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To cite this article: Moreno Mancosu, Federico Vegetti, Antonella Seddone & Giuliano Bobba (07 Jan 2025): Perceived victimhood in Italian politics: political ideology, populism, and economic grievance, South European Society and Politics, DOI: [10.1080/13608746.2024.2441555](https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2441555)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2441555>

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Perceived victimhood in Italian politics: political ideology, populism, and economic grievance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of perceived victimhood in the Italian political landscape, highlighting its correlation with political ideology, populism, and economic distress. Utilizing original survey data, we investigate how individuals' political alignment, particularly with far-right and populist parties, correlates with their sense of victimisation. Additionally, the research adapts a multidimensional victimhood scale from the U.S. to the Italian context, revealing a strong correlation between systemic and egocentric dimensions of victimhood. Findings show that perceived victimhood is especially prevalent among those with populist attitudes, right-wing affiliations, and lower economic status, underscoring the importance of economic and rhetorical factors in driving public sentiments of victimisation in Italy.


KEYWORDS

Perceived victimhood; collective victimhood; public opinion; Italy; economic grievance; populism; far-right; ideology

Introduction

The concept of victimhood is ubiquitous in contemporary public discourse. On the one hand, over the last decade pundits along the political spectrum have devoted much more attention than in the past to the claims of groups feeling oppressed by the dominant power structures, either supporting or opposing them (Chouliarakis 2024). Central to these debates is the role of the *victim*: who can rightfully claim it, for what reasons, and what should be done to right the wrongs (Druliolle & Brett 2018). On the other hand, scholars have noted an increased emphasis on grievance in political communication, particularly among populist parties and movements (Lerner 2020; Al-Ghazzi 2021; Coulson 2022; Flinders & Hinterleitner 2022; Hronešová & Kreiss 2024). According to this literature, political actors make strategic use of victimhood in their rhetoric, by portraying a group as a victim in order to unite it and gain its support. This relates to the phenomenon of 'competitive victimhood', where some groups emphasise their own suffering over the one of others in order to gain moral status (Young & Sullivan 2016). However, victimhood is not only a feature of political communication. Campbell and Manning (2018) have talked about the

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 Supplementary data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2441555>

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rise of a 'victimhood culture' at the broader societal level. In such a culture, perceiving oneself as a victim allows individuals to take a sort of moral high ground, increasing their own political relevance. This makes the status of victim paradoxically desirable. Taking from these insights, scholars have started to study citizens' perceptions of their own victimhood, investigating their psychological and political correlates, as well as their responsiveness to political rhetoric (see Armaly & Enders 2022).

Victimhood is very well embedded in Italian contemporary political discourse as well. Accusations of 'playing the victim', directed towards politicians or pundits, are common in public discourse. Moreover, the Italian political environment offers a plurality of populist parties positioned along the ideological spectrum (from right-wing to valence/left-wing populism, see Zulianello & Larsen 2024). Given the association between victimhood rhetoric and populism, Italian citizens should be therefore exposed to a great amount of victimhood rhetoric coming from different sources and framed in different ways. The question remains, however, whether and to what extent Italian citizens perceive themselves as victimised, and how such perceptions relate to their political preferences. Thus, the goal of this study is to expand the empirical understanding of individual perceived victimhood in three ways. First, by focusing on Italy, we look at a political context where the relationship between victimhood and politics is likely to be more complex than in the United States (US). Looking at a multiparty context like Italy allows us to disentangle different factors that in the US are almost perfectly overlapped, such as ideological identity, partisanship, and populist attitudes – which in the US are related to the support for the Republican candidate Trump (Armaly & Enders 2022). Secondly, we take into account an aspect that has been overlooked by previous research, namely people's objective economic conditions. Most accounts in the literature tend to assume, more or less explicitly, that victimhood is a constructed narrative, a self-perception that can be easily triggered by political communicators using specific rhetorics (as shown experimentally by Armaly & Enders 2022). However, people might feel victimised also when they lack the material means for a satisfactory life. Given that greater economic insecurity is associated with support for populist parties (Guiso et al. 2017) it is important to take people's economic status into account when studying the association between victimhood and political characteristics like populism, to avoid overestimating the association between them. The third contribution of this paper refers to the empirical measurement of perceived victimhood. A scale developed by Armaly and Enders (2022) subdivided perceived victimhood into two sub-dimensions, one called 'systemic' and the other 'egocentric'. We test to what extent these two dimensions are empirically distinguishable, to provide validation of the measurement developed by previous research in a different cultural context.

Our results show that while the two-dimensional structure of perceived victimhood observed in the US holds, the two dimensions are much more

correlated to each other in Italy, meaning that there is less difference between the inward-looking and the outward-looking aspects of victimhood. We speculate that this might be due to the more collectivist nature of Italian society, where individuals are more likely to associate their own conditions to systemic factors. We also show that people's perceived victimhood is higher among those who position themselves at the extreme right of the political spectrum, those who hold populist attitudes and vote for parties classified as populist, and those who have lower income levels. The associations are similar for both dimensions of victimhood.

Victimhood: from rhetoric to perceptions

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, victimhood is defined as 'the condition of having been hurt, damaged, or made to suffer, especially when you want people to feel sorry for you because of this or use it as an excuse for something'.¹ This definition includes three elements: the presence of some form of grievance, the search for empathy or support, and the possibility that this condition can be used manipulatively to obtain sympathy from others. Social psychology has devoted great attention to victimhood at the collective level, in the field of intergroup relations and conflict (Vollhardt 2020). An important distinction emerging from this field is the one between *victimization*, namely an objective act of harm perpetrated against someone, and *victimhood*, namely the psychological experience of trauma following such harm (Noor et al. 2017) or a form of collective identity built around it (Jacoby 2015). Building on this literature, Lerner (2020) proposes the concept of 'victimhood narrative' as a rhetorical tool used by political entrepreneurs to mobilise in-groups and gain sympathy from out-groups.

In general terms, victimhood can represent both a set of top-down communication strategies and mass-level perceptions (see also Boussalis, Craig & Rudkin 2022). On the one hand, some people and groups can be *really* victimised. Socio-political systems can oppress groups on legal grounds (for instance when criminal justice targets them more than others, see Meeks 2010), and social groups can be oppressed based on social or cultural identity (see Druliolle & Brett 2018). On the other hand, people can perceive themselves as victims even if they were no objects of clear acts of victimisation. This makes perceived victimhood an interesting phenomenon to study per se. By looking at individual perceptions, we can be agnostic about whether people are actually victimised or not. At the same time, a great deal of research shows that perceptions affect attitudes and behaviour beyond the objective phenomena that they represent. To give two pertinent examples: perceptions of lower socio-economic status are more strongly

¹See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/victimhood> (accessed on 6 May 2024).

associated with lower health and wellbeing than objective conditions (see Adler et al. 2000; Ostrove et al. 2000); perceptions of polarisation are more strongly associated with partisan animosity, distrust, and social distance than actual polarisation (see Enders & Armaly 2019; Levendusky & Malhotra 2016). With respect to victimhood, literature has shown that, quite counter-intuitively, people might seek to define themselves as victims to obtain social and political advantages from others. In general, we know that self-perceptions tend to provide psychological and social benefits to individuals (Zitek et al. 2010; Horwitz 2018). This might happen in many ways. People might perceive themselves as victims in order to feel emotionally and socially included in a victimised social group (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015). Moreover, the victim status fosters the possibility of earning political status, convincing people that they deserve deference from others (Horwitz 2018). As a consequence, feeling wronged might lead to seeking advantages for oneself, even at the cost of breaking social and ethical norms. For instance, research shows that people who perceive themselves as victims feel that the world owes them and that they are entitled to get more than what they get (see Zitek et al. 2010).

Victimhood in Italian politics

Victimhood can be often found in the rhetoric of Italian politicians, as pointed out by several pundits over the last decades. In a 2013 column for the Italian weekly news magazine *L'Espresso*, the semiotician Umberto Eco proposed that a certain degree of victimhood is indispensable for holding political office in Italy (Eco 2013). Eco provided examples of numerous influential Italian politicians who successfully claimed to be victims as a strategy for increasing media attention and public support. One example is that of Silvio Berlusconi, who, during his extended tenure in power, often claimed that the European Union (EU), opposition parties, the judiciary, and even some of his own allies were doing everything possible to obstruct his efforts to fulfill his promises (Taggart & Kaltwasser 2016). This resembles the rhetoric used by Donald Trump, who frequently portrayed himself as a victim of various systems and forces, including the media, the political establishment, the judiciary, and foreign nations (Coulson 2022).

More recently, the sociologist Marco Marzano argued in an op-ed that the current Prime Minister and leader of the largest right-wing party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli di Italia – FDI), Giorgia Meloni, tends to depict three ‘victims’ in her rhetoric: Meloni herself, who grew up in a working-class neighbourhood and experienced family issues in her childhood; Italian ‘neo-fascism’, referring to the heirs of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano – MSI), a far-right post-fascist party founded directly after the Second World War (WWII) that is an ancestor of Meloni’s own party, which has been systematically excluded

from mainstream politics since its establishment (see also Ignazi 1998); and the Italian nation, which is constantly under attack by European institutions and Anglo-Saxon imperialism (Marzano 2023).

The idea of the country being ‘under attack’ is also often used by the leader of the right-wing League party and minister of Meloni’s government, Matteo Salvini: For Salvini, the attack comes from the NGO rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean sea,² the European Central Bank,³ or ‘the markets’.⁴ The League also presented General Roberto Vannacci as a candidate for the European elections of 2024. Vannacci self-published a controversial book in 2023 entitled *‘Il mondo al contrario’* (‘The Upside-down World’), which became a best-seller following great media attention. In the book, Vannacci argues that, in Italy, reason and common sense are being attacked by minorities such as environmentalists, foreigners, or LGBT people, who are forcing their stances on the whole society. Diletti and Mazzonis (2023) report on a panel organised by the right-wing think tank ‘Nazione Futura’ following the publication of the book, in which discussants portrayed Vannacci as a victim of ‘politically correct’ and left-wing hegemony.

Although these are just anecdotal examples, many of which come from opinion pieces published on left-leaning outlets, they all represent examples of victimhood used by elites’ communication, and they say nothing about citizens’ perceptions. However, they show that Italian politics is no stranger to victimhood rhetoric, so we expect citizens to be likely recipients of victimhood messages as well. Furthermore, a tendency to elevate the victims to a heroic status appears to be a general tendency in Italian contemporary culture, observed in historical narration as well as in media communication (Giglioli 2014; De Luna 2015). To what extent victimhood rhetoric and culture are also reflected in Italian citizens’ self-perceptions remains an empirical question.

Perceived victimhood: a multidimensional concept

The first issue to take into account when exploring perceived victimhood at the mass level is measuring the very concept. In a recent study, Armaly and Enders (2022) propose a multi-item scale to measure perceived victimhood in the public opinion. The goal of this section is to validate the Italian translation of the scale, comparing its psychometric features with the ones observed in the original English version, such as the dimensionality. In fact, Armaly and Enders (2022) scale focuses on two different dimensions of victimhood. The first dimension, which they call ‘systemic’ victimhood is more out-ward-looking, and focuses on the alleged victimising role of external and powerful forces (‘the

²See (ANSA 2023).

³See Open, 2022.

⁴See Salvini’s own Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/italia-sotto-attacco-ma-ce-la-faremoinsiemesultetto/10155801843233155/>.

system' or 'society'). One example of item belonging to this group is 'the system works against people like me'. The second dimension, called 'egocentric' victimhood, is more inward-looking, and pertains to more existential aspects of people's lives. The attribution of blame (the oppressor) is not specific, but the idea is that victims have a harder go in life than they should (Rose & Anastasio 2014). For instance, one item belonging to this group is 'I rarely get what I deserve in life'. By analysing the scale using confirmatory factor analysis, Armaly and Enders (2022) show in their study that systemic and egocentric items load on two separate (albeit correlated) factors, confirming empirically that among US citizens the more inward-looking and the more outward-looking aspects of victimhood do not fully overlap – in other words, feeling victimised does not necessarily imply blaming it on the system.

As the very first step in our analysis of perceived victimhood in Italy, we look at whether the scale maintains the same properties observed in the US, that is, to what extent the items correlate with each other and whether the two-dimensional nature of perceived victimhood observed by Armaly and Enders (2022) emerges in Italy as well. While Italy and the US have a lot in common, they also differ in some key cultural aspects that might be relevant for the way citizens process feelings of victimhood. For instance, research in cross-cultural psychology shows that Italian citizens are more collectivist than US citizens (see Burton et al. 2021), and this might make the distinction between the systemic and egocentric facets of victimhood less relevant. If that was the case, the items would work better in a single perceived victimhood scale. Hence, looking at the dimensionality of the scale in Italy is relevant for both substantive and more strictly methodological reasons.

We use data from an online survey administered by the polling company SWG in January 2023 ($n = 1,715$).⁵ The data were collected between 16 and 30 January 2023, a few months after the establishment of the new right-wing government on 22 October 2022, with Giorgia Meloni as the prime minister. While the original scale proposed by Armaly and Enders (2022) includes eight items, four for each factor, due to survey space limitations we could include only six items, dropping one item from both factors. The wording of the items, together with the Italian translation, is shown in Table 1.⁶ To test for the goodness of fit of the theoretical two-dimensional structure, we run two confirmatory factor analyses, the first with the three systemic items loading on a factor and the three egocentric items loading on another factor, and the second with all items loading on one single factor. We then compare several common fit statistics used in structural equation modelling (RMSEA, CFI, TLI, SRMR) among the one-factor and the two-factor solutions, and we directly test for fit difference using a Chi-2 test. As Table 1 reports, all fit statistics improve from the one-factor

⁵For more information on the datasets and descriptive statistics, see table SM1 in the Supplemental material.

⁶Respondents were asked to express their agreement with the sentences on a 5-point Likert scale, like in Armaly and Enders (2022).

Table 1. Perceived victimhood scale items, translation, and factors.

	Original scale	Italian translation	Systemic		Egocentric		Full scale	
			Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Systemic items</i>								
1	The system works against people like me	Penso che il sistema sia fatto apposta per andare contro le persone come me	1				1	
2	The world is 'doing it' to me and there's nothing I can do about it	Sento che il mondo si stia prendendo gioco di me e che non possa farci nulla	1.069	(0.030)			1.051	(0.030)
3	The world is out to get me	Spesso mi capita di pensare che il mondo ce l'abbia con me	0.938	(0.029)			0.946	(0.029)
<i>Egocentric items</i>								
4	I rarely get what I deserve in life	Ottengo raramente ciò che merito nella vita			1		0.863	(0.029)
5	Great things never come to me	Mi capita molto raramente di ottenere le cose che voglio con facilità			0.898	(0.031)	0.757	(0.030)
6	I never seem to get an extra break	Spesso mi sembra che nella vita non me ne vada mai bene una			1.093	(0.036)	0.956	(0.030)
Cronbach's alpha			0.89		0.86		0.92	
<i>CFA fit statistics</i>								
Chi-2					31.276***		142.456***	
RMSEA					0.052		0.111	
CFI					0.995		0.975	
TLI					0.988		0.945	
SRMR					0.14		0.029	
Correlation between factors					0.89			
Chi-2 difference							111.18***	
Number of observations							1,579	

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

to the two-factor solutions, and the Chi-2 test shows that the fit improvement is statistically significant. This implies that the egocentric and systemic components of the scale are distinguishable in the Italian sample. Nevertheless, both solutions fit the data reasonably well, and both sub-scales and the full scale have good reliability, based on Cronbach's alpha. Hence, based on the researcher's substantive interest, one can reliably use both the full perceived victimhood scale and the systemic and egocentric victimhood subscales separately.⁷

Finally, the table also shows that the two sub-scales are heavily correlated with each other ($r = 0.89$), a much higher figure than the correlation observed in the US by Armaly and Enders (2022), which is 0.56. This is an interesting finding in itself, which might be related to the greater individualism of US citizens, compared to the more collectivist Italians (Burton et al. 2021). Specifically, the

⁷In order to provide a satisfactory model fit, we had to add correlations between the errors of two pairs of observed variables, according to the modification indices reported by the models. The correlation with the greatest modification index is the one between items 3 and 6. We think that this is due to the fact that the Italian translation of the two items has similar wording, which is somewhat different from the other items in the scale.

systemic and egocentric dimensions of victimhood might be more intertwined in a context, like Italy, where individuals are on average more likely to see themselves as a part of a broader social group, and thus individual grievances are more easily connected to systemic factors.

In sum, on the one hand, we can say that the two latent constructs provide reliable measurement also in the Italian context. On the other, however, the strong correlation between the two factors leads us to the conclusion that the two factors are not so distinct in Italy. Hence, for our correlational analyses of the predictors of perceived victimhood we will use the two factors separately as well as jointly.

Correlates of perceived victimhood: politics and economic grievance

In this section, we examine the correlates of perceived victimhood (the full scale) as well as systemic and egocentric victimhood in Italy. The study by Armaly and Enders (2022) shows that in the US perceived victimhood correlates with psychological constructs such as narcissism, system justification, emotional stability, and efficacy, as well as more politically relevant factors such as conspiratorial thinking, anti-elitism, perceived corruption, trust in government, racial attitudes, and support for Donald Trump. Moreover, they find some relevant differences between systemic and egocentric victimhood. For instance, support for Trump as well as some racial attitudes, such as refusal to give government aid to blacks, being against politically correct, and being in favour of the border wall with Mexico, are positively associated with egocentric victimhood but negatively associated with systemic victimhood. This makes sense if we consider that, in the US context, feelings of systemic oppression have been claimed by ethnic and sexual minorities, who are more likely to be supported by progressive movements.

Given our focus on the Italian context, we test the association between perceived victimhood and a different set of political correlates, namely left-right self-placement, populist attitudes, and party support. The mechanism by which these factors are expected to correlate with perceived victimhood is based on the assumption that, in Italian politics, some actors are more likely to make use of victimhood rhetoric than others, and this rhetoric could provide a link between citizens' own sense of victimhood and some specific political identities or attitudes. At this point, we are agnostic about the causal direction of this link – party rhetoric could be triggering citizens' sense of victimhood, or just making citizens who see themselves as victims for exogenous reasons more likely to feel represented by some parties. We simply aim to show an empirical association.

Looking at *ideology*, Armaly and Enders (2022) do not find any relationship between perceived victimhood and liberal-conservative positions. In fact, there is nothing inherent to conservative ideology that should make those who

subscribe to it more likely to see themselves as victims. However, in European multi-party systems, the ideological left and right include diverse sets of positions, rhetorical styles, and historical legacies, some of which have been more likely to embrace victimhood narratives than others. European scholars have identified victimhood as one of the driving ideological mechanisms of the XX century's radical right parties and ideologies, used as a communicative and ideological tool to justify violent actions or even mass murder. Fascist ideologies highlighted the victim status of the national ingroup in order to legitimise taking actions against the group's enemies, be they internal or external (see Waller 2007; Alvarez 2010; Paxton 2017). The tendency towards feeling victimised, at least in Europe, has thus had much to do with the radical right. Moving to the Italian context, this expectation fits well with the anecdotal evidence discussed above of the use of victimhood rhetoric by radical right-wing leaders such as Meloni and Salvini. However, while Salvini tends to frame victimhood in nativist terms, often referring to the Italian people and country being under attack by foreign and supranational powers, Meloni's political heritage claims a further layer of political victimhood due to the neo-fascist right's exclusion from power since the end of WWII. Indeed, Meloni's party FDI is the mainstream Italian party that is most directly connected with MSI, a party founded in 1946 by former members of the Italian Social Republic (the fascist state formed in the north of Italy after the 1943 armistice between Italy and the Allies and dissolved at the end of the war in 1945). Due to its origins, this political camp had been kept at the margins of mainstream politics until the early 90s, to the point that scholars defined it as 'the excluded pole' (e.g. Ignazi 1998).

Given these premises, we hypothesise that *perceived victimhood is higher among people who place themselves at the extreme right of the ideological spectrum* (H1a). In particular, given the exclusion from the political system that the neo-fascist right has been lamenting in Italy, we expect this association to be *stronger with respect to the systemic dimension of victimhood than for the ego-centric one* (H1b).

Today, the most successful radical right parties in Europe have adopted a *populist rhetoric* (Rooduijn et al. 2023a). In Italy, the right-wing coalition that won the elections with almost 44 per cent of the votes in 2022, is made of FDI and the League, both classified as 'populist' and 'far right' in the *Popu-List* database (Rooduijn et al. 2023b), and 'Go Italy' (*Forza Italia*, FI), the party of the late Silvio Berlusconi, which in previous iterations was classified as 'borderline populist' from the same source.⁸ In terms of rhetoric, populism highlights the virtues of the 'pure' people against the 'evil' elites (see Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014). This contrast is often put into a victimhood narrative (Lerner 2020; Homolar & Löffmann 2021), with the elites subjugating and seizing the

⁸The coalition also includes the small centrist party 'Us moderates' (*Noi Moderati*), which was formed right before the elections of 2022 and obtained less than 1 per cent of the votes.

power from the innocent people. In fact, Marchlewska et al. (2018) find that perceived group disadvantage and relative deprivation predict, respectively, support for Brexit in the United Kingdom and Trump in the US – two instances of vote choice associated with populism – both mediated by collective narcissism. This means that populist leaders are able to a certain extent to intercept citizens' grievances and turn them into a group (national, partisan) pride, a clear example of victimhood rhetoric – the same type of rhetoric that is often attributed to Italian populist leaders such as Meloni and Salvini, as we discussed above.

Irrespective of top-down communication, however, populism and victimhood also share some similarities at the core attitudinal level. In its essence, the Manichean distinction of good people/evil elites takes the burden of responsibility for social, economic, or political distress away from the citizens, who are regarded to all effects as blameless victims of higher powers. This mentality often exaggerates the amount of power that elites supposedly have by arguing that, if things are bad, it cannot be the people's fault – and indeed, populist attitudes correlate with conspiracy mentality, another mindset that grants almighty power to the elites (Castanho Silva, Vegetti & Littvay 2017). So, while hostility towards the elites is one side of the coin – and indeed, Armaly and Enders (2022) find a correlation between perceived victimhood and anti-elitism – the 'purity' of the people is the other. If pure people have no fault, their distress can only be the consequence of the fact that some external forces – like the *system* – act against them. Given these premises, we expect that *populist attitudes correlate with perceived victimhood (H2a), in particular in its systemic component (H2b)*.

Our expectations about radical right ideology and populism also lead us to expect *perceived victimhood to be higher among the supporters of populist and radical right parties in Italy (H3)*, namely the M5S, a 'valence' populist party (see Zulianello & Larsen 2024) that during its tenure in government between 2019 and 2022 tried to move away from any association with the right, as well as the radical right-wing FDI and the League.

Besides political factors, another association that we wish to explore is the one between perceived victimhood and *economic distress*. Here, the mechanism that we expect to be at work is very different from the one postulated so far, which is based on the assumption that perceived victimhood is to some extent a product of rhetoric or people's own mentality, in other words, a socially- (or ideologically-)constructed feeling. People might feel victimised also when they lack the material opportunities to achieve their life goals. In fact, lower income is associated with lower experienced well-being (see Killingsworth 2021) as well as poorer mental and physical health (see Shields-Zeeman & Smit 2022). So, in a way, income provides the *objective* conditions of distress that might lead people to feel victimised. This does not necessarily imply that people of lower income should *feel* more victimised. As we defined above, victimhood is not

a mere reflection on people's own social or economic conditions, but it often relates to the way people perceive themselves and expect others to perceive them. In this view, lower income should relate to a greater sense of victimhood only to the extent that individuals perceive it to be unjust.

