Populism and Negative Emotions within the Italian Politics: A Twitter-based Analysis

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Abstract

While conceptualizing populism as "a cultural-relational performative style" (Moffitt et al. 2016), this paper seeks to explore whether and the extent to which semantic categories of populism and the emotional frames of anger and fear are combined in the tweets posted by selected Italian politicians and political parties on their Twitter account. Methodologically, a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted: Content Analysis, to pinpoint recurrent thematic patterns that are relevant to the research purpose; as well as approaches of Multiple Correspondence Analysis, to verify whether the combination of the chosen variables is recurrent within the Twitter corpus purposely built for the analysis. The same tools were used to explore differences in the use of populism and emotional frames on the basis of gender, provenance and the local versus national political activity of the politicians under analysis. Results have showed that there exists a correlation between the use of given semantic categories of populism (i.e. 'Appeal to people', 'Ostracizing the others', 'Attacking the elite') and the frame of anger. The combined use of these categories was mostly detected in the tweeting style of Italian politicians and parties that collocate on the right-wing political spectrum. Moreover, preliminary findings showed a significant difference in the degree of populism depending either on the national or local political activity.

Keywords: Twitter, Italian populism, Content Analysis, emotional style

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, Europe, as well as several other nation-states worldwide, has witnessed the spread of a seemingly unstoppable wave of populism, which has led scholars to approach it as a global phenomenon (de Vreese et al., 2018: 424) and speculate about a "populist Zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004). Such far-reaching diffusion of populist movements has been mainly attributed to the recent financial crisis affecting a great number of world economies, globalization as well as the ever-growing income inequalities (Laclau, 2005).

Within the above mentioned geo-political scenario, Italy has not been spared from the contemporary populist surge. In recent years, Italian political leaders were also considered "populists", according to the classic understanding of such definition (Mazzoleni et Bracciale, 2018). These were: Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the centre-right party Forza Italia; Luigi Di Maio, leader until mid-January 2020 of Movimento 5 Stelle; Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia; Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing party Lega. Although right-wing parties have traditionally made consistent use of populist strategies, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) have highlighted how even political leaders who collocate on the center-left wing (i.e. Matteo Renzi, leading the party Italia Viva) adopt populist references as well as emotional frames in the communication with their affiliates, thus contributing to the development of an "endemic" type of populism (2018: 7). However, far too little attention has been paid to the diffusion of populism within the breadth of the Italian political spectrum as well as how it comes to be discursively spread on the social media platform of Twitter. In

order to fill this gap in the literature, this study aims to explore the extent and the modalities through which populist categories and emotional frames are combined in the tweets of selected Italian politicians and parties.

Data for this study were collected by eliciting tweets directly from the account of a broad range of politicians and political parties that belong to the Italian political landscape. Two opportunistic Twitter Corpora were therefore built and analyzed through a combination of qualitative as well as quantitative methodological approaches. In order to carry out the research, the analytical frameworks proposed by Mazzoleni et al. (2018) and Bobba (2019) were applied and implemented. While the former proposes three main populist variables to take into account when analyzing mediatized political messages ('attacking the élite', 'appeal to people', 'ostracizing the others'); the latter provides two distinct frameworks, the anger-frame and the fear-frame, to classify the emotional content of the tweets.

The paper is structured in the following way: this first introductory section has provided the background context of the investigation; the second section will lay out the theoretical framework and the state of art of the study; the third section will describe the methodologies and elucidate the aims and the research questions; the fourth part will present and discuss the findings and, finally, in the last section, conclusions will be drawn and the main research issues and implications will be explicated.

1.2. Populism and the new media

In recent times, the Italian populism has been discretely investigated from different perspectives. Specifically, previous research has focused on populism as a socially mediated phenomenon on Facebook (Mazzoleni et Bracciale, 2018), on the "populist win" of Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega during the March 2018 election (D'Alimonte, 2019), as well as on the intricate relationship between constitutionalism and populism (Delledonne et al., 2020), among other studies.

As a foreword, it is important to point out that populism has been conceptualized in manifold ways by scholars, according to the specific facets under analysis, and this has certainly revealed the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon. Among the definitions available within the bulk of literature on the topic, populism has mainly been considered a "thin-centred ideology" (Mudde, 2007), a type of discourse (Laclau, 2005), "a cultural-relational performative style" (Moffitt et al., 2016) as well as a "political strategy" (Barr, 2018).

