

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

School of Business and Governance

Department of Law

Federica Cogoni

**POPULIST COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES BY ITALIAN
LEADERS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Master's thesis

International Relations and European – Asian Studies

Supervisor: Ton Notermans, PhD

Co-supervisor: Steven Weldon, PhD

Tallinn 2019

I declare that I have compiled the paper independently
and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors
have been properly referenced and the same paper
has not been previously been presented for grading.
The document length is 11 141 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

Federica Cogoni

(signature, date)

Student code: A163637

Student e-mail address: fecogo@ttu.ee

Supervisor: Ton Notermans

Co-supervisor: Steven Weldon

The paper conforms to requirements in force

.....

(signature, date)

Chairman of the Defence Committee:

Permitted to the defence

.....

(name, signature, date)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	6
INTRODUCTION	7
1. TWO COMPETING MODELS OF COMMUNICATION IN DEMOCRACY	10
1.1. Standard communication model	10
1.2. Elites driven communication model	12
1.2.1. Agenda-setting	13
1.2.2. Priming and framing the issues	14
1.3. Populist frames	16
1.4. Voting behavior in the model	18
2. METHODOLOGY	19
3. POPULIST PARTIES AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ITALY	21
3.1. Favoring conditions for social media communication	21
3.2. Historical overview of the populist parties	23
3.2.1. Five Star movement	23
3.2.2. From Lega Nord to Lega	25
3.3. Public opinion in 2018	26
3.4. Analysis of League and M5S social media messaging strategies	30
3.4.1. Five Star Movement and social media messaging	30
3.4.2. League social media messaging	33
4. CHANGES IN OPINION ISSUES AND ELECTORAL PERFORMANCES	36
4.1. Electoral outcomes and public opinion in 2013	36
4.2. Electoral outcomes and public opinion in 2018	39
CONCLUSION	43
LIST OF REFERENCES	46
APPENDICES	50
Appendix 1. The main concerns among Italians in 2018	50
Appendix 2. Unemployment rate according to regions from 2012 to 2018	51
Appendix 3. Perceptions and real data on immigrants	52
Appendix 4. Nationalists, anti-immigrant, anti-religious minority attitudes (NIM) of Western countries from surveys conducted from April-August 2017	53

Appendix 5. Frequencies of keywords of M5S' sample of data (October 2017-October 2018)	54
Appendix 6. Multilinear graoh on most relevant issues among Italians and M5S' positions ...	55
Appendix 7. Frequencies of keywords on Matteo Salvini's sample of data (October 2017-2018)	56
Appendix 8. Multilinear graoh on most relevant issues among Italians on online news and Salvini's positions	57
Appendix 9. Issue shared among Italians in 2013	58
Appendix 10. Electoral results of 2013 and composition of Chamber of deputies	59
Appendix 11. Voters' preferences in 2013 according to professional status	60
Appendix 12. Distribution of seats in the chamber of deputies in 2018	61
Appendix 13. M5S electoral performance at the general elections of 2013, 2018 by regions in the Chamber of Deputies	62
Appendix 12. Lega electoral performance at the general elections of 2013, 2018 by regions in the Chamber of deputies	63

ABSTRACT

Populism is a widespread phenomenon and it has been defined across political, ideological and communication aspects. This study centres on the way the political debates develops on social media. From a top down view of the relations between the role of representatives and the voters, political elites rather than just inform the public, they shape and frame voters opinions. This study aims to explain the communication strategies that lead M5S and Salvini's breakthrough at the Italian general elections in March 2018. During their political campaign, M5S and Salvini direct their attention to unemployment, immigration and social discontent, while blaming the political elites for representing the cause of these problems. The approach of framing, drawn from agenda-setting theory, is employed to analyse the nature of the political communication between 2013 and 2018. This paper examines the nature of their social media messaging strategies adopted by M5S and Lega and how they reflected voter preferences and changes among Italians' opinions in 2018.

Keywords: communication, framing, social networks, populism, Italy

INTRODUCTION

The Italian populist forces of League and 5 Stars Movement (M5S) had an unprecedented electoral breakthrough at the Italian general elections in March 2018. Compared to the Italian previous general elections of 2013, in 2018 M5S was the most voted party, while League led by Salvini, overtook Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the right coalition, which has never happened before. A key reason for their success is their messaging strategy, which mirrors public opinion and citizens' resentments with anti-elitist or populist frames. In fact, populism has been defined in many different ways, mostly in regard to political ideology and dynamics and only recently it has been analyzed in relation to political communication.

Under the perspective of populism as a widespread phenomenon, Italy is not a unique case, since populist parties like Syriza and Podemos and far-right movements in Europe, like Front Nation led by Marine le Pen in France, Geert Wilders' PVV in Netherlands, the German AfD and Fidesz in Hungary have achieved significant approval ratings in the past decade. However, there are not many cases, among modern democracies, characterised by populist executives besides Hungary, US and Brazil, therefore Italy represents a recent case of study. Populist parties and far-rights movements centre their narratives on the people and their popular sovereignty, but the concept may vary depending on the notion of the people that parties intend. On one hand, M5S has developed its narratives on restoring the people's will and Italians' dignity, anti-elite elements and the introduction of the basic income for the unemployed. On the other hand, League has based its narratives claiming to restore people's will on national identity against foreigners, refugees and European institutions. These parties have mainly established their political campaign on social networks, which leads to the research question of, to what extent their nature of communication strategies and messages on social networks were effective to win the elections by reflecting voter preferences.

This paper analyses the nature of the communication strategies advocated by Italian populist leaders to assess their electoral breakthrough in 2018.

Since populism is a widespread phenomenon, the theoretical framework discusses two competing communication models applicable to representative democracies with a focus on the relations between representatives and voters. The classic model of democracy assumes that voters are the principals and elected officials are the agents (Mazey 2008). It assumes that political preferences are exogenous to vote choice and there is no space for elites to shape public opinion. Communication flows through elites and media respectively to represent citizens interests and to inform the public. Therefore, voters will vote the party which better represents their interests. The media informs citizens on party positions and public policy, it gives a space to the majority while guaranteeing equal spaces for the opposition.

The second model posits different conditions. It is a top down view of democracy where elites shape public opinions and they translate into vote choice. In this case, representatives do more than just represent, as they shape and set the political agenda influencing public opinion. Agenda-setting, priming and framing put emphasis on the mechanisms adopted by the political elite and the media to assign salience to specific issues by choosing the objects and giving them attributes. Framing involves the mechanisms adopted by politicians to present political and social problems placing blame on different sets of actors and institutions (Tewksbury et al 2001).

These models lead to two competing plausible explanations for the rise of League and M5S. On one side, citizens preferred them because they represented closer positions to their interests and views. On the other side, M5S and League moved voters towards their views, framing these issues with anti-elitist stances that better fit with people opinions.

This communication model is used to analyse the messaging strategies employed by Salvini and M5S on social networks, before and during 2018 electoral campaign. As they both reject political establishment, they use anti-elitism as an explanation for these problems. In fact, while M5S is mostly explaining unemployment and north-south divide, League accuses the European institutions of mismanaging the immigration. The top-down democratic communication model intends to show how populist leaders developed their communication strategies by framing Italians' concerns into populist and anti-elitist stances.

This study centres on M5S and League's messaging nature, in order to test how their framing activities on social media translated in voting choices. Therefore, the first hypothesis holds that Italians' public opinion and main concerns are particularly favorable for M5S and Lega positions. Secondly, since M5S also marked a success at the elections in 2018 followed by League's outstanding performance, the second hypothesis holds that both of the parties mirrored Italians issues on social media. Moreover, as M5S and League reinforced their ideological positions from 2013 and 2018, the third hypothesis holds that this ideological reinforcement led to changes in issue opinions and voting choices for these parties.

The first chapter shows two competing models of communication in democracy. In the second chapter, there is an overview on the methods employed to reach the conclusions. The third chapter describes a historical case study overview of Italian politics and the conditions for populist parties, the conditions of a particularly favoring public opinion to League and M5S' positions and an analysis on League and M5S social media messaging, which shows that it mirrored public opinion. The fourth chapter shows tentative efforts to untangle causality between the ideological changes of the parties and changes in issue opinions among Italians from 2013 to 2018.

1. TWO COMPETING MODELS OF COMMUNICATION IN DEMOCRACY

There are two distinct and competing models on political communication in representative democracies. The first model posits that, before the elections, parties present their positions, voters have exogenous preferences and they vote for the candidates who better represent their ideas. Given that political debates are mostly disputed on social media, information and communication follow different mechanisms compared to the standard representative communication model.

In social media, parties present their positions, then they prime and frame the issues targetting the voters. Drawing from agenda-setting theory, political elites are suggesting to the citizens what they should be concerned about. Agenda-setting, priming and framing put emphasis on the mechanisms adopted by the political elite to assign salience to specific issues, by choosing the objects and giving them attributes. In this way, social media producers assign attributes or frames, which are likely to reflect stereotypes, values or beliefs to maximise audience engagement. Thus, in the second model, voters react by either adapting their positions to the parties ideas, or they move their preferences to the party that better represent their stances.

1.1. Standard communication model

A representative democracy is a system of government where eligible members of the public are empowered to elect representatives among themselves, to govern and protect their interests. Media and representatives respectively inform the public and represent their political positions. The main requirement for a representative communication in a democratic system is to guarantee alternative and different sources of information to the public (Mazey 2018). While representatives before elections should sponsor their positions and their political programs.

There are different advantages that come with this system of government. Through a representative democracy, citizens are enabled to elect representatives who better represent their interests, which are communicated before the elections. Communication between representatives and represented plays a fundamental role, therefore media independence should facilitate non-partisan communication when self-regulated, politically independent and economically autonomous (Unesco 2018).

Media are the principal information source of voters and mass communications media lie at the heart of the electoral calculus of voters (Mughan & Aaldering 2017). The media as the fourth estate has basic functions in a democratic society as they should inform the public on what is going on. According to Shea 1998, the role of the media in a well functioning democratic society should follow these points:

1. News should provoke public debates leading to greater public participation in important decisions;
2. uncover abuses and pressure for their rectification;
3. alert and mobilize public opinion to humanitarian causes/injustices;
4. allow political pluralism to express itself by advertising different views/ ideological approaches to certain issues;
5. keep politicians attuned to public opinion while offering politicians a medium to explain policies/ decisions to public opinion and build necessary support (Shea 1998).

Essentially, media are entailed to offer different and alternative information to audience and if the public is exposed to all biased information, the aggregate effect of biased media is unbiased information.

Initially, the dominant medium of communication between governors and governed was represented by different newspapers, each of them were offering biased positions on political matters and audience would choose the most fitting one to their beliefs. This tended to reinforce long-standing political and ideological predispositions and behaviors.

Later on, television became the voters' preminent source of political information and played an important influence on parties' communication strategies. Leaders on TV put more emphasis on their image, politics became personalized and political talks-shows were entertaining. Television gradually displaces newspapers and other communication forms, because political parties' preferred TV over other campaigning media. Thus, voters used it as principal source of political information. Although, political parties cannot control this medium and state-licensed broadcasters

are commonly required by law to be impartial in their political coverage for not altering political pluralism (Mughan, Aaldering 2017). As traditional media systems are assuring political pluralism and different views, voters' preferences on political candidates are exogenous. Stigler and Becker (1977) make two assumptions on voters' preferences: individuals' basic tastes do not change over time, and individual do not differ from one to another in their tastes. Tastes are there, will be there next year and are the same to all men (Stigler, Becker 1977, 76).

However, acknowledging that political debates are mostly disputed on social media, where users produce information, the following model asserts different conditions between political elites and voters. Political elites and online newspapers began to adapt to social media logics, and they have established different mechanisms. The emergence of increasingly sophisticated analytic engines for gathering and assessing digital footprints, such as unique visitors, pageviews, time spent on websites, engagement, has transformed the way media producers and advertisers think about audiences. Social media organize the information displayed to users, ordered according to factors, as top viewed, commented and liked contents. In fact, news editors look at present and future audience behaviors to maximise visibility and as a result, they produce contents adhering on audience tastes (Lee et al 2014). This contributes to a culture of the click, that goes against traditional norms, values and professional judgement of the journalists and editors. Thus, if social media editors are maximizing user engagement, they are expected to value engagement news factors higher. These new metrics encourage for new modes of releasing information, as well as constructing political campaigns.

