The Age Of Populism?
An analysis Of Facebook Political Communication In Italy, France, And Spain

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1. Introduction

Populism has been primarily studied as a political phenomenon, while its communicative dimension has often been rather underexplored so far. The study of populist political communication, actually, has never been more important in light of several issues that cross Europe such as the economic crisis, the migrant crisis, and terrorism. All these factors have created favourable conditions for the emergence and rise of a new wave of populism in Europe. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how populist actors communicate in a highly mediated environment characterized by the spread of social media. What is the role of media system in restraining or supporting frames and topics close to populist stances? And, furthermore, how citizens react to populist discourses and appeals and/or contribute to the circulation and progress of these messages?

Even though an open debate is still on going on how populism can be defined, scholars agree that populist discourse centres on the juxtaposition of a 'good people' with a series of 'bad elites'. Moreover, especially in the case of right-wing populist discourse, the people’s values, identities and rights are said to be endangered not only by the actions of the elites, but also by those of a series of 'others' (who, it is claimed, are given preferential treatment by the elites). The key elements of populist discourse are thus 'the people', 'elites', and 'the others'. These elements interact amidst an overall situation of alleged crisis (and crises), with the people and democracy depicted as being under serious threat just from the elites and others. While most scholars argue that these elements are the core of populism, there has been a lengthy debate regarding whether it is an ideology or a communication style (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Stanley, 2008; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Kriesi, 2015).

Using the cases of Italy, France and Spain as an illustration, this article analyses the communication of the main political parties within these systems in order to assess the diffusion of populist traits also among not populist parties and to assess which factors explain the success of populist messages. The three countries selected, on this regard, represent a privileged point of view, since they have experienced, more than others, innovative and durable forms of populism, in the last few decades.

The 2014 European elections and the result of the referendum on Brexit have confirmed that populist parties and movements have become central in the political life of many EU member states. Alongside the right-wing populist parties, indeed, new parties and movements with different characteristics, but still ascribed by many scholars as populist (e.g. Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Síryza in Greece), have emerged. In the last few decades, the crisis of representative democracy – and in particular the high level of political dissatisfaction and citizens’ distrust – together with the effect of the Great Recession has been a breeding ground for the rise of populism (Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

Italy is one of the European countries in which the rise of populism seemed stronger (Forza Italia, Lega Nord and Movimento 5 Stelle have achieved more than 45% of the votes in 2014), while the Front National (National Front - FN) was the first party of France in 2014 European Elections (24,85%), and it also succeeded to access to run-off in 2017 Presidential elections. As concerns Spain, the success of
new political parties such as Podemos (7.98%) and Ciudadanos (3.16) at their very first entrance in a EU elections, as well as their most recent results at the 2015 and 2016 General elections, tell about the rising of a populist strand also in Spanish context.

Nevertheless, the electoral success is not the only important element of this political situation. The entire public and political debate appears to be strongly influenced by issues supported by populist parties especially via social media. As a consequence, also the mainstream parties increasingly tend to deal with these issues.

Taking Italy, France and Spain as cases studies, the research offers a first comprehensive picture of the weight of populism in the Italian, French and Spanish systems, by investigating the controlled communication that the main political parties and their leaders have published on their social media profiles (Facebook) during a randomly selected period of 30 days.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we discuss the key elements of populist discourse, in the third section, our case is outlined and a brief background on the context is provided. In the fourth section, we explain the methodology used in the study, while in section five and six we discuss our overall findings.

2. The core of populism between ideology and political communication style

The definition of populism is contentious. Generally, as aforesaid, scholars agree that the populist discourse centres on the juxtaposition of a 'good people' with a series of 'bad elites'. Especially right-wing populist claim that the people’s values, identities and rights are threaten not only by the actions of the elites, but also by those of a series of ‘others’ to whom elites provide a preferential treatment (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2007, 2014; Taggart 2000; Canovan 1999). The key elements of the populist discourse are thus ‘the people’, ‘the elites’, and ‘the others’.

Presenting themselves as the ‘real’ democrats, populists in established democracies pose the questions: ‘what went wrong; who is to blame; and what is to be done to reverse the situation’? (Betz and Johnson 2004: 323). Generally, their answers are: democracy, which should reflect the will of the people, has been usurped, distorted and exploited by 'elites'; the elites and ‘others’ (i.e. non-elites who are also not of ‘the people’) are to blame for the difficult situation in which ‘the people’ find themselves; ‘the people’ must be given back their democratic voice and power through the populist leader and party.

Three elements are thus essential within the populist discourse: ‘the people’, ‘elites’, and ‘the others’ (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). The idea of ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 544) is at the centre of populism. The ‘pure people’ constitute a homogeneous and virtuous community – a place where, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 12) observes, there is mutual trust and ‘it is crystal-clear who is “one of us” and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion’. The people are said to
be united, with divisions dismissed by populists as the creations of political, intellectual and media elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 5-6; Taggart 2000: 92). Most importantly, the people are - or should be - sovereign. As such, politics should be a direct and non-mediated expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004: 544).