Moffitt et al. (2016)'s definition theorizes populism as a political phenomenon that involves both political actors and their constituencies and takes place within a given socio-cultural framework through a set of discursive strategies. In doing so, it aligns with the notion of "styling resources" elaborated by Ekström et Morton (2018), according to which styles are performed through "the use of discursive, interactional and visual semiotic resources and anchored in (socio-cultural) sign systems" (2018: 2). Adding onto this notion, Mortensen et al. (2017) argues that these meaning-making styling resources presuppose the mediation of given technologies and, consequently, the implications of mediated contexts should be necessarily taken into account when analyzing political phenomena within virtual settings.

The current investigation draws on the theory of "network media logic" (Klinger et Svensson, 2015), which is concerned with figuring out the dynamics of new media systems. Key to the network media logic is the absence of an intermediary between the sender and the recipient of a given message, which results into a disintermediated and symmetric type of communication, characterized by immediacy, capillarity and horizontality (Ferretti, 2019; Bentivegna, 2015).

The disintermediation process is believed to have fostered the spread of populist ideologies (Engesser et al., 2017), which have ultimately and largely been supported by the communicative formats of social media, such as Twitter. Taking into account these presuppositions, the study privileges the understanding of populism as a mediated and disintermediated type of relation between political leaders and the public audience, which therefore bypasses professional judges who may decide on the appropriateness and the worthiness of the message or the lack of it (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). As Sorensen (2018: 3) points out, "[b]y challenging institutionally embedded norms and procedures, populists create new spaces for the flows of production, circulation, interpretation and recirculation of political symbols and meanings", through the use of specific rhetorical strategies and an emotionally loaded discourse, as it will be demonstrated in the next sections.

1.2. Negative emotions in populism

According to several scholars (Hameleers et al., 2016; Kühne, 2014), a typical feature of populism is to share emotion-laden messages onto social networks. Emotions are strategically evoked to gain the consent of people and increase the power of persuasiveness (Wirz, 2018). Emotional texts can capture the audience's attention because of the capacity of emotions to orient selective attention by affecting the gathering and the storing of information (Nabi, 2003). The cognitive involvement triggered by emotions determines influence on reaction and interchange (Dang-Xuan et Stieglitz, 2012), partaking (Joyce et Kraut, 2006), and social sharing behavior (Berger et Milkman, 2012). With special reference to Twitter, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012) analyzed two datasets of more than 165,000 tweets and showed that emotionally charged tweets tend to be retweeted more often and more quickly compared to neutral ones. Moreover, it has been shown that posts containing negative sentiment elicit more comments and have a stronger effect on the quantity of retweets compared to those with positive sentiment (Wirz, 2018; Stieglitz et Dang-Xuan, 2012).

Populists use the emotional communication style also for placing the blame on political opponents, instilling a sense of threat on the people, while drawing on the frames of anger and fear (Hameleers et al., 2016, Ruzza et Fella, 2011). Populism describes situations in which the well-being of the people is cracked by out-groups (i.e. the elite, foreigners). In other words, "'[t]he elite', 'the establishment', 'the state' or 'the system' (or other related signifiers) are usually evoked in populist discourse as the source of crisis, breakdown, corruption or dysfunctionality, as opposed to 'the people' who in turn have been 'let down', 'ripped off', 'fleeced', rendered powerless or badly governed" (Moffitt et al., 2014 pp. 391).

In this sense, anger is a reaction against the culprit, while fear is elicited as a response to an uncertain threat, through the portrayal of people as powerless and abused by the elite (Kühne, 2014). To test the impact of the key elements of populism (i.e. references to 'the people', 'elites' and 'others') and the expressions related to fear and anger, Bobba (2019) analyzed Facebook messages shared through the Facebook page of the Italian political party Lega and his leader Matteo Salvini. The findings of this study underlined a more recurrent use of anger in comparison to fear. Additionally, the presence of the emotional frames of anger and fear within the texts correlates with an increasing number of likes received. As affirmed by the author, this result suggests that emotionalized-style messages affect considerably the citizens and influence their relationship with the populist proposals. Since Bobba's study is limited to only one party, this study extends the analysis of the emotional frames of anger and fear to a broader spectrum including a variety of Italian politicians and parties.

2. Research questions and methodology

The aim of this study is to test how categories typical of populism ('attacking the élite', 'appeal to people', 'ostracizing the others', Mazzoleni et Bracciale, 2018) and the emotional frames of fear and anger (Hameelers et al., 2016; Bobba, 2019) are combined within the tweets of selected Italian politicians and parties. To reach this goal, three specific research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the categories of populism and the emotional frames of anger and fear in the tweets of the selected Italian politicians and parties? Is this combination a recurrent pattern within the Twitter corpora?

RQ2: Is there any difference among politicians who adopt populist references and emotional frames with respect to their gender, provenance and local or national political activity?