1.2. Elites driven communication model

The political campaign of the victorious parties during the last Italian general elections on March 2018 were mostly disputed across two different interconnected dimensions, such as social networks and public squares. Chadwick (2013) defines a hybrid communication as the intersection of traditional media (TV, radio, press) and digital media logics (Chadwick 2013).

This model centres on the interactions between the elites and their audience in social media.

Elites are able to develop personalized campaigns on different channels, like online news, TV and radio, but also blogs and personal politicians webpages construct political campaigns. This model posits that political communication changed the logics in electoral campaigning, the criteria of the

messaging modes and the connectivity with their supporters with an increasing use of targeting techniques to tailor voters' interests online. Drawing from agenda-setting theory, political elites adopting frames to their positions, are suggesting to the citizens what they should be concerned about. This influences the way viewers attribute to different political issues, their standards for constructing political evaluations and their perceptions on issues.

This model helps to analyse the communication strategies adopted by the politicians on social media, and aggregate agenda-setting, priming and framing approaches to study their messaging strategies.

1.2.1. Agenda setting

Since the early of 1970s, agenda-setting, priming and framing study to what extent the media has an impact on public opinion. The main concept of this theory asserts that the media sets the main objects of attention, secondly assign attributes and finally transfer these ones into the public agenda (Iyengar, Kinder 1987; McCombs, Shaw, Weaver 2014). In this way, the media play a critical role in directing citizens' attention to certain issues. The press may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about (Cohen 1963). Salience is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important.

A crucial aspect of the agenda-setting is the issue, considered by McCombs et al (2014) as a social problem that has received mass media coverage when it is used for political advantages. As the political elite and news outlets direct more attention to certain issues, and less to others, they are responsible for setting the news agenda and influencing the salience of specific topics. An issue is likely to continue to attract attention depending on different reasons, such as the ability of issues' proponents to generate new information on the same issue maintaining its newsworthiness and the competition with other issues (Dearing, Rogers 1996).

Agenda-setting, priming and framing put emphasis on the mechanisms adopted by the media to assign salience to specific issues by choosing the objects and giving them attributes. In this way, social media affect audiences in two ways. Firstly, social media audience and potential voters are addressed to specific issues, or primed. Secondly, social media producers assign attributes or frames, which are likely to reflect stereotypes, values or beliefs to maximise audience engagement. Consequently, audiences co-construct what they see, read or hear from the media with information drawn from their memory and experience. This affects the importance viewers attach to different

political issues, their standards for constructing political evaluations and their perceptions on issues.

1.2.2. Priming and framing the issues

Priming and framing are two approaches used to analyze the media effects on audiences in general. However, this model draws on these approaches to examine the interactions between social media content producers and social media users. On one hand, priming entails that social media producers suggests to news audiences what they should be concerned about, by exposing social media audience high frequency of some topics. Framing involves the mechanisms adopted by politicians to present political and social problems in such a way as to place blame on different sets of actors and institutions (Tewksbury et al 2001). For example, unemployment can be framed in the media as a product of presidential policies or as the result of economic developments (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Priming is the impact that agenda-setting can have on the way the individuals evaluate issues by influencing the thematic areas that individuals use to form these evaluations. The theoretical foundations of priming are grounded in psychological concepts on cognitive processing of semantic information. Priming is the process in which the media describe some issues and not others and alter the standard by which people evaluate issues. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) first identified the priming effects operated by the media. By calling attention to some matters, while ignoring others, news affect the standards by which governments, presidents, policies and candidates for public office are judged and priming refers to changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations. Generally, people do not pay attention to everything, in fact, attention on issues is highly selective. People notice only particular features of special consequence and, because of these fundamental limitations, the impressions we form of others, tend to be organized around a few central themes. Hence, the more attention social media give to a particular problem, the more frequently a problem is primed. Therefore, priming is the approach that enhances occurrence of issues in news.

The other approach through which social media producers influence audiences is framing. It can be explained as the process of defining problems and constructing storylines about issues. Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, promoting a determined problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1989).

The theoretical premises of framing theory can be traced back from sociology as it is a schema of interpretation including anecdotes and stereotypes that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events (Goffman 1974). Kahneman and Tversky (1984) theorized framing as the approach of selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others. Framing selects certain aspects of an issue and makes them more prominent in order to evoke certain interpretations and evaluations of the issues. Cacciatore et al (2016, 19), when employing framing approaches on social media, they stressed on three related phenomena:

1. a motivation among media outlets to narrow information targeting ideologically fragmented publics;
2. a tendency among individuals from the audiences to not just select and interpret information with their prior beliefs, but also to rely on previously self-selected or filtered outlets on social media, that further narrow information diets and interpretation of new information;
3. new interfaces of media audiences, such as tailored results from search engines or personalized news aggregators, that lead narrower information based on information infrastructures that are informed by voluntary and involuntary users' inputs.

This model intends to show that online news outlets on social media and leaders' messages match up audiences primarily with information that fits their prior beliefs and as a result, political leaders as well as other online media reinforce the audiences' preferences, beliefs and values. Therefore, framing is the approach used to analyse how politicians produce messages on social media. Framing suggests positive correlations between values, beliefs and citizens' perceptions and the political messages spread on social networks.

1.3. Populist frames

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) suggest that framing involves presenting political and social problems in such a way as to place blame on different sets of actors and institutions. This section gives a theoretical overview on populist frames that distinguish populist parties and leaders from other parties.

In the literature on populist studies that have combined political science and media, many scholars have demonstrated that media played a crucial role in the success of populist parties (Walgrave, Swert 2004; Mazzoleni 2008; Moffit, Tormey 2014).

Populism, as the combination of stylistic elements (highly emotional, slogan-based and tabloid-style language) and substantive rhetoric, was measured by the two core aspects of populist ideology: anti-establishment appeal and the celebration of homeland (Wirth et al 2016). Populist narratives' styles concentrate on three aspects: referring to a crisis situation, straightforwardness, simplicity and clarity and emphasis on strong and charismatic leadership as problem manager (Ibidem). Politicians use communication primarily to implement their political strategies and thereby gain popularity, to win over voters and convince opponents and other political actors of their beliefs and values. Thus, another aspect regarding the interdependence between media and populism focuses on the role of perceptions constructed by populist parties or movements (Ibidem).

Many scholars tried hard to find the constitutive characteristics of populist movements and/or parties in liberal democracies. In general, populist and extreme parties construct narratives on the following elements: people centrism, anti-elitism and the dangerous others. The people are conceived as a homogenous group and regarded as the silent majority inherently good and bestowed with a catalogue of positive attributes, such as virtuous, pure or wise (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008). Populists support the antagonistic relationship between people and elite, labelling the elites with different tags, such as political actors like the government or the political establishment, economic actors, like bankers and managers, the media, intellectual actors, like scholars and writers or legal elites, like courts, administration. Thus, the elites is connoted with negative attributes and more commonly addressed as: corrupted, immoral, conspiring, evil, exploitative and unaccountable. Here stands the rejection of traditional politics building and anti-political mentality, which constitutes an excellent breeding ground for populist inclinations and attitude and it is the preliminary condition for the unconditional delegation of authority to the populist leader (Pasquino 2008).

Beyond this relationship between the people and the elite, there are the populist actors, who call themselves spokespersons and outsiders to the political establishment, who primarily embody the people's will, advocating unmediated, transparent, directly elected leaders and a reduction of powers of the parliament and other intermediary bodies (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008). In addition to the anti-elite narratives, populists also stress on the exclusion of the dangerous others, who are different from the elite and not connected to the people and regarded as a big threat and a burden on society (Wirth et al 2016).

There are various population' segments that fall in this category, for example immigrants, people of another race, criminals, ethnic groups and religious minorities. Their exclusion is linked to forms of radical right-wing populism and thus only part of one of many shades that the populist narratives can assume. Scholars agree that the general elements that connotate the populist actors' narratives are the following: the people's sovereignty, the anti-elitism and the exclusion of the dangerous others (Wirth et al 2016).

Anti-elitism is used by populist political forces to blame popular issues and citizens concerns on other political forces and political institutions. This way of framing issues might direct citizens' views on corrupted politicians as an explanation for social and economic problems. Political communication on social media implies different consequences for the citizens and it primarily affects the principle of fairness in electoral campaign. These mechanisms can be posed by the leaders or by the way online news are releasing information. The first strategy used by leaders is called target-political advertising.

This is not a new phenomenon and it consists in classifying and segmenting the voter market for optimising messages to different profiles. This allows to model the content according to voters' interests, rather than a group. Helberger and De Vreese (2017) define it as a set of mechanisms which allow a subject to match different kind of data traces that individuals left in the cyberspace. Targeting can have different implications on elections, making them less fair as potential voters on social media are exposed to limited information, or better to information that they are likely to be interested in, which lead to what is called filter bubble or echo chambers (Ibidem). When algorithms supply stories based on their previous engagement with contents and past consumption, the more audience read one topic, the more the audience is exposed to it. This leaves tech companies in positions of great power as gatekeepers of information with the ability of facilitate or impede information dissemination, as they are in position to offer different terms and services to different campaigns.

1.4. Voting behavior in the model

Voting behavior is only assumed in the model and it draws on Carsey and Layman (2006) standpoints on party polarization.

When party leaders, candidates and platforms take distinct stances on different issues, they should direct citizens where these views on these issues go with each party. Once citizens are directed to certain issues, they will respond either by altering their party affiliations or by adjusting their beliefs to the parties positions on the issues.

However, the literature on aggregate party change suggests that in order for issues to produce major electoral transformations, they must be highly salient to many citizens. Given the centrality and stability of party identification, the only individuals who should change their partisanship on the basis of their views on issues are those who find the issues to be particularly salient (Carsey and Layman 2006). In contrast, those who are aware of party differences on an issue, but do not find the issue to be especially important, should respond by adjusting their views on that issue while maintaining their party identification. The issues central to partisan change are supposed to be the ones that generate highly emotional reactions from many citizens and on which individuals hold relatively strong views (Ibidem).

This model focuses on the activity by political leaders and different news producers on social media and the way they implement their messaging nature that would have direct voters preferences to their positions. Their positions mirror the citizens' stances on issues once they are primed by a set of news contents and framed by political leaders. The way populist parties frame anti-elitist stances in order to blame on the institutions the concerns relevant to citizens is central in this study.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study primarily examines the messaging strategies by the League and 5 Star Movement and to what extent this led to an unexpected electoral success in March 2018.

The first hypothesis holds that Italians public opinions are particularly favourable for M5S and League positions.

Secondly, since M5S also marked a success at the elections in 2018 followed by League's performance, the second hypothesis holds that both of the parties mirrored Italians issues on social media.

Moreover, as M5S reinforced its positions and Salvini redefined the ideological directions of the League, these reflected in voters preferences.

The theoretical approaches based on the top-down view of democracy suggest that as political elites shape their messages reflecting the citizens' opinions, these ideologies changes translate in voters preferences. The third chapter outlines the case study offering two descriptive sections and one analytical.

It first justifies the reasons why Italy represents a suitable case-study for populist parties activity on social media. Secondly it offers a historical overview of M5S and League to explain their main positions and stances. The third paragraph intends to test the first hypothesis, whether public opinion in 2018 was particularly favourable for M5S and Salvini' stances. The data are obtained from both surveys and official statistics from the national Italian agency of statistics. These data are reorganized and labelled independently. In order to test the hypothesis, the data are then plotted in a column graph, where the columns show visuals on the distributions of the data, ordered from the largest to the smallest. The opinions are then compared to real data and official statistics on the population.

The second hypothesis, whether Five Star Movement and League's positions reflected the Italian issues, required analysis. The fourth paragraph examines social media messaging strategies of the parties.

