

Current Populism in Europe: Gender-Backlash and Counter-strategies

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The COVID-19 Related Communication of Italian Politicians and Its Success on Facebook

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Populism, Social Media and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This chapter aims to analyse the communicative performances of Italian political leaders on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a definition of populism is required, and social network sites must be understood as part of a hybrid media system. Following these definitions, COVID-19's impact on Italy will be discussed.

Populism is a contested concept that divides academics and causes massive debates.² There are three main approaches to studying the phenomenon: as an ideology,³ as a political strategy⁴ or as a political communication style. This article will adopt the latter definition of populism, describing it as a "master frame" that politicians can use to discuss every political issue.⁵ Populists exhibit closeness to the people and adopt political discourses that feature three main elements: an appeal to the people, an attack against the elites and the ostracization of a social or political minority. The first element is necessary but not sufficient to describe an actor as populist. The other elements can be combined, generating different varieties of populism: excluding populism (only discriminating a social minority), anti-elitist populism (criticizing the elites), empty populism and complete populism (respectively characterized by only referring to the people or by adopting all the elements). The main advantage of this definition is that it guarantees the strong operationalization of the concept.

Even if the definition of populism is itself conflictual, the individuation of its causes is generally less controversial. Most academics claim that populism emerges only in the presence of several structural conditions that allow political leaders to intervene with their agency. Another general claim is that the media plays a role in populism's growth, but only as an intervenient variable which cannot be substituted by structural ones.⁶ Among these structural factors, crises are the most studied. Many authors argue that neoliberal ideology is undergoing a crisis, leading to a diffusion of populism.⁷ Others focus

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- 1 This paper has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590. Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the author's (or the authors') view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.
 - 2 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017).
 - 3 Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563; Ben Stanley, "The thin ideology of populism," *Journal of political ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–110.
 - 4 Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.
 - 5 Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, "Populism as political communication style," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (2007): 319–345.
 - 6 Gianpetro Mazzoleni, "Populism and the media," in *Twenty-first century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 49–64.
 - 7 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social media and populism: an elective affinity?" *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 745–753.

more on political representation crises⁸ or economic depression as triggers of populist movements.⁹ However, these scholars use different definitions of “crises”; therefore, the link between populism and crisis must be examined more closely.¹⁰ Moreover, as discussed later, COVID-19 represents a peculiar crisis in many respects.

A growing number of studies focus on the relationship between populism and social media since their interactivity allows populists to strengthen the link between them and their audiences.¹¹ A pioneering study has shown that, on social media, populists tend to fragment populist discourse, rarely resorting to “complete populism”, preferring to rely on one of the three elements.¹² In the Italian context, populist elements guarantee better performances on Facebook,¹³ and populist discourse has gone mainstream, being adopted even by mainstream leaders,¹⁴ according to populist zeitgeist theory.¹⁵ Theoretically, there is an elective affinity between populism and social network sites: Social media is a powerful tool for populist leaders, using it to unite and persuade a multitude of atomized individuals who are disappointed and disillusioned by the hegemony of neoliberal ideology.¹⁶

Social network sites (SNS) must be understood as a fraction of the hybrid media system now characterizing Western democracies.¹⁷ This system is the result of a process through which traditional media logic¹⁸ – characteristic of the second phase of political communication – becomes just one of the different logics at play in the political communication arena. First, as the mediatization of politics advance, traditional media logic, driven by commercial values and entertainment purposes, must confront itself with political logic.¹⁹ Second, mass self-communication technologies have emerged,²⁰

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- 8 Giuliano Bobba and Duncan McDonnell, “Italy: a strong and enduring market for populism,” in *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, ed. Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2015), 163–179; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The hollowing of Western democracy* (London: Verso Trade, 2013), 17–20.
 - 9 Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas (eds.), *European populism in the shadow of the great recession* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2015).
 - 10 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Bobba and Hubé forthcoming.
 - 11 Jamie Bartlett, “Populism, social media and democratic strain,” in *European populism and winning the immigration debate*, ed. Clara Sandelind (Stockholm: FORES, 2014), 99–114.
 - 12 Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser and Florin Büchel, “Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology,” *Information, communication & society* 20, no. 8 (2017): 1109–1126.
 - 13 Giuliano Bobba and Franca Roncarolo, “The likeability of populism on social media in the 2018 Italian general election,” *Italian Political Science* 13, no 1 (2018): 51–62; Giuliano Bobba, “Social media populism: Features and ‘likeability’ of Lega Nord communication on Facebook,” *European Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2019): 11–23.
 - 14 Gianpetro Mazzoleni and Roberta Bracciale, “Socially mediated populism: the communicative strategies of political leaders on Facebook,” *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–10.
 - 15 Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist.”
 - 16 Paolo Gerbaudo, “Social media and populism: an elective affinity?” *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 745–753.
 - 17 Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
 - 18 David L. Altheide, “Media logic,” *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, ed. Gianpetro Mazzoleni, Kevin G. Barnhurst, Ken’ichi Ikeda, Rousiley C. M. Maia, and Hartmut Wessler (Chichester, Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1–6.
 - 19 Gianpetro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, “‘Mediatization’ of politics: A challenge for democracy?” *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999): 247–261; Jesper Strömbäck, “Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 3 (2008): 228–246.
 - 20 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

ushering in a third era of political communication.²¹ SNS are characterized by a rationality that is effectively labelled as network logic.²² The differences between media and network logic could be better illustrated in terms of three analytical dimensions. Traditional media production, based on professional journalistic structures, is driven by news values and economic interests. Theoretically, network logic allows users to become *prosumers*,²³ committed to *produsage* activities.²⁴ Consequently, content production is less directed by news values and depends more on personal interests, even if platform structures still represents content constraints²⁵.

Media distribution was mainly based on media companies acting as gatekeepers, deciding which fact to transform into news; distribution on a social network is instead based on technological infrastructures that allow spreadable content²⁶ to flow through homophilic networks,²⁷ where each user is an intermediary rather than a gatekeeper. Media use was characterized by a mass audience, mass consumers and limited selective exposure. On social media, users are less influenced by spatial distances. Network logic makes it easier to distribute the same information to homophilic groups consisting of geographically distant individuals, strengthening the role of confirmation bias²⁸ and often leading to echo chambers.²⁹ Inside network logic, social and technological forces are intertwined and impossible to disentangle. Network, political and media logics – in its social and technological dimension – must be intended as ideal types, convenient when it comes to simplifying the complex flux of relationships occurring between politicians, media and citizens. It is precisely the interactions between these logics that constitute the hybrid media system.

