





Unifying and Multiplying the People: The Strategy of Ambiguity in National-Populist Discourse within a Cross-Border Area

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ABSTRACT

National-populist parties display a discourse based on the defense of the national integrity. However, in the current European context, these parties have to deal with an increasing cultural heterogeneity, new forms of citizenship, and multi-scaling arenas. How does national-populism develop its narratives in these settings? The paper elaborates a framework for understanding the way in which ambiguity is included in the discursive strategies of national-populists. Through the Critical Discourse Analysis approach, the contribution will focus on the analysis of the discourses produced by three parties located at the Swiss-Italian border at the time of the referendum campaign for the 2014 Swiss initiative “Against Mass Immigration.”

Introduction

People and nation may be taken as analytical concepts, but they are also discursive weapons in the hands of political actors, and are used to construct contending narratives.¹ The aim of this contribution is to address how these narratives have been produced by a number of West-European parties that are characterized by a strong national-populist claim.²

National-populism is commonly presented as a defense of national integrity; thus, this defense would appear to imply a clear-cut definition of what the “nation” they claim to protect might consist of. However, in its practical (and especially electoral) manifestations, national-populism has to deal not only with heterogenous constituencies, but also with different forms of national belonging within those constituencies. This is particularly true in the case of cross-border mobilizations.

As a consequence of some of the significant social, cultural and institutional transformations seen in Western societies—such as the growth of multifaceted forms of mobility and the increase in migration, the rise of unsettled forms of citizenship, and the erosion of the nation-state as we knew it in the previous century—the national-populist discourse is facing some tradeoffs. It can adopt a very narrow label of what its “in-group” is (e.g., natives with strong ethnic roots in the country), or it can strategically embrace different kinds of narratives on nationhood that are not exclusive, although partially contradictory. Thus, in order to maximize their electoral goals, political parties characterized by a

national-populist discourse might target voters with strong roots in the country, but also naturalized citizens and people with dual citizenship, with more or less intense ties with their homeland, whose votes also count.

We know that national-populist discourse mobilizes both the people and the nation, apparently merging them into one. But how exactly does it address “the people,” “the heartland,” “the nation,” and more generally “us,” when a nationalist stance is at stake in heterogenous constituencies? In this paper we will address this issue, asking how national-populisms label the “us,” and showing how its discourse is characterized by ambiguity.

Adopting the Critical Discourse Analysis approach, we will focus on the discourse produced by three parties located at the Swiss-Italian border: first, the Lega dei Ticinesi (Ticino League), a regionalist³ party present in the canton of Ticino; second, the cantonal section of the Schweizerische Volkspartei (Swiss People’s Party–SVP), which is known in Italian as the Unione democratica di centro (UDC); and the Italian Lega Nord (Northern League). The analysis will involve articles published in the three parties’ newspapers during the 2014 campaign for the Swiss federal initiative “Against Mass Immigration,” which was called by the Swiss populist parties in a bid to reduce immigration through the imposition of maximum ceilings and quotas, and the rejection of agreements with the EU.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we will show that ambiguity is a fundamental and strategic element of national-populist discourse. This strategy of ambiguity can take two paths: firstly, populists portray the people that they claim to represent in a vague manner, in order to minimize differences and address the widest possible constituency. In this sense, they use vagueness to unify the people. Secondly, they use multiple labels to address it, adapting their discourse to the complexity of contemporary societies, without acknowledging pluralism. In this way, they multiply the meaning of what is “us.” In Section 3, we will describe the context in which the selected discourses were produced. As our analysis will focus on the discourse of three parties that operate in a borderland area, we will also briefly discuss the relations between the two countries and the dynamics of the cross-border integration. In Section 4, we will analyze the discursive construction of the “us” by the three parties under consideration and the concrete use of ambiguity in the selected material. In the concluding section, we will discuss the results of our analysis.

Constructing “us”: a framework for the analysis

While social and political sciences need clear-cut definitions of concepts for doing empirical research, political actors do not always have the same requirements when it comes to achieving their goals. Unsurprisingly, the political use of terms such as “us,” “the people,” and “the nation” is often characterized by fusing vagueness and uncertain meaning. This uncertainty might be seen as a by-product of the idiosyncrasy of social and political realities, but also as a strategic response by political actors.

Political actors compete for different kinds of goals in different ways. When vote-seeking goals are at stake, political actors are less concerned by the consistency of their discourse and more by their electoral performance. They do not act in a

coherent arena, but under a contingent set of constraints and opportunities that also influence their strategies and their capacity to spread their message. For instance, parties that adopt a national-populist discourse are obliged to sell their reputation as defenders of the integrity of the nation against external threats, such as immigrants, elites unable to defend the country, and supranational elites that are accused of undermining national sovereignty. This would entail a clear definition of the constituency—the “people,” or the “us”—that they claim to protect. However, despite a growing literature on populism, there have only been a few attempts to empirically capture how the “us” is constructed in populists’ discourse within a particular electoral constituency.⁴

It is true that scholars acknowledge the fact that “the people” is the milestone of populism, be it understood as ideology, as discourse, as style, or as a strategy.⁵ Moreover, some scholars have tried to better define how populists use the concept and the term of “the people.” Indeed, one of the main characteristics of populism is its ability to use different meanings of the term “people.” Following this line of reasoning, Mény and Surel distinguish three types of people, that is to say three different ways in which populists invoke the people: *sovereign*, when a critique of the political elite of the country is involved, and the people is intended to mean those that hold political sovereignty; *class*, a people made up of small workers or entrepreneurs set against big corporations and economic interests; and *nation*, when what is at stake involves a cultural interpretation of the people.⁶ Drawing on Anderson,⁷ the two scholars argued that the people is an “imagined community” that can be shaped in different ways in populists’ discourse.⁸ In a similar vein, Taguieff⁹ emphasizes that populists can mobilize the people in two main ways, as *demos* or *ethnos*; taking into consideration these two uses of the people, the French scholar conceived the sub-types of *protest populism* and of *identity populism*, or *national-populism*.

