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ABSTRACT. Previous studies have stressed that parties that (harshly) blame or criticize the political/economic elite affect citizens' negative emotions and, in turn, populist attitudes and participation. It has also been shown that populist parties and movements massively employ these strategies in order to emotionally affect citizens. The literature, however, pays little attention to the possible effects of selective exposure to these messages. It is possible that people who are «naturally» more prone to feeling resentment and anger toward the elite may actively seek populist parties' appeals that reinforce their opinions and feelings. This study tests this hypothesis for two European countries characterized by the presence of populist parties (Italy and the UK). As a measure of emotional response it employs so-called «reactions», a new feature provided by the social network Facebook that allows users to indicate the emotions that a post provokes in them (sadness, joy, anger, etc.).

Keywords: populism, emotional appeals, social media, Facebook reactions, fractional response models.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been an impressive increase in studies about populism. Lately, the victory of «Leave» in the UK and Donald J. Trump in the USA have again signalled, if indeed demonstration was necessary, that the populist style of communication is gaining success in Western political systems. The literature shows that populist communication strategies systematically aim to blame their political rivals for the political and economic failures of the nation, presenting them as unfit to represent the will of the people (van Kessel, 2015; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, several scholars (Betz, 2002; Ruzza and Fella, 2011; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016) argue that these strategies are able to tap into people's emotional spheres in order

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to undermine rational decision-making processes. Various studies stress that political messages employing a critical and/or emotionalized style of communication are able to transmit feelings like anger and fear to the electorate, and that they can boost people's populist feelings and even increase political participation (Brader, 2005; Marmor-Lavie and Weimann, 2006; Valentino *et al.*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2012).

The literature on strategies of (emotionalized) blame attribution focuses on the processes through which these messages exert influence on individual feelings. However, it tends to systematically underestimate the active role of individuals in *choosing* to be exposed to such messages. According to the so-called «selective exposure» literature, in addition to being influenced by political messages people can decide to be exposed to messages that are generally less discordant with their previous attitudes and opinions (Stroud, 2008). Connecting this idea with arguments concerning populism and (emotionalized) blame attribution, we can argue that supporters of populist parties may actively seek sources of indignation and resentment, and react with negative feelings (or with more negative feelings than non-populist-party supporters) once they come into contact with them. This argument does not challenge the empirical evidence of previous studies, but contributes to the debate by testing an aspect of the communication process that has previously been little taken into consideration.

Unlike the influence of (emotionalized) blame attribution messages, which can easily be tested experimentally (see Brader, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2012; and Hameleers *et al.*, 2016), selective exposure expectations need to be tested outside an experimental setting: to test these hypotheses we must detect an actual political message sent by a recognizable political actor, and be able to measure the emotional reaction that the audience has to this message. In this respect, the new media (and especially social media) can help us to collect data that would be extremely difficult to collect otherwise, for instance by means of surveys, giving us the possibility of isolating and collecting a post published by a specific party/leader (which contain usually a single message), as well as the responses of their audience.

It is well-known that politicians and consultants consider social media (and especially the medium most used most diffusely by the European population – Facebook) as a tool to increase people's engagement (Gustaffson, 2012). The hypotheses will thus be tested by employing so-called «Facebook reactions» to posts on main parties' and leaders' fan pages (Turnbull and Jenkins, 2016). Reactions are a relatively new feature provided by the social network Facebook that allow users to respond to a post by indicating one of a set of emotions that it transmits to them (sadness, joy, anger, fun, etc.). So far, the measure has been employed sparsely and mainly for descriptive aims (see Eberl *et al.*, 2017), but in this paper, we aim at using this new

instrument to gather analytical insights. We systematically test our hypotheses by collecting Facebook posts and reaction data for the main parties and leaders in two countries (Italy and the UK) during the period from 1 March to 1 July 2016 (thus, a few days after Facebook's introduction of reactions on 24 February 2016).

2. Background

2.1. Populist ideology and emotions

As Taggart (2000) and van Kessel (2015) argue, although the concept of populism is not new its application in European scientific debate has increased during the past few decades, following the appearance of Western European political parties that can be defined as radical right-wing, or indeed populist (Betz, 1994; Taggart, 1996; Tarchi, 2008). As stressed in various studies, populism is a rather complex, «thin» concept (Taggart, 1996). With populism we can broadly define two main elements: the first is populism as a set of political/ideological tenets. According to the literature, indeed, populist parties share at least three ideological features (Taggart, 2000; van Kessel, 2015):

1) they depict a society divided between «the people» (a homogeneous and virtuous entity) and a (corrupted/unfit) establishment;

2) they define themselves as fierce opponents of the establishment;

3) they privilege a direct relationship between the leader and his followers, avoiding the intermediate bodies typical of traditional parties.

