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Abstract

We evaluate how traditional parties may respond to populist parties on issues that are particularly fitting for populist messages. The testing ground is the 2020 Italian referendum on the reduction of members of Parliament. We implement a large-scale field experiment, with almost one million impressions of programmatic advertising, and a survey experiment. Our treatments are an informative video on the likely costs of cutting MPs, aimed at deconstructing the populist narrative, and a reducing trust video aimed at attacking the credibility of populist politicians. Our field experiment shows that the latter video is more effective at capturing the viewers' attention. It decreases the turnout rate and, albeit less, the "Yes" votes (in favor of cutting MPs). We present a theoretical framework based on trust in traditional parties and information acquisition to account for our findings and provide additional predictions. In the survey experiment, both (unskippable) videos reduce the "Yes" votes and increase the share of undecided. Confirming the theory, for voters of traditional parties the effects are concentrated among people with low information, while for voters of populist parties previous information plays no role. Our findings show that campaign messages should target not only demographic characteristics but also trust attitudes.

JEL Classification: D72, C93

Keywords: field experiment, programmatic advertisement, Electoral Campaign

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an unprecedented rise of populism in Western democracies. Populist parties portray society as partitioned into two antagonistic groups: "pure people" and "corrupt elite" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist parties also feature anti-expert sentiments, anti-globalization stances, and an aggressive communication style on social media (De Vries, 2018). A large literature has developed on the socio-cultural and economic motivations of populism (Margalit, 2019; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2020). The entry and strengthening of populist parties has posed a phenomenal challenge for traditional parties, which struggle to find adequate and successful responses.

Several questions need to be tackled to formulate a successful and coherent strategy to best respond to populism. Should traditional parties avoid addressing divisive issues that belong to the populist camp, such as anti-establishment or anti-immigration sentiments? Should they use a more inclusive and inspirational narrative, which appeals to a moral rhetoric to activate positive emotions among voters (Jung, 2020)? Even if avoiding to focus on populist-friendly issues turns out to be advisable, however, shying away from them may not always be possible. A second set of questions therefore arises. If forced to address these issues, should traditional parties deconstruct the blame attribution, dispositional narrative used by populist parties with facts (Busby et al., 2019), in an attempt to persuade voters—i.e., to "win the argument"? Or should we expect this information strategy to backfire, particularly among voters leaning toward populist parties (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Kahan et al., 2017)? As an alternative, traditional parties might mimic the populist rhetoric of framing and blame attribution, using the typical populist tools against them, e.g., depicting populist politicians as a new opportunistic and corrupt establishment. Is this "use the same weapons" strategy effective in demobilizing populist voters? Two crucial choices thus emerge: whether traditional parties should tackle or avoid "populist" issues, and whether they should use or avoid a "populist" framing. In the context of an intrinsically populist issue, we address the second research question by running a large-scale field experiment and a survey experiment in the field.

Our paper exploits a constitutional referendum on a populist-friendly issue—the reduction

of the number of MPs in the Italian Parliament—to study the electoral effects of traditional political parties' messages to voters. This reduction was proposed by two populist parties (the 5 Stars Movement and the League) with the stated aim of cutting the operational costs of the Parliament. This reform had a strong anti-establishment content. The constitutional amendment, reducing the MPs in the Lower House from 630 to 400 and in the Senate from 315 to 200, was approved with a large majority in both branches of the legislature. Yet, in January 2020, a petition was filed by 71 Senators, who requested to hold a confirmatory constitutional referendum, which was allowed by the Supreme Court. Public opinion was largely favorable to reducing the number of MPs. In February (September) 2020, polls predicted a 90%-10% (70%-30%) victory of the "Yes" over the "No" votes, respectively, in favor and against the MPs reduction. The referendum was held in September 2020 and the "Yes" won by 70% vs 30% (with a turnout rate of 51%), thereby confirming the constitutional amendment. Traditional parties did not take a firm stand on the issue (Forza Italia) or were internally divided (the Democrats), as they refrained from tackling such a populist-friendly issue.

We ran a large-scale field experiment during the electoral campaign for the referendum using electoral material designed and provided by a committee promoting the "No" vote (*Democratici per il No*) for its national campaign. We used a novel communication tool, programmatic advertisement, to deploy almost a million video "impressions" to Italian citizens in 200 municipalities of six Italian regions (Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Lombardia, Toscana, and Veneto). These impressions consisted of non-skippable pre-roll videos displayed in a large host of websites, including newspapers, blogs, games, and so on. The randomization was done at the municipality level. In parallel to the field experiment, we ran a survey experiment administering the same treatments to a sample of 2,000 individuals from the same municipalities.

Our informational treatments consisted of two video ads supporting the "No" vote, which differed in their tone and message, but were identical in their length and graphics. Both videos lasted 30 seconds. One video provided information on the negligible cost savings achieved by reducing the number of MPs, and on the possible negative consequences for the democratic representativeness of the Parliament. It thus used a "win the argument" strategy aimed at deconstructing the populist message. The other video instead carried out a direct attack to

the politicians of the two main parties promoting the reduction of the number of MPs, by explicitly pointing out that they were proposing the MPs cut to conceal their opportunistic or illegal behavior. It thus exploited a "use the same weapons" strategy aimed at reducing the credibility of populist parties and ultimately citizens' trust in them. Both videos encouraged voters to vote "No" in the referendum.

The results of our experiments suggest a role for campaigning even on lopsided, populist-friendly issues. In the field experiment, the video that attacked the credibility of the populist politicians proved to be better equipped than the informational video to capture the viewers' attention. Programmatic advertisement using this trust-reducing video decreases turnout by almost 2 percentage points, with a persuasion rate of around 11%. This effect is stronger among potential "Yes" voters, as it is associated with a reduction in the "Yes" vote of around 0.5 percentage points (and a persuasion rate of around 3%). Hence, the trust-reducing ("use the same weapons") strategy operates through a *demobilization* channel, while *persuasion* is not effective.

Taking stock of these causal effects, we apply a theoretical framework developed by Morelli et al. (2021) to unveil potential mechanisms behind our findings. Individuals differ in their level of trust in traditional parties. People with high enough trust vote for traditional politicians and acquire political information to monitor their behavior and their policy decisions. Instead, people with low levels of trust vote for non-traditional parties that are willing to commit to simple, easy-to-verify policies (e.g., building a wall) before the elections. Hence, these low trust individuals do not need to seek political information to monitor their representatives in Parliament. According to this theoretical framework, in the referendum, low trust individuals should prefer the "Yes" vote, since they do not value much the independent role played by the MPs and should thus favor their reduction; whereas (high trust) voters of traditional parties should be more inclined to vote "No", as they value the agency role of the MPS. Our findings in the field experiment are consistent with the theoretical framework. The trust-reducing video may convince some individuals with low trust in traditional parties to turn their back on populist parties too. These individuals disregard the populist parties' advice to vote "Yes" and abstain. Conversely, the informational video has little effect on low trust individuals, who do

not seek information and are more likely to skip the video by closing the browser window.

The theoretical framework provides additional predictions on the role of information and on the effectiveness of the two videos that can be tested in the survey experiment. In this controlled environment, in which the videos cannot be skipped, both treatments are equally effective in reducing the "Yes" votes and increasing the undecided. In line with the theoretical predictions, we find that among untreated individuals, who are not exposed to any of the two video treatments, intentions to vote "Yes" are stronger for individuals with low trust in traditional parties. Turning to our treatments, they are equally effective among individuals with low and high trust in traditional parties. However, for high trust individuals, the informational video is more effective than the trust-reducing video, and it is particularly effective among the low informed people. Instead, among the low trust individuals, both videos are equally effective and no difference emerges depending on prior levels of political information.

We do not engage with the debate on the origin of populism[1] but rather with the much less studied topic of how to face populist forces, particularly on populist issues. Several studies argue that populism is an opportunistic communication strategy (Moffitt, 2016; Heiss and Matthes, 2020) that can be utilized by politicians and parties from across the political spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2014; Dai and Kustov, 2022). Instead, anti-populists tend to emit "well-mannered", rationalist and polished messages (Miller-Idriss, 2019) or situational attribution to contrast the blame-attribution, dispositional rhetoric of populist parties (Busby et al., 2019). Our field experiment proposed an anti-populist message framed with blame-attribution, dispositional rhetoric, which resembles the populist rhetoric. Our findings extend also on recent studies suggesting that populist messages are more likely to engage voters than pluralism, technocracy, and neutral rhetoric, particular on social media (Cassell, 2021), by showing that populist messages may be more engaging also for traditional parties.

