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# Narratives of extreme weather events as a field of conflict:
## a media comparison between the Emilia Romagna and Marche floods

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the state of the climate change debate in Italy by conducting a frame analysis (Diani and della Porta 2006) of two specific extreme weather events. Given the increasing frequency of such events related to climate change and their rapid impact on the daily lives of numerous regions and populations worldwide (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2020), including Italy (Legambiente 2020), an academic debate on the connection between extreme weather events, climate change, and political processes has emerged. However, this debate has had limited influence within the field of Italian political science.

Our paper aims to analyse the state and politicization of the climate change debate by focusing on the narratives that evolved around the floods that hit Emilia Romagna in May 2023 and Marche in September 2022. Using Political Claim Analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Bosi and Zamponi 2019) – a method designed to explore public discourse on a specific topic – conducted on three Italian newspapers with different political identities (Il Fatto Quotidiano, La Repubblica, and Il Foglio), we aim to investigate several key dimensions concerning the level and the actors of the debate around the extreme climate events, and the frames developed by various newspapers and political actors (e. g. parties, social movements) to capture a) their connection with climate change and environmental instances, or, on contrary, with denialist narratives; b) the strategic use of climate change issue depending by the political opportunity structure (right-wing vs. left-wing/local vs. national); c) the different approach to the climate change within the same right-wing coalition.

## 1. Introduction

Extreme weather events are an increasingly recurring phenomenon, impacting the daily lives of people and territories around the world. The United Nations has highlighted the rapid rise in these types of events, which have doubled in the last 20 years compared to the previous 20 years. The main cause is attributed to climate change (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2020).

The Italian context is not exempt from this global phenomenon, exhibiting a significant surge in extreme weather events – nearly a thousand in number – during the period 2010-2020, a trend that has intensified notably since 2016 (Legambiente 2020). This trend appears to be escalating dramatically, given that in the initial five months of 2023 alone, 123 extreme weather events were documented, marking a 134% increase

compared to the same period in 2022 (Legambiente 2023). In 2020, 12.2 million individuals in Italy were exposed to hydrogeological risks, accounting for more than one-fifth of the population (ISPRA 2021). In 2021, the economic impact of climate events was the highest recorded in the last 10 years, soaring to 56.5 billion euro (a 354% increase compared to the previous year), of which approximately 43 billion were related to extreme hydrogeological events (Ibidem). This damage was primarily caused by flood events, which are more destructive when there is a combination of a higher intensity of rainfall and pre-existing vulnerabilities (Lahsen and Ribot 2021).

The global spread of these events has sparked a sociological debate on the relationship between extreme weather events, climate change, and sociopolitical processes. However, this debate has had scarce influence on the political debate in Italy. From our perspective, investigating the debate surrounding specific extreme weather events can provide an opportunity to analyse the state of the discussion on climate change, which still exhibits a significant gap (Biancalana and Ladini 2022).

How much space is dedicated to extreme weather events in the Italian media? What frames are adopted? What role do political parties play in this debate? How much coverage is given to the climate justice movements that have emerged since 2018? What political strategies do the adopted narrative patterns respond to? These are the research questions we aim to answer with this study, attempting to partially bridge the existing gap through the investigation of the media debate surrounding the floods that struck Emilia Romagna in May 2023 and the Marche in September 2022.

Adopting an inductive and explorative approach, we carry out a *Political Claim Analysis* in three national newspapers (*La Repubblica*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and *Il Foglio*), with the aim of exploring the narratives developed by both media actors (editorial teams, journalists) and political actors (parties, social movements, etc.) concerning the floods and how they are connected to climate change, environmental concerns, territory management policies, or, conversely, framed through denialist and anti-environmental narratives. In exploring these narrative patterns, we aim to highlight the identities, worldviews, and strategies that drive the narrative of these extreme weather events.
This paper is organized as follows: we will begin by presenting the state of the art concerning the analysis of interactions between the media, climate change and extreme weather events; we will then provide an introduction to the case studies and to the methods and data collected, before moving on to the discussion of these data and the conclusion, in which we present our main results and hypothesise about the political debate on climate change and extreme weather events in Italy.

## 2. Extreme weather events, climate change and the media: a theoretical framework

A body of literature has emerged around extreme weather events that, from various disciplinary perspectives, seeks to investigate the broader phenomenon. From disaster sociology to the so-called 'sociology of Katrina' (which refers to the sociological debate that emerged in the aftermath of the hurricane that struck New Orleans in 2005), and up to studies on climate change and the financialization of risk (Keucheyan 2019), there have been numerous reflections that have highlighted the inherently social dimension of extreme weather events and their subsequent management.

The focus of our research is directed towards deepening the analysis of the relationship between extreme weather events and the media, with an awareness that their representation in the media arena plays a crucial role due to the potential it has to influence public policies and efforts to address the climate crisis (Broadbent et al. 2016).

While political science literature in the United States (Bolsen and Shapiro 2016; Park 2018) and Europe (Schmidt et al. 2013; Tavares et al. 2020; Tuitjer and Dirksmeier 2021) has produced numerous studies on the media, public opinion, and climate change, according to Biancalana and Ladini (2022, p.459) research analysing media coverage of climate change in the Italian context is relatively rare (among the few studies, see the one by Ferrucci and Petersen 2018). This gap is even more significant when considering the investigation of media coverage and the framing of extreme weather events, which serve as some of the most dramatic and emphatic evidence of climate change. The narrative patterns used to frame these events require deeper investigation, as the manner in which the media presents the issue 'can influence public opinion and the actions of policymakers' (Biancalana and Ladini 2022, p.459). At the same time, an analysis of specific extreme weather events also provides a unique and delimited space in which to monitor the state of the climate change debate.

The media can be understood as the main place in which representations of political and social phenomena are structured. Indeed, the media arena is the battleground where multiple parties with different symbolic, political, and economic resources compete to 'endorse' their own interpretation of events in the media and serves as the 'primary site of contestation on meaning' (Gamson 2004, p.243).