RQ3: Is there a difference in the use of emotional and populist categories in the tweets posted by the politicians and those shared by the political parties?

In order to tackle these questions, a combination of analytical tools was employed to analyze two opportunistic Twitter-based corpora. Approaches of Content Analysis and Multiple Correspondence Analysis were used to pinpoint recurrent thematic and emotional strategies manipulated by political actors into the textual discourse. Among the existing social media, Twitter was chosen because it is currently a popular service, used by a considerable number of Italian politicians (Di Fraia et Missaglia, 2014).

2.1. Sample

To reach the research goals, the Twitter Corpus purposely built consists of two different sub-corpora: the first containing 872 tweets posted by 19 Italian politicians; and the second including 384 tweets published from the official Twitter page of the seven most popular political parties (i.e. Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Potere al Popolo, Partito Democratico, Italia Viva, Movimento 5 Stelle, Forza Italia). The posts were shared during a one-month period, from December 1 until 31 2019, and were subsequently collected at the beginning of January 2020. The Twitter material was retrieved from the social media by means of free and open source API tools and analyzed using R clients for interacting with Twitter APIs. The main package employed to retrieve and pre-process the twitter data was `rtweet` (Kearney, 2019). The chosen parties and politicians cover the entire Italian political spectrum, standing out as the most noticeable in the domestic political arena (see Table 1). Within each party, politicians were selected according to their highest hierarchical positions (leader or secretary of the party) as well as the report of their highest social media resonance (the number of followers on Twitter). The period selected for the data gathering (1- 31 December 2019) was a routine period, without elections and major political events taking place. However, this period included Christmas time and witnessed the birth of a grassroots political movement called Le Sardine[1], originated to oppose the discourses of hatred and exclusion diffused by the leader of Lega, Matteo Salvini.

Retweets, shares, links, images or event announcement with no text were discarded from the analysis. Politicians with less than five total statements were also excluded from the study. For this reason, Luigi di Maio (former leader of Movimento 5 stelle at the time of writing),

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[1] «The Guardian view on Italy's 'Sardine' movement: politics with panache can defeat the hard right» *The Guardian* 27.11.2019 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/27/the-guardian-view-on-italys-sardine-movement-politics-with-panache-can-defeat-the-hard-right (retrieved on 15.12.2019)

De Magistris (Democrazia Autonoma) and Maria Elena Boschi (Italia Viva), previously included in the dataset, were subsequently discarded. With the aim to balance the corpus, the median of the total number of tweets was calculated to establish the maximum number of tweets allowed for each party and politician. In sum, a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 60 statements were analyzed for each political actor and party, amounting to a total of 1256 tweets.

Leader	Political party	Collocation
1. Beppe Grillo	Movimento 5 Stelle	Not possible to collocate
2. Chiara Appendino	Movimento 5 Stelle	Not possible to collocate
3. Virginia Raggi	Movimento 5 Stelle	Not possible to collocate
4. Emma Bonino	+Europa	Not possible to collocate
5. Federico Pizzarotti	+Europa	Not possible to collocate
6. Laura Boldrini	Democratic party	Left
7. Matteo Renzi	Italia Viva	Left
8. Nicola Frantoianni	Liberi e Uguali	Left
9. Michele Emiliano	Partito Democratico	Left
10. Nicola Zingaretti	Partito Democratico	Left
11. Stefano Bonaccini	Partito Democratico	Left
12. Vincenzo De Luca	Partito Democratico	Left
13. Giorgia Meloni	Fratelli d'Italia	Right
14. Silvio Berlusconi	Forza Italia	Right
15. Maria Stella Gelmini	Forza Italia	Right
16. Matteo Salvini	Lega	Right
17. Claudio Borghi	Lega	Right
18. Lucia Borgonzoni	Lega	Right
19. Giuseppe Conte	Partito indipendente	Not possible to collocate

Table 1. Complete list of the Italian political leaders analyzed with indication of their political party and collocation. Parties that declared that they do not have any political collocation are showed as "not possible to collocate"

2.2. Operationalization and measurement

Given that the research goal was to assess whether and how specific semantic and emotional categories are recurrent within the Twitter sub-corpora, manual tagging was preferred to automatic tagging. This choice was motivated by the small size of the datasets (Grimmer et Stewart, 2013) and the inclusion of context, figurative language and the implicit overtones of tweets during the analysis. This provided a greater control of semantics, avoiding the risk of overlooking relevant features in the detection of semantic and emotional categories. As a first analytical phase, all tweets were coded by the researchers (approximately 418 tweets for each coder), who employed a content analytical approach with a specific coding schema comprising semantic and emotional categories. With the purpose of avoiding any possible skewing of results, tweets were labelled following the anonymization of the content. The first 50 tweets were labelled jointly as a common training phase, which was useful to ensure that every labeler applied the same criteria. Following Mazzoleni and Bracciale's methodology (2018), populist ideology was split into three dimensions, transformed into a set of dichotomous variables:

a. 'Appeal to the people' (i.e. talking about the people, putting the people and their options in a privileged position, the rhetoric use of the first-person plural pronoun):

b. 'Attacking the élite' (i.e. typical populist rhetoric that emphasizes the distance between the common citizen and the dominant elite).