With these characteristics, populist parties tend to increase their support by vampirizing the structural failures of the socio-political contexts in which they appear. It has been suggested in many studies that the very ideological tenets of populist parties tend to attract people who are more prone to live politics with less rationality and a surplus of emotional load with respect to people supporting non-populist parties: populist parties supporters (and especially extreme right-wing parties), indeed, are usually profiled as «modernization losers» (Betz, 1994; 2002; Bowyer, 2008), i.e. atomized individuals who have lost some of their privileges during changes due to globalization processes. Together with being more prone to support populist parties, these individuals tend to be depicted as bearers of sentiments of anger and resentment against both politicians and other deprived groups such as immigrants (Betz, 2002).

If people supporting populist parties are really more inclined (because of the match between personal predispositions and the populist ideological tenets) to become emotional and more likely to respond to populist political messages with

fear and anger feelings, our first and simplest expectation is that the populist-party audience (namely, those who actively choose to be exposed to populist messages) will tend to respond to messages with more negative feelings than, for instance, the non-populist audience. Our first hypothesis is thus:

> *Hp1: populist parties are more likely to send messages that generate negative emotions.*

2.2. Populist communication style, negative campaigning, and emotions

However, populism does not represent only a set of (loosely) related ideological tenets. Many scholars (e.g. Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016) focused on populism as a *style of communication*, which is mainly based on two main elements. The first is a persistent employment of negative campaigning (Lau *et al.*, 2007; Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016), defined in the broad sense of «a strategy by which political parties distinguish themselves from other political parties, by attacking or criticizing their opponents» (Walter and van der Brug, 201: 369). The second element, partially related to this general strategy of negative campaigning, is constituted by the so-called emotionalized blame attribution (Hameleers *et al.*, 2016). In other words, populist parties and politicians criticise their political opponents by employing an emotionalized style of communication more frequently than their non-populist rivals. These strategies have been demonstrated to successfully trigger emotions in the audience (Valentino *et al.*, 2011; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016), leading to important political benefits for the parties and leaders that manipulate them. Emotions transmitted by political parties to their audiences have been shown to have a pre-conscious effect on different human biological reactions, contributing to undermining people's rational decision-making processes (Marcus *et al.*, 2000; Brader, 2005; MacKuen *et al.*, 2007) and eventually modifying the audience's attitudes and voting behaviour. For instance, Hameleers and colleagues (2016) suggest that individuals made angrier by political messages can be more prone to accept Manichean views (Mancosu *et al.*, 2017) and show less trust in political institutions, while by means of both experimental and observational data Valentino and colleagues (2011) show that anger in voters motivates participation and turnout. Although, to different extents, almost every party employs blame attribution and emotionalized styles of communication, populist narratives represent the perfect environment in which these communication strategies can thrive.

The kernel of a populist message, thus, represents a criticism of a certain situation/political actor (see Hameleers *et al.*, 2016). However, not only populist parties adopt emotionalized blame attribution. Also non-populist parties publish critical messages against their opponents, and they can be as emotionalized as those aired by populist parties. Nevertheless, if the mechanism works as expected, a critical message will trigger a greater negative response in a populist audience (composed of people who, as stressed above, are exogenously «angrier») than in a non-populist audience. More precisely, given two messages roughly similar in terms of aim and content, the audience of a populist party will react in a disproportionately angrier way compared to the audience of a non-populist one.

> *Hp2: passing from non-critical to critical/emotionalized messages increases negative reactions in populist-party audiences more than in non-populist-party audiences.*

The two hypotheses presented in the paper, if corroborated, might contribute to shed light on a phenomenon rarely tackled by previous literature, namely, what we can call a selection component in the political emotionalization. To demonstrate the effectiveness of emotionalized claims, indeed, the literature largely employs experimental designs: many studies test whether an experimental stimulus, such as a fake political message, can affect voters' emotions, and thus choices, attitudes, turnout etc. (see Valentino *et al.*, 2011; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016). In the actual political arena, however, influence is not the sole mechanism that people can experience. A relevant branch of the literature shows that people can select their media diet in order to completely avoid political messages (Atre and Katz, 2005; Baum and Kernell, 1999; Prior, 2007) or avoid information concerning a particular issue (Sunstein, 2001). People can also engage in what is called «partisan selective exposure», i.e. select media and political messages that are consistent with their previous attitudes (Mutz and Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2008). Selective exposure can be chosen to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) – a «negative drive state» that happens when some aspects of people's cognitive and ideological perceptions are inconsistent with the decisions they take in their everyday lives. High levels of cognitive dissonance can lead individuals to feel uncomfortable and to change the way in which they seek information, avoiding sources that are opposed to their previous beliefs (Festinger, 1957; Garrett *et al.*, 2013). In other words, voters can choose to follow certain political actors, attracted by their ideological tenets, thus deciding to be selectively exposed to them (Sears and Freedman, 1967; Ditto and Lopez, 1992; Stroud, 2008).