We contribute also to the large literature on political advertisement during elections – and particularly during referenda.[2] Several contributions (Gerber et al., 2011; Kalla and Broock-

[1] See e.g. (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2020; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000)

[2] Studies on electoral behavior in Italian referenda include Del Monte et al. (2019); Morisi and Plescia (2018); Uleri (2002).

man, 2018; Dunning et al., 2019) suggest that the persuasive effects of campaign advertising, such as mail, phone calls, and canvassing, on candidate choices in actual elections is essentially null, and that online campaigns are no different (Haenschen, 2022). Yet, a more effective political campaign strategy may be to target electoral turnout among potential supporters and opponents (Panagopoulos, 2016). Our findings closely relate to the effects of negative campaigning on turnout. Since Ansolabehere et al. (1994) seminal paper providing early evidence of a depressing effect of negative campaigning on turnout, the subsequent literature has produced conflicting empirical results (Lau et al., 2007). Our findings are in line with results in Krupnikov (2011), who finds negative messages to be effective in demobilizing voter when individuals had already selected a preferred candidate and negativity is about this candidate. In our setting, the reduction in turnout affects mostly "Yes" voters and negativity is directed to the politicians endorsing their selected choice (of voting "Yes").

Finally, our paper contributes to a growing literature on (randomized) field experiments with partisan electoral campaigns featuring the direct involvement of politicians or of electoral committees. Early examples of these studies include Gerber et al. (2011), Kendall et al. (2015), Pons (2018), Braconnier et al. (2017), Galasso et al. (2020), and Cantoni and Pons (2021).

The paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 and 3 describe the political background and the experimental design, respectively. Section 4 presents the empirical results of the field experiment. Section 5 discusses the theoretical framework and the predictions for the survey experiment, which is presented in Section 6. Section 7 concludes.

2 Political Background

The referendum on the confirmation of the constitutional amendment that reduced the number of Italian MPs in both Houses took place on September 20 and 21, 2020. Reducing the number of MPs had been part of the rhetoric of the 5 Stars Movement (M5S) and the League for a while, but became part of a formal agreement during the summer 2018 negotiations, when both parties signed a "contract" that listed the policy measures to be implemented by the 5 Stars movement (M5S) and League coalition government. In the paragraph "Institutional Reforms, Autonomy

and Direct Democracy," the contract stated: "It is necessary to begin with the drastic reduction of the number of MPs: 400 deputies and 200 senators." This reduction was motivated by the need of easing parliamentary work, of increasing efficiency in the legislative process, and of achieving spending reductions in the costs associated with parliamentary representation, and was clearly linked to the anti-establishment stance of both parties.

In September 2018, the legislative process for the constitutional amendment law (A.S. 805) that reduced the number of members of Parliament was jointly initiated in the Senate by the M5S group leader (Patuanelli) and the League group leader (Romeo). Following the procedure required for this type of amendments, it was approved twice each by both the Senate and the Lower House. On September 2019, the government was replaced by a new coalition government formed by the M5S and the Democratic Party (PD). On October 8, the constitutional amendment law reducing the MPs in the Lower House from 630 to 400 and in the Senate from 315 to 200 received its final approval in the Lower House, with 553 votes in favor out of 569 representatives. In this last vote, MPs from the Democratic Party, who had opposed the law in the two previous votes in the Senate and in the first vote in the Lower House, supported the reduction, in compliance with the agreement reached with their new coalition partner.

On January 10, 2020, a petition requesting to hold a constitutional referendum on the amendment was filed by 71 Senators from mainstream parties (mostly from Forza Italia, but also 5 from the Democratic Party), and the Supreme Court granted the referendum. A "Yes" vote would support upholding the law reducing the number of MPs, while a "No" vote would support revoking it, thereby keeping the preexisting number of MPs. In Italy, no minimum turnout quorum is required for constitutional amendment referendums. The majority of the valid votes determines the result of the referendum. In seven Italian regions (out of twenty), the referendum took place on the same days (September 20 and 21, 2020) as the regional administrative elections.

The issue was quite lopsided. Polls run six months before the referendum predicted a landslide (90%-10%) victory of the "Yes" over the "No" votes, while polls run the week before the referendum predicted a 70%-30% win for the reduction in the number of MPs. Many major political parties were publicly in favor of the "Yes," but they largely differed in their

commitment to run a referendum campaign and in the extent of their internal disagreements. The 5 Stars Movement was the most present in the media and strongly favored the reduction, which was one of the flagship proposals in its electoral platform. League and Democratic Party were also visible, but recorded some dissenting interventions (especially the latter, so that some of its members created a committee supporting the "No" vote, *Democratici per il No*, and major leftist media outlets supported the "No" vote too). Forza Italia left freedom of vote to its supporters. Smaller, centrist parties (Azione, Italia Viva) opposed the reduction in the number of MPs and rallied in favor of the "No" vote arguing against the populist narrative of the reduction in the political costs.

3 Experimental Design

We examine the effect of two different campaign messages in favor of voting "No," i.e., of eliminating the constitutional amendment that reduced the number of MPs. We exploited electoral material designed by the committee *Democratici per il No* for its national campaign. From this material, we selected and used two video ads, which differed in their message, but not in their length nor graphics. One video provided information on the negative consequences that reducing the number of MPs would have for the representativeness of the Parliament. This *informational* video belonged to a "win the argument" strategy. The other video brought a direct attack to discredit the politicians who promoted the reduction of the number of MPs. This *trust-reducing* video represented belonged to a "use the same weapons" strategy.

We used these two videos in a large-scale field experiment with programmatic advertisement, involving 200 small to medium size municipalities (2,500 to 15,000 inhabitants) in six Italian regions, and in a survey experiment. These treatments coexisted with the real (both "Yes" and "No" vote) campaign and therefore their effects (if any) operated at the margin. However, we designed the field experiment so that the intensity of the treatment could be strong, thereby having perceivable effects on the actual vote shares in the treated municipalities.

The field experiment was implemented between September 7 and September 18, 2020. The

programmatic advertisement allowed to deploy almost one million impressions in 200 municipalities. The two treatments appeared as non-skippable 30-second pre-roll videos displayed in a large host of websites, including newspapers, magazines, blogs, games, and so on. The randomization was done at the municipality level.

Our survey experiment was implemented between September 9 and September 18, 2020. Around 2,000 individuals from 390 municipalities (300 of which were also part of the field experiment) were exposed to one of the two videos realized by the committee *Democratici per il No*, or were part of the control group that received only a neutral video on how to vote in the referendum. Since the randomization was done at the municipality level, in both the survey and in the field experiment, individuals from a given municipality were exposed to the same experimental condition.

3.1 Video Treatments

Our treatments consisted of two video ads, used to treat two groups of municipalities both in the field and in the survey experiment, according to the randomization protocol described below. Both videos were commissioned by a group promoting the "No" vote—*Democratici per il No*—and were produced by professional video-makers. We selected these two videos from the entire electoral material available at the campaign committee, as they were the perfect fit for our research question. In the six regions in which we deployed the programmatic advertisement (Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Lombardia, Toscana and Veneto), the campaign committee agreed not to use these videos for their own campaigning.

Both videos last 30 seconds. Besides their length, the videos share most other features, such as the background colors, the speaker's voice, the narrative structure of the message, the tight rhythm of text and music. In Italian, the first video contains 78 words and the second 81.

The video used for the municipalities in the first treatment group (V1) provides information and arguments aimed at deconstructing the populist narrative. Below is a transcript of the message read by a professional actor. In italics, we emphasize the parts shared by both videos.

