Artigo

Race for attention: Twitter campaign of Italian party leaders before the 2018 parliamentary elections

Corrida pela atenção: campanha no Twitter de líderes de partidos italianos antes das eleições parlamentares de 2018

Carrera por la atención: campaña de Twitter de los líderes del partido italiano antes de las elecciones parlamentarias de 2018

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Abstract:
The 2018 Italian Parliamentary elections marked the success of populist parties. With the consolidation of hybrid media campaigning Twitter became a growingly important communication channel for party leaders. When analysing the Twitter communication from 1 February 2018 to 4 March 2018 (day of the elections) Matteo Salvini and Matteo Renzi dominated the campaign in the Twittersphere. Other party leaders didn't used Twitter as skilfully as these two politicians, their engagement indicators are lower than that of Salvini and Renzi. The internal communicational dynamic between the party leaders shows that their main target was Matteo Renzi. Even though he had the most followers within this period, overall his communication indicators were good, his party suffered a historical loss at the elections.
Keywords: *Italy; parliamentary elections; campaign; Twitter, political communication*

Resumo:
As eleições parlamentares italianas de 2018 marcaram o sucesso dos partidos populistas. Com a consolidação da campanha de mídia híbrida, o Twitter se tornou um canal de comunicação cada vez mais importante para os líderes partidários. Ao analisar a comunicação do Twitter entre 1 de fevereiro de 2018 a 4 de março de 2018 (dia das eleições), Matteo Salvini e Matteo Renzi dominaram a campanha na Twittersfera. Outros líderes de partido não usaram o Twitter com tanta habilidade quanto esses dois políticos, seus indicadores de engajamento são inferiores aos de Salvini e Renzi. A dinâmica de comunicação interna entre as lideranças partidárias mostra que seu principal alvo era Matteo Renzi. Apesar de ter tido o maior número de seguidores neste período e de modo geral seus indicadores de comunicação terem sido bons, seu partido sofreu uma derrota histórica nas eleições.
Palavras-chave: *Itália; eleições parlamentares; campanha; Twitter, comunicação política*

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Resumen:

Las elecciones parlamentarias italianas de 2018 demostraron el éxito de los partidos populistas. Con la consolidación de las campañas políticas por medios de comuniación híbridos (Con la consolidación de la hibridación de medios en campañas políticas), Twitter se ha convertido en un canal de comunicación cada vez más importante para los líderes de los partidos. Al hacer un análisis de la comunicación en Twitter entre el 1 de febrero de 2018 y el 4 de marzo de 2018 (el día de las elecciones) Matteo Salvini y Matteo Renzi dominaban la campaña en la 'Twittershpere'. Otros líderes de los partidos no usaban la plataforma de Twitter tan hábilmente como los dos políticos mencionados, y sus indicadores de participacón eran menos bajos que los de Salvini y Renzi. La dinámica de comunicación interna entre los líderes de los partidos muestra que su objetivo principal fue Matteo Renzi. A pesar de que él tenía la mayor cantidad de seguidores y en general sus indicadores de comunicación eran buenos, su partido sufrió una derrota histórica en las elecciones

Palabras clave: *Italia; Elecciones parlamentarias; Campaña; Twitter, comunicación política*

Introduction

The communicative style of political actors have become increasingly personalised (BENTIVEGNA, 2015), thus analysing social media communication of party leaders during campaign period merits academic attention. The paper aims to understand how Italian party leaders communicated through Twitter from 1 February 2018 until 4 March (date of the parliamentary elections).

The structure of the paper is set out as follows. After the results of the 2018 elections are briefly presented two introductory sections aim to help understanding the Italian political reality. After the introductory part methodology and data collection methods are displayed and research questions are proposed, this is followed by the analytical part.

