A multifaceted issue:
The coverage and politicization of the climate change issue on Italian television

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Abstract

This article investigates the level and nature of politicization of the climate change coverage in a selection of programmes aired by the main Italian national TV channels, and aims to establish connections between this analysis and public opinion research (also in view of a possible future harmonization of the research tools). Climate change is a multifaceted issue, as it is the assessment of its politicization. This complex nature becomes even more evident when trying to assess whether (and how) its politicization operates at the public opinion and at the media content levels. As to the contents, we observe that the climate change implications are portrayed and framed considering a variety of domains including economic, environmentalist, equality, conservationist, technological, etc. Both media coverage and public opinion research tend to swing from high to low concern, and from high to low politicization. The main RQ can be summarized as follows: 1) Is there a growing coverage of climate change issues?; 2) Is there a growing politicization of climate change issues?; 3) Does the level of politicization vary during the 2022 electoral campaign?]; 4) Does the politicization also mirror/reflect conflicting perspectives on climate change issues advocated by political actors holding conflicting stances? We will address our research questions using a novel, hand-coded, dataset of TV news, covering the 2020-2023 period. Data will consider TV coverage both in "ordinary" and "emergency" periods (such as the Emilia Romagna floods in spring 2023), with special attention to the contents voiced by political actors on Television during both ordinary periods and the national 2022 electoral campaign.

1. Introduction

The global discourse on environmental issues, particularly climate change, has undergone significant evolution over the past decades. While public concerns about environmental degradation and pollution date back to at least the 1970s, the narrative has recently taken a sharper turn, focusing on the imminent threats of climate change. In recent years, several key factors have contributed to this shift. Grassroots climate movements such as *Fridays for Future* (FFF) and the unprecedented global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have played a prominent role in revitalizing public attention. Additionally, global and regional efforts have been pivotal in shaping both public discourse and political agendas. International climate negotiations, such as the COP

conferences, have underscored the urgency of global action: the Paris Agreement from COP21 (2015) placed climate change at the forefront of policy discussions, garnering media attention and increasing pressure on governments and industries to act. Regionally, the European Green Deal (2019) aims for climate neutrality by 2050, sparking debate and pushing sustainability into economic and political agendas. The EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021) further ties post-pandemic recovery to green transitions, solidifying climate goals in policymaking. Moreover, the rising frequency of extreme weather events like wildfires and floods has made the effects of climate change more visible, intensifying media coverage and public discourse on resilience and adaptation. Indeed, despite the delayed politicization of climate change in Italy compared to other European nations, the interplay between grassroots movements and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on political priorities suggests a changing landscape, especially during the most recent National Election Campaign.

This paper delves into the representation of climate change in the Italian media, focusing on primetime newscasts. By examining a three-year span that includes the COVID-19 pandemic, the study addresses critical research questions regarding the coverage, politicization, and framing of climate change in the media landscape. This paper offers a novel contribution to the field by examining the representation of climate change in Italian primetime television newscasts, a medium that has been relatively underexplored in existing research on climate change communication. While most studies have focused on print, digital media, or social media platforms, the role of television – particularly in countries like Italy, where it remains a dominant source of information for a significant portion of the population – has been largely overlooked. By addressing this gap, this study provides critical insights into how climate change is framed and politicized in a format that reaches millions of viewers daily. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as television news continues to shape public opinion and inform policy debates, especially on a complex and urgent issue like climate change.

First, the following sections will present a detailed literature review and the development of our research questions; next, we will address data and results, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of climate change discourse in the Italian media landscape. The analysis involves a meticulous examination of news items aired by seven Italian national TV channels, considering variables such as cabinet composition, electoral campaign stages, and framing strategies. Among the other results, we find that the coverage of climate change is still very limited and mainly contingent on external events, i.e., International Earth Day. Furthermore, we find that while the majority of actors (including experts and activists) mostly deal with climate change in very general terms, politicians and parties are more likely to make policy proposals when dealing with it.

2. Background & Research Questions

Attentiveness to environmental issues is far from recent, as public awareness began emerging as early as the late 1960s, when concerns about the earth's limits and ecological degradation first surfaced. Early mobilizations focused on pollution, workers' protests, the destruction of green spaces, and overpopulation. Two key publications from this era played significant roles in raising awareness. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) introduced the demographic element into the environmental debate, emphasizing the planet's

finite capacity to sustain human civilization, which sparked global discourse on population growth and resource scarcity. Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971) added a critical perspective on the environmental impact of technological and industrial processes. Commoner argued that the disruption of natural ecological cycles by modern technology, such as the widespread use of synthetic chemicals and pollution from industrial processes, was driving the earth's life-supporting systems towards collapse. He underscored the interconnectedness of all ecological systems, famously stating "Everything is connected to everything else", highlighting the profound consequences of environmental disruption.

At the global level, the 1972 Stockholm Conference, officially known as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, was a pivotal moment in shaping international environmental governance. This was the first major international gathering to address global environmental issues, bringing together representatives from 113 countries, as well as civil society and environmental experts. The Conference marked the beginning of global environmental diplomacy and set the stage for future international agreements on climate and environmental issues, leading to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and formally acknowledging the need for international cooperation in tackling environmental degradation. The *Stockholm Declaration*, which emerged from the conference, outlined 26 principles on environmental management, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development and the balance between environmental protection and economic growth.