c. 'Ostracizing the others' (e.g. politicians identified isolated groups within the people as an internal enemy or when they insist on severe/illiberal political measures against those who jeopardize the uniformity of the people).

Secondly, it was assessed whether tweets were framed in an emotional way, applying the distinction between 'anger frame' and 'fear frame' (Bobba, 2019; Hameleers et al., 2016; Kühne, 2014; Nabi, 2003). Following Bobba (2019), emotionalized style was manipulated in terms of emotion words that indicate anger and fear.

Specifically, the 'fear frame' refers to messages presenting explicit lexicon (e.g. words, multiword expressions) related to the spectrum of emotions associated with fear, like alarm, anxiety, apprehension, catastrophism, horror, hostility, nervousness, panic, pessimism, restlessness, tension, terror, tragedy, worry, etc.

On the contrary, the 'anger frame' identifies those messages in which explicit lexical structures come to be related to the spectrum of emotions associated with anger, like condemnation, disappointment, discontent, dislike, dissatisfaction, frustration, hatred, humiliation, impatience, insult, irritation, nervousness, penalty, penance, punishment, retaliation, revenge, shame, etc. Both anger and fear were coded as dichotomous variables.

Categories	Definition	Example
Appeal to the people	*Including people in the discourse by mentioning them.*	Il mio slogan è sempre lo stesso: le nostre famiglie, le nostre imprese contano più delle bandiere di partito. Così ci presenteremo ai nostri concittadini alle prossime elezioni regionali: parlando il linguaggio dei fatti [My slogan is always the same: **our families**, **our businesses** count more than party flags. In this way we will introduce ourselves to **our fellow citizens** at the next regional elections: speaking the language of the facts] (Vincenzo De Luca, 13 December 2019).
Attacking the élite	*Emphasizing the distance between common people and the elite*	Ex.: Quella che esprime il governo non è una vera maggioranza: stanno insieme solo per le poltrone. Questi partiti di sinistra non hanno un progetto, ma come unico scopo continuare a gestire il potere [What the government expresses is **not a real majority**: they are together **only for the armchairs**. These **leftist parties** do not have a plan but **the unique purpose** of continuing to manage power] (Silvio Berlusconi, 12 December 2019).
Ostracizing the others'	*Attack to specific groups identified as enemy*	Ex.: Come la sardina in piazza si dice fiera di essere musulmana, io sono fiera di definirmi cristiana. L'unica differenza sta nell'ipocrisia di certa sinistra che passa il tempo a insultare me perché si vergogna della nostra cultura e delle nostre tradizioni [As the sardine in the square says to be proud of being Muslim, I am proud to call myself a Christian. The only difference is in the **hypocrisy** of a certain left that spends time **insulting** me because they are **ashamed** of our culture and traditions] (Giorgia Meloni, 20 December 2019).
Fear frame	*Messages presenting lexicon related to the related to the spectrum of emotions associated with fear*	Ex.: Da #Sondrio arriva una storia tristissima di intolleranza e ignoranza. Una bimba di 5 mesi che muore tragicamente in ospedale, le urla di dolore della madre e intorno l'indifferenza dei presenti, commenti razzisti e tanta cattiveria. Una vicenda atroce che deve farci riflettere [From #Sondrio comes a very sad story of **intolerance** and **ignorance**. A 5-month-old girl who **tragically** dies in the hospital, her mother's **screams** of **pain** and the **indifference** of those present around her, racist comments and a lot of **malice**. An **atrocious** story that should make us reflect] (Maria Stella Gelmini, 18 December 2019).
Anger frame	*Messages presenting lexicon related to the spectrum of emotions associated with anger*	Ex.: Mi vergogno per lei. Questa gente è convinta di cose che ormai appartengono al mondo della superstizione e che in realtà nascondono una forma di odio. Semplicemente odio [I am **ashamed** of her. These people are convinced of things that now belong to the world of superstition and that actually hide a form of **hatred**. I just **hate** it] (Nicola Fratoianni, 18 December 2019).