Election results

The 2018 general elections resulted in a hung parliament without clear winner in a tripolar scenario, where the protagonist political forces are of irreconcilable nature (CALÓ *et al*, 2018). The centre-right coalition received the most votes, however, without being able to claim absolute majority. This coalition formed by Berlusconi's Go Italy (Forza Italia, FI), Matteo Salvini's Lega and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) obtained roughly 37% of the votes. A significant change occurred within the coalition: Lega (17%) outperformed FI (14%) for the first time in national elections. The second position was obtained by a single M5S with 32% of the votes, while the centre-left came third with the historical defeat (23%) of its main actor, Partito Democratico (PD). Liberi e Uguali (LeU) a leftist party formed by ex-PD politicians competed alone and obtained 3% of the votes. The mainstream parties from both the left and right – PD and FI – suffered severe losses, thus were not able to form a coalition government, not even with the participation of minor centrist parties. (CHIARAMONTE *et al*, 2018). The main populist parties – Lega and M5S – together received almost 50% of total votes, thus no-one could have formed a government without the support of at least one of them.

While the main contestants remained the same as in 2013 (centre-right, centre-left, M5S) the internal dynamics of the two competing coalitions changed (CHIARAMONTE et al, 2018), and a clear trend emerged: voters' support to populist parties (FI, M5S) grew, while traditional parties (PD, FI) lost ground. After lengthy discussions the first populist government of Western Europe came into power after M5S and Lega had decided to form a coalition.

Background

After about 20 years of electoral stability in 2013 Italy experienced an electoral earthquake: an anti-establishment party (M5S) emerged as a third pole in the political spectrum. Either centre-left or centre-right coalitions lost votes to new parties such as M5S or Civic Choice (Scelta Civica). Compared to 2013, in the 2018 elections more than a quarter of the voters changed preference (PAPARO, 2018) which means that new opportunities arose for new political actors, as many voters became available in the electoral market (EMANUELE et al. 2020). From 2013 on it became evident that the establishment vs. anti-establishment conflict would play a fundamental role in structuring voter preferences (CHIARAMONTE *et al*, 2018).

The disillusion in the political elites of the First and Second Republics led the frustrated electorate to make a statement in protest. The vacuum created by the mainstream political elite was filled with a mix of populist and extremist parties that weaponised wedge issues (e.g. illegal migration, economic problems) to their advantage (SLIBERFELD, 2018). But who are the Italian populists? A commonly accepted academic definition of populism is still lacking, since scholars disagree on categorisation, labels, and boun-

daries between its different manifestations (MUDDE, 2004.). There has been a misuse of this term in the public discourse. One of the obstacles of defining populism is that it has been applied to differing historical phenomena (movements, parties, regimes, intellectuals), across various periods, and often it has been used in a pejorative tone (CAIANI; GRAZIANO, 2016). Generally, scholars agree on a minimal definition. Populist parties rely on the juxtaposition of a 'good people' with 'bad elites'. The key elements of their discourse are 'the people', 'the elites' and 'the others'. They prefer short-term policies, usually with protectionist features (e.g. trade protection, opposition to foreign immigration, citizenship-income, etc.) without taking into consideration their long-term costs. (GUISO et al. 2017). Five key elements were identified by ENGESSER et al. (2017): 1.) emphasizing in the sovereignty of the people, 2.) advocating for the people, 3.) attacking the elite, 4.) ostracizing others, 5.) turning to the notion of 'heartland'. Based on these characteristics according to the literature in Italy two main parties can be define as populist: Lega and M5S (BAKKER et al. 2020, DIJKSTRA et al. 2020): the announcement of their leaders regard short term policies (flat tax, reform of the pension system, citizenship income, etc).

Italian polity is strongly affected by the 'mediatization' of politics (STRÖMBÄCK, 2008): political sphere and discourse had to adapt to the media logics (ALTHEIDE; SNOW, 1979) that preferred to cover actual people rather than ideologies. It triggered a '(political) celebrity effect' in the collective imagery and then in the polity. As a consequence, a process of personalization of leadership started within the Italian parties (MOLNÁR, 2017). Amongst the six parties analyzed in the paper FI, Lega, PD can be identified as personalized parties.