In Italy, specific events such as the Seveso disaster of 1976, battles against nuclear power, and campaigns to eliminate asbestos marked critical turning points in environmental discourse. The Seveso disaster was a chemical accident that occurred in a small town in northern Italy when a toxic cloud of dioxin was released from a factory. The event exposed thousands of people to dangerous levels of toxins and led to widespread health concerns, environmental damage, and the long-term contamination of land. This disaster prompted greater public awareness about industrial risks and environmental safety, leading to stricter regulations in Italy and across Europe. The European Union's *Seveso Directive* (1982) was named after the event, setting high safety standards for industrial facilities handling dangerous substances. Similarly, Italy's battles against nuclear power became another significant focus of environmental activism. After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the Italian public grew increasingly wary of the risks associated with nuclear energy. This culminated in a national referendum in 1987, in which a large majority voted to abandon nuclear energy, leading to the closure of Italy's nuclear power plants. This event reinforced the role of grassroots environmental movements in influencing national policy and set a precedent for Italy's energy sources debate. Another key moment was the campaign against asbestos, a harmful material used extensively in construction and manufacturing throughout the twentieth century. Asbestos exposure was linked to severe health risks, including lung diseases and cancer. After years of activism by environmental and health organizations, Italy became one of the first countries to ban the production and use of asbestos in 1992.

Noteworthy milestones, including most countries signing the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 to combat climate change and the cultural impact of Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth" (Gore, 2006), heightened public awareness about the urgent realities of climate change, influencing its transformation into a widespread and known public

matter. Thus, gradually, climate change has transcended scientific discourse, becoming a politically relevant and disputed issue.

With respect to the perception of climate change in public opinion, Inglehart (1977) identifies a substantial shift in public values over time, transitioning from materialist values focused on basic needs and economic security to post-materialist values prioritizing quality of life, self-expression and opportunities, determining a change in the issues that could have a significant impact on public opinion and, consequently, political mobilization. Therefore, environmental issues have progressively transformed the political landscape, having an impact not only on the emergence of Green parties but also on the mobilization strategies of their competitors. Though not a new cleavage (Lijphart, 1990; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini, 1990), the 'green' issue has significantly affected party competition (Carter, 2013; Spoon et al., 2014). At the same time, climate change operates both as a valence issue, where there is general agreement on the desired outcome but differing perceptions of competency, and as a position issue, where parties take clear stances (Schworer, 2024; Canes-Wrone et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, assessing the politicization of the climate change issue in the media is not a straightforward task (Anderson, 2019). Both media coverage and public opinion research tend to fluctuate between high and low concern, and between high and low politicization. Political actors play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse around climate change, with their conflicting stances significantly contributing to its politicization. In general terms, 'politicization' means giving a political (and adversarial) character to sectors which normally have nothing to do with politics (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). As D'Albergo and Moini (2019) explain, this concept covers several historical, social and economic processes established in the 1990s that have had consequences on our society. These processes were, for instance, the issues, discourses and interests of private actors which took on a political nature because they replaced states' regulatory action and led to social changes.

It is important to remember that the concept of politicization is strongly connected to that of depoliticization, which means the removal of political character: in other words, something that is no longer influenced or controlled by politics. The dynamics of politicization and depoliticization can be activated in three ways (D'Albergo and Moini, 2019): proactive (social practices that tend to occupy areas previously occupied by public actions), reactive (social practices that are activated in response to requests, choices or decisions linked to the desire of political actors to depoliticize political action) or hybrid. The consequences of these dynamics and of the dualism between politicization and depoliticization have effects on issues (the specific point at which social practices and action are carried out), actors (people who give life to these practices), and belief systems (normative and cognitive representations that manifest themselves in the speeches of actors). Moreover, as Schattschneider (1975) considers, the driving force of politics is conflict and, therefore, politicization is "*the expansion of the importance of the conflict*". As Centemeri (2024) explains, conflict is a public outcry, based on neutral and technical explanations, against activities that maintain or increase inequalities or the illegitimate abuse of power. This requires forms of involvement and discourses that show an alternative status report to the dominant ones. However, building up mobilization is not easy, especially in marginalized areas. On the basis of this, Hutter and Grande (2014) focus on three key dimensions of

politicization: the salience of the issue, the expansion of the actor and the polarization of the actor. Indeed Hutter and Grande (2014) consider the actors to be the main elements in this process and only topics frequently debated in public can be considered politicized: the more actors are involved, the more the topic is politicized. Another important aspect is polarization: as De Wilde (2011) and Hoeglinger (2012) claim, the actors must have different positions and the more the issue is polarized, the more the two groups support totally opposite positions with the same strength. In order to measure politicization Hutter and Grande (2014) propose a 'Politicization Index' which considers all the three dimensions '*salience (actor expansion + polarization)*'. In this framework, salience is a necessary but not sufficient condition, as its effect on politicization depends on its interaction with actor expansion and polarization, with the overall level being determined by their combined influence (Hutter and Grande, 2014).

This shows how politicization tends to lead audiences to rely on the opinions of political elites rather than those of scientists. Indeed, in recent years, the environmental issue has increased in importance, and nowadays transnational actors, diplomacy and intergovernmental institutions are central elements of global environmental policy because they shape public perception through the media (Hale, 2019). Referring specifically to climate change, Gibson et al. (2016) argue for the necessity of engaging journalism in climate science and policy-making, a task hindered by new challenges to the journalistic profession. Traditionally, journalists often applied uncritical professional norms of balance and objectivity in their reporting of climate science, giving climate change deniers 'equal time', a practice that downplays the actual level of scientific consensus (Gibson et al., 2016, p. 420; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). In recent years, however, they have reduced coverage of climate skeptics, presenting science in a less controversial light (Gibson et al., 2016, pp. 419-420).

In addition, and connected to the above-mentioned 'Politicization Index', another effect of politicization is that individuals tend to be less concerned about climate change the more polarization they perceive (Linde, 2020). Instead of being a conciliatory valence issue, climate change acts as a 'multiplier' of agreement and disagreement, exacerbating contemporary challenges between both developed and developing countries in international summits and within the population, as well as between liberal and conservative cultures (Pepermans & Maeseele, 2016).

