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## Italian leaders' populist communication style in 2018 election campaign

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(Article begins on next page)

SCIENZA POLITICA 14

# POPULISM IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS

Actors and processes in time of crisis

Edited by Enrico Calossi, Paola Imperatore

PISA  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Italian leaders' populist communication style in 2018 election campaign

Antonio Martella

### 1. Introduction

The endemic spread of populism has led researchers and scholars to investigate the phenomenon and its causes, with very different approaches that sometimes have led to conflicting results. Starting from the first studies, in fact, it emerged that the concept of populism is “vague” (Canoan 1999) “chameleonic” (Taggart 2000), and that its very constitutive aspects are difficult to identify (Tarchi 2015). Despite this intrinsic difficulty in the theoretical and empirical description of the phenomenon, there have been many attempts to define it by scholars who have focused on the multiple aspects of the concept from time to time.

This work represents an attempt to identify populism as a communication style in the main Italian political leaders' online communication starting from the operationalisation proposed by Bracciale, Andretta and Martella (2021), by both reorganising some communicative strategies and adding some communicative elements related to form and content, such as issues, function of the messages, and registers/tones of the message.

Following other authors (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017; Bossetta 2017; Ernst et al. 2018) the operationalization combines the two main approaches in the literature on populism, which define it either as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004) or populism as a communicative style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Moreover, from a communication-centred point of view (Stanyer, Salgado, and Stromback 2017), it takes into consideration all

aspects of communication of political actors on social media which are characterised by several logics and actors.

The main assumption is that the presence of populism references and frames in media (Mazzoleni 2008) and in political actors messages (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018) has contributed to transform the ideological aspects identified in the literature into increasingly blurred and difficult to identify “fragments” (Engesser et al. 2017). The populist thin ideology is often hidden in the communication strategies, frames, and representations.

Therefore, the work tries to better link the main communicative strategies and the elements of populist ideology to the main processes that characterise the modern political communication. In line with the studies that have tried to analyse political actors’ communication as a whole (Bossetta 2017; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2018; Moffitt 2016; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021), communication strategies have been divided into four distinct categories based on the communicator’s goals: Appeal to emotions, Leaders’ figure (aimed at highlighting skills and actions of the political actor), Adversarial behaviours (the adoption of a conflictual communication, which includes the instrumental use of news and facts and the real attack / accusation against someone), and Problem solving (the solution proposal of the issue, which brings together the oversimplification of problems or the reference to popular wisdom).

The empirical analysis shows that all these elements were adopted by Italian leaders according to different combinations allowing to identify four main communication styles for each political actor that were characterised by the presence of populist ideology fragments in several ways.

The work presents a theoretical framework constituted by the section “A communication-centred point of view” which explains the communicative approach to populism and the section “Analysing Populism as a political communication style” which summarises the main stylistic elements emerged in the literature focusing both on populism and on political communication connecting them to the main processes involved in the nowadays political communication.

The case study and the methodologies adopted to identify populism as a political communication style are explained in the “Research design and methodology” section to clarify the empirical application of the conceptualization of populism as a political communication style. “Results

and discussion” section present the main results emerged from the analysis of the main Italian leaders’ communication in social media during the last Italian election campaign (2018).

## **2. A communication-centred point of view**

Starting from Mudde’s definition (2004), scholars who interpreted populism as a “thin ideology” (Aalberg et al. 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Hameleers 2018) identified three core elements of populism: the appeal to the people (e.g. the nation, the voters, the taxpayers, etc.), the attack of the elites (e.g. media, politics, intellectuals, etc.), and the ostracism of ‘others’ (subsets of the people considered as dangerous or deviants).

But populism often relates to the strategic adoption of some features of the communicative style (van Kessel and Castelein 2016), in fact: “the communicative tools used for spreading populist ideas are just as central as the populist ideas themselves.” (de Vreese et al. 2018: 3). Indeed, several scholars interpreted populism as a communication style focusing both on form and content in which the populist ideological references emerge too (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2018; Krämer 2017). By following these studies, the approach to analyse populism is ‘communication-centred’ (Staney, Salgado and Stromback 2017), which means that communication is populist and not necessarily communicators.

Research that adopted this approach do not often consider stylistic elements (Aalberg et al. 2017; Cranmer 2011) and the empirical definition of populism as a political communication style resulted in a combination of populist ideology fragments – empty populism, anti-elitist populism, and complete populism – (de Vreese et al. 2018; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Therefore, some peculiar communication aspects that blend with populist ideology fragments especially in social media (Engesser et al. 2017) are often left out.

For example, in the Italian context, it already emerged that most of the leaders adopt ‘ideological’ references (appeal to the people, attack on the elites and marginalization of the ‘dangerous others’) diversifying the rhetorical construction (people as a nation, social class, etc.) and with different communicative styles (Biorcio 2015; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021).

This happens because nowadays communicative features represent the practical manifestation of populist ideology in political actors communication, as reported by several authors (Kriesi 2018; Ernst et al. 2019; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021).

Consequently, by following previous studies (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021; Bracciale and Martella 2017), I argue that the most useful approach to analyse populism as a communication style should identify style elements, communication strategies, etc., emerged in the literature, and then verify their presence or absence in leaders' communication along with the fragments of populist ideology.

Following this approach, the main elements of political communication styles emerged in literature will be highlighted and related to both contextual and populist elements.

### **3. Analysing Populism as a political communication style**

Many studies have highlighted how social media are an extremely favourable habitat for the spread of populism because they allow political actors to directly address their audiences (Bartlett 2014) and to mobilize their own followers (Kriesi 2014). Indeed, Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017) identified the populist style as a useful tool to maximize attention and add news value, especially in social media in which content production is driven by attention maximization (Klinger and Svensson 2015).

