Functioning and working of the political system* (Helbling et al., 2010) - degree of action capacity of a state and state power - efficiency of bureaucracy, government and policies *Security* (Helbling et al., 2010) - crime, corruption, social turmoil

4.7 Data Collection

4.7.1 Time frame

In order to effectively analyze the impact of populist parties on how the Covid pandemic has been framed in Italy and the Netherlands, this study will focus on a defined time frame. Specifically, from December 31st, 2020, which is when China announced a new variant of pneumonia infection – Covid 19 – until the beginning of the second wave. For the latter it is more difficult to attribute a specific date because there is no official start date of the different waves. The start of the second wave in both countries will be symbolically set at October 15th, 2020 given that both countries started registering an increase in cases around that day. This specific time frame was chosen because during this period there was more uncertainty than ever on what Covid-19 was and how it had to be dealt with. Moreover, given the novelty of the phenomenon, the first wave allowed populist parties greater chances to frame the pandemic according to their interests.

4.7.2 Sources

The data employed in this thesis have been acquired solely through desk research. However, this thesis draws on a broad variety of sources, both primary and secondary.

Primary sources mainly entail speeches given by populist politicians. These are pivotal in this thesis as they provide crucial information about the discourses used by populist parties when appealing to the public. Indeed, by analyzing speeches, this thesis aims to grasp the main

cultural, economic and political frames used by populist parties to shape the public consideration of the anti-covid measures implemented by the governments. These speeches are both in written and visual form and may be found on different platforms such as Youtube, the websites of the parties and of the government. However, certain speeches have been accessed through secondary sources such as online newspaper articles. In general, secondary sources have been used mainly to provide information on the main theories and concepts of this thesis both in the first sections comprising the literature review and the theoretical framework and in the case studies analysis. Moreover, national newspaper articles have been fundamental to collect information on the development of the pandemic, its management and the measures implemented.

4.7.3 Reliability

The data collected in this thesis may be considered reliable due to the sources employed. In fact, primary sources such as video interviews, video speeches and official transcriptions of parliamentary interventions have been the main sources employed to gather data. These videos were mainly retrieved on Youtube. Moreover, social media posts on Twitter and Facebook have been gathered from politicians' official profiles. Secondary sources mainly comprised peer-reviewed journal articles and books retrieved from the Erasmus University online library and Google Scholar. With regard to newspaper articles the majority come from national accredited journals such as La Stampa and Corriere della Sera for Italy and NOS for the Netherlands. Finally, sources in Dutch and Italian have been translated personally by the author of this study and not through online translation software which might alter their meaning.

5. ITALY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyze Italy. It will investigate how the Italian populist parties challenged the anti-Covid measures implemented by the government in order to assess which category of frames has been predominantly used. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into several sub-chapters each tackling. First, there will be an introduction aimed at providing the reader with an overview on the course of covid in Italy . From then on the subchapters will consist in different themes on which the analysis is based, namely: the virus, the lockdown, the lockdown reopening, the EU, migration, the second wave and finally the general covid measures.

5.2 Background

Italy has been the first European country hit by the pandemic (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). It all started on January 31st, 2020 when two Chinese tourists tested positive and Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte declared a health emergency in Italy (Bassan, n.d.). The real turning point came on February 21st when an Italian man, residing in a small town in the province of Lodi, tested positive. This was the Italian 'patient one'. In a few hours the cases rose and on February 23rd Conte implemented the first restrictive measures. In eleven municipalities in the region of Lombardy and Veneto, every kind of public gathering was suspended and it was prohibited to leave the militarized municipalities (Bassan, n.d.). Soon after, the red zone was extended to 14 provinces across the north and in Lombardy, (Bassan, n.d.). On March 9th, Conte announced the national lockdown (Bassan, n.d.). This ordinance was named 'I stay home' and it prohibited people from leaving their house. March was a devastating month, as the country surpassed China in number of cases, it reached 969 daily deaths and in Bergamo military vehicles were called to transport dead bodies to other cities (Bassan, n.d.). In April the situation started improving, cases were declining and Conte announced the so-called phase 2 (Bassan, n.d.). This was implemented on May 4th and marked the reopening of Italy. Italians were now allowed to visit their families and by the end of the month to go to bars and meet friends. Travel restrictions within Italy were lifted on June 11th when phase 3 started. During the summer the situation was quite stable and remained relatively calm until the second half of October when the second wave of Covid-19 hit the country and the government imposed further restrictive measures (Bassan, n.d.).

5.3 The virus

This section will look at how the League and FdI framed the virus by addressing three main sub topics: the threat of Covid, the spread of viruses and its origin.

5.3.1 The threat of Covid

Italian populist parties started riding the wave of Covid very soon and certainly before the government took any action. By stressing the dangerousness of the virus, Salvini and Meloni asked to ban incoming flights from China already in January 2020 (Lecca, 2020). They called for the protection of the Italian border from external and foreign threats. The protection of national borders has been a very recurrent topic in the populist initial interpretation of the virus. In fact, the League and FdI asked for the suspension of the Schengen pact in order to avoid an inflow of positive people from other countries (Coronavirus, Lega, 2020). Salvini in an interview stated 'as a father, I want to know who enters or leaves my country' (Coronavirus, Lega, 2020). This measure was eventually implemented at the end of the month when two Chinese tourists tested positive in Rome and the government declared the state of emergency (Bassan, n.d.). Salvini argued that the government had to apologize to the Italians for not having protected their borders and thus the safety of their people (La7 Attualità, 2020).

This shows how the League's leader recurred to Italian values such as the family and safety to present himself as one of the people and defender of the people. Most importantly, this shows how populist leaders held onto nativist arguments and employed the discourse surrounding the preservation of national borders to culturally frame the governmental response to the virus.

5.3.2 The spread of viruses

As discussed by Rosenberg, identifying the nature and origin of the virus, but also an explanation for how it developed and spread, is an intrinsic feature of human beings (1989). Men and women look for reassurance in critical moments and populist parties often represent the answer to their questions. In the initial phase of the epidemic, the virus was still considered as a mere Chinese concern. Luca Zaia, the governor of Veneto and a member of the League, argued that Covid was not to be considered a problem for Italy. He declared:

> The hygiene that our people, the citizens of Veneto and the Italian citizens,

the cultural formation that we have is that of showering, of frequently washing our hands, of personal hygiene. Particularly our food regime, cleaning, hygienic norms, the fridge, the expiration date of our food [...] it is a cultural fact. I think that in China the virus paid a high cost because we all have seen them eating living rats and other things like that. [...] The virus has to find a clean environment almost like a hospital. We are a bit maniacal [...]. (Corriere della Sera, 2020)

Zaia stressed the Italian superiority in matters of personal and social hygiene and used it to reassure the people. Once again, cultural notions widely shared by the Italians, such as their superior cleaning culture, have been used to culturally frame the virus.

5.3.3 The nature of the virus

When Covid started spreading in Italy, the discourse surrounding its origin and expansion changed. The Italian superiority in cleaning culture left the space to more radical and xenophobic arguments. Already by the end of february, during an interview, Salvini stated: "someone made a mistake in China. I hope that all this is not the result of experiments with economic, commercial and industrial goals" (Matteo Salvini, 2020). Meloni took a softer approach against the Chinese by simply stating that it was their responsibility, but always pointing to the lack of prompt responses from the Italian government. Meloni's approach changed when together with the League, they started using a documentary broadcasted in 2015 on national tv dealing with the creation of a new coronavirus in China (Drogo, 2020). Although the coronavirus in analysis was not the one causing Covid-19, the League and FdI exploited this video to show how the establishment failed to deal with foreign threats endangering the Italian population (Drogo, 2020).

In this case the response to Covid has been framed mainly politically by highlighting the inefficacy of the state in preventing the spread of the virus.

Table 9

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
The threat of Covid	X		

The spread of viruses	X		
The nature of the virus			X

5.4 Lockdown

This section will analyze how Italian populist parties framed the pandemic by addressing two of their stands regarding first the lockdown in the north and then the national one.