Shifting the focus to environmental issues, Mazur and Lee (1993) argue that the level of public interest in these topics tends to align with the attention afforded to them by the media: the more content the mass media provides on the subject, the greater the awareness of the causes and effects of global warming as well as the solutions. Undoubtedly, the media play a key role in influencing the debate on climate change, which can be presented using multiple frames (Biancalana and Ladini 2022). By comparing national newspapers from 17 countries, Broadbent et al. (2016) highlight the fact that 'media framing is a key component of the cultural politics of climate change that may reinforce policy orientation and mitigation performance' (p.13). From their research it would appear that where media framing is oriented towards a cosmopolitan perspective, supports scientific consensus and provides visibility to pro-mitigation policies, successful climate action is more likely. On the contrary, media framings that provide space for scientific scepticism and climate denialism have negative implications in terms of climate action. In general terms, political polarization in relation to climate change has been found to be increasing over time (Hughes et al. 2020; McCright and Dunlap 2011), in particular as a consequence of elite polarization along the right/left cleavage (Birch 2020).

However, this theoretical framework needs to be problematized, acknowledging that even within the same country there may exist divergent and competing narratives concerning global warming, not all of which receive equal projection within the media arena. First and foremost, it is essential to acknowledge that the media arena is not a neutral ground. On the contrary, it is characterized by significant asymmetry between the actors seeking access to the media. This asymmetry is closely tied to the varying availability of economic and organizational resources between those with professional staff,

paid personnel, and credibility conferred on them by prominent journalists and intellectuals on the one hand, and actors with limited economic and organizational resources on the other hand (Gamson 2004). In addition to being a battleground, the media also acts as a player that chooses to what and whom to give media coverage, based on their political orientation (Rucht 2004) and their degree of dependence on political and economic actors (Blumer and Gurevitch 1975; Hallin and Mancini 2004), on the basis of the 'issue-attention cycle' (Downs 1972).

Secondly, the *framing* of climate change and extreme weather events should be examined in relation to the values and strategies of each actor. Framing patterns are connected with the identity of the political actors that attempt 'to align their views on climate change with preexisting ideological or party identities, or cultural worldviews' (Hughes et al. 2020, p.725). The frame, understood as an interpretive framework that allows for the identification and organization of individual and group experiences (Goffman 1974, p.21), is deeply rooted in the culture, whether individual or collective, and in the experiences of actors, and is therefore relatively stable. However, the frame does not only play a fundamental role in the perception of the world: it also plays a strategic role insofar as it organizes this world by identifying the problems and those responsible (diagnosis), as well as the solutions (prognosis) (Snow and Benford 1988; Caiani 2023).

Climate change can be framed as 'real' or 'illusionary'; it can be presented as a problem that must be addressed or one where there is no urgency to act (Broadbent et al. 2016; Carvalho 2007), and it can be discussed through different lenses (e.g., the economic impact, technological innovation, climate governance or social justice). In any case, when we deal with extreme weather events, the debate around climate change becomes even more complex. While climate denialism is a genuine risk that needs to be taken seriously, other scholars have highlighted the risk associated with climate reductionism (Hulme 2011). The key argument is that, although climate change undoubtedly increases the frequency of extreme weather events, its impact on communities is heavily influenced by pre-existing vulnerabilities (Lahsen and Ribot 2021). While extreme weather events may provide an opportunity to draw public attention to climate change, Lahsen and Ribot (2019, p.2) contend that a climate-centric communication strategy diverts 'attention from other important and treatable causes [...] with implication for social and political understanding of potential responses and for responsibility'. As demonstrated by Lahsen et al. (2020) regarding the floods that occurred in Brazil in 2008 and 2011, environmental leaders consistently refrained from adopting the climate frame, whereas Brazilian decision makers attributed the disaster to climate change. This phenomenon is explained in terms of political opportunity: shifting the focus entirely to climate change is a strategy aimed at diverting attention from the decision-making processes of local and national actors and the processes that render the community more vulnerable (Lahsen and Ribot 2021). The framing pattern chosen by each actor reveals their specific values, interests, and strategies: indeed, 'climate change can be used by parties and leaders to promote different political agendas or alliances' (Biancalana and Ladini 2022, p.460).

In accordance with a multi-causal analysis of extreme weather disasters, framing these events could encompass both climate change and the pre-existing vulnerabilities

that empirically contribute to the losses and damages inflicted by such events (Ibidem, p.3). This approach seeks to formulate policies that address both prevention and mitigation simultaneously. However, this presents a significant challenge as the framing of extreme weather events influences the strategies devised for their prevention and management.

Therefore, the examination of narratives surrounding such events holds both academic and political significance. The voices given to actors, the identified causes and culprits, as well as the proposed solutions, have the potential to influence the political handling of extreme events, which are becoming increasingly prominent on the political agenda and subsequently shaping the societal relationship with nature. With this objective, our work aims to investigate the narrative patterns of extreme weather events based on the case studies of the floods that took place in the regions of the Marche (September 2022) and Emilia-Romagna (May 2023), which will be presented in the following section.

## 3. Case studies

Our work focuses on the narratives – and their political implications – that emerged around two extreme weather events, namely the floods that hit the Marche region on 15 and 16 September 2022, and Emilia-Romagna on 16 and 17 May 2023. Both floods had a dramatic impact on people (with 13 deaths in the Marche region and 15 in Emilia-Romagna, along with a significant number of evacuees) and on the socioeconomic context.

*Causes*. The main cause of these events is related to the fact that the level of rain that fell in some areas of these two regions in just a few hours amounted to what would typically occur over several months.[1] The exceptional and intense rainfall, juxtaposed with a preceding period of drought that had compromised the ground's capacity to absorb water (Il Post, 17/9/22), is attributable to climate change.[2] However, other structural conditions of hydrogeological instability resulting from intensive land use, illegal construction, inadequate river maintenance and cleaning, and the confinement of watercourses within narrow limits exacerbated the consequences of the heavy rains. The combination of these global and local factors led to the sudden flooding of cities and rural areas, endangering the lives of thousands of people as well as their economic livelihoods.

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[1] According to the data from ARPAE, in Emilia-Romagna up to 254.8mm of rain fell within 48 hours, while in the Marche region, according to data from Civil Protection, it reached 400mm (Protezione Civile 2022), compared to an annual average of 769mm (taking the decade 2011-2021 as a reference, ISTAT data https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/05/Dati-meteoclimatici-Anni-1971-2021.pdf.). Furthermore, the Marche had already been affected by a flood in 2014, which caused much damage and three deaths. However, inadequate post-flood management allowed the problem to occur again.