A well-established stream of research shows that selective exposure is far more likely in social media, since the nature of the environment itself encourages people to select their own sources of information. To the extent that people decide to expose themselves to political information reinforcing their views, access to such information can in turn increase the likelihood of further selecting congenial contents, which leads to an «echo chamber» environment in which political messages and individual responses reinforce each other, resulting in a more polarized political environment (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Prior, 2007).

3. Data and models

For our purpose, employing Facebook information, and especially fan page data, allows us to clearly recognize the message sender (and their characteristics), the nature of the message (whether critical or constructive) and the tone in which the message is written: is it non-emotional or does it employ a wording that can possibly transfer emotions to the audience? More importantly, on Facebook fan pages posts tend to appear on a user's time-line (the «home page» of every Facebook user) if the user has «liked» the page before. It is thus possible to infer that a large part of the audience of a certain Facebook post is composed of supporters of the party/leader. Facebook data are now enriched by a new function, Facebook reactions, which allows users to express different emotions in response to public posts (and therefore political messages), enabling us to measure the mood of the audience towards certain political messages (the last piece of information that our hypotheses need).

3.1. Data and main variables

The data collection focused on posts published on the official Facebook fan pages of the main parties and leaders in two national contexts (the UK and Italy). The data on the relevant parties and leaders in the selected countries were collected in the period from 1 March to 1 July 2016[1] (11,229 posts)[2]. It is possible to gather

[1] The parties (and leaders) whose fan pages were studied are: The Conservatives (and David Cameron), The Labour Party (and Jeremy Corbyn), The UK Independence Party (and Nigel Farage), the Partito Democratico (and Matteo Renzi), the Movimento 5 Stelle (and Beppe Grillo), the Lega Nord Padania (and Matteo Salvini) and Forza Italia (and Silvio Berlusconi).

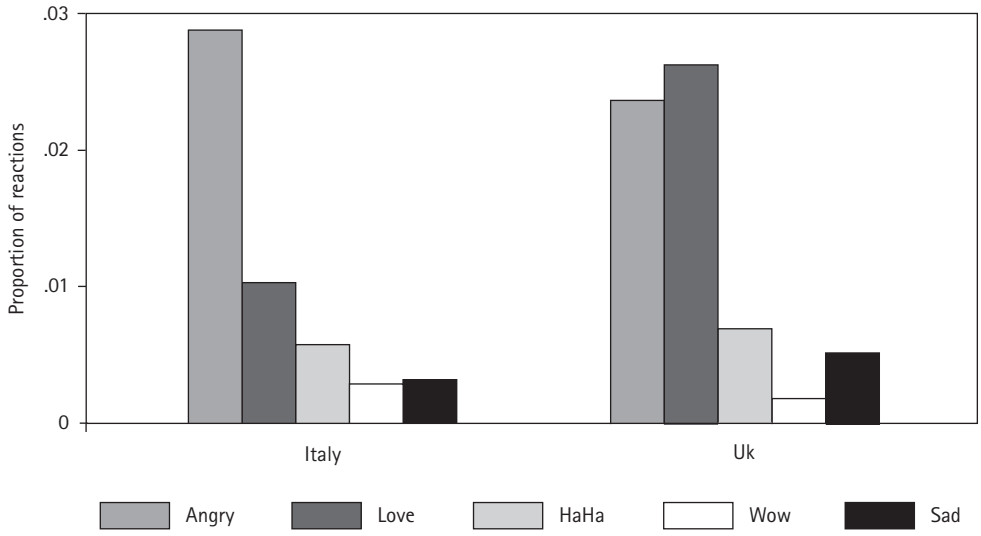
[2] In order to scrape the posts from Facebook, the RFacebook package was employed. The scraping procedure took place between 14 and 16 August 2016.