The data about the messaging strategies are obtained from Twitter, from October 2017 to October 2018. These messages are organized and clustered according to main categories. Then in order to show how they mirrored Italian public opinions, they are redistributed and plotted in multilinear graphs and discussed.

The fourth chapter and last chapter is dedicated to the last hypothesis, whether Five Star Movement and Salvini reorganization and reinforcements on their positions could be translated in voters preferences. Firstly there is an acknowledgment of the limitations before showing the results. Then, there is a comparison between the electoral outcomes of 2013 and 2018 and their respective public opinion backgrounds. After explaining and discussing the results, there is an explanation on the limitations.

3. POPULIST PARTIES AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ITALY

The paragraphs are structured in a way to explain how the parties were able to use strategies to reflect the main concerns among Italians.

The first paragraph justifies the choice of the case-study and the conditions that led to the adoption of these messaging strategies by populist parties. The second paragraph is about the surveys on public opinion and the relevant concerns among Italians to show that it was particularly fertile for populist stances. M5S and Salvini's populist narratives resonate with Italians because they speak to many of their frustrations, like the self-serving political establishment, economic stagnation, high unemployment rates, widespread corruption, a sense of national decline, the loss of a sense of belonging and mismanagement of immigration.

The third paragraph shows the analysis of M5S and League social media messaging strategies which explains how they mirrored public opinion.

3.1. Favouring conditions for political communication on social media

This section lists the main reasons why political communication should be analyzed on social media and why populist parties developed their messaging strategies on social networks.

First of all, media environments are in transition as trust for newspapers and printed news readership are declining, while the use of social media to obtain information is increasing (PEW Research 2018). Journalists are increasingly using leaders' tweets or Facebook posts as sources, often driving the news agenda because political parties and leaders heavily use social media to communicate directly with their supporters and party activists. Social media constitute an increasingly populated forum in which voters, media outlets and politicians express their views about public affairs, as well as entertainment and information.

Social media allow the tailoring of media consumption to suit individual audience members' interests. Among European countries, trust in newspapers dips lowest in Italy, France and Spain.

Accordingly, the number of people who gets informed through social media is growing, especially in Italy (PEW Research 2018). A large segment of Italian adults (64%) read online news on social media and 51% of social media news' consumers choose the news according to the sources, while 32% do not (Ibidem). The choice of the Italian case is motivated by other reasons. Firstly, in Italy the correlation between media preferences and vote choices is among the strongest in Europe (Vaccari 2013). Secondly, an average of 75% of citizens between 18-65 years old has a profile on social networks (ISTAT 2018), and 47% of them uses social networks to talk or read about politics (CENSIS 2018). Also, when it comes to political engagements, previous research on electoral studies in Italy shows that politics in social media goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be (PEW Research 2018). This also implies that political messages can potentially reach broader constituencies.

Another set of reason why political debates should be analyzed on social media relies on the mechanisms of circumventing electoral campaign regulations on traditional media and parties' expenses.

The regulations on electoral campaign established for Italy include provisions on spending limits and the assurance of equal access on traditional mass media channels during political campaigns. Spending limits are refer to: the production of materials and means for propaganda, the distribution and dissemination of such materials and means, including the purchase of space on the press, radio and private televisions (*Gazzetta Ufficiale* - Law No. 28 2000). However, no specific provision mentions Internet as well as the social media. Also, no specific evaluation as to the money invested, by parties and candidates on political communication in the social media is enacted. In fact, the costs of creating databases and profiles of citizens may not be recorded or reportable within current categories or it might be spent outside the regulatory period (Verza 2018).

This lack of provisions encourage parties to avoid the political communication legal framework in traditional media. The law *Par Condicio* establishes the right of citizens to receive a plural and diverse information about political proposals and alternatives on TV and newspapers (*Gazzetta Ufficiale* – Law No. 28 2000). At the moment, there is no specific reference about regulations concerning the political communication on social media. This implies that political parties during campaigns can avoid these communication constraints and therefore political debates are shifting to social media.

3.2. Historical overview of Italian populist parties

3.2.1. Five Star Movement

The 5-star Movement (M5S) was established in 2009, it operates exclusively on-line and the web is the centre of the party's ideology, which focuses on the realization of direct democracy through digital technologies. It all started on Beppe Grillo's blog, a comedian who frequently used satire to emphasize and simplify his arguments on politics often representing political caricatures.

Grillo built and consolidated a genuinely new movement starting from the Internet to create a network of relations between people sharing common beliefs, a sense of belonging and collective identity. Following a gradual approach, he forged a social movement before assuming any major role in the political arena.

During the first period, the blog www.beppegrillo.it was launched as an online non-profit association providing different contents: anti-Berlusconi's posts, articles about anti-globalization and environmental issues. In 2005, Grillo reboots the blog after collaborating with Casaleggio Associati, a web service company founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio. The posts are all written by Grillo and they invoked the end of bipolar politics of left and right, both global and national North-South divides, and anti-systemic messages. His main message was: "society is decadent in all aspects; digital technologies will unleash an environmental and democratic revolution" (Diamanti 2014).

Grillo dedicated a significant number of posts to the creation of an electoral blog program, announcing the establishment of 5-Star Movement in October 2009.

The blog publishes a Statute, proclaiming the 5 Star Movement as a platform for debate and consultation. The Statute clarifies the nature of the Movement stating that: "the movement is not like a political party and it aims to realize democratic participation without the mediation of elective representative bodies" (Regulation of Movimento 5 Stelle). This stance rejects democratic representation.

After 2010, Italy lives a political, economic and institutional crisis and Grillo's accusation against the establishment pay off. The movement developed a program for 2013 general elections.

In the blog, Beppe Grillo offered different topics according to his supporters' preferences. In February 2013, the 5-Star Movement classifies as the third political force on a national level, with 8,7 million votes.

The newly elected members of the Parliament are unknown figures as many of them did not have any previous experience in politics. They are students, unemployed, factory workers, self-employed, professionals from various fields.

From 2013 to 2018, the movement enters a new phase changing style and language, trying to become more institutional. The communication process takes place in Internet, as it is configured as the center of the conception of democracy proposed by Grillo (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2015). With the help of his supporters, Grillo established a code of conduct for M5S politicians, where there are strict rules that candidates should compel.

Candidates are strictly forbidden from going on TV, fearing that they would express opinions that are not representing the official lines of the movement. It binds M5S member of Parliament to adhere to M5S supporters' proposals originated on the blog. Also, MPs should publish videos on *La Cosa* - M5S YouTube channel - to let the subscribers knowing their actions (Ibidem). The blog, twitter and Facebook together act as megaphone to help spreading what is posted in the blog. Thus, Grillo communicates directly with the electoral base by showing live-streaming meetings on public squares and political sessions in the Parliament, distancing from television and press.

From 2017- present, M5S also reorganized its structure. The control over the logo, the Rousseau platform and the blog are detained formally by the 5 Star Movement Association, that replaces Beppe Grillo. The Statute of the new Association establishes the elections of the candidates online, where supporters are called to vote. The new status allows alliances with other political forces, and www.beppegrillo.it has been replaced by www.movimento5stelle.it, managed by the Rousseau Association, and Luigi Di Maio became the new Political Head replacing Beppe Grillo.

In 2016, the Movement introduces the platform Rousseau, which serves as a voting tool to allow citizens to propose new laws to the MPs. In March 2018 and throughout 2017, Grillo's posts diminished in favor of other representatives of the party, particularly Luigi Di Maio, the Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies. It is worth mentioning that Rousseau platform used by M5S' supporters, since subscribers here can share documents, propose policies and select their preferred candidates. Italian Protection Authority found out different privacy breaches dated in August 2017 in these websites (Repubblica – 6 September 2018). These mechanisms of collection of data through websites and blogs become meaningful for voter modeling mechanisms. It involves different steps such as, collection of their names, addresses, age, professional status and location.

3.2.2. From Lega Nord to Lega

Lega gained over 17,4% at the general election held in March 2018. Compared to 2013 elections, the party performs strongly in the central regions of Italy that had once dominated by the left and has also managed to establish a presence in the South and the islands. Lega is mainly characterized by two stages: Lega Nord (LN) under Umberto Bossi, which had a regionalist and populist phase and the redefinition of Lega under the guidance of the current leader Matteo Salvini from 2013.

LN was founded in 1991 unifying together many autonomist movements established across northern Italy under the leadership of Umberto Bossi. After its foundation, the party was very successful in representing two main issues: the northern question, that is the growing economic and social gap between a wealthy North and a less developed South of Italy and the rapidly growing sense of discontent and hostility toward the political class (Albertazzi et al 2018). As a regionalist party, LN aimed at altering the vertical allocation of power between the centre and the periphery, by seeking some form of autonomy for the North, advocating federalism or even independence (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016). LN justified the secessionist claims along community identity stances, identifying the northerners as homogenous and hard-working community attached to distinct traditions dissociated from the lazy southerners, who always have benefitted all the northerners' funds from the northerners. Therefore, regaining the control from the country and the capital, and thus a secession, was the main direction of the party.

Another main direction of the party was the stance against immigration. In an earlier phase it helped to justify its position against the central government, who was blamed for mismanaging immigration. Later, immigration was regarded as an existential threat to the very survival of the identities and cultures of northern Italians, thus tapping into the increasing fear and resentment of the local population towards foreigners.

Salvini became leader of the party at the end of 2013. He combined a long experience in the City Council of Milano with a role at national and European levels (Albertazzi et al. 2018). This allowed him to focus on the national level and also maintaining strong ties with the local dimension of LN and its powerbase of Lombardy district. Salvini's victory led to a renovation of the party both in general and ideological terms. Salvini apologized for the insults that LN had previously directed to southerners throughout its political activity.

More importantly, Salvini changed one of the main standpoint of the party.

His argument was: “even if it could go it alone, the North would still be the victim of regulations imposed by a totalitarian EU and would also have to use a currency allegedly set up to advantage the German economy: the euro” (Albertazzi et al. 2018). He switched Rome to EU and euro as the dimensions of real power. Salvini increased the party’s focus on immigration, identity issues, law enforcement and order, accompanied by a radical ideological change: a transition from a secessionist/regional party to a national party. This process culminated just before the end of 2017, with Salvini’s decision to drop the term North altogether from the electoral symbol of the party, allowing him to strengthen the personalization process by adding his name on the logo of the party (Lega Salvini Premier).

3.3. Public opinion 2018

This section provides an insight into the state of Italians’ opinins about their country and their main concerns in order to address them to the main positions held by the populist parties.

The data gathered to compile this section relies on the surveys conducted by More in Common and IPSOS (2018), two non-profit organizations. They conducted online and phone surveys on 2000 participants of a representative cross section of Italian voters between October 2017 and May 2018. The timeline oversaw pre-elections, elections and post elections periods. Participants were asked demographic questions and questions relating to the issues of greatest concern to them, their political views and affiliations, familiarity with refugee issues, their understanding of different terminologies on the debate about refugees and immigration and their views about the political establishment.

In 2018, before and during the elections, Italians share similar concerns about unemployment and corrupted political system. However, there are disagreements whether immigrants are good for the country and whether Italy should exit the European Union (More in Common 2018). The main issues are the following: unemployment, political establishment, economic situation, immigration, public services, crime, terrorism, taxes and climate change (fig. 1). They are plotted in a column graph in figure 1.