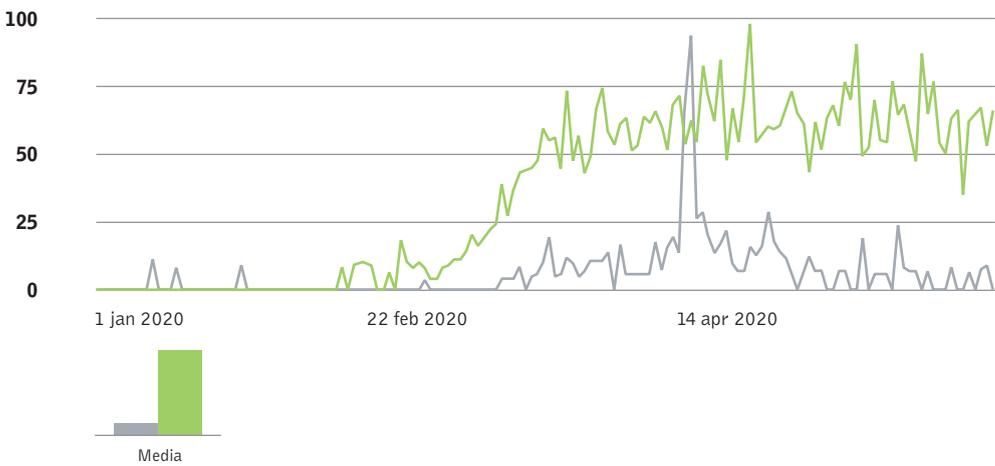
This chapter studies Italian politicians' Facebook performances during a period heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first case in Italy was recorded on 30 January 2020. The pandemic was considered a public security challenge only after a huge outbreak in Lombardy on 17 February. In the days that followed, several other outbreaks occurred, prompting a political reaction that led to a countrywide lockdown on 11 March. COVID-19's impact on Italy at the time was drastic: It caused more than 33,000 deaths and more than 250,000 cases were recorded, creating a gigantic burden on the Italian health care system. For Italian politicians, COVID-19 was an issue too big and too salient to be ignored; therefore, Italian politicians adapted their communication strategy to the pandemic so as to exploit it, reaching consensus.

In light of the literature previously examined, this crisis should have been an opportunity mainly for populists. However, during the outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic was a peculiar crisis since it was primarily related to medical science and thus was managed by doctors and experts. To exploit the

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- 21 Jay. G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, "The third age of political communication: Influences and features," *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999): 209–230.
- 22 Ulrike Klinger and Jakob Svensson, "The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 8 (2015): 1241–1257.
- 23 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).
- 24 Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From production to Produsage* (Vol. 45 of *Digital Formations*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
- 25 As an emblematic example, one can think of the difference between a tweet and a Tik Tok video.
- 26 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
- 27 Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M. Cook, "Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks," *Annual review of sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 415–444.
- 28 Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220.
- 29 Walter Quattrociocchi, Antonio Scala, and Cass R. Sunstein, "Echo chambers on Facebook," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016, available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2795110.

COVID-19 pandemic, populists had to politicize it, transforming a social crisis into a political issue³⁰. Therefore, this chapter postulates that, when facing the pandemic, Italian politicians adopted different strategies. Populists tried to politicize the crisis, whereas mainstream leaders tried to keep the pandemic issue depoliticized. This politicization of COVID-19 required time but was almost unavoidable after the adoption of the national lockdown when the pandemic’s frame inevitably shifted from a health dimension to an economic one. At the national level, Italian politicians fought to determine the entity and the economic beneficiaries. At the European level, every nation participated in the discussion regarding financial aid and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). For their part in the debate, Italian populists criticized the ESM, while mainstream leaders supported it. As figure 1 shows, the dispute had arisen in March, when the lockdown was already adopted. The apex of this process was reached on 10 April 2020 when news items on the ESM outnumbered even the COVID-19 related reporting.

Figure 1. Google Trends data for ESM³¹ mentions (in grey) and COVID-19 mentions (green) in Italian news



In light of these elements, the pandemic can be divided into two main phases. The first phase (21 January to 11 March) began with the first huge outbreak in Lombardy and ended with the nationwide lockdown. The second phase (11 March to 10 April) began with the lockdown and ended when discussions of the ESM reached their apex. In terms of this temporal division, two hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. In the first phase, the pandemic is not politicized as it presented itself as a health crisis; mainstream politicians will overperform in terms of likes, comments and shares.

Hypothesis 2. In the second phase, the crisis is politicized since the public debate focuses on its economic dimension; at this stage, populists will overperform in terms of likes, comments and shares.

30 Following Carl Schmitt’s *The concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), an issue becomes politicized when it enters into the political sphere, that is, the battlefield of an intractable fight between two opposite factions which are impossible to unify.

31 The research was effectuated with the Italian acronym “MES”.

Data and Methods

The analyses in this chapter were conducted on a dataset containing all Facebook posts published by major Italian political leaders between the 18 January 2020 and 20 April 2020. The dataset is composed of 3,350 posts automatically downloaded through Crowdtangle. This data allows us to study Facebook performances before and after the pandemic's main phases as defined in the preceding paragraph.

Six leaders are examined: Three are populists, and three are mainstream; three are in government, and three are in opposition. Considering populism as a political communication style, Italy has three main populist parties: the Northern League (LN; Lega Nord), led by Matteo Salvini; the Five Star Movement (M5S; Movimento 5 Stelle), previously led by Di Maio and, since 22 January 2020, led by Vito Crimi; and the Brothers of Italy (Fdi; Fratelli d'Italia), led by Giorgia Meloni. The Northern League has been studied as a populist party starting with its establishment in the 1990s,³² through its transition phase when – led by Salvini – it became a national rather than regionalist party,³³ until the 2018 national election, when it formed a coalition government with M5S, with Giuseppe Conte as prime minister. However, due to a political crisis provoked by Salvini, this government ended in August 2019 when Conte was confirmed as prime minister of a second coalition government consisting of M5S, the Democratic Party (PD; Partito Democratico) and Italia Viva (IV; Italy alive). The second populist party M5S is one of the typical anti-establishment movements that flourished in Europe after 2000.³⁴ M5S declares itself as post-ideological and developed Rousseau, a website conceived as an online direct democracy tool.³⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, M5S was the only populist party in government. Fdi is a far-right party having recently recorded huge growth in terms of shares, and Meloni has recently been studied as an example of a female populist leader.³⁶ Chapel Hill Expert Survey data shows political and ideological similarities between Fdi and the Northern League since strong anti-elitist traits characterize both parties.³⁷ Moreover, Meloni skilfully exploited social media and memes to open a dialogue with the broader public using an unconventional media format. For example, in 2019, Meloni's political speech was remixed, becoming a trending video in Italy with more than ten million views on YouTube.