5.4.1 The lockdown in the North

When the virus hit Italy, Salvini changed position and passed from defining Covid as a dangerous threat to a 'mere flu' (Lecca, 2020). The fact that the two most hit regions were governed by League politicians did not help the party's credibility. A few days later, through a facebook live, Salvini invited the President of the Republic Mattarella to push Conte to reopen as much as possible in order to allow the Italians to go back to earn their money and 'work, work, work' (Marzocchi, 2021). At that moment it was clear that the League exploited the sense of uncertainty and fear spread among the inhabitants of the red zones but also of the rest of the Italians. The former were those already suffering from the hard restrictive measures and the latter were worried that they would shortly be in the same situation.

Specifically, Salvini stressed the economic consequences of such closure and thus leveraged on the fear of unemployment and money loss of the citizens. At this stage, Salvini mainly used economic frames to shape public's opinion on the governmental response to the spread of the virus.

5.4.2 Request for national lockdown

A further U-turn in populists' agenda came at the beginning of March when they met Premier Conte and asked for national restrictive measures. The message sent by Salvini and Meloni was to 'close everything for the following fifteen days' besides the strategic sectors (Salvini e, 2020). Salvini stressed how a total closure could allow the Italians to later rise as a 'unified and healthy nation' (Salvini e, 2020). Moreover, he accused the government of not having prompt and efficient responses to the crisis that was hitting the country (Salvini e, 2020). He

denounced how 'someone was downplaying the seriousness of the virus' and stressed that there was no time to worry about the economy but only about the safety of the Italian people (Salvini e, 2020).

At this stage, Salvini addressed the political inefficacy and incapacity of the government to act in times of global pandemic and national danger.

Table 10

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
Lockdown in the North		X	
Request for national lockdown			X

5.5 Lockdown – reopening

This section will look at how Meloni and Salvini dealt with the easing of the lockdown, by looking at how they behaved in Easter and in the prospect of phase two.

5.5.1 Easter

Only a few weeks later, Salvini re-took the scene but this time without the support of FdI and most of his party members (La Mattina, 2020). In this case, he clearly recurred to cultural frames to challenge the establishment. With Easter approaching, he asked to reopen churches (La Mattina, 2020). At that moment, Italy was still in a very critical moment of the pandemic. Yet, Salvini used the peculiarity of the situation in his favour by claiming that at that moment, as never before, the Italians had the right to go to church and pray for their beloved (Zapperi, 2020). By leveraging on the strong religiosity of many Italians, and especially of the elderliest – also the most hit generation – he proposed himself as the defender of their culture against the elite. This request was considered to be absurd by almost every politician, and even by the pope and the Church (La Mattina, 2020). The only politician supporting him was his collegue Pillon who argued that during a pandemic 'science alone is not enough' (La Mattina, 2020). When their request was obviously declined Salvini decided to pray on national tv and asked the Virgin Mary to please help the Italians (Manucci, 2020).

At this stage, the League used religion to culturally shape the governmental response to Covid.

5.5.2 Phase 2

By the end of the month, Salvini and Meloni started asking for reopenings. Through a Facebook live, Salvini asked 'in the name of millions of Italians' to reopen the country by stating 'stop it, allow us to go out, to earn, to work' (Marzocchi, 2021). When PM Conte eventually announced the implementation of the phase 2 – consisting in a period of gradual reopenings – Meloni strongly countered his plan. She criticized Conte's decision to proceed with sectorial reopening of industries and shops as by doing so he was "condemning to death a lot of enterprises" (Giorgia Meloni, n.d). Meloni addressed how she did not want to 'sacrifice Italy's companies and jobs, and to contribute to the desertification of the Italian production market' (Giorgia Meloni, n.d). Furthermore, she accused Conte of eroding democracy and endangering the civil rights and liberties of the Italians (Giorgia Meloni, n.d).

In this case, Meloni and Salvini mainly used economic frames to shape public's opinion on Covid management. In fact, they both referred to failing companies and shops and unemployment.

Table 11

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
Easter	X		
Phase 2		X	

5.6 EU Intervention

Euroscepticism remained a constant topic in populists' agenda during the pandemic. This allowed them to deal with familiar topics also in an unprecedented crisis (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Salvini and Meloni used two main topics to frame the EU intervention: Lagarde's speech in March and the negotiations for financial aid.

5.6.1 Lagarde's speech

The first great opportunity to criticize the EU came in mid March. Italy was entering into a severe economic crisis given by the implementation of the hard lockdown. The President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, declared that it was not the ECB's duty to reduce national spreads and that she did not want to be remembered for another 'Whatever it takes' (Ucciero, 2020). Lagarde made it clear that it was not her intention to help the Italian economy overcome this crisis. On the same night, Salvini stated:

> [...] Today a woman, a French lawyer, who is the president of the European Central Bank, meaning that she surveils all the banks and all the savings of Europeans, said "we are not here to decrease the spread. In this way all the European economies lost: the Italian one burnt 68 billion euros. (Mediasetplay, 2020)

Therefore, by leveraging on the economic fears of the Italian citizens, Salvini depicted Lagarde and the whole EU as responsible for the declining Italian economy. Additionally, Meloni argued that these words were intentionally pronounced to hurt the Italian economy (La7 Attualità, 2020). She stressed how the EU was 'seeing the pandemic as an occasion to weaken the Italian economy and acquire strategic asset for low prices' (La7 Attualità, 2020)

Populists' approach to Lagarde's speech is explanatory of how they economically framed the EU. In fact, they stressed the economic negative consequences of Lagarde's words on the Italian economy and suggested the EU's intention to exploit the crisis in their favour.

5.6.2 Negotiations for financial aid

Lagarde immediately changed her stand and the EU initiated the negotiations for financial aid to Italy and other member states.

The first instrument debated was the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – which was instituted to help eurozone countries in case of severe economic distress (Losi, 2019). The ESM had been highly criticized as it was claimed to not help the economy but only to eventually worsen it. Meloni described the ESM as 'a noose around the neck, an instrument to bend Italy' (Vista, 2020). The italian population was very confused and concerned about the financial consequences of the pandemic and the EU deals. Salvini and Meloni exploited this situation and, while Conte was negotiating the ESM, the populist leaders posted false

accusations towards Conte by claiming that he had signed the ESM without consulting the parliament and the Italians. Salvini posted:

> MES was approved: [...] dictatorship in the name of the virus. [...] Since 1989 Italy gave 140 billions to the EU, now to have a loan of 35 we will enter in a system of legalized loan sharking. (Salvini, 2020)

Basically, by leveraging on the negative economic discourse surrounding the ESM, Salvini and Meloni challenged Conte via false accusations. It is clear how Italian populist parties used the European intervention to economically frame the pandemic. By specifically leveraging on the people's fear of unemployment and higher taxes, the League and FdI negatively addressed the cost and financial implications of the ESM.

Table 12

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
Lagarde's speech		X	
Negotiations for financial aid		X	

5.7 Immigration

In Italy, immigration remained a hot topic during the pandemic. Although left aside at the beginning, whenever there could be a clear connection between immigration and pandemic, populists exacerbated this relationship and made it central to their speeches. They did so on mainly two occasions: during the outbreak of the virus and during the summer.

5.7.1 Outbreak

During the first weeks of the epidemic, migration could not be linked to the spread of Covid given that the virus had not yet reached African countries. However, Meloni pointed out how the anti-Covid measures only applied to the Italians and not to the migrants. In fact, she denounced how the Italians had to be locked in their homes and migrants could freely move around countries and cross the border to arrive in Italy (Volpi, 2020). By juxtaposing the freedom of movement of the migrants to the lack thereof of the Italians, Meloni stressed the

violation of freedoms that the Italian were subjected to as opposed to the freedoms of the migrants (Volpi, 2020).

Overall, Meloni predominantly used cultural frames as she addressed the violation of civil rights that the Italian were facing as opposed to the freedom of movement migration of the migrants.