"*Perhaps you have been told that the referendum on September 20 is needed to* reduce the costs of politics. *They lied to you.* The cost savings will amount to only one coffee per year for

every Italian. But there will be other consequences. Your municipality and the small regions will have no voice in Parliament. To bring a government down, it will only take a few turncoat Senators switching party affiliation. Hence, your vote will be worth less. Is all this worth a coffee a year? *I vote NO."*

While a background voice of a professional actor reads these statements, the video displays the text and the faces of some professional actors. It ends with a large "NO" appearing in white on the screen against a yellow background, which is immediately crossed-out, suggesting voters how to vote on their electoral ballot, and with the logo and the endorsement of *Democratici per il No* displayed in a corner.

The video used for the municipalities in the second treatment group (V2) moves instead a direct attack to the credibility of the politicians promoting the constitutional amendment. It aims at reducing viewers' trust in these politicians. Below is a transcript of the message read by a professional actor. In italics, we emphasize the statements shared by both videos.

"*Perhaps you have been told that the referendum on September 20 is needed to* fight the ruling elite. *They lied to you.* The aim of this law is to reinforce them: the new ruling elite. Those who would like to replace the Parliament that originated from the Resistance movement with the private online platform run by the Casaleggio Co. Those who cut 115 Senators to save 28 million Euros, when it would only take one Senator—Matteo Salvini—to give back the 49 million Euros stolen by the League. Do you still want to be fooled by them? *I vote NO."*

While a background voice of a professional actor reads these statements,[3][4] the video displays the text and shows images of the politicians who promoted the law, such as Di Maio and Toninelli (5 Stars Movement's ministers) and Salvini (leader of the League). Also this video ends with a large "NO" appearing in white on the screen against a yellow background, which is immediately crossed-out, suggesting voters how to vote on their electoral ballot, and with the logo and the endorsement of *Democratici per il No* displayed in a corner.[5]

[3]The 5 Stars Movement has used an online platform owned by one of the founder of the Movement, Gianroberto Casaleggio, to run its primary elections and internal referenda on several issues. Beppe Grillo, the other founder of the Movement, argued that the Parliament could be replaced by direct voting on their online private platform to take place weekly on several issues.

[4]The Northern League led by Umberto Bossi was charged with receiving over the years 49 million Euros as unlawful electoral reimbursements.

[5]Both videos are available online at the experiment website (https://rebrand.ly/referendum2020).

3.2 Programmatic Advertisement and Randomization

In the field experiment, we deployed the two videos using programmatic advertisement. Programmatic advertising is the automated transaction of buying and selling advertising online. It happens thanks to an algorithmic software that operates the sale and placement of digital ad impressions through exchange platforms in a fraction of a second. A publisher lists on the supply-side platform (SSP) the ad space for a particular viewer, who is currently on its webpage. This listing contains a wealth of information on the site, the ad space, and—thanks to the cookies on the viewer's device—the geographic location, demographics, and interests of the viewer. Demand-side platforms (DSPs) review this information to match users with the budget and targeting parameters of their advertisers. In real-time, DSPs make bids on behalf of their advertisers. The SSP picks the winner and shows the ad to the user on the publisher's site. The entire process happens in milliseconds, while the page is loading for the user. Programmatic advertising has several advantages. It allows targeting users on a granular level, with the right message, in the right place, at the right time and on several devices, such as mobile, desktop, tablet, and TV. Hence, budget waste due to reaching likely uninterested viewers can be eliminated and feedback on the performance of each ad can be obtained in real time.

The programmatic campaigning we randomized in our field experiment was managed by a professional company (*Electica*). As explained above, the campaigning targeted 200 municipalities in six Italian regions (Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Lombardia, Toscana, and Veneto): 100 municipalities were reached with the informational video (V1) for our "win the argument" strategy and 100 municipalities with the trust-reducing video (V2) for our "use the same weapons strategy."

Our budget allowed us to fund around one million impressions in total. We instructed the professional company to use a bidding strategy that would allow each municipality to receive a number of impressions proportional to its size. In particular, we divided the municipalities into ten equally spaced intervals, from 2,500 to 15,000 in increments of 1,250. Using the midpoint of these ten intervals, we calculated the proportion of impressions to citizens for each municipality that would reach the target of one million and thus be compatible with our budget. Our targeted ratio of impressions to citizens was around 57%.

Using this bidding strategy, 842,172 impressions were deployed, which, accounting for multiple views by the same person, reached 587,114 individuals. The company in charge of the programmatic advertisement was instructed to place the bids to reduce, for each municipality, the discrepancy between the target and the number of obtained impressions, and to minimize the difference of the discrepancies between two treated municipalities within a given block (triplet, see below) of municipalities. These objectives were prioritized above reaching the exact target of one million impressions.

Randomization was implemented at the municipality level. As video impressions can be targeted by the zipcode in which the user is located, we exploited the (partial) correspondence between zipcodes and municipalities, to target different campaign messages to different municipalities. The choice was due to the fact that electoral outcomes are obtained at the municipal level. To allocate treatments to municipalities, we adopted the following procedure.

First, we restricted our focus to municipalities with population (in 2018) between 2,500 and 15,000 inhabitants,[6] which existed also at the time of the 2016 Constitutional referendum, had a unique zipcode, and were located in one of the following six regions: Veneto, Campania, Toscana, Lombardia, Lazio, and Emilia-Romagna. The former three regions held concurrent regional elections along with the referendum.[7] This left us with a population of 992 municipalities.

Second, from these municipalities, we selected those with sufficient "digital penetration," that is, a sufficient level of access to online contents by the citizens. A measure of digital penetration was provided by the company in charge of the programmatic campaigning, which collected information on the number of "impressions" shown in these municipalities during August 2020.[8] From our initial sample, then, 596 municipalities were selected that ex-ante guaranteed a sufficient degree of digitalization: 72 in Campania, 94 in Emilia-Romagna, 29 in

[6]The median municipality in Italy had 2440 inhabitants, and the 50% central part of the distribution lies between 1000 and around 6300 inhabitants. Around one third of the Italian population resides in municipalities in our chosen range, between 2,500 and 15,000).

[7]These six regions were chosen among the larger Italian regions, so that the three regions having concurrent regional elections (Veneto, Campania, and Toscana) were paired with three neighboring regions with no contemporaneous elections (respectively, Lombardia, Lazio, and Emilia-Romagna).

[8]"Impressions" is the commercial term of trade for videos, banners, and native ads, which adopt the design and functionality of the environment in which they are placed.

Lazio, 214 in Lombardia, 73 in Toscana, and 114 in Veneto.

Third, we formed as many triplets of municipalities as possible within each region, based on Mahalanobis distance[9] using the following covariates: population, 5 Stars Movement and Democratic Party vote shares in the 2018 election, turnout, and percentage of Yes votes in the 2016 referendum.[10] Among these formed triplets, we randomly sampled a subset in each region, to reach the total of 100 municipalities assigned to the first treatment (V1), 100 to the second treatment (V2), and 100 as pre-registered control municipalities. The remaining triplets were set aside. Specifically, we selected 18 triplets (54 municipalities) each in Veneto, Campania, Toscana, and Emilia-Romagna. In Lombardia, we selected 19 triplets (57 municipalities), and in Lazio all the 9 triplets (27 municipalities) that could be formed, due to the small number of Lazio municipalities in the desired population range and above the digital penetration threshold.

Fourth, within each triplet, we randomly assigned one municipality to each treatment group, and thus to the corresponding video (V1 and V2) or to the control group. Our randomization protocol, including the list of municipalities and their treatment assignment, was submitted for pre-registration at EGAP. Figure 1 displays the location of the treated and control municipalities (see also Figures A.1-A.6 in the Online Appendix).

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the pre-treatment variables and for our two main outcome variables, namely, turnout rate and Yes vote share by municipalities at the 2020 referendum. Table 2 shows that the pre-treatment variables used in our randomization (population of the municipality, 5 Stars Movement and Democratic Party vote shares in the 2018 election, turnout and percentage of Yes votes in the 2016 referendum) are perfectly balanced across treatment and control groups.[11]

The videos were deployed as non-skippable pre-load rolls. In other words, they were

[9]To form the triplets, we followed the procedure suggested at `http://biostat.mc.vanderbilt.edu/wiki/Main/MatchingTripletsPriorToRandomization`. We ran 10,000 iterations of the split-sample matching and selected the allocation that minimized the sum of within-triplet distance.

[10]With the 2016 referendum, voters were called to approve a Constitutional Law to overcome equal bicameralism, to reduce the number of Members of Parliament, to limit the operating costs of the institutions, and to revise and reduce the degree of federalism.

[11]Tables A.1-A.4 in the Online Appendix provide descriptive statistics and balance tests for the restricted and very restricted samples used in the analysis (see Section 4.1).

placed before a regular content video as a 30-second advertisement, which could not be removed or skipped. Individuals clicking on a content video of their liking on a regular website were shown this 30-second ad. They could not skip the ad, but they could of course choose to close the internet browser. They would avoid watching the ad at the cost of not watching the video of their interest. Overall, 59% of the people watched the videos until the end, and 74% watched it for at least 15 (out of 30) seconds.

The videos were placed on a host of websites, which differ in their category and domain. Categories include Games & Comics, Home & Gardening, Law, Gov't & Politics, Business, Pets, Technology & Computing, Careers, Arts & Entertainment, News, Entertainment, Sports, Travel, Personal Finance, Automotive, Hobbies & Interests, Education, Shopping, Health & Fitness, Style & Fashion, Society, Science, Religion & Spirituality, Family & Parenting, Food Drinks, Real Estate, Photography Video, Messaging & Communication. Among the newspaper webpages, those hosting more impressions were three newspapers, Il Giornale, Libero, and Il Fatto Quotidiano, and Ansa, the main wire agency in the country.[12]

4 Field Experiment

4.1 Estimation and Samples

To measure the causal impact of our two treatments (V1 and V2) on the referendum outcomes, we estimate the following linear model by OLS:

$$Y_m = \alpha_1 V1_m + \alpha_2 V2_m + \beta_{j(m)} + \varepsilon_m, \tag{1}$$

where the outcome variables are the turnout rate and the Yes vote share for municipality m, $j()$ is a function that maps municipality m to its triplet j, and β_j is a triplet fixed effect.

In our empirical analysis, we report results from three different samples. First, we use the full sample of the 300 municipalities that were pre-registered (391, in the robustness analysis

[12] Il Giornale and Libero have a clear right-wing political orientation, while Il Fatto Quotidiano is popular among 5 Stars Movement voters

with quadruplets). Second, we use a subset of 260 municipalities (351, in the robustness analysis with quadruplets), which we obtain by trimming the tails of the distribution of the actual intensity of the treatment. Due to the automated nature of the algorithm allocating viewers to impressions, it is inevitable for some municipalities to receive fewer impressions than targeted, and for some to receive more than targeted. These discrepancies between targeted and actual impressions are due to different ex-post digital penetration across municipalities. In other words, they depend of the number of people from a given municipality (zipcode) browsing the web –and therefore acting as potential recipients of the campaign ads– at a given point in time.[13] While the bidding strategy was continuously adjusted to approximate as closely as possible the pre-set target in terms of video impressions, there were non-negligible deviations from protocol. In order to work with a set of municipalities that received close to the prespecified number of impressions, we discard the 10% worst undertreated and the 10% most overtreated: in practice, we discard municipalities that received less than 31.8% –or more than 127.4% – of the prespecified target of impressions.[14] This represents our most preferred sample. Finally, we use a third, more restricted sample of 114 municipalities (205, in the robustness analysis with quadruplets). Instead of dropping just municipalities with substantial deviations from their prespecified target, we drop the entire triplet if at least one municipality in the triplet was among those excluded in the most preferred sample. In tables 3 to 5, we report the results of the field experiment for the three samples.

In a robustness check, we exploit the fact that the outcomes are official referendum returns—hence available for every municipality in the country—to increase the number of control observations. We form quadruplets by adding to each of the pre-registered triplets one of the municipalities—in the population of 596 municipalities—that were set aside when the randomization was carried out. In other words, to increase accuracy without introducing any bias, we match each triplet to the municipality, in the same region, that is closest in Mahalanobis

[13] It is important to notice that the level of digital penetration in a municipality is not at all related to our video treatments. Municipalities did not reach enough digital penetration (or had too much penetration) when not enough (or too many) individuals were accessing online contents. This online access is prior to (and unaffected by) our treatments. In fact, only after an individual had accessed an online webpage, the process of programmatic advertising (described in section 3.2) would take place, eventually leading to our video treatments being shown.

[14] Again, it is worth noting that we are subsetting the sample based on a *pre-treatment* characteristic of the municipality, i.e., how many people accessed one of the websites where the campaign messages might be displayed.

distance to the centroid of the triplet in terms of the five pre-treatment covariates (population and past votes) used to perform the blocking.

4.2 Empirical Results

In table 3, we show the video completion rate (VCR) by municipality as a function of the treatment. It emerges that the trust-reducing video (V2) had a higher completion rate, between 1.2 and 1.5 percentage points—depending on whether we consider the full sample or our most preferred sample (columns 7 and 8). This difference is statistically significant.[15] This divergence begins already after 25% of the length of the videos (7.5 seconds out of 30), as shown in the first two columns. It persists after 15 seconds (columns 3 and 4) and widens after 22.5 seconds (columns 5 and 6). Hence, the video providing a direct attack to the credibility of the politicians (V2) is more effective in capturing the viewers' attention than the informational video (V1).

To assess the effectiveness of the two campaigning strategies, we run the model described in equation (1) for our three samples: the full sample of 300 municipalities, our most preferred sample of 260 municipalities, and the more restricted sample of 114 municipalities.

Table 4 shows that the trust-reducing video (V2) decreases the turnout rate. The estimated reduction ranges between 1.32 percentage points in the full sample (column 1) and 2.85 percentage points in the most restrictive sample (column 5). Our most preferred specification shows a reduction of almost 2 percentage points (column 3). Associated with the reduction in the turnout rate, our results display a decrease in the Yes vote, albeit non statistically significant. Also the point estimates of the effect of the informational video (V1) on the turnout rate are negative. However, these effects, as well as the effects on the Yes vote, are not statistically significant in any of the three samples.

Table 5 reports the results of our empirical analysis adding municipalities to the control group and thereby forming quadruplets (see Section 4.1). Our findings are robust to enlarging the group of (control) municipalities. The estimated reduction in the turnout rate induced by

[15]The effect is comparatively large, as the Petersen-Mummolo residual standard deviation is 2.7 percentage points, hence the different treatments differ by half of the variation in video completion rate net of the fixed effects. The raw standard deviation is 3.9 percentage points.

the trust-reducing video (V2) varies from 1.35 percentage points in the full sample (column 1) and 2.65 percentage points in the more restricted sample (column 5)—hence displaying the same magnitude as in Table 4. The treatment (V2) reduces the Yes vote, and is statistically significant (at a 10% level) in the full sample (Table 5, column 2).

Clearly, the reduction in the turnout rate affects the Yes (and No) votes. The relative effect depends on whether turnout decreases more among the Yes or the No voters (see a formal discussion in the Online Appendix). With an estimated effect on turnout of -1.9 percentage points (Table 4, column 3), an average turnout and an average Yes vote share in the control group of respectively 58% and 70%, our trust-reducing treatment induces a drop of 3.3% in the total number of voters, which is consistent with a 4% reduction in the number of Yes votes and with a 1.7% reduction in the number of No votes. To put these effects in perspective, we can calculate the maximum possible reduction in the Yes votes induced by a reduction in the turnout rate, if we assume that no changes occurred among the No voters. This maximum effect corresponds to a 4.7% reduction in the Yes votes, only slightly higher than our estimate of the reduction in the Yes votes of 4%. Hence, conditional on the power of our exercise, the demobilization of voters induced by the trust-reducing treatments ends up reducing the Yes votes, that is, the support to the populist policy.

4.3 Persuasion Rates

Based on the estimates of the models in Table 4, we can also calculate the persuasion rate of the ads in the field experiment following DellaVigna and Gentzkow (2010). The persuasion rate is defined as $f = 100\frac{y_T - y_C}{e_T - e_C}\frac{1}{1-y_0}$ where y_T and y_C are the fractions of agents who take the action respectively under the treatment and the control, e_T and e_C are the fraction of agents exposed to the message under treatment and control, and y_0 is the fraction of agents who would take the action in the absence of the intervention. Importantly, in our setting $e_C = 0$ as the specific campaign videos which were distributed in our experiment were not available elsewhere, so no agent in the control group was exposed. This—combined with random assignment—also means that we can comfortably estimate y_0 with y_C. When it comes to e_T, there are two ways in which it can be calculated: as the average ratio between the crude number of (unique)

impressions in a municipality/zipcode and the population in the municipality, or as the same ratio, adjusted for the video completion rate. The latter considers those agents who did not complete the video—as they closed the browser window—as "not exposed" to it.

For turnout, only the trust reducing video (V2) has a statistically significant effect. The abstention rate y_0 (which in turn defines the fraction of the exposed population that could be persuaded) is 39.4%. The crude e_T is 28%, meaning that on average the number of unique video impressions was a bit more than one quarter of the population of the municipality.[16] Adjusting for video completion rate, which is 59.4%, we obtain an exposure rate to the full video of 16.6%. If we use the treatment effect estimated for our most preferred sample, $y_T - y_C = 0.019$, the persuasion rates are 11.2% for the effect of V2 on turnout (unadjusted) and 18.9% for V2 on turnout (adjusted for video completion). For the outcome "vote No," albeit it is statistically significant in only one specification, y_0 is 30.1%. The exposure rates are the same as above. In the case of vote choice, the treatment effect estimated for our most preferred sample is $y_T - y_C = 0.005$. Hence, the persuasion rates for V2 are respectively 2.6% (unadjusted) and 4.3% (adjusted for video completion).

These persuasion rates are in line with those found in the literature. They are comparable with the effects of canvassing found in Pons (2018): 9.5%-12%; Green et al. (2003): 11.8%; Gerber and Green (2000): 15.6%, and of TV in DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007): 11.6%; Enikolopov et al. (2011): 7.7%-10.2%.

5 Rationalization and Theoretical Mechanisms

Findings from the field experiment show that: (1) the informational treatment (V1) has no significant effects on the turnout rate and the Yes vote share; (2) the video completion rate is lower for the informational treatment (V1) than for the trust-reducing treatment (V2); (3) the trust-reducing treatment (V2) reduces the turnout rate and, to a lesser extent, also the Yes vote share (although these effects are not statistically different from those of V1 because of lack of

[16]The calculations for the exposure rates are based on the subset of observations that enter the estimation sample after discarding the upper and lower tails in terms of deviations from the target number of video impression to be delivered pre-specified by the protocol.

power). We discuss a theoretical framework based on Morelli et al. (2021) to account for these findings and to provide additional predictions to be tested in the survey experiment.

The "commitment theory of populism", developed in Morelli et al. (2021), suggests that, at time of election of policy-makers, low trust in traditional representative democracy induces individuals to prefer parties (or politicians) with simple pandering commitments. This preference for simple commitments drastically reduces the willingness to listen to information. The advantage of the traditional delegation to a political representative is that the optimal policy is uncertain at time of election, and hence ex ante commitment is typically suboptimal. However, uncommitted politicians can be captured by interest groups or elites, which may try to derail from the optimal policy. Voters differ in the probability they attach to politicians being captured by the elites. Voters who fully trust politicians not to be captured will prefer to fully delegate the policy decision to the politicians, as in the traditional trustee model of political agency. In fact, in absence of external influence, delegation to a competent agent is desirable, since a common value policy is best chosen in the post-election period after observing the realization of the state of the world. On the contrary, voters who completely distrust politicians, that is, who believe that politicians will always be captured by the elites, prefer politicians willing to commit ex-ante to a policy outcome.[17]

In this political environment with low trust voters of populist parties and high trust voters of traditional parties, we consider the voters' preferences for the referendum on the reduction of the numbers of MPs in the Parliament. Low trust voters largely favor this reduction—and thus vote "Yes", since they attribute no particular relevance to the MPs, other than implementing the ex-ante agreed policy. Voters of traditional parties, who have faith in the representative democracy, need to evaluate how the reduction in the number of MPs may affect the working of the Parliament—and thus of the representative democracy. Hence, their preferences on how to vote in the referendum will depend on their beliefs about this effect and will thus be more heterogenous than among the voters of populist parties. For high trust voters, information about

[17]The 5 Stars Movement offers the clearest example of the crucial attempt to attract voters with low trust who desire commitments. Five policies defined the 5 Stars Movement in 2013: citizenship income at any cost; no-tav policy (i.e., against the building of fast-train infrastructures) at any cost; the promise to give back part of their Parliamentary salary; two-term limit for any political position; cutting the costs of politics by reducing the number of MPs.

the possible consequences of the referendum on the effectiveness of representative democracy is thus very important in determining their voting decisions. In a political environment mostly favorable to the "Yes" vote, only the more informed individuals may be able to learn about the possible efficiency costs related to reducing the number of MPs. Hence, the more informed among the voters of traditional parties are more likely to vote "No."

How do our informational (V1) and trust-reducing (V2) treatments affect the different voters' decision in the referendum? Low trust voters of populist parties do not seek information and may decide to avoid the informational treatment (V1).[18] However, if forced to watch the videos, the information about the costs of reducing the number of MPs may decrease their "Yes" votes. High trust voters of traditional parties are more open to receive information on the referendum. This new information will reduce the "Yes" vote, particularly among the less informed voters. Our second treatment (V2) aims at reducing the credibility of the promoters of the reform and the trust in the populist parties. Among the voters of populist parties, the video may thus induce doubts about the credibility of populist politicians, thereby decreasing the "Yes" vote and increasing the undecided. Among the high trust voters of traditional parties, this treatment may confirm their negative views on the populist politicians—and thus reduce the "Yes" votes. However, this effect is likely to be moderate as high trust voters may disapprove the aggressive tone of this treatment (V2), which resembles the populist messages.

The findings of the field experiment—namely, the lower completion rate of the informational video (V1) and its lack of electoral impact– are consistent with our theoretical framework, in which populist voters are unwilling to listen to information about the costs of reducing the number of MPs. In the next section, we use our survey data to test the two main predictions of the theoretical framework. The first hypothesis (H1) represents a test of the general predictions of the commitment theory of populism as a rationalization framework for our field experiment results. The second hypothesis (H2) instead tests for secondary predictions of the commitment theory of populism which arise in our experimental setting and may also help elucidate the main mechanisms behind our general findings:

[18]Interestingly, the completion rate for the informational treatment (V1) is significantly lower in the municipalities with larger 5 Stars Movement's vote shares.

- **H1:** Among the untreated individuals, we expect to find
  - significantly greater support for the "Yes" vote among the low trust voters, who prefer populist parties;
  - no effects of the prior political information on the voting decision among low trust voters and higher support for the "No" vote for the more informed among the high trust voters, who were more likely to had exposure to information in favor of the "No" vote.
- **H2:** Analyzing the role of information for individuals with high and low trust in traditional parties, who are forced to watch the videos (as in the survey), we expect to find
  - for low trust voters, no difference in the effectiveness of the two treatments and no effects of the prior political information;
  - for the high trust voters, a larger effect of the informative message (V1) among voters with lower prior political information, who are thus less likely to have been exposed to informational messages in favor of the "No" vote.

6 Survey Experiment

6.1 Experimental Design

Our survey experiment was deployed in parallel with the field experiment. A professional survey company (*CE&Co*) interviewed 2,003 individuals between September 9 and 19, hence during the final two weeks before the referendum. All interviews were online (CAWI method) and lasted 8 minutes on average. Treatment assignment for the survey followed the randomization at the municipality level done for the field experiment. Respondents located in municipalities that were treated in the field experiment with programmatic advertisement received the same treatment also in the survey experiment. To reach the total target of 2,000 interviews in two weeks, additional triplets of municipalities were included in the survey experiment, besides the 300 municipalities used in the field experiment. Part of these municipalities were chosen from those set aside in the field experiment. Another set of triplets was formed —using the same

metrics as before—from municipalities within the chosen population range and with unique zipcode, but failing the "digital penetration" thresholds required for the delivery of the programmatic advertisement. Within these additional triplets, we randomly assigned a treatment status (V1, V2, or C) to one municipality each.