Italy's mainstream parties include Forza Italia (FI; Go Italy), PD and IV. Berlusconi is FI's founder, and he has been studied as a clear example of populism.³⁸ However, the same survey quoted above reveals that his communication can no longer be considered populist in respect to the anti-elitism and anti-establishment traits adopted. Moreover, in the 2018 elections, Berlusconi overtly depicted himself as the only alternative to populists.³⁹ PD, led by Zingaretti, is the biggest left-wing party even after

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- 32 Lorella Cedroni, "Lega Nord" in *I Partiti Italiani. Iscritti, Dirigenti, Eletti*, ed. Luciano Bardi, Pietro Ignazi and Oreste Massari (Milano: Università Bocconi Editore, 2007), 247–268.
 - 33 Danielle Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini and Antonella Seddone, "No regionalism please, we are Leghisti! The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (2018): 645–671.
 - 34 Lorenzo Mosca and Filippo Tronconi, "Beyond left and right: the eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement," *West European Politics* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1258–1283.
 - 35 Roberto D'Alimonte, "How the populists won in Italy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 114–127.
 - 36 Donatella Campus, "Female Populist Leaders and Communication: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Perspectives on Populism and the Media: Avenues for Research* 7 (2020): 235–252.
 - 37 Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Seth Jolly, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova, "2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey," Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2019, available at <https://www.chesdata.eu/2019-chapel-hill-expert-survey>.
 - 38 Andrej Zaslove, "Here to stay? Populism as a new party type," *European Review* 16, no. 3 (2008): 319–336.
 - 39 Franca Roncarolo and Cristina Cremonesi, "Journalistic Narratives and Political Communication Strategies Against the Background of a Critical Mood: The 2018 Election Campaign in the Traditional Media and Beyond," in *The Italian General Election of 2018*, ed. Luigi Ceccarini and James L. Newell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 191–215.

a split the saw Matteo Renzi – the former prime minister – found IV, a centrist and personal party. Together with M5S, PD and IV have been in government throughout the COVID-19 crisis (as of this writing). This government is led by Giuseppe Conte, whose Facebook account will be analysed at the end of the next paragraph.

Regarding the dataset, some specifications are necessary. First, even if Di Maio is no longer M5S’s leader, we preferred to analyse his account rather than Crimi’s. This choice is primarily motivated by the institutional and media relevance which Di Maio, unlike Crimi, has in the Italian political landscape. Moreover, the management of Crimi’s account is less professionalized, and, above all, it publishes a small number of posts, making statistical analysis fragile. Additionally, this dataset has two main disadvantages. Firstly, Facebook users are not a representative sample of the Italian population, and this prevents generalizing the results of this article. Secondly, in the first paragraph, SNS were discussed and defined in the context of a hybrid media system; using only Facebook data, the theoretical standpoint of the analysis is betrayed. We used other data sources to compensate for this shortcoming: In the preceding paragraph, Google Trends was used to establish the apex of ESM-related news; and in the conclusion, private survey data will be used for some considerations. The statistical analysis uses the number of likes (and reactions), comments and shares obtained by each leader on their Facebook posts as dependent variables. Table 1 shows some descriptive statistics about the performances of these pages.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of leaders’ performances (in terms of likes and reactions)

Descriptive statistics				
Variable	Obs	Media	Min	Max
Di Maio	382	14,623	2,489	145,790
Salvini	1,505	16,045	1,591	131,283
Meloni	630	14,172	1,050	198,077
Renzi	231	5,361	0	48,418
Zingaretti	388	1,024	0	38,284
Berlusconi	241	1,733	433	53,837
N	3,350			

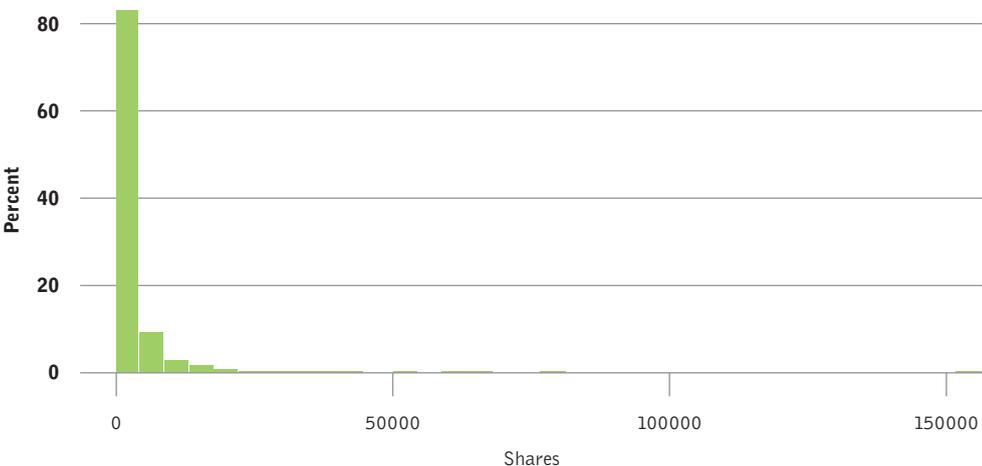
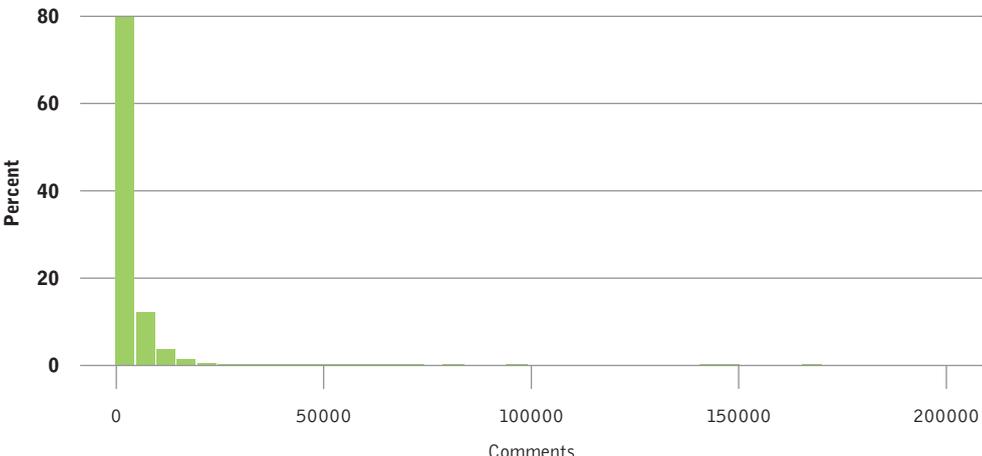
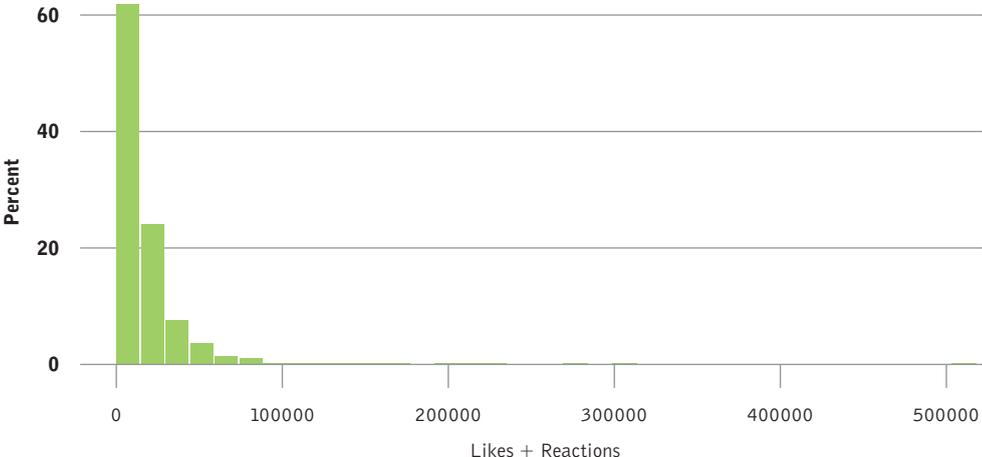
The leaders’ accounts are very different in terms of fanbases and number of posts published during the designed period. Thus, their average post garners different success as regards likes, comments and shares. To ensure the comparability of every item in the dataset, it is therefore necessary to standardize the three dependent variables, as shown in figure 2, for the variable generated from the sum of likes and reactions.