Table 2. Definition and examples of the semantic and emotional categories applied in the study

Lastly, a Multiple Correspondence Analysis was performed to display the disposition of the overall patterns in each corpus, with the aim of crossing and mapping the use of the described categories in both datasets (i.e. 'Appeal to the people', 'Attacking the élite', 'Ostracizing the others', 'Anger frame', 'Fear frame').

Overall, a data structure was created including for each tweet (row element) the attached information related to the author of the tweet (metadata), together with five additional columns, each of them representing a binary variable related to the presence-absence of each item-category. Ultimately, the final data structure was tweets-by-metadata (including topics). The Pearson correlation and the Jaccard similarity were computed on this tweet-by-topics matrix. MCA was exploited as graphical tool visualization of the relative positions of the five topics even when using a chi-square distance.

3. Findings

As mentioned in the previous section, coders have analyzed and assigned the sematic and emotional categories using the same coding schema. The distribution of the categories within the corpora (figures in Table 1 display the absolute number of tweets and the relative percentages) highlights that the most frequent item is 'Appeal to the people'. This label is also more predominant (64% vs 54%) within the Political Parties corpus and this is probably due to the fact that the Twitter pages of the official parties have a broader audience of activists and members as target, and therefore they sponsor political events and summon people to participate. Overall, most of the percentages in terms of category presence/absence are very similar, and this implies that political communication on Twitter seems to follow a regular pattern. 'Fear frame' is the least common item (18% and 14%) and, together with the item 'Ostracizing the others', is the only one mainly present in the first corpus (Politicians Corpus) in comparison with the second one (Political Parties Corpus). To some extent, Political Parties seem to make a wider use of sematic and emotional categories related to populism than Politicians.

		App.People	Elite	Ostracising	Anger	Fear
Politicians	Yes	470	187	176	293	154
	No	402	685	696	579	718
Tot		872	872	872	872	872
Parties	Yes	247	98	71	140	54
	No	136	285	312	243	329
Tot		383	383	383	383	383

Table 1. Distribution in both corpora (Politicians Corpus and Political Parties Corpus) of the five items in terms of presence/absence

3.1. Correlation matrix and Jaccard similarity among items in both corpora

In line with the research aims, it was necessary to verify whether there exists some correlation between the five categories taken into consideration for the investigation (i.e. 'Appeal to the people', 'Attacking the élite', 'Ostracizing the others', 'Anger frame', 'Fear frame'). From a first analysis of the correlation matrix based on Pearson correlation (Fig 1: Corrplot), a positive correlation emerged between the labels 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite' and the 'Anger Frame', as they appeared to be particularly linked. This finding emphasizes the emotional style of political tweets (Bobba 2019: 11), where anger dominates and comes to be used as a discursive weapon to weaken political enemies and establish oneself and one's party as the sole source of morality and fairness towards the citizens; this being typical of the populist rhetorical strategies (Pels, 2003). Likewise, during the close-reading phase of the sub-corpora, it could also be singled out that the 'Anger Frame' was substantially related to

discourses of nationalism, and in particular of national identity, as it is exemplified in the following tweets:

a) L'Italia potrebbe trovarsi costretta a finanziare, fino a 125 miliardi di euro, per operazioni di salvaguardia di altri stati, o di banche straniere, anche se la reputassimo sbagliate e contro il nostro interesse nazionale. #MES [Italy may be forced to finance up to 125 billion of euros on safeguard operations of other states or foreign banks, even though we thought it were wrong and against our national interest. #MES] (Silvio Berlusconi, 4 December 2019).

b) Mentre in Italia si continua ogni giorno a morire al lavoro, la ferita della #ThyssenKrupp rimane aperta, con i manager tedeschi (condannati perché responsabili di quella strage il #6dicembre) ancora liberi. 1 schiaffo alle vittime e alle loro famiglie che non si meritano. [While in Italy people continue to die at work every day, the wound of the #ThyssenKrupp remains open, with the German managers (convicted because they were responsible for the massacre on December 6th) still free. 1 slap to the victims and their families who don't deserve it] (Nicola Fratoianni, 6 December 2019).

Another interesting finding is the negative link between the variables 'Ostracizing the Other' and 'Appeal to the People', thus implying that while tweeting the Italian political actors under analysis are prone to either criticize and blame their adversaries or invoke 'their own people'. On the whole, the two rhetorical and communicative strategies do not seem to be combined together, showing that the politicians privilege a one-way communicative approach with their constituencies, which probably appears to be more effective and convincing to the political audience.