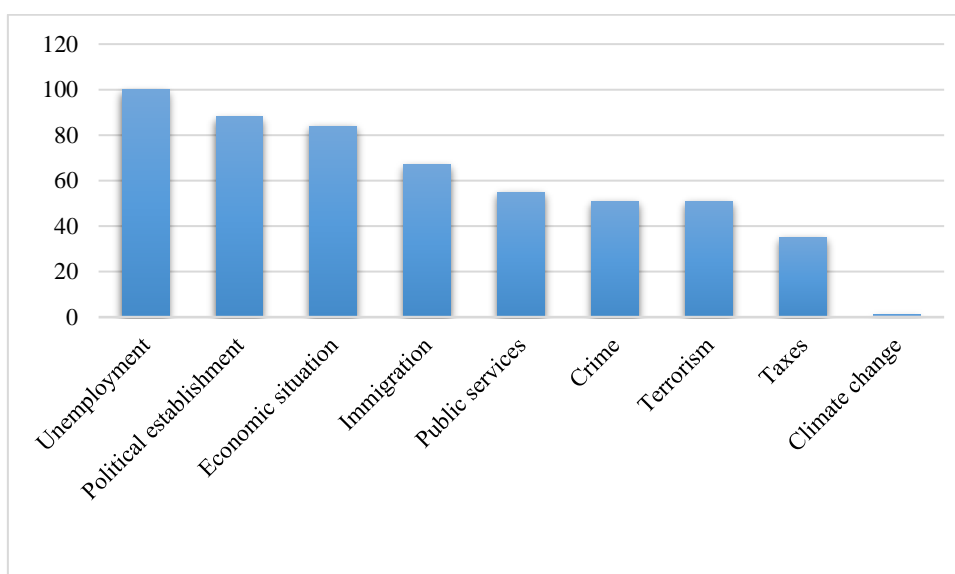


Figure 1. The main concerns among Italians in 2018

Source: Author's calculations based, More in Common 2018

Italians are really concerned about unemployment, which is 10.7% according to Istat (table 1). Although, compared to previous years unemployment rates have decreased and unemployment rate for 2018 is similar to 2012 rates.

The division between north and south remains stable and southern regions were affected the most by unemployment throughout the years. North and south division represents a concern for Italians.

Table 1. Unemployment rate according to regions from 2012 to 2018

REGIONS	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
North	7.4	8.4	8.6	8.1	7.6	6.9	6.5
Centre	9.4	10.7	11.4	10.6	10.4	10	9.6
South	17.1	19.7	20.7	19.4	19.6	19.4	18.4
Italy	10.7	12.1	12.7	11.9	11.7	11.2	10.7

Source: ISTAT

*2018 column contains only the averages from January to September.

Besides unemployment, Italians are very concerned about the economic situation and do not trust the political establishment.

According to the surveys on public opinion, Italians perceive the need of economic measures in order to tackle the unemployment rate and to overcome the division between north and south.

Also, the economic situation is perceived negatively among 76% is perceived negatively (fig 1).

Among Italians there are resentments for political institutions.

In fact, only 33% trusts the national institutions and it has optimistic views towards the direction in which the Italian economy and Italian society are heading, whilst the majority feels that Italy's traditional system is broken, politicians are corrupted and that political parties do not care about citizens' problems. 36% of the interviewees wish for a stronger and authoritarian leader to fix the country's problems.

Another relevant problem among 67% of Italians is immigration (fig.1). Many of them have different views about immigrants: 19% perceive migrants and refugees to be violent and a potential security threat. 48% feel strongly that immigrants are taking economic resources away from the citizens, or that they're given priority over Italians when it comes to social benefits, housing and public service, and among them 17% feel that Italian identity could disappear (More in Common 2018). In general, Western Europeans vary by country when it comes to having positive or negative views about immigrants and religious minorities (Pew Research Center 2018). Among other western EU countries, Italians have more distorted perceptions among the percentages of non EU residents in the country. In fact, according to Istat, non-EU residents in Italy in 2017 corresponded to 7% of the Italian population. However, according to Eurobarometer, Italians estimate 25% of non-EU residents in the country (Table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions and real data on immigrants

ITALIAN REGIONS	% PERCEIVED NON-EU RESIDENTS	% REAL NON-EU RESIDENTS
North-west	21.2	10.7
North-east	20.1	9
Centre	25.9	9.4
South	27.5	4.3

Source: Eurobarometer surveys 2017 and ISTAT 2017

As it is showed above, besides distorted views on the amount of non-EU citizens in Italy, Italians have also negative attitudes towards immigrants. According to Pew Research in order to examine these attitudes, they developed a scale to measure the extent of Nationalist, anti-Immigrant and anti-religious Minority (NIM) sentiment, and scores range from 0 corresponding to positive attitudes to immigrants and 10 as nationalist.

There are considerable variations across Western European Countries, however in Italy, 38% of respondents scored from 5.01 to 10 and an average of 4.1, being the first in the list compared to other European country (table 3).

Table 3. Nationalists, anti-immigrant, anti-religious minority attitudes (NIM) of Western countries from surveys conducted April-August 2017

COUNTRIES	MEDIAN SCORE OF NIM
Italy	4.1
Portugal	3.5
Austria	3.3
Switzerland	3.3
Finland	3.1
Uk	3
Germany	2.9
Spain	2.9
Belgium	2.7
France	2.5
Sweden	1.2

Source: PEW Research center 2018

As hostility for migrants increases, the more are the distorted answers on the percentage of non-EU residents. Also, people who describe themselves as being on the political right are more likely to score higher on the scale of nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-religious minority attitudes than are those who place themselves on the political left (Ibidem).

Italians are mostly concerned about unemployment, economic situation, political establishment and immigrants. This section puts emphasis on the Italians first concerns and the correspondent statistics about these issues. M5S and Salvini's populist narratives resonate with Italians' concerns because their populist anti-elitist stances blame their main concerns on the political establishment. The next section shows the analysis on M5S and Salvini's messaging strategies and the way they reflected the Italians' public opinions.

3.4. Analysis of M5S and League social media messaging strategies

Here there is the analysis of politicians' messaging strategies and the way they framed the social issues, primarily adopting populist anti-elitist claims. Here in this section the analysis centres on to what extent populist narratives mirrored Italians' public opinions in 2018.

Political leaders are expected to direct their narratives to voters' positions on issues. Framing approach shows that politicians blame on other actors, such as the political establishment, to have caused these issues. Framing approach is the way the elites shape voters opinion closer to their positions. This section exposes how far M5S and Salvini used anti-elitism, which is also an important concern among Italians, to give an explanation to unemployment, their economic situation and immigration.

The first questions as of, whether Salvini and M5S adapt their arguments on relevant issues are answered separately.

3.4.1. Five Star Movement and social media messaging

In fact, the communication style is characterized by the preponderance of attacks against mainstream media, based on the argument that the establishment uses television and newspapers as self-referential, therefore the movement relies on internet because it guarantees freedom and acts as a counter-democratic surveillance.

From 2016 the movement started to focus on new topics and redefined its Statute and organization. Regarding the topics, the political debate on the blog centers on new topics, such as the introduction of basic income, a fund for the small-medium enterprises and investments against unemployment. M5S' positions on the political program are multi-ideological, which makes it difficult to place the movement in the political axes. Some of them lean to left-wing, while others are close to right-wing ideologies. There are positions which might resemble extreme right-wing stances, such as Euroscepticism, positions against tax burden low levels of inter-personal trust and a hostile attitude against the State and public employees, because they enjoy privileged conditions as compared to the rest of the population.

On the other hand, the positions of other M5S voters are in line with the left-wing outlooks, as they focus on the question of civil rights, support of gay marriage, granting the citizenship to the Italian-born children of immigrants and basic income for unemployed.

Figure 2. plots the main positions of M5S on a column graph.

From October 2017 to October 2018, M5S positions and arguments on Twitter rely on the following issues: establishment (106), basic income (76), economy (64), unemployment (51), immigration (27), North vs South (23), European Union (15), environment (7) and services (6).

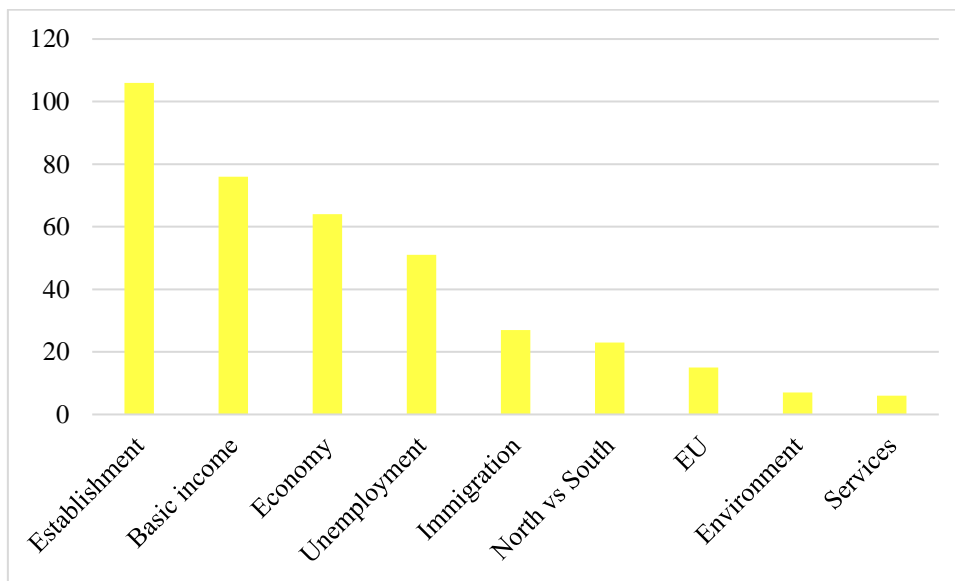


Figure 2. Frequencies of keywords of M5S' sample of data (October 2017 to October 2018)
Source: Author's calculation, M5S' official Twitter page - @Mov5stelle

1. "Establishment" ranks as most occurrent category. It includes all the tweets criticizing bureaucrats, public institutions, political parties and leaders, politicians' cases of corruption, public officers, public money waste, members of the parliament, old politicians, corporations, mass media and public broadcasting.
2. "Basic income" corresponds to the hashtag (*reddito di cittadinanza*) which occurs quite often.
3. "Economy" stands for all the mentions on the economic situation of the Italians and measures of political economy.
4. "Unemployment" is the second category, refers to all the tweets containing the word unemployment, or the mentions on unemployed people.
5. "Immigration" refers to immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and ethnic minorities.

6. “EU” refers to arguments about the European institutions and other European countries.
7. “Environment” refers to all the discussions on global warming and pollution
8. “Services” refers to all the mentions about public services, particularly health care, vaccines and education.

In order to test the hypothesis whether M5S’ positions adapt on public opinions, the positions of M5S are redistributed across the categories of the Italians’ main issues, which are the following: unemployment, political establishment, economic situation, immigration, services, crime, terrorism, taxes and climate change.

Figure 3. shows a multilinear graph where the yellow line contains the variables of M5S positions, while the blue line contains the variable of Italians’ concerns.

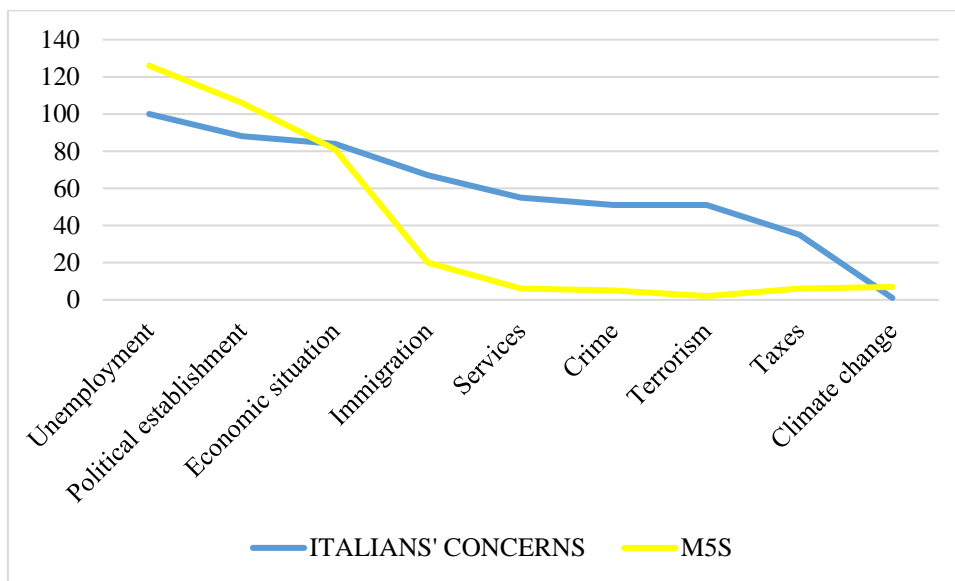


Figure 3. Multilinear graph on most relevant issues among Italians and M5S’ Twitter page. Source: author’s calculations, M5S’s official page on Twitter (@Mov5Stelle).