[2] A recent study by the World Weather Attribution (WWA) acknowledges the potential link between climate change and extreme weather events but contends that it did not detect a statistically significant connection in the Emilia-Romagna flood. Nonetheless, other scholars, including climatologists, meteorologists, physicists, and environmental engineers, have identified several structural limitations in the study. These limitations are associated with the utilized data (limited to post-1960 instead of utilizing more extensive historical datasets), temporal distribution (measuring precipitation in millimetres over a 21-day period without accounting for the fact that such quantities may not have accumulated evenly across that timeframe but rather over 24/48 hours), and the methodology of rapid assessment (which, while replicable on a global scale, operates at a relatively low resolution)(Climaternanti.it, 3/6/23).

*Sanitary and socio-economic impact.* In addition to the numerous deaths, the floods produced further problems. They triggered landslides and mudslides and dramatically compromised the land, leading to the emergence on the ground surface of pathogens from fertilizers and animal waste, as well as toxic substances near industrial sites and landfills. This has had an impact on human health that is difficult to quantify today, as thousands of people came into contact with these materials both during the cleaning of streets and homes and through the infiltration of these agents into the water infrastructure and sewerage systems. Exposure to these risk factors can result in infectious diseases that can affect various parts of the body, the effects of which only become visible in the medium to long term (Michelozzi and De Donato 2014). Furthermore, the impact on the mental health of the residents of losing loved ones, their homes, and their livelihoods should not be underestimated.

Looking at the socioeconomic impact of the floods, the estimated losses amount to over 3 billion euro for the Marche region (Il Messaggero, 21/9/22) and nearly 9 billion euro for Emilia-Romagna (Repubblica, 3/8/23). The sectors that were most severely affected were agriculture, livestock farming, and tourism. The rains damaged crops and, at least for a period, arable land, greatly affecting the supply chain. The destruction of a number of historical town centres and the contamination of beaches where water from the rivers drains into the sea impacted, among other things, the flow of tourists.

It is worth noting that intensive livestock farming, land exploitation through monocultures, and mass tourism are among the causes of ecological degradation and global warming. In this sense, precisely because of their extractive and intensive management logic, the very sectors that have been affected are part of the problem.

*Political context and flood management.* To provide an overview of the political context in which the two floods occurred, we believe it is important to focus on two dimensions: the distribution of power at different levels (regional/national) and the choices made regarding the appointment of a special commissioner. With regard to the first dimension, during the period in which the floods occurred, there were different political actors involved:

a) Emilia-Romagna (where there is a deeply rooted left-wing or red subculture) was, at the time of the floods, led by the centre-left Democratic Party, with Stefano Bonaccini as the regional leader (who would go on to become the President of the Democratic Party in 2023). Meanwhile, the national government was led by a far-right coalition (*Fratelli d'Italia*, *Lega*, and *Forza Italia*) represented by Giorgia Meloni.

b) The Marche region, at the time of the flood, was led by a radical right-wing party, *Fratelli d'Italia*, with Francesco Acquaroli as the regional leader. The national government, on the other hand, was led by a broad coalition of parties ranging from the centre-left to the centre-right and was represented by a technocrat, Mario Draghi, the former head of the European Central Bank.

Concerning flood management and subsequent reconstruction efforts, alongside aid packages, bonuses, and extensions, the national government decreed the appointment of a special commissioner to oversee emergency management and reconstruction – a practice that has become progressively prevalent in addressing events deemed as emergencies. In the case of Emilia-Romagna, at the end of June 2023, following a heated

political debate, the Meloni government identified General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo as the person best suited to fulfilling this role. General Figliuolo had previously served as a special commissioner chosen by the Draghi government to manage the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A novel aspect of this appointment is that a military figure was chosen for a 5-year term, the longest mandate ever recorded for such a role.

In the case of the Marche, there was no immediate appointment of a special commissioner, and there was no debate regarding reconstruction. However, nearly a year later, and after the events in Emilia-Romagna, General Figliuolo was designated as the commissioner for the reconstruction not only in Emilia-Romagna but also in the Marche.

Throughout this paper, we will seek to highlight, in various dimensions, the relationship between the political context and the narrative patterns that emerged around the floods.

## 4. Methodology and data

In this contribution, we focus on the analysis of narratives related to extreme climate events in the cases of the Marche and Emilia-Romagna, through an inductive and exploratory approach. We adopt a case-oriented comparative design (della Porta 2008), combining a Most Different System Design (MDSD) and Most Similar System Design (MSSD) (Przeworski and Teune 1970). In fact, as outlined in the previous paragraph, we compare two cases with some similarities (mostly related to the causes, and the socio-economic and sanitary impact), but also with some differences (political context and flood management). By doing so, we believe that the differences identified can help explain the varying narratives associated with the two events. We employ the Political Claim Analysis (PCA) method, which makes it possible to explore the dimension of public discourse surrounding a particular object of study (Bosi and Zamponi 2019, p.17). Our analysis encompasses the plurality of actors who, through conventional or unconventional means, expressed a political claim regarding a specific issue (Koopmans and Statham 1999, p.203). The unit under examination is the claim, understood as intentional and strategic communicative action, both verbal and non-verbal, utilized in the public sphere on behalf of a group or community (de Wilde et al. 2014, p.7).

For this work, we have chosen to examine three national newspapers representing three different perspectives: *La Repubblica* (aligned with the centre-left parties), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (aligned with the Five Star Movement), and *Il Foglio* (aligned with the liberal-conservative right). The decision to examine the press is linked to both the need to narrow the scope of the investigation within the entire media sphere and the strategic importance that the national mass media continues to have in producing narratives capable of influencing public opinion, while determining the visibility they may choose to offer to different actors. Indeed, although the use of the internet has profoundly changed communicative processes, it has not diminished the importance of the mass media as an arena where information deemed credible and noteworthy is preselected, and communication actors are considered serious and competent (Rucht 2004, p.26). The mass media remains central to the processes of shaping public opinion, to which protests attempt to appeal. The arena of mass media is thus confirmed as the 'primary site of

contestation over meaning' (Gamson 2004, p.243), the analysis of which remains crucial to the study of political phenomena in general, although it is not exhaustive.