5.7.2 Summer

Populist parties finally had a great opportunity to bring back immigration into their agenda during the summer. A spike in cases brought back restrictive measures which particularly affected the nightlife. This decision provided fertile ground to populist politicians to leverage on the desire of freedom of the Italians and to juxtapose it to the freedom of the migrants. In fact, Salvini, whose agenda has always been centered around migration, declared how the problem was not a bunch of Italian kids enjoying their summer but migrants illegally bringing Covid to Italy (La Repubblica, 2020). Meloni added:

> If the government deems to close clubs it has also to close ports to illegal migration. It is impossible to ignore the relationship between the rise in cases and clandestine immigration. Our production sectors and companies are on their knees: Italy does not deserve this crazy government. (Meloni, 2020)

Salvini mainly leveraged on the exhaustion of the Italian young population and their violated civil rights, in order to construct a negative discourse surrounding the migrants and how the government dealt with the pandemic. Meloni used the same discourse by stressing how young people were being deprived of the right to enjoy their night while migrants could still freely enter Italy (Meloni, 2020). Overall, Meloni and Salvini adopted the same approach to migration and leveraged on the violation of civil rights to construct an anti-governmental understanding of the pandemic management.

Therefore, in this case cultural frames were predominantly used.

Table 13

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames

Outbreak	X		
Summer	X		

5.8 General anti-Covid measures

Throughout the pandemic the government implemented permanent measures aimed at personal protection such as the implementation of the 1.5 m distance, face masks and the institution of a state of emergency. The latter consists in a judicial condition implemented in exceptional cases aimed at allowing the government to act promptly and with extraordinary powers (Che cos'è, 2020). During the first months of the pandemic, these measures were not given much attention by populist parties as they had more concrete themes to tackle. This section will look at how FdI and the League framed these measures.

5.8.1 Face masks

During the summer, given the lack of hard measures, populists mainly discussed safety distance and particularly face masks. Although taking different stands, the League and FdI both countered the mandatory use of face masks. By taking a softer stand, Meloni stated that she would have not allowed masks to become bibs (La Stampa, 2020). This statement was made on occasion of a FdI manifestation on July 6th, when Giorgia Meloni was accusing the establishment of exaggerating the risk of contagion during a protest, only to prevent her party from giving voice to the Italians (La Stampa, 2020). By claiming that she "would have not allowed masks to silence her", Meloni leveraged on the freedom of speech to challenge the elite and propose herself as the savior of the Italians (La Stampa, 2020).

Salvini took a harder and controversial approach to these safety measures and kept countering them for the whole summer. In July he participated in a denialists reunion at the senate and refused to wear a face mask (Mari, 2020). Moreover, he proudly declared that he would have not used the elbow salute but he would have greeted people with the traditional two kisses on the cheeks (Mari, 2020). By advocating the end of the pandemic, he accused the elite of listening to pseudo-virologists that were only terrorizing the people for personal interests (F.Q., 2020). Given Salvini's controversial political agenda, in August he changed stand and encouraged the people to follow the indications of the experts and thus wear a face mask and keep the distance (Salvini fa, 2020). In this case, Salvini combined traditional customs and

the incapacity of the state to counter their covid management via cultural and political frames.

Overall, face masks have been a hotly debated topic. Populist leaders in Italy adopted a controversial stand and they recurred to a different set of frames to construct the public's opinion on it. By referring to freedom of speech and the traditional salute, they clearly used cultural frames. Moreover, by stressing the state's incapacity in ensuring social welfare Salvini also used political frames. However, given that political frames have been used only by Salvini and cultural frames have been used by both, it may be argued that for this topic the predominant frame is the cultural.

5.8.2 State of emergency
During the summer, the government proposed an extension of the state of emergency in order to cope with the eventuality of a second wave. The League and FdI were against this extension and took very hard stands. Salvini stated:

> You are risking to cause more damage for hunger than what the virus made in hospitals. Out of respect for the 35 000 deaths, you cannot keep an entire country under threat. The Only announcement, only the hypothesis of a prolongation [of the state of emergency] from October 31st to December 31st is causing a loss of tens of billions of euros to the Italian economy. Who pays? (F.Q., 2020)

Meloni took the same stand and during a parliamentary session she accused Conte of killing democracy and of being 'crazy and irresponsible' (Corriere della Sera, 2020).

In this case, Salvini and Meloni used different frames and thus it is not possible to establish the predominant one. In fact, Salvini addressed mostly economic consequences, whilst Meloni mainly used cultural frames as she addressed Conte's attempt to destroy the Italian democracy. Hence in the table below, the state of emergency will appear as framed both economically and culturally.

Table 14

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames

Face masks	X		
State of emergency	X	X	

5.9 Conclusion

Table 15

Theme	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
The virus	XX		X
Lockdown		X	X
Lockdown – reopening	X	X	
European Union		XX	
Immigration	XX		
General anti-Covid measures	XX	X	
TOTAL	7	5	2

This chapter has analyzed how the Italian populist parties have framed the Covid management. This analysis has taken into account six topics and looked at country-specific subtopics to establish the overall predominant frame. Out of fourteen frames, seven were cultural, five were economic and only two were political. This means that, overall, for the case of Italy, the cultural frame has been predominantly employed. However, it is worth to notice that although being predominant, it has not been employed to frame every topic. Indeed, the lockdown has been framed both economically and politically, while the EU intervention has been only economically framed.

To conclude, in order to facilitate the comparison with the case of the Netherlands the relationship between the number of frames used and the number of total frames will be

presented in percentages. Hence, the cultural frames count for 50%, the economic for 36% and the political for 14%.

6. THE NETHERLANDS

This chapter will analyze the case of the Netherlands by following the same structure as the previous case.

6.1 Background

The Netherlands was hit at a later stage by the pandemic and to a lesser degree than other European countries, such as Italy and Spain (Darroch, 2020). While other EU governments were taking hard measures, the Netherlands allowed the celebration for carnival in the regions of Noord-Brabant, Limburg and Gelderland (Darroch, 2020). A few days later, on February 27th, the first case was registered and on March 6th the first death (Darroch, 2020). The first measure came on March 9th, consisting in a ban on hand shakes followed by a negative travel advice for Italy (Darroch, 2020). The Netherlands was now in the so-called Containment phase – preventing the virus from spreading– and Rutte banned public gatherings of more than 100 people and encouraged people to work from home (Darroch, 2020). March 15th marked the date of the start of the Dutch *intelligent lockdown* – consisting in the closure of schools, bars and restaurants; staying at home was not mandatory but encouraged (Zuurbier, 2020). Rutte declared that the lockdown was designed to preserve personal freedom and eventually create a wall of immunity (Darroch, 2020). By the end of the month, the situation worsened, contact professions closed and a few days laters universities' students started their online education. The relaxation of the lockdown came on May 6th when contact professions, librarians and driving instructors could reopen. Bars and restaurants were granted reopening on June 1st with a limit of 30 guests. Face masks were not mandatory unless in public transports and all the measures had to be applied with the 1.5 meters distance scheme (Darroch, 2020). Over the summer the situation stayed quite calm until the beginning of October when after an exponential rise in the cases, the Netherlands entered in the second wave and slowly implemented another lockdown.

6.2 The virus

When the virus reached the Netherlands, there were already some guidelines on how to deal with the pandemic and some examples of how populist parties framed the pandemic. The soft approach of the Dutch government favoured the populist agenda. In fact, populist parties leveraged on the disastrous impact of Covid in southern European countries to criticize the lack of Dutch restrictive measures (Akkerman, 2020). This section will analyze how the virus was framed by looking at how they approached the threat of Covid and its nature.

6.2.1 The threat of Covid

Populist parties took the opposing stand of the government and immediately started asking for restrictive measures. Thierry Baudet asked for the suspension of flights from China already in the beginning of February. In fact, he thoroughly criticized prime minister Rutte by accusing of not being able to think ahead and argued that any individual normally capacitated could have foreseen the spread of the virus in the Netherlands (Forum voor Democratie, 2020). Moreover, Baudet criticized the inefficiency and tardiness of Rutte's job. He argued that the more the time passed, the more restrictive measures should have been implemented and, as a result, the more Rutte's claim to protect the economy would reveal to be flawed (Forum voor Democratie, 2020). Furthermore, Baudet asked to ban flights from high risk countries such as Italy and Iran and denounced how "people with 40 °C fever could still freely enter the country" by mid March (Forum voor Democratie, 2020).

Although referring to border protection, the cultural frame is not the predominant in this case. At this stage, Baudet clearly used political frames to counter Rutte's management. In fact, he highlighted the inefficient work of the PM and the lack of action of the government in preventing the spread of the virus.