Figure 2. Standardization formula applied to the first dependent variables

$$\frac{\text{Likes + Reactions} - \text{mean (Likes + Reactions)}}{\text{sd(Likes + Reactions)}}$$

Moreover, as figure 3 shows, the frequency distribution of these three variables is not linear since a great number of posts obtained few likes, comments and reactions, whereas just a small number obtained great success.

Figure 3. Dependent variables' frequency distributions

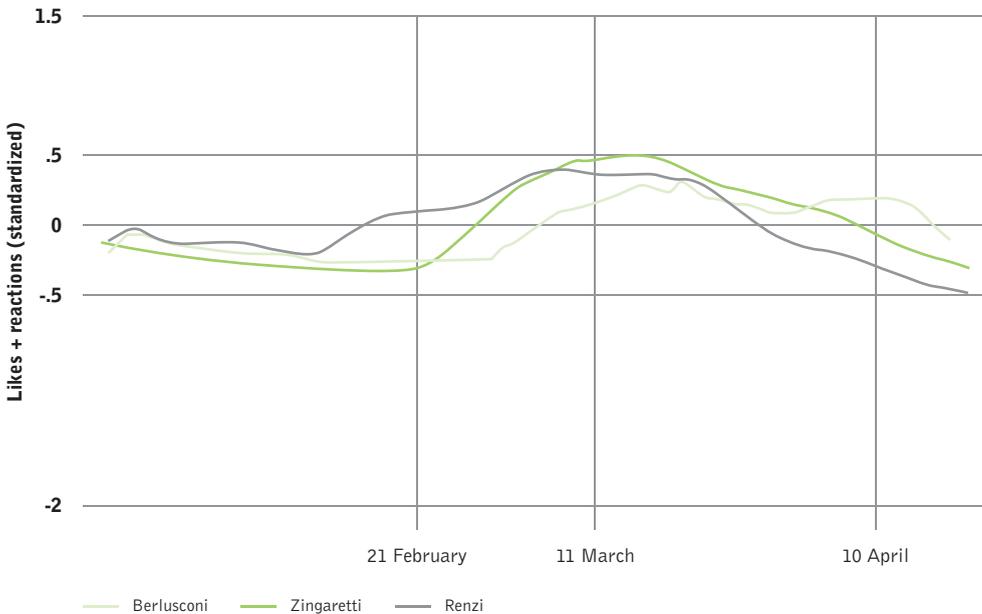


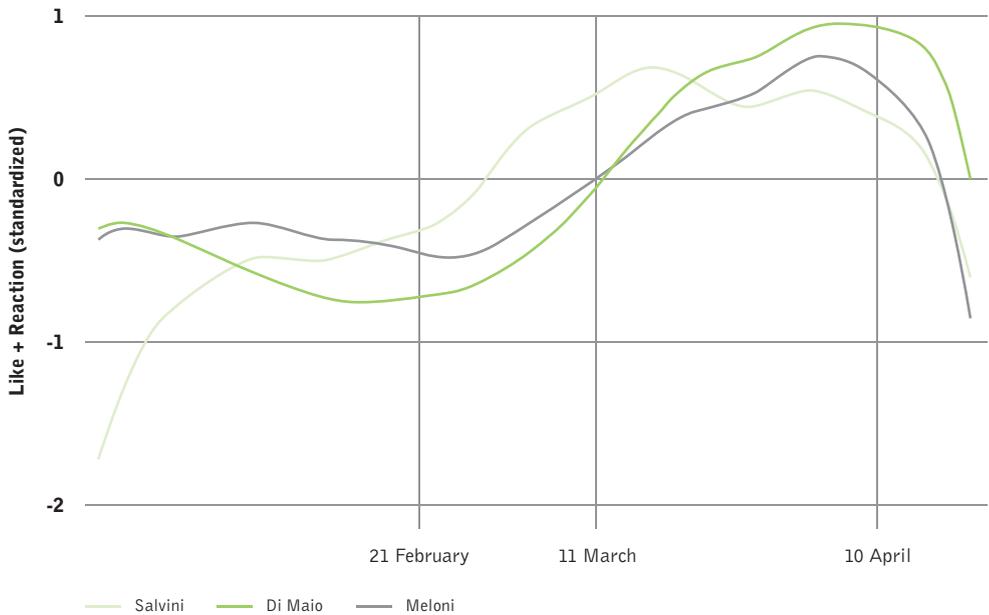
These frequency distributions and the hypothesis declared in the first paragraph determined the choice of statistical model used in this article. We decided to use LOWESS curves, an acronym that stands for locally weighted scatterplot smoothing. This technique produces a linear regression for each value recorded by each dependent variable. It then uses the regression lines identified in that way to produce the curve that best fits the trend of their values. The advantage of this tool is that the regression result is less influenced by outliers. The main disadvantage is that the extremes of the curves are not totally reliable; each point of the LOWESS curve is affected by the position of the adjacent points, and this implies that its initial and final segments are drawn upon weaker analysis. This technique will be used to perform three statistical models – one for each dependent variable – that will describe the chronological evolution of Facebook performances. Finally, another regression analysis will be presented to evaluate the statistical significance of the difference in performances obtained by each leader before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. This last model will be based on a linear regression because the analysis will be applied to the already standardized variables. All these procedures will be first applied to the parties’ leaders, comparing populists and mainstream performances. Lastly, they will be applied to Conte’s account.