additional information from these posts, such as the day on which the message was published and the various ways in which the audience, mainly consisting of fans or users who happened to come across the message on their Facebook time-line, responded to the message. The Facebook platform allows users to interact in four basic ways: by means of the «Like» button, the share of the public content on user's personal page, and the comment. The final, and more recent, way in which a Facebook user can interact with the published contents is represented by the previously-mentioned Facebook reactions, a feature that allows users to indicate – in an unsolicited way – one of a set of emotions that the post transmits to them. Besides «Like», a user can express love, fun, astonishment, sadness and anger. This feature was introduced on 24 February 2016 (a few days before our time-span starts). Figure 1 shows the proportions by country of the «reactions» on the fan pages of political parties and leaders during the first four months after their introduction on Facebook based on the entire number of possible responses that users can give (also taking into account «likes»). Reactions represent about 10% of the total (a percentage that remains pretty stable also in other contexts and in more recent periods of time, see Eberl *et al.*, 2017), meaning that «likes» – the standard way of expressing generic, apparently non-emotionalized, favour for a post – are still largely prevalent. One could argue that the emotional responses are, all in all, not a very common reaction to a post. According to much research, however, emotions are actually not very common in people's everyday lives; Scherer *et al.* (2004) report that only about one in five people are able to recall and clearly identify an emotion felt on the day before an interview. Therefore, the small proportion of emotional reactions should not concern us much. On the contrary, this confirms that when not solicited to express a feeling, people do not get emotional very easily (especially when reading a party/politician's post).

According to the graph, it seems that political leaders and parties mainly arouse two emotions: «Anger» and «Love» («Haha», «Sad» and especially «Wow» reactions barely reach 0.5% of the possible responses). This result is unsurprising since it shows that emotional reactions can be mainly positive (the «Love» button) or negative/hateful (the «Angry» button).

Since our focus is on the critical/emotionalized communication style and the negative emotions that it can lead to, the dependent variable used will be the percentage of «Angry» reactions to each post. The measure can be affected by different measurement errors. Reactions, in particular, do not tell us anything about the target of people's anger: angry reactions, indeed, could be directed toward the message sender (namely, the party/candidate) rather than the object of the party/politician's emotional appeal (for instance, a political opponent). Further, part of the audience of a political leader/party might be composed by «trolls» or rival parties' activists, an

Figure 1. Percentage of each reaction of total responses (Likes included), by country (data from 01/03//2016 to 01/06/2016)



element that could additionally bias our measure. These, of course, represent a limit of our research. Although we are confident that the limit of the measure can be overcome by the advantages that employing online social network data can bring, we will further discuss the drawbacks of the measures in the last paragraph of the article.

The main independent variable is represented by the nature of the message's sender, i.e. whether it is sent by a populist or non-populist party/leader. Regarding non-populist parties, we collected data for those which are generally seen as the main parties in the political spectrum in each national context: the governing parties, the Partito Democratico in Italy and the Conservative party in the UK, and the main opposition parties, Berlusconi's Forza Italia in Italy[3] and the Labour party in the UK.

As stressed above, defining populism and identifying populist parties is far from simple. In this paper we take into account three parties that, according to the literature, present clearly populist traits. In the UK, the party presenting populist characteristics is Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP – see Abedi

[3] A possible party that could be defined as populist is Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. However, we decided not to define the party as populist because, since 2013 (the year of its refoundation), Forza Italia seems to have radically changed its aims and style. In particular, as Albertazzi and Giovannini (2015) stress, the main aim of the party is to start a process of institutionalization, trying to become «a more democratic organization, a broad, enduring conservative party able to fight elections without having to rely on Berlusconi's communicative skills» (Albertazzi and Giovannini, 2015: 434).

Table 1. Employment of (emotionalized) critical messages by parties (in %)

Party	Non-critical	Critical	Critical + Emotionalized	Total	N
PD	88	10	3	100	40
FI	46	31	23	100	26
M5S	51	25	24	100	280
LN	58	20	22	100	404
Total Italy	56	22	22	100	750
Tories	76	19	5	100	134
Labour	54	32	14	100	297
UKIP	57	26	18	100	319
Total UK	59	27	14	100	750

and Lundberg, 2009; Ford *et al.*, 2012; Tournier-Sol, 2015). In Italy, according to the literature, at least two populist parties, the Movimento 5 Stelle (Corbetta, 2013; Vezzoni and Mancosu, 2016) and the Lega Nord (Tarchi, 2008; Mancosu 2014; Albertazzi, 2016) can be identified.