The concept of national-populism testifies to scholars’ growing recognition of the close connection between nationalism and populism in contemporary European politics.¹⁰ While there is certainly a need to draw a distinction between the two in analytic terms, it is also true that actors in reality perform mixed claims, both nationalist and populist.

In analytical terms, while some scholars claim that populism and nationalism are fundamentally different, others maintain that they are intersecting and mutually implicated, though not fully overlapping. According to De Cleen and Stavrakakis,¹¹ populism presents a vertical discourse, structured by the opposition between the people-as-underdog and the elite, while nationalism employs a horizontal one, structured by the opposition between those located inside and outside a bounded community. On the contrary, Brubaker¹² affirms that a substantial (though only partial) zone of overlap between populist and nationalist discourses exists: a vertical opposition to those on top and a horizontal opposition to outside groups, constructed or not in ethnic or national terms, are tightly interwoven in populist discourse.

In our view, national-populism enhances the cultural and national (or sub-national, as in the case of ethno-regionalist parties) dimension of the people, and takes advantage of the fear of the other, considered external to the community. In national-populism the two lines of conflict, a vertical one against the elites, typical of populism, and a

horizontal one that excludes those that are outside the national community, characteristic of nationalism, are mobilized at once. However, this construction is neither static nor univocal. On the contrary, it is a never-ending discursive process shaped by ambiguity and ambivalence.

According to Ruth Wodak,¹³ one typical trait of right-wing populism's rhetoric is the "calculated ambivalence" of their discourse. Calculated ambivalence is defined as the phenomenon that one utterance carries at least two more-or-less contradictory meanings, oriented toward at least two different audiences. This not only serves to simultaneously address multiple and contradictory audiences (e.g., different electoral groups), thereby increasing the scope of the audience, but also enables the speaker or writer to deny any responsibility over the content of his or her discourse. In our view, this strategy of ambiguity can also embrace how national-populist discourse addresses the "us."

Using vagueness to unify diversity

One of the reasons for the scarcity of empirical analyses of the use of the notion of the people by national-populists is probably the apparent vagueness of its references in their concrete discourse. However, the ambiguity of the concept of the people was already stressed in some seminal works on populism. Margaret Canovan argued that what she defined as "politicians' populism" is based on an "exaltation of people," although the latter is "one of the slipperiest concepts in the political vocabulary, capable of meaning many different things in different circumstances."¹⁴ Canovan contends that populist rhetoric tries to unify the people beyond differences and factions, giving some examples of how politicians perform a discourse claiming "the people are a single entity."¹⁵ The function of this rhetorical technique is to "cancel existing political divisions and to propose a realignment." Instead of dividing along classes or segments of the population, in populism, the people are seen as a whole and in opposition to the people's enemies.

However, this rhetoric is not static and cannot be taken for granted. It is worth mentioning, moreover, that Canovan also underlines how the populist appeal doesn't take always the form of an explicit claim for popular unity. More crucially, she highlights why politicians' populism provides a strategy of ambiguity in its claims. Using the technique of an "all-embracing vagueness," politicians try "to attract all voters and therefore play down ideology and concentrate on issues that will not alienate any group."¹⁶ According to Canovan, "it is precisely this combination of vagueness and emotional resonance that makes 'the people' such an effective battle cry, and a particularly useful one for politicians who seek to blur established differences, to unite followers across former party lines, and to spread their appeal as widely as possible."¹⁷

Resonating with these reflections, one relevant strand in the recent literature in electoral studies shows that ambiguous policy platforms are particularly effective in increasing voting support.¹⁸ Compared with clear-cut and univocal messages, ambiguous messages might be more effective for targeting a broader and heterogenous constituency.

Multiplying the “us,” while avoiding the recognition of pluralism

The strategy of ambiguity not only concerns the fact that national-populism unifies heterogeneity, while avoiding any univocity, but also the fact that the “unity,” that is, the nation, the us, the people, is in reality multiple. Using different labels as part of its discursive strategies, national-populist discourse refuses, of course, to recognize a plurality within the “us,” but pragmatically adapts its discourse to the fuzzing, unsettled, fragmented context in which national belonging and citizenship is shaped nowadays. In other words, the vagueness of the discourse reflects the complexity of contemporary society, where unsettled notions of nationhood and citizenship, but also multiple scales of belonging, coexist.

First, national-populist discourse tends to emphasize national belonging in defining the “true” people, that is the true nationals. However, what the true national is represents an issue in terms of electoral targeting for national-populists. A lot of effort goes into dividing the “good” from the “bad” immigrants.¹⁹ However, this might not be enough in a context where the notion of citizenship is changing and borders are becoming less clear than they were in the past.²⁰ Nowadays, some features of nationhood—shaped by the legacy of the postwar European nation-state—still persist: citizenship, a set of civic and political rights, and cultural belonging. Meanwhile, multiple, debordering, hybrid and “gradual” forms of citizenship have emerged, as a consequence of European integration, globalization and neoliberal policies.²¹ This implies strong changes in political and residential rights: a more or less large number of naturalized immigrants can vote; a proportion of them are bi-nationals, holding two (or more) passports; and they are often long-established immigrants, coming from European countries, who play a role in vital economic sectors. Thus, national-populists’ strategy of ambiguity makes it possible to defend national integrity while taking into account, without a clear recognition of the phenomena at stake, an increasing heterogeneity in their constituencies.²²

Second, the strategy of ambiguity toward “us” depends on the scale in which national-populist discourse is produced. For instance, when a party performs a discourse on Islam it defends *European* Christianity, giving a rather different meaning—and boundary—to the notion of people. Suddenly, “us” does not refer to national belonging, as national-populist discourse makes claims for a European identity and, ambiguously, for commonalities among national sovereigntists.²³ National-populist parties compete at local, regional, and national levels—and, for EU countries, at a supranational one—and to some extent they adapt the message to these different constituencies.²⁴ Thus, a variable use of “us” can also occur when, as is true in almost all the cases, European national-populist parties run in multilevel electoral arenas. Therefore, the reference to the people depends on the arena being considered. Moreover, in some electoral competitions, issues can be more or less related to a multitude of scales. National elections in Europe can be strongly influenced by European or supranational issues, as in the case of the Great Recession, or the refugee crisis.