The survey company then chose respondents from the municipalities in these lists. A total of 755 individuals, located in 229 municipalities, were treated with the informational video (V1), 737 individuals in 242 municipalities were treated with the trust-reducing video (V2), and 511 individuals in 207 municipalities were part of the control group. Individuals in the control group were shown a neutral video—released by the Italian Parliamentary TV Agency and freely available on the internet—with information on how to vote in the referendum. The survey collected socio-demographic information on the respondents, such as age, gender, educational attainments, as well as level of political information and their political preferences[19].

After this initial set of questions, one of the three videos was shown, depending on the (treatment or control) group that the respondent belonged to. Three questions were asked immediately after the videos. Answers to these questions are our outcome variables of interest. Respondents were invited to answer an open question on what the video made them think. They were asked whether they intended to vote in the referendum, with answers being "yes" or "no." Finally, they were asked how they intended to vote, with answers being "Yes," "No," or "I have not decided yet." From this last item, we create three outcome variables: a dummy for choosing Yes vs *not* choosing Yes (hence "undecided" or "No"); a dummy for choosing undecided vs *not* choosing undecided (hence "Yes" or "No"); and a dummy for choosing No vs *not* choosing No (hence "Yes" or "undecided"). The coding of the variables that we adopt has a built-in redundancy, but it greatly simplifies the interpretation of the results. In the tables with the empirical results, the coefficients on each row sum to zero (up to decimal rounding), hence it is easier to understand how each treatment, in a loose sense, "moves" vote intentions.

We estimate linear probability models of the general form

[19]The English translation of the survey questionnaire is available online at the experiment website (https://rebrand.ly/referendum2020).

$$Y_i = \alpha_{1g(i)} V1_{m(i)} + \alpha_{2g(i)} V2_{m(i)} + \varepsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where the outcome variables are indicators for vote intention (or other reactions to the video treatments) for respondent i, and $m()$ and $g()$ are functions that map individual i respectively to her municipality m and to her social group g. [20] Social groups indexed by g are defined by support for traditional vs. populist parties, by levels of political information, and by combinations of these two. We estimate standard errors clustered by municipality, which is the level at which the treatment is assigned.

To test our theoretical implications, we defined as individuals with high trust in traditional parties those who are willing to vote for traditional parties. In our survey, they are the respondents who reported that they would vote for the Democratic Party, for Forza Italia, and for other (minor, centrist) parties in the case of an imminent (upcoming) election. Individuals with low trust in traditional parties are instead the voters of populist parties, i.e., those who reported they would vote for 5 Star Movement, League, and Fratelli d'Italia. We disregard individuals who reported to be undecided, as we are unable to classify their type of indecision (for instance, whether between traditional and populist parties or between populist parties and not voting), those who did not answer and those who declared that they would not vote at all in a political election. As measure of political interest, we use the answers to four questions on how frequently individuals obtain information about politics from (i) newspapers; (ii) radio or TV; (iii) blogs, internet; (iv) discussing with family and friends. Answers range from 1 (never) to 4 (very regularly). We average the answers on these four questions and construct a dummy variable for highly informed individuals, if their average level of information is larger than the median in our sample.

Table 6 provides descriptive statistics on pre-treatment and outcome variables. Table 7 shows that the demographic (age, gender, education) variables and the level of political information are balanced across treatment and control groups.

[20] We can also estimate models that include triplet fixed effects. Table A.5 in the Online Appendix reports the results for the main specifications—as in Table 8—but including triplet fixed effects. The coefficients are unaffected. In order to avoid some issues that arise when evaluating heterogeneity via split sample analysis, for simplicity we estimate all the main models without including triplet fixed effects.

6.2 Findings on Main Predictions

Table 8 shows the results of a linear regression model in which the individuals' voting intentions in the referendum are regressed on the individuals' political affiliation, but only for the respondents that were not treated. Our findings are in line with **H1**: (untreated) voters of traditional parties are less likely to vote "Yes" and more likely to vote "No" in the referendum.

Table 9 reports the results of a linear regression model testing the association between political information and voting intentions in the referendum separately for untreated voters of all parties, of traditional parties and of populist parties. As suggested in the previous section and summarized in **H1**, political information is relevant among untreated voters of traditional parties, with more informed individuals more likely to vote "No" and less likely to vote "Yes" (see columns 4-6); this is not the case for untreated voters of populist parties (see columns 7-9). Hence, the effect of the information on the voting behavior found in the sample of all voters (see columns 1-3) is mostly driven by voters of traditional parties (see columns 4-6).

Table 10 reports the estimates of the separate effects of the two treatments–V1 and V2. The P-values for the difference in the effects of the two treatments on the three outcomes of interest are reported in the V1 vs V2 row. The main message that emerges is that both videos reduce the Yes vote intention by 18 to 19 percentage points (column 1), increase the undecided by 13 percentage points (column 2), and increase the No vote intention by 5 to 6 percentage points (column 3). Clearly from cross-sectional data we cannot observe actual vote flows from one intention to the other, but simply how the composition of vote intentions differs between control condition and treatments. However, our findings suggest that two thirds of the induced reduction in the Yes vote turn intentions into indecision and only one third into No vote intentions.

We find no statistical differences across the two treatments in their effects on voting Yes, being undecided, or voting No. However, it is important to notice that the interviewed individuals did not have the opportunity to skip the 30-second video. Hence, unlike in the field experiment, where they could close the browser, they were forced to take the treatment. Respondents receive a monetary compensation from the survey company only if they answer all questions. In fact, only 163 individuals started the survey but did not finish it completely—and

thus were not included in our sample. Among these 163 individuals, only 25 abandoned the survey after the videos. In particular, 13 respondents left during or after being treated with the informational video (V1), 6 during or after the trust-reducing video (V2), and 6 during or after the neutral video (the control group)—thereby confirming that the trust-reducing video is more likely to be seen even in this controlled environment.

6.3 Text Analysis

After having watched any of the three videos, respondents to the survey were asked to write their thoughts about the video in an open question. These unconstrained answers allow us to learn about the different reactions that the informative and the trust-reducing videos induced into the viewers. Answers were short, ranging from one word, such as "nothing," to around sixty words. Due to the limited text of the answers, traditional text analysis based on libraries are not well equipped to group them. We thus decided to classify the answers according to the following seven categories: (i) negative aggressive vs the video (e.g., "this is bullshit"); (ii) negative vs the video (e.g., "it sends a false message"); (iii) dubious (e.g., "it makes me undecided" "I don't know"); (iv) neutral (e.g., "nothing" "it deals with the referendum"); (v) favorable to the video (e.g., "it made me think" "it confirmed my intentions to vote NO"); (vi) generally aggressive, but not against the video (e.g., "all crooks"); (vii) else (e.g., "xxxx"). This last residual category includes the answers of those individuals who just filled some space to continue with the survey, since it was mandatory to give an answer to the question. These categories allow us to compare whether the informative video was perceived more (or less) favorably than the trust-reducing, whether it induced more (or less) doubt or whether it induced a more (or less) negative attitude. We provided these classification instructions to a small group of undergraduate and graduates students, who independently classified each answer into these seven categories.

Table 11 reports the estimates of regressions in equation (2), in which the dependent variable is respectively one of the seven categories, and each variable takes values between 0 and 1, corresponding to the average classification for each qualitative answer. The models compare the answers for the viewers of the informational video (V1) and the trust-reducing video (V2)

to those for the neutral video, which just reported information on how to vote. The row V1 vs V2 reports the P-values for the difference in the effect of the two treatments. Not surprisingly, both the informational (V1) and the trust-reducing video (V2) are perceived as less neutral than the control video. They drive both negative—particularly the trust-deducing video (V2)—and favorable —particularly the informational video (V1)—reactions. Both videos induce aggressive reactions against the content, but also—particularly V2—general aggressive sentiment, not specifically directed toward the video's content. The informational video, unlike the other one, is also effective in increasing doubts.