In Italy the traditional media environment is highly politicized, traditional parties control all means of communication. Hybrid media campaigning consolidated in 2018: parties used hybrid communicative strategies, integrating traditional media logics with digital media logics (BRACCIALE; CEPERNICH, 2018:1). The structure of hybrid campaign is based on three pillars: real space, television and Internet. This new reality might be problematic for traditional political forces – which in our case are the 'mainstream' parties of the Second Republic – which need to deal with the transformation of representation democracy, of its political language and of its communication. (CHADWICK, 2013) The nature of social media can contribute to strengthen populist parties when elite vs. common people logic is applied to it: these new online platforms are engineered in a way to give equal opportunities for every user to publish content (BRACCIALE *et al*, 2018).

Methodology

The paper provides an analysis of politicians' Twitter communication. When and how did they tweet compared to each? Who dominated the Twittersphere in the election campaign, and did it affect the outcome of the vote? We analysed the tweets produced by six party leaders (Matteo Renzi (PD - centre-left coalition), Matteo Salvini (Lega - centre-right coalition), Silvio Berlusconi (FI - centre-right coalition), Luigi Di Maio (M5S - running alone), Pietro Grasso (LeU - running alone) and Emma Bonino (More Europe - centre-left coalition) in the last month before the elections, from 1 February 2018 until 4 March (date of the elections). We collected data from Twitter

and carried out a software-assisted corpus-based analysis. Our corpus of tweets contained 1698 items, while the corpus of all activities (including any kind of mentions, comments etc.) contained 44883 items that formed the base of our analysis. Our goal was to identify similarities and dissimilarities between the party leaders' communication strategies on Twitter. Quantitative and qualitative computer-assisted methods are appropriate for a corpus-based analysis with a supervised approach (FRANZOSI, 2018).

Twitter bots are automated user accounts that interact with Twitter using an application programming interface (API). They can be programmed to perform tasks normally associated with human interaction, including following users, favoring tweets, directing message (DM) other users and, most importantly, they can tweet content, and retweet anything posted by a specific set of users or featuring a specific hashtag. In the case of a campaign, however, political or otherwise, they are normally used to generate mass interest in specific content by spreading messages at a rate that isn't possible with human users. We used the beta version of BotSight software on our corpus. To determine whether an account is a bot, the software looks at over 20 different distinguishing features per case, including the amount of randomness in the Twitter handle, whether the account is verified, the rate at which it is acquiring followers, and the account's description (KATZ, 2020). With the help of BotSight we found that less than 8% of our bigger corpus (containing all the comments and mentions, not only the tweets posted by the party leaders) were made by bots.

Twitter can be considered as an apt platform for analysing online political communi-

cation since it is mostly used for short (limited length), public text messages. Basic actions on Twitter are posting original content (tweet), and sharing the original content posted by others (retweet). While there seem to be a general agreement that tweeting is the form of participation in the communication space (BENTIVEGNA; MARCHETTI, 2017, HAWTHORNE *et al*, 2013), there are several ways of decoding what retweeting means (FREELON, 2014, SMALL, 2011), but the majority of scholars agrees that retweeting is a tool to propagate content. (ELMER, 2013, SMALL, 2011) More generally, sharing content on social media amplifies the reach of a message, thus it 'hacks' the status of attention economy (SHIN; THORSON, 2017), since it expands the circle of users who see the original content. As BRACCIALE *et al.* (2018) argues that retweeting itself is an action, received retweets can be considered an indicator of success.

The next feature to analyse is the hashtag function, since they are central to the organisation of information on Twitter. Through the use of hashtags tweets can be sent to an audience larger than one's followers. These labels attached to the messages exhibit many characteristics associated with participatory culture (DAVIS, 2013). Hashtags are created by Twitter users (not by the site), and may be of various kinds, ranging from tags which categorise the subject matter of the tweet to idiosyncratic examples which function as expression punctuation (PAGE, 2012, 184).

This paper builds on the following indicators:

1. Communicative strategies aimed at maximising visibility: taking into consideration broadcast communication rule, the greater the communication flow, the greater the visibility.

a. Productivity indicator:
   frequency – daily average of produced tweets
   intensity - number of posts published per week

b. Interactivity indicator:
   mentions done – percentage of tweets with a mention out of the total number of produced tweets
   replies done – percentage of replies out of the total number of produced tweets
   retweets done – percentage of retweets out of the total number of produced tweets

2. Engagement measures party leaders' potential for activating online supporters
   a. retweets received
   b. likes received
   c. reach
   d. all mentions: all mentions done using the username of the party leaders (tweets, comments, etc.)