These results are confirmed also by the Jaccard similarity (Ben-Hur et al., 2002) computed among items (Fig 2: Heatmap based on Jaccard Similarity). In both corpora, major relevant similarities are found between 'Anger Frame' and 'Ostracizing the others' and 'Appeal to the people'.
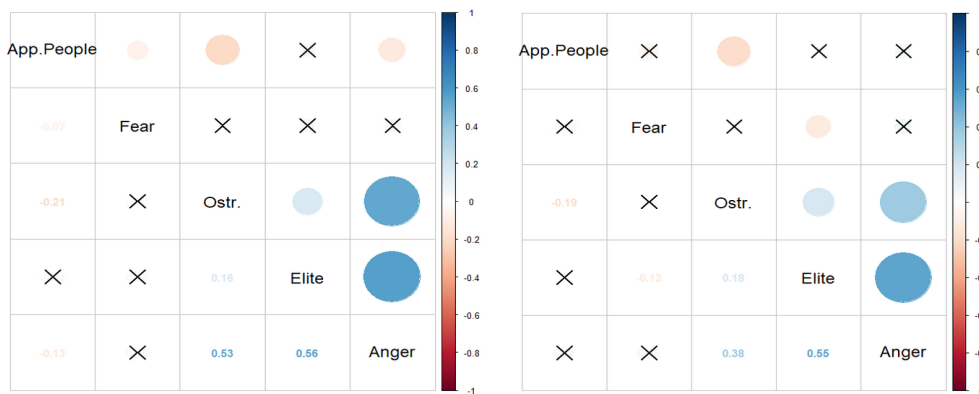
Figure 1. Corrplot (Pearson correlation) among items included in the analysis for each tweet in the first and second corpus. The blue color was used for positive correlation, whereas red for negative correlation. The "X" symbol indicates a non-significant correlation (p-value greater than 0.05). As can be seen, both graphs show a very similar pattern

Figure 2. Heatmap of Jaccard similarity among items included in the analysis for each tweet in the first and second corpus. The blue color was used for high Jaccard similarity, whereas red for low Jaccard similarity. As can be seen, both heatmaps show a very similar pattern; this result is consistent with Pearson correlation computed in Fig.1.

It is worthy to note that both on the politicians' side as well as on the official political parties' side, the correlation among items is almost superimposable. It is a strong clue that, no matter what the source is, when the context accounts for the political arena it is likely that the political communication on Twitter has some general and somehow recurrent patterns for what concerns these relationships in terms of correlation among variables.

3.2. Exploring the Politicians Map

After having established a significant relationship between the five categories, their combination was investigated (RQ1) through the Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Husson et al, 2017) (MCA), in order to figure out whether and where the overall pattern can be plotted on the two axes. Thus, categories (in red) have been used to compute axes, and politicians (in green) as well as their characteristics (in blue) have been used as supplementary variables. Given the binary nature of all the active variables and the nominal (categorical) nature of all the supplementary variables, this technique was adopted to identify a 2-dimensional space where the relative positions of items and metadata can be observed.

With respect to the arrangement of the five labels (i.e. 'Appeal to the People', 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite', 'Anger Frame' and 'Fear Frame'), in red in the graphs, they appear to be in line with the correlation matrix and this result can be attributed to the correlation among the five items and axes. On the first axis, 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite' and the 'Anger Frame' appear on the right-hand side of the plot, highlighting how they are likely to appear together in the same tweets. 'Fear Frame' and 'Appeal to the People' strategies are instead located on the opposite side with respect to the second axis, and this is consistent with their negative correlation. In terms of explained variance, the first axis seems to be able to stress out with more emphasis a segmentation of overall communication strategies among politicians, with a clear difference among politicians that lie on the left-hand side and those who lie on the right-hand side of the graph.

In regard to the position of the politicians, it could be argued that, with reference to those that were presented as "populists" in the introductory part of the paper, the results are somehow consistent with what expected. On the right-hand side of the graph, closer to the position of 'Anger Frame', 'Ostracizing the Others' and 'Attacking the elite', there are politicians coming mainly from the right wing of the Italian political spectrum. That is, Salvini and Borghi belonging to Lega, Meloni belonging to Fratelli d'Italia, Gelmini belonging to Forza Italia. Furthermore, Emma Bonino, leader of +Europa and holding a story of political affiliation to the left-wing liberal and radical party, is the one collocated at the farthest right point of the plot. However, it should be taken into account that only seven tweets were retrieved from her account, that is why this finding needs further investigation and cannot be generalized. Matteo Renzi and Nicola Fratoianni, center-left and left affiliation respectively, seem to adopt a similar communication strategy, with a slightly more emphasis on the 'Fear Frame' with respect to the former politicians belonging to right-wing parties. Silvio Berlusconi, for years addressed as a populist leader by his opponents and by a wide portion of Italian political literature, seems to adopt here a different content approach, leaving the role of unprejudiced communicators to other young leaders leading right-wing parties.