The lines are overall positively related showing that M5S has adapted its frames to Italians’ concerns, especially among the three issues of unemployment, political establishment and economic situation.

Regarding the first two issues, unemployment and political establishment, M5S values are higher than the values attributed to the same issues by Italians.

This can be explained because M5S highly promoted basic income as a fitting solution for the unemployed. M5S framed the issue of unemployment and the economic situation as the political establishment's fault, which explains why these values are similar to the Italians's positions.

3.4.2. League social media messaging strategies

The development of League relies highly on the party communication through social media. Salvini's decision to heavily rely on social media and his ability to do so effectively also helps to explain why he could bring such a profound ideological shift so quickly, without relying on any intermediaries (Diamanti 2017). In fact, the core themes defining the regionalist character of the LN under Umberto Bossi has been put aside by Salvini and replaced with an agenda that has a broader national focus.

He replaced the interenal enemies, such as the Italian state , the corrupted elite in Rome accused of squandering money on services priveded to the lazy southernns with other elements.

Now the enemies are the European Union, the euro currency, the corrupted elite in Brussels, who are blamed for the country's stagnant economic growth and mismanagement of the uncontrolled migration.

Looking closely at the core themes presented on League's political agenda, Salvini's main issues are the following, immigration (87), establishment (46), crime (27), European Union (24), national identity (21), services (20), unemployment (15), terrorism (14), economy (14). The issues are plotted in a columns graph (fig.4.).

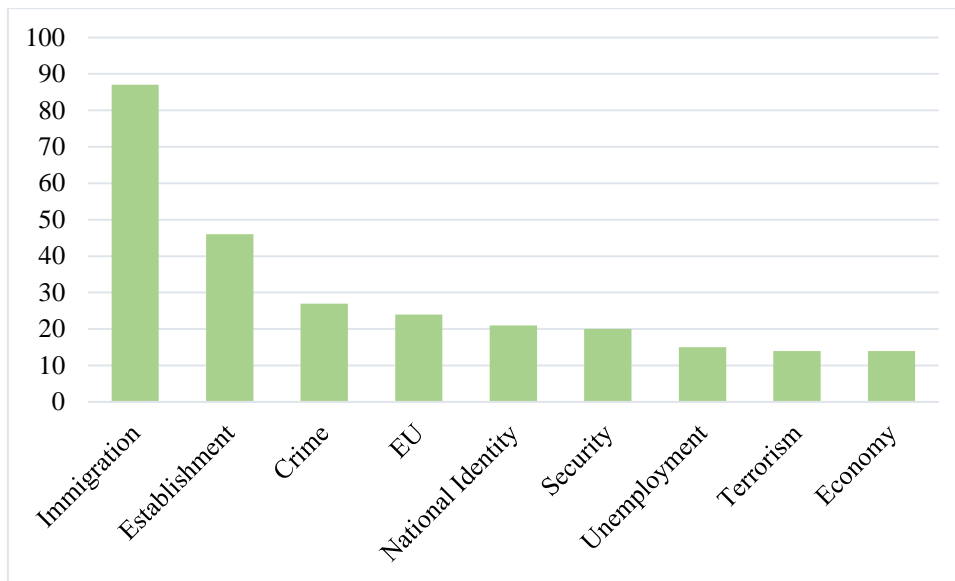


Figure 4. Frequencies of keywords on Matteo Salvini's sample of data (October 2017 to October 2018)

Source: Author's elaboration, Matteo Salvini's data from the official Twitter page - @matteosalvinimi

1. "Immigration" ranks as the first category more frequent and it refers to stories, narratives and episodes strong against mostly African refugees and asylum-seekers, irregular immigrants, ethnic minorities. These tweets often contain the following hashtags: "back to their country" (*a-casa-loro*); or "fun is over" (*finita-la-pacchia*); or "bulldozers" (*ruspe!*) hashtags.
2. "Establishment" refers to all critics against public institutions, political parties, bureaucracy, cases of corruption and public money waste.
3. "European Union" comprises all the messages against European institutions, against the Monetary Union, and mostly against the measures for the migration crisis.
4. "National identity" stands for all the messages containing the hashtag "Italians-first" (*prima-gli-Italiani*).
5. "Security" refers to all the national security measures proposed, including closed-borders policies, stricter measures against mafia and restoring military service.
6. "Unemployment" is also often mentioned.
7. "Terrorism" refers to all the episodes of terrorist attacks anywhere in the world and presumed terrorist targets.
8. "Economy" refer to economic situation of the citizens, public debt and all the party's economic initiatives, such as reductions on taxes.

In order to test the hypothesis that holds that Salvini adapted its frame to public opinion and distorted perspectives, Salvini political positions are first redistributed across Italians' main concerns of: unemployment, political establishment, economic situation, immigration, services, crime, terrorism, taxes and climate change. Then both values are plotted in a multilinear graph (fig. 5).

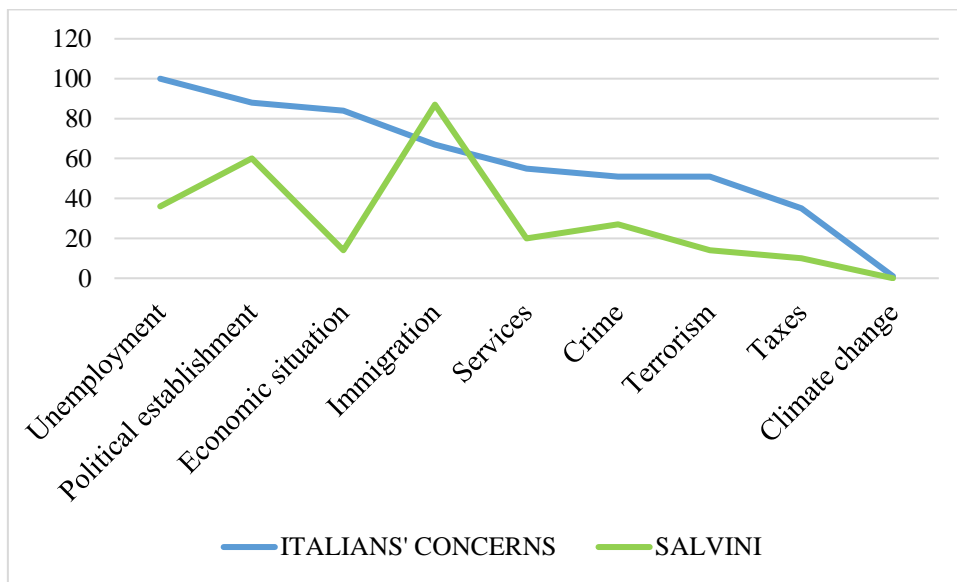


Figure 5. Multilinear graph on most relevant issues among Italians on online news and Salvini's Twitter page
Source: author's calculations

Some values on the Salvini's propaganda are positively related to Italians' concerns. Especially unemployment, political establishment and immigration. The values attributed to Salvini's positions are the highest on immigration and political establishment. This explains that Salvini's frames on the problem of immigration, as the mismanagement by the previous governments and the European Union, is constructed on Italian's resentments for political institutions and Italians distorted perspectives on immigrants.

The analysis on the frames created by Salvini and M5S on the issues among Italians suggests that Salvini and M5S reflected Italians' issues and views. Although, to answer whether if these strategies were successful to win 2018 general elections the next chapter gives an overview on the electoral outcomes of 2013 and 2018 and show the changes in issue opinions among the Italians.

4. CHANGES IN OPINION ISSUES AND ELECTORAL PERFORMANCES

The research question of this paper is whether populist parties' messaging strategies were successful to win the elections. This question implies that elites shape voters' preferences to their positions. However, this causal claim between elites' messages as a determining condition for voters preferences cannot be validated. First of all, Italy is a recent case-study for determining party polarization, or the case in which an individual's stance on a given issue, policy or person is likely to be defined by their identification with a particular political party ideology. This requires more data on voters' engagement in social media. Given the limitation on the establishment of a causal relation between voters preferences and political issues, this section attempts to untangle causality between changes in opinion issues among the Italians and the electoral outcomes between 2013 and 2018.

4.1. Electoral outcomes and public opinion in 2013

Before the general elections of 2013, Italy has been significantly impacted by the 2008-2009 financial crisis and by longstanding corruption. In 2013, Italians were mostly worried about unemployment, economic situation, recognizing the lack of adequate domestic economic national measures.

Unemployment and the difficult economic conditions are the first concerns for Italians, while terrorism and climate change are marginal problems (fig.6.). The first paragraph is drawn by surveys from Eurobarometer, Demos & Pi a research institute studying public opinion.

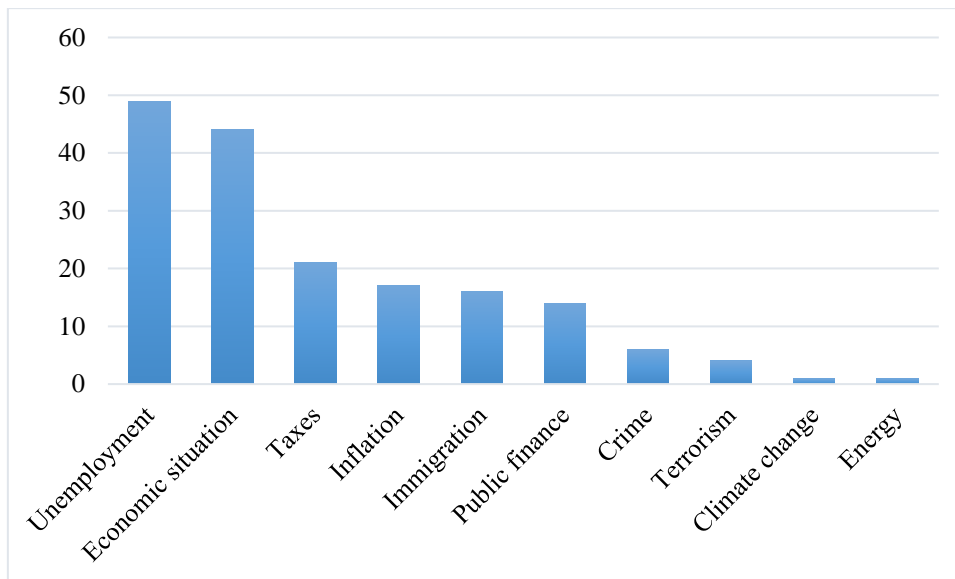


Figure 6. Issues shared among Italians in 2013
 Source: Author's elaboration and Eurobarometer 2013

Italians felt that European institutions are not taking enough efforts to tackle these issues, such as creating job opportunities, instead taxes are increasing and prices are increasing. However, Italians were favoring euro currency together with the monetary union and the European Central Bank.

Specifically, 53% were favoring euro, while 36% were against it (Eurobarometer 2013)

Rather than showing resentments against European institutions, they disapproved national institutions, particularly the government and Parliament. Moreover, citizens felt more closer to regional and local districts authorities (Eurobarometer 2013).

The majority of Italians claims that domestic economic reforms are necessary for reducing deficit and public debt, and they should be enacted as soon as possible, although they feel that government and parliament are not taking many efforts. In fact, Italians favor European supervision and guidance on economic measures and public finance. According to the interviewees, European Union should create the conditions for more competitive firms and industries.

This scenario characterized by resentments against the political institutions and concerns about their economic situation, was the base for the elections in 2013. The general elections of February political and social geography radically changed the territorial political affiliations. According to Diamanti (2013), social demographic conditions determined these changes.

Right and left coalitions lost their traditional social ties among many regions. The electoral results of the Chamber of deputies are plotted in figure 7. in a pie chart.