Hence, in a controlled environment in which individuals are unable to skip the videos, the informative video (V1) (i) is more perceived as less negative; (ii) receives more favorable reactions; and (iii) induces more doubts than the trust-reducing video (V2). However, findings from the field experiment suggest that the informative video (V1) is less effective at capturing viewers' attention and thus at being watched voluntarily.

6.4 Findings on the Mechanisms

The role of prior trust and political information in mediating the effects of the informational and trust-reducing treatments (**H2**) can be tested more closely in the survey experiment, in which respondents were unable to skip the videos—although they could of course disregard them.

Table 12 reports the results of the survey experiment for all voters and separately for the voters of traditional and of populist parties. The results for the sample of voters (Table 12, columns 1-3) are in line with those for the sample of all respondents, shown in Table 10. Among voters of traditional parties (Table 12, columns 4-6), the informational video (V1) is particularly effective in reducing the Yes vote intentions. Among voters of populist parties (Table 12, columns 7-9), both videos induce an equal reduction in the Yes vote intentions towards indecision and NO vote intentions.

Table 13 reports the estimates of the effects of the two treatments for all voters, voters of traditional and of populist parties, according to their level of political information. The informative video (V1) is particularly effective among voters with low political information,

who become undecided (columns 1-3). This effect is mostly driven by low informed voters of traditional parties (columns 4-6). Among voters of traditional parties, also the trust reducing video (V2) is more effective for respondents with low political information. No differential effects of the treatment according to the information level of the respondents emerge instead among voters of populist parties. These findings are in line with the theoretical predictions in Section 5, suggesting that information matters more among low informed voters of traditional parties, and that the commitment theory of populism is useful in disclosing the mechanisms behind our experimental results.

7 Conclusion

In our study, we exploit the unique testing ground provided by the 2020 Italian constitutional referendum and run a field experiment using programmatic advertisement, to test the effectiveness of different strategies that traditional political parties may use to respond to the challenge posed by populist parties. The issue of the referendum—that is, an anti-establishment reduction in the number of MPs—is the turf where traditional parties were called to (best-)respond to the populist message. We experimentally evaluate the effectiveness of two different strategies: 1) providing factual information on the side effects of the populist reform, in order to "win the argument;" 2) attacking the populist politicians who promoted the reform as the new establishment to reduce their credibility and voters' trust in them, thereby employing a "use the same weapons" strategy. In our field experiment, we find that the latter strategy is more effective at capturing the viewers' attention. This "use the same weapons" strategy reduces voters' turnout, particularly among potential "Yes" voters and thus slightly decreases the "Yes" voter share.

In the survey experiment, where respondents could not skip the videos, both messages were equally effective in reducing the "Yes" vote, while making voters mostly undecided. Among voters of traditional parties, the informative video was more effective and respondents with less political information were more responsive to the videos. Among voters of populist parties, both messages were equally effective and no differences emerged depending of the level of

political information of the respondents. This suggests that to convince populist voters, who were not interested in acquiring information on the referendum, the most relevant aspect was to capture their attention. The more aggressive "use the same weapons" strategy worked better at this. However, findings from both the field and the survey experiment show that these voters were not convinced to switch camp and vote No, but rather become undecided or chose to not vote. Hence, having traditional parties exploiting this "use the same weapons" strategy has costs in terms of increasing toxic messages during the electoral campaign and of reducing political participation.

In terms of campaign implications, our findings suggest that traditional parties, when devising their strategy to (best-)respond to populist parties, should focus on mobilization rather than persuasion. And they also suggest that campaign should target not only demographic characteristics but also cultural (trust) attitudes.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Field Experiment, Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Median	St Dev	Min	Max	Nr. Obs
Pre-Treatment Variables						
5 Stars 2018	27.68	25.53	8.75	11.28	55.6	300
Dem 2018	20.39	19.31	7.3	6.55	41.68	300
Yes Vote 2016	42.46	41.72	8.71	25	63.74	300
Turnout 2016	72.42	74.33	6.32	51.74	82.65	300
Population	8796.21	8745	3521.14	2547	14953	300
Outcome Variables						
Yes Vote 2020	69.84	70.42	5.68	55.07	82.48	300
Turnout 2020	60.16	60.29	9.85	33.68	88.26	300

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the pre-treatment variables used for blocking, and of the two outcomes of the 2020 referendum, in the baseline field experiment sample of three hundred municipalities.

Table 2: Field Experiment, Balance Test

VARIABLES	5 Stars 2018	Dem 2018	Yes Vote 2016	Turnout 2016	Population
Video 1	0.21	-0.31	-0.27	-0.32	186.61
	(0.32)	(0.34)	(0.36)	(0.27)	(258.29)
Video 2	0.39	-0.49	-0.29	-0.36	-161.30
	(0.35)	(0.34)	(0.36)	(0.26)	(258.61)
Observations	300	300	300	300	300

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of the pre-treatment variables used for blocking on treatment indicators, estimated on the baseline field experiment sample of three hundred municipalities.

Table 3: Field Experiment, Videos Completion Rates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	VCR 25 pc	VCR 25 pc	VCR 50 pc	VCR 50 pc	VCR 75 pc	VCR 75 pc	VCR 100 pc	VCR 100 pc
Video 2 vs 1	0.54*	0.82**	0.58	0.93*	0.83*	1.25**	1.19**	1.52**
	(0.29)	(0.37)	(0.39)	(0.48)	(0.48)	(0.61)	(0.52)	(0.65)
Obs	200	160	200	160	200	160	200	160
R-sq	0.57	0.66	0.59	0.69	0.59	0.66	0.57	0.63
Sample	Full	Trim	Full	Trim	Full	Trim	Full	Trim

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: Coefficients and standard errors of the regression of video completion rates on a dummy for trust-reducing video (vs. informational video) on the full sample of 200 treated municipalities (odd columns) and on the trimmed sample of 160 municipalities (even columns). The outcomes are in the order: fraction of viewers who watched at least a quarter of the video (7.5 seconds), fraction who watched at least half of the video (15 seconds), fraction who watched at least three quarters of the video (22.5 seconds), and fraction who watched the video in full. The coefficient estimates the difference in these fractions between the trust-reducing video and the informational video: a positive value indicates that more viewers watch the trust-reducing than the informational video.

Table 4: Field Experiment, Estimation Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Turnout	Yes Vote	Turnout	Yes Vote	Turnout	Yes Vote
	Rate	Share	Rate	Share	Rate	Share
Video 1	-0.268	0.023	-0.586	-0.424	-1.790	-0.897
	(0.815)	(0.539)	(0.879)	(0.613)	(1.239)	(0.845)
Video 2	-1.320*	-0.384	-1.896**	-0.549	-2.854**	-1.033
	(0.780)	(0.509)	(0.876)	(0.591)	(1.206)	(0.855)
Obs.	300	300	260	260	114	114
R-sq.	0.758	0.742	0.791	0.753	0.814	0.697
V1 vs V2	0.170	0.462	0.139	0.850	0.319	0.879
Sample	Full	Full	Trim	Trim	Restr	Restr

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 4: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of the outcome variables on indicators for the two treatments, including fixed effects for the blocks based on which randomization was performed. The first two columns report the estimates on the full sample; the second two on the sample dropping under- and over-treated municipalities; the last two on the sample dropping all the triplets containing an under- or over-treated municipality. The row labeled "V1 vs V2" reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the coefficient on the trust-reducing treatment and the coefficient on the informative treatment.

Table 5: Field Experiment, Estimation Results, Robustness

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Turnout	Yes Vote	Turnout	Yes Vote	Turnout	Yes Vote
	Rate	Share	Rate	Share	Rate	Share
Video 1	-0.299	-0.368	-0.656	-0.736	-1.581	-1.145
	(0.769)	(0.463)	(0.842)	(0.519)	(1.373)	(0.833)
Video 2	-1.351*	-0.776*	-1.685**	-0.848	-2.645*	-1.280
	(0.765)	(0.452)	(0.824)	(0.516)	(1.434)	(0.856)
Obs.	391	391	351	351	205	205
R-sq.	0.691	0.722	0.715	0.729	0.768	0.772
V1 vs V2	0.189	0.447	0.254	0.858	0.427	0.891
Sample	Full	Full	Trim	Trim	Restr	Restr

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 5: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of the outcome variables on indicators for the two treatments, including fixed effects for the blocks. The first two columns report the estimates on the full sample, augmented by additional control observations; the second two on the sample dropping under- and over-treated municipalities from the augmented sample; the last two on the sample dropping all the quadruplets containing an under- or over-treated municipality. The row labeled "V1 vs V2" reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the coefficient on the trust-reducing treatment and the coefficient on the informative treatment.

