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Euroscepticism, Populism and Social Media Dynamics: the ESM Debate on Twitter in Italy

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Introduction

In the last ten years the development of social media and the diffusion of its use has been exponential. Social media, with their peculiar characteristics that drastically differentiate them from traditional media, have become a means of expression on a global, national, and local level. The possibility of active mass participation makes this new media suitable for political-social mobilization. One of the most striking cases is the ‘Arab spring’ and the relative use of Twitter for the mobilization and dissemination of information.¹ But the potential of social media does not end in the possibilities of collective action from below: parties, political leaders and any actor using traditional media for communication, now have a new channel available that does not replace the traditional media by differentiating itself in the function of mediation, but rather by operating a paradigm revolution and eliminating the mediator himself, triggering a process of ‘disintermediation’. The case of the US presidential campaign in 2016 is striking²: Trump's very wide use of social media, and his fight against traditional media, caused a big sensation into the world and is still the subject of numerous debates, not only academic but also of ethical and political nature. What are the consequences of the mass use of social media? Do the affordances of social media favour the spread of other phenomena such as the spread of fake news, or populism?

So even when the movements of opinion on social networks do not result in real street actions, they deserve to be considered because: a) given the widespread diffusion of social media, they provide a valid measure of citizens' opinions b) social media are increasingly used as a medium to find political information and thus in turn social media influence citizens' opinions. In their work on hashtag #welcomerefugee Barisione et al.³ focused and conceptualized those cases in which citizens' voice conveyed through social media combines the traditional

¹ Tufekci & Wilson, 2012

² Enli, 2017

³ Barisione, et al., 2017

notion of public opinion and of social movement in "a new digitally based type of political force".⁴ The resulting theoretical concept is defined as Digital Movement of Opinion (DMO) and can have different characteristics depending on the case but is always referred to:

Cases in which the general public actively uses social media platforms to react to a highly mediatized and emotionally charged event in a manner that creates the impression of a monolithic voice arising from social media.⁵

The concept of digital movement of opinion therefore provides us with a useful framework for framing and studying debates developed on social media and focused on a single main topic, so in our case we applied it to the discussion that took place on the issue of ESM in Italy between end of November and beginning of December. Using this conceptual framework, we investigated quantitatively the salient features of the debate in question. However, before proceeding to the actual analysis, the debate itself was contextualized within the Italian-European socio-political framework. The contextualization also served to identify the salient aspects of the subsequent analysis, to design the questions and establish "what to look for" in the dataset. The result is a multifaceted framework within which various research themes intersect and overlap: the ESM, as a European treaty on financial matters, involves the Eurosceptic component of the public debate and the broader discourse on austerity and European responses to the recent financial and debt crises in 2008-2011. The salient passages of the development of the treaty and its reform have been reconstructed, as well as the mounting of a Eurosceptic sentiment within Europe (and Italy) in the last thirty years, with focus on the post-2008 period. The Italian national political context at the end of 2019 was analysed too. Regarding it, Italy stands out for the presence of populist parties with anomalous history and presence in parliament (over 50%), and the debate itself on

⁴ Ibid., p. 3

⁵ Ibid.

the reform of the ESM has largely involved populist forces. Given this, it was decided to investigate two points: the link between populism and social media, a topic of growing academic relevance, and the link between populism and Euroscepticism, particularly in the Italian context. With regard to the first point, in addition to the analysis of the debate, an analysis of the users was made for the identification of social bots, with regard to the second point the content of the most salient tweets in the debate was analysed, using a qualitative approach, searching for key elements indicating the presence of populist or Eurosceptic rhetoric.

In conclusion, there are three key passages in this work: the socio-political contextualization of the debate on ESM in Italy, useful for identifying the subsequent themes and research questions; the quantitative analysis of the dataset obtained on Twitter, using the DMO framework; the qualitative analysis of the phenomenon in the context of populism and Euroscepticism established in the Italian political debate.

1 Theory: Euroscepticism, Populism and New Media

Contextualize the birth and evolution of an entity such as the European Stability Mechanism, require to examine a series of historical passages happened in the last thirty years of European institutions, to reconstruct the economic, social and political events that led to the creation of the fund and to the debate around it. If the logical prerequisite for the existence of the ESM is the existence of the Eurozone, the political, social, but also economic, premise for the fund is the European sovereign debt crisis and the need, by the Eurozone countries, for coordinated interventions in countries such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal. But the modalities and the management of these interventions, in particular the Greek debt crisis, brings to numerous problems relating to European governance, the effects of monetary union and the individual responsibilities of countries. If the creation of the fund institutionalizes debt intervention between eurozone countries, it also institutionalizes all critical issues and internal dialectics.

The salient line of the debate on European sovereign debts is the call for rigor and responsibility by the countries with their accounts in order, in contrast to the demand for flexibility by the more 'spendthrift' countries. Furthermore, economic interventions always involve the transfer of sovereignty, even in a non-direct way, by those who receive them. In this context, different elements are intertwined: Euroscepticism, variegated populism, clashes around the European policy and the future of the integration: The Euroscepticism could be oriented both in opposition to austerity and the parameters of Maastricht – now the Fiscal Compact –, or forward a demand for greater rigor. Here originates the dialectic between the so-called 'hawks' and the Mediterranean block. On the scene is also present the populism, ready to exploit weaknesses within the union, paralyzed by confrontation. Nevertheless, other European policy issues are intertwined, such as

the management of the common border and immigration. It is not intended here to reconstruct the set of all the challenges that the European Union is facing in order to achieve a greater degree of cohesion, a job that would require much larger spaces. The literature on the subject is extensive and articulated, for a literature review it can be seen here.⁶ However, we will try to outline what are the key issues around which the confrontation is played out over an apparently exclusively economic institution such as the European Stability Mechanism.

1.1 Euroscepticism: Birth, Development and Content

The Euroscepticism and the existence of a stable and substantial opposition in the confrontations of the European institutions, date their birth origin more recently than the ratification of the first treaties. In the earliest thirty years following the signing of the 1957 Rome treaty "what opposition existed against the European economic consensus tended to be small and marginal".⁷ The term Euroscepticism has its origin in the United Kingdom in the 80', referring to that current of conservatives most averse to European integration.⁸ Margaret Thatcher's speech in Bruges in 1988 is considered one of the key steps in British Euroscepticism, a forerunner of the historic decision of the British Conservatives to hold the 2016 referendum on the permanence of the United Kingdom in the European Union. But the real watershed moment is considered the development of the Maastricht Treaty in the 90', with which the political economic integration was strengthened and the passage of new competences to supranational institutions was ratified – above all, the single currency – sanctioning the birth of the eurozone as we know it today:

Maastricht acted as a pivotal point as the raised profile and salience of the EU allowed opportunistic politicians and leaders willing to mobilize public opposition to obtain national draw from the European issue. Pan-European co-operation begins between nationally organized sceptical interest groups, springing from shared

⁶ Hobolt & Vries, 2016

⁷ Usherwood & Startin, 2013, p. 3

⁸ Cfr. Brack & Startin, 2015, p. 241

adversity and common threats, drawing in groups where opposition might have previously been only latent and/or inopportune. In short, Maastricht acted as a catalyst as Euroscepticism spread across the EU, both in terms of political parties and in terms of public opinion.⁹

And, in Serricchio et al.:

Public support for European integration dropped in the 1990s, despite some favourable economic conditions such as low inflation rates in Europe. The Treaty on European Union (TEU) (also known as the ‘Maastricht Treaty’) transformed the nature of the EU from a primarily economic project into a political one.¹⁰

Only after the Maastricht Treaty did the use of the term ‘Euroscepticism’ spread on a supranational scale. The enlargement to Eastern European states in the early 2000s, the subsequent great recession of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis in 2011 are the successive steps of enlargement and diffusion of Euroscepticism in the European Union. In particular, the financial and debt crises play the role of a leading actors in the transition to a ‘mainstreamed’ Euroscepticism, in other words, a legitimate Euroscepticism of growing importance in the European political landscape.¹¹ Some scholars diverge on the role of the global recession and focus more on the subsequent eurozone crisis, or debt crisis, as a condensing event of a large-scale Eurosceptic opposition.¹² This point is argued by explaining that the first of the two crises was conceived as receptive to national solutions, while the Eurozone crisis closely involved the supranational European institutions, and they were held responsible for any aftermath “with the consequence that the Union was under pressure to be seen to be an efficient political and economic actor”.¹³

⁹ Usherwood & Startin, 2013, p. 4

¹⁰ Serricchio et al., 2013, p. 53

¹¹ Cfr. Usherwood & Startin, 2015, p. 240

¹² Serricchio et al., 2013

¹³ Ibid., p. 11

QA9 In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?
(% - EU)

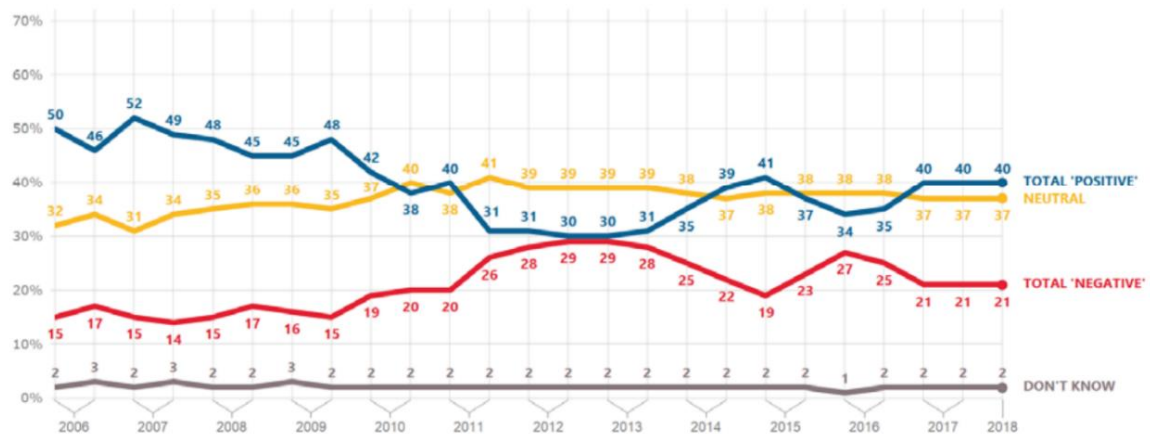


Figure 1: The image of the European Union: trend – Source: Eurobarometer

Figure 1 shows the Eurobarometer data on the perception towards the European Union. Following the financial crisis there is a slight increase in negative feelings, but it is only after the Eurozone crisis that the maximum peak is reached. To this day, one fifth of respondents say they have a negative image of the European Union.

The Maastricht Treaty is an essential starting point in the spreading of the Euroscepticism before which there was a ‘permissive consensus’¹⁴ for European economic integration. It is necessary to note how the deepening of integration and subsequent enlargement, involving more the socio-political level, have determined the entry on the scene of elements such as national identities and political institutions.¹⁵

These watershed events changed the public’s cost–benefit calculations, bringing social and political variables, such as identity and political institutions, to the forefront in explaining public opinion support (or otherwise) for the EU.¹⁶

¹⁴ Inglehart, 1970, p. 773

¹⁵ Cfr. Loveless & Rohrschneider, 2011, p. 5

¹⁶ Serricchio et al., 2013, p. 53

In the work of Serricchio et al.¹⁷ is considered the ability of different variables to explain the level of Euroscepticism. It is noted that there is a post-1992 trend in which national identities and political institutions play an increasingly important role in explaining the level of Euroscepticism, and that there is a negative correlation between Euroscepticism and confidence in national political institutions. The post-1992 trends are then exacerbated in the financial and debt crisis period. The transition from an economic union, favoured by the elites and silently agreed by almost all European citizens, to a socio-political union with the transfer of governance by the countries to the union, finally has occurred and this is fraught with consequences in terms of opposition to European integration.

1.1.1 Different Types of Euroscepticism

Despite this growing political importance, there is no precise and definite meaning of the term ‘Euroscepticism’, as it brings together a set of different and variegated anti-European attitudes adopted by different political groups and framed in different ideologies. The existence of more Eurosceptic parties with different instances reflects the variety of the phenomenon. At the academic level, a distinction is made between different approaches to Euroscepticism, framing them in general political theory. Using Easton's¹⁸ concept of political support, three types of opposition to the European Union are outlined in a work by Wessels:

‘Opposition to the authorities’ refers to negative attitudes towards public officials and institutional actors that exercise EU governance. ‘Opposition to the regime’ refers to negative attitudes towards the political values, norms and structures of the EU. ‘Opposition to the community’ refers to negative attitudes towards other citizens understood as fellow members of the European collective.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cfr. Ibid., p. 53

¹⁸ Easton, 1965

¹⁹ Wessels, 2007, p. 289

In the work of Easton, a second distinction made is the way of orientation towards these three specific objects and two are identified: specific or diffuse. The specific orientation refers only to the actions of the actors while the diffuse orientation is related to what that object ideally represents. Easton's theory suggests that consensus arises in specific orientation at the first level, and therefore positive experiences towards the authorities can consequently reach a more abstract level, transforming support for the authorities into support for the regime. A separate discourse is due to the orientation towards the political community, which plays a crucial role of primary importance. Among these three political elements the community stands out for its self-ascription nature, it is the sense of belonging and identity, which plays a leading role in the formation of consensus. Easton's argument that as the cohesion of the political community breaks down, support for the regime and the authorities consequently falls apart, is overturned by Wessel, who hypothesizes that identity recognition can perform a function as a buffer for disagreement towards the regime and the authorities. The hypothesis is empirically confirmed by Wessel's own work, and he make the conclusion: "European identity is the strongest factor preventing skepticism".²⁰ The sense of belonging is therefore a fundamental distinction in evaluating different types of Euroscepticism or negative attitudes towards the European Union.

In national systems, Eurosceptic parties have been strengthened or new are born from scratch, but they differ one from each other in terms of attitude and objectives. Starting from Taggart's seminal works which note the presence of hard and soft Eurosceptic parties in every EU country, Usherwood & Startin²¹ identify four different types of Eurosceptic parties:

1. Single-issue pro-sovereignty parties, that is, parties which are wholly opposed to European integration and which adopt a hard-Eurosceptic rhetoric.