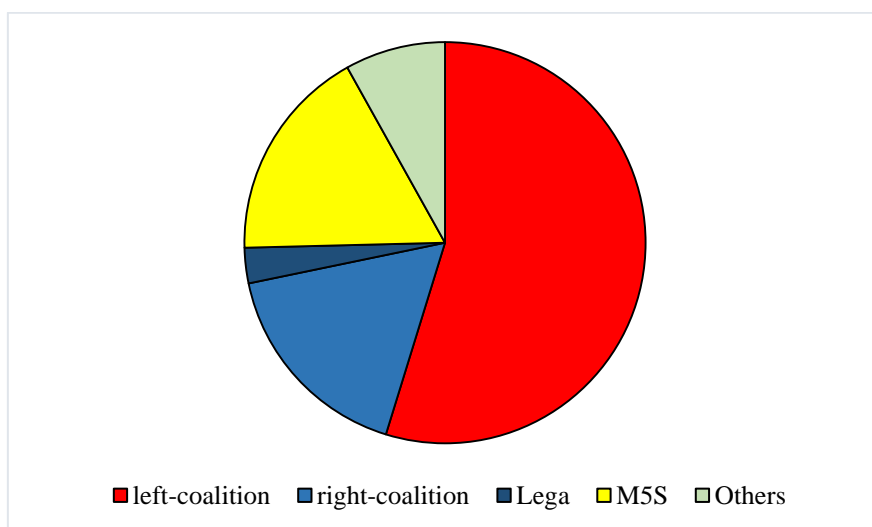


Figure 7. Electoral results of 2013 and composition of Chamber of deputies
Source: Italian Minister of Interior 2013

Left coalition reached 29.5% and won the majority bonus and it reached 55%. Right coalition and M5S were assigned respectively 29.1% and 25.5% (Minister of Interior 2013).

On one hand, Democratic party (PD) and the rest of the left coalition, marked in red, were particularly supported in the central regions of Italy (Tuscany, Marche and Umbria) and generally PD' supporters were public employees, bureaucrats and the middle-class. On the other hand, Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PDL) and other parties forming the right coalition (marked in blue), were supported mostly by entrepreneurs of small and medium enterprises, private companies, retired and unemployed anywhere across Italian districts (Demos & Pi 2013).

Moreover, many professional categories of voters who used to identify with right or left changed their preferences and opted for M5S (Table 5).

Table 5. Voters' preferences on 2013 according to professional status

PARTIES	Blue-collars	Employees	Entrepreneurs	Self-employed	Students	Housewives	Unemployed	Retired
Left-coalition	21.7	32.4	14.8	29.6	27.4	24.5	20.1	39.5
Right-coalition	25.8	21.2	34.6	15.6	26.1	43.3	23.7	32.2
Centre	6.6	13	5.8	15.3	12.4	7.5	9.5	12.3
M5S	40.1	27.1	40.2	31.3	29.1	20	42.7	11.5
Others	5.8	6.3	4.6	8.2	4.9	4.7	4	4.5

Source: Demos and Pi 2013

Unemployed, workers, private workers and students mostly opted for M5S among many districts. The so called red districts in the center of Italy (Marche, Tuscany) Democratic party lost its support favoring M5S. Similarly, in Sardinia and Sicily, Berlusconi lost its once strong support as M5S was preferred. These electoral results achieved by M5S reflect the issues and the strong concerns about unemployment and economic situation of Italians in 2013.

4.2. Electoral outcomes and issue opinions in 2018

In 2018, the new electoral system of Rosatellum – a mixed electoral system that differentiates from the previous Porcellum mainly because it does not attribute any majority bonus to any coalition, voters' preferences have again changed compared to 2013.

Figure 8. plots the results of 2018 electoral outcomes in a pie chart. M5S was assigned 32.7% while the right coalition, which includes Lega (marked in dark blue), were assigned respectively 37% and 17.5%. The left coalition was assigned 22.8%.

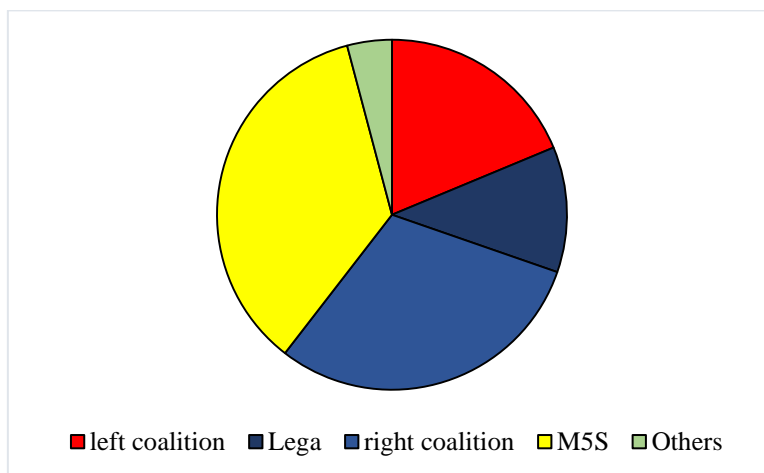


Figure 8. Distribution of seats in the chamber of deputies in 2018
Source: Italian Minister of Interior 2018

M5S is the first Italian most voted party and increases its support from the previous result of 2013 25.5% to 32.6% in 2018. Left coalition compared to the result of 55% in 2013, lost almost 30% of the seats. Right coalition increases its support from 29.1% in 2013 to 37.2% in 2018.

M5S towards new topics and the redefinition of the Statute achieved great electoral results. From 2013 to 2018, M5S increased their electoral support especially in the South (Tab.6).

Table 6. Electoral performance in the general elections of 2013, 2018, by regions in the Chamber of Deputies

REGIONS	2013	2018
Aosta Valley	20.7	24.1
Piedmont	25.7	26.4
Lombardy	17.4	21.1
Liguria	30.3	30.1
Veneto	24.6	24.4
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	25.5	24.6
Trentino-Alto Adige	15.1	19.5
Emilia Romagna	23.1	27.5
Tuscany	22.7	24.7
Umbria	25.3	27.5
Marche	30.3	35.5
Lazio	25.9	33.4
Abruzzo	28.4	39.8
Sardinia	28.7	42.5
Molise	26.6	44.8
Campania	20.7	49.3
Apulia	24.1	44.9
Calabria	22.2	43.4
Sicily	29.5	48.7

Source: Minister of Interior 2013, 2018

M5S performed better in the central regions at a rate of about +10% in Lazio, Abruzzo and Sardinia. While, it performed particularly well in the southern regions of Molise, Campania, Apulia, Calabria and Sicily with an increasing rate of almost 20% in every region.

These results can be associated to the higher rates of unemployment in the southern regions (table 1.) and the solutions to tackle unemployment proposed by M5S.

Regarding the electoral results achieved by the League, it overtook its long-standing coalition partner Forza Italia and became the main party of the right coalition (fig. 6). League increased its electoral support by 13% in 2018 compared to 2013 (fig.5).

The support for Lega increased across the whole country, mostly supported in the North, but also grew traditionally in the red regions (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche) and it also established a presence in the South and the islands, forming coalitions with many regionalist parties, redefining the original standpoints of LN (table 7.).

Table 7. Lega performance in 2013 and 2018 at the general elections and seats according to regions assigned at the Chamber of Deputies

REGIONS	2013	2018
Aosta Valley	3.19	17.5
Piedmont	4.8	22.6
Lombardy	12.9	28
Liguria	2.3	19.9
Veneto	10.5	32.2
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	6.7	25.8
Trentino-Alto Adige	4.2	19.2
Emilia Romagna	2.6	19.2
Tuscany	0.7	17.3
Umbria	0.6	20.2
Marche	0.7	17.3
Lazio	0.2	13.4
Abruzzo	0.2	13.8
Sardinia	0.1	10.8
Molise	0.2	8.7
Campania	0.3	4.3
Apulia	0.1	6.2
Calabria	0.3	5.6
Sicily	0.2	5.2

Source: Minister of Interior 2013, 2018

As outlined in the third chapter, Salvini's positions put emphasis on the mismanagement of immigration blamed on the institutions, this could be associated to the distorted perspectives that Italians have on the presence of migrants in the country (table 4). This result reflects also the stronger positions of Italians on immigration from 2013 to 2018. In fact, according to the surveys, in 2013 Italians were mostly concerned on their economic situation and unemployment rather than migrants. While in 2018, 67% of the sample of Italians consider immigration as a major problem. Therefore, Salvini's redirection in ideologies might have been translated in voters' preferences

M5S and Salvini stressed on the significant issues for Italians, while the former one put emphasis on unemployment and economic situation the latter one stresses on immigration. Both of them framed these issues with anti-elitist connotations, blaming on the political establishment for being responsible for these problems. According to the electoral results, it is possible to establish a positive relation between their frames, citizens' issues and their electoral success. Therefore, the question whether these parties were able to win the elections through their messaging strategies involving frames that resonate with Italians' prominent issues, can be partially answered positively.

However, given the theoretical premises of the top-down democratic relation between the elites as active constructors of public opinions that model voters' choice is not validated for different reasons. First of all, the lack of data on voters in political engagement on social media, it is not possible to prove if elites are driving voters' choices. This thesis only suggests that based on Italians' concerns on economic situation, unemployment, untrustworthy and corrupted politicians and distorted perspectives of foreigner residents in the country, 5 Star Movement and Salvini embraced citizens' positions differently.

Given these results, more research on Italians' voting choices related to their engagement on social media can be conducted to establish a stronger linkage between voters preferences and parties' stances on issues. This could be possible with broader data on potential voters' engagement with the contents of main leaders media coverage in social media. In this way it would be possible to establish clearer causal relations between voters preferences and the role of elites as active constructors of public opinions.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to understand how the populist political forces in Italy, 5 Star Movement and the League, achieved their electoral success at the general elections in 2018. A key reason for their success lies on their messaging strategies in social media. Their rhetorics involve anti-elitist frames that mirror the citizens' issues and perspectives, which are blamed on the political establishment and political institutions.

Regarding the main results, overall it is possible to admit that the strategies employed by M5S and Salvini which resonate with the Italians' main concerns are positively related to their respective electoral results.

First of all, in Italy public opinion was particularly favorable to Salvini and M5S' stances. From the analysis on the surveys, it is clear that the majority Italians are mostly concerned about four issues, such as unemployment, their economic situation, the corrupted and untrustworthy political establishment and immigration.

Secondly, from results achieved in the analysis on the messaging strategies adopted by the populist forces in 2018, it is clear that their positions and their arguments were positively aligned to the main Italians' concerns, with some exceptions. In fact M5S constructed its frames on unemployment and economic situation, blaming them on political establishment. Therefore, it is expected that unemployed were mostly supporting their stances.

Instead, Salvini mainly stressed his arguments against migrants, refugees and ethnic minorities rather than unemployment. Therefore, it is expected that these stances translated in voting choices.

These results suggest that these parties' ideological stances reflected the changes in public opinion between 2013 and 2018 and they give an explanation for their breakthrough at the general elections. In fact from the analysis that compares respectively public opinions and the electoral results between 2013 and 2018, it is possible to establish a positive relation between the redefinition of the League, the reinforcement on the positions of M5S and their respective electoral performances.

The conclusions of this paper are supported by opinion surveys on citizens between 2013 and 2018, statistics on the respective concerns affecting the Italians, their perspectives on the issues and the aggregate elections results is limited on public opinion surveys on citizens, statistics on real problems and the aggregate data of electoral results.

However, due to the lack on data of voters' engagement in any political activities in social media it is still uncertain whether populist parties' strategies were affecting directly voters preferences, and hence to establish a causal relation between them. Therefore, to answer to the research question, of whether these parties' messaging strategies, besides the limitations presented, it is still uncertain if the elites' frames determined directly the voters preferences for these parties.

This paper merely suggests that populist parties and populist leaders' activities, while pointing at the citizens' concerns and blaming them on other political actors, might attract supporters and be translated in voting choices. The comparisons between public opinions in two different periods and the respective electoral preferences shifts, shows that voters expressed their preferences based on their issues and concerns. However, since these parties framed the citizens' issues with anti-elitist stances and they won the elections, this leads to conclude that M5S and Salvini better represented their interests.