In fact, bad or worsening economic conditions have also been shown in the literature to trigger a number of feelings and attitudes that we expect to be directly related to victimhood. The literature of the last 20 years has investigated the growing relevance (both in the academic and public debate) of a sense of economic *resentment* among the citizens in Western societies. As Kriesi et al. (2006) argue, globalisation has produced winners and losers, with some individuals and regions benefiting from increased economic integration and others experiencing negative economic consequences, such as job loss and wage stagnation. The literature has shown a strong association between being 'losers' of globalisation and political resentment, distrust, active protests, and, more in general, a feeling of being left behind by society (Kurer et al. 2019; Walter 2021). Several studies contend that neo-liberal policies might have contributed to economic insecurity and resentment among the citizens, who feel that their economic interests have been ignored or undermined. What all these studies point at, is a tendency to attribute the causes for one's own economic distress to external forces – which might be mediated by top-down communication, as is suggested by some research showing an association between economic insecurity and support for populist parties (Guiso et al. 2017; but see also Margalit 2019). So, all in all, we expect *perceived victimhood to be negatively correlated with income* (H4).

Investigating the correlates of perceived victimhood

To test our hypotheses, we run a set of multivariate OLS models in which the dependent variables are (1) the full scale of perceived victimhood (namely the scale including all items from both dimensions), as well as the two sub-dimensions of (2) systemic and (3) egocentric victimhood. For each respondent, we determine their individual score on the three scales by calculating the average of the items within each scale. This allows us to retain the individual measurement error, using the scales as dependent variables in regression models, instead of estimating them into a full-blown structural equation model.⁹ We standardise the three variables, so their variances will be comparable. We estimate multiple-regression models to estimate the marginal effect of each of the predictors related to our hypotheses while controlling for the other variables that we deem relevant. However, by running this type of model we do

⁹This is a common practice with multi-item indexes, and it is the same technique employed by Armaly and Enders (2022) in their analyses. We note that the correlation between the additive indexes of the two subscales is slightly higher than the one of the two factors as extracted by the CFA shown above: $r = 0.93$ instead of $r = 0.89$.

not wish to establish any *causal* effect, but only to test for correlations among multiple variables while controlling for the others.

To measure *left-right self-placement*, we rely on the classic 11-point scale running from 'Extreme left' to 'Extreme right', which we recode ranging from -1 (left) to +1 (right), with the respondents positioned in the very centre taking value 0. To minimise the loss of observations due to people refusing to answer the question, we also code refusers as 0, as if they were in the very centre, and then we add a dummy variable to identify them.¹⁰ Moreover, given the fact that our hypotheses H1a and H1b focus on respondents who place themselves on the *extreme right*, we also add a second-grade polynomial of left-right self-placement, to estimate a curvilinear effect. This will allow us to see whether perceived victimhood is more prevalent among radical right-wing citizens, as we expect, or whether it involves moderate right people as well.

To test hypotheses H2a and H2b, we measure *populist attitudes* using the well-established scale by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014). The scale consists of six items and presents a good reliability score ($\alpha = 0.87$). As with perceived victimhood, we calculate an additive index by taking the average among the items for each respondent, and we standardise the variable. To test the hypothesis H3, we use respondents' reported *vote choice* at the previous elections, in September 2022. Since this variable is supposed to be highly related to left-right self-placement and populist attitudes, we run two sets of three models: one set in which we include left-right and populism without vote choice, and one set in which we include vote choice and exclude left-right and populism.

To test for hypothesis H4, we ask the respondents to declare the *monthly income* of their household. The survey question is subdivided into 15 categories – from 'less than €500' to 'more than €6,000'; we then turn the variable into numeric by substituting, for instance, the category 'less than €500' with 250 or 'between €3,000 and €3,500' with 3,250. We also ask for the number of members that stably live in the household, and we divide the cardinalized income variable by this number, to have an estimate of the income of the individual; this variable is then logged and standardised.

We also add several *control variables* to avoid potential composition effects, as well as to account more carefully for the heterogeneity in our sample that might obfuscate the correlations observed with the dependent variables of our interest. More specifically, we include *gender* (1 = women), *age* (standardised), *educational level* (two dummies, one for 'low' education – less than completed high school – and one for 'high' education – university degree or more), and a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent *lives alone*. Finally, we include a standardised index of *trust in institutions* (the parliament, the police, the prime minister, the president of the respondents' region, and the

¹⁰Excluding them from the sample leads to largely similar results.

government; $\alpha = 0.86$) and a single indicator of *interest in politics* (recoded in three categories: $-1 =$ 'Not interested at all'/'Not very interested'; $0 =$ 'To some degree'; $1 =$ 'Very much interested'). Even though the latter two indicators are not mere socio-demographic controls, we do not have specific hypotheses about them. However, we chose to include them because they might affect the observed relationship between our key predictors, in particular populist attitudes, and perceived victimhood.

Results

The full model results are shown in tables SM1 and SM2 in the Supplemental material. Below we just show the results related to our hypotheses. As far as the control variables are concerned, the full models show no substantively relevant association between respondents' gender and perceived victimhood. There is a significant negative correlation between age and the two facets of perceived victimhood, as well as with the full index, suggesting that older respondents are less likely to perceive themselves as victims. People with lower levels of education are significantly more likely to perceive themselves as victims on the systemic dimension, and highly educated people are less likely to perceive themselves as victims on the egocentric dimension, as well as in the full scale. Living alone is always positively associated with both facets of victimhood. (Dis)trust in institutions also has a positive, significant, and strong coefficient on all versions of the perceived victimhood index.