²⁰ Wessels, 2007, p. 304

²¹ Cfr. Usherwood & Startin, 2013, pp. 5-6

2. Radical right parties, they fall within the ideological spectrum of sovereigns, and oppose the transfer of powers to supranational institutions. They often concentrate their communication on migration issues and the recovery of national sovereignty is considered essential for exercising a 'tight' migration policy.
3. Left-wing parties beyond the mainstream left, opponents of the 'neoliberal' social economic policy – towards which current European integration would be oriented –, the target of their criticisms is in particular the European financial and economic elite and the institutions in league with them.
4. Parties who are increasingly adopting a soft-Eurosceptic rhetoric, which adopt a critical line towards the European budget, the enlargement, and the future of integration. These parties are also driven by the need to realign in a political system where Euroscepticism is advancing, so they want to adapt themselves to both political opponents and an ever more Eurosceptic public opinion.

In conclusion, there are different types of Euroscepticism, as they are different in the ideological substratum but also addressed to different purposes, based on electoral strategies and different local contexts. The first and most important of the differences, however, remains that on the level of European identity. This element acts as a watershed between two visions of the Union: a skepticism that does not deny belonging to the EU identity on the one hand, and a skepticism of those who do not feel ties to the supranational political community on the other and which politically pushes for anti-integrationist instances.

1.1.2 The Crucial Step: Austerity and Debt Crisis

In the context of the global recession and the subsequent European debt crisis, the Eurosceptic discourse can be summed up in a criticism of the reaction of the European institutions. In the countries of the Mediterranean bloc, the so-called 'neoliberal drift' of the EU is essentially criticized because it would have exacerbated the effects of the crisis by triggering a process of deflation on the continent through austerity policies.²² This austerity policy, debated within the eurozone countries, is embodied by the set of budgetary control rules and procedures adopted by the euro countries over the years, i.e. first the Treaty on the European Union (1992), then the pact of stability and growth (1997) and finally the Fiscal Compact (2012). Set of policies that took place in coordination with the European Central Bank, an independent body whose purpose is the price stability within the eurozone, helping to blur even more the hierarchy of responsibilities in the eyes of citizens.²³ The great recession is not the triggering and provocative event of national debts – although sovereign debts have increased as a direct consequence of it – but it is the revealing moment during which all the problems of acute budget differences between the eurozone countries emerged. The center of the debate is not the global budget of the eurozone, but the internal disparities in it: while some countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, were in a situation of budget surplus, other members such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain were from an extremely negative trend for state budgets.

Finally, in addition to its on-going economic maladies, a potentially more significant outcome from the Eurozone crisis concerns the EU's political developments, of which Euroscepticism is but one aspect, with greater long-term damage potentially emerging through the imposition of 1930s-style austerity policies.²⁴

²² Leruth et al., 2017, p. 427

²³ Ibid., 2017, p. 434

²⁴ Leruth et al., 2017, p. 433

Many other issues would deserve to be dealt with in relation to Euroscepticism, among all the migrant crisis and the difficulties of the European institutional mechanisms, blocked by obstructionism and the impossibility of finding common agreements on numerous policies. Problems that have become increasingly important with the enlargement of EU to include Eastern countries. In addition to this the debate has often stopped on the common fiscal policy, with many reports about internal competition and inequalities in national budgets. However, for the purpose of this work, we will not delve into all these political issues, and just concentrate this work on the guideline of European debts and budgetary rules. To do this, after analyzing the meaning of Euroscepticism, we will observe its use in political practice, in particular by populist forces which have managed to insert themselves very profitably in the deep rifts created by divisions within the Union.

1.2 Populism: Meaning and Types

Populism is considered one of the main characteristics of contemporary politics. In the historical period following the 1960', the number of works on the theme of populism has steadily increased.²⁵ Some authors have come to consider populism an inevitable phenomenon given certain shock conditions (e.g. economic crisis) and have focused on what these conditions are and how they activate populism. In this way it becomes possible to compare populisms in different nation-states and to investigate the essence of populism as well as the different declinations that it assumes.²⁶ In the western world a recovery and a strengthening of populism occurred because of two economic shocks – the second very related to the first – the financial crisis in 2008 and the debt crisis in 2011, the latter relating only to the European Union. But in the context of this new renaissance and expansion of populism one cannot fail to consider the profound transformation undergone by the media system in the last twenty years with the advent of the internet era: first blogs and emails and then social networks, have revolutionized

²⁵ Cfr. Tarchi, 2015, pp. 274-275

²⁶ Zanatta, 2004

communication systems expanding the capacity of the people to connect and spread their ideas. In addition, the possibility of bypassing the gatekeeper role played by traditional media has opened ample space for the rise of new populist leaders. So, in the context of the exploit of populist forces across the western world, a worldwide debate is currently underway on the existence of a correlation between the wide spread of social media and the rise of populism. There is already academic work in this regard, including Gerbaudo²⁷ and Engesser²⁸, which confirm the link between social media and populism arguing that social platform affordances are favourable to populist mechanisms. But despite the fact that populism as a political phenomenon was studied from the twentieth century, a debate on its definition is still open today, and any work investigating the relationship between populism and social media cannot ignore the response to the first question: what is populism?. So, to proceed with an analysis of the populism of a leader, of a party or of a message, the first methodological passage is to define the concept of populism and the main characteristics of a populist style.

Secondly, after retracing the definitions of populism in literature, it is necessary to point out the existence of a populism-social media relationship, studied at an academic level and of growing interest on the international scene, in particular after Donald Trump's electoral rise. in the USA, characterized by a wide use of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, in the perspective of this work, it will be necessary to identify more precisely populism in Italy, its evolution over the last thirty years and its salient characteristics. Having analysed these three points: the definition of populism, the interplay between populism and social media and the Italian declination of populism, it will be possible to proceed to an interpretation of the style and rhetoric of the messages in the debate on ESM.

²⁷ Gerbaudo, 2018

²⁸ Engesser et al., 2017

1.2.1 What Is Populism: The Thin Ideology

Populism has been called a ‘thin ideology’²⁹ and as such adaptable to pre-existing ideologies. For this reason, we can speak of an extreme right populism and of an extreme left populism, each one with different characteristics. However, most studies have identified the reference to a clear distinction between us and theirs, the people's ingroup and the elite outgroup as a transversal and founding characteristic of populism. This distinction can be declined in different ways based on who is identified as part of the elite outgroup, but its presence remains a constant element in populist communication. We can therefore proceed to operationalize the populism of a message, evaluating the use of this type of narration: the “us against them”. For example, in the case of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the promoters' motto was we are 99% of people (against the richest 1%). The call to nationality and sovereignty of the people against foreign powers, the great intergovernmental organizations (and the internal elites that support them) made by the right-wing populism, acts as a parallel to this left-wing slogan. It is clear therefore that any operationalization of populism will be more effective if it considers the different faces of it.

A different type of operationalization considers the audio-visual component of populism, as the facial expressions and tone of voice of the political figures. Populist candidates tend not to respect the "traditional" rules of the game and to adopt behaviors considered not formally suitable for the context of the democratic debate. This is the case of Donald Trump and his management of journalists, his facial expressions of disappointment and his angry tone in the rallies. In the work of Bucy et al.³⁰ the correlation between the candidates' expressions and the level of reaction on social networks was measured, and from it emerged that Trump's level of mentions on social networks increased significantly consequently to his exhibition of facial expression. In this work audiovisual traits will not be examined, however, of central importance is the attitude of the leader to break the

²⁹ Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017

³⁰ Bucy et al., 2020

'rules of the game'. In this sense, we will see how the practice of name & shame is to be considered typically populist, and subversive with respect to the traditional rules of political debate.

So, the measurable populist traits are of different types and refer to both form and content of messages. For our work we have a set of tweets and consequently we will only analyze the textual and content component of them. We will operationalize the populism variable, starting from the academic definitions of populism but also considering the specific context of the debate.

1.2.2 Populism in Italy: Peculiar Uniqueness of the Italian Case

To operationalize populism in our case study, it is necessary to identify the features of Italian populism, its genesis, and its evolution in the context of the "Second Republic". The theme of the ESM cannot be separated from the Italian debate on participation in the single European currency, which began since joining the Euro in the 1990s and which developed most starting from the post financial crisis period of 2008 and the 2011 debt crisis. Several studies focus on the Italian declination of populism, attributing to Italy the role of "laboratory" of it and forerunner of some of the populist phenomena that occurred in the western world in the last two decades. In Bobba & McDonnell Italy is defined as "a strong and enduring market for populism"³¹ a market whose characteristics:

Derive, firstly, from the favourable structural conditions which have presented on different occasions for the emergence and success of populist parties and, secondly, from the astute agency of these parties in exploiting those structural conditions.³²

Bobba & McDonnell highlight how populism in Italy was functional to democracy, taking part in the process of breaking down the so-called "first

³¹ Bobba & McDonnell, 2015

³² Ibid., p. 163

republic" and ending the period of bipolarism in the "second republic". the same argument is repeated in Verbeek and Zaslove, where Italian populism is called "partly functional to democracy in helping bring down the First Republic, in contributing to establish more contestation, and thus in bringing Italy closer to a Dahlian polyarchy".³³

Just as populism has been functional to certain historical political passages in Italy, the Tangentopoli scandal has sanctioned the entry of populism into the Italian system. First through the Northern League, the ethno-regionalist party initially not involved in the corruption scandals, secondly with the affirmation of Forza Italia. As claimed in Tarchi:

Tangentopoli marked a further decisive turning point in the spread of populist outlooks in Italian society and politics. In the wake of the investigations into the corruption of governing politicians nationally and locally, invective against the public institutions reached a crescendo, as did the discredit heaped upon the parties, and the language of populism became, for at least 2 years the conventional language of Italian politics.³⁴

In addition to its functionality to democracy, a second peculiarity of Italian populism has been the reaction to him, which contributed to the generation of new populist forces: previously the birth of Forza Italia in reaction to the League's success, and then, after a presence of more than twenty years of these two parties in the institutions, arose a new reaction anti-elitist and anti-traditional party (among which Forza Italia and the Northern League were now considered).

Thirdly, several authors have considered how the response of traditional forces to populism has often been inadequate and devoid of the components observed in other countries, as a purging of populist or a strong demand for education.³⁵

³³ "Concept coined by the American political scientist Robert Dahl to denote the acquisition of democratic institutions within a political system that leads to the participation of a plurality of actors. Polyarchy, which means "rule by many," describes the process of democratization, in contrast to democracy itself" - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/polyarchy>

³⁴ Tarchi, 2015, p. 277

³⁵ Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016, p. 317

Instead of providing a strong response based on the cornerstones of democracy, the Italian populist-opponents, has often been indecisive and has adopted timid and changing strategies towards populism. To the point that in Verbeek & Zaslove argue: “We observe in Italy, on the one hand, what we will call mutating populism and, on the other hand, a peculiar mixture of paralysis, antagonism, and imitation by its opponents”.³⁶

The birth of Forza Italia in reaction to the league and the birth of the 5-star movement in reaction to traditional parties, which included Forza Italia and Lega, did not lead to the disappearance of any of these political forces, although Forza Italia has reduced by much his electorate. So that in the years following 1994 the totality of populist forces represented in the Italian parliament has steadily increased.

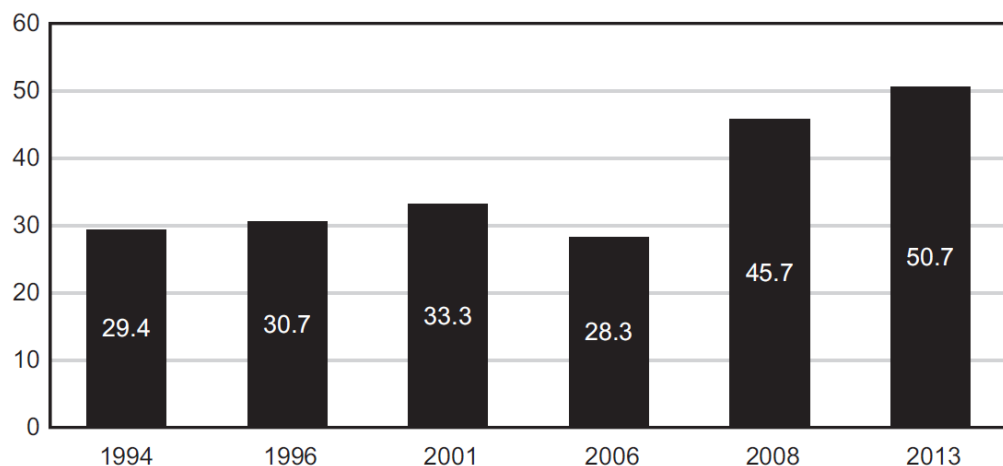


Figure 2: total populist vote in Italian general elections (1994–2013): refer to the proportional part of the elections for the lower house of parliament. The counted parties are PDL, LN and M5S (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015, 164).

At the turning point of the 2008 financial crisis, the focal point of the recovery of populisms in the western world, populism in Italy was already well established. This to the point that in 2013, following the 2011 debt crisis and two years of technical governance, populist parties obtained more than 50% of the total votes. The Italian case, in which different and multifaceted populist forces were born,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 305

also provides an example of the evolution of populism in power (as in the case of the Forza Italia and Lega Nord parties which have participated in various governments over the past twenty years).

We must consider how the birth of the Italian populist movements, at the end of the nineties and after 2011, coincides with two moments of economic and financial crisis, and the concept of crisis itself has been and is crucial within the rhetoric and message adopted by the populists.³⁷ As claimed by Moffit:

Crises are never 'neutral' phenomena but must be mediated and 'performed' by certain actors. It argues that populist actors actively participate in the 'spectacularization of failure' that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit 'the people' against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis [...] we should move from a conception of crisis as something that is purely external to populism, to one that acknowledges the performance of crisis as an internal feature of populism.³⁸

There are two aspects of the crisis to consider: the crisis as a trigger for populist phenomena and the crisis "performed" by the populists themselves. When in opposition, to point out the failures and betrayal of traditional parties, but also when in government, using it as a justification for the inability to deploy the proper government action. This is the case of the 2001-2006 and 2008-2011 periods, when the center-right populist majority government used the external conditions of crisis as an explanation for the failure to achieve the promised objectives.³⁹ But beyond the use of the crisis by populist actors, it is also necessary to consider the actual crisis condition in Italy in the context of the 90 'and the debt crisis of 2011. In both cases the government in office raised concerns on the part of the European Union, affected by the possible consequences of an Italian crisis. In the 1990s, the need for Italy to accelerate the reform process in view of joining the Euro led to the fall

³⁷ Bobba & McDonnell, 2015, p. 165

³⁸ Moffit, 2015, p. 190

³⁹ Bobba & McDonnell, 2015, p. 166

of the first Berlusconi government and the formation of the Dino-Ciampi technical government and the subsequent Prodi I government. Similarly, in 2011 fears of an Italian economic collapse due to debt unsustainability caused the fall of the fourth Berlusconi government and the formation of the Monti technical government.