Acknowledging that this case-study is quite recent, since Salvini and M5S started their mandate in 2018, there will be more data available on supporters and their content preferences in the following years.

In conclusion, stressing on the novelty of the the case-study and based on the results achieved this paper sets the direction for more research on populist forms of communication and party polarization.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2008). Introduction: The scepter and the spectre. Basingstoke, UK: Plagrave Macmillan
- Albertazzi, D. (2016) "Going, Going,...Not Quite Gone Yet? 'Bossi's Lega' and the Survival of the Mass Party." *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol. 8, n°1, pp: 1–16
- Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A. Seddone A. (2018) "No regionalism please, we are Leghisti!" The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, *Regional and Federal Studies*, pp. (1-27)
- Cacciatore, M., Scheufele, D., Iyengar, S. (2016) The End of Framing as we know it...and the Future of Media Effects, *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 19, No.1, pp. 7-23
- Carsey, T. Layman, G. (2006) Changing sides or changing minds? Party identification and policy preferences in the American electorate, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, n°20, pp: 464-477
- Ceccarini, L., Bordignon, F. (2015) The Five-Star Movement: a hybrid actor in the net of state institutions, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol.20, n° 4, pp: 454-473
- CENSIS (2018) I media digitali e la fine dello star system (Digital media and the end of the star system), 11 October 2018
Available : http://www.censis.it/Censis/browse/7?shadow_comunicato_stampa=121173
- Chadwick, A. (2013) *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press
- Cohen, B. (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Institute of Governmental Studies, 9th ed. Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press
- Dearing, J. W., Rogers, E.M. (1996) *Agenda-Setting*, London, UK: SAGE
- Demos and Pi (2013) 2013 general elections: how professional status changes voting distributions, Elezioni Politiche 2013: com'è cambiata la composizione sociale del voto, available: <http://www.demos.it/a00831.php>
- Diamant, J., Starr, K. J. (2018) Western Europeans vary in their nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-religious minority attitudes Pew Research center on italian nationalism, Pew Research Center - 19 June 2018. Available: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/19/western-europeans-vary-in-their-nationalist-anti-immigrant-and-anti-religious-minority-attitudes/>

- Diamanti, I. (2013) Destra e Sinistra perdono il proprio popolo. M5S come la vecchia DC: Interclassista, Demos and Pi, available:<http://www.demos.it/a00832.php>
- Diamanti, I. (2014) The 5 Star Movement: a political laboratory. In *The Five Star Movement: A new political actor on the web, in the streets and on stage*, edited by Ilvo Diamanti and Paolo Natale.” *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol.6, n° 1, pp. 4–15
- Diamanti, I. (2017) La lega oltre Bossi. E oltre la Padania. *La Repubblica*, March 17, 2017
- Electoral handbook by the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, January 2018
Available:<http://www.camera.it/temiap/2018/01/18/OCD177-3269.pdf>
- Entman, R. M., (1989) How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (May, 1989), pp. 347-370
- Eurobarometer standard 80 (2013) Autumn wave – National report on public opinion in Italy
- Eurobarometer 469 (2017) Integration of immigrants in the European Union, October 2017
- Gazzetta Ufficiale* - Law No. 28 2000
Available: <http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/000281.htm>
- Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press
- Helberger, N., Bodò, B. de Vreese, C.H. (2017) Political micro-targetting: a Manchurian candidate or just a dark horse? *Internet Policy Review*, Vol. 6, n°4
- ISTAT (2018) Activities on Internet,
Available: <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=22998>
- ISTAT (2018) Unemployment rates in Italy.
Available:http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXDISOCCU1
- ISTAT, Foreigners in Italy <http://www4.istat.it/it/archivio/208951>
- Italian minister of interior (2013), Electoral results of Chamber of deputies
Italian minister of interior (2018), Electoral results of Chamber of deputies
- Iyengar, S. (1990) Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty, *Political Behavior*, Vol.12, No. 1, pp. 19-40
- Iyengar, S., Kinder, D. (1987) *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*, American Politics and Political Economy, Chicago: USA, The University of Chicago Press
- Kahneman, D., Tversky, A. (1984) Choices, Values and Frames, *American Psychologist Association*, Vol.39, No 4, pp-339-350

- Lee, A., Lewis, C. S., Powers, M. (2014) Audience clicks and news placement: a study of time-lagged influence in online journalism, *Communication Research*, Vol. 41, n° 4, pp. 505-530
- Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the media. In D. Albertazzi, & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 49–64). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- McCombs, M., Shaw, D., Weaver, D.H. (2014) New Directions in Agenda-Setting Theory and Research, *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 6, pp. 781-802
- Moffitt, B., Tormey, S. (2014), *Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style*, *Political Studies*, Vol. 62, pp. 381-397
- More in Common, IPSOS (2018) *Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Italy - Report*, July 2018
- Mughan A. , Aaldering L. (2017) Politics, media and the electoral role of party leaders, (pp. 169 -180) in Fisher, J. Fieldhouse E., Frankin M., Gibson, R., Cantijoch, M., Wlezien, C. 1st Ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion*, New York: United States, Routledge
- Pasquino, G. (2008) Populism and Democracy. In D. Albertazzi, & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 15-30). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- Pew Research Center, May, 2018. “*In Western Europe, Public Attitudes Toward News Media More Divided by Populist Views Than Left-Right Ideology*” - Fact Sheet: News Media and Political Attitudes in Italy
- Regulation of Movimento 5 Stelle. Available: <http://www.beppegrillo.it/regolamento-m5s-e-comitato-di-appello/>
- Rogue0 "buca" ancora Rousseau, il Garante avvia le verifiche (Rogue0 hacks again Rousseau platform, the Authorities started the investigations) - Repubblica, 6 September 2018 https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/sicurezza/2018/09/06/news/attacco_hacker_a_rousseau_il_garante_ha_avviato_le_verifiche_l_ex_dipendente_ecco_cosa_puo_essere_successo_-205733326/
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. H. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 9-20.
- Shea, J.P. (1998) *The Role of the media in a democratic society*, Nato Speeches, 2-3 July 1998
- Stigler, G., Becker, G. (1977) De gustibus non est disputandum. *American Economic Review*, 67, pp. 76-90
- Tewksbury, D., Weaver, A. J., Maddex, B. D. (2001) Accidentally informed: incidental news exposure on the world wide web, *J&MC*, Vol. 78, n° 3, pp.533-554

- Twitter - How to use hashtags Available: <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/how-to-use-hashtags>
- Unesco (2018) Worlds Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, Global Report 2017/2018
- Vaccari, C., Valeriani, A., Barberà, P., Bonneau, R., Jost, J., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. (2013) Social Media and Political Communication: A survey of Twitter users during the 2013 Italian general election, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica, Italian Political Science Review*, Vol. 3, pp. 381-410
- Vargo, C., Guo, L., McCombs, M., Shaw, D. (2016) Network Issue Agendas on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 64, No.2, pp. 296-316
- Verza S. (2018) Policy Brief: An overview of Italian online and offline political communication regulation, *Global Freedom of Expression*, 23 February 2018
- Walgrave, S., Swert, K. (2004) The making of the (Issues of the) Vlaams Blok, *Political Communication*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 479-500
- Wirth, W., Esser, F., Wettstein, M., Engesser, S., Wirz, D., Schulz, A., Ernst, N., Buchel, F., Caramani, D., Manucci, L., Steenbergen, M., Bernhard, L., Weber, E., Hanggli, R., Dalmus, C., Schemer, C., Muller, P. (2016) The appeal of populist ideas, strategies and styles: A theoretical model and research design for analyzing populist political communication, National Centre of Competence in Research: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century, n° 88, pp. 1- 55

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The main concerns among Italians in 2018

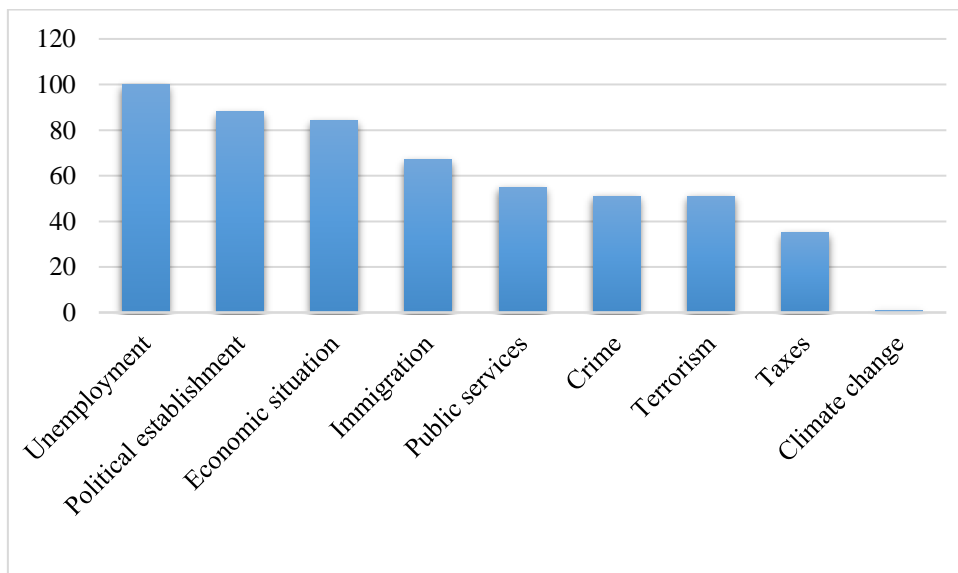


Figure 1. The main concerns among Italians in 2018
Source: Author's calculations based, More in Common

Appendix 2. Unemployment rate according to regions from 2012 to 2018

REGIONS	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
North	7.4	8.4	8.6	8.1	7.6	6.9	6.5
Centre	9.4	10.7	11.4	10.6	10.4	10	9.6
South	17.1	19.7	20.7	19.4	19.6	19.4	18.4
Italy	10.7	12.1	12.7	11.9	11.7	11.2	10.7

Source: ISTAT

*2018 column contains only the averages from January to September

Appendix 3. Perceptions and real data on immigrants

ITALIAN REGIONS	% PERCEIVED NON-EU RESIDENTS	% REAL NON-EU RESIDENTS
North-west	21.2	10.7
North-east	20.1	9
Centre	25.9	9.4
South	27.5	4.3

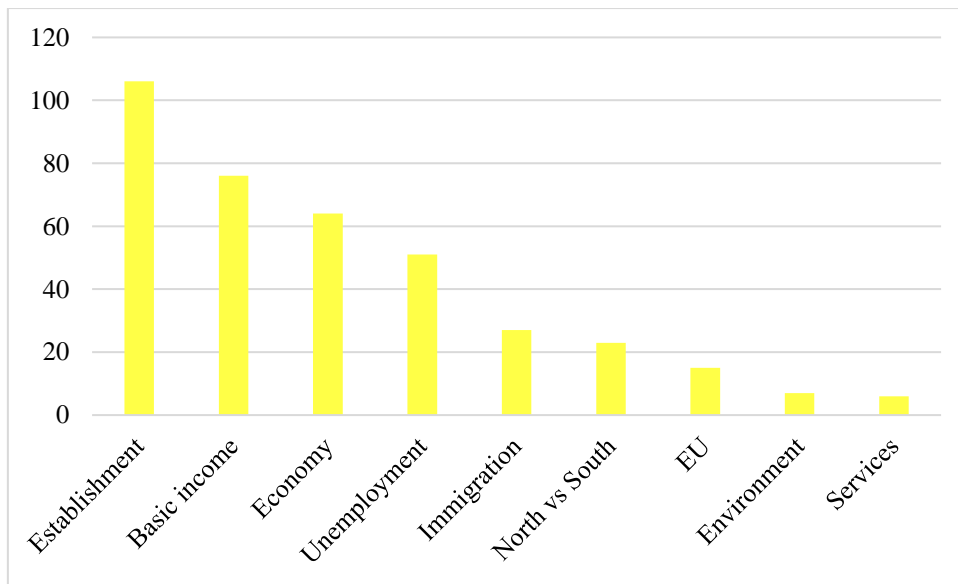
Source: Eurobarometer surveys in 2017 and ISTAT 2017