Table 6: Survey Experiment, Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	St dev	Min	Max	Nr Obs
Male	.36	.48	0	1	2003
Young	.21	.41	0	1	2003
Adult	.63	.48	0	1	2003
Old	.16	.37	0	1	2003
College	.29	.45	0	1	2003
Low Political Info	.47	.5	0	1	2003
Voters of Traditional Parties	.22	.41	0	1	2003
Voters of Populist Parties	.43	.49	0	1	2003
Undecided	.23	.42	0	1	2003
No Vote	.12	.33	0	1	2003
No Vote No Trad Par	.55	.5	0	1	2003

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for the respondents to the survey.

Table 7: Survey Experiment, Balance Tests

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
						Low Pol.	Traditional	Populist		
VARIABLES	Male	Young	Adult	Old	College	Info	Parties	Parties	Undecided	No Vote
Video 1	0.001	-0.030	-0.004	0.034	-0.003	-0.025	0.022	-0.034	0.013	-0.000
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.033)	(0.026)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.028)	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.021)
Video 2	0.009	0.010	-0.002	-0.008	0.004	-0.051	0.044*	-0.032	-0.019	0.007
	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.031)	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.034)	(0.027)	(0.033)	(0.024)	(0.021)
Observations	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 7: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of pre-treatment variables on treatment indicators, estimated on the full survey sample.

Table 8: Survey Experiment Testing Basic Theoretical Implication

	(1)	(2)	(3)
VARIABLES	Yes	Undecided	No
Traditional Parties	-0.209***	0.047	0.162***
	(0.067)	(0.050)	(0.058)
Observations	304	304	304
R-squared	0.040	0.004	0.034

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 8: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for vote intention on an indicator for being a supporter of traditional (vs. populist) parties, estimated on the sample of untreated individuals.

Table 9: Survey Experiment Testing Theoretical Implication about Political Information

PARTY	All parties			Traditional			Populist		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
VARIABLES	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No
Low Pol. Info	0.100*	0.025	-0.125**	0.184*	0.048	-0.232**	0.057	0.017	-0.074
	(0.052)	(0.041)	(0.050)	(0.109)	(0.082)	(0.104)	(0.064)	(0.048)	(0.059)
Observations	304	304	304	90	90	90	214	214	214
R-squared	0.011	0.001	0.024	0.033	0.004	0.062	0.004	0.001	0.011

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 9: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for vote intention on an indicator for respondents who are classified as having low political information, estimated respectively on the sample of untreated individuals (columns 1-3), on the subset of supporters of traditional parties among untreated individuals (columns 4-6), and on the subset of supporters of populist parties among untreated individuals (columns 7-9).

Table 10: Survey Experiment, ATE

	(1)	(2)	(3)
VARIABLES	Yes	Undecided	No
Video 1	-0.189***	0.129***	0.060**
	(0.034)	(0.030)	(0.027)
Video 2	-0.180***	0.130***	0.050**
	(0.034)	(0.030)	(0.025)
V1 vs. V2	0.785	0.966	0.690
Observations	1,726	1,726	1,726
R-squared	0.026	0.015	0.003

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 10: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for vote intention on indicators for treatment, estimated on the whole sample. The row labeled "V1 vs V2" reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the coefficient on the trust-reducing treatment and the coefficient on the informative treatment.

Table 11: Survey Experiment, Text Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
VARIABLES	Aggressive	Negative	Dubious	Neutral	Favorable	Gen. aggr.	Else
Video 1	0.016***	0.112***	0.047***	-0.363***	0.097***	0.086***	0.004
	(0.006)	(0.021)	(0.013)	(0.028)	(0.019)	(0.016)	(0.010)
Video 2	0.024***	0.177***	0.014	-0.402***	0.029*	0.140***	0.018
	(0.006)	(0.024)	(0.011)	(0.029)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.011)
V1 vs. V2	0.292	0.006	0.009	0.104	0.001	0.005	0.196
Observations	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003	2,003
R-squared	0.006	0.036	0.008	0.156	0.015	0.031	0.002

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 11: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for content of the open-ended comments about the videos on treatment indicators, estimated on the full survey sample. The row labeled “V1 vs V2” reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the coefficient on the trust-reducing treatment and the coefficient on the informative treatment.

Table 12: Survey Experiment, Voters

PARTY	All parties			Traditional			Populist		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
VARIABLES	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No
Video 1	-0.207***	0.105***	0.102***	-0.230***	0.110*	0.120*	-0.178***	0.098***	0.080**
	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.071)	(0.057)	(0.066)	(0.046)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Video 2	-0.180***	0.105***	0.075**	-0.126*	0.071	0.055	-0.187***	0.119***	0.067*
	(0.039)	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.076)	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.047)	(0.041)	(0.037)
V1 vs. V2	0.496	1	0.422	0.116	0.473	0.289	0.855	0.624	0.752
Observations	1,178	1,178	1,178	404	404	404	774	774	774
R-squared	0.029	0.012	0.008	0.032	0.009	0.009	0.027	0.015	0.007

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 12: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for vote intention on indicators for treatment, estimated respectively on all respondents who report they intend to vote for a specific political party in the next election (columns 1-3), on respondents who intend to vote for a traditional party (columns 4-6), and on respondents who intend to vote for a populist party (columns 7-9). The row labeled "V1 vs V2" reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the coefficient on the trust-reducing treatment and the coefficient on the informative treatment.

Table 13

PARTIES	All voters			Traditional			Populist		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
VARIABLES	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes	Undecided	No
Video 1	-0.148***	0.059	0.090*	-0.138	0.075	0.063	-0.134**	0.047	0.087
	(0.051)	(0.040)	(0.049)	(0.090)	(0.074)	(0.096)	(0.060)	(0.047)	(0.057)
Video 2	-0.136**	0.107**	0.029	-0.020	0.058	-0.038	-0.175***	0.133**	0.042
	(0.053)	(0.041)	(0.048)	(0.098)	(0.069)	(0.095)	(0.061)	(0.052)	(0.053)
Low Pol. Info	0.100*	0.025	-0.125**	0.184*	0.048	-0.232**	0.057	0.017	-0.074
	(0.052)	(0.041)	(0.050)	(0.109)	(0.082)	(0.104)	(0.064)	(0.048)	(0.059)
Low Pol. Info * V1	-0.134*	0.128**	0.005	-0.218*	0.108	0.109	-0.103	0.138*	-0.035
	(0.076)	(0.065)	(0.071)	(0.131)	(0.125)	(0.144)	(0.096)	(0.075)	(0.083)
Low Pol. Info * V2	-0.095	0.001	0.095	-0.262*	0.052	0.210	-0.017	-0.033	0.050
	(0.079)	(0.065)	(0.071)	(0.144)	(0.113)	(0.138)	(0.096)	(0.080)	(0.080)
Observations	1,178	1,178	1,178	404	404	404	774	774	774
R-squared	0.032	0.025	0.021	0.043	0.026	0.027	0.030	0.028	0.016
Low info*V1 - Low info*V2	0.642	0.0728	0.208	0.710	0.645	0.455	0.394	0.0495	0.288

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 13: Coefficients and standard errors of regressions of dummies for vote intention on indicators for treatment interacted with an indicator for respondents classified as low political information individuals. The models are estimated respectively on all respondents who report they intend to vote for a specific political party in the next election (columns 1-3), on respondents who intend to vote for a traditional party (columns 4-6), and on respondents who intend to vote for a populist party (columns 7-9). The row labeled "Low info*V1 - Low info*V2" reports the p-value of the F test of the difference between the effect on the trust-reducing treatment and the effect on the informative treatment for low information individuals.

Figure 1: Randomization