In political communication, two drivers were already identified fostering the popularization of politics (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), that are in some way related to the spread of populist communication. In fact, on the one hand, we have witnessed the spread of media populism as a consequence of the media logic in political communication (Mazzoleni 2014; Mazzoleni, Stewart and Horsfield 2003); on the other, the political actors involved in these processes have adapted their language, style, and contents to the media logics, increasingly using emotionalization, simplification, sensationalism, spectacularization, etc. (Campus 2016).

These processes have led to an increasingly frequent appeal to (both positive and negative) emotions (Caiani and Graziano 2016; Ernst et al. 2019; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese 2016) in order to engage and stir users' feelings, up to affect citizens voting behaviour (Cepernich and Novelli 2018). Since the earlier studies, literature on populism has often identi-

fied the use of highly emotional language and style as a typical trait of populist communication (Moffitt 2016; Alvares and Dahlgren 2016; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021) even though it cannot be considered as an exclusive prerogative of populist actors.

Indeed, due to personalization and disintermediation processes that characterise the hybrid media system, the importance of the leader's figure has grown rapidly (Campus 2010; Enli and Skogerbø 2013) to the extent that nowadays it is possible to label this process as 'leaderization' or 'leadership personalization' that involves all advanced democracies (Viviani 2017). The focus shifting from parties and ideologies to the leader's figure fostered at least two individualization processes: on the one hand, an increased attention to professional and personal skills of the political actors (Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Van Aelst and Staney 2011), and, on the other hand, an increased emphasis on their actions and successes (Van Dijk 1998; 2006) as a signal of political actors' abilities.

Moreover, the personalization of politics also encouraged political actors to share private and personal moments (Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Staney 2012) or explicitly refer to their personal feelings in their speech and messages (Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2017) 'humanising' them and allowing leaders to self-present as 'one of the people' (Campus 2016). Still related to the personalization/individualization processes, other strategies emerged that foster the rhetorical construction of a charismatic leadership (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021): on the one hand, the adoption of a decision making language, aimed to quick problem solving and imbued of black or white logic (Bordignon 2014; Moffitt 2016); on the other, (self) presenting the political actor as a fixer of the problem of the nation, of the people, etc. that some scholars labelled 'missionary politics' (Zúquete 2013; Moffitt 2016). Clearly, populist actors are not the only ones who adopt these strategies, although the relationship between the personalization of politics and populism is increasingly identified as structural (Kriesi 2018) due to the importance of the leaders' figure in populist parties and movements (Canovan 1999; Moffitt 2016; Weyland 2001).

Among the consequences of the mediatization of politics and the necessity to reduce the gap with the citizens, at least two other communication strategies emerged in literature: simplification and frequent references to "popular wisdom" (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021). The first one can be considered a necessity in the current media system char-

acterised by speed, simplification, and polarization, and it refers to the oversimplification of problems and related solutions (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016; Caiani and Graziano 2016). The reference to popular wisdom defined as a “continuous reference to proverbs, stereotypes, cliché and in general to ‘common sense’” (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021, 5) allows political actors to use the language of the ‘ordinary people’ referring to their imaginary, which in the case of populism recalls the concept of the heartland (Taggart 2000): a mythical past evoked by populist actors to highlight what was lost in current world.

Another characteristic of the modern political communication is the strong polarization especially in online debates that leads to an adversarial use of social media platforms (Conover et al. 2010; Guimaraes, Wang and Weikum 2017), characterised by the ‘negative campaigning’ elements, as well as attacking, blaming, or critiquing competitors, parties, or issues. This strategy fits well the rhetorical construction of the ‘people’ against the ‘elites’ or the ‘dangerous others’ according to the “us vs them” logic (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese 2016; van Kessel and Castelein 2016). Also the exploitation of news can be included in the adversarial use of the platform (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021), considering that it consists of using specific facts or single events (Krämer 2014) to polarize the audience on a specific topic to support own theses and/or attack competitors.

## **4. Research Design**

### **4.1. Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Maximising users’ attentions in social media is fundamental because of the network media logic (Klinger and Svensson 2015). Moreover, as emerged in other studies (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021), social media audiences react differently to specific communicative elements depending on the leader. Therefore, it seems possible to hypothesise that Italian leaders adopt different communication styles based on communicative strategies, registers, etc. to communicate with and engage their own followers. Consequently, the first research question is:

RQ1. Which are the main communication styles adopted by the Italian leaders during the 2018 election campaign? Which are the main differences?

Based on a *communication-centred* approach that addresses populism as a communication phenomenon (Stanyer, Salgado and Stromback 2017) it is possible to hypothesise that political actors adopt populist ideology fragments in online messages according to their goals and needs. For example, the appeal to the people can be used to show that leaders care about them or to mobilise audience in the election campaign (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Moreover, the attack of the elites can be adopted to shift the blame on competitors (van Kessel and Castelein 2016) or to show closeness to the people underlying the distance between them and the elites. Therefore, the second research question is:

RQ2. Which communication styles relate the most to populist ideology fragments for each leader?

#### 4.2. Case study

To answer the research questions, I analysed Facebook and Twitter posts of the main Italian leaders during the 2018 general election campaign. I focused on electoral campaign because it is the primary testing fields for political communication practices, strategies, styles, etc. (Cepernich 2017), and social media are fundamental tools for elections by now (Vergeer and Hermans 2013).

Leaders have been selected according to the importance in the Italian political realm and their different ideologies: Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia, hereafter FI), Luigi Di Maio (Five Stars Movement, hereafter M5S), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia, hereafter FdI), Matteo Renzi (Partito Democratico, PD) and Matteo Salvini (Lega – Salvini Premier, LS).

As emerged in other studies, many Italian leaders adopt populist ideology fragments in their online communication although in a different way (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021), in fact several scholars identified Italy as a “breeding ground” (Bobba and Legnante 2017) for populism.