In recent years, two main phenomena have contributed to revitalizing public discourse on climate change and environmental issues and, thus, its politicization, as politicians and grassroots movements are more prone to exploit it. On the one hand, new climate movements (such as Fridays for Future) have emerged, emphasizing the urgency of taking immediate action regarding the climate crisis. These movements not only express environmental concerns but also have tangible impacts on shaping policy and media agendas (Hultman et al., 2018). In this respect, youth engagement in environmental issues is particularly relevant to its politicization as it contributes to a broader societal shift, influencing both political mobilization and policy agendas (Blok et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new global crisis that, to some extent, diverted public attention and prioritized climate change. The pandemic shifted political priorities, creating a complex relationship between immediate health concerns and long-term environmental challenges (Fuentes et al., 2020). While the re-emergence of war concerns in Western countries may potentially diminish

the priority of climate change for citizens and policymakers (Jacoby et al., 2022), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought environmental issues back into focus. This conflict, closely tied to energy security and a heavy reliance on fossil fuels, has sparked renewed debates on the need to transition to renewable energy sources. The conflict exposed Europe's deep reliance on Russian fossil fuels, particularly natural gas, raising urgent concerns about the geopolitical vulnerabilities associated with energy dependence. As countries scrambled to secure alternative energy sources and reduce their reliance on Russian imports, the war sparked renewed debates on the necessity of accelerating the transition to renewable energy. The invasion has prompted discussions about increasing investments in green technologies, such as wind, solar, and hydrogen, not only to mitigate the economic and political risks associated with fossil fuels but also to meet long-term climate goals (Hosseini, 2022).

Not only that, but it is essential to consider that climate change can exacerbate existing conflicts and create new challenges on the global stage (Burke et al., 2015). Such a close connection between climate issues, pandemics, economic challenges, and geopolitical emergencies is evident in the European Union's Next Generation EU plan, which intertwines economic recovery with climate action, connecting environmental sustainability and economic resilience.

With increased attention from both the public and elite actors – especially the media and political class – *the way* climate change is framed acquires significance as well. As more actors outside of the scientific community deal with the issue, climate change escapes the rigorous communication of experts and enters the day-to-day struggle of political competition. Two aspects are particularly interesting in this regard. The first is the extent to which the issue is presented as *critical* and *urgent*, ranging from an impending catastrophe to a minor issue to be dismissed, a matter particularly relevant to the media. For instance, in a computer-assisted content analysis of climate change articles from major U.S. newspapers between 1985 and 2017, Chinn et al. (2020) find that media representations are both increasingly politicized and polarized. On the other hand, an excessively dramatic representation of climate change and environmental issues reduces the credibility of the source of information, which, in turn, affects the way the public responds to the issue (Feldman & Hart, 2021). As the data on the extreme events map (ISPRA 2024) shows, between 2020 and 2023 a series of extreme phenomena occurred in Italy, often of a serious nature. This multitude of serious events gives an idea of how the continuous use by television of a very exacerbated tone of voice – aimed at impacting the audience's attention – reduces news credibility in the long term. Secondly, it is also pertinent to evaluate how the climate change issue is portrayed in terms of policy, whether presented in broad, abstract terms, as a general call to action, or linked to specific policy proposals.

While Italy has experienced a delayed politicization of climate change and environmental issues compared to other European countries (Beltrame et al., 2017), despite Italians' growing worry about the effects of environmental change (Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006; Antronico et al., 2020), there appears to be a notable shift in recent years. Indeed, the two aforementioned factors – new grassroots green movements and the Covid-19 Pandemic – may have increased public opinion attention on climate change and related issues. On one hand, movements like Fridays for Future have gained

international resonance, suggesting that they may have found fertile ground even in countries where green parties have traditionally performed poorly in elections (Biorcio, 2016). On the other hand, although the politicization of climate change remained limited and largely non-polarized in the 2010s (Ghinoi & Steiner, 2020), the shock of the pandemic, especially pronounced in Italy, may have influenced a shift in its politicization in the most recent national elections (October 2022) and in particular during the electoral campaign.

Recent research, conducted by Osservatorio di Pavia in collaboration with Greenpeace, has analysed the portrayal of climate change in the Italian media. The study focused on newspapers, TV programmes, and social media. Results revealed that climate change is relatively underrepresented in the Italian media, gaining prominence mainly in connection with extreme climate events like floods, fires, or landslides. Moreover, political actors very rarely incorporate climate change into their political agendas. When they do, the discussion often develops along partisan lines, which creates a barrier to discussing policy solutions to the issue and, in some cases, with an ambivalent stance on the climate actions required to address the problem. Moreover, even when climate actions are labelled as a priority on the political agenda, they tend to be discussed in rather general terms (Greenpeace Italy 2022; 2023).

Taking cues from their research, we investigate further how the issue of climate change is represented in the Italian media, and, in particular, on primetime newscasts on television, considering that television is still the main source of information for the Italian public (AGCOM 2024). Although television is the most used means of accessing news in Italy, the hybridization of the media system (Chadwick 2013) has led to the growth of online platforms as a means of information. More precisely, the AGCOM report highlights how in Italy the audiences of the main broadcasters, the main national news outlets and the unique users of general information sites or apps are decreasing. On the increase, instead, are those of platforms that show content produced by their users, including social networks (not only Instagram and TikTok, but also the number of unique Facebook users still appears to be slightly increasing, even if lower than the two former social networks).

In a global setting, even if compared to 2022, all media show a decline in use: social media, however, reveals a growth of 11 percentage points. Television and public radio, even in their online dimensions, appear to be the media in which citizens have even greater trust but in general, the levels of trust in news coming from social media are growing compared to the previous year (Data Reportal 2024; European Union 2023). Platform news consumption is also fragmented and "*videos are becoming a more important source of online news, especially with younger groups*" (Reuters Institute 2024).

In general, we want to investigate how the coverage, politicization, and framing of the climate change issue evolve over a time span of three years and especially in conjunction with the Covid-19 Pandemic. In particular, in the present paper, we address four main research questions: 1) Is there a growing coverage of climate change issues? 2) Is there a growing politicization of climate change issues? 3) Did the level of politicization vary during the 2022 electoral campaign? 4) How does the framing of news content shape the discourse around climate change in terms of a general 'call to action' versus specific policy proposals?

3. Data and Results

In the following section, we will first provide a descriptive analysis of the data, and we will then confront our research questions more directly.

In order to address our main research questions, we relied on the analysis of news items aired by the prime-time news broadcasts of the seven national public and private Italian channels – Rai1, Rai2, Rai3, Rete4, Canale5, Italia1, and La7. The timeframe ranged from 31 December 2019 to 30 September 2023, thus covering both an initial period before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Italy, the whole pandemic period, and the subsequent 'back to normality' period. For reasons of data availability and their compatibility with those of the period considered, it was impossible to go further back in time. However, in this way, we were both able to observe some dynamics in action before the explosion of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown (see the discussion in Figure 1), and how for a long time the pandemic obscured attention towards environmental issues (Stoddart et al. 2023; Smirnov and Hsieh 2022; Lyytimäki et al. 2020; Rauchfleisch et al. 2023), which only subsequently returned to the attention of public opinion, in particular in the presence of trigger events (see again Figure 1).

Although the initial selection amounted to 181,793 pieces of news, we reduced it to 5,785 by selecting only those news items whose text contained at least one of a list of keywords[1] related to the climate change issue. Next, we refined the selection further by manually selecting only those news items that mentioned climate change in a meaningful and relevant way for a final dataset of 1235. We then carefully read each piece of news and manually coded them to build the variables of interest (for a general overview of the variables, refer to Table 1).

As presented in Table 1, we coded five variables for each piece of news. *Cabinet*, referring to the Cabinet in office at the time of the airing; *electoral campaign*, meaning the stage of the electoral campaign; *not in campaign*, that is before the fall of Cabinet Draghi; *pre-campaign*, between the fall of Cabinet Draghi and the submitting of the electoral lists; campaign, until the day of the national elections; *post-campaign*, from the day of the national elections onward. We also built two variables about the framing of the news; in particular, *Policy*, coding whether the piece of news contained a general call to action or a specific policy proposal and *Urgency*, coding how urgently the issue of climate change is framed. Finally, we also built a Politicization score. We build on the approach developed by Chinn et al. (2020) and reprised by Hart et al. (2020) to define politicization, i.e. the percentage of political actors mentioned in the news relative to the mentions

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[1] All the following words (including their plural form and adjacent concept) were used to make the selection: 'più caldo', 'più freddo', 'climate change', 'cambiamento climatico', 'fridays for future', 'temperature insolite', 'cambiamenti climatici', 'catastrofe naturale', 'temperatura insolita', 'temperatura record', 'temperatura', 'clima', 'ultima generazione', 'alluvione', 'surriscaldamento', 'ghiacciaio', 'scioglimento dei ghiacci', 'antropogenico', 'antropocene', 'eventi estremi', 'evento climatico estremo', 'evento estremo', 'eventi climatici estremi', 'ambiente', 'emergenza climatica', 'carbon tax', 'inquinamento', 'gas serra', 'CO2', 'accordo di parigi', 'protocollo di kyoto', 'desertificazione', 'transizione energetica', 'transizione green' 'giustizia climatica', 'sostenibilità', 'sostenibilità ambientale', 'ecologia', 'eco terrorista', 'ecoansia', 'negazionista climatico', 'attivista per il clima', 'fonti rinnovabili', 'fonti fossili', 'nucleare', 'energia green', 'energia rinnovabile', 'energia verde', 'fonti di energia rinnovabile', 'emissioni', 'crisi climatica', 'tutela ambiente', 'global warming', 'riscaldamento globale', 'emissioni climalteranti', 'decarbonizzazione', 'gretini', 'eco-vandali'.

of other actors by date.[2] In particular, we built a 'Politicization Score', where we assigned value 1 to every item of news that mentions political actors, activists or citizens in a politicized way; value 0 to items of news mentioning media or other actors; and value -1 to those which mention experts. Thus, a positive score would be associated with higher politicization, while a negative score would be associated with lower politicization.

Thus, we differ partially from Chinn et al. (2020), as activists as well as citizens are included as actors contributing to the politicization of the climate change issue as part of grass-roots political players in shaping the way climate change is framed by newscasts.

As suggested by several researchers (see, among others, *La Crisi climatica nell'informazione italiana*, a comprehensive report on the coverage of climate change issues in the Italian media written by Osservatorio di Pavia, 2020), our study finds that climate change is seldom mentioned in Italian mainstream television newscasts. Indeed, of the 181,793 observations – each corresponding to an item of news – of the initial dataset, we find that only around 0.6% of the total news mentions climate change in a meaningful and relevant way.

Of the three years analysed, climate change was mentioned in at least one news item in 569 occurrences – around once every two days. As shown in Figure 1, there appears to be no significant variation in climate change coverage depending on the Cabinet considered. For instance, the two 'peaks', corresponding to 13 news items dedicated to climate change, occurred on two specific occasions that had little to do with partisan political actors. The first was on 31 December 2019, when both the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, and Pope Francis made explicit references to the environment during their respective end-of-the-year speeches, the second, after quite a long period in which the Covid-19 pandemic monopolized the public debate, on 21 April 2021, during International Earth Day.

