The likeability of populism on social media in the 2018 Italian general election

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Abstract

This article focuses on the controlled communication that the main Italian political leaders – Silvio Berlusconi, Luigi Di Maio, Pietro Grasso, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Renzi, Matteo Salvini – published on their Facebook profiles during a period of four weeks before election day. Taking the 2018 Italian general election campaign as an illustration, this article aims to clarify whether and to what extent populist communication on Facebook differs from non-populist communication in terms of volume and likes received. Facebook was selected as the source, since digital politics and social media are becoming increasingly relevant for both political parties and citizens. The article shows that, in general, messages containing populist claims get more 'likes' compared to non-populist messages. However, only messages containing references to immigrants – namely complete and excluding populism – appear to be significantly correlated with the number of likes.

1. Introduction

The 2018 general election was thematised as a clash between antithetical conceptions of politics. It was structured around a series of antithetical dimensions: new against old politics, people against the elites, responsible against irresponsible candidates, and honest ones against the unacceptable. The election campaign – involving a divided centre-left, a compact centre-right, and the 5 Star Movement (M5S) – was defined by all kinds of journalists and commentators as the ugliest ever, centred on fake news, insults and false promises.[1] It also reached high levels of conflict between the incumbent Matteo Renzi, leader of the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) and the two most active competitors: Luigi Di Maio, political leader of the M5S, and Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN).

The election results returned a deeply changed political balance, in which, despite the fact that forming a government remains a big issue, winners and losers are clear. Undoubtedly to be counted among the winners is the M5S, whose result certifies both the growing attraction of its proposals and a deep discontent with the performance of traditional parties. The growth of the right, that the polls had recorded both in terms of voting intentions and increasing hostility towards migrants (Demos & Pi 2018), has rewarded

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[1] 'Elezioni 2018, la campagna più brutta della storia. Anche i talk show ridotti a monologhi', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 19 February 2018; 'Una campagna elettorale ferma a 70 anni fa', *Il Giornale*, 11 February 2018; Enrico Mentana: 'Questa è la più brutta campagna elettorale', *L'Aria che tira*, 2 March 2018.

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the LN at the expense of more moderate allies, such as Forza Italia (Go Italy, FI) and more radical ones, such as Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI). Finally, the decline of Renzi and PD approval attests that the former mayor of Florence failed not only to convince Italians during his term but also to mobilize his electorate during the election campaign (Emanuele 2018).

Within this big picture, this article aims to study an aspect which has been poorly empirically analysed so far, namely the use of a populist style of communication by political leaders on social media. As is well known, social media have changed the way politicians communicate with and relate to their constituencies during election campaigns and routine periods alike. In particular, it has been observed that they provide a powerful tool for populists to mobilise their followers, in addition to the traditional channels of political communication and mainstream media (Kriesi 2014: 367). If, in the 1990s, populist parties obtained visibility thanks mainly to tabloid media coverage (Mazzoleni 2003), the advent and widespread diffusion of social media platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) among citizens has now provided them with a way to communicate directly and more spontaneously with their audience (Bartlett 2014). Despite the growing importance of social media, few studies have examined the features of online populist communication and addressed the question of how to assess the success of online posts (Bobba 2018; Ernst et al. 2017).

This study focused on the controlled communication that the main leaders published on their Facebook profiles during a period of four weeks before the election day. The material collected was analysed for content to assess the presence of populist elements. Facebook was selected as the source, since digital politics and social media are becoming increasingly relevant for both political parties and citizens: in 2017, Italy had 73% of Internet penetration and 34,000,000 (56.1%) Facebook users (Digital in Italia 2018).

The structure of the article is as follows: in the next section, the key elements of populist discourse are discussed. The second section presents the research questions and methodology, while the third presents the results. The article shows that not all messages containing populist claims get more 'likes' compared to non-populist messages. Though populist posts against elites or immigrants are the largest ones, only messages containing references to this second issue – namely complete and excluding populism – are significantly correlated with the number of likes.

2. The key elements of populism

Populism is a contentious concept. Generally, scholars agree on a minimal definition. Populist discourse relies on the juxtaposition of a 'good people' with a series of 'bad elites'. Moreover, in the case of right-wing populists, the people's values, their identities and rights are considered to be endangered not only by the elites but also by the action of a series of 'others' that would receive preferential treatment by the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2007, 2014; Taggart 2000; Canovan 1999). The key elements of populist discourse are thus 'the people', 'the elites' and 'the others'.