Silvio Berlusconi has been identified as a neo-liberal populist (Bobba and McDonnell 2016) due to the recurrent rhetorical contraposition between citizens and bureaucracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Also, Luigi Di Maio and M5S have been considered populists due to their description



of citizens as sovereign against the corrupted elites (Bordignon and Cengarini 2013; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

Fratelli d'Italia has been identified as a nationalist populist party (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018) and Giorgia Meloni has been found quite populist on social media (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

While the Democratic Party is not identified as a populist party (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018) Matteo Renzi's communication has been found slightly populist on social media (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021) frequently characterised by the 'us vs them' contraposition, and by an anti-political elites rhetoric (Biorcio 2015).

Finally, the League has been labelled as a populist party since the beginning (Bobba 2019) and his leader, Matteo Salvini, emerged as a populist actor in several studies (Biorcio 2015; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

U

### 4.3. Methodology

Facebook and Twitter timelines of the Italian leaders have been downloaded via Facebook Graph API<sup>1</sup> and Twitter REST API since February 4<sup>th</sup> to March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (the last month of the election campaign including the election day).

**Table 7.1. Italian leaders in Facebook and Twitter.**

Leader	Facebook	n. fan*	Twitter	n. follower*
Silvio Berlusconi	128	1.037.181	770	25.000
Luigi Di Maio	310	1.229.420	58	281.889
Giorgia Meloni	326	784.139	129	634.732
Matteo Renzi	88	1.115.199	109	3.365.525
Matteo Salvini	468	2.025.681	740	648.669

\* Updated to February 18, 2018.

<sup>1</sup> It has been possible download data from Facebook app until the deadline for the app review process <https://developers.facebook.com/blog/post/2018/07/02/app-review-deadlines-approaching/>.

In total, 1320 Facebook posts and 1806 tweets were analysed through content analysis by two trained coders to identify: 1) issues, 2) registers, 3) communication strategy, and 4) populist ideology fragments. Krippendorff  $\alpha$  from 0.68 to 0.82 and agreement percentage from 94% to 98%, have been considered highly satisfactory values according to field norms (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). To analyse the whole online communication, Facebook posts and tweets have been aggregated in one database for each leader.

For each leader, communication styles have been identified through the application of Multiple Correspondence Analysis that allow summarising many variables in few dimensions that can be interpreted by the researcher (Di Franco 2011). The MCA allows distinguishing between active variables (registers, functions, and communication strategies) which are used to build dimensions and supplementary variables (issues, social media, and populist ideology fragments) which are used to describe dimensions. Eigenvalues inertia has been re-evaluated according to the 'optimistic' formula of Benzécri (1979). For each leader, the two main dimensions emerged from the analysis have been projected on a Cartesian plane in order to identify specific communication styles (Bracciale and Martella 2017).

### **5. Populism as a communication style: codified variables<sup>2</sup>**

The first variable relates to the social media platform: Facebook or Twitter. Although they are both adopted by leaders in their communication, several studies showed some differences in their use and their audiences. First, Facebook is perceived more intimate compared to Twitter that is often used for negative campaigning and adversarial behaviour (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021). Indeed, Twitter emerged as "less suitable to populist communication than Facebook" (Ernst et al. 2019: 11) probably due to the presence of wider and general audiences in the latter.

Issues in leaders' messages were recognised following Graham et al. (2013). Following Bracciale and Martella (2017), five registers were identi-

<sup>2</sup> See appendix for further details on variables' definition.

fied (e.g. neutral, aggressive, colloquial, etc.) to highlight the tone used by leaders in their messages.

Four main functions of the messages were coded based on research focused on political communication in social media (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2014; Jungherr 2015; Karlsen and Enjolras 2016) to understand leaders' communicative aims (e.g. campaigning, self-promotion, etc.).

Following Bracciale et al. (2021) eight communicative strategies were identified in leaders' messages. The first one is the appeal to emotions – both positive and negative. Three communicative strategies emerged in literature focusing the leader's figure: 1) 'Distinguish Oneself', which includes individualization and the emphasis on leader's actions (Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Rega and Bracciale 2018; Van Aelst and Staney 2011; Van Dijk 1998; 2006); 2) 'Personal leader', that involve the sharing of personal emotions and of private aspects of leader's life (Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese 2011; Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2017; Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Staney 2012); and 3) the 'Charismatic leader', which refer to the use of decision making language and the performing of the 'missionary politics' (Moffitt 2016; Zúquete 2013; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021). Based on the literature (Krämer 2014; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese 2016; van Kessel and Castelein 2016; Moffitt 2016), two strategies related to the adversarial behaviour were identified: 1) the 'Attacking' and 2) the exploitation of specific events ('Instrumental actualization'). The last two communicative strategies relate to the problem solving and they are the references to 'Popular wisdom' and the 'Simplification' of issues and solutions (Moffitt 2016; Alvares and Dahlgren 2016; Canovan 1999; Tarchi 2016). Finally, the three core concepts of the populist ideology were identified: 'Appeal to the people', 'Attack of the elites' and the 'Ostracising Others'.

## **6. Results and Discussion: The communication styles**

The Multiple Correspondence Analysis applied to each Italian leader's online communication allowed to identify the most significant elements and how these have been adopted by leaders during the last month of the general election campaign. Indeed, the associations emerged from the MCA application, confirmed by the presence of specific issues, permit-

ted to interpret each radiant as a communication style and therefore the adoption of specific communication strategies.

### 6.1. Silvio Berlusconi

The MCA applied on Silvio Berlusconi posts and tweets showed two main dimensions explaining 96% of the variance found. The first dimension (76%) ranges from 'position taking' (negative pole) to 'self-promotion' (positive pole). The second dimension (21%) appears characterised above all by the degree of personalization mixed with the appeal to emotions<sup>3</sup>.

These dimensions projected on the Cartesian plane (see Figure 1) allow to identify the four different communicative styles adopted by the President of Forza Italia.