In this context, it is of great importance to consider the role of the Northern League, which, driven by the need to differentiate itself from Berlusconi's populism, has alternated phases of alliance and phases of rupture with Berlusconi, but above all, at the level of political positioning has taken more extreme positions with a view to diversification:

The party sought to differentiate itself from the PDL and present itself as the sole defender of 'the people' against the elites of Rome, Brussels, and the financial markets amidst a situation of crisis.⁴⁰

In conclusion, Italy is particular for its populist phenomena, characterized by very fast ascents in moments of crisis, iteration between different populisms, the birth of populisms in reaction to the institutionalization of populist parties present on the scene for two decades, timid and mixed reactions from non-populists. It has been seen that among the causes of the Italian political peculiarity it is possible to cite the historical moment of the transition from the first to the second Italian republic, but it must also be highlighted how the Italian political system has been considered, by internal and external alike, structurally fragile, since the its establishment following the Second World War.⁴¹

However, despite the complexity and multifaceted variety of populist movements in Italy, a common line can be identified in the approach to the crisis as a 'performance': in both contexts of the 90s and post-2011 the role of the crisis in political discourse is fundamental and the debate gravitates in particular between two different poles, the pro-European and that of the opponents of the Brussels

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 172

⁴¹ Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016, p. 305

bureaucrats. In the first case under discussion were the reforms necessary for entry into the Euro, in the second case Italy's financial stability undermined by the debt crisis. For this reason, the rhetoric and the language of populists in Italy has inevitably taken on an evident anti-European meaning, where the European supranational power is seen as an opponent of national interests and prone to guaranteeing the prerogatives of other European states, such as in particular Germany and France.

1.2.3 Populism and Euroscepticism: a Very Strong Interrelation

In conclusion to this chapter, it is important to return to the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, as it would be wrong to consider the two phenomena to be completely superimposable. Euroscepticism is not characteristic of populist parties alone, even the less extremist and more traditional parties can adopt a soft Euroscepticism. This can happen when Euroscepticism becomes mainstream and no longer belongs only to extremist fringes. At the same time, however, we must consider how the extremist and populist fringes are the first to adopt a Eurosceptic tone, framing it in populist rhetoric. From this point of view, it is evident that it was populist Eurosceptic parties that increased the salience of Euroscepticism in European political systems.⁴² What happens is that when populist parties compete with traditional parties by threatening their status, the latter can react by adopting certain elements of the populist agenda. The assonance between Euroscepticism and populism is therefore not to be considered structural. It is the occurrence of the great recession that has proved a crucial opportunity for all populist parties for a major Eurosceptic electoral mobilization

The different crises thus extended the range of Eurosceptic frames typically employed by populist parties. Populists criticised European integration for its malign socioeconomic consequences, its threat to national sovereignty or cultural

⁴² Pirro et al., 2018, p. 3

homogeneity, the creation of an illegitimate supranational system of governance, or a combination of the above.⁴³

But even more interesting, once a Eurosceptic rhetoric centered on the socio-economic consequences of the crisis was adopted, the right-wing populist parties again turned to frames that are more familiar to them – and transversal to the parties of the various European countries unlike positions on issues such as common taxation – such as the legitimacy of supranational institutions and the cultural frame.⁴⁴

The works of Pirro, Taggart and Kessel therefore refer to a theoretical concept for which little research exists, the performance of the crisis, described in Moffitt's work seen above. The populist parties have acted in reaction to the European crises, not only the socio-economic one but also the migratory one, or on any other problem or difficulty within the union, such as the legitimacy of supranational institutions in contrast with the governments of individual countries. In Pirro & van Kessel work we see how the frame of legitimacy and sovereignty is used by all populist parties, while the cultural one is used almost exclusively by right-wing populists.

Maintaining their own basic ideological approaches, such as the division of society into people and elite, the populist parties have adapted and transformed their ideology into a Eurosceptic key. Based on this analysis in the work of Pirro and Taggart it is argued “that the coupling of populism and Euroscepticism may be partly situational”.⁴⁵ Thus in the adaptation of populism to Euroscepticism the European Union becomes interpreted as an elitist project carried out against the will of the people through undemocratic systems. And this is precisely the guideline of the populist Eurosceptic movements / parties: the accusation that in the end European institutions are not democratic and therefore legitimized to impose themselves on the will of the peoples and governments of the countries.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 2

⁴⁴ Pirro and van Kessel, 2017, p. 10

⁴⁵ Pirro & Taggart, 2018, p. 5

Therefore, even if the populist parties have at times taken different strategic choices, the common denominator of the frame of the legitimacy of the European institutions shows that “the easiest way to undermine the credibility of the European project, from a populist perspective, is to sustain a systematic criticism of its undemocratic character and inability to weather different crises”.⁴⁶ Precisely in the wake of the social economic consequences of the great recession, the populist parties attacked the decisions taken by the supranational elites, considered aimed at preserving the interests of large banks and multinationals rather than the interests of citizens. In a research by Conti⁴⁷, where a comparative analysis of the positioning of European parliamentarians is carried out, it is noted that traditional parties – in the work of Conti defined as 'mainstream' – in competition with populist parties have largely reacted by tending to isolate these last, and not adopting its Eurosceptic tones. It was not the traditional parties, but the extremist parties, which led to a shift of axis such as to make Euroscepticism an integral part of the European debate, becoming from simple fringes, important actors in the European context. It can therefore be said that the implantation of Euroscepticism in the European party system is due to the success of populist parties which have adopted the frame for electoral purposes, blaming Europe for the socio-economic consequences of the great recession. It follows that in Europe, Euroscepticism is a typical characteristic and referable almost exclusively to populist parties. As for the traditional parties, the question must be rather “whether mainstream politicians are also eager to publicly offer unconditional support for the ‘European project’”.⁴⁸

In the work of Pirro & van Kessel⁴⁹ the cases of Italy and Holland are comparatively analyzed. The comparative analysis of the two countries is of extreme interest as the Dutch and the Italian Eurosceptics are respectively in the hawkish block and in the Mediterranean block, thus having the same Eurosceptic attitude but opposing positions on the fiscal policies of the EU. In Italy

⁴⁶ Pirro & van Kessel, 2018, p.12

⁴⁷ Conti, 2018, p. 10

⁴⁸ Pirro et al., 2018, p. 7

⁴⁹ Pirro & van Kessel, 2018

Euroscepticism is shared by two of the current main parties, the 5-star Movement and the Northern League, theoretically rivals but who ruled together between 2018 and 2019. While the Northern League, adopting the economic, legitimacy and culturally frames, fully respects the classification that it is a populist right-wing party, the 5-star movement is characterized by a fluid identity and different internal souls. Only during the 2018-2019 government did it therefore embrace the cultural frame becoming a unicum in the European panorama among non-right-wing parties, change that can be considered due to the electoral competition with the League. In the 2018 elections - those that led to the formation of the government of the two parties - the league took 17% making it the first party within the center-right pole, while the 5-star movement took 32% making it the first party nationwide. The two forces alone occupy more than half of the seats in parliament, and it is necessary to consider that some opposition forces are also Eurosceptic, such as the other two center-right parties, Fratelli d'Italia and Forza Italia. Populism and Euroscepticism are to be considered not only systemic elements in Italian politics, but at present also preponderant forces in it.

Besides ascertaining the influence that these two parties may have exerted on each other, as of March 2018 populist Euroscepticism ostensibly is a majoritarian element in the Italian parliament. The traditional pro-EU balance of the Italian party system has thus been altered and the prospects for populist Euroscepticism may be greater than ever before.⁵⁰

In the study by Pirro and van Kessel already mentioned, the evolution of Euroscepticism in the two Italian parties involved, the League and the 5-star Movement, is also reconstructed. In both, an original socio-economic matrix of the frame is recognized, linked to the consequences of the great recession and based on a main topic then declined in several ways: the Italian crisis was due to its participation in the eurozone in the first place and to the elites world economic

⁵⁰ Pirro et al., 2018, p. 6

financial second. The cast of populist ideology is evident. On the basis of this argument any European supranational institution is rejected, any interference by the eurozone on the country's fiscal economic policy, even if based on institutional mechanisms, is considered unacceptable. This is the case of the European Stability Mechanism, a fund established within the eurozone to be able to provide low-level loans to participating countries in the event of budgetary difficulties. An instrument considered by the European elites necessary to avoid the repetition of coordination difficulties and uncertainties as in the case of Greece. However, given the economic and financial nature of the treaty, the opposition to it of the Italian Eurosceptic forces can be considered almost obvious.

1.3 New Media: the Paradigm Shift Brought by Digital IT

The term New Media is used to generically define all uses of digital technologies for communicative purposes. Online newspaper sites are also considered new media. The term is used in contrast to old media, which primarily includes traditional paper newspapers, radio, and television. The most qualifying features of new media are the possibility of using the content on demand at any time on digital devices. Within the new media, social media or social networks occupy a prominent position, which have upset the world of communication and the internet to such an extent that scholars speak of a "web 2.0". The effects of the social networks studied in the field of communication affect all new and traditional media. Effects that in a mediatized society spread in a chain on high media processes, such as politics. Studies in this regard are in strong growth, also given the epoch-making nature of some of the changes underway that are already visible in highly publicized events such as protests, presidential elections, or terrorist attacks around the world.

Given the partial overlap of effects between new media or digital media and the effects of their social media subset, the main set of new media will be used in some cases. Where, on the other hand, we will focus on the role of social networks,

this direct reference will be used, if not the reference to specific social networking platforms.

1.3.1 Effect of Social: the New Logic of Connective Action

As online media have become widely used, the functionalities they perform have expanded. First in web 1.0, that of information, then in web 2.0, that of social networks, an increasingly large slice of people read the news, get insights, and build their opinions on the internet. The growing share of information conveyed by digital channels leads to their growing importance in communication and political science studies. As the communication theory recognizes, the media is never neutral, and each technology has specific affordances that determine far-reaching consequences in the case of social networks, now used by billions of people (80% of those that have an internet connection).

Online media have recently become popular platforms of civic engagement. Citizens are using online media to inform themselves about policy issues and government actions, form political opinions, mobilize support from others and voice their needs and preferences to policymakers.⁵¹

Starting from this assumption in the work of Dennis & Becker, the logical path that leads from the democratic principle to the responsiveness of elected politicians is reconstructed in this way: “at the core of democratic theory is the argument that citizens should be able to influence the policies that govern their lives”, in a continuous trend towards “the congruence of collective public attitudes towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected representatives”.⁵² That is, since political leaders are elected and act on the basis of public opinion (the preferences of citizens), the places and means where this opinion is formed and in-formed are crucial in the socio-political dynamic:

⁵¹ Dekker & Bekkers, 2015, p. 1

⁵² Ibid., p. 2

At the core of democratic theory is the argument that citizens should be able to influence the policies that govern their lives. This requires that policymakers are responsive to public opinion. Responsiveness is defined as the congruence of collective public attitudes towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected representatives.⁵³

This is a logical framework that finds its foundation in 'classic' political science and communication studies, but to which is added the element of a new category of media, those online, and in particular of a typology of them: social networks.

Isolated this argument "in a democracy public opinion is the main factor affecting political action" we can identify the second key point in the medium theory, that is (in short), the media is not neutral and affects the message. Regarding traditional media, given their more ancient existence than digital ones, there is a wide literature,⁵⁴ where phenomena such as gatekeeping and mediatization are identified and described. On the other hand, digital media have brought about a revolution in the media world with different characteristics from traditional media. Through social media, the control of the gatekeepers is lost, also affecting the functions of the already existing media. Naturally, the new media have not completely replaced the traditional ones, which, due to their structure and resources, are not easily replaceable and still perform key tasks in the information sector. However, the new media have opened the possibility for political leaders to address the public directly and systematically avoiding the 'filter' operated by traditional media. In addition, a sort of space has been created for the 'alternative' media in contrast to the traditional media themselves. The classical system of mediation has become refutable and avoidable, not to mention that it has been transformed internally in reaction to these phenomena. However, the evolution of classical media will not be considered here, we will focus only on the more "direct" effects of the new media.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Esser & Strömbäck, 2014

From the point of view of social movements and collective actions, the transition to the digital age was even more crucial. Social networks provide the support and structure for mobilization processes, where each individual can inform and invite all the participants of their network to contribute, replicating a process that also occurs in the non-virtual world, but substantially lowering the effort required for the action. In this perspective, invitational acts have been studied, and two important conclusions emerge: 1) being invited to participate by someone present in one's interpersonal network is a predictor of future participation 2) the cost and risk associated with the action exercised online – as can be the sharing of a hashtag – are much lower than the costs and risks of participating offline. The phenomenon, defined micro-mobilization in Nekmat et al., is becoming a fundamental component of any collective action:

Processes of micro-mobilization via social networking technologies, where individuals are solicited by people in their online networks through messages informing and inviting them to contribute toward a common cause, are increasingly crucial in forming and sustaining collective action efforts.⁵⁵

The relevance of the digital component in collective action has therefore become such as to affect the organizational structures of social movements and large-scale protests. Studies on the logic of connective actions (concept that is the digital transposition of the classical theoretical framework of collective actions) are grafted on this guideline:

Large-scale, sustained protests are using digital media in ways that go beyond sending and receiving messages. The organizational dynamics that emerge when communication becomes a prominent part of organizational structure. The familiar logic of collective action associated with high levels of organizational resources and

⁵⁵ Nekmat et al., 2015, p .1

the formation of collective identities and the less familiar logic of connective action based on personalized content sharing across media networks.⁵⁶

The theoretical framework of the logic of connective actions, develops in the wake of the Castells network society and takes shape in the analysis of the protests that arose following the global recession of 2008. A case study is the Put People First (PPF) movement, which arose as a protest against the financial economic elite and the austerity policies decided in response to the global crisis. The relevant factor in this series of protests is that although they were sponsored by numerous non-governmental organizations, the protests nevertheless "seemed to operate with surprisingly light involvement from conventional organizations".⁵⁷

It is noted that the central objective of the protests are the neoliberal order and the austerity policies, central elements, as we have seen, also in the ideological frameworks of populism and Euroscepticism. One of the catalytic events in the physical world by PPF was a march of 35,000 people organized in London on the days of the 2010 G20 meeting, whose agenda was to decide on measures to respond to the crisis. The temporal coincidence between the moment of greater speed of diffusion of social networks and the explosion of the global recession is certainly an element worthy of research: how did this influence determine those convergences discussed today between social media and populism?.