The third main variable, which is employed to test Hp2, represents the critical/emotionalized content of the message published by a party/leader. In this study, the variable was constructed following these steps. First, a subset of 750 messages for each country was randomly selected from the corpus of messages posted on the official Facebook fan pages of the main parties and leaders in the time-span selected. Afterwards, the messages were analysed and manually coded by a single coder who was blinded to the identity of the sender of each message. Two variables were coded: a first variable identifies critical messages from the party/leader, and is coded 0 when the message is not critical, 1 if it attributes blame to another party/leader or another subject (immigrants, the economic elite, the European Union etc.), and 2 if it also uses emotionalized language/style (the coding procedure followed Hameleers *et al.*, 2016)[4].

The resulting variable is cross-tabulated with parties in Table 1. As can be seen, messages coded as emotionalized or non-emotionalized criticisms are mainly employed by opposition parties, both populist and non-populist. This is consistent with results in the literature (Marmor-Lavie and Weimann, 2006).

In addition to the criticism variable, a measure that takes into account constructive messages was also manually coded. This variable is coded 1 when the

[4] Both the full datasets and the subsets with the manually coded variables are available as supplementary material.

post presents a constructive claim and 0 otherwise. This measure will be employed as a control to take into account messages in which the content is complimentary (usually concerning achievements of the party/politician).

3.2. Models

The two hypotheses are tested by means of a set of fractional logistic models, which provide unbiased coefficients which are equivalent in interpretation to those from a logistic regression model (for more information about these models, see Papke and Wooldridge, 1996) Coefficients are fitted separately for each national context. To control for possible composition effects in the models, several other control variables have been added: first, we can imagine that candidate posts can be more emotionalized than party ones, being allegedly sent directly by a physical person (the leader), and not an organization: in the following models, «Candidate» is a dummy variable equal to 1 when the post comes from a candidates' official page and 0 when it comes from a party page. Also the percentage of reactions («Perc. Reactions» in the models below) can increase the level of angry reactions in a post (we can imagine that more reactions means also, probabilistically, more negative reaction), the date of the post («Date» in the following models) controls for the possible increase of prevalence of (negative) reactions over time (being the beginning of the observational window immediately after the introduction of reactions). The number of reaction and likes is an indirect measure of the post success, which can influence the prevalence of negative reactions. The average number of posts per day, finally, («Avg. Daily posts») controls for the prolificacy of leaders and parties (we do not have any clear descriptive hypothesis on this aspect).

The first hypothesis tests whether the audience of the populist parties studied is generally angrier than the audience of other parties. The model to test this hypothesis can be written as follows:

> Model 1: Perc. Angry = Party + Perc. Reactions + Candidate + Date + # Reponses + Avg. Daily posts + Terror,

where Perc. Angry is the percentage of Angry reactions among the total responses for each post, and Party is a set of dummy variables that indicates which party/candidate is the message sender. Model 1, however, does not take into account the nature of the message. Model 2, which includes the manually-coded variables, is fitted to just the 750 randomly selected cases per country:

Model 2: Perc. Angry = Party*Critique + Construct + Perc. Reactions + Candidate + Date + # Reponses + Avg. Daily posts + Terror

The differences between this second model and the first one are represented by the two hand-coded variables, «Critique» and «Construct» in the model above, which have been explained above, and Terror, an additional control variable to take into account fluctuations in the emotional structure of reactions to posts dealing with terrorist attacks (the assassination of the Labour MP Jo Cox and the Brussels attacks took place in the time-span selected). By means of the two-way interaction in this model, we can assess differences in levels of anger in response to a critical post published by populist/non-populist parties/leaders. The main idea behind the interaction is that if, as expected, selective exposure is involved in driving emotional responses in the audience, the interaction effect should be positive and significant. In other words, when a non-populist audience is considered, the differences between reactions to emotionalized/critical and non-critical messages are expected to be small. On the other hand, according to the selective exposure hypothesis, people who seek angry contents should select angrier political parties/leaders, reinforcing their negative feelings toward the elite or the system. In this way, when a populist audience is considered, the differences between reactions to emotionalized/critical or non-critical messages should be greater.

4. Results

Table 2 tests the first hypothesis. Regarding the control variables, we can say that if the proportion of reactions (vis-à-vis likes) is higher, the proportion of «anger» reactions rises (probably because of a composition effect). Leaders' pages present higher levels of anger than parties' official pages. The trend of angry responses decreases slightly in the time-span considered (see the coefficient for the date). Finally, by multiplying the opportunities to react, a higher number of posts per day leads to a decrease in the prevalence of angry reactions.