Findings

Figures 4, 5 and 6 show the results of the LOWESS curves produced for each dependent variable. The axes represent the publication date of every Facebook post and its standardized score measured by the three variables. Since they were standardized, all the leaders’ curves are comparable.

Figure 4. Mainstream and populist performances (likes and reactions)

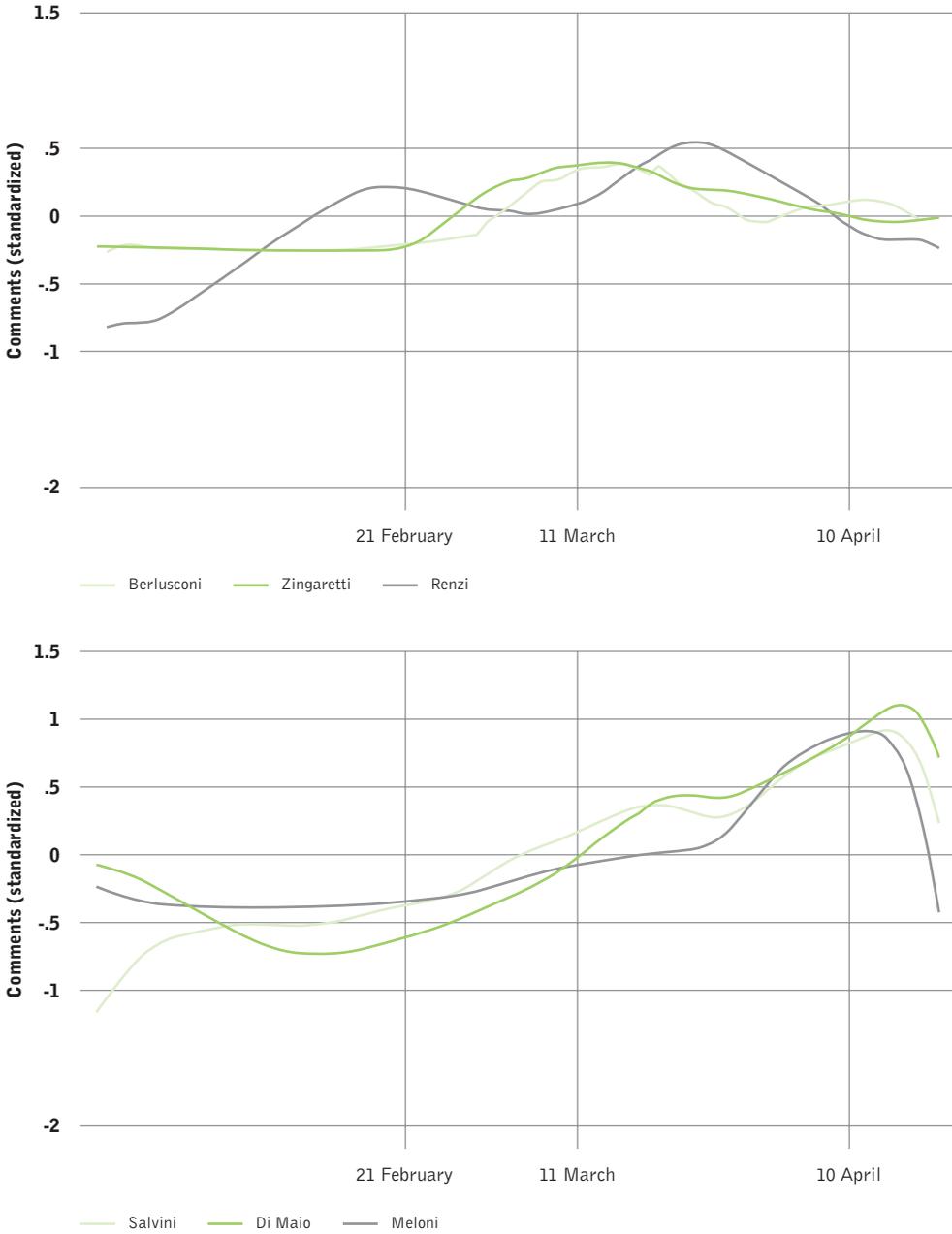




The first dependent variable measures the sum of likes and reactions obtained by each post in the dataset. From the LOWESS curves, a trend compatible with the research hypotheses emerges. Before 21 February, that is, before the outbreak of the pandemic, all Italian politicians' performances were below their average values. However, this is not a particularly pronounced trend, especially for mainstream leaders, who are very close to their "normal" performances. A partial exception is that recorded by Salvini, who consistently underperforms. However, his lowest scores occur in the initial days. As explained in the previous paragraph, this can be due to the statistical tool used. In the first phase, all the politicians improve their performances. However, the populist leaders' performances only weakly increase, and, among them, Salvini is the only one to overperform, obtaining more likes and reactions than the average. The increase is more substantial for mainstream leaders, who all overperform. Therefore, in the first phase, mainstream leaders overperform, while populists obtained weaker results, underperforming.