3. Topics based on hashtags

Findings and discussion

Number of posts and intensity

The 2018 election campaign was a debut for Berlusconi's Twitter account. Within the timeframe of our analysis, he was the most active tweeter, with an average of 21, 69 tweet per day (total of 694). In this respect Berluconi is followed by Salvini (612 tweets) and by Meloni (120 tweets). Our findings show that the leaders of the centre-right coalition used Twitter within the timeframe of our analysis much more extensively than any other political leader. They were followed by the centre-left coalition (PD, +EU) with a total of 173 tweets. The third 'pole' of the tripartite construction of the Italian politics (M5S with Luigi di Maio) underperformed in this matter compared to the centre-left.

Mentions and engagement

When analysing engagement and reach two contestants stand out: Renzi and Salvini. The maximum reach of their tweets was 22 624 115 for Salvini and 23 264 766 for Renzi which means that through retweeteing more than 22 million Twitter users were reached by a certain tweet of these politicians. After them a significant gap can be found: the third contestant within this classification is Meloni who reached about 90% less users than Renzi and Salvini (slightly more than 2 million users). It is interesting to note the difference between them and the Prime Minister candidate of the then biggest party of Italy: Di Maio reached a maximum of only 1 million users. It is worth noting that even though Berlusconi tweeted the most within the timeframe of analysis the maximum reach was about 721 000, thus he was less successful in engaging his followers in sharing his content.

In other engagement indicators (likes and retweets received) Salvini dominated the election campaign in Twitter: he received much more retweets (73 414) than the other leaders. Received retweets is one of the few indicators where Salvini wasn't closely followed by Renzi, since Di Maio with this limited Twitter-activity finished second. In this regard only non-significant differences can be observed within Di Maio, Meloni and Renzi, while Grasso and Bonino are lagging behind. Observing the number of likes received Salvini outperformed significantly any other party leader by receiving almost three times as much likes as Renzi who classifies second in this regard.

Retweets and mentions

At first look it could be presumed that due to Salvini's high frequency of tweeting (with an average of 19.1 tweets/day compared to Di Maio's average of 1.6 or Renzi's 2.5) his posts didn't generate as much noise within the Twittersphere as those of less frequent tweeters (e.g. Di Maio, Renzi). When analysing the significant underperformance of Berlusconi and Bonini – two candidates with indicative differences: Bonini with a low number of tweets produced, but with much more followers than Berlusconi and Berlusconi with the highest number of tweets and the lowest number of followers - these factors might worth consideration. The number of followers – which constitutes the pool of potential retweeters and likers – and the number of produced tweets differ significantly, however there is no correlation between the number of followers and retweets (r= 0,092) or between the number of followers and likes (r=0,15). Thus Salvini's domination regarding retweets and likes received isn't only the consequence of the law of the averages and it is neither a direct consequence of his capacity to engage his followers, since looking into averages other party leaders were more successful in this regard. However, with the high number of posts he managed to counterbalance the fact that the average number of retweets and likes received by Salvini is lower than the average of the whole corpus analysed.

In order to analyse which party leaders were subject to the public discourse on the Twittersphere a closer look should be taken on the indicator 'all mentions'. Through the proprietary algorithm of the online listening software used for the analysis we were able to gather and analyse all statements, opinions, and comments on Twitter that contain keywords specified in the search query (in our case the username of the party leaders). The results show once again that Salvini managed to surpass the others, since his username was

used more than 228 thousand times during the four weeks before Election Day. Even though Salvini stands out in this regard, it should be noted that only Renzi (cc. 170 thousand mentions) and Di Maio (cc. 142 thousand mentions) exceeded 100 thousand mentions, other part leaders were less part of Twitter conversation. Correlation between all mentions and the number of followers is somewhat stronger than in the case of likes and retweets received, but it is still far from being direct (r=0,446).