The coverage of news related to climate change also varies depending on the channel (see Table 2); in particular, Tg1 was the newscast that dedicated most coverage to climate change issues (accounting for 28% of total news), also due to the fact that this channel is traditionally more attentive to 'institutional' voices such as the President of the Republic, or Pope Francis, who often consider climate change in their interventions. Climate change was mentioned by Tg3, Tg5, and Studio Aperto in 17%, 16%, and 16% of the coded occurrences, respectively. Hence, over half of the climate change coverage was by Rai newscasts (56%), 39% by Mediaset channels, and only 5% by Tg La 7 – with the contextual consideration that Rai and Mediaset account for three channels each, while La7 only has one.

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[2] In the [few] cases where more than one actor was mentioned in the piece of news analysed, we considered the more prominent one.

Table 1. Overview of the Main Coded Variables

Variables	N	Description	Example
Cabinet	1235	Conte II (31/12/19 - 11/02/2021) 25% Draghi (12/02/2021 - 21/10/22) 49% Meloni (22/10/22 - 30/09/23) 26%	-
Electoral Campaign	1235	Not in Campaign (31/12/19 - 18/07/22) 66% Pre Campaign (19/07/22 - 23/08/22) 4% Campaign (24/08/22 - 25/09/22) 3% Post Campaign (26/09/22 - 30/09/23) 27%	-
Policy	1204	General Call to Action (59%) Neither General nor Specific (25%) Specific Policy Proposal (16%)	"President Mattarella's discourse […] remarks the importance of protecting the environment" (Tg3, 31/12/19) "Recovery Plan: the objectives […] recycling, energy, mobility" (Tg La7, 24/04/21) "Milan, to protect the environment, smoking outside will soon be banned" (Tg2, 17/01/20)
Urgency	1046	Climate Change is not an Urgent Issue (2%) Neither Not Urgent nor Urgent (28%) Climate Change is an Urgent Issue (70%)	"[…] Beppe Grillo expresses satisfaction over Mario Draghi's reassurance on climate change" (Tg2, 19/02/21) "Coronavirus: […] worry over glaciers melting" (Studio Aperto, 23/04/20) "Climate Crisis: significant reduction of fertile soil, study finds" (Tg2, 01/02/20)
Politicization score	-	Range: -3; 12 Unique values: 12 Mean: 0.78 St. Dev: 1.9	-

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

The analysis identified key peaks where the politicization score was 6 or higher, each corresponding to significant events related to political discourse and environmental concerns. Many of these peaks are connected by recurring themes such as international cooperation and political reform. For example, events like the Earth Day climate summit (April 21, 2021) and the COP26 summit (October 31, 2021) reflect heightened political focus on environmental issues. Both saw world leaders, including Italy's Prime Minister Draghi, advocating for urgent climate action. Similarly, youth movements played a prominent role, with Greta Thunberg's activism during the World Economic Forum in Davos (23 January 2020) and the Fridays for Future protests (30 September 2021), emphasizing generational concerns about the climate crisis. Political reform and institutional speeches also drove peaks, such as Nicola Zingaretti's announcement of the PD congress (10 January 2020) and President Mattarella's New Year speech (31 December 2019), where calls for unity, institutional strength, and national identity resonated widely. We observed that political and institutional events, rather than extreme weather occurrences, served as the main catalysts for discussions about climate change. Although heatwaves, floods, and natural disasters may be seen as potential triggers for conversation, they were not the primary drivers of public dialogue during the period we studied. In fact, we see that the

Marmolada tragedy in July 2022 did lead to a significant spike in media attention, but the overall trend during the period we studied shows that political developments, high-profile speeches, and international summits were the main catalysts for the largest increases in climate change discussions.

Figure 1. Mentions of Climate Change in the Italian mainstream television newscasts 2020-2023
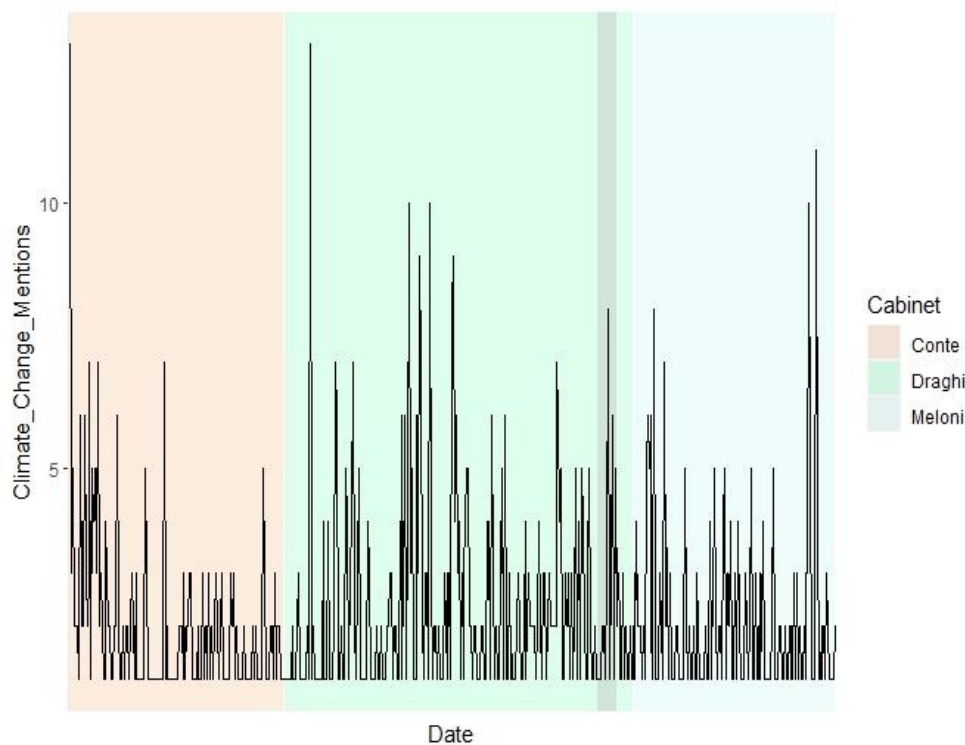
Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Next, as shown in Table 3, we map which actor was mentioned in the news item. Political actors are mentioned in around 16% of the total news coverage, experts – including scientists, researchers and scientific institutions – are mentioned 14% of the time; ordinary citizens and media actors - individual journalists, publishing houses and other media – are mentioned significantly less, respectively in 3% and 1% of news stories. By comparison, the residual category 'Other' is mentioned in more than half of the news items. It is worth noting that many of the 'light news' items were classified as Other, i.e. "United Kingdom, environment and nature: in the South Georgia archipelago, blue whales are returning, at the risk of extinction due to hunting and climate change" (Tg1, 26/02/202); "Cinema: Louis Garrel's film, starring Laetitia Casta, 'The Crusade,' will be released in theatres on Wednesday. A film that pits two generations one against the other, parents and children, on environmental conservation" (Tg1, 06/04/2022).