The strategy of ambiguity in the national-populist discourse also depends therefore on the issues and on the places in which political parties compete. The relevance of new migration patterns and nationalist legacies can play a strong role in shaping national-populist strategies, in particular when migration issues are at the top of the

agenda. Regarding this issue, state-borders have become a crucial political issue in national-populist mobilization in Europe and beyond.²⁵ European borderlands have become privileged arenas of subnational European integration and have been directly involved in some European controversies, especially around financial, migrant- and security-related issues in the 2000s and 2010s.²⁶

A national-populist mobilization across the Swiss-Italian border

In an attempt to highlight how the strategies of ambiguity characterize national-populist discourse, we focus on the discourses produced by the selected parties around one of the most relevant federal initiatives voted by Swiss citizens in the last decades,²⁷ that is the federal popular initiative “Against Mass Immigration” (AMI). Although our focus will be neither on the development of the campaign of the initiative, nor on the political consequences of its result, we contend this initiative is an event capable of activating strong national-populist discourses on the part of the selected parties. In fact, this initiative had a huge impact in the country as a whole, and especially in the Swiss-Italian border.²⁸

The initiative “Against Mass Immigration”

The peculiarity of AMI lies in the fact that it succeeded in uniting the heterogeneous issues gathered in migration policy (e.g., cross-border agreements, and legislation on foreigners and asylum seekers) with that of foreign policy, in particular the relationship with the European Union (e.g., the bilateral agreements). As concerns the initiative, it was initially promoted in 2011 by Swiss national-populist parties. After the collection of the required signatures and the parliamentary debate, the initiative went to a vote on 9 February 2014 and was accepted by the majority of valid votes (50.3%) and a majority of the cantons (with 14.5 cantons in favor vs. 8.5 cantons against). At almost 57%, the participation rate was one of the highest recorded in recent decades. The initiative requires Switzerland to manage immigration autonomously, in particular, by reintroducing maximum ceilings and annual quotas for all types of foreigners (explicitly or implicitly including resident and cross-border workers, asylum seekers, etc.), asking for Swiss citizens (and foreign citizens with residence permit) to have a priority in the job market over the new immigrants, and discarding the agreement with the European Union on the free movement of persons signed in 2002. Moreover, the initiative prohibits the conclusion of international treaties contrary to these provisions and obliges the Federal Council to renegotiate and adapt the treaties already in force within three years.

Ticino was the canton with the highest acceptance rate for the initiative (68.2%) and a rather high turnout (57.1%). This represents the expression of the singularity of the Italian-speaking canton in the federal context, a peculiarity already present in recent years (e.g., in the vote on the bilateral agreements with the EU) and one which seems to be strengthening over time.²⁹ In no other canton was the Yes vote for the initiative so clear, indicating that the questions affected by the initiative are particularly relevant for the southern canton of Ticino, which is the closest canton to the Italian border.

The Swiss-Italian border

The Italian-Swiss borderland is one of the most integrated regions in Western Europe. Northern Italy, especially Lombardy and Piedmont, and Southern Switzerland (the Canton of Ticino and the Italian-speaking valleys of the Canton of Grisons) share a language (Italian), and more than 70,000 Italian workers cross the Swiss-Italian border every day. Because of the common language, Ticino has been one of the most important destinations for Italian migrant flows since the Second World War. In 2018, about 30% of Swiss residents in Ticino were bi-national (with a second passport, predominantly European). More than 100,000 Italians are permanent residents in Ticino, while the entire canton numbers 350,000 inhabitants. More than half of the Italian residents in Ticino are bi-nationals, mostly Swiss. Italians are not only the primary European foreign component of residents in Ticino. In 2018, more than 27.7% of Ticino's residents, most of them active workers, were (only) foreign citizens. The naturalization rate has also increased in recent years, especially for Europeans, and for Italians in particular.³⁰

In the 2000s, though Switzerland never entered the EU, the so-called “bilateral agreements”—e.g., the free circulation of persons and the Schengen-Dublin treaties—promoted an increasing European integration of Switzerland, with a stronger impact on borderland regions. The weakening of control over the labor market increased cross-border competition and challenged the traditional benefits that had favored Swiss residents. In reality, the politicization of cross-border issues had already arisen in the late 1990s, when right-wing populists mobilized for the defense of the national sovereignty and the majority of Ticino's voters opposed the Swiss-EU bilateral agreements in a national referendum.³¹ The apex of the tensions emerged in 2008–2009, when the Italian government denounced illegal financial flows from Italian taxpayers to Swiss banks located in Ticino.³² While the political elites and public opinion in Ticino are divided over the benefit of cross-border integration (accused of dumping Swiss salaries), Northern Italy, and especially the provinces around Varese and Como, have been historically dependent on Ticino's labor market. More recently, especially after the recession of the 2010s, an increasing number of the inhabitants of these provinces daily cross the Swiss border seeking better jobs and better salaries.

The parties and their newspapers

As a consequence of Ticino's specificity as a border canton, different from other regions of the country, the local campaign within the region for the initiative “Against Mass Immigration” focused in particular on the question of cross-border workers and on border issues in general. The main parties supporting the initiative were the cantonal branch of the Swiss People's Party and the Lega dei Ticinesi.

On a national scale, the Swiss People's Party is one of the most successful national-populist parties in Western Europe. Since the beginning of the 2000s, it has become the most successful Swiss party at national elections and it has in recent decades been continuously represented in the federal government, apart from a brief interruption in 2008. The SVP is not a new party: it has been present in the Swiss political system since the first decades of the twentieth century. Moving away from its agrarian legacy, the party has undergone a process of radicalization in recent decades, adopting a sharp

anti-establishment and anti-immigration stance and a discourse focused on the critique of the political class and a defense of the country's sovereignty and national identity (e.g., with the opposition to international treaties and organizations, intended to preserve Switzerland's isolation and neutrality),³³ while embracing liberal conservatism on economic matters. Along with its radicalization, the SVP has experienced increasing electoral success (achieving 29.4% of the vote in 2015) and has been the leading party at the national level since the 2000s. In Ticino, the cantonal branch of the SVP (called, in Italian, *Unione democratica di centro*) remains a small party that achieved around 7% of the vote in 2015. The party has often been allied to the *Legha dei Ticinesi*, but is also in competition with it. Both parties are also strongly involved in referenda mobilization on immigration and EU issues.