Returning to the logic of collective actions, it is found that: 1) this logic increasingly shapes social life in modern democracies 2) the radical transformation in the adoption of this logic is that formal organizations lose their grip on individuals and the bonds of group are reformed on a different scale and consistency 3) the logic of connective actions derives primarily from social media. These transformations are at the expense of the sense of identity, of the "we" present in formal organizations. In parallel to the personalization of the contents, a personalization of identity and participation takes place:

⁵⁶ Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 739

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 741

These networks can operate importantly through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’.⁵⁸

There are therefore essentially two prerequisites of collective action that are absent in connective action: the collective identity of the group, and high levels of organizational resources:

Connective action networks are typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities.⁵⁹

Thus, the absence of strong organizational structures is reflected in the production of contents, which instead of deriving from the top and being hierarchically distributed are now co-produced, revealing “a different economic and psychological logic: co-production and sharing based on personalized expression”.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the transformation of the dynamics and economics of participation is radical. New psychological processes come into play in the activation of participation, such as individualized personal expression. We have seen how the phenomenon has been studied coinciding with the protests against austerity across Europe, consequential to the global recession. It is therefore essential to ask how institutions, traditional media and political actors react to the new dynamics of participation based on the logic of connective actions. In this work we focus in particular on the possible convergence between a specific type of political actor, the populist one, and a particular frame of the debate, the

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 748

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 750

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 752

Eurosceptic one. Can political actors and more traditional organizations, such as parties, enter the new dynamics and ride them instead of being excluded from the arena of alternative debate?

1.3.2 Echo Chambers: the Ideological Amplification

At the heart of the effects of the use of the Internet on public opinion remain the theories on echo chambers, self-sorting, and polarization. The theme exists regardless of social networks and the first works in this sense were already written in the first ten years of the 2000s. In 2007 an article by Cass Sunstein was published entitled "Ideological Amplification" where the phenomenon of personalization and filtering of news and opinions that takes place online is the subject of analysis. So in the American case, we are talking about the tendency of Republicans to read only Republican blogs and vice versa the Democrats, and the effect, according to Sunstein, is to create enclaves and niches where the starting opinions are strengthened and polarized. Sunstein himself recognizes that the phenomenon is not in itself negative, as in the past the enclaves have served as "generators" of new ideas which are sometimes adopted by the whole society. However, they were likewise the cradle of extremist movements. While not recognizing an absolute negative connotation of the phenomenon, it is clear that an exacerbation of it in the digital world is evident. This raises some questions, what are the effects, beneficial or evil, on modern democracies and societies?

1.3.3 Crisis Perception: New Media and Crisis Communication

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, populist ideology and the Eurosceptic frame use the concept of crisis to the point of being able to speak of a 'performance of the crisis'. In this regard, it must be specified that in the period analysed we cannot objectively speak of an economic crisis in Italy. However, the Italian GDP had the lowest growth among those of European countries in the post-2011 and the frame of the crisis, as we have seen, has never abandoned the public debate since then, often used by populist and Eurosceptic forces, over time become

majority in the country. For this reason, we will see the role and effects of new media in the context of crisis communication. In this sense, a work that can be considered parallel to this, by case of study and approach, is "Twitter, Public Engagement and the Eurocrisis: More than an Echo Chamber?", a research article focused on the role of Twitter in the communication of crisis during the acute phase of the Greek debt crisis. In the opening, the increased independence of the public is highlighted:

Digital media have ushered in a new era in crisis communication by restraining the control of traditional journalistic media and political leaderships over information flows on the one hand, and strengthening the informational and participatory independence of the public, on the other.⁶¹

But even more relevant is the role – found in the Greek case study – of the new media not only as an alternative, but also as the main and only arena for crisis communication, a space in which traditional media and institutions struggle to enter to develop the negotiation on the frame and the story.

In this sense, online media have opened up an asymmetric public arena for crisis communication, within which it is increasingly difficult for formal political institutions to claim or maintain their reputation and trustworthiness.⁶²

It should be noted that when the formal political institutions lose their reputation and credibility, the ground is fertile for the development of populist messages framed in the elite vs people scheme, where the elite are precisely the formal political institutions, in particular in the case of the European Union. The dynamics of framing in the context of crisis are inserted in this rift. Because “framing plays a significant role in crisis evolution and the attribution of meaning

⁶¹ Michailidou, 2017, p. 241

⁶² Ibid.

to a crisis”,⁶³ it follows that the places and the actors who co-produce the framing are essential in the public perception of a crisis. Furthermore, social media are used not only for communication but also for receiving information, to the point of becoming a complement or alternative to traditional media. This aspect is evaluated in van der Meer & Verhoeven, where it is highlighted that in the face of the increased role played by mass self-communication in the attribution of meaning to the crisis, there is still a gap in the related studies that fully investigate this aspect:

With the advent of social media, the public has gained the power to collaborate in crisis frame building, especially as a means of rapid mass self-communication. Currently, a gap remains in the field of Public Relations (PR) and crisis research regarding crisis framing by prominent actors.⁶⁴

Pushing to its final consequences the role of social media as a place for information, we come to hypothesize the effect of them on traditional media: once the information is disseminated and the frame established through social media, it is traditional media itself that adopt the frame established. Furthermore, the dynamics of the accountability crisis must be considered, that is, the perception of how the crisis is being managed by those in a position to manage it (political institutions). The reception of the policies adopted as countermeasures to the crisis depends on this, as in the case of the austerity measures following the global recession. Two are the key determining factors: the levels of public legitimacy and the coincidence between the discourse adopted by the rulers to justify the measures and public sentiment.⁶⁵ Public sentiment represents precisely the public perception around the problem, not only the magnitude of it, but also the perceived origins and the necessary solutions. Sentiment is an integral part of public opinion and its genesis and evolution over time passes through the media, both new and

⁶³ Schultz et al., 2012

⁶⁴ Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013, p. 229

⁶⁵ Brändström & Kuipers, 2003

traditional, according to the dynamics under discussion here. If the justification patterns of the crisis of the political institution do not coincide with those of public sentiment, a process of delegitimizing and loss of credibility is triggered. In the case of the European crisis, public opinion disagreed with the political elite on the need for austerity measures, not to mention that even before the crisis the European political institutions did not enjoy a broad consensus, but rather an elitist consensus mixed with the silent-assent of a majority.

Previous work on the link between crisis accountability in public discourse and the success of a crisis management strategy suggests that public reception is likely to be higher if the political actors involved in the design and implementation of counter-crisis measures: (a) enjoy elevated levels of public legitimacy; and/or (b) follow a justification pattern that coincides with the dominant ‘public sentiment’⁶⁶

Therefore, the interpretation of politics passes through justifications and arguments put in place through the media according to the way media work. In reaction to the need to make framing also on new media, organizations and political institutions must adapt to them and include in their strategy the way of communicating the crisis. This with the aim not only to reach as many people as possible, but also to participate in the mapping of the crisis. This function attributes to the online media “the potential to reconfigure the dynamics of crisis communication”.⁶⁷

The result is new process of information, protest, and organization, determined by the medium itself – online media and in particular social networks – with all the affordances relating to specific technologies. The global recession in 2008, the election of Trump in 2016, as well as the European debt crisis and the subsequent advent of populisms in the old continent, constitute two major macro case studies of this synergy between populism, crisis context and connective logic. This does not mean that the connective logic and affordances of social media have a causal

⁶⁶ Michailidou, 2017, p. 243

⁶⁷ Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 244

relationship with the advent of populisms, but rather that there is a convergence in the dynamics of phenomena. The crisis context, the de-legitimization of political institutions on the one hand, the co-production of contents, the absence of gatekeeping in co-production platforms and the dynamics of self-communication on the other. In the case of the ESM debate, the online public sphere becomes an alternative debate arena to traditional media, a dynamic very similar to that observed by Michailidou in the Greek Twittersphere during the debt crisis:

Links to their democratising archived material or external sources make it possible for online news readers to either follow news stories back in time or to get several different perspectives on a story simultaneously. Does the social media public sphere offer an outlet for alternative Eurocrisis discourses? Does it amplify the spectre of voices publicly raised about the issue?⁶⁸

1.3.4 Populism and Social Media: Effective Convergence

There is a continuous crescendo of literature about the interplay between populism and social media. The issue is quite recent, given the youth of mass social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, founded in the early 2000s. However, the mass use of these platforms has made them an element of very significant importance in the context of political communication:

Social media has inflicted and sustained a pivotal playing role in the way populists' campaigns are carried out and the ways political actors communicate and directly engage with the electorate.⁶⁹

The possibility of having a direct way to engage one's electorate is certainly the key element in this paradigm shift, which eliminates the passage for traditional media by bypassing their function as gatekeepers. It becomes even more relevant when we consider that the direct appeal to the people is one of the peculiar features

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 246

⁶⁹ Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020

of populism. The online environment allows the circumvention of traditional opinion leaders and facilitates what has been referred to as the ‘one-step flow of communication’.⁷⁰ This possibility is offered not only to political candidates but also to ordinary citizens:

On social media such as Facebook, both ordinary citizens and politicians are able to express their viewpoints on important societal issues, uncensored by the professional and ethical rules of the traditional mass media.⁷¹

The use of social networks to establish relationships and communicate with other users is of significant importance, as it is subject to a structural bias that leads users “to reach an audience of like-minded others”.⁷² Therefore, any discourse on the interplay between populism and social media cannot be limited to observing how new media eliminate gatekeeping at the entrance, but must also consider the internal mechanisms of social platforms and how affordances affect user behavior – at the level of creation of networks, dissemination of messages, selection of news. There is empirical evidence that receiving the message from personal sources increases its credibility.⁷³ The tendency to look for people who think the same way, is called homophily, and makes populism and social networks structurally adequate to each other.⁷⁴ The existence of this link is reflected in the fragmented presence of populism on social medias: populist rhetoric is found across nation, parties and leaders.⁷⁵ It can be said that social medias are an ideal stage for populist rhetoric. However, it would be a mistake to consider the social media category as a single granite block with identical characteristics. The affordances specific to each social platform entail a series of effects in the use. In the research work of Jacobs et al.⁷⁶ a model of use of the two most relevant social networks in the

⁷⁰ Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015

⁷¹ Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017, p. 1425

⁷² Ibid., p. 1426

⁷³ Nekmat et al., 2015

⁷⁴ Cfr. Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014, p. 318

⁷⁵ Cfr. Engesser et al., 2017

⁷⁶ Jacobs et al., 2020

political sphere, Facebook, and Twitter, is proposed, distinguishing them in the functions they perform for users. Facebook, they argue, is used to trigger emotions, mainly anger, in citizens. On Twitter the target is often journalists, through the mechanics of name & shame, with the aim of exerting pressure on traditional media workers in order to guarantee greater coverage in them. Twitter architecture is very suitable for public naming & shaming, making it possible to @-mention any other user.

1.3.5 Twittersphere and Refraction: Beyond the Echo Chambers

In the previous paragraphs we have seen how the heart of the theories around the effects of online media is the notion of self-selection – hence personalization, echo chambers, polarization. However, over time the studies on the effects have increased and theory as echo chamber has come into question, replaced by mixed approaches, where echo, refraction, and adaptation of the actors to new media come into play. Some studies, carried out on large datasets taken from social networks, hypothesize that the phenomenon of echo chambers has been overestimated.⁷⁷ A new notion studied is that of refraction: when content is shared several times on social networks – in particular through the mechanism of retweeting on Twitter – the content can ‘transform’ in the passage of sharing, that is, the user can accompany the sharing with its own text or counter-content, which invalidates the initial message. In this dynamic, called refraction, the messages travel outside the echo chambers, but receiving a framing which can also completely contrast with the initial content. In addition, a study by Rieder on refraction, notes that the most successful retweets are often those who add a twist, or spin, to the initial tweet – or to other shared content, such as news – in this way operating a sort of framing on it, which is shared too. The initial ideology can be completely dispersed in this passage, in favor of the ideology of those who relaunch the

⁷⁷ Barberá et al., 2015

content. Indeed, the content itself can be shared to express a negative opinion about it:

Users in mixed-attitude communities, where we are more likely to observe refraction rather than echo, are less significant to hold sharply polarised views, but more liable to express negative sentiment towards other users with differing views.⁷⁸

The dynamic in which polarization and tendency to build networks intersect is also weakened by the very structure of Twitter, where instead of bilateral relations, where two users establish a bond by making friends, each user can follow the other users without reciprocity. The result is much more complex than that which includes only the echo chambers and must be evaluated according to new perspectives such as refraction.

From this point of view, it becomes even more crucial to establish what is the role of Twitter in public opinion. In this regard, it is interesting to observe its evolution, starting from its genesis, also according to the words of the founders themselves. At the birth of Twitter Jack Dorsey, founder and owner of the platform, had in mind a microblogging space where you can share 'trivial' and 'banal' information with your circle, the classic example is the tweet about what you are eating for dinner . This was reflected in the platform's motto, which was then "What are you doing?". But in 2009, following the evolution of use by users, the tagline changes to "What's Happening?", meaning according to linguist David Crystal "A move from an ego to a reporting machine". The change is crucial to the push of the users themselves with their behavior and their use of the platform:

As Jack Dorsey, the Twitter co-founder, phrased it, Twitter also did rather well during disasters and elections, and subsequently became an event-following tool, at once shedding at least in part its image as a what-I-had-for-lunch medium⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Michailidou, 2017, p. 250

⁷⁹ Rogers, 2013, p. 356

There are therefore two guiding characteristics in this sense: 1) the immediacy of the data flow on Twitter, where the tweets remain visible for very short spans of time to the followers, to the point of talking about the 'stream' of the tweets. This means that the stream traces the flow of news in real time, where the most popular elements complete their life cycle and are replaced each time by the next topic; 2) the use of the hashtag to collect and organize the macro-themes. Initially not thought of in this way by the creators, even the hashtag can be defined as an innovation brought by the users themselves, who have started using it in this way. The platform then adapted and today each user can view the trending hashtags (in relation to his interests). In this way, news and in particular large collective events become trending hashtags on Twitter and function as information collectors.