Looking at politicization over time, we observe that the mentions of political actors, activists and ordinary citizens taking a political stance on climate change are particularly relevant during the electoral campaign – around 41% of the news related to climate change in this time frame – compared to other periods, when politics is mentioned in 12% to 15% of the observations. It is worth observing that there was little conflict *between* political actors even during the electoral campaign over climate change issues: the only partial exception is the debate over the possibility

of introducing nuclear plants to diversify the energy supply that took place during the electoral campaign; "[...] [Angelo] Bonelli refutes the proposal of introducing nuclear power plants" (Tg2, 07/09/2022).[3] Generally, politicians and parties criticize or engage with other actors, such as individual activists, experts, or collective groups, i.e. "Florence, the city mayor, Dario Nardella, stops *Last Generation* eco-activists (climate crisis)" (Tg La7, 16/03/2023);[4] "Controversies erupt regarding Roberto Cingolani's [Minister for Ecological Transition] harsh words on activists, 'radical chic who do more damage than the climate crisis'" (Tg4, 01/09/2021);[5] "President La Russa invites Eco-activists from Last Generation to go and help with the flood in Emilia-Romagna. The Vandals attack the President." (Tg5, 19/05/2023).[6]

Table 2. Key Dates of Political and Environmental Peaks (Politicization Score ≥ 6)

Peaks Dates	Example
2019-12-31	Discorso di fine anno del Presidente Sergio Mattarella con alti ascolti e visualizzazioni, il richiamo all'identità nazionale, alla fiducia e all'impegno, la crisi occupazionale, il buon funzionamento delle istituzioni, il sostegno ai giovani, e la lotta ai cambiamenti climatici.
2020-01-10	Zingaretti annuncia il congresso del PD dopo il voto in Emilia, rilanciando il partito e aprendo a società civile e movimenti ecologisti.
2020-01-23	Assisi: presentato il Manifesto per il Clima; Davos: Greta Thunberg denuncia l'ignoranza sul clima, mentre l'UE rilancia il piano di investimenti per la transizione ecologica.
2021-04-21	Giornata Mondiale della Terra: vertice sul clima promosso da Biden; Draghi parla delle politiche ambientali e del Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza.
2021-09-16	Vertice EuMed ad Atene: allarme ambientale per il mancato rispetto degli accordi internazionali sul clima. Draghi avverte sui rischi catastrofici.
2021-09-20	76ª Assemblea Generale dell'ONU: Biden discute della collaborazione con l'UE e della necessità di risposte multilaterali alla pandemia e alla crisi climatica.
2021-09-29	Draghi interviene alla Youth 4Climate e ribadisce l'impegno italiano nella lotta ai cambiamenti climatici.
2021-09-30	Milano, manifestazione Fridays for Future: Greta Thunberg e Vanessa Nakate in testa al corteo per la difesa dell'ambiente.
2021-10-31	Cop26 a Glasgow: obiettivo ridurre le emissioni di gas serra. Draghi esorta all'azione ascoltando i giovani, ma si registrano assenze significative (Russia, Cina, Brasile).
2021-11-02	Gran Bretagna: alla Cop26 di Glasgow, banche e società finanziarie si impegnano contro i cambiamenti climatici.
2022-07-04	Tragedia della Marmolada: il ritiro del ghiacciaio a causa dei cambiamenti climatici; rischio crollo dei ghiacciai delle principali vette d'Italia.
2022-11-10	Egitto, Cop27: Biden annuncia nuovi impegni sull'emergenza climatica, con un focus sull'Africa e sui paesi più colpiti dai cambiamenti climatici.
2023-08-02	Giornata Mondiale della Gioventù, Lisbona 2023: papa Francesco incontra i giovani e lancia un appello sull'importanza di agire contro i cambiamenti climatici.

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

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[3] In the original: "[...] Bonelli condanna l'ipotesi di ritorno al nucleare" (Tg2, 07/09/2022)

[4] In the original: "Firenze. Il Sindaco Nardella ferma il blitz degli eco-attivisti di Ultima Generazione (crisi climatica)." (Tg La7, 16/03/2023)

[5] In the original: "Polemiche sulle dichiarazioni del ministro Cingolani che si è schierato contro gli ambientalisti 'radical chic che fanno più danni delle tempeste climatiche'." (Tg4, 01/09/2021).

[6] In the original: "Il Presidente La Russa invita gli eco-attivisti di Ultima Generazione ad andare in Emilia Romagna ad aiutare a spalare contro i danni dell'alluvione. I vandali attaccano il Presidente La Russa." (Tg5, 19/05/2023).