The *Legha dei Ticinesi* is a regionalist and populist party³⁴ rooted in the canton of Ticino. It was founded in 1991 by the entrepreneur Giuliano Bignasca in the context of the economic crisis that was hitting the country and the canton of Ticino in particular. The *Legha dei Ticinesi* managed to politicize the issue of Ticino's peripherality with respect to the "center" of the country, while also mobilizing Eurosceptic orientations.³⁵ It also experienced strong and durable electoral success within the canton (achieving 22.8% in the cantonal legislative elections of 2011; 24.2% in 2015; and 19.9% in 2019), challenging the cantonal party system, and also electing one or two representatives to the National Council (lower chamber). In recent decades, the *Legha dei Ticinesi* took advantage of the political opportunities offered by the free circulation of persons, and by focusing on cross-border issues in particular,³⁶ it also made political gain from the Italian economic crisis that pushed a growing number of Italians to seek work in Switzerland.

At the same time, there is another relevant national-populist party operating on the Swiss-Italian border that is also involved in the initiative "Against Mass Immigration": the *Legha Nord*. Known simply as *Legha* since December 2017, the *Legha Nord* is an Italian party that was founded in 1991 as a federation of local autonomist groups present in the regions of Northern Italy (especially in Veneto and Lombardy), the richest and most developed regions in the country. If it is true that in its first phase it could be understood as an ethno-regionalist and autonomist party,³⁷ it also always had a strong component of anti-party protest and a critique of central political institutions. The *Legha Nord* evolved over time, adapting to a changing context and also managing to widen its consensus beyond the North of the country. Starting from the election of Matteo Salvini as party secretary in 2013, the *Legha Nord* underwent significant transformations:³⁸ it passed from the defense of a local territorial community to a bid to defend and represent the national community. It also sharpened the fight against immigration and supra-national integration, and strengthened its links with other European populist radical-right parties. Despite a fluctuating electoral trend, the *Legha* is far from being only an opposition party: it has been present within the national government on four occasions, the last one in a coalition with the *Movimento 5 stelle* (Five Star Movement) between 2018 and 2019. At the time in which the campaign on the initiative took place (February 2014), its results were quite low: it obtained 4% at the 2013 general elections and 6% at the 2014 European elections.

Although the campaign on the initiative "Against Mass Immigration" and the debates over its consequences covered several months before and after the scrutiny and involved

many different actors, according to our scope we decided to investigate the discourses produced by the three parties only during the most intense phase of mobilization and to focus on the parties' official newspapers: *Il Mattino della Domenica* (Lega dei Ticinesi), *Il Paese* (SVP), and *La Padania* (Lega Nord). It should be stated that, since the campaign involved only Switzerland, the number and type of articles is obviously different in the case of *La Padania*. In this case, we can analyze the representation of an event that happened in another country—albeit an event with a strong impact on Italy, and on some provinces of Northern Italy in particular.

On a theoretical level, the analysis of the construction of the “us” by the Lega Nord can help us to investigate the relationship between populist parties located on different sides of a border. European right-wing parties, especially those expressing populist and nationalist claims, are facing a crucial dilemma. While they are defending their people, they have, sometimes, to deal directly with neighboring right-wing parties that defend their “own” people. Thus, our aim will be to shed light on the relationships between two parties across a national border, in order to understand whether they construct a common in-group and avoid conflict by the use of a strategy of ambiguity and ambivalence, through which address multiple and contradictory audiences.

As regards the type of data, while it is true, that the parties' communication has increasingly migrated to the online world, party newspapers offer some advantages for scholars. On the one hand, unlike websites or social network sites, the newspapers are reliable sources. On the other, they allow a greater and deeper articulation of the discourse. They can also be considered to represent the official positions of the parties.

Analyzing the strategies of ambiguity in the construction of “us”

Our analysis has been carried out by adopting the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis. Within the CDA approach, discourse is considered as *social practice*: scholars believe that there is a dialectical relationship between discourses and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded. The situational, institutional and social context shape and affect the discourse and, in turn, the discourse influences the social and political reality. In other words, discourse helps constitute social reality and is constituted by it. Through discourse, social actors constitute identities and relations between social groups. The aim of CDA is to unmask those relations and the structures of power that lie behind them, thus linking linguistic-discursive practices and extra-linguistic social structures. However, the paradigm of CDA is not homogeneous. According to the Viennese School of CDA, that is to say, DHA (the Discourse-Historical Approach), employed in this article, the historical dimension of discourse is taken into particular consideration, in order to integrate as much available information as possible on the historical background in which the discourses are embedded.³⁹

So far as the three party newspapers were concerned, we collected all the issues within a two-month timespan (from one month before until one month after the initiative, that is to say, from 9 January to 9 March 2014).⁴⁰ Second, we selected all the articles that made a direct reference to the initiative.⁴¹ Adopting these criteria, 70 articles were selected, including 40 from *Il Mattino della Domenica*, 15 from *Il Paese*, and 11 from *La Padania*. Typically, the authors of the articles are elected representatives

at various levels or regular contributors to the newspaper, though they may also be readers or simple members and supporters. Articles have been analyzed with the software MAXQDA.

Our analysis is focused on discourses. The units of analysis are not single words but segments, which correspond to the sequences of utterances and sentences, distinct propositions, topics, or communicative functions in a text.⁴² We know that DHA focuses on the ways in which discourse is used to construct positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations (“us” and “them”), by means of the strategies of nomination, predication and argumentation; in other words, it examines the labeling of in-groups and out-groups and the legitimation of this inclusion or exclusion.⁴³ This approach is particularly useful, therefore, in analyzing populist discourse.⁴⁴

Accordingly, the aim of our coding was to identify: (a) how “the people” (the in-group) and (b) “the enemies of the people” (the out-group) were constructed and labeled in the parties’ discourse; and (c) the discursive strategies (argumentation schemes or *topoi*) employed in that discourse. For the purposes of this article, we decided to focus our analysis in this article primarily on point (a), that is, how the people is labeled. Within this broad framework, the material was coded inductively. For instance, when a particular label of the in-group was mobilized in a segment of text, the segment was coded accordingly. A pilot analysis of our data allowed us to sharpen and improve the coding, creating also sub-codes, that is to say a more specific labeling of the in-group and the out-group.⁴⁵ The results of the analysis are shown in the next section.