Topics

Through our software-assisted content analysis we were able to collect and compare the most frequent hashtags of the party leaders. Our results show that within the period analysed top hashtags used by the party leaders didn't function as a tool to propagate policy proposals. Two major categories of hashtags can be determined: hashtags referring to well-known Italian political TV shows (e.g. #dallavostraoarte, #portaaporta, #ottoemezzo, #la7) and hashtags encouraging to vote for the respective parties (e.g. #4marzovotolega, #giorgiapresidente, #4marzovotofdi, #sceglipd, etc.). The second category is an acclaimed strategy of political communication as hashtags also generate popularly referenced topics, known as "Trending Topics". If a tag achieves trending status, then assumedly it is one of influence, popularity, and importance that is why politicians tend to emphasise their party affiliations during parliamentary elections campaigns. The importance of the first category is to be emphasised, since these hashtags refer to programmes of the *traditional* media which is still an important source of information for more than 80% of the Italians (NEWMAN; FLETCHER

et al., 2018). With using hashtags referring to TV programmes party leaders integrated digital and traditional media logics in their Twitter communication. It is of a peculiar feature of the Twitter campaign that within their top hashtags only Berlusconi (#flattax) and Di Maio (#convergisuldimezzamento) used tags for the propagation of proposals.

When comparing top hashtags used by the party leaders with those of the corpus of their 'all mentions' database some differences can be observed. The two categories mentioned above (TV shows and encouragement to vote) are present within the corpus of all mentions proliferating the party leaders' intentions to create a bridge between traditional and social media and to create Trending Topics. Within the top hashtags of their all mentions the names of the party leaders – except for the case of Grasso – appear, through this practice their audience is expanded. Apart from this in the cases of Bonino, Renzi, and Berlusconi no significant changes can be observed between the top hashtags used by the politicians and their all mentions corpus. Three 'new' politicised topics appear when analysing all mentions: a.) the situation of Rome (#ilsalvaromasiamonoi, #romacapitale) found within the corpus of Meloni, Di Maio and Grasso encompassing the whole right-left spectre of Italian politics, b.) #novincoli appearing in the case of the same leaders and c.) #macerata that we consider to be a politicised trending topic appearing by right wing leaders campaigning with the topic of migration as a priority. All of these topics are divisive within Italian politics, parties had quite different positions, differences could be observed not only between parties of the left and those of the right, but even between parties of the same side of the political right-left scale

(e.g. FDI supported Salva Roma, while Lega didn't). As our results show party leaders didn't assume the responsibility to use hashtags referring to divisive topics in this regard they tried to remain neutral.

Through a graphic visualisation (see below) it can be displayed the internal communi-cational dynamic between the party leaders. In order to see the proportion of this phenomena we analysed only those politicians that appeared in another party leader's keyword cloud. After selecting the respective tweets, manual content analysis was carried out on the tweets that contained the name of another party leader.
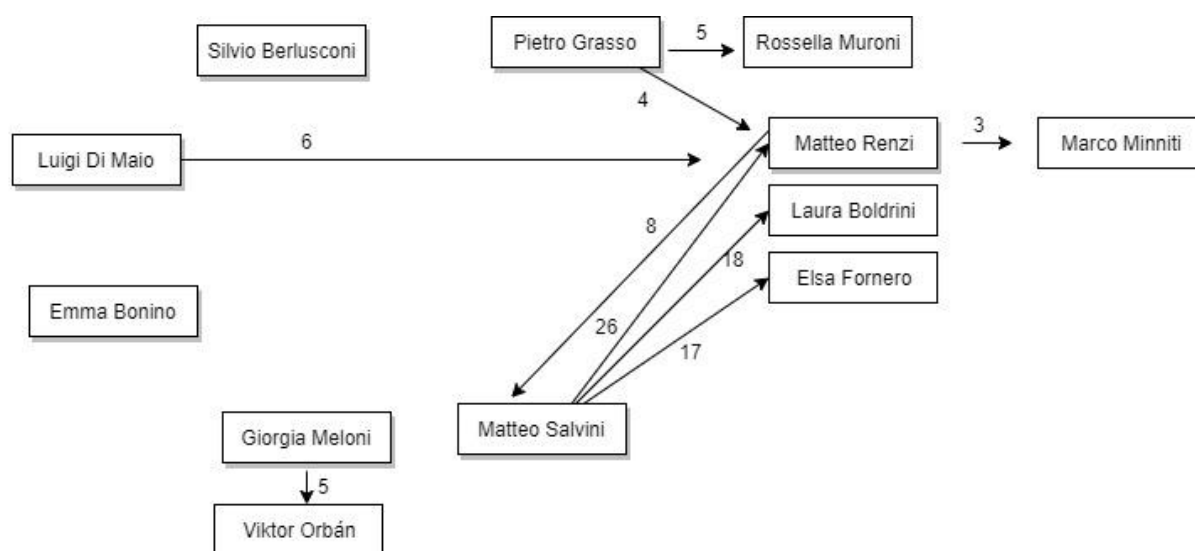
Source: Author's own elaboration