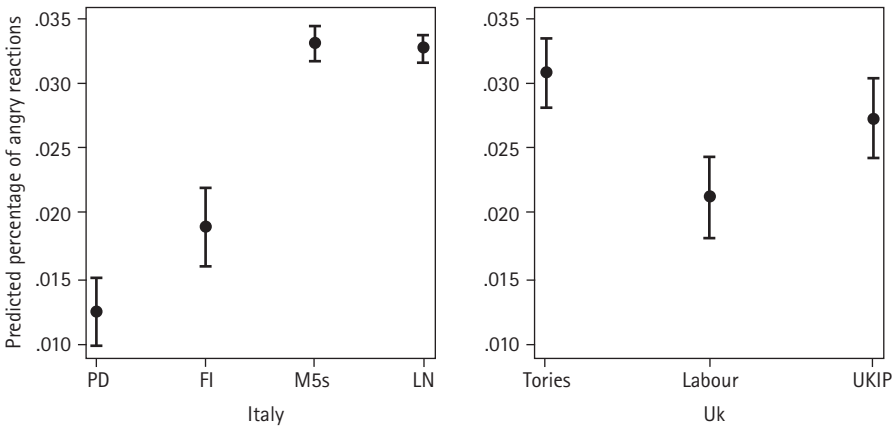
As for the substantive variables, it can be seen from Table 2 that the level of «anger» responses by populist audiences (Lega Nord and Movimento 5 Stelle) is significantly higher than that of non-populist audiences in Italy. In the UK the situation is less clear. Figure 2 shows the predicted percentages for the party variables in the two contexts. The level of «anger» in response to populist party posts (independently of the nature of the post) in the two national contexts is between 2.8% and 3.2%. On the contrary, the average percentage of predicted angry responses

Table 2. Fractional logistic model for the study of angry reaction percentages

	Model 1 – Italy		Model 1 – UK	
Independent variables	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
Party - Italy (ref. PD)				
Forza Italia	0.48***	(0.14)		
M5S	1.11***	(0.12)		
Lega Nord	1.10***	(0.12)		
Party - UK (ref. Conservatives)				
Labour			−0.40***	(0.10)
UKIP			−0.13	(0.08)
# Reactions on reactions + Likes	0.14***	(0.00)	0.13***	(0.01)
Leader page (ref. Party page)	0.20***	(0.03)	0.07	(0.09)
Date of post	−0.01***	(0.00)	−0.01***	(0.00)
# Reactions + Likes (in thousands)	−0.02***	(0.00)	-0.01***	(0.00)
Average number of posts per day	−0.00***	(0.00)	0.02**	(0.01)
Constant	119.20***	(8.60)	124.89***	(21.31)
Observations	9,911		1,305	

Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Figure 2. Predicted percentages of angry reactions by populist/non-populist party and context (Model 1, Table 2 coefficients)



for non-populist parties is between 1.2% and 2.2%, with the noticeable exception of the Tories and their leader (the former Prime Minister David Cameron), which provoke the highest levels of anger in the UK context. This inconsistency with the hypothesis may be due to a number of factors. In particular, we can imagine that it is not necessary that the whole of a party's audience supports the party/candidate. The high levels of anger towards the Conservatives may be the result of «trespassing» by supporters of other parties and them signalling their dissatisfaction with the government. This could be also due to an indirect effect of the aforementioned strategies of negative campaigning, which can influence also activists of other parties (in this case, we could witness an indirect evidence of the fact that not only parties fans react to a certain party's message). In addition, it should be noticed that the data were collected during the Brexit referendum campaign (a situation in which the Conservatives were internally divided; see Wilkinson, 2016). Our first hypothesis, which expects a higher level of anger among the audience of populist parties, is thus partly corroborated.

Table 3 tests Hp2 and presents four models. The first two are the equivalent of Model 1 only fitted to the random sample of 750 posts for each national context. It can be seen that the results for the random samples do not differ much from those presented in Table 2. The second set of models interacts the party variable with information about the nature of the post. Hp2 states that, besides the influence effect found in various studies in the literature, individuals who choose to follow a populist fan page may be exogenously more prone to get angry and react more negatively when facing the critical claims of populist parties. On the other hand, we expect that people who support and follow non-populist parties will tend to be exogenously less emotional even if they are exposed to a critical message.