The first quarter (top-right) represent the 'Involving Self-Promoter' style, particularly devoted to the leader's self-promotion with a neutral register together with the attempt to mobilise the audiences. Here Berlusconi promotes his presence in other media above all through neutral tones and sometimes invites his follower to read his interviews, watch his speech, etc. In fact, the only issue here is 'presence in media' (14% of his posts). The Facebook variable lies in between of the first and the fourth quarter that means that Silvio Berlusconi's posts tend to be wrapped by both this style and the 'Personal Campaigner'<sup>4</sup>.

The second (top-left) quarter represents the substantial communication strategy of the FI leader, characterized by aggressive tones, negative emotions associated with the 'Attack to the elites' (5.6%), especially institutions and bureaucracies (12% of his posts), and the 'Ostracising others' (mainly immigrants – 6%). Because of the presence of many aspects of the negative campaign (attacking, negative affect), this communication style was labelled as 'Negative Campaigner'<sup>5</sup>.

The third quarter (bottom-left) is more characterised by the assertive register together with the leaders' comments on political fact (informing function) and with the strategies related to the emphasis of the leader's

<sup>3</sup> See the appendix for further details on MCA dimensions for each leader.

<sup>4</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/SilvioBerlusconi/videos/vb.116716651695782/1857256537641776/>.

<sup>5</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/berlusconi/status/969133188441411584>.

figure. The presence of issues ‘business and economy’ (17%) and ‘health and social welfare’ (8%) identify this style as ‘Assertive Leader’. Indeed, the presence of the ‘Appeal to the people’ (32% of his posts) depicts a charismatic leader who cares about the people and take position in favour of them<sup>6</sup>.

The last quarter seems to identify the ‘Positive Campaigner’ style due to the presence of the function ‘campaigning’, a more colloquial register, and positive emotions. The presence of positive affect that lies between the third and the fourth quarter seems to characterise both these last two communication styles. Issues more related to this style are ‘campaign and party affairs’ (27% of his posts) and ‘personal and leisure’ (1%) due to some private moments of the leader shared during the electoral campaign<sup>7</sup>.

The adoption of the three elements of populism in his case is differentiated. The people (32%), although blessed and embraced with love, is not necessarily opposed to the elites (6%) or the ostracised others (6%). On the contrary the ‘dangerous others’ are used to criticise the elites.

### 6.1. Luigi Di Maio

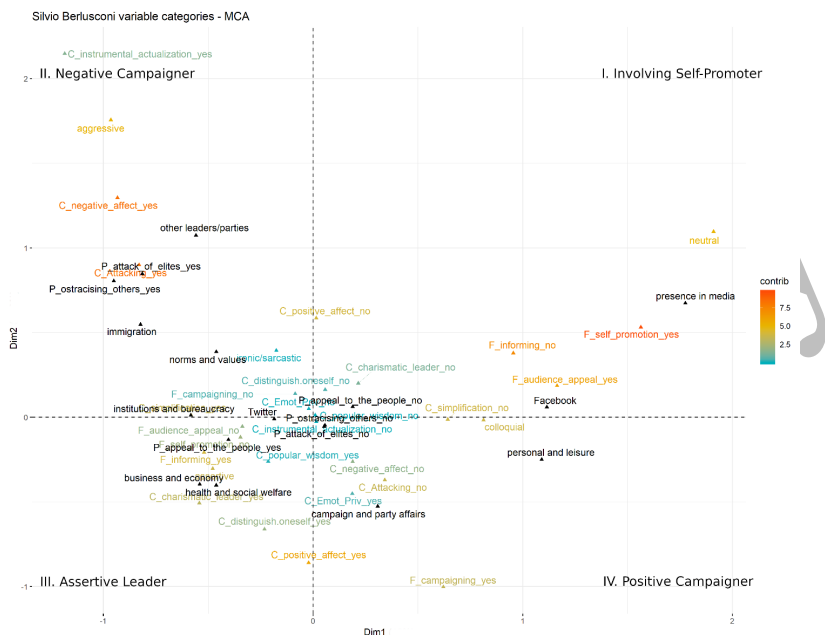
The analysis of Luigi Di Maio’s tweets and posts highlighted two main dimensions explaining the 96% of the variance. The first dimension (84%) ranges from ‘Campaigning’ (negative pole) to ‘Position Taking’ (positive pole). The second dimension (12%) relates to the degree of personalization in which the negative pole is more focused on personal and positive emotions.

The intersection between these two dimensions on the Cartesian plan allows to identify four different communication style adopted by Luigi Di Maio (Figure 2). The first quarter (top-right) can be identified as the ‘Negative Campaigner’ due to the presence of an aggressive register, attacking strategies and references to emotions of fear and anger. In fact, the issues related to this style are above all ‘other leaders and parties’ (10%) and ‘immigration’ (1%), even though the communication of Luigi Di Maio rare-

<sup>6</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/berlusconi/status/969331102866464768>.

<sup>7</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/SilvioBerlusconi/posts/1859353150765448>.

## ITALIAN LEADERS' POPULIST COMMUNICATION STYLE IN 2018 ELECTION CAMPAIGN



**Fig. 7.1.** Silvio Berlusconi Communicative styles.  
Note: supplementary variables in black.

ly refer to immigrants (see Andretta and Imperatore, chapter 6) This style appears more related to his Twitter communication<sup>8</sup>.

The second quarter (top left) identifies a style focused on self-promotion with a neutral register that can be labelled ‘Self-Promoter’. In line with this interpretation, the only issue related to this quadrant is the promotion of his ‘presence in media’ (9% of his posts)<sup>9</sup>.

The third quarter appears more related to the campaign reporting, and it is characterised by a colloquial register, the appeal to the audience and to positive emotions. The presence of the issue ‘personal and leisure’ (1.6%) and the unveiling of personal emotions (between the third and

<sup>8</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/luigidimaio/status/966023409141473280>.