6.2.2 The nature of the virus

During the course of the pandemic, the origin of the virus was widely attributed to a wet market in Wuhan (Mizumoto et al, 2020). Some months after the outbreak, Baudet published on his channel an interview with the US ambassador in the Netherlands talking about the accountability and responsibility of the Chinese government in allowing the surge of a pandemic (Thierry Baudet, 2020). The Chinese nature of the virus served Baudet a chance to criticize globalization. Indeed, he argued that the Netherlands had been infected because of the promotion of global interdependence and interconnectedness (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Baudet stressed how the Western reliance on Chinese supplies had been the main cause of global contamination (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). As a consequence, he called for a revision of the supply chain in such a way to ensure western security and safety standards (Thierry Baudet, 2020).

In this case, Baudet culturally framed the pandemic by criticizing the elites' reliance on Chinese products and thus the rejection of traditional market values and standards.

Table 16

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
The threat of Covid			X
The nature of the virus	X		

6.3 Lockdown

The tardiness and softness of the Dutch approach to the pandemic created fertile terrain for the Dutch populist parties. This section will present an analysis on the framing of the lockdown by looking at how they requested the lockdown and how they used schooling in this process.

6.3.1 Request for a national lockdown

Populist parties started asking for harder measures. Their demand consisted of a hard lockdown of "four weeks in order to avoid contact and the spread of Covid" (NOS, 2020). Prime minister's plan was to avoid a hard lockdown in order to preserve the economy as much as possible (Darroch, 2020). However, Baudet argued that postponing the lockdown would have resulted in worse economic outcomes (NOS, 2020). Moreover, they insisted on the implementation of a lockdown in order to avoid the scenario of overcrowded hospitals (NOS,2020). In fact, this could endanger the health and well being of the Dutch given that they would not be able to be helped in case of car accidents, heart attacks or any other health emergency. On the same line stood Wilders who adopted an even harder approach. PVV's leader attacked Rutte by twittering: "All Europe is in lockdown except for the Netherlands of Rutte, because Rutte prefers to play with the lives of the people rather than saving them. Dangerous man" (Wilders, 2020).

It is clear how in this case, Dutch populist parties predominantly used cultural frames. In fact, they highlighted the risks that a missing lockdown could have on the safety of Dutch people. It may therefore be argued that the cultural frames have been the most used. In fact, both Wilders and Baudet addressed the importance of protecting the health of their people.

6.3.2 Schooling

A further theme employed by Dutch populist parties to appeal to the public was schooling. Their demands for a lockdown were mainly centered around the need to protect the children, the Dutch students and their families (NOS, 2020). Their initial request for a temporary closure of schools was rejected by the parliament. Therefore, Wilders encouraged the Dutch parliament to, at least, lift the fine for not sending the children to school with the claim that parents are entitled to decide whether to send their children to school and to protect them (NOS, 2020). Baudet supported Wilders and stressed the importance of granting Dutch parents the 'freedom to decide whether to send their children to school or not' and 'worry about the real danger of their kids getting infected in schools' (NOS, 2020). This freedom was considered to be essential given that the health and safety of the whole family were thereon dependent.

In this case, Dutch populist parties recurred to civil rights such as education and freedom in order to culturally frame the governmental response to the pandemic. Moreover, they leveraged on traditional institutions such as families to appeal to the public and challenge the elite.

Table 17

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
Request for national lockdown	X		
Schooling	X		

6.4 Lockdown – reopening

Soon after the lockdown was implemented, Dutch populist parties changed stand and called for reopening. This section will analyze how PVV and FvD asked for reopening and how they framed its announcement.

6.4.1 Request for reopening

Easing the lockdown has been central to populist agenda already after nearly one month from its enforcement. Their demand was to reopen everything in order to allow the economy to

function and not end up in an economic recession (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b). In this case, the economic discourse is very clear. Baudet during a parliamentary speech on April 16th stated:

> Every day counts. Especially for independent workers and small companies the situation worsens very quickly. About 30% or 40% are failing, according to the latest surveys. [...] Our economy is getting hit like never before. Companies are failing and people are losing their jobs. (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b)

Moreover, Baudet called for a reopening by accusing the government of implementing extremely strict measures that were damaging the economy and were risking one million jobs in the catering sector (Akkerman, 2020). Finally, Baudet and Wilders requested the government to start planning a reopening in order to 'give the Dutch people perspective on getting back their freedom and keeping their company or their job' (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b).

Although rare cultural references to freedom, the request for reopening was definitely economically framed. Baudet and Wilders repeatedly referred to money loss, unemployment and failing companies to counter the pandemic management and thus challenge the elite.

6.4.2 Announcement of reopening

Prime Minister Rutte announced a gradual reopening through a press conference on May 6th, 2020. The reopening concerned mainly the hospitality sector and shops, but he stressed that the conditions of the IC and cases had to allow it (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b). The day after, Baudet strongly criticized the words pronounced by Rutte as he claimed they were confusing and controversial. In fact, with regard to the possibility to ease the lockdown, Baudet stated:

> [...], yesterday night he said multiple times – 7 million people heard it – "if this is still possible". But now you go further. You take three steps back. You say "perhaps terraces will have to close again. Perhaps hair salons will have to take a step back. Perhaps restaurants will not open." Your words, mister president, have meaning. [...] Yesterday's signal was not "if it is possible"; the signal was "we will do it". [...] Today's signal is a totally different one. You are taking three steps back. (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b)

With this statement Baudet criticized the efficacy of Rutte's speech and policies. Indeed, he claimed that he was confusing the Dutch people on how they would have to behave. He requested a more coordinated and clear exit strategy. Therefore, it is clear that in this case Baudet employed political frames to construct the public's view on Rutte's management.

Table 18

	Cultural frames	**Economic frames**	**Political frames**
Request for reopening		X	
Announcement of reopening			X

6.5 EU Intervention

This paragraph will look at how populist parties framed the EU by analyzing how they dealt with the initial negotiation for financial aid and later the recovery fund.

6.5.1 Negotiations for financial aid

Euroscepticism appeared in the populist agenda for the first time when the EU announced its plan to create a rescue fund for the hardest hit member states. The request of the Southern countries was to issue the so-called Eurobonds (Zuurbier, 2020). As soon as this idea spread, PVV and FvD emphasized their *Nexit* position (Akkerman, 2020). Baudet worriedly addressed the need to inhibit the EU from exploiting this situation to damage the Dutch economy in favour of others. Indeed, he stated:

> 92 millions of EU money to Armenia, 87 millions to Moldavia. 190 millions to Ukraine, 60 millions to Belarus and only 25 million to the Netherlands. This is not a eurobond but these are other aid funds. [...] We need to prevent at every cost that those 150 000 entrepreneurs fail – we cannot allow that – while eurobonds and other measures pass. (Tweede Kamer, n.d. a)

Wilders held the same position. They both argued that the implementation of eurobonds would have resulted in creating a situation where the wealthy northern countries ended up

with debts in order to sustain the poor southerners (Zuurbier, 2020). Their chance to counter the establishment vanished soon as Rutte refused to help Southern countries together with the other three frugal countries – Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020).

Overall, it is clear that PVV and FvD economically framed the Eurobonds. Indeed, they referred mainly to failing Dutch companies and the great cost and little advantage of Eurobonds for the Dutch economy and citizens (Tweede Kamer, n.d. a).

6.5.2 Recovery fund

Euroscepticism re-took the scene when Rutte agreed to participate in the EU Recovery Fund. As a EU member state the Netherlands had to contribute financially to this project. Already during the negotiations, Wilders started accusing Rutte of giving away money to the EU and southern economies rather than giving them to the Dutch people who were suffering and losing their jobs (TheLvkrijger, 2020). When the deal was signed, Wilders Twittered: "Italian Premier @GiuseppeConteIT is very happy. He gets 82 billions as a gift – from our money– while the Italians are three times richer than the Dutch. Because they never pay taxes. Now we will pay them [...] (Wilders, 2020). Wilders frequently used taxes as a means to challenge Rutte. He addressed how Rutte refused to postpone the deadline to pay taxes but signed to give other countries money that will be repaid starting from 5 years (Tweede Kamer, n.d. c).

It is clear how Wilders economically framed the EU intervention and the recovery fund. Although recurring to some xenophobic argument, Baudet and Wilders principally levareged on the negative economic repercussions of EU deals on Dutch citizens. Wilders principally juxtaposed the rising economic prosperity of European countries to the declining Dutch one.