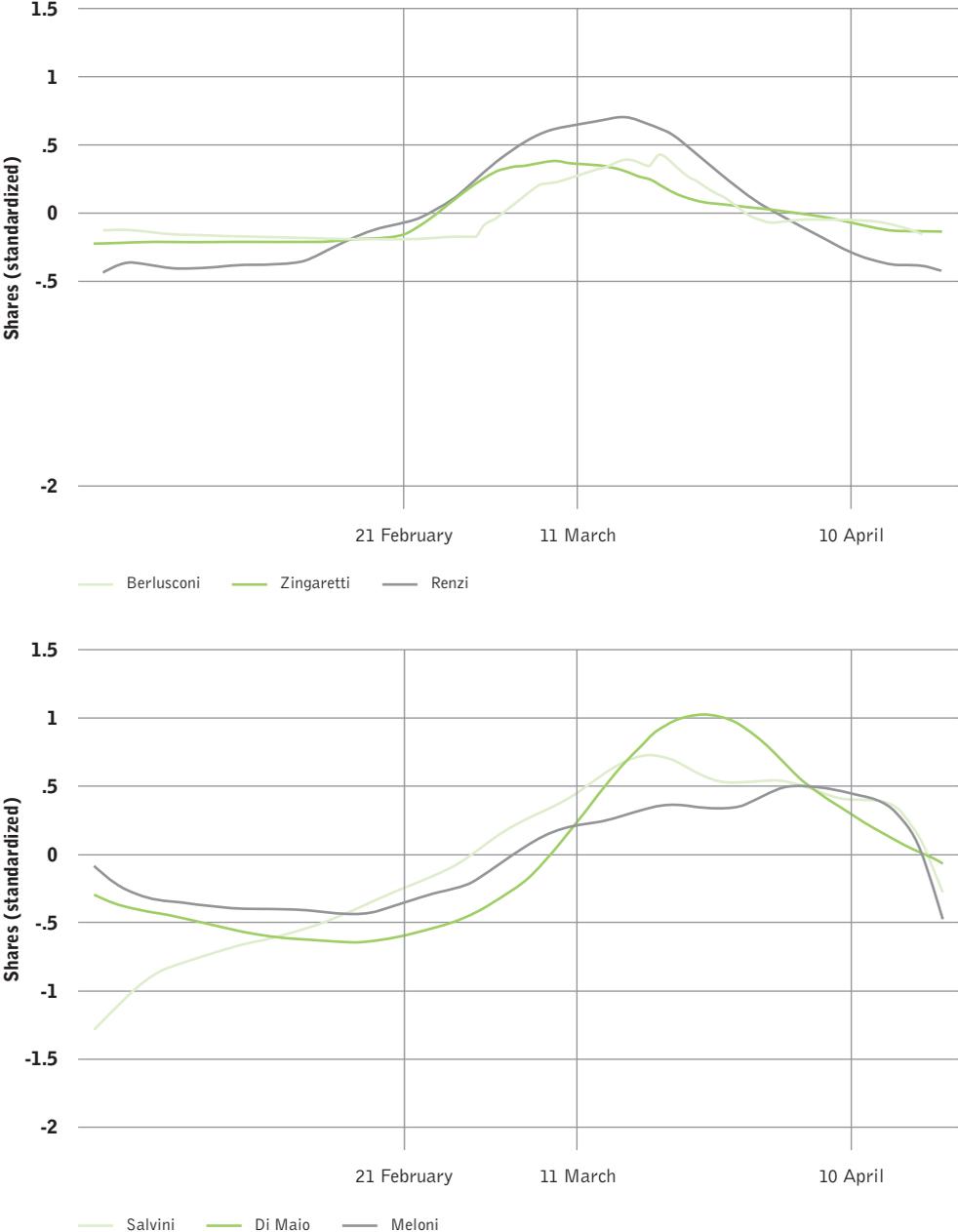
During the second phase, mainstream leaders' performances instead deteriorate and return closer to their average values. Conversely, populists considerably overperform, reaching an average number of likes and reactions almost in excess of one standard deviation of their average values. The peak of these performances tends to coincide with the apex of the ESM discussion that occurred on 10 April. After this date, the performances of Italian politicians seem to undergo a generalized decline.

Figure 5. Mainstream and populist performances (comments)



The LOWESS curves describing the comments obtained by each Facebook post (figure 5) show a similar, although less pronounced trend. In the first phase, Matteo Salvini is the only populist who overperforms. During this phase, all mainstream leaders overperform, albeit not in an accentuated way in terms of standard deviations. In the second phase, instead, their performances drop, while those of the populists reach similar levels, achieving one standard deviation higher than their average.

Figure 6. Mainstream and populist performances (shares)



The final LOWESS curves show a similar trend in shares. In the first phase, mainstream leaders slightly overperform, whereas the populist leaders' performances are below their average score. During the second phase, Berlusconi, Renzi and Zingaretti's performances do not substantially differ from their average scores; Salvini, Meloni and Di Maio are instead beneficiaries of steady growth in their performances.

The LOWESS curves can only describe the chronological evolutions of leader performances and, therefore, fail to assess whether the differences between the average post published by each leader before and after the pandemic is statistically significant. To ensure a more robust analysis, we carried out a linear regression for each dependent variable. The results are shown in figure 6, where the confidence interval is set at 95%. As described in the preceding section, the populists' performances improve after 11 March; the chart shows that all those differences are statistically significant, except for the difference in Meloni's performances measured by the comment variable. On the other side, mainstream leaders registered a lower increase in their performances, and those differences are never statistically significant. This result is particularly important because it partially prevents the analysis from adopting spurious relations: The variable that seems to be the most important to explain the variation in the dependent variables is the dichotomous populist/mainstream variable and not the variable in power / in opposition.

Figure 7. Statistical significance tests (likes and reactions)

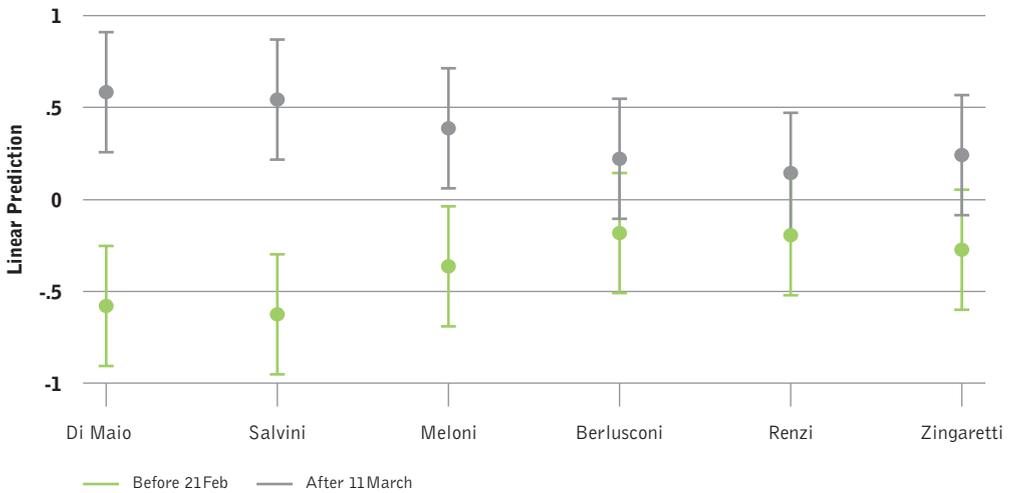


Figure 8. Statistical significance tests (comments)