<sup>9</sup> Postexample: <https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/1621302917906248>.

the fourth quarter) allow to identify this style as ‘Personal Campaigner’: a leader devoted to the narration of the electoral rally with a colloquial register along with the attempt to involve audiences and to share personal emotions and moments<sup>10</sup>.

The bottom right quarter depicts a style focused on the leader’s figure that comments on political facts, often simplifying issues. The register is assertive and the promotion of his abilities and skills adds to the three dimensions of populism (‘Appeal to the people’ 16%; ‘Attack of the elites’ 16%, and ‘Ostracising others’ 2%) the traditional supply of a charismatic leader. These elements allow to identify this style as the ‘Popular Leader’<sup>11</sup>. What makes Di Maio a unique case is that here the populist ideology is fully articulated and associated with most of the issues dealt with during the campaign.

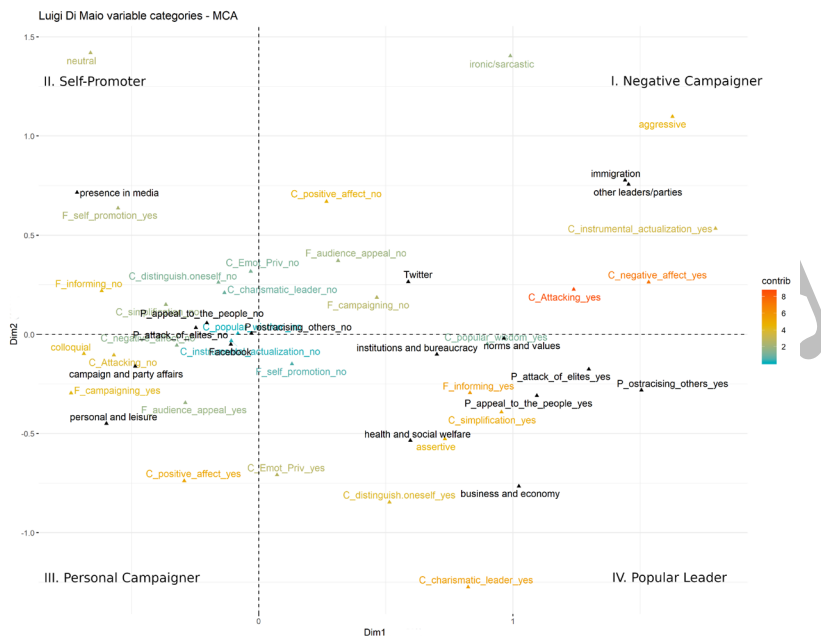
### 6.3. Giorgia Meloni

Giorgia Meloni posts and tweets analysis highlighted two main dimensions explaining the 96% of the variance. More like Berlusconi than to Di Maio, the first dimension (84%) ranges from ‘position taking’ (positive pole) to ‘self-promotion’ (negative pole). The second dimension (13%) appears to be related with the degree of personalization with a positive pole aimed at emphasising the leader’s figure along with positive emotions. The first (top-right) quarter represents her ‘Negative Campaigner’ style due to the association between ‘position taking’ and ‘low personalization’. In fact, in Figure 3 the most significant variables are the aggressive register, the instrumental actualization, references to fear or anger, and the attacking behaviour. Indeed, issues related to this style are ‘other leaders and parties’ (10% of her posts) and ‘immigration’ (6%), which confirm that the target of this communication style are ‘the others’. Finally, this style appears characterised by the populist fragment ‘Ostracising others’ (14% of her posts) which deals with the identification of an inter-

<sup>10</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/posts/1616941781675695>.

<sup>11</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/luigidimaio/status/960448805585014784>; <https://twitter.com/luigidimaio/status/961529807069679616>.

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**Fig. 7.2.** Luigi Di Maio MCA.  
Note: supplementary variables in black.

nal enemy within the people and perfectly fits the negative campaigning focused on ‘the others’<sup>12</sup>.

The intersection between the ‘low personalization’ and the self-promotion generates the ‘Self-Promoter’ style (top-left quarter), characterised by a neutral register and by the promotion of the presence of the leader in mainstream media. In fact, the only issue in this quarter is the ‘presence in media’ (14% of her posts)<sup>13</sup>.

The third quarter made by the intersection between ‘self-promotion’ and ‘high personalization’ describes the ‘Positive Campaigner’ style. This

<sup>12</sup> Tweetexample: <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/966600139275227136>.

<sup>13</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/video/vb.38919827644/10156063549967645/>.



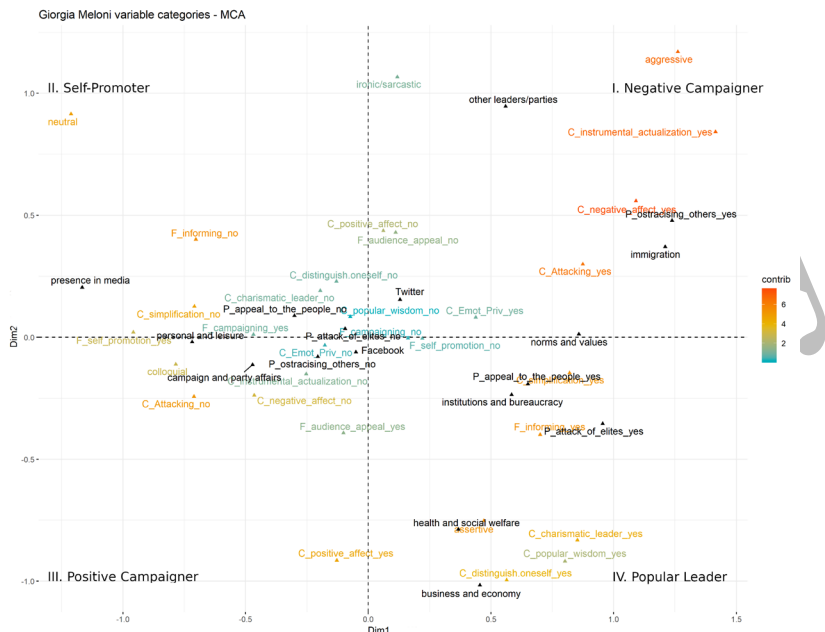
style is mainly characterised by a colloquial register, by references to positive emotions and by the appeal to online audiences (call to vote, call to action, etc.). The issue dealt with this style is the ‘campaign and party affairs’ (32% of her posts), that is the narration of the electoral campaign by Giorgia Meloni imbued by positive feelings together with the attempt to mobilize her fans/followers<sup>14</sup>.