Table 19

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
Negotiation for financial aid		X	
Recovery plan		X	

6.6 Immigration

Migrants play a central role in Wilders and Baudet's agenda (Otjes, 2020). The pandemic represented a very challenging time for Dutch populist parties as they recognized that migrants could not be blamed for the spread of Covid and thus had to abandon this theme (Akkerman, 2020). However, Wilders found the occasion to bring back migrants into his agenda when the hospitals were in overcapacity.

6.6.1 Limited IC capacity

Although some random and rare anti-immigration claims, Dutch populist parties did not have the chance to relate Covid to migrants. Wilders took the first chance possible around October 2020, by exploiting the lack of IC beds. In fact, on his twitter page, Wilders addressed how non-western patients who cannot speak Dutch are occupying the precious IC beds (Tweet Wilders, n.d.). Hence, he called for a parliamentary explanation on how this equal treatment would affect the anti-Covid measures. Furthermore, Wilders twittered:

> So the treatment and surgeries for Henk and Ingrid with cancer, strokes, and other illnesses are being postponed because IC beds are mostly being occupied by Mohammed and Fatima who do not speak our language and do not respect measures? (Tweet Wilders, n.d.)

In this case, Wilders clearly shaped the pandemic management by using cultural frames. By recurring to xenephobic arguments, he accused the government of unfairly treating the inner and outer group equally. He highlighted how the Dutch people should have priority when it comes to civil rights such as the right to be treated and have an IC bed.

Table 20

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
Restricted hospital capacity	X		

6.7 General anti-Covid measures

To deal with the pandemic, there have been some internationally adopted measures such as the mandatory use of face masks and the 1.5 meter distance. This section will look at how PVV and FvD framed these measures.

6.7.1 Face masks

The Netherlands took a different stand than most EU countries and did not make the use of masks mandatory in the first wave. This decision has been highly criticized by populist parties which made it a central request in their pandemic agenda. Having always advocated their use, PVV and FvD strongly countered the decision of the Dutch government to send face masks to China in February. Wilders accused the government of putting the Dutch people at risk by shipping masks 'three days after the WHO warned of a global lack of protection instruments' (Tweede Kamer, n.d. a). Baudet accused Rutte of having sent 'all the protective dispositives available in the Netherlands abroad' (Tweede Kamer, n.d. a).

Hence, Baudet and Wilders used this event to address the governmental incapability of acting in the interests of the people. In fact, they leveraged on the government's misjudgement on the need of face masks to shape the public's understanding of the pandemic management. Therefore, face masks have been framed by employing political arguments such as the inefficacy of the government.

6.7.2 Security distance

The security distance has been internationally adopted in order to curb the spread of the virus. In contrast to face masks, the Netherlands followed this international trend. Yet, populist parties countered this decision and advocated for its removal. Wilders always criticized this measure as he claimed that social distancing was far more challenging to enforce than masks, especially when it came to contact jobs and social habits such as grocery shopping (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b). FvD member Hiddema during a parliamentary speech stated:

> Living at 1.5 meter distance is not normal and never will be if it depends on the Forum. People simply are social animals and social distancing does not fit therein. People become extremely unhappy if they have to adapt to their normal behavior practices that are against human nature. Why has it been decided for such a new normality? (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b)

Especially due to Hiddema's statement it may be argued that the negative consideration of social distancing has been constructed through cultural frames. In fact, Hiddema stressed how this measure was in contrast to human nature and people's values, customs and traditions.

Table 21

	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
Face masks			X
Security distance	X		

6.8 Conclusion

Table 22

Theme	Cultural frames	Economic frames	Political frames
The virus	X		X
Lockdown			X
Lockdown – reopening	X	X	
European Union		XX	
Immigration	X		
General anti-Covid measures	X		X
TOTAL	5	3	3

This chapter has investigated how Dutch populist parties framed the governmental response to the pandemic from its outbreak until the start of the second wave in October. As for the previous case, the analysis consisted of six main topics, each analyzed through country-specific subtopics. Out of eleven frames, five were cultural, three were economic and three were political. Hence, the predominant frame employed by Dutch populist parties was the cultural one. Besides being the most used in terms of proportions, the cultural frames have been used in four out of the six subtopics – only the lockdown has been politically framed and the EU intervention economically.

For this case, the percentages are: cultural 46%, and economic and political 27%.

7. COMPARISON & DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction

This study investigated the framing of the pandemic and it presented a case-by-case analysis on Italy and the Netherlands aimed at establishing which frames were predominantly used by populist parties. The results of the analysis show a predominance in the use of cultural frames, with Italy using them in 50% of the cases and the Netherlands in 46%. Therefore, among the three hypotheses, the first one best explains how populist parties framed the pandemic.

It is worth noting that in both countries, populist parties have shown a controversial and inconsistent approach to the pandemic. This behavior is in line with Mudde's Us vs Them dichotomy. Populist parties' pandemic agenda are characterized by continuous changes in their suggestion for pandemic management. This varied according to the policies implemented by the government. Indeed, populists kept changing their opinion and requests as a response to the measures implemented. For instance, populist parties in both countries first asked for a lockdown and soon after it was implemented they asked to lift it. Moreover, face masks are explanatory of this behavior as in Italy, where they were mandatory, populist parties asked for their removal, and in the Netherlands, where they were not mandatory, populist parties requested their mandatory use. This behavior proved Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology (2013). As a matter of fact, the populist approach to the governmental pandemic management does not follow a clear ideological line or clear values and ideas. It is rather based on an anti-elite sentiment which makes them counter every measure implemented with the main aim of appealing to the population and gaining their support (Mudde, 2004). This may be considered as being in contrast with the predominance of cultural frames employed to shape the pandemic. However, the fact that populist parties recurred to cultural frames does not entail that they had a clear ideological line to follow. Rather, they leveraged on a shared appreciative system to appeal to the norms, values and ideas shared by the people in order to raise them against the elite.

Besides the similarities in behavior, the analysis has shown several similarities as well as differences in populist framing (Table 22). This chapter will compare the findings on Italy and the Netherlands, and it will discuss the predominance of the cultural frames over the others. Specifically, it will outline the concordant and discordant points by conducting a

per-topic comparison and discussion aimed at presenting how populists employed frames in their pandemic agenda.

7.2 The Virus

The virus has been mainly culturally and politically framed in both countries. Although showing a similar behavior and similar arguments, populist parties in the two countries used the same frames but to construct different arguments.

Since the outbreak of the epidemic in China, populist parties have asked to ban incoming flights to prevent the virus from spreading. In Italy this request was mainly culturally framed by stressing the need to protect the Italian border and population and by leveraging on values such as family. In the Netherlands, they employed border protection in order to shed light on the inability of the government to deal with the pandemic. Indeed, Dutch populists mainly employed political frames aimed at criticizing the inefficacy of the government in protecting their people.

With regard to the nature of the virus, both Dutch and Italian populist politicians speculated on its Chinese origin. In Italy, they mainly used political frames to highlight how the government failed to protect the people notwithstanding year long warnings. On the other hand, in the Netherlands, the virus' Chinese origin was used to counter the Western economic reliance on China and advocate for an economy based on Western values and standards.

7.3 Lockdown

How populist parties dealt with the lockdown is explanatory of their anti-elitarian sentiment. In fact, their demands varied accordingly with the change of governmental measures. As soon as the government implemented the lockdown they asked to lift it and vice versa. This happened in both countries although the governments adopted very different lockdowns. However, these requests were economically and politically framed in Italy, and culturally in the Netherlands.

In Italy Salvini and Meloni had a very inconsistent approach to the lockdown. They initially asked for its removal in the North, by stressing its negative economic consequences, and then accused the government of being ineffective, due to their tardiness in enforcing a national lockdown (Manucci, 2020). In the Netherlands, Baudet and Wilders mostly highlighted the

need to protect the health of the people and their freedom and thus to enforce a stricter lockdown.

7.4 Lockdown – reopening

Both in Italy and in the Netherlands, populist parties soon changed their mind and requested to lift the lockdown. The request to lift the lockdown presents a wide range of frames. However, economic frames were predominant. They both stressed the need to reopen in order to preserve the economy and not risk unemployment and money loss. In this case they used both different and similar frames.