In addition, it should be highlighted that Beppe Grillo accounts for a singular case in the current research. While reading closely the Politicians Corpus, it emerged that the M5S leader employs a peculiar communicative style on the digital platform, in that he retweets seemingly scientific articles which have been originally published on his own blog (www.beppegrillo.it). This comes out as an alternative and unexpected communication strategy, especially when compared to other politicians belonging to the same party. Yet, since the article has a different scope, the case of Beppe Grillo could not be explored, although it certainly needs further investigation.
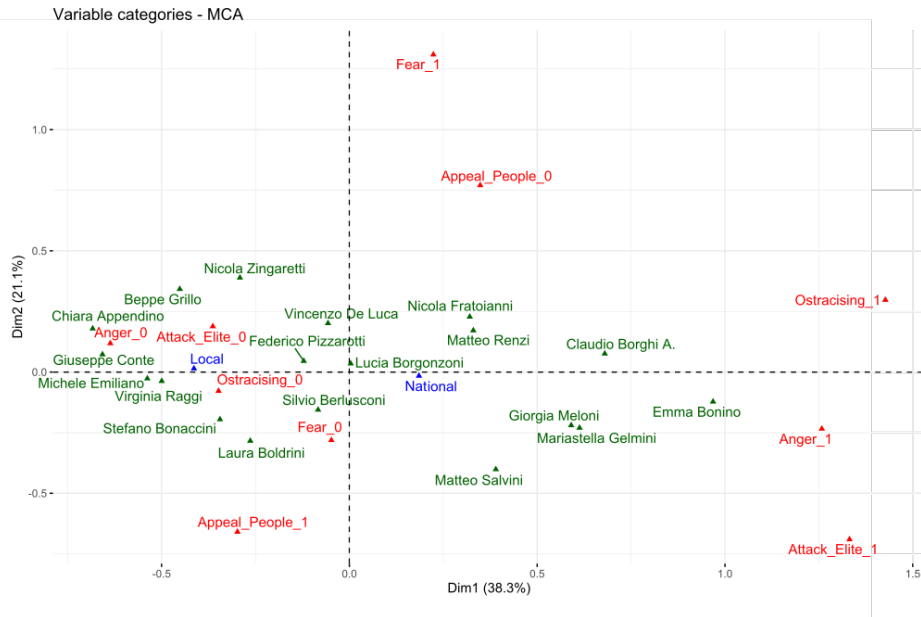
Figure 2. Multiple Correspondence Analysis related to the first corpus (Politicians Map).

Furthermore, we tested whether there is any difference in the use of the semantic and emotional categories on the basis of gender, provenance and regional or national political domain of politicians (RQ2). The variables of gender and geographic difference did not surface significantly from the overall analysis, and thus are not projected as supplementary elements on the MCA map. However, in the Politicians Map, the divide between Local and National (in blue) came out as relevant. This could be explained by the fact that mayors of municipalities and governors of regions tend to prioritize local needs over the national (i.e. issues related to the health, education and job sectors as well as the means of transportation within a particular area, etc.). On the other side, national politicians seem to be focusing more on controversies and verbal confrontations at a national level. This is one of the most interesting results of the study, which was never pointed out before in previous research.