Once considered a source of “pointless babble” about one’s lunch and a backchannel for interacting at an event [...] Twitter increasingly has come to be studied as an emergency communication channel in times of disasters and other major events as well as an event-following.⁸⁰

This implies the optimality of Twitter in crisis communication. Through the hashtag, tweets are collected, which describe and comment on the event according to the refraction dynamics seen previously. At that moment the clash over the framing of the news essentially takes place and a public sentiment of the platform is formed – often it is the hashtag itself that gives a spin or connotation to the news, as in the case of the hashtag #STOPMes which will be seen later. Ultimately, the specific dynamics of each social network determine different systems of incentives and approaches to use, in the case of Twitter it “provides opportunities for rapid crisis communication in response to the escalating character of crises and for frame negotiation and alignment.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Rogers, 2013, p. 363

⁸¹ Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013, p.231

2 Analysis: The Case Study Of The ESM Debate

The analysis was carried out with the aim of finding confirmation in relation to the theoretical guidelines outlined in the previous chapter. The dataset used, relative to the debate that took place over two weeks in which the ESM was a salient topic in Italy, has several elements and characteristics that make it peculiar and suitable for an analysis centred on three points: Euroscepticism, populism and dynamics of social media. We will not limit ourselves to framing the data collected in the theoretical structure outlined up to now, but we will try to hypothesize what the specific relationship between them is in our case study. For the purpose of structuring the chapter it was decided to divide the analysis into two parts: the first a method part, where the research questions, the hypotheses, and the models used to carry out the analysis will be identified from the point of view of the theory developed in chapter 1. In the second part the results will be exposed and commented.

2.1 Method

In the methodological description of this work we wanted to outline several elements: the theoretical framework, that is the connection between the elements presented in the theory and the aspects examined in our dataset. Secondly, a further element attributable to the theoretical framework was described, the conceptualization of Digital Movement of Opinion, useful for the purpose of research as a theoretical synthesis of various theoretical aspects concerning the connective actions and dynamics of social media. The hypotheses and research questions based on the theory already expressed were then formulated. Then we proceeded to the precise contextualization of the dataset and the description of the method of collection of it. finally, the last three paragraphs were devoted to three levels of analysis: content analysis, network analysis and bot analysis.

2.1.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used ranges from the field of pure political science to the field of analysis on big data. We saw in the last chapter that literature is adopted on three macro-themes: Euroscepticism, populism, and the effects of social media on communication. For the purposes of the analysis, Usherwood & Startin's theoretical framework will be used to classify the Euroscepticism of contents in the debate. As far as the populist component is concerned, the more classical operationalization will be used, that is the presence of an "us against them" rhetoric, declined as seen in the European context where the elite is represented by European supranational institutions. Moffit's conceptualization of crisis will also be central in assessing the performance of populist actors in mediating the crisis.

For the sole purpose of the analysis, given that the presence of a compact and unidirectional public sentiment on Twitter and its adversity to the ESM is assumed, the theoretical conceptualization of the Digital Movement of Opinion (DMO) will be used. DMO was so far employed only to describe opinion movements generated from below but in our case it will be applied to a movement of opinion of mixed origin (as will be seen) where different actors from above and below cooperate for the final result. This conceptualization, which is used to clarify the theoretical premises deriving from it, was not explained in the previous chapter as it is more necessary for the practical component of the analysis than for the discourse made up to now. However, by its very nature, it is at the crossroads of the different theoretical elements reported in paragraph 1.3 New Media. In the next paragraph a synopsis of the concept of DMO is reported, clarifying its theoretical premises.

2.1.2 Digital Movement of Opinion: a Useful Conceptualization

Castells defined the horizontal logic of internet communication, carried out through blogs and social networks, as "mass self-communication".⁸² The diffusion of digital communication has opened a new era in democracies by enormously increasing the possibilities of expression and the spread of messages from below. In addition, Papacharissi defines "Affective Networked Publics" those publics that drive daily topics of conversation on twitter.⁸³ Social media also increase the feeling of participation in the political sphere. This increase in participation is not only given by the technological potential, but also by the qualitative effects of the affordances of social media: "Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others".⁸⁴ So, storytelling practices facilitate the involvement of affective publics. For this reason, interpreting the role and the belonging of opinion leaders becomes a key step in understanding if a Twitter's debate was generated from above through the framing of facts, such as for example the ESM parliamentary story told by the deputies of the government and by those of the opposition. In the investigation of the ESM debate we used the theoretical framework of the "Digital Movement of Opinion" as described in Barisione & Ceron⁸⁵ and Barisione et al.⁸⁶, so we have to take on some of the same operational propositions: the comments on Twitter about the ESM can be considered an effective indicator of public opinion on the subject; if the comments are unidirectional they can start a DMO; a DMO can be accompanied by collective offline actions. In our case, the main collective action was a gathering of signatures against the ESM organized by the Northern League party and therefore generated from above.

⁸² Castells, 2013

⁸³ Papacharissi, 2014

⁸⁴ Ibid., 5

⁸⁵ Barisione & Ceron, 2017

⁸⁶ Barisione et al., 2017

2.1.3 Research Questions and Hypothesis

Does the debate on ESM that took place in the Italian Twittersphere have populist and Eurosceptic salient characteristics? Is the public sentiment that emerges from the Twittersphere in the period in question representative of Italian public opinion at the time? Is there a convergence between the communication dynamics of some political actors – parties and exponents – and the affordances of Twitter as a social network?

It is hypothesized that given a convergence of dynamics between Eurosceptic populist actors and twitter Affordances, adopting the logic of digital communication and connective actions, some political forces implement a performance of the crisis by creating a false public sentiment that determines the subsequent framing of certain events. The question remains, why some political actors are less able to participate in the framing game on Twitter and do not adopt the same strategies as their opponents? Is there a convergence between the dynamics of communication on the new media and populism that inevitably favors the latter? Or is it possible that such a phenomenon can only be contextualized in a specific crisis scenario, where traditional non-populist institutions undergo a process of delegitimization?

2.1.4 Context: the European Stability Mechanism and Its Reform

The European Stability Mechanism is an international organization with the aim of ensuring the financial stability of the euro area. It was established by the amendments to the Lisbon Treaty ratified by the European Council on 25 March 2011 and has been in effect since July 2012. It takes the form of a financial fund which can issue loans (or use other tools) to provide financial assistance to countries in difficulty. The shares of the financial fund are calculated starting from the population and the gross domestic product of each state in relation to the overall one of all the participants. The fund is managed by the Board of Governors made up of euro area financial ministers, a Board of Directors appointed by the Board of

Governors and a general manager. Are also part of it as observers the European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the President of the ECB.⁸⁷

In Italy, the ESM reform process started in June 2018. Subsequently, in December 2018 the prospectus of the reform was approved and in June 2019 an agreement was reached on the draft revision of the treaty, which represents the agreement on which the discussion is still based. At the time of these steps, the Italian government in office chaired by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, was supported by a coalition between the 5 Star Movement and the Northern League. In the summer of 2019, the Italian government fell, and a new cabinet was formed supported by a coalition formed mainly by the 5 Star Movement and the Democratic Party and still led by Giuseppe Conte. The national debate on the ESM started on November 19, 2019 when the leader of the Northern League Matteo Salvini criticized the reform⁸⁸, from the benches of the opposition, with these words: «The yes to the modification of the ESM would be the ruin for millions of Italians and the end of national sovereignty». In the following days, the debate took on national proportions developing in parliament, in Italian media and on social media. On December 2, the prime minister reported in parliament on the case and was accused by opposition deputies of "high treason".⁸⁹ The 5 Star Movement, in government both during the beginning of the ESM reform process and at the time of the opening of the debate, took an ambiguous position declaring itself not entirely favourable to the reform and referred to the opposition parties having approved the first version of the ESM as well as having participated in the first revision phases. Meanwhile the democratic party defended the government's work while highlighting some critical points in the reform while also leaning against the political opportunism of the opposition. In the following two weeks, the debate was consistently present in the national media, in particular in conjunction with salient events of the political clash, such as the question of Prime Minister Conte

⁸⁷ <https://www.esm.europa.eu/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/11/20/salvini-di-maio-mes/>

⁸⁹ <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/12/02/foto-senato-mes/>

in the Senate, and the Senate's favourable vote on a non-binding resolution to ask the government approving the reform based on certain conditions.⁹⁰

2.1.5 Sampling

Through the hashtag #MES – in Italy the abbreviation 'MES' corresponds to that of 'ESM' – we collected the tweets regarding the debate, albeit with some limitations due to the Twitter API, in the period in which the debate was one of the salient topics at a national level. In total, 249.500 tweets were downloaded, all published in the period from 21 November to 12 December 2019.

We collected all the tweets available with the Twitter API in the period between 21 November and 15 December, during the period in question the debate took place on a national scale, punctuated by some key events including the Senate vote on the ESM and the parliamentary questioning of Prime Minister Conte. Initially, tweets were collected before and after the above period, then the dataset was limited to the days when the Twitter API returned more than 1,000 tweets. before November 21 and after December 15 the debate was not a salient topic at national level and for this reason the number of tweets on the subject was much lower. In total, the dataset consists of 241,500 tweets. The dataset includes a series of metadata on tweets including the author of the tweet, the publication date, the author of the post retweet. The chronological trend of the number of tweets collected can be traced back to the performance of the key passages on the ESM in the debating chambers of the parliament. Once the tweets were extracted, we verified the presence of tweets unrelated to the key topic and we found none, therefore we can estimate the possible presence of tweets unrelated to the topic has no significant impact on our analysis.

⁹⁰ <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/12/12/senato-approvato-risoluzione-mes/>

2.1.6 Content Analysis

Social media have now become a huge source of data which, however, are disorganized and often difficult to interpret. For research in the field of communication, a new perspective emerged of having an ocean of information available, freely accessible in the case of some social networks, such as Twitter, information that becomes exceptionally useful for the ease and quantity with which it can be found. The challenge for communication scholars has been to incorporate new techniques to study the available data:

At the intersection of computer science and social science, communication scholars have incorporated computational techniques to study massive databases of media texts, especially the content flows of social media.⁹¹

At the centre of this new large availability of digital texts are social media, on which billions of people produce textual or audio-visual materials every day – just think that about 80% of internet users, or two billion people, have an account Facebook. To the point that:

The exponential growth of social media and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter raise the possibility of using the web to explore and track the (political) preferences of citizens. It has also been noted that merely counting mentions or tweets is not sufficient to provide accurate foresight.⁹²

One of the most interesting perspectives is the possibility of partially automating the content analysis process. In the classic definition, content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”.⁹³ Content analysis is a technique that can be used regardless of the existence of digital methods, however, new

⁹¹ Lewis et al., 2013, p. 35

⁹² Ceron et al., 2013, p. 341

⁹³ Berelson, 1952, p. 18

possibilities have opened up with technological innovation that allow us to overcome problems related to traditional coding.⁹⁴

The very architecture of social media determined what the structural characteristics of digital communication were, such as in the case of the hashtag of Twitter as a collector.

Hashtags function primarily as metadata tags facilitating the retrieval of content from the site. In this article, however, I will argue that the role of hashtags has developed beyond their original purpose, and I will suggest that they now also function to guide readers' interpretations.⁹⁵

In our case, the use of the #MES reference allowed us to collect tweets related to the topic with considerable precision. It should be noted that even within the platform in the period in question the use of the #MES hashtag was encouraged as it was trendy – the use of a trendy hashtag allows you to appear in the series of tweets relating to that hashtag.

Once the dataset was extracted as we were interested in the daily trend, we worked both on daily tweet subsets and on the complete dataset. For each day we extracted a random sample and labeled it, finally we labeled a causal sample extracted from the complete dataset. The set of tagged tweets was used to train an NLP classifier algorithm with which the remaining tweets were tagged.

The tweets were labeled based on search needs in the following way:

1. Tweets that express a clearly negative opinion towards the reform of the ESM and its effects on the Italian system. The framing used is that of "betrayal" by Prime Minister Conte who is accused of having acted without the consent of the parliament. These tweets come almost exclusively from parliamentarians, politicians, journalists, and other profiles, all related to the Italian political area of the center-right and the Northern League and Brothers of Italy parties plus some

⁹⁴ Lewis et al., 2013, p. 38

⁹⁵ Scott, 2015, p.8

tweets from the most extreme area of the left, such as those of Stefano Fassina, exponent of the Free and Equal Party. This is most tweets, and they cover about ninety per center of the dataset in some days. Most of these are retweets from a set of more influential tweets produced by those who participated directly in the parliamentary action, such as the deputy Claudio Borghi of the Northern League.

2. Tweets related to the ESM topic but that do not express a negative or positive opinion: this group includes tweets from newspapers or individual journalists that update the public on the development of the story but also tweets from the political area, largely attributable to the 5 Star Movement. This party, the first force of both governments of the legislature, participated fully in the ESM reform process. However, when they were attacked on the issue, in an attempt to defend themselves, they took an ambiguous position, referring to the opposition political opportunism (because of having first carried out the reform of the EMS) and almost never clearly expressing a qualitative judgment on the reform (but when this judgment is expressed most of the time is with negative tones).

3. Tweets that express a positive opinion on the reform of the ESM, characterized by an often technical language, that illustrate the mechanics of the fund and demonstrate the benefits, adopting a skeptical language towards the government opposition, accusing them of opportunism and reminding them that they were previously supportive of the ESM. These tweets are partially attributable to the democratic party but in large part they come from less politicized figures such as Carlo Cottarelli president of the Observatory on Italian Public Accounts.

Sampling

Date	Population	Sample
25/11/2019	1681	129
26/11/2019	5873	136
27/11/2019	22007	139
28/11/2019	21447	139
29/11/2019	13073	138
30/11/2019	9341	137
01/12/2019	14251	138
02/12/2019	30190	139
03/12/2019	21643	139
04/12/2019	16530	138
05/12/2019	12307	138
06/12/2019	5485	136
07/12/2019	3539	134
08/12/2019	6558	137
09/12/2019	10232	138
10/12/2019	5554	136
11/12/2019	19862	138
12/12/2019	12720	138
13/12/2019	4899	136
14/12/2019	2936	133
15/12/2019	1463	127

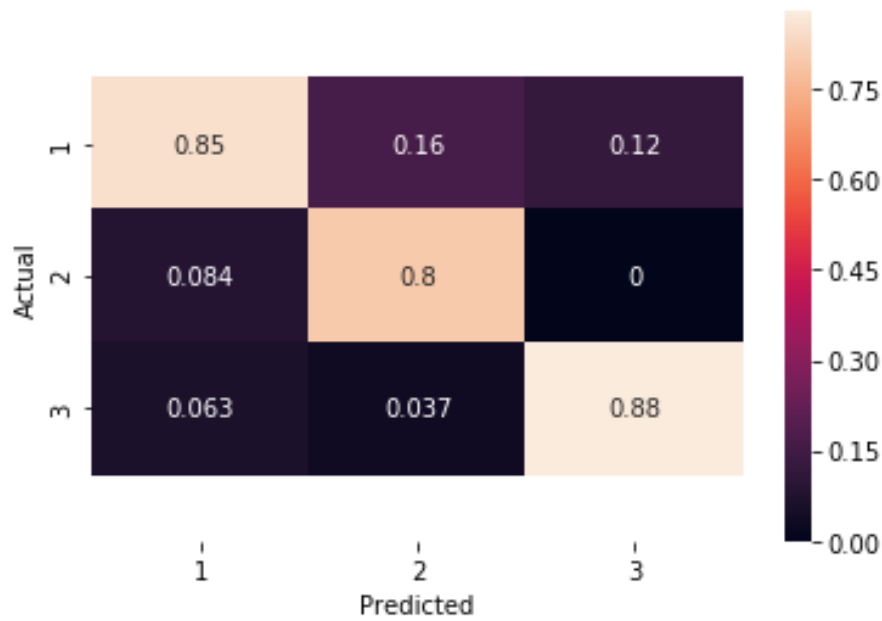


Figure 3: Confusion matrix of the NLC classifier used to predict labels

The labeling was carried out on the random samples extracted for each of the 14 days, the sample size was varied based on the number of daily tweets collected in order to guarantee confidence and the desired margin of error. The set of tagged tweets was used to train a Watson native language classifier,⁹⁶ which then tagged the entire dataset. The result was checked by re-extracting a random sample of the tagged tweets from the classifier and manually relabeling them to generate a confusion matrix. Given the control values, reported in the confusion matrix, the accuracy level of the classifier was considered valid.