The cultural frame was clearly used by Salvini when he asked for the reopening of churches for Easter. The economic frame was employed in both countries, when they started highlighting the disastrous consequences of the lockdown on companies and the economy, and thus asked for a return to normality. Although employed to a lesser degree also in Italy, the Netherlands made a strong use of the political frames. Indeed, Baudet held a parliamentary speech solely aimed at criticizing the inefficacy of Rutte's announcement of a gradual reopening (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b).

7.5 EU intervention

EU intervention was framed economically in both countries. Although standing on opposing stands, as one country was the one to be helped – Italy – and the other the one helping – the Netherlands – populist parties have used the same frames to argue their opposing stands. In fact, all the populist politicians considered in this thesis stressed the negative economic consequences of the EU deals and leveraged on the fear of money loss and higher taxes. Overall, they portrayed the EU as undermining national sovereignty and the economic stability of their people and they thus manifested their nativist sentiments (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020)

7.6 Immigration

Although poorly tackled, in both countries migration was employed to culturally frame the response to Covid.

Migration was particularly left aside in the Netherlands given that they could not directly relate it to Covid. However, Wilders employed it to culturally frame the lack of IC beds in

hospitals by stressing how the right of healthcare of the Dutch citizens was being overturned in order to cure infected migrants (Tweet Wilders, n.d.). In Italy, Meloni and Salvini continuously juxtaposed the situation of the Italian citizens to the migrants, by stressing how the latter had the right of movement and were responsible for the rise of cases.

7.7 General Anti-Covid Measures

General anti-Covid measures comprehend measures such as the 1.5 social distance, face masks and the state of emergency. The first two have been analyzed for the case of the Netherlands and the latter for the case of Italy. This has been the case as these were the measures mostly debated in the two countries. These measures have been central in populist pandemic agenda. The analysis has shown a predominant use of cultural frames, as both countries have referred to traditional customs and civil rights to challenge the establishment on the implementation of such measures.

Similar to the lockdown, these measures show how populist parties always adopt the opposing stand of the establishment. In fact, in Italy, where masks were mandatory, Salvini and Meloni strongly countered them and used cultural frames such as freedom of speech and the violation of traditional salutes (La Stampa, 2020; Mari, 2020) . In the Netherlands, where face masks were not mandatory, these were politically framed and used to highlight the inability of the government to efficiently combat the pandemic (Tweede Kamer, n.d. a).

Moreover, cultural frames were employed in the Netherlands to criticize the 1.5 m. In fact, this measure was claimed to be in contrast to human nature (Tweede Kamer, n.d. b). Also in Italy, cultural frames were used by Meloni to criticize the government's decision to extend the state of emergency. Indeed, she accused Conte of planning to kill democracy. Salvini took a different stand and mainly employed economic frames to counter this measure and stressed its excessive costs for the Italian economy (La Stampa, 2020; Mari, 2020).

7.8 Results

As discussed, cultural frames have been predominantly used in both countries to shape the pandemic. Indeed, cultural frames have been employed in 50% and in 46% of cases in Italy and the Netherlands, respectively. The economic ones in Italy in 36% of cases and in the Netherlands for 27%, while the political ones have been used respectively in the 14% and 27% of cases. This means that in both countries populist parties continuously referred to

cultural notions, such as civil rights, personal and collective freedoms and traditional customs, to construct an anti-elitarian public understanding of the Covid management.

The per-topic comparison has shown some similar and contrasting patterns regarding how populist parties shaped the pandemic across the countries. Some topics have been framed in both countries with the same category of frames, while some topics have been framed with different categories. The virus has been politically and economically framed in both countries. The lockdown has highlighted a significantly different use of frames, with Italy using predominantly cultural frames and the Netherlands using both economic and political. The reopening has shown a broad variety of frames, but with the predominance of the economic ones. The economic frames have been widely employed also with regard to EU intervention. Migration has been culturally shaped in both countries. Finally, the general anti-Covid measures have shown a predominance of the cultural frames.

All in all, the overall predominance of the cultural frames is confirmed by the per-topic analysis. Indeed, in both countries, cultural frames are present in four out of the six themes. Populist parties in both countries did not recur to cultural frames in framing the EU intervention. Moreover, these were not used to frame the lockdown in Italy and the lockdown reopening in the Netherlands.

7.9 Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the length of this thesis prevented an extensive and more detailed presentation and discussion of populists' arguments. These could have been investigated more in depth by, for example, taking into consideration additional topics and/or sub-topics. Second, this thesis mainly analyzed the arguments of the party's leaders and may thus generalize populists' behavior, approach and opinions. Finally, the proximity in time of the phenomenon and the study is a further limitation due to a shortage of academic studies on the topic.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Conclusion

This thesis researched into the current political landscape in Italy and the Netherlands in order to assess: *How did populist parties frame the pandemic in the European Union?*. Overall, this research established the predominance of the cultural frames in the populist framing of the pandemic. Specifically, this research found that populist parties recurred to cultural values, such as civil rights, personal and social freedoms, religion, family and school, to construct an anti-elitarian public understanding of the pandemic management. To reach this conclusion, this thesis underwent several steps. First, academic debates on framing, populism and pandemics have been presented. Second, the theoretical framework explored how the three concepts are intertwined in today's society, and outlined the three hypotheses – each claiming the predominance of one type of frame in the populist framing of the pandemic. Third, the research design presented the Congruence Analysis approach, the different criteria employed to select the case studies and the populist parties, and how the analysis was structured. The following two chapters analyzed the two case studies: Italy and the Netherlands. These analyses were conducted according to pre-established themes: the virus, the lockdown, the lockdown reopening, EU intervention, migration and general anti-Covid measures. These chapters presented the main arguments and approaches of populist parties in the two countries in analysis based on data collected through a combination of speeches, journal articles, newspaper articles and social media posts. Finally, the main findings have been compared and discussed.

This research contributed to the current academic literature on Covid-19 populism. This study brought an example on how to analyze the impact of populism on the framing of the pandemic in two EU countries: Italy and the Netherlands. Moreover, it employed numerous theories and concepts related to framing and populism. This study revealed how populist parties leveraged on an Us vs Them dichotomy to gain public consent. The pandemic has been a great chance to challenge the elite and particularly to highlight a consistent divide between the corrupt elite – playing and deciding for citizens' life – and the people – the victims and the ones to be defended. As argued by Mudde, populist parties tend to present themselves as the voice of the people (2013). Both in Italy and the Netherlands, populist parties presented themselves as the voice of the volonte generale and did so by constantly challenging the political class. Moreover, populist parties in both countries proved the

innovative argument proposed by Brubaker and Vieten regarding populist attitudes in times of crisis (2020; 2020). According to Brubaker, populist tendency to exploit crises to their advantage changed during the pandemic as they adopted an anti-crisis attitude and accused the elite of exacerbating the crisis (2020). This behavior started in both countries when the lockdown was imposed and from then on it has become a central point in populist agenda (Brubaker, 2020). Indeed, claiming that the establishment was exaggerating the crisis allowed them to constantly challenge the political class and shape the public's opinion regarding the pandemic management. Therefore, through a predominant use of cultural frames, Italian and Dutch populist parties constructed their own interpretation of the pandemic and of the governements. Hence, they made use of framing to shape the people's understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon (Rein & Schon, 1993). The understanding of the pandemic that they spread around was mutative but always centered around their main goal of countering the government. Overall, the governmental response to Covid has been portrayed as the enemy threatening the wellbeing of the people and thus the one to fight.

8.2 Recommendations

Further research may expand the reach of this study by investigating other EU countries. This study has shown similar populist behaviors in countries with different economic conditions and different developments of the pandemic. It would be relevant to verify if this has been only a coincidence or if populism around the EU has approached the pandemic in the same way. Moreover, further research may expand the topics analyzed in order to conduct an even more in depth and detailed analysis. Finally, this research focused on the first wave, further research may analyze populist attitudes in the following waves and eventually make a comparison in order to assess whether there has been a change in behaviors both spatial and temporal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnel, D. (2008). Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre. In *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 1-11). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Akkermans, T. (2020). The Netherlands. In Katsambekis, G., & Stavrakakis, Y. (Eds.) *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report* (pp. 34-36). Thessaloniki: Populismus.