Usually, populists in Western democracies present themselves as the 'real' democrats, the only ones able to denounce what went wrong, who is to blame, and what is to be done to reverse the situation (Betz and Johnson 2004: 323). In their storytelling,

democracy should reflect the will of the people, but it has been usurped and exploited by the 'elites'. The elites and 'others' (namely non-elites who are also considered as not part of 'the people') are held responsible for the difficult situation in which the people find themselves. 'The people' must express their voice and power through the populist leader and party.

Populism is centred on the idea of 'the pure people' (Mudde 2004: 544), a homogeneous and virtuous community, a place where, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 12) observes, 'it is crystal-clear who is ''one of us'' and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion'. The people are – or should be – united and sovereign. Potential divisions are caused by political, intellectual and media elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 5-6; Taggart 2000: 92). For populists, politics is therefore a direct and non-mediated expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004: 544).

Populism relies on a 'Manichean outlook' that combines the positive valorisation of the people with the denigration of their enemies, namely the elites and the 'others' (Panizza 2005: 16-17). The elites are generally accused of being incompetent and self-interested when not actually conspiring against the people and seeking to undermine democracy. They comprise political, media, financial, judicial and intellectual elites. The identity of 'the others' is country dependent but, for right-wing populists in Europe, it usually includes out-groups such as immigrants, homosexuals, Roma communities and other specific social categories that are held not to be 'of the people'.

Empirical evidence has also revealed that populist parties have been favoured by the proliferation of social media, and especially by the effective use that populist actors have made of these new platforms. This has made populist messages central to the public debate as well as in the daily life of ordinary citizens (Engesser et al. 2016; Aalberg et al. 2016). Moreover, candidates use populist style not only as a form of communication but also as a mobilization resource to effectively reach their constituencies (Roncarolo 2017).

As regards our case study, it is worth noting that Italy has experienced innovative and durable forms of populism compared to other European countries in the last few decades. It has been defined, among others, as the 'promised land' (Tarchi 2015), an 'enduring market' (Bobba and McDonnell 2015) and a 'breeding ground' for populism (Bobba and Legnante 2016). The emergence of the LN in the late 1980s and the unexpected performance of Silvio Berlusconi at the head of Forza Italia (FI, 'Go Italy') in the early 1990s were the first stages of the recent history of populism in Italy. Since 2012, also FdI has reached the right-wing populist field. Finally, the success of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, 'Five Star Movement') since 2013 has expanded the varieties of populism (Caiani and Graziano 2016) to include non-right-wing parties. Some scholars, have also described the Italian situation as characterized by the presence of an 'endemic populism' that overflows from strictly populist precincts into the general political discourse (Bracciale and Mazzoleni 2018).

3. Research questions and methods

In the last few years, the role of the Web in explaining the success of populist parties and movements has been stressed by the literature addressing the study of the new wave of populism in Europe (Bartlett 2014; Kriesi 2014). Recent research has also showed empirically that social media are highly compatible with populist communication (Bobba

2018; Ernst et al. 2017). The underlying concept of these interpretations is that populists can reach a broader range of citizens through social media and thereby are able to increase support for issues that were not so popular previously. As such, a first research question is:

> **RQ1:** *Do leaders of populist parties get more likes than leaders of non-populist parties in their FB communication?*

In addition, moving from populist as the source of communication to the presence of populist contents within a message, a second intertwined question is:

> **RQ2:** *Do populist messages get more likes than non-populist messages on FB?*

Finally, considering that populist posts could stress and combine different aspects related to the key elements of populism – the people, elites, others – the last question is:

> **RQ3:** *Which types of populist message get more likes on FB?*

To tackle these questions, a quantitative content analysis was conducted of the messages posted by the main Italian leaders – Silvio Berlusconi, Luigi Di Maio, Pietro Grasso, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Renzi, Matteo Salvini – on their official Facebook accounts. All messages posted on these accounts – except for shares, links, images or event announcements without any text – were gathered and analysed for the last four weeks of the election campaign (31 January – 3 March 2018). In total, the sample consisted of 1,459 posts.