⁹⁶ <https://cloud.ibm.com/apidocs/natural-language-classifier>

2.1.7 Network Analysis

The network analysis was aimed at two purposes: 1) to confirm the three clusters of content and deployment proposed for the content analysis, i.e. the group of those against ESM, the group of those in favour of ESM, and the group that for comfort we will define of 5 Stars Movement, but it is essentially the set of who are against ESM and are part of or support the government team 2) obtain a graphic rendering of the debate that would highlight the main nodes of it and the structuring in groups. For the analysis we extracted from the dataset the set of all the retweet relations, used as connections, and of authors, used as nodes. The network was processed with Gephi⁹⁷ to obtain a graphical display where the size of the node depended on the quantity of retweets received.

2.1.8 Bot Analysis

With the growing importance of social media, used for political communication and as a means of information, the topic of social bots has become of crucial importance. If social media are a tool through which the opinion of citizens is formed, the effects of any distortion of their metrics and contents can be decisive. According to the definition “a social bot is a computer algorithm that automatically produces content and interacts with humans on social media”. Compared to the problem of the dissemination of fake news the criticality is no longer the accuracy of the information, but the risk that to be manipulated is the popularity of the information itself (regardless of veracity), creating an idea of false success and approval that affects the real human user. And in the same way that bots can be used to give the false impression of support and popularity, they can also serve to create the opposite impression, i.e. that of widespread resistance and opposition. Furthermore, given the contagiousness of emotions on social media, the use of social bots can have as its goal the generation of moods, such as anger and fear. The need to control and react to the phenomenon has led to the

⁹⁷ <https://gephi.org/>

development and creation of increasingly sophisticated bot detection systems, which, however, are followed by more advanced bots designed to circumvent such systems. So, “One of the greatest challenges for bot detection in social media is in understanding what modern social bots can do”.

In order to carry out an analysis of the accounts present in our dataset, we used one of the most widespread tools for researchers, Botometer, which is a detection algorithm based developed by the Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) and the Network Science Institute (IUNI) at Indiana University. Botometer analyzes all public characteristics of a profile – private accounts cannot be scanned – and returns a series of values on the similarity of the user's behavior to that of social bots. The classification by observing the meta-data of the users generates more than a thousand features which are grouped into six classes. Each class corresponds to one of the possible aspects to be examined, such as the network, the information about the user, the information about his contacts, the time patterns of the user, the content and the sentiment. These indicators are not explored in detail as for the purposes of our work we limited ourselves to observing the summary score between the categories, the Complete Automation Probability (CAP), a Bayesian estimator of the probability that the account examined is a bot. It is our interest to detect not only the presence of bots in the debate but also their possible purpose, so if they have been used by one of the parties in the field for an astroturfing operation, for this reason we will observe the presence of social bots divided on the three categories of debate identified in this chapter.

Relevant Features

Feature	Description
Euroscepticism	
Authorities	Negative attitudes towards public officials and institutional actors that exercise EU governance
Regime	Negative attitudes towards the political values, norms and structures of the EU
Community	Negative attitudes towards other citizens understood as fellow members of the European collective
Populism	
People Vs Elite	Presence of the basic populist frame, division of society into people against elite
Performing Crises	Feeling of urgency because of institutional or economic crisis
Social Media Dynamics	
Connective Action	Mobilization from below, appeal for the re-sharing and dissemination of the message
Refraction	Re-sharing of contents with addition of text that affects message interpretation
Delegitimization	Formal political institutions considered not legitimate, accusation of treason and request for resignation

2.2 Results

The results are presented according to the three levels, content, network, and presence of bots, already identified and described on a methodological level in the previous chapter. In each paragraph the rites are commented on, but reference is made to the conclusions for the connection between research questions and results. In addition, on a qualitative level the main tweets and influencers present on the network were analyzed.

2.2.1 Content Analysis: a One-Way Debate

The trend in the number of total tweets (also counting the retweets) is temporally related to the trend of the events and mainly to some passages in the classrooms of the parliament. As can be seen in Figure 1, the absolute peak occurred on December 2 when happened the chamber and senate hearings of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. There are also two secondary peaks, on November 27, on the occasion of a physical clash in the Senate between some parliamentarians, widely reported in the Italian media and on December 12, on the occasion of the approval of the (non-definitive) reform. The relationship between the number of tweets and retweets, clearly unbalanced in favor of the latter, indicates a debate led by a few opinion leaders. By analyzing the most shared tweets and identifying the central nodes through the analysis of networks, we have identified the main actors of the debate which are mostly attributable to the political sphere. Some of them are parliamentarians who actively participated in the debate by reporting on their follow-up on social media. For example, the second most re-tweeted tweet ever was produced by Claudio Borghi an MP from the opposition and belonging to the Northern League party:

@borghi_claudio: Tutto quanto detto da Gualtieri è gravissimo e evidenzia comportamenti che potrebbero anche configurare eversione. Conte ha nei fatti approvato un testo definitivo e inemendabile senza alcun dibattito in parlamento. Che il presidente si cerchi un avvocato. #AudizioneGualtieri #MES

The tweet refers directly to the hearing just held in the Senate by the Minister of Economy Gualtieri and expresses a position of strong disagreement outlining a picture of interpretation of the news.

Figure 2 shows the daily trend of the tweets belonging to the three different "pro", "neutral", "against" positions, while in Figure 3 the relationships between the three positions are quantified. The "against" position is predominant on a total level but also on each of the individual days taken into consideration. Figure 4 shows the confusion matrix of the NLC classifier used.

Finally, figure 5 shows a graphic rendering of the network, made using retweet relationships as arcs. As can be seen, the analysis of the networks confirms the existence of three main clusters, one of which, that of users "against" the reform of the ESM is predominant over the others.

It can be seen that the first peak of tweets against the ESM does not correspond to a peak of favorable or neutral "response" tweets. From this emerges a role of generators of the debate on the part of the no ESM influencers who put the topic on the Twitter platform first. In general, in the entire period of the debate, there are a preponderant number of tweets opposed to the ESM. The peaks at key events reflect Twitter's backchanneling function. Events that took place in the real world were commented on when not reported on social media. As will be seen in the last paragraph of this chapter, there are several Tweets from the most important node of the network, Claudio Borghi, who tell the events live from the chamber of parliament.

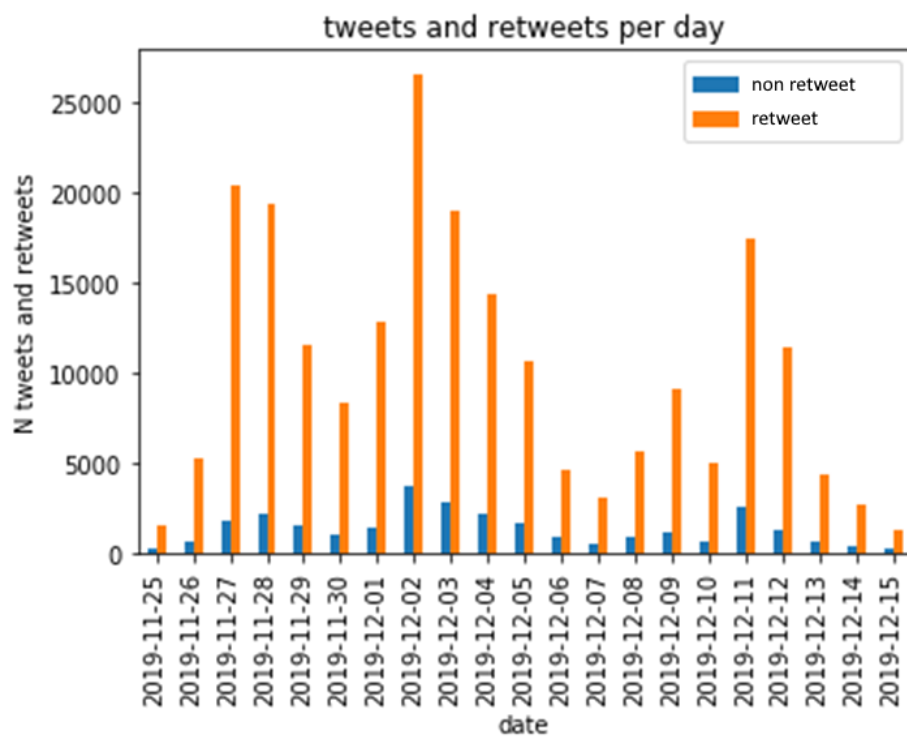


Figure 4: Distribution of tweets and retweets with the hashtag #mes

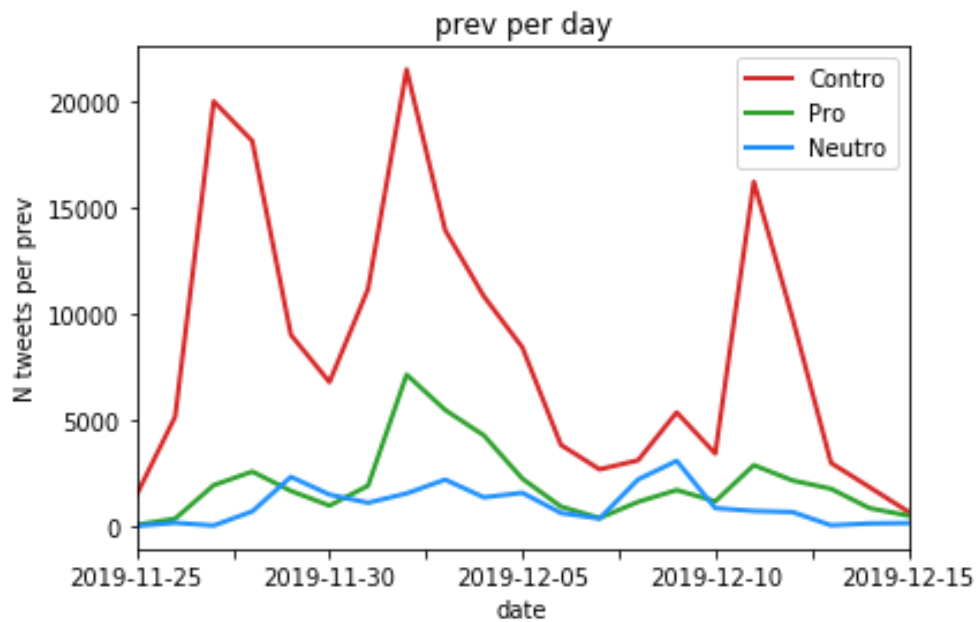


Figure 5: Percentages of tweets according to tags in the period

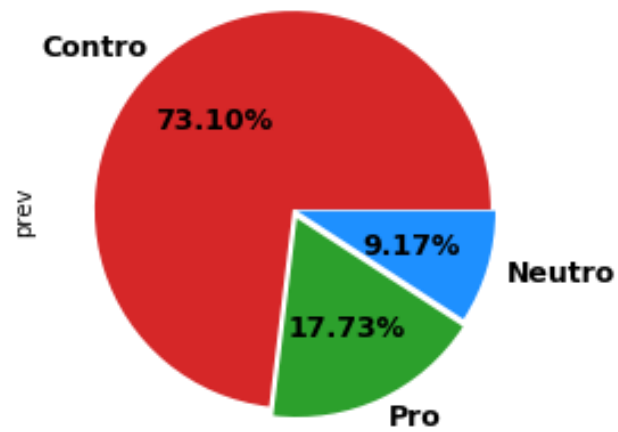


Figure 6: Distribution of tweets for the three labels "pro", "against", "neutral"

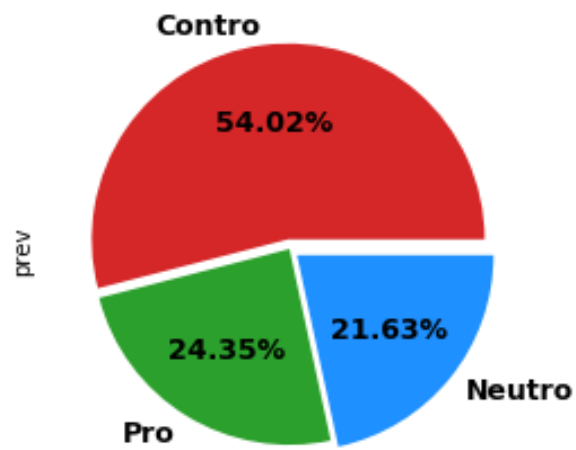


Figure 7: Distribution of users for the three labels "pro", "against", "neutral"