Bassan, V., Salvioli, L., & Simonetta, B. (n.d.). Cose che noi umani. *Ilsole24ore.com.* https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/storia-coronavirus/

Bekkers, V., Fenger, M., & Scholten, P. (2018). Four Perspectives on the Policy Process. In *Public Policy in Action* (pp. 50-93). Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Blatter, J., & Haverland, M. (2012). Congruence Analysis. In *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (pp. 144-204). Palgrave Macmillan.

Blatter, J., & Haverland, M. (2012). Co-Variational Analysis. In *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (pp. 33-78). Palgrave Macmillan.

Brubaker, R. (2020). Paradoxes of populism during the pandemic. *Thesis Eleven*, 20(10), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513620970804

Bruno, V. A., & Downs, J. F. (2020, February 27th). The case of Fratelli d'Italia: how radical-right populists in Italy and beyond are building global networks. *Democratic Audit.* https://www.democraticaudit.com/2020/02/27/the-case-of-fratelli-ditalia-how-radical-right-populists-in-italy-and-beyond-are-building-global-networks/

Che cos'è lo stato di emergenza. (2020, October 12). *Openpolis.* https://www.openpolis.it/parole/che-cose-lo-stato-di-emergenza/

Chong, D, & Druckman, J. N. (2007). A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments. *Journal of Communication,* 57(1), 99-118. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00331.x

Coronavirus, Lega: "Sospendere Schengen". Conte: "Ora non ce n'è bisogno". (2020, February 21). Quotidiano Nazionale. https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/coronavirus-salvini-1.5040789

Corriere della Sera. (2020, February 28). *Zaia: <<Grazie all'igiene dei veneti solo 116 positivi, i cinesi? Li abbiamo visti tutti...*[video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqKPFtH3eDE

Corriere della Sera. (2020, July 20). *Migranti, Meloni a Conte: <<Al governo pazzi irresponsabili>>* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tcl_AlNVNY&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGafrjCEdWKX4aQMl8n98lpsR&index=10

Country comparison Italy vs Netherlands. (n.d). Countryeconomy.com. https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/italy/netherlands

Dabramo, L. A. (2019, March 7). L'abbigliamento del populista. *Patria Indipendente.* https://www.patriaindipendente.it/terza-pagina/costume/labbigliamento-del-populista/

Darroch, G. (2020, May 16th). '*Coronavirus: A timeline of the pandemic in the Netherlands'. DutchNews.nl.* https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/05/coronavirus-a-timeline-of-the-pandemic-in-t

he-netherlands/

Davitier, F. (2007). Policy Framing in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 14(4), 654-666. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760701314474

Dennison, J., & Geddes, A. (2021) The centre no longer holds the Lega, Matteo Salvini and the remaking of Italian immigration politics. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1853907

Drogo, G. (2020, March 26). Cosa c'è dietro Salvini e Meloni che postano "alternative facts" come il video del TGR Leonardo. *Next*. https://www.nextquotidiano.it/cosa-ce-dietro-salvini-e-meloni-tgr-leonardo/

Fidler, D. P. (2020). The Covid-19 Pandemic, Geopolitics, and International Law. *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 11(2), 237-248.

Forum voor Democratie. (2020, March 12). *Corona: Met Deze maatregelen kunnen we het Coronavirus stoppen!* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItCLusA6BvI&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGafCq2o7IIfrD8YKZKcq9lje&index=4

Fratelli d'Italia. *Giorgia Meloni: Una tempesta perfetta contro l'Italia! Il mio j'accuse a Germania e Francia* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcRp9cltKr8

Fukuyama, F. (2020). The Pandemic and Political Order. *Foreign Affairs*, 99, 26-32.

F.Q. (2020, July 14). Coronavirus, per Salvini l'emergenza è finita. E al Senato dice: "Basta con il distanziamento sociale". *Il fatto quotidiano*. https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/07/14/coronavirus-per-salvini-lemergenza-e-finita-e-l-senato-dice-basta-con-il-distanziamento-sociale/5868257/

Giorgia Meloni. *Meloni a Conte: l'Italia non è un reality show, la misura è colma* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odr_Tm3zo9A https://www.giorgiameloni.it/2020/04/30/meloni-a-conte-litalia-non-e-un-reality-show-la-misura-e-colma-video/

Greene, J. A., & Vargha, D. (2020). Ends of Epidemics. In Brands, H., & Gavin, F. J. (Ed.) *Covid-19 and World Order: The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation* (pp. 23-39). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hajer, M. A. (1993). Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Britain. In Fischer, F., & Forester, J. (Ed.) *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (pp. 43-76). Duke University Press

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2016). The Netherlands: A Heartland Full of Insights Into Populist Communication. In Aalberg, T., Esser, F., Reinermann, C., Strombeck, J., & De Vreese, C. H. (Eds.) *Populist Political Communication in Europe.* New York: Routledge.

Helbling, M., Hoeglinger, D., & Wuest, B. (2010). How Political Parties Frame European Integration. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49(4), 495-521. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01908.x

Krastev, I, & Leonard, M. (2020, June 24). Europe's pandemic politics: how the virus has changed the public's worldview. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. https://ecfr.eu/publication/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview/

La Mattina, A. (2020, April 7). Anche Meloni sconfessa Salvini su apertura chiese per Pasqua. Berlusconi: "sarebbe irresponsabile". *La Stampa: Politica.* https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2020/04/07/news/anche-meloni-sconfessa-salvini-su-apertura-chiese-per-pasqua-berlusconi-sarebbe-irresponsabile-1.38689779

La Repubblica. (2019, October 20). *Centrodestra in piazza, Meloni contro gay e lgbt: "Sono una donna, sono cristiana"* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmaIuGJWbEA

La Repubblica. (2020, August 14). *Coronavirus, Salvini: "Unico problema non sono i ragazzi che ballano ma quelli che sbarcano"* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQFB3pl3-w0&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGacdHkWUHSUeHSmPC3OxuL_&index=2

La Stampa. (2020, July 6). *Centro-destra in piazza, Meloni: "Le mascherine non siano un bavaglio"* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGBcfYQeUIY&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGafrjCEdWKX4aQMl8n98lpsR&index=16

La7 Attualità. (2020, February 26). *Coronavirus, Matteo Salvini: "Il governo dovrà chiedere scusa agli Italiani"* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEpY2q0r9vk&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGacdHkWUHSUeHjSmPC3OxuL_&index=8

La7 Attualità. (2020, March 28). *Coronavirus, Giorgia Meloni contro l'Europa: "Aspetta il terremoto in casa nostra per fregarci ...* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZgiWKYgxis&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGafrjCEdWKX4aQMl8n98lpsR&index=8

Losi, M. (2019, November 2019). MES, cos'è e come funziona il Fondo salva Stati. *Il Sole 24 ore.* https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mes-cos-e-e-come-funziona-fondo-salva-stati-ACGaaC2?refresh_ce=1

Lecca, T. (2020, February 27). Coronavirus, la giravolta della Lega: con la Cina confini chiusi, con il Nord "è poco più di un influenza". *EuropaToday.* https://europa.today.it/attualita/coronavirus-giravolta-lega-cina-nord.html

Lucardie, P. (2008). The Netherlands: Populism versus Pillarization. In Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (Ed.) *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 151-165). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

MacKellar, L. (2007). Pandemic Influenza: A Review. *Population and Development Review*, 33(3), 429-451.

Mari, L. (2020, July 27). Coronavirus, al Senato il convegno dei "negazionisti". Salvini: "Non Metto la mascherina". Sgarbi: "In Italia non c'è più". *La Repubblica: Politica.* https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/07/27/news/cornavirus_sgarbi_insiste_in_italia_no_c_e_piu_il_governo_ci_ascolti_-262991120/

Manucci, L. (2020). Italy. In Katsambekis, G., & Stravakakis, Y. (Eds.) *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report* (pp. 31-33). Thessaloniki: Populismus.