As far as the hypotheses are concerned, we show the results using prediction plots in Figures 1–3. All the figures include histograms of the independent variables plotted on the x-axis, to provide information on their distribution. Looking at Figure 1, we can see that left-right self-placement is positively and significantly associated with the full scale of perceived victimhood, as well as with the systemic component, while the association is still positive but not particularly relevant on the egocentric component (in fact, the coefficient of the linear term on egocentric victimhood is significant with $p < 0.05$, however, that does not emerge from the prediction plot). This confirms both the hypotheses H1a and H1b. The figure shows that, as expected, the people who feel more victimised by the system in our sample are those positioned on the far right of the ideological spectrum. The curvilinear line does not raise when moving from the left to the centre but grows substantially when moving from the moderate to the extreme right.

Figure 2 shows the correlation between populist attitudes and perceived victimhood. As the figure shows, there is a positive association between populism and both facets of victimhood, as well as the full scale. The correlation between the two variables is very strong: the full range of the distribution of the scale of populist attitudes accounts for more than one standard deviation in perceived victimhood, and the effect is identical for both sub-dimensions. This

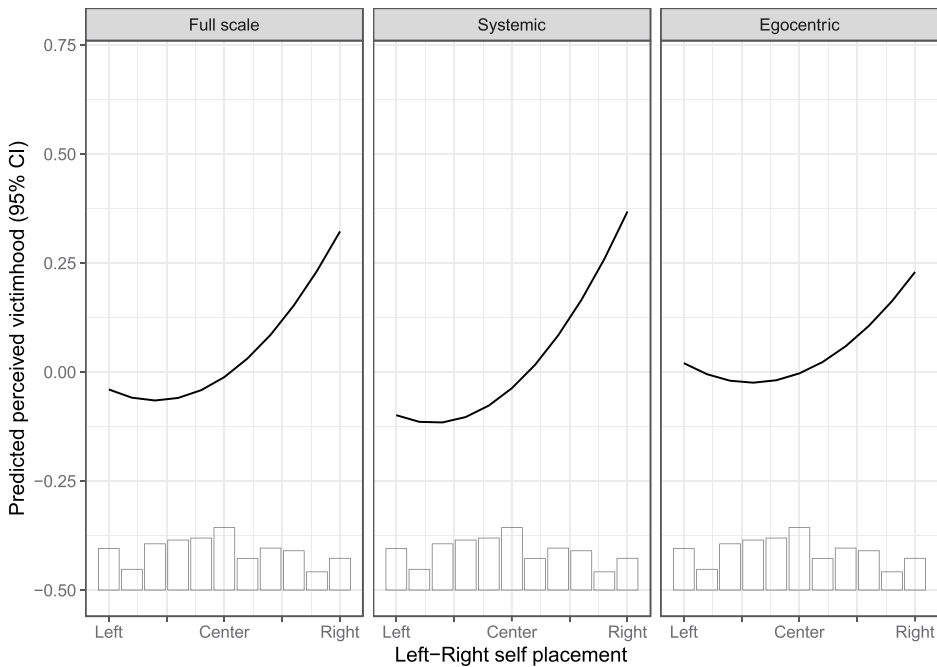


Figure 1. Predicted perceived victimhood and left-right self-placement.

leads us to confirm hypothesis H2a, but not hypothesis H2b, where we posited that populism was expected to correlate more with systemic victimhood than with egocentric victimhood.

Figure 3 shows the association between perceived victimhood and log income. As expected, the correlation in this case is negative, and also fairly strong. This leads us to confirm hypothesis H4, namely that perceived victimhood is negatively correlated with income. We did not have separate hypotheses for the two sub-dimensions; however, the figure shows that the association is slightly stronger for egocentric victimhood ($-0.23, p < 0.001$) than for systemic victimhood ($-0.19, p < 0.001$). This suggests that respondents with lower income levels are more likely to see themselves as victims than victims of *the system*. This suggests that the first mechanism that we posited, relating income to life satisfaction and well-being, works slightly better than the second, relating it to economic resentment.

Finally, Figure 4 shows the average perceived victimhood on the full scale and on the two sub-dimensions among the voters of the largest parties that ran at the national elections in 2022.¹¹ As the figure shows, voters of both the

¹¹Among the parties included in the figure, the 'Greens/Left alliance', the Democratic Party (PD), and +Europe were part of the centre-left coalition, while FI, the League, and FDI were part of the right-wing coalition. Table SM2 includes the coefficient also for some minor parties. Among those, only one has a significant and very strong coefficient, especially for systemic victimhood: the party Italexit, a populist, eurosceptic, and nationalist party that was founded by a former member of the M5S and includes members of far-right movements such as the neo-fascist association *CasaPound*. We did not include it in the figure as it is a very small party, which obtained about 1.9 per cent of the votes in the 2022 elections.

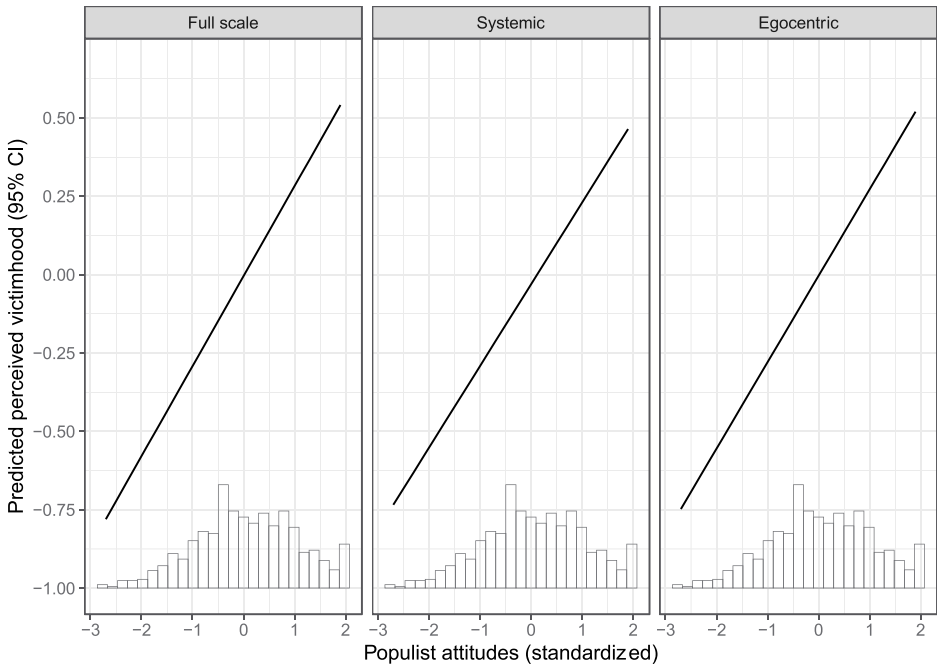


Figure 2. Predicted perceived victimhood and populist attitudes.