Media ultimi 15 giorni e confronto con due settimane fa

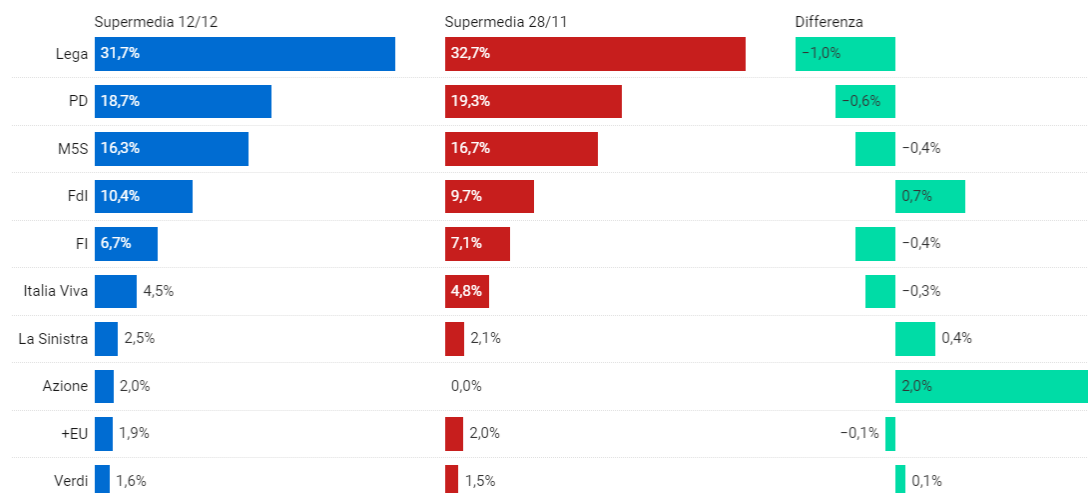


Figure 8: Average of various surveys on Italian political preferences in the period indicated.⁹⁸

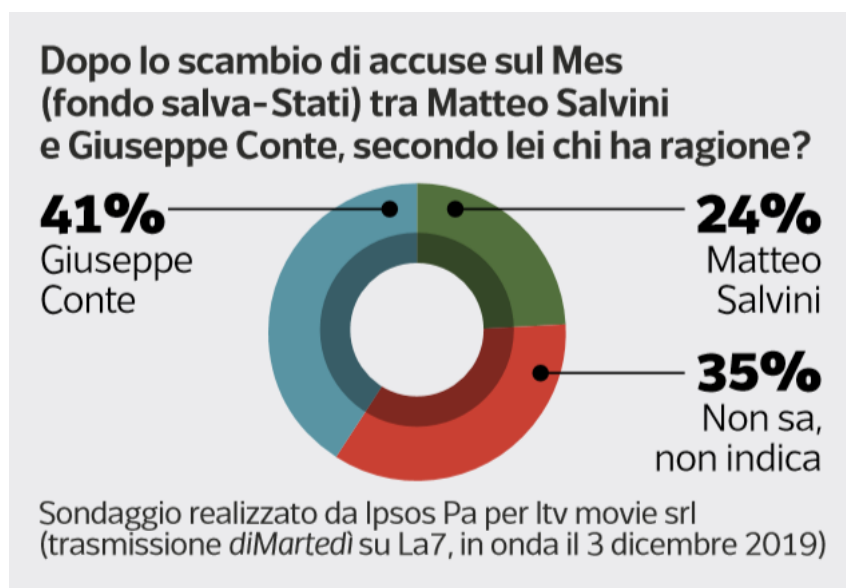


Figure 9: Result of a survey published in the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the leading Italian newspapers, on December 5, 2019.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ <https://www.youtrend.it/2019/12/13/supermedia-sondaggi-politici-12-dicembre-calano-tutti-i-partiti-piu-grandi-tranne-fdi/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.nextquotidiano.it/sondaggio-mes-gli-italiani-con-conte-e-contro-salvini/>

2.2.2 Network: Three Subnets in the Debate

The aim of the network analysis was first of all to confirm the existence of three macro-groups of content type, those used for tagging in content analysis. Secondly, we wanted to identify and graphically highlight the central nodes and the isolation between the different groups. In figure 5 we can see how the three groups correspond to the three labels used. But even more interesting, the ambiguity of group two emerges, the governmental one but contrary to the ESM, which while partially isolating itself is strictly connected to group one (government opposition, total opposition to the ESM). Group three forms an island of its own, however, retweet ties are numerous even extra-groups. Note that the node size, based on the number of retweets received, does not measure the quality of retweets and phenomena such as refraction. As we have seen above, Cottarelli's retweets can be extremely negative towards the original tweet, while increasing its overall relevance in the network.

Observing the most relevant issues, it stands out that in groups three and two these are almost exclusively public or political figures, opinion leaders or party profiles. In group three, although the most important node remains that of the Lega deputy Claudio Borghi, most of the most influential nodes belong to 'common' profiles of users without positions and public visibility in traditional media. But the most interesting element is certainly how the main node of the network favorable to the ESM is comparable in number of retweets to the main node of the network contrary to the ESM. Analyzing the retweets received by Claudio Borghi and Cottarelli, it was found that while the retweets to villages almost exclusively meant support for the deputy, many Cottarelli retweets were made with negative comments against the original tweet, confirming the presence of a more complex phenomenon than the traditional echo chamber, where even the refraction dynamics comes into play.

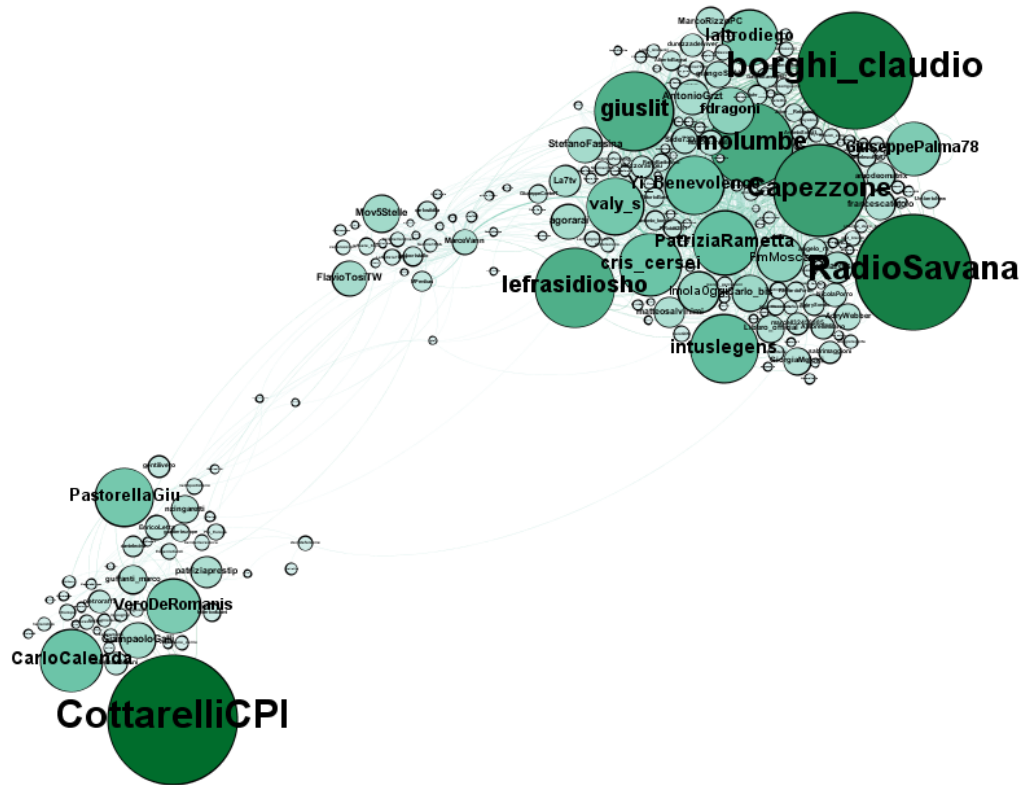


Figure 10: Network of authors weighted by number of retweets.

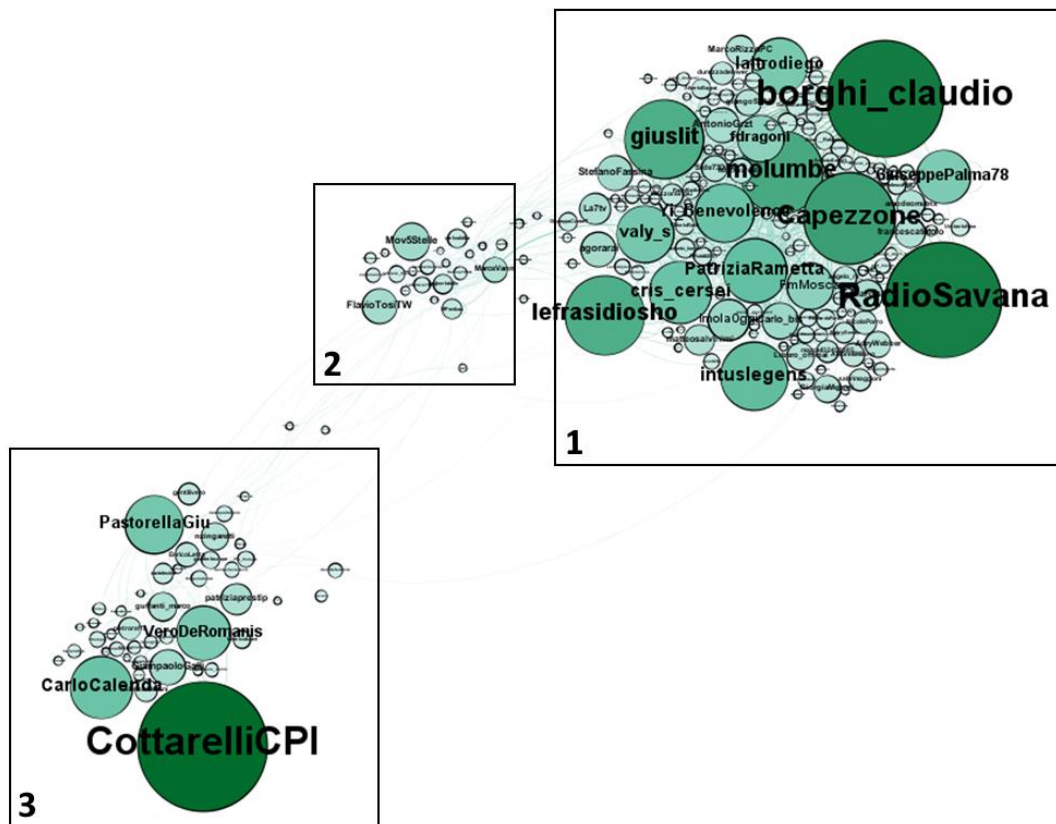


Figure 11: Figure 10: Network of authors weighted by number of retweets, cluster detected.

2.2.3 Bot: Result of the Analysis

Upstream of the analysis of the bots, there was expected a possible presence of them aimed at inflating the main frame of the debate, the one against the ESM, with the aim of feeding an illusion of numerousness. However, the entire dataset was analyzed with the aim of also having a control group and being able to carry out a precise analysis. The result of the analysis is that there is no significant presence of bots in the debate and such as to make further investigations necessary.

Figures 11 and 12 show the frequency (figure 11) and the relative frequency (figure 12) for each decile of CAP punctuation, divided by the three categories of opinion identified in the debate. In none of the three categories there is a relevant number of users with a high probability of being social bots. More than 96% of users have an estimated probability of being social bots between 0 and 20%. However, it was also considered necessary to analyze the total contribution to the debate per quintile, as it is possible that the accounts estimated as probable bots have made a high number of shares and retweets. As a measure of 'overall presence' in the debate, the distribution of frequency on the original dataset was used - therefore not considering the single authors but the total set of tweets -. Figures 13 and 14 show how the global presence in the debate was not greater than that of normal users, but rather, they are under-represented from this point of view. This measure is definitely not a definitive proof of participation in the debate, as it does not take into account a possible activity of astroturfing that has gone under the radar, for example the bots may have put a series of likes, or they may have re-tweeted temporarily to relaunch certain tweets and then deleted the retweet to leave no traces. However, given the collected dataset, there is no significant presence of social bots or of their imprint in the debate.

interval	(0.0, 0.2]	(0.2, 0.4]	(0.4, 0.6]	(0.6, 0.8]	(0.8, 1.0]
prev					
1	15630	293	128	80	53
2	5894	110	60	30	18
3	4862	103	38	30	12

Figure 12: distribution of CAP probability of unique authors for each category

interval	(0.0, 0.2]	(0.2, 0.4]	(0.4, 0.6]	(0.6, 0.8]	(0.8, 1.0]
prev					
1	0.965	0.018	0.007	0.004	0.003
2	0.964	0.017	0.009	0.004	0.002
3	0.963	0.020	0.007	0.005	0.002

Figure 13: percentage distribution of CAP probability of unique authors for each category

interval	(0.0, 0.2]	(0.2, 0.4]	(0.4, 0.6]	(0.6, 0.8]	(0.8, 1.0]
prev					
1	154750	1245	385	168	805
2	38301	425	155	94	116
3	20494	225	79	43	15

Figure 14: distribution of CAP probability for any tweet for each category

interval	(0.0, 0.2]	(0.2, 0.4]	(0.4, 0.6]	(0.6, 0.8]	(0.8, 1.0]
prev					
1	0.983	0.007	0.002	0.001	0.005
2	0.979	0.010	0.003	0.002	0.002
3	0.982	0.010	0.003	0.002	0.000

Figure 15 : percentage distribution of CAP probability for any tweet for each category

2.2.4 Main Influencers and Frames

In the first twenty tweets for the number of retweets, a mix of different authors appears by sphere of social belonging. The two most influential profiles are that of a deputy from the league opposed to ESM, Claudio Borghi, and that of an Italian economist who is not political but close to the political sphere, Carlo Cottarelli, who is in favour of ESM. In the field of set two, that of the 5-star movement, we find the official profile of the party as the most important node. In the field of people opposed to ESM we also find a journalist, Daniele Capezzone, and a series of users with unofficial roles in the world of politics and the public world but with a good following on twitter. The same cannot be said for sets two and three where the main nodes are almost exclusively public figures, often politicians or journalists of national importance.

In the entire network analyzed Claudio Borghi is the most relevant node, and several of his tweets are among the most retweeted. Claudio Borghi has been an MP for the League since 2018, and within the same party he also holds the role of economic manager. He has always adopted anti-euro positions together with the other leading economist of the party, Alberto Bagnai. On Twitter he counts the number of 98,000 followers. His role as a deputy has placed him at the center of the parliamentary affair of the ESM, from his privileged position in the hall of parliament he commented on the crucial steps that took place in the two weeks under analysis.

*@borghi_claudio: Tutto quanto detto da Gualtieri e gravissimo e evidenza
comportamenti che potrebbero anche configurare eversione Conte ha nei fatti
approvato un testo definitivo e inemendabile senza alcun dibattito in parlamento.
Che il presidente si cerchi un avvocato. #AudizioneGualtieri #MES
2019-11-27 13:49:39*

This tweet by Claudio Borghi does not directly present elements of populism or Euroscepticism. The most important aspect is its typical backchanneling function, the deputy is inside the parliament and comments on the action in

progress, namely the hearing of the economy minister Gualtieri in the chamber. Terms such as "very serious" and "subversion" are used which then launch a predominant frame in the debate, that of "betrayal" by the government. The reference is exclusively to national politics, even if it is implicit that the betrayal occurred by approving a reform of European origin.