The fourth communication style (bottom-right) emerges from the intersection between ‘high personalization’ and ‘position taking’ and it has been labelled ‘Popular Leader’. This style is mainly performed through an assertive register, and it is focused on commenting on political facts with an informing function. Communication strategies appear grouped in two clusters: the first one focused on the leader’s figure and actions together with charismatic elements (missionary politics and decision-making style) and references to popular wisdom; the second one, includes simplification of the message and the informing function. Most of the issues related to this style (i.e., ‘business and economy’: 8%; ‘health and social welfare’: 4%; ‘institution and bureaucracy’: 5%) confirm that the representation of the leader is strictly connected to the political discourse. Indeed, this style seems characterised by two populist ideology fragments: the ‘Appeal to the people’ (32% of her posts) and the ‘Attack of the elites’ (9%). This relationship highlights that Giorgia Meloni represents herself as a strong leader who cares about the people against the elites to solve their problems<sup>15</sup>.

The strategy of communicating the populist ideology is different from that of Berlusconi and Luigi Di Maio. Here, the ostracising of others (14% of her posts) is central, but it is not used to attack the elites and it is not opposed to the people (32%). On the contrary, the people are opposed to the elites (9%) connected each other by the emphasis on her figure.

<sup>14</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/969264709991063552>.

<sup>15</sup> Tweetexample: <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/968791879209947136>.



**Fig. 7.3.** Giorgia Meloni MCA.  
 Note: supplementary variables in black.

### 6.4. Matteo Renzi

The MCA applied to Matteo Renzi posts and tweets produced two main dimensions explaining the 94% of the variance. The first dimension (79%) ranges from ‘position taking’ to ‘self-promotion’. Compared to the other leaders, the positive half-plane it is also related to the emphasis on his figure (‘Distinguish oneself’). This means that the position taking of the secretary of the Democratic Party, from the one hand, relates to his figure and actions, and, on the other hand, is entangled with negative campaign strategies.

The second dimension (15%), instead, is more related to the degree of personalization but, unlike the other leaders, is more focused on unveiling Matteo Renzi personal emotions together with the campaign narration and the appeal to positive feelings.

The first quarter (top right) identifies a ‘Negative Campaigner’ style. In Figure 4 it is possible to observe all the variables related to the attack of others, the aggressive register, the appeal to sentiment of fear and anger and the exploitation of news (instrumental actualization). The issues dealt with this style are above all ‘other leaders and parties’ (13% of his posts) but also ‘health and social welfare’ (4%), ‘norms and values’ (6.6%) and ‘immigration’ (1.5%). This confirms that the negative campaigning strategies are acted against competitors and that the most underlined cleavages are the socio-economic conditions of the citizens and his – and his party – norms and values compared to the others. Finally, the immigration issue is not so very present in Matteo Renzi tweets and posts (See also Andretta and Imperatore, Chapter 6). This style appears the most related to Twitter posts although the variable is very central in the Cartesian plane, and it is difficult to assign it to a specific style<sup>16</sup>.

The second quarter (top left) is mainly devoted to self-promotion with neutral tones. The only issue present is the ‘presence in media’ (16% of his posts), therefore this style can be labelled as ‘Self-Promoter’<sup>17</sup>.

The third quarter (bottom left) made by the intersection between high degree of personalization and self-promotion represents the ‘Personal Campaigner’ style. The register adopted is colloquial and the functions mostly related to this quarter are ‘campaigning’ and ‘audience appeal’, meaning that the campaign narration by Matteo Renzi is aimed to involve and mobilise online audiences. In fact, the issue most related to this style is ‘campaign and party affairs’ (43% of his posts)<sup>18</sup>.

The last quarter (bottom right) identifies the ‘Popular Leader’ style. The register is above all assertive, there are not specific functions, but several communicative strategies related to the emphasis of the leader’s figure (‘Charismatic leader’, ‘Distinguish oneself’) and to his emotions (‘Emotionalization’ and ‘Privatization’) along with the appeal to enthusiasm, pride and hope and the oversimplification of the issues. This style is characterised by the presence of the ‘Appeal to the people’ (17% of

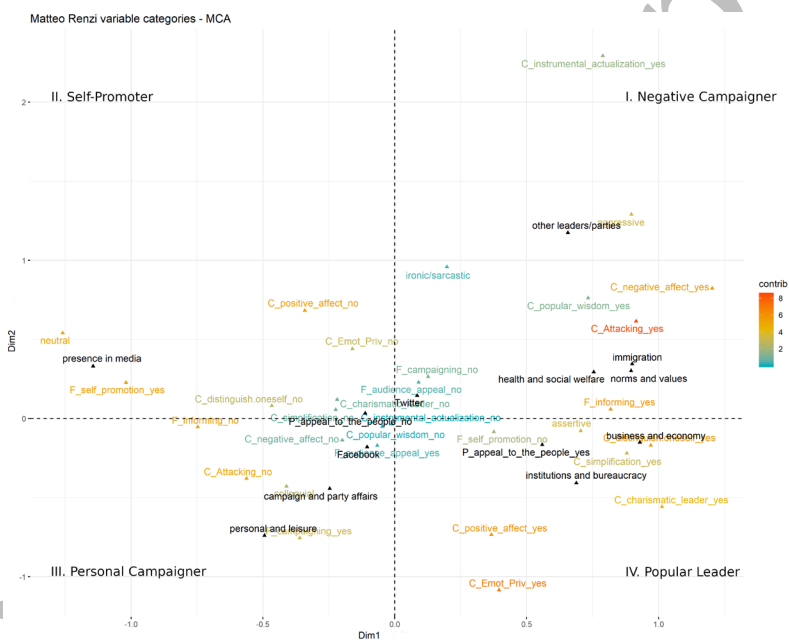
<sup>16</sup> Tweetexample: <https://twitter.com/matteorenzi/status/969675309942493184>.