In Section 2, we argued that the strategy of ambiguity can take two paths: populists can address the people that they claim to represent in a vague manner, in order to cancel differences and address the widest possible constituency. In parallel, they use multiple labels to refer to it, multiplying what is “us.” In the next section, analyzing how the three parties label the “us,” we will see whether and how they enact these strategies.

Unifying and multiplying: the construction of the people by Swiss parties in borderlands

Our aim, in the first place, is to give an overview of the labeling of the in-group by the Lega dei Ticinesi and the SVP. Figures 1 and 2 display all the different ways in which the two parties represented the “us” in the selected material, together with the number of coded segments for each code identified. When a particular label of the in-group was mobilized in a segment, the segment was coded accordingly. In the figure, each code is shown together with its sub-codes. At a later stage, we will show the strategy of ambiguity in its making, presenting and commenting the most relevant segments of text.

Figure 1 shows the labels of the in-group by *Il Mattino della Domenica*. First of all, we notice that the defense of Ticino and Ticinesi is clearly prevalent in the case of the Lega dei Ticinesi’s newspaper. 56 segments, out of 186 coded segments of *Il Mattino della Domenica*, refer to Ticino as the in-group, while 36 segments refer to Ticino people (Ticinesi). This is not surprising, considering the dominant regionalist agenda of this party. At the same time, the articles also emphasize the defense of Switzerland (34 segments) and the Swiss (35 segments), according to a nationalist stance.⁴⁶ So, territory

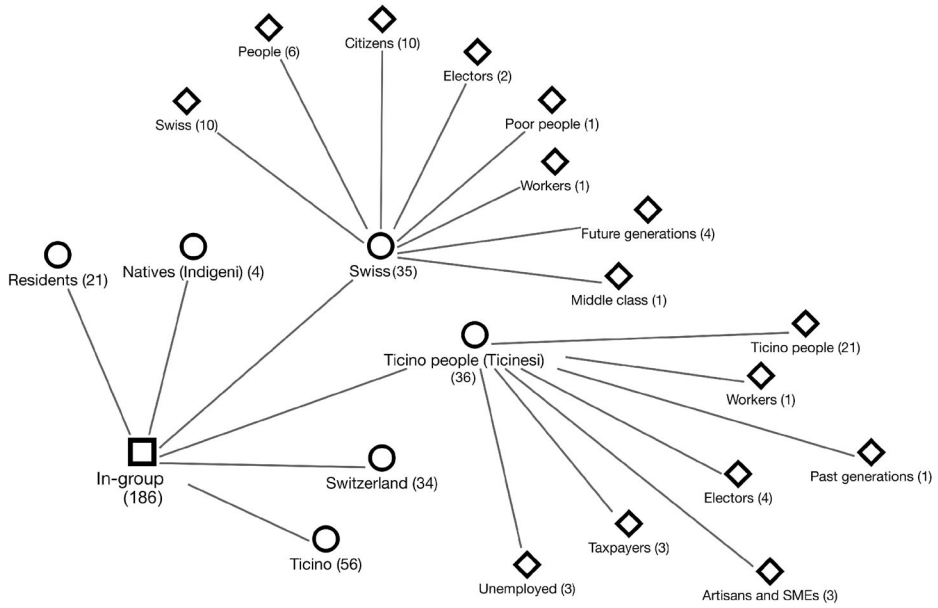


Figure 1. *Il Mattino della Domenica*, codes and subcodes.

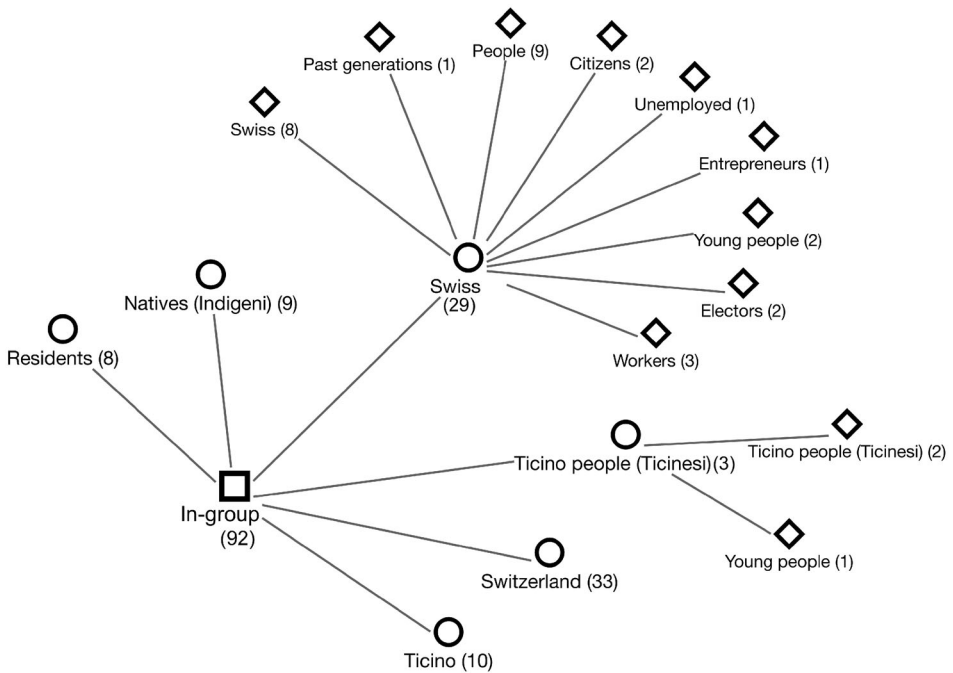


Figure 2. *Il Paese*, codes and subcodes.

and people compose the two main categories of in-group mobilized in the party's newspaper. Regarding people, besides the Swiss and the Ticino people, we note that residents and natives (21 and 4 segments, respectively) are also mentioned. When the discourse addresses the people, national and regional forms of belonging are not the only ones to consider: the reference is broader and also includes non-nationals and non-Swiss living in the canton.