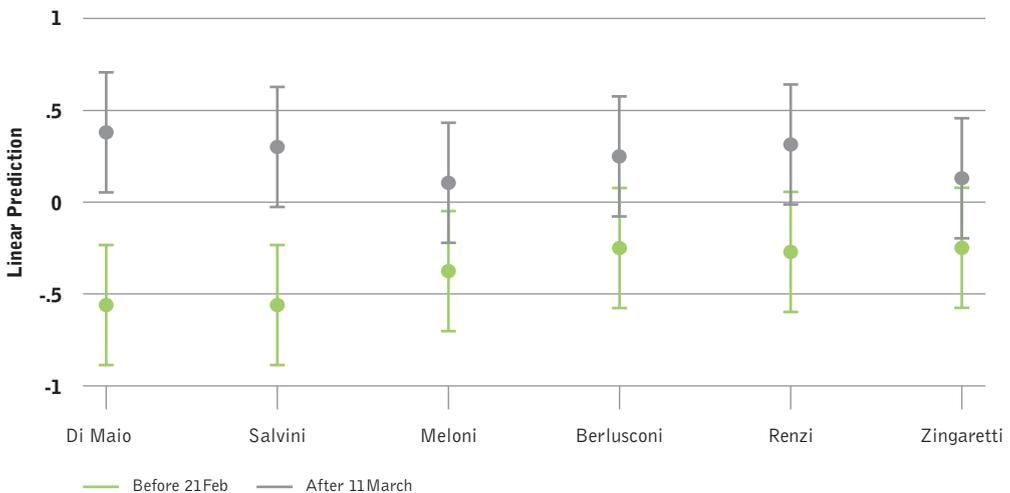
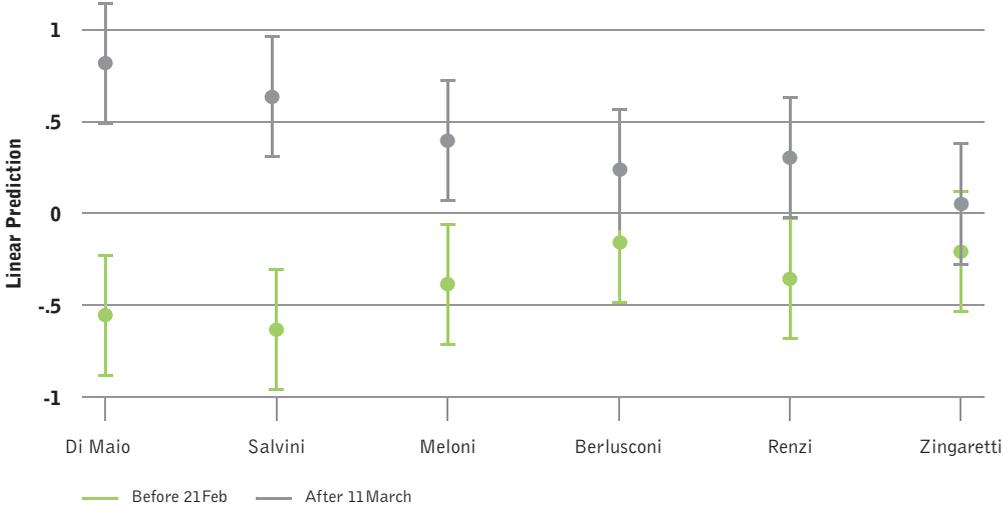


Figure 9. Statistical significance tests (shares)



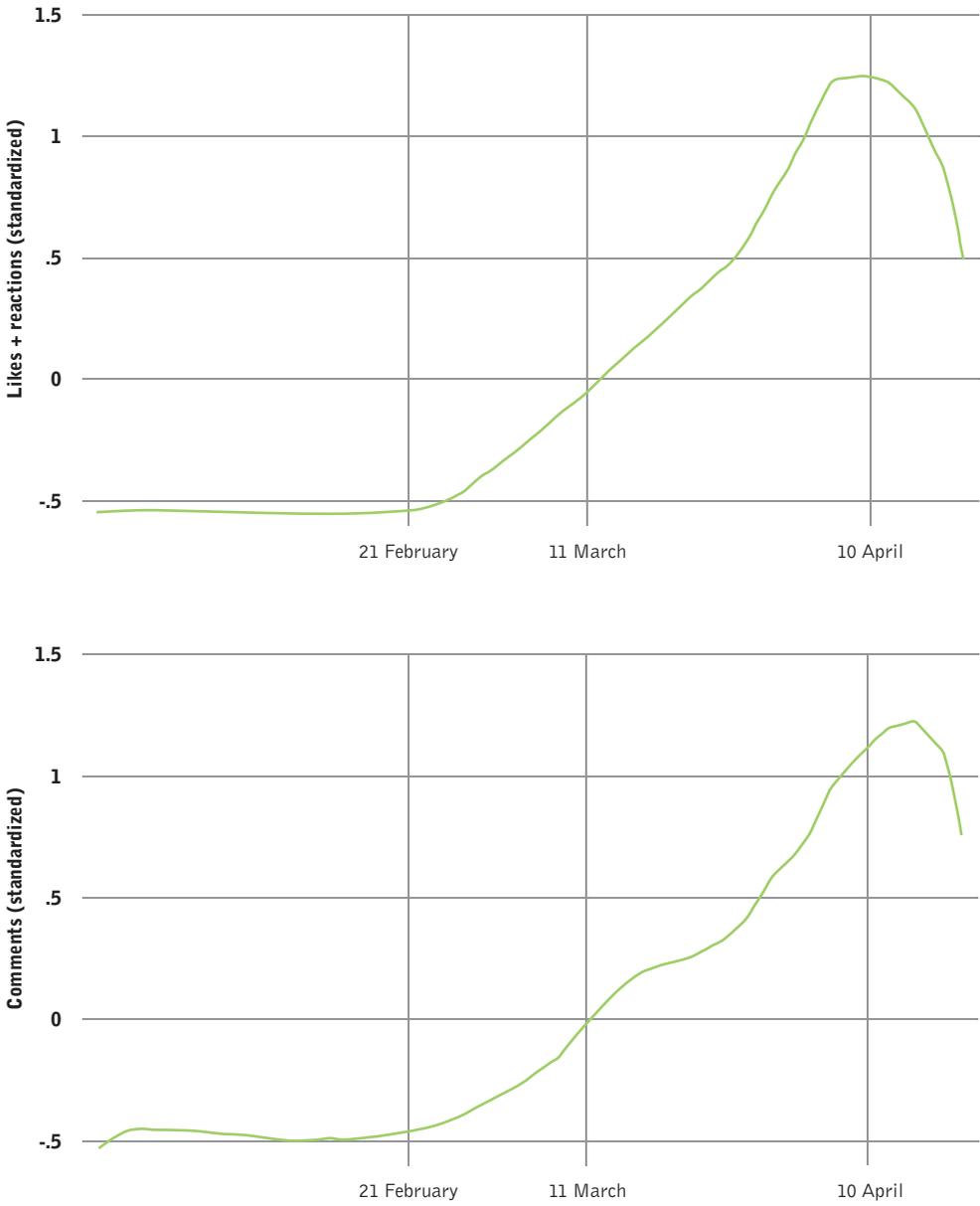
Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte does not follow the trends described in the previous sections. This is mainly due to the institutional role, which guarantees him considerable visibility and media coverage. Also, during the pandemic, he repeatedly announced “in advance” the content of government measures on his Facebook profile, which immediately became one of the most followed in the nation.