<sup>17</sup> Examples: <https://twitter.com/matteorenzi/status/969525166966542336>; <https://www.facebook.com/matteorenziufficiale/posts/10155717197449915>.

<sup>18</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/matteorenziufficiale/posts/10155653468589915>.

his posts), the only ideology fragment adopted by Matteo Renzi, and this allows to interpret this communication style as a leader close to the people, who unveils his emotions, and emphasizes his actions and his figure dealing with economical and institutional issues<sup>19</sup>.

In the case of Renzi, it does not emerge any articulation of the populist ideology. The recourse to the attack to the elites is rare (1% of his posts), and the ostracism of other is absent. The appeal to the people (17%) is then isolated and treated with positive emotions.



**Fig. 7.4.** Matteo Renzi MCA  
 Note: supplementary variables in black.

<sup>19</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/matteorenziufficiale/posts/10155646493089915>.

## 6.5. Matteo Salvini

The two dimensions interpreting Matteo Salvini posts and tweets explains 98% of the variance. The first dimension (90%) ranges from ‘Campaigning’, by involving new voters through self-promotion, to ‘Position taking’ aimed to attack others, take position with an aggressive register and negative feelings. The second dimension (8%), like other leaders, seems to identify the degree of personalization with a negative pole characterised by the emphasis on the leader’s figure.

The first quarter (see Figure 5) identifies the ‘Negative Campaigner’ style enacted with an aggressive tone sometimes tempered by sarcasm and irony, aimed to attack others (in fact the issues dealt with are: ‘other leaders/parties’ – 4% of his posts; or ‘immigrants’ – 11.5%), to the exploitation of news (‘Instrumental actualization’) along with negative emotions. In this quarter it is possible to notice the presence of two fragments of populist ideology: The ‘Attack of the elites’ (6%) and the ‘Ostracising others’ (28%). This means that the negative campaigning of leader of the League is imbued with populist ideology: from the one hand, depicting competitors as elites, and, on the other hand, stigmatising segments of the population like immigrants<sup>20</sup>.

The second quarter represents the ‘Involving Self-Promoter’ style. Unlike the other leaders, Matteo Salvini self-promotion is performed with colloquial register that goes along with frequent attempt to mobilise online audiences (function ‘appeal to the audience’). Issues addressed with this style are above all ‘presence in media’ (11% of his posts) and sometimes ‘personal and leisure time’ (2%). Indeed, this style appears the most related to the Facebook variable that means that his Facebook posts are more wrapped by this style<sup>21</sup>.

The third quarter (bottom left) represents the ‘Positive Campaigner’ style. This communication style relates to the report of the campaign rally, and it is imbued by the appeal to emotions of pride, enthusiasm, and hope (‘positive affect’). In line with this interpretation the only issue pres-

<sup>20</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/967881035311669248>.

<sup>21</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10155546750378155>.

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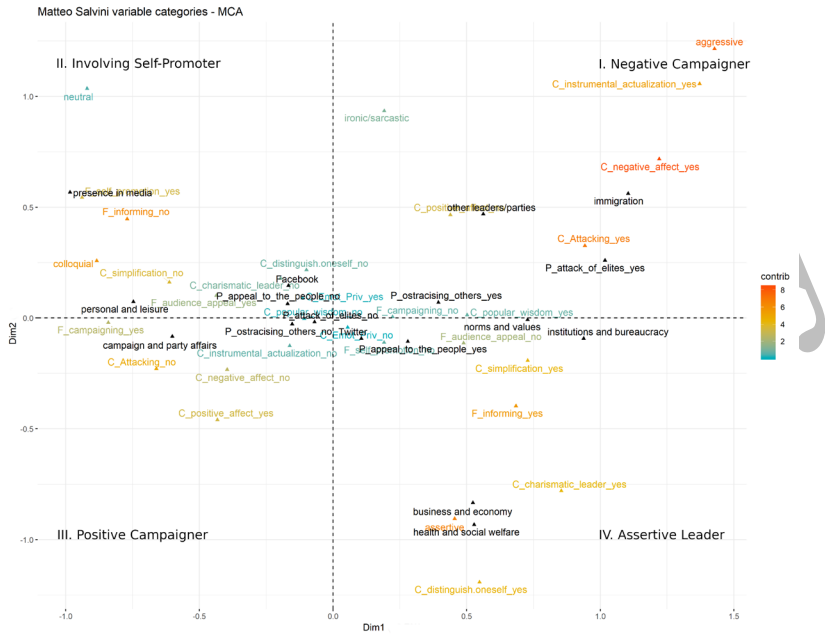


Fig. 7.5. Matteo Salvini MCA.  
Note: supplementary variables in black.

ent in this quarter is ‘campaign and party affairs’ that emerges in 40% of Matteo Salvini’s posts and tweets<sup>22</sup>.