@borghi_claudio: Non ho parole, e già sparito anche il "pacchetto", perché il MES si approva subito, anzi, è già approvato (???) e gli altri punti basta che sia individuata una ROADMAP. Questi sono pazzi, sono pericolosi e pensano di ingannare tutto e tutti. #AudizioneGualtieri #MES

2019-11-27 16:29:30

On the same day, the deputy published a second tweet, where the tones are further extreme. The actors in the government field are defined as "crazy" and "dangerous", the story insists on the lack of clarity of the parliamentary procedures in place.

@borghi_claudio: La trasparenza del MES: niente Parlamento, niente Consiglio dei Ministri, incontri in altre sedi, i viceministri dovevano essere avvisati da Conte, non so se l'abbiano fatto... Ma DI COSA STIAMO A PARLARE!!!! #Tria #MES

2019-12-01 14:09:39

On the first of December, a further tweet challenges the transparency of the ESM. In the most retweeted tweets of the main node of the anti-ESM network they do not contain obvious elements of Euroscepticism, but only a populist style, however the implicit of a frame where the signing of a European treaty is a betrayal, is certainly Eurosceptic. Relevant is the use of Twitter as a backchanneling platform by a deputy who uses his privileged position as a participant in the event.

Among the most shared tweets opposed to the ESM appear other public figures including those of two former deputies, Stefano Fassina, belonging to the left political area and Daniele Capezzone, former secretary of the Italian radical party and journalist. The latter can be considered a center-right political area. Both are therefore public political figures who do not belong to the Lega party but adopt the same frame because they converge on an ideological level on populism and Euroscepticism.

@Capezzone: Seguo l'audizione del ministro (pare sia un ministro italiano) #Gualtieri al Senato su #Mes. Non so se sia peggiore la figura che sta facendo lui (negando l'evidenza) o l'evocatissimo #Conte che a giugno avrebbe trattato una risoluzione del Parlamento come carta straccia#StopMes
2019-11-27 15:30:28

In Daniele Capezzone's tweet the frame proposed by Claudio Borghi is confirmed, in addition there is a reference to the sense of national identity. In an ironic parenthesis, Minister Gualtieri is referred to as "he seems to be an Italian minister" suggesting that he does not work in the national interest.

@StefanoFassina: Caro Ministro @gualtierieurope su che basi afferma che la riforma del #Mes sarà firmata a Dicembre? Chi ha dato al Presidente @GiuseppeConteIT il mandato a firmare? Basta colpi tecnocratici all'interesse nazionale. Abbiamo già dato. Deve votare il Parlamento
2019-11-26 05:12:41

In the second tweet by Stefano Fassina an element of populist Eurosceptic rhetoric is revealed, that is the reference to the "technocratic" blows inflicted on the nation. The frame of the supposed betrayal is also confirmed here, the government is accused of not taking into account the parliamentary will and therefore the popular one.

Now we present some of the most retweeted tweets but with authors who cannot be considered public figures, although they all have between 8000 and 50.00 followers. They are therefore digital influencers with no national prominence in the physical world. Some of them are profiles with a precise identity where the name and surname is used in the twitter username, others, such as @intuslegens and @radiosavana, cannot be traced back to real identities.

@RadioSavana: #Molinari asfalta #Conte alla #Camera sul #Mes: "State mettendo a rischio i conti correnti degli italiani, non finga di non capire, vada da #Mattarella e rassegni le dimissioni." #AltoTradimento #ConteDimettiti #RadioSavana #resilienza19

2019-12-02 15:45:33

This first tweet is used to relaunch the intervention in the chamber of a member of the League, Riccardo Molinari. The language used already tells a well-defined evolution of the situation: it is written that the deputy of the League "asphalts" Prime Minister Conte, a term used to mean a large victory in a debate. The #AltoTradimento and #ConteDimettiti hashtags are used, the frame is that of a deep institutional crisis.

@intuslegens: #Borghi svela il complotto criminale contro l'Italia. Il #MES non si discute, le misure in favore dei tedeschi passino umiliando il Parlamento. Questo il diktat vile di #Conte. Borghi lo smaschera e minaccia azione per #AltoTradimento. Guardo con commozione a un vero #italiano.

2019-11-27 22:04:52

In this tweet there are several extreme elements in terms of populism and Euroscepticism: a "criminal conspiracy" against Italy is mentioned, the EU measures are presented as favoring the Germans and the humiliation of the spoken word, or the popular will, is mentioned. surpassed by a "diktat" of the Premier Conte. In conclusion, the deputy of the Lega Borghi is referred to as a "true Italian".

@intuslegens: Se sostengo la #Lega, non e per simpatia verso la barba di #Salvini, o per il nord, che apprezzo, ma da meridionale. Finche la Lega difendera l'Italia da una cospirazione finanziaria come il #MES o dalla sostituzione etnica dello #IusSoli, la sostengo perche farlo e mio dovere.

2019-11-25 17:11:25

The tweet has the same author as the previous one. In addition to it, the ESM is referred to as a "financial conspiracy" against Italy. The Frame is that of people vs elite, where the first is made up of the Italians, defended in this case by the parliament and the Lega party, the second is made up of the European financial elite, supported by the government and the Premier.

*@PatriziaRametta: #Conte e #Tria ci hanno venduto a Bruxelles! Il nuovo #Mes e inaccettabile per l'Italia alle 22.30 si parte con il #tweetstorm #StopMes Informate gruppi chat amici fate tweets #StopMes e retwittate. Ci faremo ascoltare!!!
@borghi_claudio @Rinaldi_euro @A_Gusmeroli*

2019-12-03 07:43:54

In this tweet the Eurosceptic populist frame is present in the first part "they sold us to Brussels" where the Belgian city represents the fulcrum of the European institutions, and in the second part there is an exhortation to spread the proposed message. Friends are asked to inform about groups and chats and to retweet. This tweet is very interesting because the scheme is that of a connective action. A non-public user launches a #tweetstorm and asks his contacts and followers for help in spreading the information. The final promise contained in the tweet is "we'll be heard". There are no references to political parties or organizations.

@PGreco_: Il #MES serve a questo. A trasferire i crediti inesigibili dalle banche agli stati, cioe a noi. E gia successo quando "Monti ha salvato il paese", cioe ci ha prelevato un po' di miliardi per appianare i debiti che la Grecia non avrebbe mai ripagato alle banche francesi e tedesche

2019-11-25 20:50:38

The last tweet analyzed among those opposed to the mes is interesting because it adopts a eurosceptic populist frame where this time the banks are framed in the elites and recalls the original theme of state bailouts and austerity during the 2011 debt crisis.

In the field of ESM supporters, we have seen the main and preponderant node of the network is Carlo Cottarelli. Two of his tweets are among the twenty most retweeted in the debate. Carlo Cottarelli is an Italian economist and editor, known in Italy for his work on the spending review and for having founded and being the director of the Observatory on Italian Public Accounts. He can only be considered partially outside the political sphere as he has carried out advisory roles for previous governments and himself has been indicated as a possible prime minister during the post-electoral consultations of 2018, a position that would have placed him at the head of a technical government. . In our network he is the second most important node ever after Claudio Borghi and he is the most relevant and retweeted personality among ESM supporters

@CottarelliCPI: Se ne dicono tante sul #MES ma la cosa piu assurda e che chi adesso critica l accordo era al governo quando l accordo venne finalizzato. Che facevano? Si occupavano del franco CFA? O del signoraggio? O di qualche altra bufala? O semplicemente dormivano?

2019-11-30 16:49:20

The tweet does not adopt any frame that foresees a us against them clash, it directly addresses the parliamentary opponents of the ESM and reproaches them for the hypocrisy of having participated in the drafting of the agreement they oppose. In the finale they are further discredited through the use of irony.

@CottarelliCPI: Si e sparsa la voce che il #Mes presta soltanto a paesi che rispettano le regole europee sui conti pubblici. E una bufala. Questo limite si applica

solo a una particolare categoria di prestiti. Il Mes e il prestatore di ultima istanza proprio per i paesi in difficoltà

2019-11-26 17:00:43

Tweet more technical who replies on one of the merit criticisms made by ESM. The language is formal, the argument of the opponents is called "hoax".

Finally, even if it is not among the first twenty tweets, a tweet of the 5 Star Movement is reported in order to exemplify the position of group 2 of our analysis.

@Mov5Stelle: Il #MES è stato votato nel 2012 anche da chi ora lo attacca in maniera strumentale per seminare panico e disinformazione. Il MoVimento invece di fare polemiche da stadio pensa ai fatti. Le proposte per migliorare il MES ci sono. Ora ci aspettiamo una revisione dei punti critici

2019-11-29 09:13:42

The language is very formal if we consider that the 5 Star Movement falls into the category of Eurosceptic populist parties. One does not express one's favor to the ESM of which it is said "to improve". The real frame is to present as instrumentalizers the members of the opposition who declare themselves opposed to the ESM despite having taken part in the drafting previously. It is likely that the ambiguous position of the 5 Star Movement is due to their participation in the government majority.

3 Conclusions

We believe that the debate observed on Twitter falls within the conditions of the conceptualization of digital movement of opinion, i.e. a political force emerging from social networks. However, it is atypical with respect to the DMOs studied previously due to a peculiar top-down approach both in the diffusion of online tweets and in the organization and realization of a real-world protest, that is, the collection of signatures against the ESM organized by the Lega party. In our case study the citizens were mobilized by a pervasive emotional reaction on a national issue, however the narrative of this issue and the language used by the elites who participated in the parliamentary events in the first person produced a precise framing of the message, negative towards the ESM and the government. The concept of DMO is very useful for studying large reactions on social media to widely covered events over a short period. In addition to the peculiar characteristics of a DMO it is considered necessary to investigate two further elements: the origin and structure of the DMO. It is possible that some types of DMO have the character of “self-fulfilling prophecy”: the development of a debate on the reform of the ESM could be argued as being due to certain deputies and political leaders, who were also among the main actors in the diffusion of the reaction on social media as well as were involved in the organization of traditional protests. So, we are left with two main questions: where does a DMO come from? Who are the main players in the network? We believe it is possible to develop further theoretical insights around these questions.

The very nature of the DMO of the Twitter debate is central in answering research questions: the debate is majority in a specific direction and can be studied with the characteristics of the DMO. Starting from this assumption, conclusions are reached by following the guideline of the questions of research. In order:

- 1) Does the debate on ESM that took place in the Italian Twittersphere have populist and Eurosceptic salient characteristics?

In the debate, the centrality of a strong Eurosceptic rhetoric was found, based on opposition to the community, that is, to European integration itself. At the same time, a populist frame structure emerged, with the presence of a division between the people and the elite, the latter identified in the Italian government and in the European institutions. The convergence between Euroscepticism and populism has already been the subject of several studies. In our work it is found in line with what is proposed by the theory and with the contextualization of the development of populism in Italy. The performance of the crisis, a central element of the populist style, is present in the debate on the ESM, framed in the broader social and political affair of the European debt crisis and subsequent Austerity measures. At the center of the opposition to the ESM there is a party classified as populist already by different studies, the Lega party of Matteo Salvini. However, we believe the studies on this convergence are all referable to a precise historical conjuncture that took place over the last thirty years, passing through two key moments. The strengthening and enlargement of the European Union, and the debt crisis of 2011. Even today, the key elements in the economic and immigration frameworks remain the same as in 2011, even if in this sense the European Union has made some progress to overcome certain crisis factors and the ESM itself can be seen in this sense. Further studies should investigate the convergence between Euroscepticism and populism, defining more precisely structural correlation and causation relationships.

- 2) Is the public sentiment that emerges from the Twittersphere in the period in question representative of Italian public opinion at the time?

The most relevant empirical data that emerges from our work is certainly the result of the content analysis on the opinion movement studied: the debate on Twitter was the majority in its hostility to the ESM reform, when national polls carried out in the same period attribute weight very different from political parties opposed to the ESM (less than 50%) and also polls on the specific issue, such as

that carried out by *Corriere della Sera*, show how hostility to the ESM was a minority in the period in question. However, this is not the impression a Twitter user might have had by reading the main tweets on the topic on the platform and viewing their metrics. The one on the ESM was a real DMO, compact in the opinion that the ESM reform should not be approved. Although the percentages of parties in Italy and the survey published by *Corriere della Sera* are a relevant empirical fact, it cannot be considered decisive from the point of view of conclusions. We do not know *Corriere della Sera's* method of collection, and the party preference percentages are not entirely indicative: voters of a particular party may not agree with political leaders on the specific issue of the ESM. However, the perception of the existence of a Bulgarian majority in opposition to the ESM can be assumed to be at least illusory. Further research and insights should be done in this sense by monitoring the use of the hashtag in the following months when the wave of DMO dies down and the contextualization changes. For example, in Italy the debate on the ESM has returned to the public arena several times at the same time as the economic health crisis caused by Covid-19. The national health system has found itself under an excessive strain and the possibility of accessing the ESM credit line for health purposes has been planned at European level. How did the different contextualization affect the debate?

- 3) Is there a convergence between the communication dynamics of some political actors – parties and exponents – and the affordances of Twitter as a social network?

This is the question that is most difficult to answer as it is the most extensive and difficult to operationalize. Certainly, some patterns have been highlighted in this work, including: 1) a convergence between Euroscepticism and populism, 2) the performance element of the crisis by populist actors. We have seen how the perception of the crisis is a key element, even in terms of periods not to be defined as “crises time” according to the economic indicators. At the same time, Twitter's organizational structure seems to make it the ideal platform for imposing a certain frame on an event in progress. In this sense, the hashtag performs an organizational

function of routing towards a particular topic. We have seen that the hashtag can also perform content functions – just look at the difference between hashtags #MES and #STOPMES – but in our case we focused on the first of the two functions. Furthermore, the phenomenon of refraction was observed, that is the sharing of content with the addition of a text that overturns the initial message (function not specific to Twitter only). Hashtag and refraction are the two pillars for the imposition of the frame on the social network analyzed. And as we have seen, the frame has actually established well according to the results of the content analysis. However, the global dimension of the network of users opposing ESM does not provide us with information on what the effects may be on public opinion. #STOPMES users may just be more active and coordinated in their use of social media than the other users. This would demonstrate the existence of a convergence between social mechanics and populism with a bottom-up origin, where certain uses of social media occur by users who are also inclined to welcome populist messages. Further studies should be made in this sense, establishing more precisely which are the correlation and which causation relationships in the convergence between new media and a specific political style, or ideology.

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