Appendix 4. Nationalists, anti-immigrant, anti-religious minority attitudes (NIM) of Western countries from surveys conducted April-August 2017

COUNTRIES	MEDIAN SCORE OF NIM
Italy	4.1
Portugal	3.5
Austria	3.3
Switzerland	3.3
Finland	3.1
Uk	3
Germany	2.9
Spain	2.9
Belgium	2.7
France	2.5
Sweden	1.2

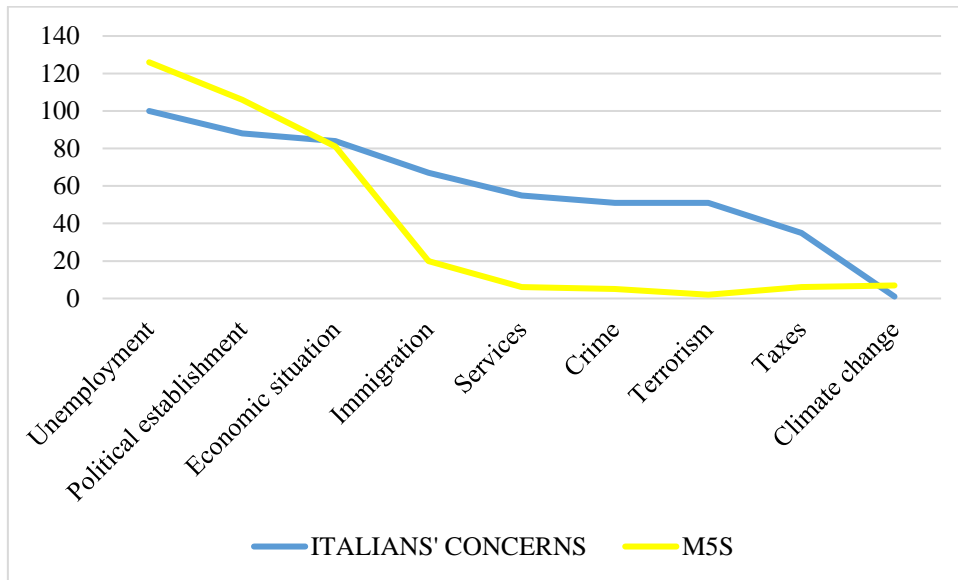
Source: PEW Research center 2018

Appendix 5. Frequencies of keywords of M5S' sample of data (October 2017 to October 2018)



Source: Author's calculation, M5S' official page - @Mov5stelle

Appendix 6. Multilinear graph on most relevant issues among Italians and M5S' Twitter page



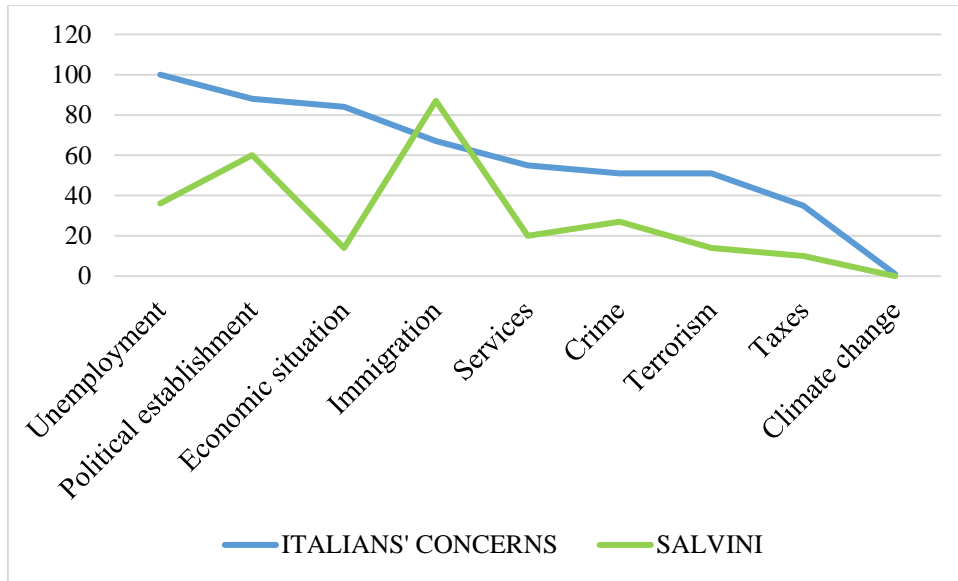
Source: author's calculations, M5S' official page on Twitter (@Mov5stelle)

Appendix.7. Frequencies of keywords on Matteo Salvini's sample of data (October 2017 to October 2018)



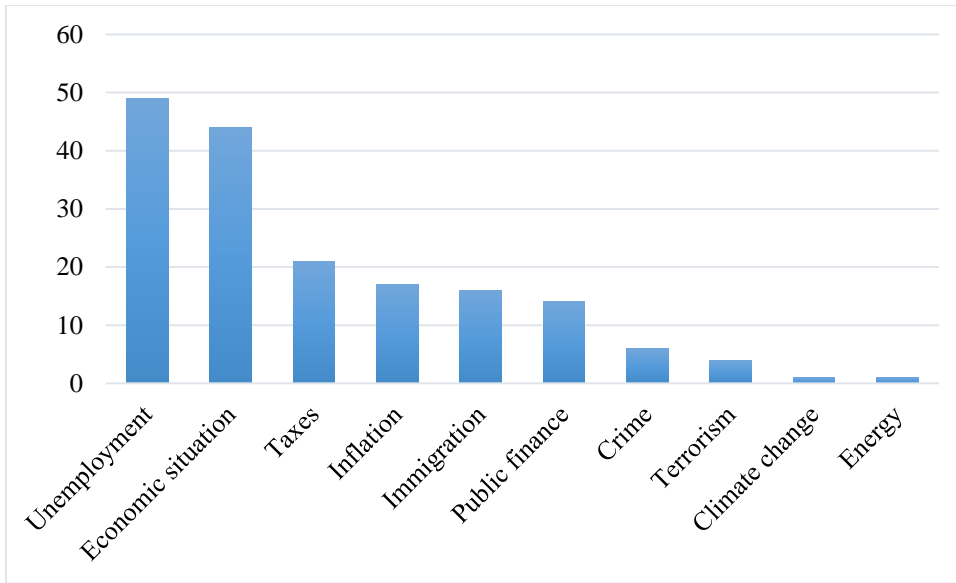
Source: Author's elaboration, Matteo Salvini's data from the official Twitter page - @matteosalvinimi

Appendix 8. Multilinear graph on most relevant issues among Italians on online news and Salvini's positions



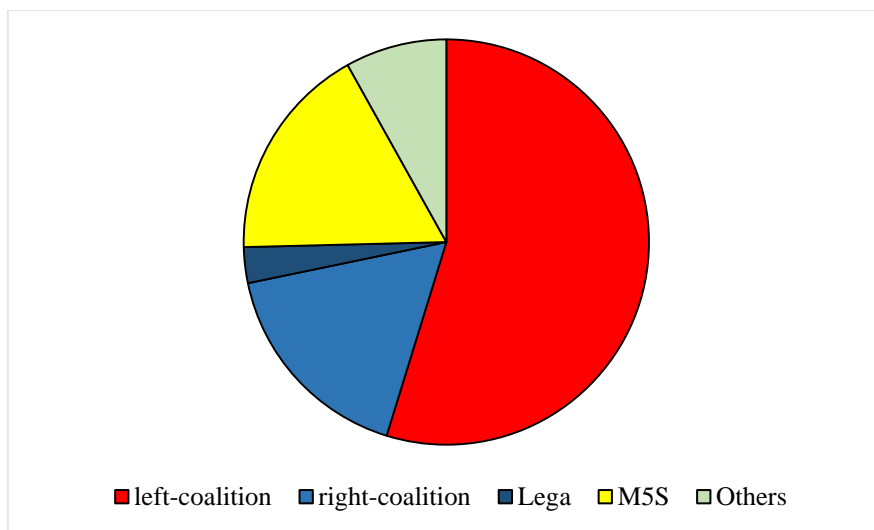
Source: author's calculations, More in Common and Twitter

Appendix 9. Issues shared among Italians in 2013



Source: Author's elaboration, Eurobarometer 2013

Appendix 10. Electoral results of 2013 and composition of Chamber of deputies



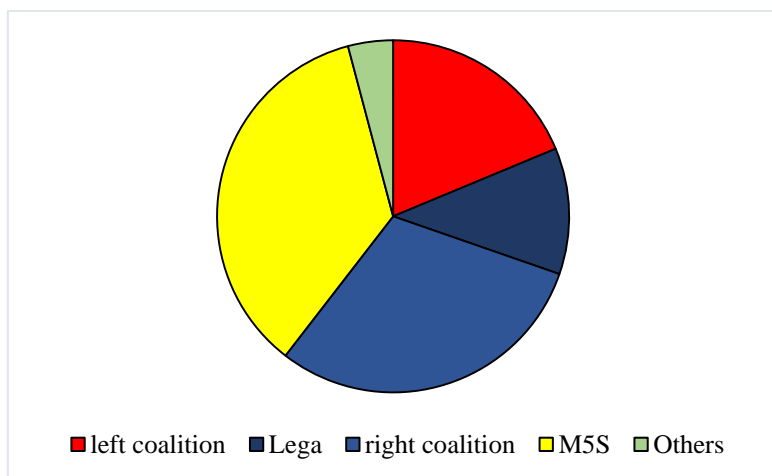
Source: Italian Minister of Interior 2013

Appendix 11. Voters' preferences in 2013 according to professional status

PARTIES	Blue-collars	Employees	Entrepreneurs	Self-employed	Students	Housewives	Unemployed	Retired
Left-coalition	21.7	32.4	14.8	29.6	27.4	24.5	20.1	39.5
Right-coalition	25.8	21.2	34.6	15.6	26.1	43.3	23.7	32.2
Centre	6.6	13	5.8	15.3	12.4	7.5	9.5	12.3
M5S	40.1	27.1	40.2	31.3	29.1	20	42.7	11.5
Others	5.8	6.3	4.6	8.2	4.9	4.7	4	4.5

Source: Demos and Pi 2013

Appendix 12. Distribution of seats in the chamber of deputies in 2018



Source: Italian Minister of Interior 2018

Appendix 13. Electoral performance in the general elections of 2013, 2018, by regions in the Chamber of Deputies

REGIONS	2013	2018
Aosta Valley	20.7	24.1
Piedmont	25.7	26.4
Lombardy	17.4	21.1
Liguria	30.3	30.1
Veneto	24.6	24.4
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	25.5	24.6
Trentino-Alto Adige	15.1	19.5
Emilia Romagna	23.1	27.5
Tuscany	22.7	24.7
Umbria	25.3	27.5
Marche	30.3	35.5
Lazio	25.9	33.4
Abruzzo	28.4	39.8
Sardinia	28.7	42.5
Molise	26.6	44.8
Campania	20.7	49.3
Apulia	24.1	44.9
Calabria	22.2	43.4
Sicily	29.5	48.7

Source: Minister of Interior 2013, 2018

Appendix 14. Lega performance in 2013 and 2018 at the general elections and seats according to regions assigned at the Chamber of Deputies

REGIONS	2013	2018
Aosta Valley	3.19	17.5
Piedmont	4.8	22.6
Lombardy	12.9	28
Liguria	2.3	19.9
Veneto	10.5	32.2
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	6.7	25.8
Trentino-Alto Adige	4.2	19.2
Emilia Romagna	2.6	19.2
Tuscany	0.7	17.3
Umbria	0.6	20.2
Marche	0.7	17.3
Lazio	0.2	13.4
Abruzzo	0.2	13.8
Sardinia	0.1	10.8
Molise	0.2	8.7
Campania	0.3	4.3
Apulia	0.1	6.2
Calabria	0.3	5.6
Sicily	0.2	5.2

Source: Minister of Interior 2013, 2018