Table 3. Distribution of News on Climate Change on TV News

Programme	Freq.	Percent
Tg1	346	28%
Tg2	139	11%
Tg3	205	17%
Tot. RAI	**690**	**56%**
Tg4	90	7%
Tg5	201	16%
Studio Aperto	194	16%
Tot. Mediaset	**485**	**39%**
Tg La7	60	5%
Total	1,235	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Table 4. Distribution of Actors Mentioned in the News 2020-2023

Actors	Freq.	Percent
Activists	152	12%
Citizens	36	3%
Experts	174	14%
Media	13	1%
Others	665	54%
Politicians & Parties	195	16%
Total	1,235	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Next, one of the most interesting aspects of news about climate change, and particularly relevant to its politicization, is how they are framed. Concerning *Policy* (see Table 1), the vast majority of news (59%) expressed a general plea to take action, while only 16% of the news items referred to concrete actions to be taken. The remaining 25% contained news that was considered a middle ground between very general and a very practical call to action.

As presented in Table 5, interestingly, news items mentioning political actors were the most 'balanced' in terms of framing; around 36% were general calls to action against climate change, 34% represented some sort of 'middle ground', and, finally, approximately 30% were explicit calls to implement specific policies. News that mentioned all the other actors were mostly general pleas to take action against climate change and its devastating effects. This is particularly enlightening as, even when news mentioned experts, only 10% focused on specific policy actions, while 71% were making very general – and almost normative – pleas. Examples of this latter framing include[7]: "Luca Parmitano [famous Italian astronaut] is back on Earth: the tale of his experience in space and concerns for the environment in his first press conference"

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[7] In the original: "Luca Parmitano è rientrato sulla terra: il racconto della sua esperienza nello spazio e la preoccupazione per l'ambiente nella sua prima conferenza stampa" (Tg5, 07/02/2020); "Torino: vigilia dell'apertura dell'edizione del Salone del Libro, intervista allo scrittore indiano Amitav Ghosh da sempre impegnato nella difesa dell'ambiente e nella lotta ai cambiamenti climatici" (Tg3, 17/05/2022); "Meteo: caldo e temperature estive, i dati delle città, numerosi ancora i bagnanti sulle spiagge, commenti anche sul cambiamenti climatici, l'analisi del fisico Pasini" (Tg1, 28/09/2023).

(Tg5, 07/02/2020); "Turin: the day before the launch of Salone del Libro festival, interview with writer Amitav Ghosh, who has always been committed to the protection of the environment and the fight against climate change" (Tg3, 17/05/2022); "The weather: hot and summerlike temperatures […] comments on climate change, the analysis by physicist, Pasini" (Tg1, 28/09/2023).

The distribution of frames in news stories mentioning climate activists is particularly intriguing. In this context, only 8% of the news focuses on practical policy proposals, while a substantial 77% revolves around general calls to action. Several factors contribute to this somewhat unexpected data. On the one hand, news coverage dedicated to events like roadblocks and Last Generation protests tends to highlight the methods of protest and their consequences – such as police intervention and public opinion – overshadowing the presence of more specific requests by the activists. For instance, proposals like the introduction of a 'reparation fund' for damage from extreme climate events, frequently advocated by activists, might not receive adequate attention.

On the other hand, it is essential to note that, even though activists are meticulous in formulating 'concrete' proposals to address criticisms of their protest methods, modern environmental activism inherently involves deliberately expressive demonstrations. These demonstrations aim to remind politicians of the urgency of the climate crisis and the importance of heeding expert advice. In the words of Greta Thunberg, "I'm not the one who's saying these things. I'm not the one we should be listening to. And I say that all the time. We need to listen to the scientists."

Table 5. Actors' Framing of News on Climate Change in terms of Policy

Actors	Framing		
	General call to action	**Middle Ground**	**Practical policy proposal**
Activists	77%	15%	8%
Citizens	75%	19%	6%
Experts	71%	19%	10%
Media	85%	0%	15%
Other	57%	27%	16%
Politicians & Parties	36%	34%	30%
Total	59%	25%	16%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

Turning to how urgently the climate change issue is framed in the news, we find that 70% considered it urgent, 28% somewhat urgent, and 2% not very urgent. As shown in Table 5, if we take those news items where the climate change issue is 'not urgent', more than half (52%) mention politicians and parties.[8] Thus, politicians and parties tend to propose practical policy solutions to the climate change issue but, at the same time, do not frame it as urgently as other players do. Turning our attention more specifically to the research questions outlined earlier – refer to Figure 1 – we find no compelling evidence supporting the notion that coverage of the climate change issue has increased over time. It is crucial to acknowledge the substantial

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[8] It should be noted that in absolute terms, the number of news broadcasts mentioning political actors and in which the climate change issue is framed as 'not urgent' is just 11.

influence of contingent events on the news cycle. As mentioned earlier, the days when mentions of climate change were notably abundant were all tied to particular occurrences.

Next, we analyse in detail the politicization of climate change issues. As discussed in the descriptive part of this section, we build on the approach of Chinn et al. (2020) and reprised by Hart et al. (2020) to define politicization, including activists and ordinary citizens as well as actors contributing to politicization of the climate change issue.

Table 6. Actors' Framing of News on Climate Change in terms of Urgency

	Urgency		
Actors	**Not Urgent**	**Somewhat Urgent**	**Very Urgent**
Activists	0%	4%	17%
Citizens	0%	2%	3%
Experts	10%	10%	17%
Media	0%	0%	1%
Other	38%	61%	51%
Politicians & Parties	52%	23%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

As shown in Table 6 (Model 1), we do observe a growing politicization of climate change; indeed, with respect to Cabinet Conte II, politicization significantly increases during Cabinets Draghi and Meloni. While there is certainly an increase in politicization, it should also be noted that Cabinet Conte II covered the first phases of the Covid-19 pandemic when experts from every field were often invited to debate the evolution of the crisis. With respect to our second research question, we find that politicization also increases during the electoral campaign compared to any other period considered. While heightened media coverage of politicians during elections is expected, our findings indicate a simultaneous increase in the politicization of climate change-related news. This finding suggests a growing, if not substantial, electoral significance attributed to the climate change issue on the Italian political landscape. We also control for the effects of different broadcasters, but we do not find any significant effect on polarization.