Table 2. Account growth during the COVID-19 pandemic

Account	18/01	18/01–23/02	Phase 1: 23/02–11/03	Phase 2: 11/03–20/04	Δ	Δ %
Conte	1,062,114	3,363	111,892	1,710,912	1,826,167	172%
Meloni	1,319,908	21,662	22,582	134,353	178,597	14%
Salvini	4,020,473	36,791	13,033	114,624	164,448	4%
Di Maio	2,206,005	-2,606	1,734	115,930	115,058	5%
Zingaretti	300,858	1,927	10,995	6,997	19,919	7%
Berlusconi	1,058,705	522	-1,061	11,380	10,841	1%
Renzi	1,152,179	3,467	2,502	4,646	10,615	1%

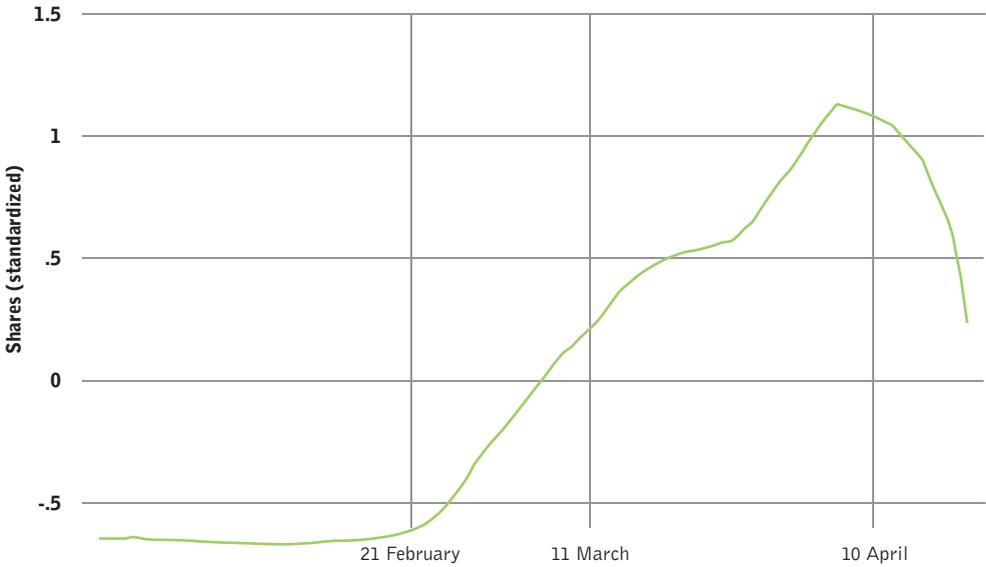
As table 2 shows, Conte’s fanbase increased by 172% during the pandemic. This means that it gained almost two million followers in four months. This incredible growth is unmatched among other Italian politicians and makes it difficult to compare the accounts. Despite the standardization of dependent variables, Conte’s page is anomalous, since during all pandemic phases, it improves its performance considerably, as shown in figure 8.

Figure 10. Conte's performance (likes and reactions, comments and shares)⁴⁰



⁴⁰ The scale of these graphs is different from previous ones.

Figure 11. Conte's performance (shares)



Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to shed light on the relationship between populism and social media in a peculiar period, characterized by COVID-19's drastic impact on Italian society. At first, populism was defined as a communicative style appealing to the people, attacking the elite and ostracizing others. Next, Facebook was studied as part of a complex hybrid media system built upon intricate interactions occurring between media, political, social and technological forces. The relationship between these two phenomena was then deepened and examined, with Italy as the chosen case study and the months-long COVID-19 outbreak as the temporal setting. The pandemic was analytically divided into two phases. During the first phase, stretching from the detection of the first outbreak to the beginning of the lockdown, the pandemic issue progressively gained social and political attention, although it was framed primarily as a social crisis and, therefore, remained depoliticized. Here, mainstream political leaders overperformed in terms of likes, comments and shares obtained on their Facebook posts, while, conversely, populists slightly underperformed. These trends confirmed the first research hypothesis and were mainly linked to the social rather than political nature of the crisis. Another element that may contribute to explaining these results could be a "rally around the flag" effect.⁴¹ Indeed, survey data shows that in this period, citizens tended to be supportive of their government, positively evaluating its

⁴¹ John E. Mueller, "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson," *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 1 (1970): 18–34. Accessed August 28, 2020.

policies and criticizing politicians who overly created obstacles for Conte and his interventions during this critical period.⁴²

The second phase started with the lockdown and ended when the ESM discussion reached its quantitative apex on 10 April. Here mainstream leaders underperformed while populists largely overperformed in terms of likes, comments and shares. During this phase, the pandemic's frame changed; it was labelled a political rather than social crisis. Here, every possible way of rallying around the flag vanished. Moreover, the differences measured by the three dependent variables before and after the pandemic are statistically significant only for populists. These results match the second research hypothesis.

Conte's Facebook account is anomalous since it gained almost two million fans during the pandemic. This gigantic growth fosters his performances, which constantly improve in the period examined. The main reason why Conte's fanbase increased to such a degree is that he regularly used his Facebook account to broadcast in advance of the most important policies. Rather than a reflection on the relationship between populism and crisis, Conte's account is a fruitful field to reflect on the relationship between institutional visibility and private ownership of the channels with which it unfolds. During the pandemic, Conte gathered a large audience, thus accumulating a large amount of social capital and power through the growth of his private profile on Facebook. These resources will remain Conte's property even after the termination of his institutional assignment.

42 "Ipsos Srl survey," published on September 3, 2020, available at: <http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/ListaSondaggi.aspx>. 86% of the subjects interviewed approved the first policies adopted by the government to deal with the pandemic; 61% of the subjects interviewed criticize Salvini and Renzi, who are the politicians responsible for criticizing Conte the most in this period. Another survey ("Ipsos Srl Survey", published on December 3, 2020; available at: <http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/ListaSondaggi.aspx>) reveals that at the beginning of the lockdown, Italians seemed to be totally supportive of their government as long as it followed scientific experts, who were trusted by 64% of interviewees.