3.3. Exploring the Political Parties Map

As for the Political Parties Map, we measured the presence of the five categories (i.e. 'Appeal to the People', 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite', 'Anger Frame' and 'Fear Frame') within the tweets shared by the political parties under analysis (RQ3). Their arrangement, in red in the graph, is in line with the Corrplot and with the Politicians Map. This is a noteworthy result, since they reveal a potential systematic relation among them, in terms of disposition and correlation, which is graphically shown on the maps. This is important especially when considering that the two different research sub-corpora were coded manually by the labelers and that the behavior of the variables was not predicted or hypothesized at an early research stage; rather it emerged as a completely data-driven result. This finding needs of course to be substantiated by further studies, yet it already lays the groundwork for future research in this direction.
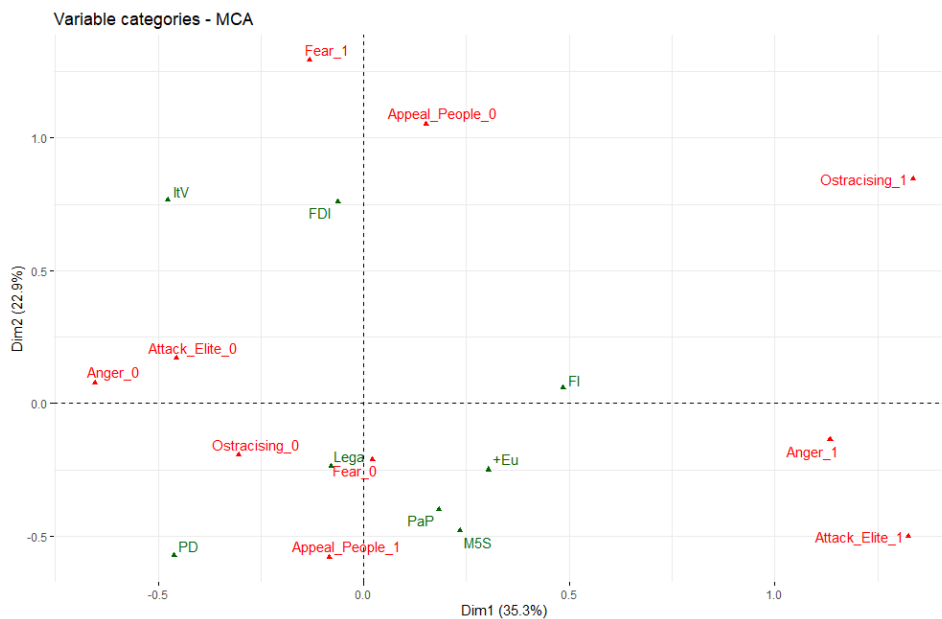
Figure 3. Political Parties Map. Multiple Correspondence Analysis related to the second corpus (Political Parties Corpus). Parties included are: Partito Democratico (PD), Lega, Potere al Popolo (PaP), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), +Europa (+Eu), Forza Italia (FI), Fratelli d'Italia (FDI), Italia Viva (ItV)

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore typical semantic populist frames used in combination with the emotional frames of anger and fear, employed on the digital platform of Twitter by selected Italian politicians and political parties. Bearing in mind the explorative nature of the study, three are the main results of the investigation that provide an answer to the research questions formulated in the methodological section.

Firstly, (1) a positive correlation between the labels 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite' and the 'Anger Frame' was demonstrated, suggesting that the emotional style (and in particular, the anger component) correlates strictly to the use of populist references within the virtual political arena of Twitter. Moreover, this correlation is present in both sub-corpora, which were built and analyzed for the study (i.e. the Politicians Corpus and the Political Parties Corpus), thus hinting at a potential systematic relation among the five categories taken into account as reference criteria. The second noteworthy result is that (2) politicians situated on the right-hand side of the map appeared to be "the most populist" according to the axes. Unsurprisingly, it also turned out that these political actors mostly belong to the different right-wing parties within the Italian political spectrum (i.e. Salvini, Borghi, Meloni, Gelmini). In addition, from the interpretation of the Corrplot, it emerged that while, on the one hand, politicians may have their own peculiar performative style while tweeting (i.e. the case of Beppe Grillo is emblematic in this sense), on the other, they resort to rhetorical and discursive patterns that were proven to systematically appear within both sub-corpora. Another interesting result concerned (3) the variables of gender and geographic difference, which did not surface significantly from the overall analysis. Contrarily, the divide between Local and National came out as relevant, suggesting that national and local politicians apply different communicative styles in relation to the reach of their populist enticements, performed within the local or national political domain. In the former case, it emerged that politicians active at a

local level tend to prioritize local needs and issues; in the latter, those operating at a national level engage more frequently in verbal confrontations with other political adversaries, reinforcing therefore the dichotomous perspective "we versus them", kernel of the populist discourse. To sum it up, the current findings aspire to add to a growing body of literature within the field, by providing additional evidence with respect to the "endemic" aspect of this global political phenomenon, which places politicians more on a continuum of features rather than on polarized positions.

However, the generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For instance, the research corpora are relatively small, since not all the politicians and the political parties were put under the analytical lens. Further investigation may also test whether the correlation between the categories of populism and the anger frame is systematically detectable, even when adopting a wider number of coders and a larger dataset containing tweets that have been shared during a longer period of time. It would also be interesting to analyze whether there exists a correlation between the populist categories ('Appeal to people', 'Ostracizing the Others', 'Attacking the elite') and other negative or positive emotions, with particular regard to disgust, because, as suggested by Roberts et al. (2012), the latter plays an important role in populist communication.

Notes on the authors

In the heading, the names of the authors are arranged in alphabetic order. All the authors developed the study concept, provided critical revisions and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission. Arianna Grasso wrote the Introduction and the subparagraph "Populism and the new media"; Francesca Carbone the subparagraph "Negative emotions in populism" and the Methodology; Francesco Santelli the Findings.

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