The data collection was conducted by selecting all articles containing the keyword '*alluvione*'[3] (flood) published between 15 September and 24 October 2022, for the Marche region, and between 17 May and 25 June 2023, for the Emilia-Romagna region. The chosen time frame allowed us to include the initial debates in the aftermath of the floods and cover the two city demos organized exactly one month after the flood by various local actors in both cases.

We collected a total of 263 claims, with 58 related to the floods in the Marche and 205 related to the floods in Emilia-Romagna. While we used a semi-structured codebook for data collection, following an exploratory phase, we inductively coded the macro-frames to which the collected claims referred. This approach allowed us to establish macro-categories that represented general expressions of the themes emerging from the claims. The following table outlines the distinction of macro-frames resulting from this process.

**Table 1.** Empirical analysis: operationalization

| Macro-frame label | Description (it refers to…) |
| --- | --- |
| Economic | economic dimensions related to (insufficient or lacking) investment in land management, economic losses, and funds for reconstruction. |
| Environmental | environmental dimensions related to climate change (affirmed or denied), (the lack of) land management, or more generally the connection between environmental perspectives and extreme climatic events. |
| Political-procedural | political and/or procedural dimensions, related to political responsibilities and/or procedures for managing the extreme climatic event. |
| Solidaristic | statements of solidarity with the people affected by the extreme climate event. |
| Identitarian | representations of the population affected by the extreme climatic event. |

Source: own elaboration.

In the following paragraphs, we will analyse the collected data, highlighting the political strategies behind the choice of certain actors to shape their discourse in one way rather than another.

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[3] The research does not encompass all the articles that report meteorological bulletins, but includes editorials published in the three newspapers as a data source because we consider the media as actors positioned within the public debate.

## 5. Extreme weathers events and the media in Italy: discussion

As mentioned above, the media coverage of the two events differs significantly, with 205 claims collected in relation to the events in Emilia-Romagna compared to 58 collected for the Marche floods. The case of Emilia-Romagna would appear to have significantly ignited the political debate on the prevention and management of extreme climate events.

Moreover, the extent of coverage allocated to the debate varies significantly between newspapers: *Il Foglio* devotes less space to extreme climate events compared to *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, both of which offer similar levels of coverage (refer to Appendix, Table A1). However, disparities not only exist in the level of coverage but also in the space dedicated to the theme of climate change and, consequently, the association between extreme climate events and global warming.

**Figure 1.** Climate change citation by journals (%)
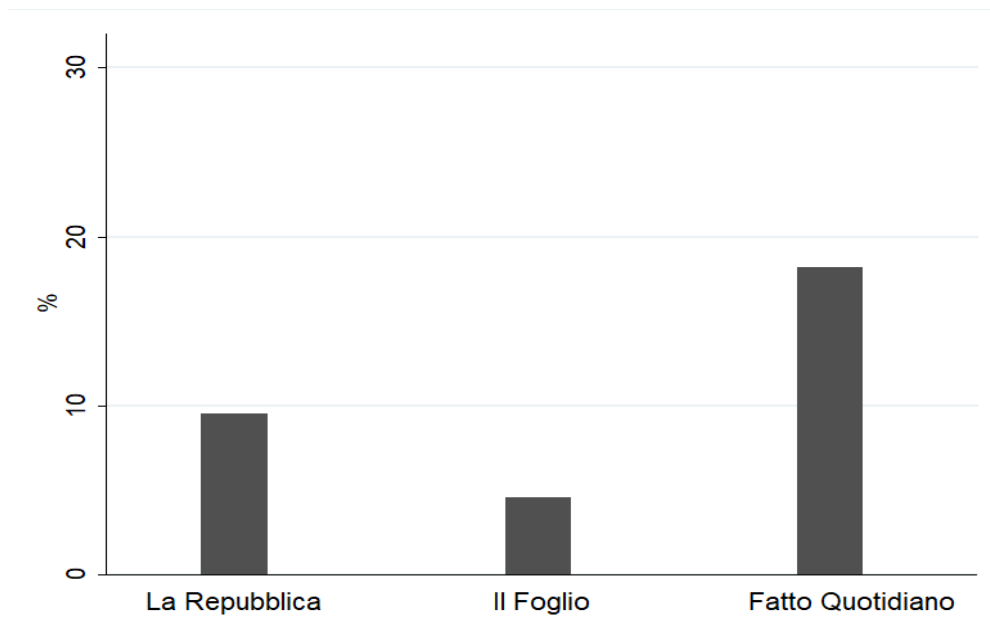


Source: own elaboration.

Looking at the overview of the two cases, climate change is referenced in nearly a third of the articles (32.3%). Generally, discussions surrounding climate change aim to recognize its correlation with extreme climate events, as observed in the context of the floods in this instance. Most rarely, in 12.9% of instances, climate change is mentioned to deny its existence. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the decision to circumvent discussions on climate change can, in certain instances, serve as a means to implicitly deny its existence or diminish its significance (Zerubavel 2006).

A significant difference exists between the three newspapers, and while climate change is still far from being adequately addressed, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* allocates the most space to these issues, while the topic proves to be marginal in *Il Foglio* (Figure 1). This initial data suggests that the attention given by different newspapers to climate change

is connected to the value system and political positions that they adhere to, confirming the political nature of the media. Media outlets can make strategic choices related to the topics they cover, the actors they give space to, and how they approach these issues. Shifting our focus to the actors present in the media arena, the comparison of the two cases reveals interesting results.

**Table 2.** Claims' actors by events (%)

|  | Marche flood (September 2022) | Emilia-Romagna flood (May 2023) |
|---|---|---|
| Civil society actors | 12.1 | 7.8 |
| Political Parties | 20.7 | 23.9 |
| Trade unions | / | 0.5 |
| Businesses | 1.7 | 7.8 |
| National government | 8.6 | 14.2 |
| Regional governments | / | 8.3 |
| Local governments | 8.6 | 4,9 |
| Media/Journalists | 10.3 | 22.9 |
| Intellectuals | 1.7 | 2 |
| Experts | 12.1 | 10.2 |
| Political Parties | 20.7 | 23.9 |

Source: own elaboration. Note: multiple responses were possible.

A notable distinction emerges in the prominence of government actors across all levels. As depicted in Table 2, concerning the Emilia-Romagna case, government actors – particularly at the national and regional levels – are notably present in the discourse, encompassing more than 27% of the discussion. Conversely, in the case of the Marche region, assertions made by the regional government are absent, while national and local government involvement in the debate is notably diminished, accounting for just over 17% of the discourse. From our perspective, this data correlates with the divergent political contexts surrounding the two floods and underscores the strategic role assumed by right-wing actors. The flood in the Marche region occurred within a political landscape where the region was governed by a right-wing coalition, while the national technocratic government enjoyed support from a broad coalition consisting of various political factions, including the right (excluding FdI). Conversely, the flood in Emilia-Romagna unfolded within a markedly different context, with a national government led by the right-wing coalition and the regional government governed by the PD, thus exacerbating political tensions. In the case of the Marche, the conflict between the region and the technocratic government is relatively low in polarization, and the right demonstrates little interest in criticizing either the region governed by its representatives or the government in which it participates. In contrast, in Emilia-Romagna, the political landscape is characterized by intense competition between the PD-led region and the FdI- and Lega-led government, fostering a heightened level of polarization in the debate. This polarization would appear to be connected to the greater presence of the right in the media arena,

which is both linked to the strategic role of government actors in the debate (more than a 5-percentage point difference between the two events) and the different exposure of right-wing parties. While in the case of the Marche they are present in 5% of cases, their presence in the debate multiplies in the case of Emilia-Romagna, where they occupy a significant space (almost 21%) (Table 2).

While the different presence of these parties in the two cases can be explained by the different political-institutional contexts, analysing the themes of the debate allows us to understand the effects of this presence.

**Table 3.** Claims' macro-frames (%)

|  | Marche flood (September 2022) | Emilia-Romagna flood (May 2023) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Economy | 17.2 | 11.2 |
| Environmental | 55.2 | 40.5 |
| Politics | 37.9 | 45.9 |
| Solidaristic | 25.9 | 8.8 |
| Identitarian | 3.4 | 7.3 |

Source: own elaboration. Note: multiple responses were possible.

The most common macro-frame in the debate surrounding the floods is the environmental frame, which is particularly the case in the Marche (55.2%) compared to Emilia-Romagna (40.5%). In the Marche, the environment topic is brought into the media debate by the three main actors, namely experts (18%), environmental organizations and movements (15%) and left-wing parties (12.5%). Management of the territory, whether linked to the climate question or not, is the most common interpretation for the cause of the floods, and there is recognition of the fact that the region is particularly exposed to such events due to the action of humans (such as an overexploitation of the land, an increase in concreted surfaces and a reduction in the management of river banks and river beds), the most devastating effects of which emerge in the wake of these types of flooding events. The most common diagnostic frame is that of a lack of territorial management aimed at tackling these types of problems, aside from in response to emergency situations, with reference to the previous floods that took place ten years earlier and that affected the same areas.

In the case of Emilia-Romagna, the environmental frame assumes a significant role; nevertheless, the emerging interpretations are characterized by a greater degree of variability and contradiction. Numerous frames adopt a denialist or obstructionist narrative, accounting for about a third of the claims (34.9%), compared to the Marche case where this narrative is marginal (5.4%). The right attributes primary responsibility for the devastating effects of the floods to environmental organizations and movements (17.50%) and left-wing parties, primarily the PD (27.5%). The 'salon environmentalists' are portrayed as the cause of the floods because, as asserted by Salvini, they 'think more about nutrias than humans', while Prime Minister Meloni argued for the need to 'shift the paradigm' and put an end to environmentalism. Various accusations against environmentalism or scepticism towards climate change are evident in these excerpts:

"Environmentalists sitting in their lofts are objecting to projects: some projects need to be carried out. Our problem is the culture of 'no'."[4] (Fratin, Minister of the Environment).

"The activists of *Ultima Generazione* should go shovel mud to show their interest in the environment."[5] (La Russa, President of the Senate)

"Climate change should not be a dogma; there are no definitive truths. Research must continue."[6] (Lucio Malan, FDI)

The obstructionist campaign of the right also benefits from the support and active contribution of some journalists affiliated with the same political spectrum, thus doubling their presence in the Emilia-Romagna debate (22.9%) compared to the Marche case (Table 2), with statements like:

'We needed more concrete; when nature decides, it decides. This can happen, and it has always happened.'[7] (Sallusti, right-wing journalist)

'First they cry because it doesn't rain, then because it rains too much.'[8] (Feltri, right-wing journalist)

Although they are nearly equally represented in both cases (Table 2), left-wing actors more frequently resort to an environmentalist narrative in the case of Emilia-Romagna (31.1%) than in that of the Marche (12.5%).

In the case of Emilia-Romagna, left-wing party actors, especially the PD, strongly emphasize the role of climate change in bringing about the floods, simultaneously accusing the right of its 'offensive' and 'denialist' positions, aimed at 'defending fossil fuel lobbies' (Schlein, PD). The main target of left-wing parties, particularly the PD, is the right-wing government (73.3%), as it is argued that 'the government does not talk about climate and is denialist' (Schlein), engaging in 'scavenging' and 'insulting science'. At the same time, while emphasizing the role of global warming in elucidating the floods and advocating 'financial resources and streamlined procedures to safeguard the territory from climate-related crises' (Schlein)[9], efforts are made to divert attention from other land management factors – overseen by the PD – that contributed to significant

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[4] 'Gli ambientalisti dei loft si oppongono ai progetti: alcuni progetti devo essere realizzati. Il nostro problema è la cultura del no.' Ruccia, G. (2023). Disastro in Emilia Romagna, il ministro Pichetto Fratin se la prende con gli ambientalisti: 'Vivono nei loft e dicono sempre di no alle opere', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9 June.

[5] 'Gli attivisti di Ultima Generazione dovrebbero andare a spalare il fango per dimostrare il loro interesse per l'ambiente.' F.Q. (2023). La Russa provoca: 'I ragazzi di Ultima generazione vadano a spalare il fango'. Ma ci sono già: 'Noi non cerchiamo visibilità'*, Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[6] 'Il cambiamento climatico non deve essere un dogma: non ci sono verità definitive. La ricerca deve continuare.' F.Q. (2023). Il capogruppo FdI Malan sostiene che in Romagna non c'entra il cambio climatico. È polemica: 'Negazionista'. Il centrodestra tace, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[7] 'Avevamo bisogno di più cemento; quando la natura decide, decide. Questo può succedere, ed è sempre successo.' Pietrobelli, G. (2023). 'Cemento? Ce n'è troppo poco': la sparata di Sallusti a La7. Che cita (male) anche il Vajont: ecco perché ha scelto l'esempio più sbagliato, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[8] 'Prima piangono perché non piove, poi piangono perché piove troppo.' F.Q. (2023). Vittorio Feltri choc sull'alluvione in Emilia Romagna: 'Prima piangono perché non piove, poi perché piove troppo...'. Scoppia la polemica, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[9] 'Risorse Finanziarie e procedure snelle per salvaguardare il territorio dalle crisi legate al clima.' F.Q. (2023). Alluvione, Schlein chiede di usare più soldi del Pnrr contro il dissesto. Ma il problema sono le risorse stanziate e non spese, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

damage: one of the statements made by Bonaccini is that 'there is no concrete here; we are the most heavily wooded region. It is drought that cracks the ground.'[10]

Given the vast amount of space occupied by institutions and political parties in the media, our research reveals the underrepresentation of the point of view of associations and social movements (both organized and unorganized). These representatives of civil society had shown interest and expertise on ecological issues through various forms of collective action. Although this presence is marginal in both cases, it is slightly higher for the Marche floods, just over four percentage points more than in Emilia-Romagna (Table 2). In both cases, these are mainly social movements, such as Fridays for Future, *Ultima Generazione* and Extinction Rebellion, followed by environmental associations like the WWF or *Legambiente*. More media attention seems to have been directed towards climate movements like Fridays for Future, *Ultima Generazione*, and Extinction Rebellion, which entered the debate by leveraging the structural dimension of the climate crisis, pointing out both culprits (politicians and the wealthiest parts of the planet) and solutions (the abandonment of fossil fuels):

> 'The climate crisis increases extreme climatic events such as droughts and floods. A structural political intervention is necessary, not emergency measures.'[11] (Legambiente)

> 'It's not just rain or bad weather; it is a climate crisis. The emergency is here, and we must act immediately.'[12] (Fridays for Future)

> 'We are experiencing an unprecedented eco-climatic crisis; politics procrastinates, but there is no more time.'[13] (Extinction Rebellion)

At the same time, there is a risk of sliding towards climate reductionism, which does not adequately consider the variables contributing to such disastrous situations.

The second most prevalent macro-frame observed is the political-procedural frame (refer to Table 3), a theme in which both right-wing and left-wing parties are notably engaged in the discourse across both cases. Notably, there is a discernible shift in the right-wing's strategy: from being relatively absent in the discourse surrounding the Marche floods, it emerges as a central actor in the debate regarding the Emilia-Romagna floods, with 57.5% of assertions linked to a political frame. Much of the political contention revolved around the appointment of the commissioner for reconstruction. This discourse not only highlighted a significant conflict between the government and the opposition but also led to internal division within the right along the regional/national axis. This element of tension did not concern the idea of appointing a commissioner, but rather the

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[10] 'Non c'è cemento qui; siamo la regione più boscosa. È la siccità che spacca il terreno.' F.Q. (2023). Emilia-Romagna, Mattarella sorvola le zone dell'alluvione insieme a Bonaccini: il video, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[11] 'La crisi climatica aumenta gli eventi climatici estremi come siccità e alluvioni. È necessario un intervento politico strutturale, non misure emergenziali.' Colombo, G., (2023). Dalla siccità alle alluvioni, oltre 70 eventi estremi nel 2023. Ecco le regioni più colpite e i danni | mappe e grafici, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[12] 'Non è solo pioggia o cattivo tempo, è la crisi climatica. L'emergenza è qui e dobbiamo agire immediatamente', Colucci, G. (2023). Fridays for Future in piazza per l'Emilia Romagna: 'Non è pioggia, è crisi climatica', *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

[13] 'Stiamo vivendo una crisi eco-climatica senza precedenti; la politica procrastina, ma non c'è più tempo'. Barabino, P. (2023). 'Il sonno della Regione genera morti', gli attivisti climatici protestano in Emilia-Romagna: l'azione durante l'assemblea legislativa, *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 9 June.

person who should fill the role: the possible appointment of a commissioner for reconstruction who was not also the regional governor was perceived as a threat to the powers of regional governors, leading some right-wing/centre-right governors to support the appointment of the centre-left president of Emilia-Romagna, Bonaccini. Part of this debate also concerns the process by which emergency decrees are passed: on the one hand we can observe both criticism and praise from right-wing parties with regard to a government they consider capable of responding promptly to the emergency; on the other we can observe criticism in the other direction, especially from left-wing parties, for the sluggish response from the government with regard to the emergency and subsequent phases. In the case of Emilia-Romagna, we see an increase in political-procedural frames (64.4%) from left-wing parties compared to the Marche case (22.4%).

In the Marche, the political debate focused on different aspects. The river that overflowed in September 2022 is the same one that overflowed less than ten years before, in 2014, causing extensive damage and casualties. Following that flooding event, funds were allocated by the government, which, aside from not being entirely used, were employed for other projects and works unrelated to those considered essential for repairing and reinforcing the affected area. Claims related to political-procedural frames predominantly addressed bureaucratic sluggishness, the responsibility of the parties in power from 2014 onwards, and the failure to implement a territory security project, which has existed since 2018. The region also figures among the targets identified by actors adopting this frame, and is accused of not issuing timely and effective weather alerts for the area, leaving the population unprepared for the event and therefore at risk. Such data confirms how most of the media attention in Italy is for internal-political dynamics, cutting space for more in-depth information on the policies and arguments in support for (or in contrast to) them (Bobbio and Roncarolo 2015)

The economic frame exhibits significantly less prevalence, accounting for 17.7% in the Marche case and 11.2% in Emilia-Romagna, respectively. This narrative framework predominantly centres on the adverse economic consequences of the floods for the affected regions, a theme more prominently featured in the Emilia-Romagna case than in the Marche. It also addresses the funds required for social reconstruction and territorial security. While in the Emilia-Romagna case the debate mainly revolves around the management of funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), in the Marche case, a significant part of the debate focuses on the use of funds from the Casa Italia project (initiated under the Renzi government), with post-flood funds allocated in 2014.

The subsequent macro-frame is the solidarity frame. In this instance, the disparity extends beyond mere frequency, as it emerges as a theme in nearly 26% of claims in the Marche case, contrasting with its occurrence in only 8.8% of claims in Emilia-Romagna. Regarding the Marche, these are expressions of solidarity with the people affected by the floods, mainly voiced by national and local political figures. In the Emilia-Romagna case, declarations of solidarity, complemented by donations from prominent sports and entertainment figures or companies, have greater prominence. Although still marginal in the Marche case (1.7%), they garner more media attention in Emilia-Romagna (7.8%) (refer to Table 2), where the economic infrastructure is more robust. In both cases, there is no trace of grassroots solidarity initiatives or spontaneous support from individuals

rushing to the flooded areas to offer assistance. This confirms the growing trend to personalize communication (Bracciale and Rega 2018) and focus attention on prominent figures or charismatic leaders.

Finally, the identitarian frame is present in 3.4% of cases for the Marche and 7.3% for Emilia-Romagna, respectively. In the Marche case, the population is portrayed as resilient amid significant adversity. Conversely, in Emilia-Romagna, this macro-frame is not just more frequent, but it primarily manifests as a populist representation emphasizing the courageous and industrious nature of the affected populations, who have responded actively and 'without complaining'. One can't help noticing a very different narrative for the inhabitants of the two territories, which may depend on the socio-economic characteristics of the two regions. In both cases, however, we believe that this narrative minimizes the traumatic effects of events of such magnitude (indirectly stigmatizing those who reacted differently in a negative light). On the other hand, it conveys the image of a population incapable of, or disinterested in understanding the causes and effects of the flood itself. In some way, this narrative relegates the population to a position of passivity, removing its agency capacity. As evidence of this, there is the fact that the protest events that occurred around the theme of the floods and the accompanying claims were almost completely ignored, rendering virtually invisible those grassroots actors who did not fit into the narrative of the industrious and uncritical population in reacting to the effects of the flood.

## 6. Between reductionism and obstructionism: some provisional conclusions

The first relevant aspect of this contribution concerns the level of media attention afforded to extreme weather events in Italy, that is, *how much* they are talked about. Our study unveils that the discourse surrounding these two extreme weather events witnessed an unprecedented inclusion of the issue of climate change. To contextualize this finding, one merely needs to undertake similar research pertaining to previous floods that transpired just a decade ago, resulting in comparable numbers of victims and damages to those witnessed in Emilia-Romagna and Marche. Despite a study conducted between 2004 and 2007 (Beltrame et al. 2012) showing a growing level of media attention to the topic of climate change (which during that period entered the debate on the occasion of international institutional summits), the same keyword research conducted in relation to the 2009 Messina flood (37 victims) and the 2011 Liguria flood (13 victims) yields very few results, none of which mentions the climate crisis, preferring terms such as 'apocalypse' and 'downpour' among others. While this study does not intend to systematically compare the evolution of narrative patterns over time, these preliminary findings already appear to indicate increased media coverage of extreme weather events and a shift in the narrative paradigm regarding the issue of global warming, in comparison to similar events that occurred at earlier points in time.

While the media coverage of such events is higher than before, it is essential to highlight that the two floods, although similar in terms of the damage caused and the historical phase in which they occurred, received different levels of media coverage. On the one hand, both floods occurred in a phase that followed the rise of climate movements, which have diligently endeavoured to establish connections between global

warming and extreme weather events, and they also took place in proximity to elections (national elections took place shortly after the Marche floods, and local elections were held a few weeks after the Emilia Romagna floods). While the cycle of climate protests may have influenced the level of media attention to extreme weather events (a hypothesis that needs to be verified with further studies), the proximity to electoral rounds is considered a key factor in understanding the level of conflict between partisan actors, which tends to intensify strategically in close proximity to a vote (Chadwick 2013).

Although these two variables may have influenced the level of the debate, causing it to intensify, the significant differences observed in the comparison between the two cases require further attention. In our view, these differences can be attributed to a number of key factors:

1) The level of tension between local government and national government;

2) The strategic position held by climate change denialist parties;

3) The strategic position of the region along the centre-periphery axis.

In fact, it emerges that concurrently with the floods that hit Emilia-Romagna, which remained in the spotlight for weeks, there was the presence within the regional and national governments of the two main political forces competing for consensus (with radically antithetical positions on climate change), as well as the presence of a national government led by climate change denialist right-wing parties that polarized the debate. It is noteworthy that obstructionist claims in the presence of the right-wing government increased significantly, from 5.2% in the case of Marche to 34.9% in the case of Emilia-Romagna. This undoubtedly intensified the debate and heightened the tone, triggering chain reactions among political actors. Finally, we see that the centre-periphery relationship may have contributed to the different media coverage afforded to the two extreme weather events. In fact, counterbalancing the centrality in economic terms of Emilia-Romagna, the third most important Italian region in terms of GDP is the Marche, an area in central Italy that is often considered peripheral in socioeconomic terms. Looking at the contribution of the two regions in terms of national GDP, we observe very different figures: 8.8% for Emilia-Romagna (ART 2023), one of the regions considered to be a driving force for the industrial development of the country (La Stampa, 8/5/23), compared to 2.4% for Marche (Regione Marche 2022). Such a difference may have contributed to generating different outcomes in the two cases, and projecting socioeconomic dynamics into the media arena: where the productive fabric is stronger and there is greater economic development and contribution to the national GDP, there is also greater attention to the damage caused by the floods and concern for the consequences this might have on the productive sectors that drive the Italian economy.

The second dimension we aim to highlight concerns the actors who, through their representation in the media, are present in the debate, i.e., *who* is talking about it. Despite varying frequencies for each of the two cases and differing (if not conflicting) narratives and objectives between them, some actors are predominant in the debate, such as actors from institutional politics, journalists, and experts (the latter albeit to a lesser extent). The notable absentees are the climate movements, ecological collectives, and environmental associations which, despite raising the issue more than anyone else, are marginally present in both cases and mostly find media space in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. Additionally, social movements are identified as targets in the speeches made by

government representatives (on the Right) and journalists: all claims that find more space in *Il Foglio*. This confirms a fact highlighted by Gamson (2004, p.251): if some groups are treated as 'agents' with a recognized voice on a particular issue, others are treated as mere 'objects' of discussion that others can talk about, without the direct parties having the right to intervene in the same context.