According to our framework, we can consider the use of generic labels such as "Switzerland," "Swiss," "Ticino" and "Ticino people" as an attempt to unify the people beyond differences, to see it as a single entity, and so to construct in a univocal way a constituency that is, in reality, much more fragmented. However, as expected, the strategy of ambiguity does not only conceive the use of generic labels. Articles from *Il Mattino* articulate the references to the people in many ways, multiplying the conception of "us."

In the figures each code is shown together with its sub-codes; displaying all the singular and specific meanings given to each segment in the text. We can see that while the party's discourse sometimes refers generically to the "Swiss," in some other cases they address specific categories such as the "Swiss people," "poor," "workers," "future generations," or the "middle class." A similar logic also appears when considering the use of the label "Ticinesi." In this case, the general category of "Ticinesi" is connected with other labels, such as "workers," "past generations," "artisans and small and medium-sized enterprises," "taxpayers," and "unemployed people." In this case, the strategy of ambiguity consists in the use of different labels to address a fragmented audience and the increased heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary societies.

The newspaper of the Ticino branch of the Swiss People's Party also provides a vague and large reference to the people, mobilized both as a territorial entity and as a nationalist and regionalist identity. As a nationalist party, the main label concerns "us" as Switzerland (33 segments) and the Swiss (29 segments), but the regional belonging is also relevant. Though to a lesser extent than the Lega dei Ticinesi, the reference to Ticino and to Ticinesi is also present (10 and 3 segments, respectively). Along with the national and regional belonging, "natives" and "residents" are also considered in the discourse of the cantonal SVP.

As in the case of *Il Mattino*, we can consider the use of generic labels as an attempt to unify the people beyond differences. For instance, in the SVP's discourse, Switzerland, the most present code, can be considered as the ultimate symbol of the national belonging, that encompasses all other forms of belonging.

The logic of multiplication also arises in the articles published by *Il Paese*. For instance, when the label of "Swiss" is at stake, the newspaper of the cantonal SVP articulates national belonging in various ways. This means an explicit reference to the "people," "citizens," and "voters," but also to "entrepreneurs," "the old," "the young," and "workers."

Let us now consider more concretely the strategy of ambiguity in its discursive making. In the following segments we show the representation of the people by the two Swiss parties considered in our analysis. We can see that sometimes a representation of the people under threat is evoked as a vague and single entity: Swiss citizens and their

country, Switzerland, which would risk disappearing under European integration and the flux of immigrants:

We think it is a “miracle” if Switzerland and the Swiss still exist! Moving forward at this rate, we risk extinction, because what is happening seems like an *Anschluss* and we are convinced—as well as tired of being taken for a ride—that the President of the Confederation & Co. are playing dirty, inflicting us day and night with the usual deceptive proclamations that we are forced to listen to! (*Il Paese*, 24 January 2014–Drake)

In other segments, by contrast, we can see that the people is simultaneously labeled in multiple ways. In the following segments, there is a fuzzy distinction between “the Swiss,” “Ticinesi,” and “residents.”

It is not only thanks to bilateral agreements that people arriving from across the border supplant the Swiss (and in particular the people of Ticino) in being hired for work, but they are also paid to do it: while they are in our country looking for work at the expense of the residents, they draw on social aid, which is paid for by the residents themselves. (*Il Mattino della Domenica*, 19 January 2014–Lorenzo Quadri)

Ambiguity also comes with the criticism of the excessive flux of Italian cross-border workers that compete with Ticinese workers. However, what is “Ticinese” isn’t stated clearly, as some sentences later the discourse moves on to residential workers and residents. Although not fully recognized, the national-populist discourse of the Lega dei Ticinesi also ambiguously includes in the people some immigrants which are part of the generic category of “residents”; but, at the same time, some other immigrants, like cross-border workers, are presented as a problem for the “Ticinesi” in the labor market. This makes it possible to avoid a direct attack against Italians per se.

In a regime of the devastating, unlimited free circulation of people, those who do arrive are precisely the cross-border workers who supplant the Ticinese in being hired. Those who are useful to the economy can also be recruited with quotas: it has always been this way. But today, the profile of the cross-border worker is increasingly similar to that of the Ticino worker: therefore, it does not fill a gap at all, but overlaps. And supplants. Proof of this is to be found in all those cross-border workers who work in offices, banks and insurance companies: areas in which there should not even be a single cross-border worker, given that there is no shortage of resident workers. Indeed, with the collapse of the financial center caused by the 5%-minister Widmer Schlumpf, the one who goes around with her pants around her ankles, the residents alone exceed the needs of the market. (*Il Mattino della Domenica*, 23 February 2014–Lorenzo Quadri)

Similar ambiguous arguments are also present in the discourse of the cantonal SVP. It therefore appears unclear if the party is defending the Swiss or “the working-resident population.”

And in fact, cross-border workers already existed in the same way as they exist today, only they were mostly employed in sectors in which they were really necessary. So let’s clear the table of the absurd catastrophes in the event of a Yes to the initiative “Against Mass Immigration,” as feared by economic associations [...] that took the field not so much in defense of their vital interests, as for the convenience and advantage of being able to hire more cost-effective skilled and unskilled workers without the slightest obstacle. A selfish and short-sighted policy, which will, in the long term, reveal itself and is already proving to be catastrophic for the country and, above all, for the resident working population. (*Il Paese*, 24 January 2014–Eros Mellini)

Tellingly, immigrants are also included among the “citizens of this country.”