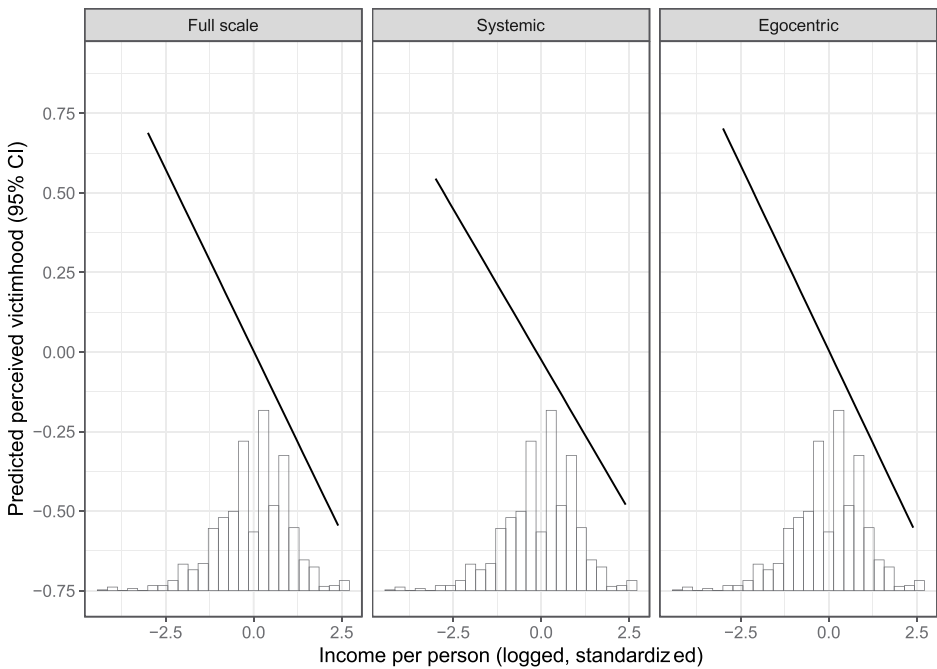


Figure 3. Predicted perceived victimhood and log income.

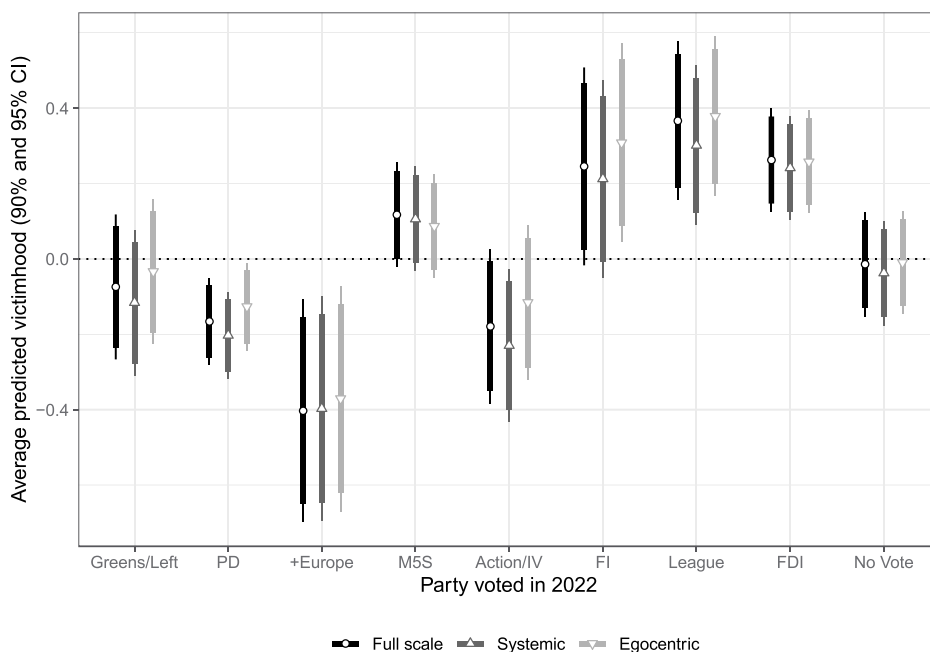


Figure 4. Predicted perceived victimhood and vote at the 2022 national elections.

League and FDI, the two radical right populist parties in the right-wing coalition, score significantly higher from 0, indicating that voters of those parties score higher on perceived victimhood, as well as on the two sub-dimensions, than the average respondent in the sample. This partially confirms hypothesis H3, which focused on voters of populist and radical right parties. To fully confirm the hypothesis, we should have observed a similar pattern also among the supporters of the ‘valence’ populist M5S. However, while the average perceived victimhood of this group is higher than the sample average, it is not statistically significant. The voters of the moderate-conservative FI are significantly higher than the average only with respect to the egocentric component of victimhood. We also note that voters of the centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD) and the liberal More Europe (+*Europa*) have significantly lower degrees of victimhood than the average, as do voters of the liberal alliance Action/Italy Alive (*Azione/Italia Viva*, IV), but only for what concerns the systemic component.

Discussion

The first aim of the paper was to test the reliability of a new measure that taps into a phenomenon gaining increasing interest in both the academic and public debate: perceived victimhood at the mass level (Armaly & Enders 2022). The results in Italy confirm the reliability of the scale, which was initially tested in the

US. The two-factor structure, distinguishing between systemic victimhood ('I am a victim of the system') and egocentric victimhood ('Nothing ever works out for me'), holds in our data as well.