The most relevant data, in our opinion, is that in the media arena, other social parties, and generally the community, are excluded from the discussion around climate change and the management of extreme weather events, despite being subjects, such as associations and social movements, with significant expertise in the matter, or subjects, such as residents, who have a greater ability to monitor and observe changes and risks in the territory. A democratic governance of the climate crisis, in our opinion, requires the recognition of, and dialogue with such actors.

Lastly, shifting our attention to narrative patterns, i.e., the content of the debate, or *how* it is discussed, two trends appear to be particularly relevant. Firstly, the research shows that, although still far from becoming central and universally recognized as a triggering or multiplying factor of extreme weather events, today, no political, social, or media actor can evade the issue. Taking both cases into consideration, about one-third of the claims invoke climate change. It is important to highlight this data: it is now impossible to discuss flooding without referencing climate change, whether affirmed or denied. Indeed, in the press analysed here, we observed a notable emphasis (compared to the past) on the theme of climate change to explain the intensity and impact of the floods. Simultaneously, there are shrewd attempts by right-wing parties to deny its causal relationship or avoid addressing the issue, a strategy that has intensified the debate, prompting other actors to comment on the obstructionist statements of right-wing political leaders. Although, according to some studies (Beltrame et al. 2012), as recently as a decade ago the debate on the climate crisis seemed settled and resolved by identifying techno-scientific innovation and the transformation of daily lifestyles as responses to the problem, today we seem to be witnessing the opposite process. There is a multiplication of political interpretations of the phenomenon and political polarization around climate change that is emerging as a positional issue in Italy, as has been seen elsewhere (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Hughes et al. 2020), especially due to the narrative strategies of the right, which is capable – as observed on the immigration issue (Andretta and Imperatore 2022) – of launching concerted media campaigns that polarize the debate. This research confirms a clear growth in polarization around the topic of climate change, 'driven by growing right-wing activity' (Falkenberg et al. 2022, p.1114).

As this research seeks to highlight, the narrative patterns of the climate crisis adopted by various political actors are diverse and influenced both by political identity and strategies. On the one hand, our study confirms what other authors have already emphasized (Birch 2020; Biancalana and Ladini 2022) regarding the fact that 'one of the most relevant factors in explaining attitudes toward climate change is political orientation' (Ibidem, p.458). Thus, political orientation of parties along the left/right axis and their strategic positioning in relation to the extreme events (government vs. opposition and local vs. national) emerge as relevant variables capable of influencing frames and political strategies related to climate issue. On the other hand, it is useful to underscore the strategic role of these narrative patterns.

Left-wing parties assigned great importance to the issue of climate change to explain the floods in Emilia-Romagna. However, particularly in the case of the PD, they downplayed their own responsibilities in land management, which, as stated in the presentation of the case studies, was a decisive variable that contributed to the dramatic outcome. The focus on global warming attempted to shift attention from the regional government led by the PD and its role in the processes of altering the territory to the broader and uncontrollable phenomenon of climate change, confirming the arguments of Hulme (2011) and Lahsen and Ribot (2021) regarding the risks of a reductionist climate approach. Indeed, various statements by Bonaccini, simplifying the issue, claimed that 'after months of drought, the soil does not absorb water', omitting the fact that Emilia-Romagna is the leading Italian region in terms of soil consumption, a responsibility that lies with the region. On the other hand, right-wing parties emphasized the latter aspect of land management and denied any responsibility for climate change to support their accusations against the regional government and, in general, against left-wing parties. Through a process of mystification based on accusing 'ideological environmentalism' the 'climate Taliban', and the 'No-front', the right displayed a proudly anti-environmentalist rhetoric.

However, there are some nuances within the right-wing perspective regarding the interpretation of climate change, especially in relation to the floods in Emilia-Romagna, where the right-wing political actors were most present in the debate. While some figures within the right, such as deputies, journalists, opinion makers, etc., denied the existence of climate change and tended to downplay its scale, those in more prominent government roles, such as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Giovanni Toti, Nello Musumeci, along with others, adopted an obstructionist narrative aimed at instrumentalizing the potential impacts of environmental policies on businesses to slow down their implementation. They talked about combining 'economic sustainability' (Meloni) and 'development needs with the defence of the territory' (Toti), attempting to mask their anti-environmental views through narrative sleights of hand in order to present themselves as reliable interlocutors with other institutions. This variety of narratives within the right highlights the manner in which denialism is increasingly accompanied, if not replaced, by obstructionist narrative strategies that 'include all those calls which do not deny the human-induced nature of the climate crisis (science), but nevertheless delay or forestall meaningful climate action' (Ekberg et al. 2023, p.13) or that tend to 'misrepresent rather than clarify, raise adversity rather than consensus' (Lamb et al. 2020).

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# 7. Appendix

**Table A1 -** claims about Marche and Emilia Romagna floods by journals, (n and %)

| Journals | Marche flood (September 2022) | | Emilia-Romagna flood (May 2023) | | Both flood events | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Il Foglio | 20 | 34.5 | 43 | 21 | 63 | 24 |
| La Repubblica | 23 | 39.7 | 83 | 40.5 | 106 | 40.3 |
| Il Fatto Quotidiano | 15 | 25.9 | 79 | 38.5 | 94 | 35.7 |
| Total | 58 | 100 | 205 | 100 | 263 | 100 |

Source: own elaboration.

**Table A2 -** claims by political parties, by flood events (%)

| | Marche flood (September 2022) | Emilia-Romagna flood (May 2023) |
|---|---|---|
| Fratelli d'Italia | 3.4 | 13.7 |
| Lega | 1.7 | 4.9 |
| Forza Italia | / | 2 |
| Partito Democratico | 15.5 | 17.6 |
| Sinistra Italiana/Verdi | 5.2 | 4.9 |

Source: own elaboration. Note: multiple responses were possible.