I think that the initiative “Against Mass Immigration” has nothing to do with xenophobia or racism and that the proposals contained within it should be read carefully. It is simply an intelligent and well-calibrated initiative that wants to make us masters in our own home again; which wants to give the citizens of this country (among which there are hundreds of thousands of immigrants from past decades and centuries) the tools to defend not their privileges, but their rights, their work, their well-being, their territory, their achievements. (*Il Mattino della Domenica*, 26 January 2014—Amanda Rückert, elected representative of the Lega dei Ticinesi in the parliament of Ticino)

On the other side of the border: the Lega Nord’s representations of AMI

As anticipated, a part of our research was dedicated to analysis of the representation of the Swiss initiative in the Italian newspaper *La Padania*, the official organ of the Lega Nord. In the peculiar case of the AMI initiative, the party is in the strange situation of defending Italians as immigrants, despite the fact that it usually employs an anti-immigration rhetoric and opposes open borders.

In [Figure 3](#), we see the construction of the “us” by *La Padania*. In this case, we must clarify that the Lega Nord’s newspaper is covering a foreign event, although an event with a strong impact on its constituency. Moreover, the initiative was triggered by a fellow national-populist party (the SVP) and supported by a regionalist party (the Lega dei Ticinesi) with which the Lega has robust ties. So, the type of discourses produced are fundamentally different with respect to the Swiss parties’ ones, as they involve a reaction to an external event. Nevertheless, we believe that investigating the labeling of the in-

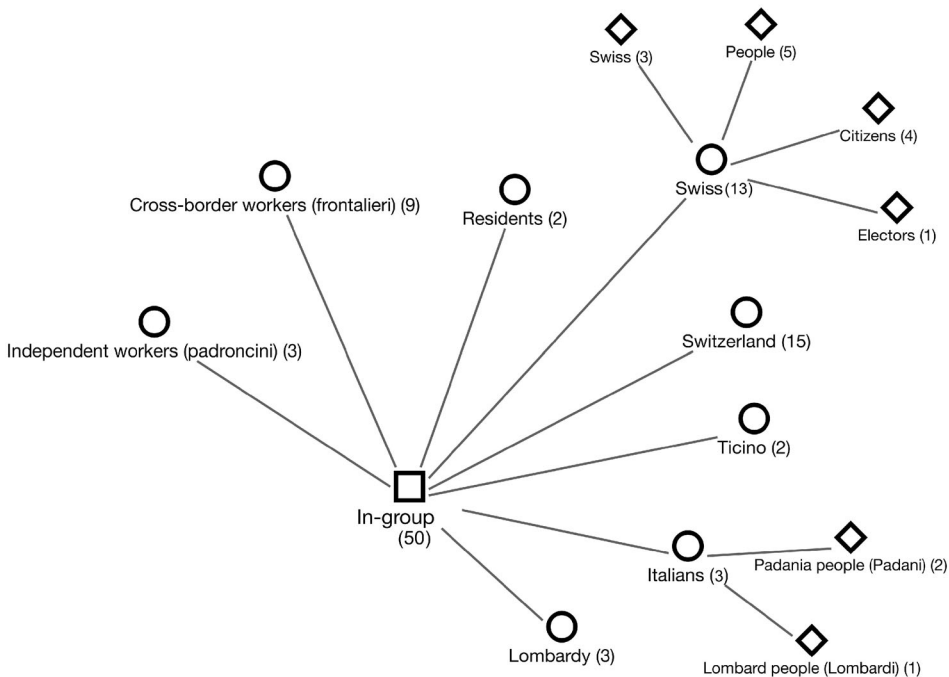


Figure 3. *La Padania*, codes and subcodes.

group in this peculiar context could be interesting, in order to shed light on the relationships between two parties across a national border, and to understand whether they construct a common in-group and avoid conflict by the use of a strategy of ambiguity and ambivalence.

In fact, our data show that the Lega Nord did not show any hostility with regard to the Swiss initiative “Against Mass Immigration.” In its commentaries on the initiative, instead of interpreting it as an attack against Italians, and the Lombards in particular, *La Padania* represents restrictive Swiss demands over immigration as a legitimate attempt to defend the country’s sovereignty. In its discourse, “Swiss,” “Switzerland,” “Ticino,” and “residents” symbolize “friends” against “enemies” (immigrants from afar, politicians, etc.), together with “us,” that is cross-border workers, independent workers, Italians, and the people of Lombardy. The strategy of ambiguity makes it possible here to praise the Swiss initiative and Swiss citizens, to show solidarity to Swiss populist parties, and at the same time to defend its own Northern Italian constituency.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Swiss referendum might have a negative impact on Italian cross-border workers is acknowledged, as we can see in the segment below.

Stop immigration. And rewrite the free movement agreements with the European Union. The Lega’s dream is coming true in nearby Switzerland, where Sunday’s popular referendum denied the European government, parties and institutions in one fell swoop. It is a pity that the referendum initiative promoted by the Swiss UDC-SVP (conservative right) unites foreigners and asylum seekers with cross-border workers, extending to them the same request to reintroduce quotas that limit their number in the territory of the Confederation. As if to say: there is the risk of throwing the child away with the bath water. (*La Padania*, 11 February 2014)

Regarding this topic, it is interesting to read that when interviewed in a radio program (an interview that was re-proposed in an article), Norman Gobbi, a representative of the Lega dei Ticinesi and since 2011 member of the cantonal government, stated that the form of immigration that Switzerland wants to avoid is not the Italian one. This contradicts the long-lasting campaign carried out by *Il Mattino* against cross-border workers in Ticino, who are mainly Italian.