However, our findings reveal a notable difference between the Italian and American contexts: the correlation between systemic and egocentric victimhood is significantly higher in Italy compared to the US. Several factors might contribute to this stronger association. Firstly, cultural differences between the US and Italy could play a relevant role. Italian society is often characterised as having a more collectivist culture, where individuals are more likely to see themselves as part of a broader social group (Burton et al. 2021). In such a context, individual grievances might be more readily connected to systemic issues. This contrasts with the more individualistic culture of the US, where personal and systemic victimhood might be perceived as more distinct. Secondly, the political landscape in Italy, with its prevalent use of victimhood rhetoric by political elites, might reinforce this connection. As discussed above, Italian politicians frequently frame their messages around themes of national and cultural victimisation. This pervasive rhetoric could blur the lines between personal and systemic grievances, making individuals more likely to see their personal struggles as part of a broader systemic issue.

Our results also underline the association between perceived victimhood and political positioning on the extreme right, especially for what concerns the systemic facet of the measure. This aligns with historical patterns where radical right ideologies have leveraged victimhood narratives to mobilise support (see Alvarez 2010). The significant correlation observed between systemic victimhood and right-wing ideology suggests that individuals on the far right are more likely to perceive themselves as victims of external systems and forces. This is consistent with the rhetoric of Italian right-wing leaders, who frequently frame their political messages around themes of national and cultural victimisation.

Also, we show that the relationship between populist attitudes and perceived victimhood is robust across both systemic and egocentric dimensions. This suggests that individuals with strong populist views not only see themselves as victims of systemic injustices but also harbour a broader sense of personal victimisation. This dual perception underscores the appeal of populist rhetoric, which often portrays the 'pure' people as blameless victims of corrupt elites. The overlap between populism and victimhood in Italy might reflect a broader European trend where populist leaders exploit grievances to galvanise support.

The correlation between perceived victimhood and economic conditions adds an interesting element to our understanding. Lower income levels are strongly associated with higher perceived victimhood, particularly with the egocentric dimension. This finding indicates that economic distress significantly contributes to individuals' feelings of being victimised, controlling for the influence of political variables. The negative correlation between

income and perceived victimhood underscores the importance of addressing economic inequalities to mitigate feelings of victimisation among the public.

Finally, the analysis showing that voters of radical right populist parties, such as the League and FDI, exhibit significantly higher levels of perceived victimhood, further supports the hypothesis that these parties' rhetoric effectively resonates with individuals who feel marginalised or oppressed. However, the small magnitude of the association among Five Star Movement (M5S) supporters suggests a more complex interplay between populism and victimhood that may vary across different types of populist movements (a relationship that might be further analysed by means of future comparative research).

Conclusion

In the last few years, it seems that the public debate around victimhood is mainly focused on the left side of the political spectrum: it is not rare to read (left- and right-wing) pundits blaming ethnic minorities, self-righteous 'social justice warriors' and LGBTQ groups for complaining too much about their conditions (Phelan 2019), getting too easily offended and, in general, wallowing in their misery by taking a 'victim stance'. The results of this work show that, at least when we consider the Italian context, this picture does not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

As pointed out above, victimhood can lead to various advantages when it comes to political struggle in liberal democracies (Campbell & Manning 2018; Boussalis, Craig & Rudkin 2022). Political leaders might be tempted to portray themselves as victims to gain symbolic and strategic advantages in the political debate: a 'victim stance', indeed, makes them less vulnerable to criticism, increases their moral righteousness, and decreases the responsibility for their actions (Horwitz 2018). Consistently, people might feel victimised by society, politics, and the elites (Armaly & Enders 2022). When we focus on victimhood at the mass level – and on its correlates – we notice two interesting elements: the first is that right-wing people tend to feel significantly more victimised with respect to leftists and centrists. Although this is only partially true when we consider the literature focusing on the US – Armaly and Enders (2022) find indeed an association of victimhood with Trump support, but not with conservative ideology – the results that we provide with Italian data give strong evidence towards an ideological asymmetry that sees right-wing people scoring higher in both egocentric and systemic victimhood.

Secondly, the pervasive association between populist attitudes and perceived victimhood indicates that populist rhetoric effectively taps into deep-seated grievances. About this point, we also like to stress that, although positively correlated, perceived victimhood is not just another way of defining

populism but can be seen as a concept that can be empirically distinguished from the latter, although both share some theoretical elements (see above).

Furthermore, a novel contribution of this study is the examination of what we can call the ‘material correlates’ of perceived victimhood, particularly the relationship with a well-known concept, that of economic grievance (Kriesi et al. 2020). Our findings indicate that economic grievance plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of victimhood. Individuals with lower income levels are more likely to feel victimised, underscoring the importance of economic conditions in understanding perceived victimhood.

Our results also raise two important puzzles that warrant further investigation. First, the causal relationship between victimhood and its correlates remains unclear. Although previous experimental evidence (see Armaly & Enders 2022) points to the idea that party cueing has a significant role in shaping perceived victimhood among citizens, our data are unable to systematically test whether heightened victimhood levels among right-wing/populist citizens are more likely to be driven by supply-side factors or are the product of some form of self-selection (or both). Additional research will be needed to answer this puzzle.

Second, our single-country evidence begs the question of which contextual variables – whether related to political supply, demand, or broader cultural/economic elements – might lead to variations in the relationship between ideology and perceived victimhood. Our analysis, based on a dataset collected from a sample of Italian citizens, presents relevant differences compared to US data. These discrepancies suggest that, in addition to political supply-side factors, broader socio-economic contextual factors might play a role in shaping perceived victimhood. One potential difference to explore is the varying degree of collectivism between the two cultures (see Burton et al., 2021), which could influence how individuals perceive and express victimhood. Other relevant factors might include Italy’s deep-rooted Catholic heritage, its history of political instability and regional disparities, lower levels of institutional trust, and emotional political discourse. In contrast, the US’s emphasis on individualism, meritocracy, and systemic change could shape distinct perceptions of victimhood. Future comparative research will need to identify these elements to fully understand the phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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