As regards our cases we made our selection and classification relying both on the literature and on empirical evidences of the 2017 Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES, see Polk et al. 2017). In the literature, LN is considered as a classical example of radical right populism (Betz 2018) or ethno-regionalist populist party (Spektorowski, 2003). FI has been defined as neoliberal populist (Mudde 2007: 47). M5S, though harder to classify due to its eclectic mix of right- and left-wing policies, presents a populist ideological profile in terms of opposition between the people and the elites (Fabbrini and Lazar 2013). Research focused on FdI as a populist party is scarce so far. However, when studying the Italian political context, some scholars have included it in the populist field (Castelli Gattinara 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

As regards CHES data, in 2018 for the first time the survey also includes two questions related to the core definition of populism: people-centrism[2] and anti-elitism[3]. Three out of six parties are clearly considered populist by the experts interviewed: LN,

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[2] 'Some political parties take the position that "the people" should have the final say on the most important issues, for example, by voting directly in referendums. At the opposite pole are political parties that believe that elected representatives should make the most important political decisions. Where do the parties fall on this dimension?' Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2017 Codebook: www.chesdata.eu.

[3] 'Next, we would like you to think about the salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric for a party. How important was the anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric to the parties in their public stance?' Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2017 Codebook: www.chesdata.eu.

M5S, and FdI[4]. On the other side, PD and Movimento Democratico e Progressista (the major party of the left-wing electoral cartel, Liberi e Uguali, included in the survey) scored a low level of populism. Finally, Forza Italia shows an intermediate result.

Combining these two sources of data, we therefore considered as non-populist parties PD and LeU, and as populist parties the other four: LN, M5S, FdI, and FI. For this latter party we are aware that something is probably changing in terms of populist attitudes of the party. Still, we preferred to be conservative by considering FI a populist party.

Two coders content-analysed the messages to assess which posts were or were not populist, by the presence of the three key elements of populist discourse outlined previously: 'elites', 'the people' and 'the others'. An intercoder reliability test was conducted on a subsample of 150 posts (10 per cent of the entire sample) and yielded satisfactory results (Krippendorff's Alpha, KA >0.67). In particular, in the category 'the people' (KA 0.87), we placed references to the 'common man', Italian identities, Christian tradition, made in Italy, etc. The category 'elites' (KA 0.81) contains criticism of blame attribution to politicians, banks, the media, the judicial system, the EU, etc. Finally, in the category 'others' (KA 0.85) was coded criticism of or blame attribution to immigrants, Roma communities, Muslims, homosexuals and welfare recipients.

Relying on the idea that on social media 'populism manifested itself in a fragmented form' and that this fragmentation 'could be an empirical expression of populism's "thin" nature and "inherent incompleteness"' (Engesser et al. 2017: 1121-1122), all the posts containing at least one reference to the aforementioned key elements have been considered as an expression of populism. Following the typology of populist discourse by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), the three key elements were then combined in order to identify different types of populist messages:

> COMPLETE POPULISM: posts containing references to all three key elements;
> EMPTY POPULISM: posts containing only references to 'the people';
> EXCLUDING POPULISM: posts containing references to 'the others' and posts containing references to 'the people' and 'the others';
> ANTI-ELITIST POPULISM: posts containing references to 'the elites and posts containing references to 'the people' and 'the elites';
> CONTENTIOUS POPULISM: posts containing references to 'the elites' and 'the others'.

Complete and empty populism are operationalized as in Jagers and Walgrave: in the first case, each post including all the key elements together were coded, while in the second one, those posts referring only to 'the people' were coded. As regards excluding and anti-elitist populism, besides considering the references to 'the elites' and 'the others' in a given post, the combination of these with 'the people' is also taken into account. Finally, contentious populism is a combination that highlights the aggressive and contentious nature of messages that are at the same time against both 'the elites' and 'the others'. A typical example consists in the blaming of immigrants by attributing

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[4] The average score of people-centrism and anti-elitism items (1-10 scale) is 9,88 for the M5S, 7.84 for the LN, 6.65 for FdI, 3.68 for FI, 2,61 for PD, and 2,14 for Movimento Democratico e Progressista, the major party of the left-wing electoral cartel, LeU, included in the survey.

responsibility to some kind of elite, such as politics, international finance, or the media. Since it is a combination of 'the elites' and 'the others', only right-wing populists could publish this type of claim.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows the number of posts published by leaders of populist and non-populist parties as well as the number of likes they received. As mentioned, Berlusconi, Di Maio, Meloni, and Salvini have been considered as leaders of populist parties, while Grasso and Renzi as leaders of non-populist parties. These data allow us to provide an initial response to RQ1.