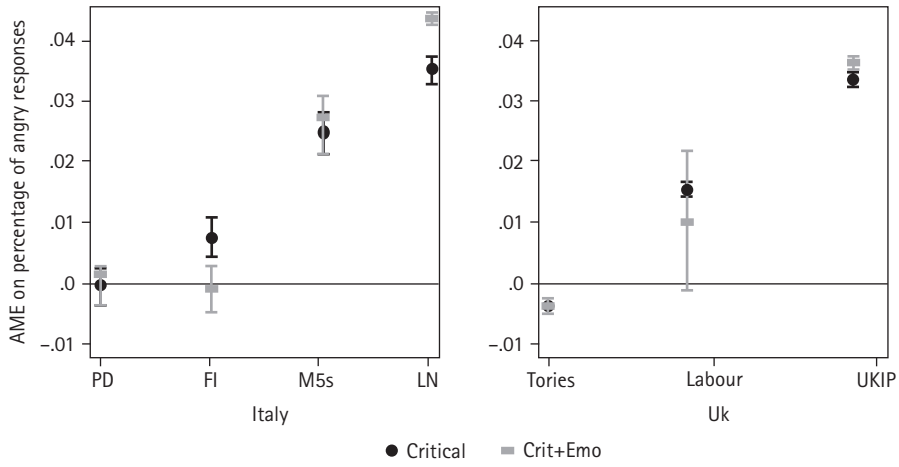
Figure 3 shows the average marginal effects for the simply «critical» and «emotionalized» message variables by party and context. In other words, the estimates represent the increase in percentage points of angry reactions when a message passes from non-critical to critical and from non-critical to critical *and* emotionalized. The results for the UK and Italy are similar. First, we notice that the main governing parties (the PD in Italy and the Tories in the UK) do not see an increase in anger in the audience when attempting to criticize their opponents (not even when they employ some form of emotionalized rhetoric). Non-populist opposition parties (Forza Italia in Italy and the Labour Party in the UK) both see an increase in angry reactions when the criticism is not emotionalized, while emotionalization seems to increase levels of anger, but in a less strong way compared to a «simply critical» message. As for our three populist parties (Lega Nord and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, and the UKIP in UK), we see a clear pattern in which critical posts increase dramatically the levels of angry

Table 3. Fractional logistic model for the study of angry reaction percentages

	Model 1 – Italy[a]		Model 2 – Italy		Model 1 – UK[a]		Model 2 – UK	
Independent variables	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
Party - Italy (ref. PD)								
Forza Italia	0.84	(0.60)	−0.54***	(0.11)				
M5S	1.61***	(0.61)	−0.31**	(0.15)				
Lega Nord	1.70***	(0.63)	−1.65***	(0.14)				
Party - UK (ref. Conservatives)								
Labour					−0.33***	(0.06)	−0.93***	(0.04)
UKIP					−0.09***	(0.03)	−2.19***	(0.07)
Critical message (ref. Non-critical message)			−0.03	(0.11)			−0.13***	(0.01)
Critical + Emotionalized			0.09**	(0.04)			−0.12***	(0.02)
Forza Italia * Critical			0.64***	(0.14)				
Forza Italia * Crit+Emo			−0.17	(0.23)				
M5S * Critical			1.22***	(0.17)				
M5S + Crit+Emo			1.19***	(0.13)				
Lega * Critical			2.61***	(0.18)				
Lega * Crit+Emo			2.72***	(0.11)				
Labour * Critical							0.93***	(0.01)
Labour * Crit+Emo							0.71***	(0.23)
UKIP * Critical							2.45***	(0.04)
UKIP * Crit+Emo							2.53***	(0.07)
# Reactions on reactions + Likes	0.14***	(0.01)	0.10***	(0.00)	0.13***	(0.01)	0.11***	(0.01)
Leader page (ref. Party page)	0.07	(0.06)	0.03	(0.03)	0.18***	(0.04)	0.17***	(0.02)
Date of post	−0.01***	(0.00)	−0.00***	(0.00)	−0.01***	(0.00)	−0.00***	(0.00)
# Reactions + Likes (thousands)	−0.00	(0.00)	−0.00	(0.00)	−0.02***	(0.00)	−0.01***	(0.00)
Average no. of posts per day	−0.00	(0.00)	−0.00	(0.00)	0.02***	(0.00)	0.02***	(0.00)
Constructive message (ref. non-constructive message)			−0.56***	(0.07)				
Post about terrorist attacks			−0.48***	(0.06)			−2.16***	(0.31)
Constant	124.47***	(12.48)	51.13***	(5.81)	142.17***	(4.89)	69.88***	(5.60)
Observations	748		748		750		750	

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; [a] Model 1 fitted to 750 cases

Figure 3. Average marginal effects of percentage of angry reactions for a critical/non-critical message, by populist/non-populist party and context (Model 2, Table 3 coefficients)



reactions, and emotionalized criticisms additionally increase these levels, although not in a particularly strong way (we will deal with this result in the following section). All in all, we can say that Hp2, which expects the self-selection of a more emotional audience supporting populist parties, is confirmed.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Political entrepreneurs invest some of their resources in producing an emotionally-charged style of communication. In Europe, this strategy has been generally associated with the populist style of communication. So far, the literature has focused on the effectiveness of such claims mainly by testing whether emotionalized (and/or non-emotionalized) blame attribution claims can influence people's emotions, making them, for instance, angrier. These studies show that being exposed to criticisms of political opponents or problematic situations actually leads individuals to be angrier (Betz, 2002; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016) and this, in turn, affects these people's attitudes and behaviours.