Marzocchi, A. (2021, January 1). Il 2020 di Salvini. Dal citofono di Bologna al Covid: le richieste di "apertura" e "chiusura", i selfie senza mascherina. E il silenzio sulle inchieste della Lega. *Il fatto quotidiano: Politica.*

https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/01/01/il-2020-di-salvini-dal-citofono-di-bologna-al-covid-le-richieste-di-apertura-e-chiusura-i-selfie-senza-mascherina-e-il-silenzio-sulle-inchieste-sulla-lega/6038439/?pl_id=6051723&pl_type=playlist

Matteo Salvini. (2020, February 24). *VOGLIO SAPERE CHI ENTRA ED ESCE DAL MIO PAESE* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSToMFDEfd4&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGacdHkWUHSUeHjSmPC3OxuL_&index=24&t=16s

Mediasetplay. (2020, March 13). Matteo Salvini contro Christine Lagarde: "Parole al vento [video]. https://www.mediasetplay.mediaset.it/article/mediasetplay/drittoerovescio/matteo-salvini-contro-christine-lagarde-parole-al-vento_SE000000000713_a10655

Meyer, B. (2020, August 17). Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.* https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19

Meloni, G. [@GiorgiaMeloni]. (2020, August 16). *Se il governo ritiene di chiudere le #discoteche deve anche chiudere i porti agli sbarchi illegali. Non si può ignorare legame tra aumento contagi e immigrazione clandestina. I nostri settori produttivi e le aziende sono in ginocchio: l'Italia non merita questo governo scellerato* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1295085236368347138

Mizumoto, K., Kagaya, K., & Chowell, G. (2020). Effect of a wet market on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) transmission dynamics in China, 2019-2020. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 97, 96-101.

Msughter, E., & Philipps, D. (2020). Media Framing of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Study of Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspaper in Nigeria. *International Journal of Health, Safety and Environment*, 6(5), 588-596.

Mudde, C. (2016). Introduction to the populist radical right. In *The Populist Radical Rights* (pp. 1-10). Routledge.

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and opposition,* 39(4), 541-563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C. (2020, March 27). Will the coronavirus 'kill populism?' Don't count on it. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-populism-trump-politics-response

NOS. (2020, March 12). *TERUGKIJKEN: Kabinet in debat over coronavirus onder vuur om open houden scholen* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo2ig7iBwLs&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGaePnvI602E8iT1PmehE6l7Z&index=3&t=6096s

Otjes, S. (2021). The fight on the right: what drives voting for the Dutch Freedom Party and for the Forum for Democracy. *Acta Politica*, 56(1), 130-162. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-020-00150-y

Reijmerink, B. (2020, March 23). FLASHBACK: VVD lachte Thierry Baudet UIT toen hij

corona-alarm sloeg!
https://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2020/03/flashback-vvd-lachte-thierry-baudet-uit-toen-hij-corona-alarm-sloeg/

Rein, M., & Schon, D. (1993). Reframing Policy Discourse. In *The Argumentative Turn* (pp.145-166).

Rosenberg, C. E. (1989). What Is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective. *Daedalus*, 118(2), 1-17.

Salvini, M. [Matteo]. (2020, April 9). *MES APPROVATO: FUORI DALLA LEGGE, DITTATURA NEL NOME DEL VIRUS Non ci sono gli Eurobond che voleva Conte ma c'è* [Post]. Facebook. https://m.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.278194028154/10157581944113155/?type=3&source=48&__tn__=EH-R

Salvini e Meloni: bisogna chiudere tutto. D'accordo anche Zaia. Palazzo Chigi: "Pronti ad adottare le misure necessarie". (2020, March 10). *La Stampa: Cronaca*. https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/03/10/news/salvini-e-meloni-dopo-l-incontro-con-conte-bisogna-chiudere-tutto-emergenza-sottovalutata-1.38575053

Salvini fa dietrofront sulle mascherine: "Si nei luoghi chiusi, usate la testa". Su leadership Lega: "La decidono gli elettori". (2020, August 3). *La Repubblica: Politica*. https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/08/03/news/salvini_dietrofront_mascherine-263597261/

Scholten, P. (2017). The limitation of policy learning: a constructivist perspective on expertise and policy dynamics in Dutch migrant integration policies. *Policy and Society*, 36(2), 345-363. https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1322263

Taggart, P. (2004) Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 269-288. https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528.

Tarchi, M. (2008). Italy: A Country of Many Populisms. In Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (Ed.) *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 84-99). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

TheLvkrijger. (2020, June 17). *Geert Wilders: "750 miljard naar EU? Welke zieke geesten hebben dit verzonnen? 17-06-2020 HD* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnC810brnGE

Thierry Baudet. (2020, November 12). *Let's Talk about China: U.S. Ambassador Pete Hoekstra & FVD Leader Thierry Baudet* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcohYBXUBRw&list=PL9P0lL9ZqGafCq2o7IIfrD8YKZKcq9lje&index=3&t=1667s

Tweede Kamer. (n.d a). Tweede Kamer, 69e vergadering Woensdag 22 April 2020. *Tweede Kamer der staten generalen*. https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/7133cf71-90f0-448a8493-7d47abc97277

Tweede Kamer. (n.d b). Tweede Kamer, 70e vergadering Donderdag 7 Mei 2020. *Tweede Kamer der staten generalen*. https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/c5e7cfde-da44-403e-9ea8-28e246f8f3da#idfb5225e6

Tweede Kamer. (n.d c). Tweede Kamer, 92e vergadering Dinsdag 14 juli 2020. *Tweede Kamer der staten generalen.* https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/aeb01af5-98e9-4e2a-9ea2-7046a846de9e

Tweet Wilders over coronapatienten met niet westerse achtergrond wekt woede. (2020, October 11). *NOS.* https://nos.nl/artikel/2351928-tweet-wilders-over-coronapatienten-met-niet-westerse-achtergrond-wekt-woede

Ucciero, G. (2020, March 12). Coronavirus: le misure della Bce. *Affari internazionali.* https://www.affarinternazionali.it/2020/03/non-convincono-del-tutto-le-misure-anti-coronavirus-della-bce/

Vieten, M. U. (2020). The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilitisation of the Far-Right. *Social Sciences*, 9(9), 165. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9090165

Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale. (2020, April 18). *Meloni: "Mes è un cappio al collo, Conte e M5S non scappino dal voto parlamentare"* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpHiRdyQl-s .

Volpi, C. (2020, April 8). Meloni, l'ultima vergogna: italiani chiusi in casa, mentre gli immigrati sbarcano e circolano liberamente. *Secolo d'Italia: cronaca.* https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/04/meloni-lultima-vergogna-italiani-chiusi-in-casa-mentre-gli-immigrati-sbarcano-e-circolano-liberamente/

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19-11 March 2020. (2020, March 11). *World Health Organization.* https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020

Wilders, G. [@geertwilderspvv]. (2020, March 17). *Heel Europa in lockdown behalve het Nederland van Rutte die speelt graag met mensenlevens in plaats van ze te redden. Gevaarlijke man* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1239993069308719104

Wilders, G. [@geertwilderspvv]. (2020, July 21). *Italiaanse Premier @GiuseppeConteIT zeer tevreden. Krijgt 82 miljarden aan giften – van ons geld – terwijl Italianen drie keer rijker zijn dan nederlanders. Omdat ze daar nauwelijks belastingen betalen. Nu gaan wij ze betalen. Dankzij de slappe knieen van #Rutte* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1285454544516853761?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1285454544516853761%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.businessinsider.nl%2Frutte-eu-deal-corona-italie-wilders-baudet%2F

Wondreys, J., & Mudde, C. (2020). Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19. *Nationalities Papers*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.93

Wojczewski, T. (2019). 'Enemies of the people': Populism and the politics of (in)security. *European Journal of International Security*, 5(1), 5-24. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.23

Worldometer. (2020, June 21). Covid Live Update. *Worldometer.* https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/

Zapperi, C. (2020, April 4). Coronavirus, Salvini: riapriamo le chiese per Pasqua, la scienza non basta. *Corriere della Sera: Politica.* https://www.corriere.it/politica/20_aprile_04/coronavirus-salvini-riapriamo-subito-chiese-celebrare-pasqua-e1df6fc8-7676-11ea-91b2-6c33b390094b.shtml

Zaslove, A. (2008). Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type. *European Review*, 16 (3), 319-336.

Zuurbier, M. (2020, April 13). How Dutch populists (unsuccessfully) try to exploit the Corona Virus. *BiLGi PRIME YOUTH.* https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/blog/how-dutch-populists-unsuccessfully-try-exploit-cor/