With Norman Gobbi, a State Councilor for the Republic and the Canton of Ticino, as well as a prominent member of the Ticino League, the comment on the outcome of the referendum that will impose the control and limitation of immigration to the Swiss territory. [...] The Italian media has shamefully attempted to depict the referendum as a war against the cross-border workers of Padani: Gobbi sent the idiotic nonsense back to the sender, reiterating that these are not the immigrants that Switzerland wants to avoid. The enemies of the Padani workers are not the Swiss who seek to defend their sovereignty, who want to continue to be masters in their own home, but the Italian-EU government, with its information watchdogs, its unions, and its presidents of the republic, who massacre economy, freedom of opinion and the right to choose who to be governed by! (*La Padania*, 17 February 2014)

So, the Swiss strategy of ambiguity allows *La Padania* to praise Switzerland and to take it as an example, without considering the fact that what populist parties in Ticino want to avoid is precisely cross-border immigration. The strategy of ambiguity by the Lega dei Ticinesi and the cantonal SVP also makes it possible to avoid any open conflict between the populist parties located on different sides of the border, who are able to

unite their efforts against the common enemy of the European Union. Avoiding any univocal form of narrow nationalism based upon the divide between Switzerland and Italy, giving room to the narrative of commonalities among residents in Ticino (regardless of their citizenship), but also between traditional (good) Italian cross-border workers and newcomers, it legitimates support for the Swiss initiative “Against Mass Immigration” by the Italian Lega.

And precisely on the initiative of the Lega Nord, a parliamentary question on the results of the Swiss referendum has arrived at the Brussels Parliament to be discussed in the plenary session. Mara Bizzotto presented it, stating that “Italy must follow the example of Switzerland and stop the arrival of new immigrants: we have the duty to protect our people and to think about our unemployed, not the latest arrivals. While in Italy the crime of illegal entry has been abolished and politicians rave on the *ius soli*, the Swiss people are democratically deciding to defend themselves from mass immigration and protect their interests. The Swiss referendum is an example to our country and serves as a warning to the whitewashed tombs of the EU who, from Brussels, persist in their busted pro-immigration policies.” (*La Padania*, 11 February 2014).

Conclusion

Inspired by the concept of calculated ambivalence, and the lack of empirical studies on the construction of the people in populists’ discourse, the aim of the article was to show that the strategy of ambiguity is a fundamental element of national-populist discourse. In order to grasp the concrete use of this strategy we analyzed the discursive construction of the “us” by three political parties located on different sides of the Swiss-Italian border during a campaign that involved migration and foreign politics issues.

On the one hand, we have seen that Swiss parties label the people that they claim to represent in a vague manner, in order to cancel differences and address the widest possible constituency. In this sense, they use vagueness to unify the people. On the other, we have also seen that they use multiple labels to represent it, adapting their discourse to the complexity of contemporary societies, without acknowledging pluralism. In this way, they multiply what “us” is.

Which are the consequences of the use of these strategies? Populism is often accused by scholars of being too vague a notion, and from an analytical point of view this vagueness might be seen as problematic. However, in order to understand the growing relevance of national-populist discourse in contemporary democracies, vagueness is a crucial component. According to Brubaker, the ambiguity of populists’ people is “a practical resource that can be exploited in constructing political identities and defining line of political opposition and conflict.”⁴⁷

The defense of “the people,” “the nation,” “the us” by populists, would imply a precise political definition of what these entities are. But the strategy of ambiguity makes it possible to use them against different enemies, by avoiding a clear and static definition. What is crucial is that national-populist rhetoric labels “us” in a multiple and ambiguous way, in order to unify a heterogeneous and differentiated constituency. Ambiguity characterizes the logic of national-populist discourse in multiplying the reference to “us,” without recognizing its plurality, and unifying diversity avoiding any univocity.

We can say therefore, that in the case of the national-populist discourse, the strategy of ambiguity favors the pursuit of electoral goals under a specific configuration of opportunities and constraints, shaped by the context in which actors have to perform and compete. For successful parties, this implies taking advantage of rescaling dynamics and multiple kinds of citizenship and belonging molded by globalization and European integration. In particular, for the parties considered in this study, it implies facing the challenge and taking advantage of the opportunities to act in a highly integrated cross-border area. In our case, there are two main goals at stake. In the first place, the populists' goal is to embrace the largest voting support possible, that is, a vote-seeking goal. Thus, through an ambiguous reference to the people, also Swiss naturalized and bi-national residents with voting rights, most of them with Italian roots—who, as we have seen, make up a considerable part of the electorate in Ticino—can be easily mobilized for supporting the initiative.

In the second place, the strategy of ambiguity helps to deal with competitors and allies within different political arenas. In this case, we have seen that the strategy of ambiguity makes it possible to avoid any open conflict between populist parties located on different sides of the border. *La Padania*, the organ of the Italian Lega Nord, is thus able to praise the Swiss initiative promoted by its fellow national-populist parties, without considering the fact that their target is precisely that of cross-border immigration.

Notes

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2. Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusion populiste: essai sur les démagogies de l'âge démocratique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007); Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018).
3. In this work, even though they can be labelled "regionalist" parties, we consider the Lega Nord and the Lega dei Ticinesi to be parties characterized by the use of a strong national-populist discourse. This is because we adopt a definition of nation as "imagined community," see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London-New York: Verso, 1991) and of nationalist politics as a way to define a political community by stressing who is included and who is excluded, see Rogers Brubaker, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism," in *The State of the Nation* edited by John A. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
4. See Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze, eds., *Imagining the Peoples of Europe: Populist Discourses Across the Political Spectrum* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019).
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8. Mény and Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*.
9. Taguieff, *L'illusion Populiste*.

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13. Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015).
14. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 295.
15. Canovan, *Populism*, 261.
16. *Ibid.*, 262.
17. *Ibid.*, 260.
18. See for instance Thomas Bräuninger and Nathalie Giger, "Strategic Ambiguity of Party Positions in Multi-party Competition," *Political Science Research and Methods* 6, no. 3 (2018): 527–48.
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22. In Switzerland, voters with a migration background do not vote as a bloc, although there are some propensities to support left-wing parties. See Oliver Strijbis, "Migration Background and Voting Behavior in Switzerland. A Socio-Psychological Explanation," *Swiss Political Science Review*, 20, no. 4 (2014): 612–31. In a similar vein, dual citizenship seems to have no impact neither on lower country loyalty not on specific voting preferences. See Andrea Schlenker, "Divided Loyalty? Identification and Political Participation of Dual Citizens in Switzerland," *European Political Science Review* 8, no. 4 (2016): 517–46.
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 40. Note that *Il Mattino della Domenica* is a weekly magazine, *Il Paese* is issued twice a month, and *La Padania*, until its closure in November 2014, was a daily magazine.
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