Leaders of populist parties appear more active and their posts more liked: on average, populists publish 4.5 times more posts than non-populists, while they receive about 1,000 likes more for each post. Looking deeper into the data, Berlusconi stands out for being the least active and popular, while Salvini published more posts (around 15 per day), and Di Maio received more likes (9,446). Among non-populist leaders, on the one hand, Grasso appears to be little focused on social media for the election campaign, while on the other hand, Renzi – whose favourite medium is Twitter – gets a considerable amount of likes when compared to Di Maio and Salvini. The figure of the PD leader shows that likeability is dependent on several factors linked not only to the content, but also to the type of message (text, video, image, etc.), to the source that publishes a post, and to the frames and/or emotions the post contains. Nonetheless, populist contents, in this particular age, are certainly among those elements capable of increasing the communication success of a party/leader on social media.

Table 1. Activity and likeability of leaders of populist and non-populist parties on FB

	N	Likes (Mean)	Median	FB Fans (N)
Leaders of populist parties (Mean)	327	6,252	4,197	
Berlusconi	136	2,826	1,740	1,061,607
Di Maio	329	9,446	5,595	1,621,552
Meloni	362	3,828	1,972	834,740
Salvini	482	8,909	6,672	2,213,012
Leaders of non-populist parties (Mean)	75	5,376	3,874	
Grasso	55	3,507	2,864	144,080
Renzi	95	7,244	4,667	1,124,102
Total	**1,459**	**6,890**	**4,159**	

As regards the populist content of the message, Figure 1 and Table 2 show that populist postings received more likes than non-populist ones almost continuously during the campaign. The general trend highlights three peaks linked to the particular success of three individual posts. On 6 February, Salvini published a video containing his speech to the European Parliament against the EU on the subject of immigration, achieving 74,000 likes. Di Maio is instead the author of the other two posts that move the average of likes upwards. The first one was posted on 13 February and concerns the so-called

'reimbursement scandal' involving the M5S (130,297). M5S requires its MPs to donate a part of their salary to a fund which helps small enterprises. However, some MPS have made only fake bank transfers instead of actually donating money. Di Maio in this post promises to expel from the party all those who have not been honest. The second very popular message was posted on 2 March. It contains an appeal to vote, namely a letter entitled 'Despite everything, we will change Italy' that achieved 107,612 likes.

Figure 1. Trend of populist and non-populist messages in the last four weeks before election day (average number of likes)
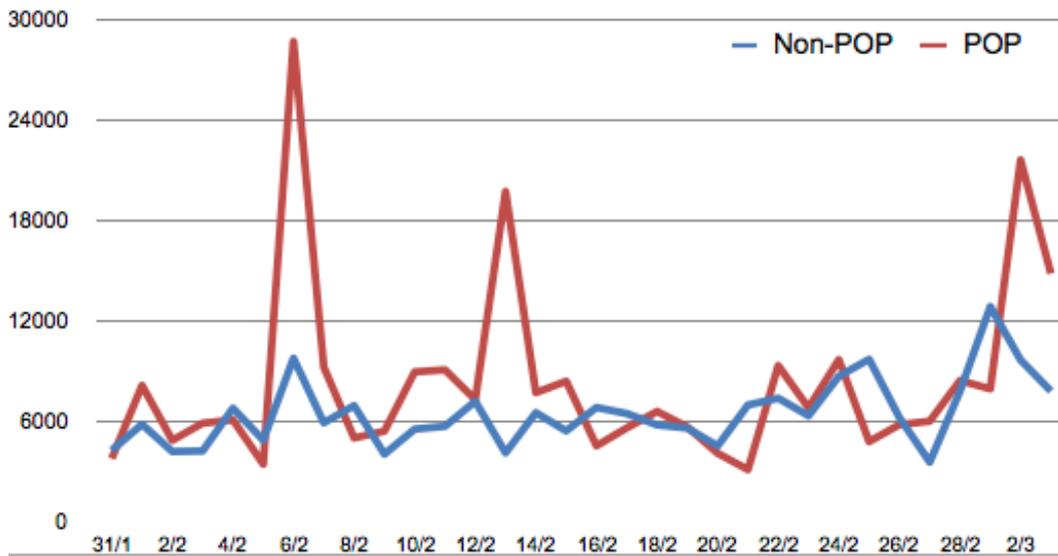

Table 2 shows the relevance of populist contents within the leaders' FB communication. The data allow us to clearly identify two groups. On the one hand, Salvini, Meloni and Di Maio show a relevant percentage of populist messages (between 20.1% of the M5S leader and 30.1% of the FdI leader). On the other hand, Renzi, Grasso and (contrary to the literature) Berlusconi, show percentages no higher than 11.6%. Not surprisingly, the messages of populist parties leaders also achieve a greater number of likes when compared with their respective non-populist messages as well as with the messages of non-populist party leaders.

Table 2. Activity and likeability of leaders of populist and non-populist parties on FB

	Non-populist					
	% (N)	Likes (Mean)	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Median
Berlusconi	91.9 (125)	2,812	3,333	373	21,920	1,633
Di Maio	79.9 (263)	9,085	12,267	733	118,806	5,779
Grasso	92.7 (51)	3,603	2,955	272	15,959	2,929
Meloni	69.9 (253)	3,815	6,634	147	79,719	2,026
Renzi	88.4 (84)	7,139	7,277	724	32,039	4,636
Salvini	77.6 (374)	8,583	7,859	407	73,702	6,493
Total	**78.8 (1,150)**	**6,695**	**8,706**	**147**	**118,806**	**4,068**

	Populist					
	% (N)	**Likes (Mean)**	**Std. Dev.**	**Min**	**Max**	**Median**
Berlusconi	8.1 (11)	2,986	2,098	532	8,772	2,508
Di Maio	20.1 (66)	10,881	20,711	909	130,297	4,732
Grasso	7.3 (4)	2,286	1,704	1,240	4,814	1,545
Meloni	30.1 (109)	3,858	6,025	360	41,299	1,857
Renzi	11.6 (11)	8,044	6,784	2,318	21,405	5,531
Salvini	22.4 (108)	10,038	9,346	1,397	74,060	7,435
Total	**21.2 (309)**	**7,616**	**12,073**	**360**	**130,297**	**4,451**

Turning to the type of populist message, Table 3 shows that the more frequent type is excluding populism (101 posts), closely followed by anti-elitist (92). On the contrary, complete (15) and contentious populism (32) are the least frequent types. In terms of likes received, complete populism, though the least frequent type, obtained the highest level of likes (11,223), while its opposite, empty populism, the lowest level (5,209).

Table 3. Types of populism published by the main Italian political leaders on FB

	% (N)	**Likes (Mean)**	**Std. Dev.**	**Min**	**Max**	**Median**
Non Populist	**1,150**	**6,695**	**8,706**	**147**	**118,806**	**4,068**
Populist	**309**	**8,132**	**10,398**	**360**	**130,297**	**4,451**
Empty	72	5,326	6,001	533	30,233	3,494
Complete	15	11,223	11,915	1,088	47,810	7,601
Excluding	98	8,447	14,409	532	130,297	5,280
Anti-Elitist	92	7,874	14,326	360	107,612	3,754
Contentious	32	7,787	5,339	494	23,742	6,733

Table 4. Types of populism published by Salvini, Di Maio, and Renzi on FB

	Salvini			**Di Maio**			**Renzi**		
	AVG Likes	**Median**	**N**	**AVG Likes**	**Median**	**N**	**AVG Likes**	**Median**	**N**
Non Populist	8,583	6,493	374	9,085	5,779	263	7,139	4,636	84
Populist	10,038	7,435	108	10,881	4,732	66	8,044	5,531	11
Empty	7,891	5,315	22	8,070	4,127	11	6,749	4,605	9
Complete	16,602	12,503	8	-	-	0	-	-	0
Excluding	10,172	8,286	38	13,303	4,185	16	-	-	0
Anti-Elitist	10,072	5,560	20	10,681	5,448	39	13,873	13,873	2
Contentious	9,486	8,797	20	-	-	0	-	-	0

The likeability of the most popular leaders – Salvini, Di Maio, and Renzi – seems to be differently linked to populism. Table 4 clearly shows that all these leaders improved their results when they published populist posts: on average more than a thousand likes for Renzi, about 1,500 for Salvini and almost 1,800 for Di Maio. Still, the populist content of these posts differs greatly.