Numbers show the number of mentions of the party leaders by the other contestants. The above-mentioned manual qualitative content analysis allowed us to observe the tone of the tweets (positive - endorsement /negative - attack). The results show that every mention of the PD or its main representatives by politicians outside of the party was negative, the party was the main target either of Luigi di Maio, or of Matteo Salvini. As mentioned before, Salvini was able to mobilise and engage actively his followers, thus his attacks against PD politicians need to be highlighted.

Matteo Renzi, Laura Boldrini and Marco Minniti are all members of PD which can be considered as the most attacked party during the election campaign, their names were men-tioned the most during the month analysed in the paper. As the illustration shows Renzi and the PD was the main target of the other leaders. Bonino and Berlusconi stayed out of this dynamics, no mention of other politicians can be found within their word cloud. Meloni isn't part of this internal dynamics either, but the only reference to a foreign politician (Viktor Orbán) can be found on her Twitter account. It is important to highlight that based on the 7 party leaders most frequently used words reference to Orbán was the only 'topic' going beyond Italy's national boundaries, no reference to other foreign politicians or more generally foreign policy-related words can be found (apart from 'Europe', but no 'EU' appears), meaning that the electoral campaign on Twitter

concentrated mostly on domestic issues. According to our content analysis this conversational part of the Twitter campaign shows signs of negative campaign. The only positive mentions were intra-party (Renzi backing Minniti, Grasso backing Rossella Muroni) None of the party leaders mentioned their coalition partners.

Conclusion:

As our findings show Matteo Salvini and Matteo Renzi were the protagonists of the election campaign on the Twittersphere, while other party leaders were significantly lagging behind in most indicators. Renzi's and Salvini's Twitter strategy consisted in engaging actively their followers, thus they noise within the Twittersphere were more loud than the other party leaders'. However, there are significant differences among them: due to his previous experience as Prime Minister, Renzi had significantly more followers than Salvini, who tried to counterbalance this with an increased intensity of tweeting.

Renzi and Salvini stand out regarding campaigning on Twitter, the other party leaders didn't generate as much noise as them. As it can be seen in the case of Silvio Berlusconi, frequent tweeting doesn't equal active engagement of the followers.

Renzi was the protagonist of the election campaign on Twitter from another point of view, as well: when observing the internal communication dynamics of the party leaders, it can be seen that Renzi (was most in the crosshairs of the others, he was criticized the most by the other party leaders. After analyzing our dataset it is hardly surprising that Matteo Salvini was the most active "attacker" of Renzi. However, not only a left-right division can be

observed in this case, as Renzi was criticized by M5S and by the leftist Pietro Grasso, as well.

Even though past researches found 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, our results show that based on our indicators there are no significant cleavages between populist and non-populist leaders. Even though to a certain extent traits of their short-term policy proposals can be found in their communication this was not the most important feature in the Twitter campaign. Engagement and interactivity indicators show that populism isn't the distinctive feature of the leaders who made the biggest impact on Twitter. However, either Renzi, or Salvini are leaders of personalized parties.

Even though Matteo Renzi managed to keep pace with Matteo Salvini in the Twittersphere, his party suffered a historic loss on the elections, while M5S became the biggest party of Italy despite Di Maio's – and the party's - limited activity on Twitter.

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Disclosure statement: