

The 2022 Italian general election campaign: measuring different levels of populism on Facebook and assessing its impact on engagement.

Master thesis

Michele Coloricchio (S2796074)

University of Twente

MSc Communication Science

Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social sciences

Main supervisor: Prof. Dr. M.D.T de Jong

2nd assessor: Dr. S.R. Jansma

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Abstract

Purpose

As politics around the world experience a rise in extremism and populism, democratic principles are increasingly in jeopardy. Social media is believed to play an important role in making populism an attractive political strategy as political discourse moves onto digital communication channels. Italy follows this trend after a right-wing populist coalition won the 2022 general elections, raising criticism and concern nationally and internationally. The goal of the research is to analyse the parties' communication on Facebook to understand how populist communication and rhetoric characterised the election campaign and what differences exist between populist and non-populist content in terms of social media engagement.

Method

The Facebook posts were collected from the accounts of party leaders who campaigned during the 2022 general election. The analysis covers the four weeks leading up to the September 25 2022 elections, and posts metrics such as likes and reposts are considered to assess their relevance and impact. A total of 723 posts were collected and coded according to a framework developed starting from existing literature, and extended to identify a broader range of populist features and distinguish between intrinsic populism and populist communication style.

Results

Campaign analysis found that 31% of posts contained at least one populist element, of which 15% were intrinsically populist and 16% had populist communication features. These results were unevenly distributed across parties, with parties classified as populist using the most intrinsically populist content and non-populist actors refraining from this practice. Nonetheless, the use of populist communication elements was also found in the posts of non-populist politicians. The analysis of interactions with posts shows that populist content does not lead to higher engagement for either populist or non-populist parties. Instead, the data show that the type of party, populist or not, influences engagement, with populist parties being most prevalent on social media platforms.

Conclusion

Although the study shows that populism is increasingly becoming a mainstream political practice, its use by non-populist parties and politicians can be a questionable practice in terms of social media engagement and electoral returns. Moreover, engagement showed not to be influenced by the presence of populist content. On the contrary, populist parties have shown that their social media activities can attract a high number of followers and interactions, regardless of whether they use populist content or not. These considerations make it necessary to further investigate what leads users to interact with populist content, but also to evaluate the interactions from a more qualitative perspective, rather than viewing them as mere numerical indicators of social media success.

1. Introduction

Politics are increasingly characterised by a wave of extremist shifts and populist movements that are threatening democracies worldwide (Moffit, 2016). Populists around the world exploit social media platforms to build consensus and delegitimise the role of truth (Ernst et al., 2019) witnessing how the political debate moved to social media platforms prompting new communicative tactics to persuade electors and gain more votes. The result is an impoverished trust in democracy, a polarised society where populists gain more power by exploiting the fears of the people and scapegoating vulnerable groups (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). They continue their disinformation agenda jeopardising civil rights and societal progress while bolstering conservatism and nationalism. Their goal is to increasingly fragment society by fueling anti-migrant movements, resentment towards LGBTQ+ groups, and hostility towards social progress and civil rights in general, undermining democratic milestones such as information pluralism, independence of the judiciary systems and personal freedom (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). By instrumentalising such issues, and especially by successfully spreading false information, they gain power and influence society and politics.

Although this is a phenomenon that affects all of Europe and the entire democratic world, this research focuses on the Italian context, which, similar to other European countries, has experienced a radical change in the political panorama, where populist parties have gained support and voters (Chiaromonte et al., 2018). The example of the Five Star Movement, Brothers of Italy, and Lega Nord parties may be representative of how political discourse has changed to fuel Euroscepticism, xenophobia, hatred, and generally, disinformation to gain votes and seats in parliament (Maccaferri, 2022; Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021). In this regard, Italy became another example of how fast the phenomenon could escalate after that in the 2022 parliamentary elections a right-extremist populist coalition won the majority of the seats in the parliament putting at stake democratic principles.

This backlash is amplified by the fact that politicians use multiple channels to spread their false beliefs, especially through social media, which leads to decreased trust in democracy and overshadows the role of truth (Güvercin, 2022). Populist politicians have created a strong presence on social media platforms, where, supported by large teams of communication and public relations experts, they compose ad hoc messages aimed at stoking fears and discontent, polarising society. Notwithstanding these acknowledgements, Hameleers et al. (2020) emphasise in their research that if populist rhetoric is particularly useful for extremist parties, it could also appeal any political actor, including mainstream parties, as shown by the impact of their messages both in the media and on social media (Ernst et al., 2019). De Vreese et al. stress that "it is possible to determine the degree of populism through the frequent or infrequent use of characteristic content and style features" (2018, p. 428). In these regards, it might be necessary to distinguish between those political actors who are intrinsically populist because they use

substantive content such as anti-elitism and person-centredness, and those who merely use a populist communication style in order to achieve a better reach to the electorate.

Therefore this study aims to use a quantitative and qualitative content analysis to verify the presence of populist discourse in social media communication on Facebook by Italian parties during the 2022 Parliament election campaign and to analyse their impact on user interaction by answering the following research question and subquestions:

RQ1: *To what extent has intrinsic populism and populist communication style occurred in the 2022 Italian political campaign on Facebook and what is the impact of populism on content engagement?*

- *How intrinsic populism and populist communication style occurred in the 2022 Italian political campaign on Facebook according to populist and non-populist parties?*
- *What are the differences in content engagement between content classified as intrinsic populist, populist communication style and non-populist during the 2022 Italian political campaign on Facebook?*
- *What are the differences in content engagement between populist and non-populist parties?*

The research questions aim to find out to what extent political parties and leaders used populist content in their Facebook communication during the 2022 Italian parliamentary election campaign to win votes, and whether this communication strategy only applies to parties considered populist or whether its use also influenced the communication of other political actors. In addition, as it has been shown that certain message features, typical of populist discourse, such as eliciting strong emotions, attacking the political counterparts or use scapegoats such as migrants and ethnic minorities could encourage interaction on social media (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018), the purpose of this research is also to verify how populist content affects engagement on social media. So far, much research attention has been paid to the situation in Germany, Britain, and the United States, and a gap has been noted in the literature on other influential parts of Europe. Furthermore, given the result of the 2022 parliamentary elections, Italy appeared again to be a fertile ground in which populism could flourish. Only recently has research on populist communication begun to acknowledge the role of social media as a factor in the success of populist parties and leaders, which calls for further research (Blassnig et al., 2020). Ultimately, the study allows us to look closer at the communication strategies of political parties and the extent to which they are successful or not, measuring it in terms of social media engagement.

The research contributes to a better understanding of the communication strategies employed by political actors in the most recent political context in Italy and provides insights

into the role of communication in shaping political discourse. Specifically, it may help to understand how the different political parties, populist and non-populist, made use of populist rhetoric in their communication strategies. This research could help expand knowledge about populist communication, with particular attention to how it is supported by social media platforms. By highlighting the typical discourse disseminated by populists on these platforms, it could also help provide a framework to help identify and improve the fact-checking done by platforms to vet political content and curb the problem of spreading messages that fuel polarisation, hatred, and distrust in democracy. The following sections explain the theoretical framework with a detailed definition of populism, its relationship to social media, and the methodology provided for conducting this research.

2. Theoretical framework

The following sections will explain the connection between dissatisfaction with democracy and the rise of populism, as well as the intertwining of the populist phenomenon with social media. A comprehensive definition of populism is provided that also takes into account contextual nuances. In the context of this research, a distinction is made between intrinsic populism and populist communication style, which, in line with the aim of this study, seeks to understand more subtly how political parties, populist and non-populist, use populist rhetoric in their communication strategies.

2.1. Democracy dissatisfaction and democratic backsliding

The democracy observatory Freedom House confirms in its 2022 report that from 2018 to 2021 democracy has deteriorated in 60 countries and today only 2.3 billion people live in a democratic country witnessing how anti-democratic practices are jeopardising democratic stability worldwide: it is the lowest figure since 1991 (Freedom House, 2022; Our World in data, 2022). In the regular report of the University of Cambridge on satisfaction with democracy (2020), it is confirmed that trust in democracy is decreasing in Western societies. Dissatisfaction with democracy could result from many factors: First and foremost, the constant and repeated crises and the frequent governments' incapacity to tackle those crises could undermine citizens' trust in institutions. Thus, we can cite socioeconomic factors such as unemployment, future prospects, and economic stability (Loveless and Binelli, 2018). Also, populism is blamed for the weakening of democratic principles and the erosion of trust in institutions, leading to so-called "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016). In the European context, it is worth recalling the success of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the rise of the far-right AfD in Germany, and the success of many other populist parties and leaders in European democracies. With people across the democratic world feeling the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the economic and social crisis prompted by the war in Ukraine, far-right populists find the perfect ground to take advantage of that part of the population that feels being left behind by ineffectual left politics.

Dissatisfaction with democracy has also increased recently among Italian citizens, which on the one hand increasingly destabilised the country's delicate political equilibrium and on the other hand strengthened Eurosceptic positions and influenced the political course in the European context (Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). As populism became an obvious threat in Western democracies, it is essential for researchers to trace its mechanisms to find out how populist communication is so successful. To better understand the phenomenon, the following section provides a detailed definition of populism, also taking into account its contextual nuances.

2.2 The rise of populism

Populism is considered a serious challenge to liberal democracy as it deteriorates the quality of public debate as it seeks to delegitimise the institutions and processes that are at the base of a social and democratic state (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Establishing a cohesive definition of populism may be difficult, as populism is susceptible to contextual variation: Rooduijn (2013) argues that, depending on the political context, populism can refer to far-right positions, as in the case of populism in Western democracies, or to left-wing extremism, as in the case of the political context in Latin America. Therefore the political positions can swing between Christian conservatism and nationalism for those leaning towards the right, and hostility towards the political establishment for those leaning towards the left (Rooduijn, 2013).

Nevertheless, Rooduijn has noted that populists in different times and places have four features in common: "They criticise the elites (political, economical or media elite); they emphasise the centrality of the people; they perceive the people as a homogeneous entity, and they proclaim a serious crisis. These four characteristics constitute the core elements of populism" (2013, p.7). Rooduijn (2014) argues that "populism is sometimes associated not only with negativity toward the elite, but also with negativity toward certain social groups: immigrants, the unemployed, or people of a different religion or race" (p. 14). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) define populism as "a thin-skinned ideology, a set of ideas that construct society as divided between 'us,' the pure people, and 'them,' the corrupt and self-interested elites, and a belief system that emphasises the importance of popular sovereignty for politics" (p. 7). Furthermore, populism is often associated with emotional and simplistic discourse, as well as "opportunistic politics aimed at (quickly) pleasing the people/voters" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018, p.3). This results in a notion of populism in a pejorative sense, and all these definitions link populism as a threat to democracy "but also with undesirable economic agendas, simplistic discourse, and positions against European unity" (Schwörer, 2019, p.4).

Populism centres around communication (De Vreese et al, 2018), and the "use of a characteristic set of presentational style elements is deemed to be at the heart of the populist

issue” (p.428) which is ultimately considered a communication phenomenon. Anderson and Secor (2022) define it as communication full of resentment that assumes a dichotomous reality, urges hatred and anger, and relies on a strong emotional appeal. Schwörer (2019) describes populist public debates "as opportunistic, as a discourse that goes out to catch votes and say what people want to hear" (p.4). Other common features of populist communication include the use of simplified language, as Rooduijn argues, "Populists use a direct communication style to get their message across" (2014, p.7). Furthermore, populist communication tends to support and spread disbelief and conspiracy theories (Schwörer 2019). It should also be emphasised here that a populist organisation has a strong charismatic leader at its head and the centralization of the leader plays a strategic role. "Populists want to free themselves from intermediary institutions and organisations that stand in the way of a direct relationship between them and their followers" (Rooduijn, 2014, p.7). In the context of this research that highlights the role of social media in contemporary populist communication, the role of populist leaders is an important factor to consider: it is often the individual leader who acts through social media platforms to reach his or her followers, rather than the party as a whole.

To give a comprehensive definition of populism, it can also be argued that populism is a political ideology based on unstable ethical principles that seek consensus through simple and effective communication that challenges the political establishment, which is considered incapable of listening to the needs of the people, blaming the political opposition for political failure, and proposing itself as a solution to the social problems that affect a particular social context by reclaiming the sovereignty of "the people". At the heart of populist communication, there is the construction of identity and political power (Block & Negrine, 2017). The populist communication style is associated with violence, intolerance, attacks, and a strong emotional appeal that overshadows the role of truth and real facts.

It is believed that non-populist parties also tend to use populist rhetoric because they believe that it could help them mobilise a larger number of voters and that populism is no longer just a prerogative of populist parties (Mazzoleni & Bracciali, 2018). However, the type of populism they employ may differ in terms of intensity: Intrinsic populism refers to the use of substantial populist elements such as anti-elitism or exclusionism, while populist communication style could be considered as the use of discourse features such as emotionality, attacks, and simplification (Hassler et al., 2020). Considering all of these elements and adapting them to the scope of the research necessitates a distinction between intrinsic populism and populist communication style in order to further examine the communication strategies of these parties and understand the extent to which they employ populism.

2.3 Populism and social media

The spread of social media is another element that impacts the quality of democracies because it increases political polarisation in society and facilitates the creation of radical groups as they are provided with the possibility to connect and network with each other (Tucker et al., 2018). Social media became the primary source of news and information for the majority of the population, prompting several changes in the way people consume media and opening new possibilities and scenarios for political communication (Newman et al., 2021). Since populists have a particular interest in being close to the people, social media provides them with this opportunity (Engesser et al., 2016). Research from Prior (2021) highlights that social media plays a strategic role in effectively communicating populism, to such an extent that one can coin the term "digital populism." This is to highlight that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become the preferred stage for populist leaders to spread their ideology, thoughts, and messages. A comprehensive study by Jungherr (2014) shows how Twitter is used by politicians at different stages of their political activity: Election campaigns, commentaries on televised debates, party conventions, and election days attest to a dramatic increase in the use of social media platforms for political purposes, with populists also benefiting from the broad visibility they provide (Kruse et al., 2017). Since populist leaders prefer to avoid the institutions of social mediation and seek direct contact with people, "they use direct communication strategies, largely supported by digital communication mechanisms, to reach out to people without intermediaries such as traditional journalism" (Prior, 2021, p.5).

The logic of traditional mass media is juxtaposed with the mechanisms of social media, where the former can rely on the professional and ethical work of media institutions and journalistic gatekeepers, and the latter allows one to bypass these barriers and establish a direct and almost unfiltered connection with the audience, which is the ideal ground for populist communication (Engesser et al., 2016). In their study, Ernst et al. (2019) identified four features of Facebook and Twitter that foster the potential for populist communication: "They offer the opportunity to connect closely with the people, they provide direct access to the public without journalistic intervention, they can create a sense of community and recognition among otherwise dispersed groups, and they foster the potential for personalization" (p.11). Further evidence can be found in the study by Engesser et al, which examined populist communication on social media across cultures and ultimately found "that social media gives populist actors the freedom to articulate their ideology and spread their messages" (2016, p. 4), and identified key common features of the messages conveyed: there is an emphasis on popular sovereignty, attacks on political, economic, and media elites, and a warm appeal to defend the heartland (Engesser et al., 2016).

This idea that populists prefer social media to achieve their communicative goals, is strengthened by the concept of algorithmic populism elaborated by Maly (2018), who claims

that populist parties and leaders use social media algorithms to create content that gains visibility and attention according to the same logic as social media advertising. This means that users are strategically targeted thanks to the data that social media platforms have about them. Algorithmic populism conceptualises populism as a "digitally mediated communicative relationship between various human and algorithmic actors" (Maly, 2018, p. 8) and focuses on how populist discourses are articulated online. Due to this feature, social media is the perfect stage to create echo chambers, where users are presented with content that confirms their beliefs (Bail et al., 2018). Moreover, van Raalte et al.'s study notes that "the accumulation of followers, likes, and retweets on social media not only helps to support populists' claims that they represent the voice of the people. They also help solidify the appeal of a particular political "brand," whether in the form of a political party brand or an individual political persona" (2021, p. 7). Thus, social media become a central element in the electoral campaigns of populist actors and, although platforms such as Instagram or Tiktok are increasingly being used for political scopes (Mameli et al, 2022), platforms such as Facebook and Twitter remain the most successful, both for the interactions they generate from likes and shared and for the number of followers (Blassnig et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the theoretical framework presented in this research provides a crucial understanding of the relationship between populism, social media, and contemporary politics. By examining the concept of dissatisfaction with democracy and how it contributes to the rise of populism, we are able to contextualise the current political climate and understand the motives behind the communication strategies of political parties on social media. The framework also highlights the importance of social media as a platform for populist rhetoric, which has become a significant tool for political communication and mobilisation. The distinction between intrinsic populism and populist communication style is particularly important for this research, as it allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which parties are using populist rhetoric on social media. By examining the content of party communication during the last general campaign in Italy, this research seeks to identify the extent to which intrinsic populism and populist communication style were present, and to explore the implications of this for democratic discourse.

3. Method

To answer the research questions, quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Facebook posts was conducted. To facilitate the collection of posts on Facebook, Facepager (Juenger & Keyling, 2019) was used to download data from the social media accounts of relevant party leaders who campaigned during the 2022 general election. The collected posts were manually reviewed to assess their consistency with the content of the relevant pages on the website and to fetch post metrics such as the number of likes and shares. Each post coded using Atlas.ti to extrapolate qualitative insights and searched for the presence of populist

rhetoric. Examples are provided for each category of the codebook. Successively, data is quantitatively analysed using SPSS statistical software.

3.1 Case selection

This study focuses on the 2022 general elections in Italy, in which a right-wing populist coalition led by the far-right Brothers of Italy party won. To answer the research questions, an analysis of the election campaign on Facebook is conducted, selecting posts from the social media profiles of Italian political leaders. Among the different social media platforms available, Facebook was selected because it is the most used social media platform in Italy (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). All major Italian politicians have a Facebook profile, and after comparing it with other platforms, the Facebook profiles of the selected politicians had the largest number of followers. A total of 33 electoral lists participated in the political race (Ministero dell'Interno, 2022), and the main coalitions were the right-wing one, composed of the Brothers of Italy, Lega Nord, and Forza Italia parties, and the left-wing one, composed of the Democratic Party, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, and Europa+ parties. In addition, the Five Star Movement, Italia Viva and Azione were among the parties with the most candidates (Ministero dell'Interno 2022). The right-leaning coalition received 43% of the vote, the left-leaning coalition 25%, the Five Star Movement 16%, and Azione and Italia Viva 8% (Ministero dell'Interno, 2022).

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to distinguish political parties according to their political position, i.e. whether they are considered right-wing or left-wing or whether they can be classified as populist or extremist. Chiamante et al. (2018) consider the Five Star Movement as a good example of a populist party, as it focuses on the concept of the people and criticises the political and media establishment, framing it as a corrupt elite. Nevertheless, their communication remains moderate and cannot be described as extremist. Donà (2022), on the other hand, considers Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) and Lega Nord to be extremist on the right, and they fit the description of populism as they focus on the concept of the people, push the defence of national values and place national sovereignty above European sovereignty, are hostile to immigration, equal marriage, euthanasia and abortion, downplay the climate crisis and their communication is characterised by attacks on political opponents. Forza Italia is considered neoliberal populist, often accusing the elite parties (leftist parties) of frustrating the hard-working people with unnecessary legislation and taxes (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Further confirmation can be found in Rooduijn's (2019) PopuList, which assesses and categorises political parties across Europe and determines whether they are populist, far-right, far-left or Eurosceptic. The Democratic Party historically adheres to leftist ideals, and the new parties Azione and Italia Viva also espouse leftist principles in their statutes (Partito Democratico, 2022; Azione, 2022; Italia Viva, 2022).

3.2 Corpus

To determine the content to analyse, a selection of Facebook profiles was made according to party leaders which campaigned during the 2022 general election. Matteo Salvini's Lega party (5M followers), Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (2,7M followers), the Five Star Movement with its leader Giuseppe Conte (4,5M followers), Berlusconi's Forza Italia (1,1M followers), Enrico Letta's Democratic Party (151K followers), Carlo Calenda's Azione (319K followers), Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva (1,1M followers) and their associated Facebook accounts are selected for study. The time frame covers the four weeks leading up to the elections, i.e. 25 September 2022. In view of the mandatory electoral silence before election day, posts are collected from 24 August to 23 September 2022. The unit of analysis are posts and only posts from parties that surpassed the 5% electoral threshold in the elections will be collected. For the collected posts, the textual and visual content is coded to assess whether or not they contain populist elements, according to the coding scheme presented in the following section. To facilitate the coding process, posts with images with textual content and the first minute of videos were transcribed and considered for the analysis so that a total of 723 posts could be analysed. In addition, metrics such as "shares" and "likes" were collected to assess interaction and engagement with the posts.

3.3 Coding scheme

The posts were categorised using a coding scheme developed deductively, starting from the framework designed by Hassler et al. (2021), which aims to assess political content across European countries and includes all the elements to identify populist features in political discourse. Considering the research objective, the coding scheme is structured to distinguish between intrinsic populism and populist communication style. This distinction allows identifying a broader range of populist features in the analysed content, including in the messages of parties and politicians that are considered non-populist. According to Hassler et al. (2021), the criterion for classifying political content as intrinsically populist is to assess whether it exhibits one or some of the following elements: 1) generalised criticism of "the elite" or the political establishment as a group, 2) reference to the united people and their interests, either as a community, ethnic group or political actor in contrast to the interests of the establishment, or 3) thematisation of the dangerous others. These three main categories are expanded with corresponding sub elements. In these regards, the presence of one or more of these elements results in classifying the content as intrinsically populist.

Populist communication style is characterised by elements such as emotionality and negativity (Farkas et al., 2022) and a rhetoric of exaggeration (Block & Negrine, 2017). Furthermore, populism tends to emphasise the figure of the leader as close to the people (Farkas et al., 2022) and to simplify complex issues by "advocating the simplification of political

institutions and processes" (Moffit, 2016, p. 131). Ultimately, populist communication could involve attacks on political opponents, who are blamed as scapegoats for political failures (Lorentzen, 2020). Therefore, the presence of one or more of these elements results in identifying populist communication style in the content. These elements are not mutually exclusive, and one post can feature both intrinsic populism as populist communication style characteristics. If a post contains neither intrinsic populism nor populist communication style features, it is coded as non-populist. The full codebook can be found in Appendix A, and Table 1 below provides an overview of the main categories in the codebook.

Table 1
Codebook

Category	Subcategory	Description
Background variables	Party	What party belongs to the post.
	Topic	What topic the post is about, according to a list of recurrent political topics.
Intrinsic populism	Challenging the country's political establishment	The post contains attempts to discredit, delegitimise and attack the country's elites: elite parties, media elite, economic or judiciary elite.
	Reference to the people	The posts contain elements which are recalling the sovereignty of the people, emphasise national identity or are attempting to create the dichotomy of people against the elite.
	Reference to the dangerous others	The content appeals to outgroups such as migrants and ethnic minorities as a threat for the people. These groups are framed as threatening national values and culture, as well they could be accused of taking advantage of the welfare system.
Populist communication style	Personal attack	The posts contain attacks directed personally to a political counterpart. There is an explicit mention of the attacked person, and the content could include insults, attempts to discredit the other person's personal opinion, political position or political work.
	Emotional appeal	The content is an attempt to arouse strong emotions to bypass critical thinking and persuade people to make 'gut decisions'. Topics that could arouse anger, contempt or disdain are also exploited as decoy to divert attention from controversial opinions.
	Simplification/Exaggeration	The content tends to simplify thorny matters to make the people believe other than the truth. Also an exaggeration of

	trivial matters could be exploited to divert attention from controversial opinions.
Questionable sources	Similar to simplification, the content features ideas, standpoints and facts not fully supported by evidence or that are bypassing commonsense.
Non-populist content	The analysed content does not entail intrinsic populist or populist communication style elements.

3.4 Inter-coder assessment

To assess the reliability of the coding procedure 90 (around 15% of the total corpus) posts were sampled from the main corpus and assigned to a second independent coder. The coder, which was familiar with content analysis, was given an explanation of the codebook and the aim of the research. The inter-coder test was divided according to the codebook main categories, namely ‘Topics’, ‘Intrinsic populism’ and ‘Populist communication style’. After the first round of coding the results showed inconsistencies in the coding scheme which ultimately resulted in various disagreements and in a poor inter-coder coefficient in the ‘Intrinsic populism’ category. After reviewing the codebook, several subcategories were removed resulting in a more concise scheme. Disagreements with the second coder were discussed by establishing short guidelines to better recognise whether the analysed content features populist characteristics or not, e.g. overuse of wording such as ‘the people’, ‘the power of the people’, ‘our Nation’ (in capital letters as opposed to ‘country’ used by non populist parties), or demonising or attempting to delegitimise the political adversaries.

In the first coding round, Cohen’s kappa inter-coder reliability coefficient in the ‘intrinsic populism’ category was 0.59 for ‘Challenging the country’s political establishment’, 0.44 for ‘Reference to the people’, 0.33 for ‘Reference to the dangerous others’ and 0.78 for the category ‘Populist communication style’. After the codebook review, in the final round of coding the ‘intrinsic populism’ category resulted in a 0.81 Cohen’s kappa intercoder-reliability coefficient.

3.5 Data analysis

Posts collected via Facepager are imported into a spreadsheet that includes the textual and visual content, the name of the account from which the post was downloaded, and metadata such as the time and date of publication. The spreadsheet was cleaned up and the number of likes and shares was added manually for each post. All posts were numbered from 1 to 723, and the spreadsheet was imported into Atlas.ti to be coded according to the codebook presented earlier to detect the presence of populist rhetoric in the messages of political leaders. After

coding the posts, the coded items were converted into a series of dichotomous variables to mark the presence (1) or absence (0) of each codebook entry in the political leaders' posts and imported into the spreadsheet format. These data were merged with the original file, which also included the number of likes and shares, and finally imported into SPSS for data cleaning. Once the variable set was fully set up, statistical analysis of the data was performed. The results of the analysis are presented in the next section.

4. Results

The results of the analysis are presented below. In order to provide both qualitative and quantitative insight into the analysis of the campaign, this section provides examples of the analysed posts and their respective categorisation, as well as data on the occurrence of populism during the campaign in question. The first subsection provides an overview of the occurrence of populism in the campaign and the examples for each coded category. This is followed by the data on the occurrence of populism by party, with a comparison between populist and non-populist parties, and the results of the analysis of the engagement metrics of the posts.

4.1 How populism occurred in the campaign

Table 2 below, shows the frequencies for the categories "Intrinsic populism", "Populist communication style", "Both cases", "Non-populist content" and their corresponding subcategories. In addition, examples for the categories "intrinsic populism", "populist communication style" and "Both cases" are reported in subsections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 to provide qualitative insight into the analysed campaign. The examples are translated into English and the original posts are listed in Appendix B. For clarity, a brief contextual explanation is provided. The results in Table 2 could also provide insights to answer RQ1. In this regard, despite the majority of Facebook posts analysed were classified as non-populist, the category of "Intrinsic populism" accounted for 15% of the data and 16% contained populist communication features. The data shows that populism in this context occurs in 31% of the analysed content, with "challenging the country's political establishment" and "reference to the people" being the most frequently used populist rhetoric. In addition, "personal attacks" and "simplification/exaggeration" are the populist communication features that appear most frequently in the data. Only in 1,5% of the cases both intrinsic populism and populist communication style were identified in the same post. While there is no general rule of thumb to determine how populism affects politics or institutions, these results show that populism is increasingly entering the political mainstream. Moreover, these findings provide an opportunity to look more closely at the elements that characterise populist discourse and to understand how it manifests itself concretely in this specific political context.

Table 2
Populism frequencies

	Category	N. of cases	%
Intrinsic populism	Challenging the country's political establishment	60	8,3
	Reference to the people	42	5,8
	Reference to the dangerous others	18	2,4
	Intrinsic populism identified	113	15
Populist communication style	Personal attack	37	5,2
	Emotional appeal	15	2
	Simplification/Exaggeration	77	10,3
	Questionable sources	7	1
	Populist communication style identified	116	16
Intrinsic populism and populist communication style	Both cases, intrinsic populism and populist communication style are identified.	11	1,5
Non-populist content	Populist features not identified	505	69
	Total posts	723	100

4.1.1 Intrinsic populism

Here are reported examples for the intrinsic populism category. The subcategory "Challenging the country's political establishment" analyse whether a post is an attempt to discredit, delegitimise, blame or challenge the political establishment/elites of the country. Could include accusing the elite of being corrupt, betraying the people or acting against the people's interest. Following are reported examples for the corresponding sub-categories found in the analysed content.

- **Challenging political actors/system:** This code refers to the typical populist rhetoric that contrasts "us" and "them," where "us" is the common people and "them" is the entity designated as the country's elite. This can be the political mainstream, the media, or economic power (Akkerman et al., 2014). Generally, these messages assume a dichotomous reality and are delivered with the goal of discrediting the elite, attempting to portray the sender of the message as the solution to the problem and assuming that they are always on the side of the people. In this case, the elites are portrayed as corrupted, unable to listen to the needs of the people and using resources only in their own interest (Caiani & Graziano, 2016).

“Mafia bosses and convicted criminals released prematurely on parole or because of penitentiary benefits? It seems this troubles only the Five Stars Movement, for the other parties doesn’t seem to be a priority.” (Giuseppe Conte, 09.09.2022)

The leader of the Five Star Movement, Giuseppe Conte, criticises the political forces for not opposing the decision of the judiciary to release some convicted criminals on parole earlier to solve the problem of overcrowded prisons. He claims that the Movement, left alone by the other political forces, is the only one taking action to address the problem, while all other parties ignore it.

“Just out of interest... The left led the government for eight years, and today they are promising that if they win the elections they will make Italy a better country, by increasing the wages and adding one monthly salary for employees. But if they are as good as they claim to be, why in the eight years at the government have they done the opposite?” (Giorgia Meloni, 26.08.2022)

For Giorgia Meloni the left represents the political elite which often considers to act against the interest of the people. She attempts to discredit their work and in this case she claimed that in the past eight years where the left led the government, they failed to meet what they promised. These examples are representative of the code as in both cases, Conte and Meloni are trying to downgrade their adversaries, reducing the debate to a mere comparison between who is doing good for the people and those that are failing to meet their needs.

- **Challenging the elite parties:** This code refers to the criticism of the political actors, who are considered political elite, and their members. In this context, the political elite refer to the left and progressive parties that have governed many central and regional institutions for several years. In Italy, the left is often portrayed by conservative and extremist parties as an elite of intellectuals who have nothing to do with the real needs of the people, so attacks on the left and progressive parties are considered in this code.

“I will say it out loud another time: there is no chance that Fratelli d’Italia will form a government coalition with the Democratic Party. We are fighting against their hegemonic power and the pointless journalistic reconstructions are definitely not enough to make our mind change.” (Giorgia Meloni, 17.09.2022)

Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni wants to make it clear that her party will not betray its principles and will never cooperate with its counterpart, the Democratic Party (left-centrist), which she claims to be hegemonic. She subtly refers to the fact that in the past the Democratic Party has formed a governing coalition even with opposing parties that have violated and betrayed its principles and values.

“I leave to Letta and the Democratic Party attacks and insults, while I always and only do the interests of the Italians: whoever chooses Lega chooses (also) the stop to the television licence fee. Leftist rallies on public TV shouldn't be paid by taxpayers. SIGN TOO to support the abolition of the fee, let's make our voice heard.” (Matteo Salvini, 21.09.2022)

TV license fee has long been a controversial topic and several parties discussed abolishing it, without succeeding because the state is considered an important voice of income. Matteo Salvini claims that he and his party will eventually abolish it so that the taxpayer no longer has to subsidise the left's political rallies on TV. He frames the Democratic Party and the left as propagandists that exploit public money for their own interests.

- **Challenging the supranational elite:** The content is an attempt to depict the supranational institutions like the EU as a threat to national values and identity and that because of their supremacy, they are posing a serious threat to the decisions of the local authorities. These are core elements of populism which seek to push on national values and national supremacy, and the posts featuring these characteristics are coded under this category. Some examples are provided below.

“Are the sanctions imposed from Europe working? No. Today those that have been sanctioned keep earning whereas those that imposed the sanctions are crippling. Apparently, someone in Europe is making some evaluation mistakes: the strategy must be rethought to save thousands of jobs in Italy.” (Matteo Salvini, 13.09.2022)

“Every day businesses are struggling because of energy prices and workers are laid-off. Europe is not taking any action, it is time that the government take ownership of the situation. But it must do it now, otherwise it will be a disaster.” (Matteo Salvini, 10.09.2022)

Lega's leader Matteo Salvini openly criticises the European Union for not doing enough for the energy crisis in Europe, claiming that the sanctions against Russia are not bringing any benefit to people, instead is causing several laid-off due to the unsustainable energy prices in Italy and across Europe. He wants the government to take its own decisions, overruling European policy supremacy.

The category "reference to the people" aims to determine whether the content directly addresses "the people" as a community or as a political sovereign. As one of the core elements of populism, the concept of the people is often used to create a sense of community, a shared identity, and an urgent need to defend the values shared by that identity. This usually refers to

national values and culture, which populists portray as threatened. Moreover, populists want people to believe that power is in the hands of the people, who, with their vote, are the only ones capable of bringing about change. De facto, this is another attempt to draw a clear distinction between those who want to defend these values and those who threaten them based on other ideologies, disregarding the complexity of the democratic process. The messages containing one or several of these elements are categorised under this category and below are reported some examples, according to the corresponding sub category.

- **National identity:** This code refers to the use of terms such as "the Italian people" or "power of the people", "will of the people", our nation, Italy. It is important that such catchy words are used to create a sense of community and to reinforce pride for the nation, its culture and its people. In this case, the nation and the people are perceived as a single entity that opposes everything foreign. If these elements are present in the post, it is categorised under this code and some examples are reported here below.

“For those who are dreaming of a fierce Italy, for those who want to be proud again of their Nation, of their people and their flag, on the 25th of September have to choose Brothers of Italy. We are ready: now it is your time.” (Giorgia Meloni, 23.09.2022)

“We are ready to give Italy an authoritative government capable of giving concrete and serious answers. Our nation must go back to its greatness.” (Giorgia Meloni, 11.09.2022)

- **Reclaiming people’s sovereignty:** This code refers to content that is an attempt to emphasise that the power is in the hands of the people, as opposed to the elite. Typically, populists want the voters to believe that all the power is in their hands, and that the power must be taken away from those who are not the people or do not belong to the nation. This refers mainly to the country’s elites, political, economical or intellectual but also to those not considered as official citizens, e.g. migrants or cultural minorities. Below are some examples.

“They fear our victory and they are trying everything to stop us. But we are tireless and have a strong back because of your support. On the 25th of September let's show together that nothing is stronger than the power of the Italian people.” (Giorgia Meloni, 04.09.2022)

“Sunday are the Italians who will vote, not others, very proudly. Long live democracy, freedom, and the League.” (Matteo Salvini, 21.09.2022)

The category “Reference to the dangerous others” refers to a narrative that is used to ostracise those groups presented as antagonists of the people, separated or excluded from the 'people', and considered as a threat to national values and unity. The contraposition is between ‘us’, ‘the people’ and these out-groups that are depicted by political actors as a threat to the people. It is different from previous codes as this one is not referring to the elite but to other groups which are used as scapegoats to blame for the problems of the country. The code’s subcategories are reported below.

- **Migrants/religious outsiders:** This code refers to content that depict migrants, ethnic minorities, non-italian citizens as they could undermine national identity and values.

“Letta (DP) wants to extend Universal Income also to the immigrants which just arrived. On September the 25th we will finally change! #SundayIvoteLeague.”
(Matteo Salvini, 19.09.2022)

Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord), who openly opposes immigration, also opposes basic income, a welfare measure designed to support economically vulnerable individuals and households. One of the hard conditions for receiving the subsidy is possession of Italian citizenship, which is not the case for recently arrived immigrants. Salvini criticises Letta for saying he would extend the subsidy to non-citizens. In doing so, he opens a debate that contradicts their positions on integration and openly portrays immigrants as a problem or threat to national identity.

- **Welfare scroungers:** This code refers to content that points to that part of the population who take advantage of the welfare system without contributing to it, at the cost of honest, hard-working citizens.

“Lega has supported it for some time: cutting VAT on basic necessities such as pasta, bread, milk, fruit, vegetables and rice is a priority for Italian families. How to do it? Taking the money from the billions used for Universal income! There are those who have been on the subsidy for years and have never worked, what incentive would that be?” (Matteo Salvini, 09.09.2022)

Salvini attacks again the Universal income, and this time targeting also the receivers of the government subsidy. He wants that instead of using the billion euros ‘for someone that has never worked’, that resource will be used to cut VAT and benefit ‘the good part of the people’, in his language the hard working, well behaved citizens.

4.1.2 Populist communication style

The “Populist communication style” category identifies whether the content features characteristics relatable to populist communication style such as personal attacks, appeal to

emotions, simplification or exaggeration and using questionable sources. Although it differs from the intrinsic populism category because it does not contain elements such as anti-elitism and exclusionism, it keeps the characteristics of aggressive, emotion-arousing and misleading typical of populist discourse.

- **Personal attack:** the content includes personal attacks against political counterparts and criticism directed at another politician's actions. Although this is a common political practice, in the case of populism the attack is a direct attempt to discredit the person's personal character to trigger a negative judgement or to exclude the interlocutor from a dialogue. It could include insults and pejorative comments directed to a specific politician as well as discrediting their political opinion or political work.

“Letta, you can't do anything right... Enrico be quiet, on Sunday the Italians will send you back to France with their vote! #onsundayIvoteLeague.” (Matteo Salvini, 21.09.2022)

The attack is addressed to the leader of the Democratic Party (left-centrist) Enrico Letta, and Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord) claims that the dem leader is good-for-nothing and thanks to the votes of the Italians he will be sent back to France were he led a diplomatic panel.

“The only thing I feel like saying to Silvio Berlusconi after yesterday's statements about Putin is that the time has come for him to do something else and we will do everything to make it happen. On Matteo Salvini, I ask the Italians, but do you really continue to trust someone who says something different every time and when he was a minister he spent his time kissing the cows instead of working? Giorgia, are you ready? For example, I feel ready to govern but I think that someone is better than me and that someone is Mario Draghi.” (Carlo Calenda, 23.09.2022)

Carlo Calenda (Azione) tries to expose all his right-wing opponents for their inappropriate behaviour. He accuses Berlusconi (Forza Italia) of being friend with Putin and encourages him to do something other than politics; with Salvini (Lega), he questions his legitimacy as a politician and criticises his inappropriate behaviour; and with Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia), he questions her readiness to become the next prime minister. He then claims that he would be ready for office, but there is someone best suited above all others, namely Mario Draghi.

- **Emotional appeal:** in the analysed content, emotions are exploited to bypass critical thinking through the use of sensationalist language, the intention is also to manipulate the truth. Sensible topics are often exploited to prompt controversial opinions and to drive people to take gut decisions instead of rational ones.

“On September 25, we teach a democratic lesson to this arrogant left with vulgar and violent language, which makes havoc on the institutions by using public roles to insult and intimidate political opponents, complete with the applause of Enrico Letta. #VoteFDI” (Giorgia Meloni, 13.09.2022)

“The climate of hatred and intolerance of a certain left against Fratelli d’Italia knows no bounds. Well done to our militants who do not give in to provocations and threats. Those who are strong in their own ideas have nothing to fear. Let’s go ahead with our heads held high.” (Giorgia Meloni, 18.09.2022)

Meloni (Fratelli d’Italia) accuses the leftists of being violent and attacking her party physically and verbally, which is not the case. She wants to make them out to be the violent ones and blame them for certain violent fringes that have nothing to do with the Democratic Party and other leftist parties. In this way, it tries to incite hatred and rejection towards its political opponents and mislead its voters when they know the truth.

- **Simplification/exaggeration:** This code refers to the use of a direct communication style to get the message across mostly to bypass critical thinking. In this way the complexity of the political debate is reduced to a mere discussion . Some examples of content coded under this category are reported below.

“Politics became just as a consumption style: one day trends the yellow of the “vaffa”, the other day trends the green of “the Italians first” and then the light blue. But all these offers have something in common: as they have to start to govern they fall down because their approach goals go against every governing principle and they fail to acknowledge the contradictions and complexities of what governing means.” (Carlo Calenda, 30.08.2022)

Carlo Calenda, leader of Azione, makes an analogy between consumerism, such as fashion, and politics: he claims that politicians are unable to realise what it really means to govern because they act only as a trend, or to please people temporarily. Yellow refers to the Five Star Movement and its infamous slogan "Abolish Caste," green to the Lega Nord and its earlier slogan "We put Italians first," and light blue to the current government led by Brothers of Italy. Calenda concluded that the new government will also eventually fail for lack of consistency, just like the others.

“Welcome to the left in the real world: when Lega spoke of emergency bills and obtained billions to buffer the increases, the DP and his companions dealt with Ddl Zan,

taxes on the house and free drugs. Now they prove us right months late...” (Matteo Salvini, 25.08.2022)

Salvini reduced two thorny policy issues to a mere comparison: a bill to align civil rights for same-sex marriage with European standards and one to liberalise and regulate recreational use of soft drugs. He accused the Democratic Party of caring only about these "trivial matters" while he and his party cared about the country and the people who were struggling because of energy prices. In this way, he fails to recognise the complexity of the democratic process and the fact that political forces should work together on various achievements rather than hindering progress.

- **Questionable sources:** This code includes content that uses questionable sources or to support opinions or attempts to discredit authoritative experts as to divert the role of truth or bypass real facts.

“Nuclear power is ‘Salvi’s dream’? But is Letta aware that that is the only way to have cheaper energy bills? Or is he living on Mars and he doesn’t know what the rise of energy prices is? Those who will choose the League say yes to the next-generation nuclear technology, clean and safe, for a country that looks towards the future. #on25SeptemberIvotetheLeague” (Matteo Salvini, 7.09.2022)

Salvini claims that nuclear power generation is the only solution to quickly lower energy prices. This springs only from his own beliefs and is not supported by scientific evidence. Moreover, Italy decided in 1986 to stop operating nuclear power plants for safety reasons and because of the high seismicity of its territory. He is, in fact, promising his voters something that cannot be realised.

“Landings with the League at the Ministry of the Interior in August 2019: 1,268. Landings with the Democratic Party in the same period of this year: 14,103. 1012% more, and the graph speaks for itself. From 25 September, if you give us a hand with the vote for the Lega, we will go back to defending the borders and the security of this country #25settembrevotolega. PS. Put this post on the wall of some left-wing friend, maybe gnawing.” (Matteo Salvini, 28.08.2022)

When Salvini was Interior Minister in 2019, he got Parliament to pass a bill that made it nearly impossible for migrants to arrive by sea with embarkation. The bill was highly controversial, and two months later Salvini was charged with several crimes and the bill was revoked. He then compares the number of migrants arriving when he was minister with that of the new minister from the Democratic Party, highlighting how his policies have prevented irregular immigration.

In this way, he sidesteps the complexity of the issue and makes his followers believe he did the right thing by preventing migrants from arriving by sea.

4.2 Comparing populism among parties

This section is dedicated to presenting and comparing how populism manifests itself among parties in the analysed election campaign. The goal is to expand on the answer to RQ1 and to gain a more detailed overview of the occurrence of populism during the election campaign, as well as to gain insight into the parties' social media communications. Table 3 shows the frequencies for intrinsic populism and populist communication style in each party. The table shows the percentage of intrinsic populism, populist communication style and non-populist content on the total posts of each party. Among the populist parties, Fratelli d'Italia recorded the highest number of intrinsically populist content, followed by Forza Italia, Lega, and Movimento 5 Stelle. Conversely, Italia Viva, Azione, and the Democratic Party avoided using intrinsic populism in their social media communications on Facebook. Among the non-populist parties, Italia Viva and Azione used the most populist communication features in their content, while Lega was the populist party that used the most populist communication style in their Facebook posts. Only the Democratic Party (PD) scored zero cases in both intrinsic and communication-wise populism. This shows that populist parties tend to use more of substantial populism reminiscent of typical populist milestones, namely anti-elitism, people-centrism, and exclusionism, while non-populist political actors can use populist communication features to improve their communication tactics.

Table 3

Number and percentage of intrinsic populist, populist communication style and non-populist posts according to parties.

	Party								Total
	Populist				Non-populist				
	FDI	Lega	FI	M5S	IV	Azione	PD		
Intrinsic populism	N. 47 (36%)	35 (26%)	20 (28%)	10 (24%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	112	
Populist communication style	N. 18 (14%)	33 (24%)	4 (5%)	5 (11%)	9 (26%)	43 (19%)	0 (0%)	116	
Non-populist	N. 64 (50%)	69 (50%)	50 (67%)	28 (65%)	26 (74%)	186 (81%)	86 (100%)	505	
Total	N. 129 (100%)	137 (100%)	74 (100%)	43 (100%)	35 (100%)	229 (100%)	86 (100%)	733	

* FDI: Fratelli D'Italia

* Lega Nord

* Forza Italia

* Movimento 5 Stelle

* Italia Viva
 * Azione
 * Partito Democratico

Table 4 provides information on the occurrence of intrinsic populist and populist communication style elements, depending on whether a party is classified as populist or not. The chi-square test was conducted to compare the different levels of populism between populist and non-populist parties. In the group comparing the presence of intrinsic populism in the posts of populist and non-populist parties the test was significant ($p < .001$), indicating that there is significant differences between the two groups and that non-populist parties are unlikely to use intrinsic populism in their social media communications. Conversely, in the group that compares the presence of communication-wise populism in the posts of populist and non-populist parties was not significant ($p = .382$), confirming a correlation between the two groups and that non-populist parties also use populist content in their social media communications. Although the majority of populist posts found in the data were posted by populist parties, these results are showing that, on the one hand, intrinsic populism is a feature of populist and extremist parties, and that, on the other hand, non-populist political actors may also tend to display populist features in their communications without being populist at their core.

Table 4

Number and percentage of intrinsic populist and populist communication style posts according to populist and non-populist parties

		Populist party	Non-populist party	Total
Intrinsic populism	N.	113 (15%)	0 (0%)	113 (15%)
Populist communication style	N.	64 (8%)	52 (7%)	116 (16%)
Non-populist content	N.	193 (26%)	312 (43%)	505 (69%)
Total posts	N.	723	723	723

4.3 The influence of populism on engagement

To test what impact populist content and populism could have on engagement, a multiple linear regression was conducted. The regression model included number of followers, intrinsic populism, populist communication style, and party type as predictor variables, and two separate tests were conducted for the dependent variables 'likes' and 'shares'. Table 5 below shows the results for the effects of the predictor variables on likes. It can be observed that the number of likes of a post is significantly affected by the number of followers of its source when

it is tested without including the other predictors. In the full model, the number of followers, intrinsic populism, and populist communication style do not significantly affect the number of likes a post receives. Conversely, the type of party, i.e., whether the party is populist or not, was found to have a significant impact on likability scores. Overall, the regression model proved statistically significant both when the number of followers was tested alone and when it was tested together with the other predictor variables, with a modest variance in likes in both cases.

For what concerns the effect of number of followers, as shown in table 6, intrinsic populism, populist communication style, and party type on shares, it is observable that followers have a significant impact when tested without including the other predictors. Similar to the regression model for likes, followers, intrinsic populism, and populist communication style do not show any significant effect on the number of times a post is shared. In addition, party type was confirmed to also have a significant impact on shares, implying that party type has a large impact on engagement metrics, regardless of the presence of populist content. The regression model was statistically significant when followers were tested alone and also when it was included with the other predictor, with little variance in the proportions in either case. Given these results, the presence of intrinsic populism or a populist communication style was shown to have no effect on engagement. In contrast, a more consistent effect is due to the type of party.

Table 5

Regression for impact of followers, intrinsic populism, populist communication style and party type on likes

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	t	β	t
Followers	.28	7.9**	-.01	-.25
Intrinsic populism			-.03	-.89
Populist communication style			.05	.15
Party type			-.38	-6.1**
R ²	.08		.12	
F	63.7**		26.2**	
df	1, 721		4, 718	

Note. *p<.05; **p<.01.

Table 6

Regression for impact of followers, intrinsic populism, populist communication style and party type on shares

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	t	β	t

Followers	.27	7.6**	.08	1.2
Intrinsic populism			-.02	-.66
Populist communication style			-.03	-.07
Party type			-.24	-3.7**
R₂	.07			.08
F	58.7**			18.6**
df	1, 721			4, 718
Note. *p<.05; **p<.01.				

Additional insights are provided by Table 7 below which shows the average number of 'likes' and 'shares' per party according to intrinsic populism, populist communication style or non populist content. The Five Star Movement and Fratelli d'Italia publications are both the most liked and the most shared in the intrinsic populism category, averaging almost four times the other populist parties. They are followed by Lega and Forza Italia. Fratelli d'Italia averaged the highest number of likes and shares in the populist communication style category, being the populist party with the highest interactions average. It is followed by Five Stars Movement, Lega and Forza Italia. Non-populist parties averaged lower numbers of likes and shares in the populist communication style category, when compared to their counterparts.

Non-populist posts also resulted in high likes for Fratelli d'Italia, Five Star Movement, Lega and Italia Viva. One example is the post by Giorgia Meloni with the highest number of likes (206819 likes), in which she thanks her daughter for being the reason for her strength and tenacity. This trend confirms the relevance of the message sender and its impact on engagement on social media. In contrast, the Democratic Party, which did not publish populist content, recorded the lowest average values for both likes and shares. This confirms how social media strategies of populist parties are more successful if compared to their moderate counterparts, and that the characteristics of the message sender is making the difference in terms of posts engagement.

Table 7

Average number of shares and likes by parties and presence of intrinsic populism and populist communication style

		Party							Total
		Populist			Non-populist				
		FDI	Lega	FI	M5S	IV	Azione	PD	
Likes	Intrinsic populism	19054	5638	1407	24581	0	0	0	50680
	Populist communication	29401	5230	1376	19894	5867	2566	0	58467

style									
	Non-populist	23277	5761	2191	23147	5635	2216	1113	63340
Shares	Intrinsic populism	1793	599	103	4353	0	0	0	6848
	Populist communication style	3262	577	148	2943	482	147	0	7923
	Non-populist	2299	388	190	4437	443	173	71	8001

5. Discussion

5.1 Main findings

The research results confirm that populist content was present in almost all Facebook communication strategies of Italian political parties during the 2022 general elections, with the exception of the Democratic Party. A total of 31% of the posts published during the election campaign contained at least one populist element, 15% of which were considered to be populist at their core, while the other 16% exhibited populist communication characteristics. As confirmation that populist rhetoric has entered the political mainstream, right-wing, conservative, and extremist parties are more likely to adopt intrinsic populist tactics and populist communication in general, but it has been found that other political actors may also use populist elements in their communication strategies. This could be interpreted also as an attempt to stay ahead of the success of their far-right populist opponents. Populist parties mostly resorted to anti-elitism and people-centrism, whereas other parties exploited rhetoric of simplification and exaggeration and personal attacks. These findings are in line with previous research by Likeller and Balaban (2021) on political communication on social media in other EU countries, where populist elements were similarly present in 27% of the analysed content and by Koc-Michalska et al. (2018), where 31% of the analysed content also included populist elements.

Although Fenoll and Hassler (2019) claimed in their research that populist content gains major attention and interactions (likes, reposts) in this study populist content was not determinant for engagement on social media, instead it highlighted the importance of the message sender. The number of followers or whether being a populist party or not showed to have a bigger impact on popularity and shareability. It is true that populist political actors have bigger followership on social media and receive more ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ when compared with their political adversaries and regardless whether the content is populist or not. The study results showed that social media metrics such as ‘likes’ ‘shares’ and ‘followers’ are higher for the content and profiles of populist parties. The success of populist parties is especially due to

their popularity and their agility on social media and this is observable also at the European level (Hassler et al, 2020).

It is noteworthy how the party who won the elections, Fratelli d'Italia, and her leader Giorgia Meloni stand out for its popularity and gained several thousands of followers during the campaign because of her capacity of letting her followers feel close to her. She used the most powerful tool she had available to convince the unsure electors that she was the right choice for the future well-being of the country: her social media profiles and audience. Via her digital channel she kept strong relationships with her most loyal followers, but also tried to endear uncertain voters by shifting her tone of voice accordingly. In this way, she has been able to build a strong community on social media and increase approval ratings for her party and parties alike. A similar strategy was pursued by the Five Star Movement, which also received a high number of 'likes' and 'shares' during the election campaign. The leader of the movement, Giuseppe Conte, also stands out on social media platforms for his popularity and the number of his followers. Nonetheless, non-populist parties and leaders are also recognising the potential of social media and, as this study shows, are increasingly inclined to adopt populist communication tactics to compete in the political race.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contribution of the study is twofold. First, it provides empirical evidence that populist communication style is not exclusive to populist parties, but it is also adopted by non-populist parties in Italy. This finding challenges the conventional understanding that populism is a phenomenon limited to certain political parties or movements. Second, the study suggests that the use of populist communication style by non-populist parties can be explained by the electoral incentives. In other words, non-populist parties adopt populist communication style because they believe that this practice can help them to attract more votes from the electorate. The results showed that is not the case and that this practice becomes useful to those parties which are populist at their core.

Focusing on social media and distinguishing the level of populism could be a good tool to explore how populism influences political discourse in different European contexts because it expands the understanding of populism beyond its mere core elements. As the results show, populism can also influence other political actors, and non-populist parties may also be prone to populist behaviours. This finding could be a starting point for further research on the phenomenon. In addition, the study showed that the presence of populist content does not necessarily lead to high engagement rates on social media. Instead, it shows that regardless of whether the content contains populist elements or not, posts by populist parties receive significantly higher engagement rates, both in terms of 'likes' and 'shares.' This suggests that the source of the message conditions its popularity independent of the characteristics of the

message itself, urging further investigation into the characteristics that allow populist parties to become so popular on social media platforms.

Overall, the study contributes to a better understanding of the nature of populism in Italian politics and the role of political communication in shaping electoral outcomes. Furthermore, it suggests that the extended adoption of populist rhetoric by parties may have implications for the quality of democracy, lowering the quality of the public debate promoting simplistic and polarising messages. This finding highlights the importance of studying the relationship between political communication and electoral competition, and the extent to which political actors strategically adapt their communication style to maximise their electoral appeal.

5.3 Practical implications

The study highlights the growing prevalence of populism in Italian politics, which suggests a need for further research into the reasons for this trend and the potential consequences for democracy and political stability. The coding scheme developed in this study could be useful for the study of populism in different political contexts in Europe because of its versatility. The distinction between intrinsic populism and populist communication style could help understand how populism manifests itself in social media in more precise and subtle ways. The framework developed could be used by social media companies to filter and better assess political content on their platforms to improve its quality and the quality of political debate online. A better understanding of the issue could encourage policymakers and social media platforms to improve their policies related to political communication by improving content filters and policies without undermining free speech rights. Platforms may need to consider ways to balance free speech with responsible content moderation, particularly in the context of political speech. This would ultimately benefit free speech, citizens, and democracy by improving the quality of political debate and enabling healthy political participation through these platforms.

Finally, the finding that populist content is not necessarily more engaging on social media than other types of content suggests that parties must be careful not to rely too heavily on populist messaging as a means of generating engagement and support. While populism may be effective in capturing attention and creating a sense of excitement around a particular candidate or issue, it may not necessarily lead to sustained support or long-term success for a party. Instead, political actors could work together to avoid the normalisation of populist discourse, which polarises political opinion and harms democratic principles. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of careful analysis and strategic thinking when it comes to political communication and messaging, and the need for parties to consider the potential risks and benefits of different strategies before adopting them.

5.4 Limitations

The study focuses on a particular political period when citizens are exacerbated in the midst of an economic and energy crisis and have some hope in someone capable of making drastic changes. These conditions could make the electorate susceptible to emotional manipulation and empty promises. Moreover, these elections were characterised by a short campaign period and a government that was only responsible for ordinary administration. Normally, elections would have been held in winter and under different circumstances, with a longer campaign period and broader electoral programmes. The previous government should have remained in office for another six months, but the opposition parties deliberately caused a government crisis that led to an early election and the fall of the Mario Draghi government. Mario Draghi's government enjoyed broad support among citizens, and the fall of the government caused by Brothers of Italy became unpopular.

This led to a particularly polarising situation in which opinions were divided and voters were less engaged; in fact, this election recorded the lowest turnout in the history of the Italian Republic (Ministero dell'Interno, 2022). Moreover, the short campaign planning time may have caused politicians to take rushed decisions on their campaign strategy, failing to acknowledge the complexity of this democratic procedure and leaving behind those with less resources and voters. This may have led to inequalities between candidates, favouring those who were already in the lead and influencing the course of the campaign also on social media. Moreover, it is important to mention that not all parties invested the same resources in planning their online communication and that not all parties have the same online presence. Parties such as the Fratelli d'Italia or the Five Star Movement have a different approach to social media than parties such as the Democratic Party or Italia Viva, with the former basing their activities on social media while the latter have a less aggressive social media strategy.

Another limitation could come from the fact that the interactions taken into account for the analysis are not providing any qualitative insight into the actual appreciation of posts or the sentiment aroused from them. This means that metrics such 'likes' and 'shares' could provide information on the overall reach of these contents but fail to provide a precise level of agreement with what it has been said. Nonetheless, the study's findings are noteworthy as they provide an overview of how populism is increasingly entering the political mainstream and call for more attention to prevent the phenomenon from becoming the norm.

5.5 Suggestions for future research

The findings of this study highlight how populism and social media are intertwined and how populism is affecting the political mainstream calling for further investigation of this relationship. Nonetheless, not all formulated assumptions were met, and the focus should move toward a framework that pays more attention to both sender and receiver characteristics. An interesting perspective could also be to look at the side of the users, as the different attitudes of users can lead to different outcomes in terms of interactions and success of populist parties. More attention should also be paid to what characteristics make up the typical user who contributes to and interacts with populist content, and to understand what mainly drives social media users to interact with populist actors, not only in terms of basic metrics such as 'likes' and "shares," but also in terms of reactions and comments in a more qualitative way. The mere engagement metric could not be insightful enough to catch the sentiment of the users and to draw enough conclusion on the level of like or dislike of a content. A more qualitative approach on this metric is needed. Similar studies could be conducted in different political contexts and on different social media platforms, taking into account the differences between the social media platforms used and the nuances indicated by different audiences and political actors.

5.6 Conclusion

Populism appears looming in Western democracies, in part due to the ubiquitous use of social media as political debate gradually shifts to the Internet. This study focused on the question of whether populist rhetoric and communication style is a prerogative of populist parties or whether this trend is spreading to non-populist parties as well. In an attempt to regain ground, the results of this study showed that populism can be an attractive political tactic even for those political actors that do not have populism at their core. Nonetheless, right-leaning, conservative, and extremist parties are among those that exploit populist rhetoric the most, outweighing the efforts of their opponents and gaining more viewers and supporters on social media platforms. These results show that populist parties generate more engagement than their opponents, regardless of whether their messages are populist or not, which calls for a closer examination of this phenomenon. Overall, the research would serve as a wake-up call for democrats and policymakers to not only recognise the threat posed to society by polarisation, far-right, and extremist political ideologies, but also to help make social media a safe space for constructive political debate, which is at the core of a healthy democratic system.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Full coding scheme

Background variable

1.1. Party

- 1.1.1. Fratelli d'Italia
- 1.1.2. Lega Nord
- 1.1.3. Forza Italia
- 1.1.4. Italia Viva
- 1.1.5. Movimento 5 Stelle
- 1.1.6. Azione
- 1.1.7. Partito Democratico

1.2. Topic

- 1.2.1. Energy crisis and transition
- 1.2.2. Environmental crisis
- 1.2.3. Immigration
- 1.2.4. Economy and Taxes
- 1.2.5. EU/Foreign policy
- 1.2.6. Education
- 1.2.7. Labour/Minimum salary
- 1.2.8. Welfare and Health services
- 1.2.9. Ukraine
- 1.2.10. National issues
- 1.2.11. Crimes
- 1.2.12. Electoral agenda/Political position
- 1.2.13. Civil rights
- 1.2.14. Addressing the adversaries

1.

2. Intrinsic populism

2.1. Challenging the country's political establishment

- 2.1.1. Political actors/system
- 2.1.2. Elite parties
- 2.1.3. Supranational elite

2.2. Reference to the people

- 2.2.1. National identity
- 2.2.2. Reclaiming people's sovereignty
- 2.2.3. Victimising the folk/hard working people

2.3. Reference to the dangerous others

- 2.3.1. Welfare scroungers
- 2.3.2. Cultural outsiders/criminals
- 2.3.3. Migrants/Religious outsiders

2.4. Content classified as intrinsically populist

3. Populist communication style

- 3.1. Personal attack
- 3.2. Emotional appeal
- 3.3. Simplification/exaggeration
- 3.4. Questionable sources

- 3.5. Populist communication style is detected
4. **Non-populist content**

Appendix B

Reported examples

-
- 2.1.1 “Boss mafiosi e condannati per reati gravi che escono tranquillamente dal carcere per i benefici penitenziari? È un problema solo per il Movimento 5 Stelle, per altri partiti non è una urgenza.” (Giuseppe Conte, 09.09.2022)
- “Così, per sapere... il pd è stato al governo per otto anni, oggi promettono che se vinceranno le elezioni renderanno l'Italia migliore, con salari più alti e una mensilità in più. Ma se sono così bravi perché in otto anni al governo hanno fatto l'opposto?” (Giorgia Meloni, 26.08.2022)
-
- 2.1.2 “Sarò chiara ancora una volta: non c'è alcuna possibilità che Fratelli d'Italia vada al Governo col Partito Democratico. Noi combattiamo la loro egemonia di potere e non saranno di certo le assurde ricostruzioni giornalistiche a farci cambiare idea.” (Giorgia Meloni, 17.09.2022)
- “A Letta e al Pd lascio attacchi e insulti, io faccio sempre e solo gli interessi degli italiani: chi sceglie la Lega sceglie (anche) lo stop al canone Rai. I comizi di sinistra sulla tv pubblica non devono essere pagati dai contribuenti. FIRMA ANCHE TU per sostenere l'abolizione del canone, facciamo sentire la nostra voce.” (Matteo Salvini, 26.08.2022)
-
- 2.1.3 “Le sanzioni imposte dall'Europa stanno funzionando? No. A oggi chi è stato sanzionato sta guadagnando, mentre chi ha messo le sanzioni è in ginocchio. Evidentemente qualcuno in Europa sta sbagliando i conti: ripensare la strategia è fondamentale per salvare migliaia di posti di lavoro e imprese in Italia.” (Matteo Salvini, 13.09.2022)
- “Ogni giorno aziende in difficoltà per i costi delle bollette e lavoratori a casa. Se non interviene l'Europa, che intervenga il governo. Ma subito, come stanno facendo tutti gli altri! O sarà un disastro” (Matteo Salvini, 10.09.2022)
-
- 2.2.1 “Chi sogna un'Italia orgogliosa, chi vuole tornare ad essere fiero della sua Nazione, della sua gente e della sua bandiera, il 25 settembre sceglie Fratelli d'Italia. Noi siamo pronti: ora è il vostro momento. #VotaFdi” (Giorgia Meloni, 23.09.2022)
- “Siamo pronti a dare all'Italia un Governo autorevole in grado di dare risposte concrete e serie. La nostra Nazione deve tornare ad essere grande.” (Giorgia Meloni, 11.09.2022)
-
- 2.2.2 “Hanno paura della nostra vittoria e le stanno tentando tutte per fermarci. Ma le nostre spalle sono larghe, perché ci siete voi a sostenerci. Il 25 settembre dimostriamo insieme che non esiste potere più forte di quello del popolo italiano.” (Giorgia Meloni, 04.09.2022)
- “Domenica votano gli Italiani, non altri, a testa alta. Viva la democrazia, la libertà, la Lega.” (Matteo Salvini, 21.09.2022)
-
- 2.3.1 “E Letta (PD) vuole estendere il Reddito di Cittadinanza anche agli immigrati arrivati da poco... Il 25 settembre, con la Lega, finalmente si cambia! #domenicavotoLega” (Matteo Salvini, 19.09.2022)
- “La Lega lo sostiene da tempo: tagliare l'Iva sui beni di prima necessità come pasta, pane, latte, frutta, verdura e riso è una priorità per le famiglie italiane. Come farlo? Prendendo i soldi dai miliardi usati
-

per il reddito di cittadinanza! C'è chi prende il sussidio da anni e non ha mai lavorato, che incentivo al lavoro sarebbe?" (Matteo Salvini, 09.09.2022)

3.1 "Letta non ne azzecca una... Enrico stai sereno, domenica gli Italiani col loro voto ti permetteranno di tornare in Francia! #domenicavotoLega" (Matteo Salvini, 21.09.2022)

"A Silvio Berlusconi l'unica cosa che dopo le affermazioni su Putin di ieri mi sento di dire è che è arrivato il momento che faccia altro e noi faremo di tutto per farlo accadere. Su Matteo Salvini chiedo agli italiani ma veramente continuate a dare fiducia a uno che ogni volta dice una cosa diversa e quando era ministro passava il tempo a baciare le mucche invece di lavorare? Giorgia ti senti pronta? Per esempio io mi sento pronto a governare ma penso che qualcuno è migliore di me e quel qualcuno è Mario Draghi." (Carlo Calenda, 23.09.2022)

3.2 "Il 25 settembre diamo una lezione democratica a questa sinistra arrogante e dal linguaggio volgare e violento, che fa scempio delle istituzioni utilizzando ruoli pubblici per insultare e intimidire gli avversari politici, con tanto di plauso compiaciuto di Enrico Letta. #VotaFDI" (Giorgia Meloni, 13.09.2022)

"Il clima di odio e intolleranza di certa sinistra contro Fratelli d'Italia non conosce limiti. Bravi i nostri militanti che non cedono alle provocazioni e alle minacce. Chi è forte delle proprie idee non ha nulla da temere. Andiamo avanti a testa alta." (Giorgia Meloni, 18.09.2022)

3.3 "Ormai la politica è come uno stile di consumo: va di moda il giallo del "vaffa", poi va di moda il verde del "prima gli italiani", poi va di moda l'azzurro. Hanno una costante queste offerte: crollano come devono governare qualcosa, perché il modo in cui si pongono è il contrario del governo. Il governo è pieno di contraddizioni e di complessità." (Carlo Calenda, 30.08.2022)

"Benvenuta alla sinistra nel mondo reale: quando la Lega parlava di emergenza bollette e otteneva miliardi per tamponare gli aumenti, Pd e compagni si occupavano di Ddl Zan, tasse sulla casa e droghe libere. Ora ci danno ragione con mesi di ritardo." (Matteo Salvini, 25.08.2022)

3.4 "Il nucleare è "il sogno di Salvini"? Ma Letta sa che è l'unico modo in prospettiva per pagare meno le bollette? O vive su Marte e l'aumento delle bollette non sa cosa sia? Chi sceglie la Lega dice Sì al nucleare di ultima generazione, pulito e sicuro per un Paese proiettato verso il futuro. #25settebrevotoLega" (Matteo Salvini, 11.09.2022)

"Sbarchi con la Lega al ministero dell'Interno nell'agosto 2019: 1.268. Sbarchi con il Pd nello stesso periodo di quest'anno: 14.103. Il 1012% in più, e il grafico parla chiaro. Dal 25 settembre, se ci date una mano con il voto alla Lega, si torna a difendere i confini e la sicurezza di questo Paese #25settebrevotolega. Ps. Metti questo post sulla bacheca di qualche amico di sinistra, magari rosicante." (Matteo Salvini, 28.08.2022)