On the one hand, as mentioned, Renzi makes little use of populist rhetoric and when he does so, he mainly posts appeals to the people (9 posts out of 11). These are the types of claim defined by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) as empty populism typical of all parties' election campaigning. The last two messages in the sample contain instead anti-elitist claims that refer to a Manichean view of politics. What is striking about these few populist posts is that the empty populism ones receive few likes (on average 6,749), while anti-elitist ones double the result (13,873). On the other hand, Salvini and Di Maio – besides being among those who post more populist contents – are the two leaders that benefited more in term of likes from this type of communication. Salvini especially gets likes in response to complete, anti-elitist and excluding populism, while only these last two types are relevant in the communication of Di Maio. As in the case of Renzi, here again a similar pattern is found, suggesting that heated and contentious communication probably produces more engagement with users on Facebook.

Table 5. Users engagement with different types of populist posts on Facebook

	B	SE		
Empty populism	-1,053.34	1,114.41		
Complete populism	4,991.26*	2,385.84		
Excluding populism	2,037.57*	973.67		
Anti-elitist populism	746.21	999.58		
Contentious populism	1,082.75	1,653.45		
Salvini	1,309.47	1,033.54		
Di Maio	1.965.21▪	1,071.78		
Meloni	-3,844.76***	1,063.95		
Berlusconi	-4,524.66***	1,223.72		
Grasso	-3,842.29*	1,550.10		
Renzi	(omitted)			
(constant)	7,328.05***	943.90	N = 1459	$R^2 = 0.085$

Note OLS regressions. Dependent variable: Likes count. Entries are non-standardized B-coefficients and standard errors
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$ ▪$p < 0.1$

A thorough look at the different types of populism through an Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression model (Table 5) offers some evidence of this suggestion. Three main features stand out. First, complete populism – although the least frequent type – significantly affects the number of likes: messages containing references to the people, elites, and the others together gained around 5,000 'likes' compared to other messages. Second, also a simple reference to immigrants, minorities, welfare recipients – namely excluding populism – contributes to the explanation of likeability, even though it appears to be less relevant in terms of magnitude of the correlation coefficient compared to complete populism. Third,

all the other types of populism – empty, contentious, and anti-elitist – are not significantly correlated with the likeability of a given post, meaning that the amount of likes they receive is independent from populism. In addition, as regards the leaders, Di Maio is the only one who is significantly and positively correlated to the number of likes: a post published by the leader of the M5S received around 2,000 likes more than Renzi (reference category) regardless of its – populist or not-populist – content.

5. Conclusions

A recent strand of research has highlighted social media as being a fertile ground for populist actors (Engesser et al. 2017). Taking the 2018 Italian general election campaign as an illustration, this article follows this line, aiming to clarify whether and to what extent populist communication on Facebook differs from non-populist communication in terms of volume and likeability. Our findings confirm the existence of different patterns of communication. Indeed, we find evidence that posts containing populist claims get more likes than non-populist ones on Facebook. However, not all populist messages were equally popular over the period analysed. In our sample only complete and excluding populist messages boost the number of likes of a given post. This means that right-wing and M5S leaders put great emphasis on 'the other' and that these messages were also the most popular among their fans on FB. On the contrary, anti-elitism – though relevant in terms of size – does not impact on the likeability of leaders' communication.

In the light of the data presented, an element clearly emerges: in the 2018 Italian general elections the debate was polarized between leaders and parties using populist communication and leaders and parties that did not use it. This was particularly evident on social media but, more in general, this division structured the entire campaign, influencing both media coverage and the action of all political actors.

The adoption by LN, M5S and FdI of populism as a communicative macro-frame pursued a twofold objective. On the one hand, it was used to mobilize the electorate by exalting the opposition Us vs. Them, the people threatened in its integrity, its values and its wealth by the immigrants and the outgoing political class (led by Renzi). On the other hand, it allowed a simplification of the political debate by interpreting everything through a Manichean division between right and wrong, good and bad, honest and corrupt, new and old. The success of this rhetoric and contents imposed on the other parties their agenda and rhythm. This found both the centre-left (PD and LeU), and FI not entirely ready to implement effective countermeasures. The result was an election campaign sparsely articulated in terms of content, but strongly connoted in terms of the use of populist communication that had a polarizing effect on the entire political-media system.

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