Little research has focused on the ways in which people come into contact with these claims. According to the theory of selective exposure, people can be interested in being exposed to information that tends to confirm their opinions (Sears and Freedman, 1967; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2008). In this way, it is possible for people to create an «echo chamber» that endorses previous attitudes and avoids

cognitive dissonance (Garret *et al.*, 2013). This paper has mainly aimed to test whether selective exposure can contribute to explaining the levels of emotional reactions among the audiences of populist parties, comparing them to those for non-populist audiences (the plain and simple negative campaigning seems to be sufficient).

One of the main difficulties in testing this expectation concerns data. We needed observational data (as experimental data is unsuitable for testing our hypotheses) that can account for both the nature of the political message and the unsolicited emotional response of the audience. By using Facebook data, we have found evidence compatible with a selective exposure mechanism. More precisely, people who decide to be exposed to a populist party's messages – regardless of their nature – tend to be more prone to respond with negative emotions (at least in Italy). We have also shown that on populist fan pages negative responses are boosted by critical posts published by the party/leader, which is consistent with the idea that the audience of populist parties is different from that of non-populist ones, i.e. it is more prone to get angry in response to a critical/emotionalized post. Our results also show that the differences in the increase in angry responses between when a populist audience is exposed to a simply critical and to an emotionalized critical message, although statistically significant, are substantively small. This further confirms our idea about the nature of the populist audience: it does not necessarily need an emotional cue to become emotional and in turn to respond in a disproportionately angry way compared to the non-populist audience.

Of course, because of their particular nature, dealing with online social network data also has a number of drawbacks. In this case, we can identify at least three main problems. The first order of issues concerns the nature of messages aired by parties/leaders. The models that test Hp2 assume that messages coded as «critical» or «critical + emotionalized» are roughly similar, regardless of the party/leader publishing them. However, it is debatable whether different messages coded as harsh criticism are understood by the respective audiences as equally harsh. Indeed, it may be that the increase we see is partly related to the fact that criticism by populist parties has a stronger emotional tone (compared to that by non-populist parties), a situation that would lead to support the influence argument concerning observational data. Although we have tried to account for this issue by coding «simply critical» and «emotionalized» messages differently, the suspicion that emotionalized messages published by populist parties are harsher than those published by non-populists remains.

The second order of possible drawbacks is related to the message receivers. Basically, we know very little about who responds to political messages and do not even have demographic information about these people. In this paper we have

made a very strong assumption that the audience of a Facebook page is exclusively an audience of the page's fans. It is possible, however, that the audience that reacts to the posts is partly composed of detractors of the party (we have hypothesized that the high level of anger directed at the Tories' page can be explained in this way). It may therefore be, as stressed above, that the anger is not directed towards the object of the critical message but towards the message sender himself, leading to bias our dependent variable. Further, Facebook reactions might be just a substitute for general support/aversion, without having, for part of the audience, a clear emotional meaning. This would undermine the external validity of the measure[5].

Finally, it is doubtful whether we can extend our results outside the Facebook environment. As previously stated, social networks tend to boost the employment of selective exposure, since the very nature of an online social network's experience is connected with choosing the contents which one wants to be exposed to (Garrett *et al.*, 2013). It is therefore not clear whether we would also detect similar patterns and mechanisms in a traditional media diet.

There is no easy way out for these issues, and additional research is necessary to exploit the data more to find convincing answers to these problems. These issues lead us to argue that social network data, unlike experimental evidence, will hardly be able to give us the «smoking gun» concerning these political behaviours and strategies. However, we are confident that this article shows that online social network data (and especially Facebook data) can be an essential ally of political behaviour studies by providing the information that can give us crucial evidence about behaviours which are generally difficult to detect.

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[5] With this respect, it could be possible to validate externally reactions as an actual measure of emotional response, for instance, by comparing users' comments (and their emotional content) with the reaction these same people report. Of course, this kind of validation exceeds the aims of this paper.

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