Furthermore, tackling our last research addressing the framing of climate change-related news, we employ two distinct models. This first model aims to explore the overall narrative surrounding climate change, and the extent to which media discourse delves into specific, actionable policy measures, ranging from a general call to action (=0) to a specific policy proposal (=2).

We do find that, compared to Cabinet Conte II, climate change news content is more often associated with specific policy actions during Cabinet Draghi, while there is no effect for the subsequent Cabinet Meloni. Again, while the result is meaningful, it should be noted that Cabinet Draghi was characterized by a heated debate over the reforms and actions to be implemented within the Green New Deal promoted by the European Union. In addition, for the electoral campaign, the items of news broadcast in periods immediately preceding it (Not in Campaign and Pre-Campaign) are more

likely to present actual policy proposals.[9] Interestingly, the opposite is true for how urgent the piece of news is relating to the climate change issue. Indeed, during Cabinet Draghi, climate change is framed as a less pressing issue compared to Cabinet Conte II – again, with no significant effect in comparison to Cabinet Meloni. On the other hand, the electoral campaign is marked as the period when the issue is presented as more urgent compared to the two preceding periods.

Table 6. Alternative explanations

Variables	Model 1 Politicization[10]	Model 2 Policy	Model 3 Urgency
(Reference: Conte II)			
Draghi	0.362***	0.660***	-0.528***
	(0.135)	(0.0500)	(0.0381)
Meloni	1.745***	-0.0483	-0.171
	(0.462)	(0.170)	(0.113)
(Reference: Electoral Campaign)			
Not in Campaign	-0.888***	0.371***	-0.376***
	(0.311)	(0.114)	(0.0760)
Pre-Campaign	-2.455***	0.753***	-0.264**
	(0.523)	(0.192)	(0.126)
Post-Campaign	-1.908***	-0.258*	0.0376
	(0.396)	(0.146)	(0.0987)
(Reference La7)			
RAI	-0.382	-0.533***	0.0159
	(0.257)	(0.0951)	(0.0683)
Mediaset	-0.298	-0.479***	0.0266
	(0.252)	(0.0933)	(0.0670)
Constant	1.795***	0.299**	2.296***
	(0.409)	(0.151)	(0.105)
Observations	1,235	1,204	1,046
R-squared	0.035	0.174	0.221

Source: own elaboration from the dataset

4. Conclusion

The analysis of climate change representation in the Italian media, particularly in primetime newscasts, reveals nuanced patterns and dynamics that shed light on the evolving discourse surrounding this critical global issue. Our examination spanned a three-year period (January 2020 - September 2023), thus incorporating the challenging

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[9] Even if we introduce the variable simply as a control, with respect to RAI and Mediaset, news items on La7 are more likely to include specific policy proposals related to climate change.

[10] All models are linear regression models, thus considering all three dependent variables as numeric for clarity of interpretation, but it should be noted that both 'Policy' and 'Urgency' could be interpreted as ordinal variables.

backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study, by means of a qualitative-quantitative approach, explores the media's role in shaping public perceptions of climate change.

While we expected a shift over time, our findings do not strongly support the notion of a consistent increase in climate change coverage over the analysed time frame. While there were notable peaks tied to specific events, such as President Sergio Mattarella and Pope Francis addressing environmental concerns, the overall trend does not depict a consistent upward trajectory. This challenges assumptions about a steady rise in media attention to climate change.

The prevalence of general calls to action in news content (59%) compared to specific policy proposals (16%) indicates a broad, overarching approach to the issue. However, political actors exhibit a balanced framing strategy, with a notable emphasis on specific policy actions (30%). This indicates a potential role for politicians in proposing concrete solutions to climate change while navigating the delicate balance of urgency. The framing analysis also highlights the distinct narrative surrounding climate activists, where a significant majority of news focuses on general calls to action (77%), potentially overshadowing specific policy proposals. This dynamic underscores the challenges activists face in communicating detailed policy recommendations amid expressive demonstrations. Furthermore, the electoral campaign emerges as a period when the urgency of the climate change issue is accentuated, possibly reflecting a strategic alignment with public sentiments during this crucial political phase. Nonetheless, our paper confirms previous findings (among others, Osservatorio di Pavia, Greenpeace) that, in general, political actors dedicate little to no attention to the climate crisis and, even during the campaign, the debate is limited to a few particular cases.

There are important limitations of the study that should be acknowledged when discussing our findings. The focus on primetime newscasts does not capture the entirety of media discourse, ignoring both traditional and social media, and the selective use of keywords could introduce biases.

This study makes a valuable contribution by shifting the focus to primetime television, an under-researched medium in climate change communication. Unlike prior studies that predominantly concentrate on print and digital media, this paper underscores the significant role of television in framing public perceptions of climate change. In Italy, where television remains a primary source of information for a large audience, understanding how climate change is framed in newscasts offers important insights into the broader media landscape. This research may also open the door for further studies into how traditional media can either support or hinder public understanding of environmental issues. Also, future research could explore the evolving role of social media in shaping climate change narratives and further investigate the impact of specific events on media coverage. In conclusion, by dissecting the coverage, politicization, and framing of climate change-related news, we deepen our understanding of how this critical issue is communicated to the public, with implications for broader societal awareness, political mobilization, and policy formulation.

Acknowledgements

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