The fourth quarter (bottom right) depicts the ‘Assertive Leader’ style, performed through an assertive register, taking position on political facts by often simplifying problems and solutions, and emphasizing the leader’s figure and actions (‘Distinguish oneself’ and ‘Charismatic leader’ strategies). The last fragment of populist ideology (‘Appeal to the people’ – 38% of his posts) appears to be wrapped by this style and the most related issues are ‘health and social welfare’ (7%) and ‘business and economy’ (5%). This means that the leader shows to care about the people

<sup>22</sup> Post example: <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10155536707813155>.

especially for their economic situation<sup>23</sup>. The Twitter variable lies in this quarter, but it is too close to the centre of the Cartesian plan to assert that is more related to this style.

The populist ideology articulation is once again different from the other leaders. While the people (38%) are isolated, as in Berlusconi, Salvini does not use emotions when he refers to many policy issues, but an assertive register through which he presents him-self as the solution. Differently from Meloni, Salvini uses the ostracism (28%), often towards immigrants, to blame the elites too (6%).

Summarizing, it emerges that each leader adopts several communication styles based on different aims and strategies (RQ.1), and that populist ideology fragments relate to different communication styles depending on the leader (RQ.2). Silvio Berlusconi presents two communication style characterised by populist references: the 'Assertive Leader' entangled with the 'Appeal to the people' and the 'Negative Campaigner' which includes the 'Attack of the elites' and the 'Ostracising others'. Luigi Di Maio, instead, shows only one communication style characterised by all populist ideology fragments: the 'Popular Leader'. Giorgia Meloni shows a different pattern: her 'Popular Leader' style appears characterised by the 'Appeal to the people' and the 'Attack of the elites', and her 'Negative Campaigner' is more focused on the ostracism of others. Like Luigi Di Maio, Matteo Renzi presents only one style characterised by populist reference: the 'Assertive Leader', even though it is worth to notice that the former Democratic Party secretary adopted only the 'Appeal to the people' during the electoral campaign. Finally, Matteo Salvini shows two communication styles linked to populist ideology fragments: the 'Assertive Leader' related to the 'Appeal to the people' and the 'Negative Campaigner' characterised by the 'Attack of the elites' and the 'Ostracising others'. Compared to the other leaders, the very central position in the Cartesian Plan of the 'Appeal to the people' and the 'Attack of the elites' allows to hypothesise that these fragments are shared by several Matteo Salvini's communication styles.

<sup>23</sup> Tweet example: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/969573734788096001>.

## 7. Italian leaders' populist communication style: some conclusions

Social communication is becoming a powerful tool at the leaders' disposal to gain momentum in electoral campaigns. Through it, leaders attempt to influence mainstream media agenda, to bring their issues at centre of the political debate, to get the public support in spreading their messages, and to involve supporters in campaigning activities. Social media, in fact, intersects processes of transformation in the political context (democratic erosion), in the media environments (media populism and hybridization) and in the political actors (personalization), in which they fit very well (Andretta and Bracciale 2017). The case of the Italian leaders e-campaigning before the last national elections confirms these trends. However, their social communication strategies differ according to their political aims, targets, and positions. Their social audiences (fans and followers) are differentiated and react to their leaders' messages according to what they expect from them (Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021). If the analysis of their social communication styles confirms the differentiation of the communication strategies of the different leaders, two amongst them have been similarly used, although with some specifications, the 'Negative Campaigner' and the 'Assertive' or 'Popular Leader' styles. Those styles are of obvious importance in the political and media contexts described above, in which both media and political logics emphasize the leader capacity to present herself as the one who could satisfy the 'people' needs. In this sense, depicting competitors as elites or simply unable and blaming them (van Kessel and Castelein 2016), and, at the same time emphasizing a distinguished leadership are part of the same, and somehow inescapable, strategy (RQ1). It is worth noticing, that the 'Appeal to the people' is the populist fragment used by all the Italian leaders and it is mainly 'performed' through the 'Assertive/Popular leader' style: that is "one people, one leader". The other two styles used by some of them, such as 'Personal campaigner' or 'Self-Promoter', seem to be functional to support the first two substantial strategies: promoting media events, advertising campaign events, highlighting electoral meetings are all attempt to activate the audience that will be listening or watching their leaders attacking the competitors and exalting themselves.

What really differs amongst leaders is the combination and the articulation of the different styles with issues and other populist fragments (RQ2). As well as Salvini and Meloni, Berlusconi combines the 'Negative



campaigner' style with 'Ostracising others' and the 'Attacking the elites', by dealing with the immigration issue. However, in Meloni's messages the attack to the elites is wrapped with the 'Popular leader' style, while dealing with welfare, economy, and institutions. Similarly, the emphasis on their leadership, combined with the 'Appeal to the people', is associated with issues such as economy, welfare, and institutions.

On the other hand, Di Maio adopt populist fragments (but ostracism is rare in his case) along with the exaltation of his leadership, able to deal with basically all substantial policy issues. His negative campaign is somehow pure, with no populism or substantial issues, while Renzi deals with issues such as welfare, and norms when he attacks other parties and leaders in his negative campaigning, and with economy and institutions when he promotes his leadership (mainly reporting his government success). Regarding social media and communication styles, Twitter seems to be more used for negative campaigning while Facebook is more associated with positive emotions and user involvement. However, the social media variable almost always emerged as central into the Cartesian plans suggesting that leaders did not often adopted specific styles based on social media.

Overall, this work suggests analysing the question of the populist *zeitgeist* in a more nuanced way. Although not all political actors are populist *stricto sensu*, they all need to adapt to the new political, media and communication contexts, by adopting at least a 'high impact' communication style, made of oversimplification, attacking the other competitors, exalting their leadership, using a mix of negative and positive emotions along with populist references. The way in which they succeed in this depends very much on their ability to engage their voters in the production, reproduction, and diffusion of their political messages. Those political leaders who also articulate a populist ideology, do so by associating their communication styles with populist ideological fragments, and by crafting an original populist discourse.