Populism relies on a ‘Manichean outlook’ that combines the positive valorisation of the people with the denigration of their enemies, namely ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’ supposed to be neither homogeneous nor virtuous (Panizza, 2005: 16-17). The elites generally comprise political, media, financial, judicial and intellectual elites who are accused of being incompetent and self-interested, when not actually conspiring against the people and seeking to undermine democracy. The identity of ‘the others’ differs from case to case, but for right-wing populists in Europe it usually includes groups such as immigrants, homosexuals, welfare recipients, Roma communities and other specific social categories who are held not to be ‘of the people’.

While these three previous elements are generally considered the core of populism, whether it can be considered as an ideology or rather a communication feature is still contentious1 (Kriesi 2015; Aslanidis 2015).

Populism has been defined as an ideology dividing society into two opposed groups: the virtuous people and the corrupt establishment (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 1977; Mudde, 2004). This moral division between ‘the people’ and ‘elites’ is the basis for the most widely cited definition of populism during the past decades. Cas Mudde conceives populism as «an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale of the people» (Mudde, 2004: 544). According to Mudde and the subsequent articles of Stanley (2008), populism is a ‘thin-centred’ ideology, since it does not propose a coherent worldview, on the contrary, his viewpoints appear limited when compared with "full" ideologies. The thinness of populism «ensures that in practice it is a complementary ideology: it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies» (Stanley 2008).

The concept of thin ideology «resolves the persistent problem of how to account for the variety of political content associated with manifestations of populism whilst simultaneously positing a set of common elements, but it also illustrates the dependent relationship of populism on “fuller” ideologies that project a more detailed set of answers to key political questions» (Stanley and Učeň 2008, in Kriesi 2015: 170). But at the same time, the concept of «thin ideology» has been criticised for its spurious nature, methodological inconsistencies, and several problems of classification and measurement (Aslanidis 2015).

In contrast to the idea of populism as an ideology, several authors have proposed to consider it as an element closely linked to the discursive and communicative dimension of leaders, political parties or movements. The few studies that have explored populist political communication so far,

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1 It is worth noting that populism has also been defined as a political strategy, especially in reference to Latin America (Weyland 2001; Roberts 1995).
shed important light on the role communication and the media play in populist politics. One of the central insights is how important the media are in widening the appeal of populist political actors. Following Ellinas (2010) the media control the gateway to the electoral market place and they enable smaller newer groups to reach an audience greater than their resources would ordinarily allow (Bos et al. 2010). Populist actors often receive critical coverage in the ‘elite’ media and favourable coverage in the popular press. Mazzoleni et al. (2003) note that the media might be more likely to give coverage to populist actors when certain salient issues dominate the news, such as crime and immigration. Jagers and Walgrave conceive populism as a political communication style that «appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name» (2007: 322). A similar definition has been proposed by Aslanidis who suggests that dropping the ideological clause and simply conceiving populism as a discursive frame «resonates better with the cognitive aspects of the populist message; and it provides a solid methodological framework for empirical research» (2015: 11). Finally Hawkins (2009) defines populism as a discourse. In his words populist discourse «is like an ideology in that it is a set of fundamental beliefs about how the world works and tends to compel its believers into political action. But unlike an ideology, populism is a latent set of ideas or a worldview that lacks significant exposition and “contrast” with other discourses and is usually low on policy specifics» (1045).

In this paper we adopt this second approach and we analysed therefore the controlled communication of the six main parties in each system, namely both parties those usually labelled as populist and those labelled as not populist according to the literature. This angle allows a more inclusive understanding and a better operationalization and measurement of populism as well as the assessment of the success of populist messages among citizens on social media.

3. Cases and context

3.1 Main Italian political parties

Italy is one of the European countries that, in the last few decades, have experienced more than others innovative and durable forms of populism. Among others, it has been defined as «promised land» (Tarchi 2015), «enduring market» (Bobba and McDonnell 2015), «breeding ground» for populism (Bobba and Legnante 2016). The emergence of the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) in the late 80’s and the unexpected performance of Silvio Berlusconi at the head of Forza Italia (FI) in the early 90’s represented the first steps of the recent history of populism in Italy. Moreover, the recent success of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S) since 2013 has expanded the variety of populism, also including parties not belonging to the Right.

While these three parties are those that usually has been studied as examples of populism, as explained in the introduction, in this paper we examine the discourses of the main parties, that is the first six parties in terms of votes in the 2014 European elections. So in addition to the three
aforementioned, for the Italian case we also include the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (Left Ecology and Freedom, SEL), and Nuovo Centro Destra (New Center Right, NCD).

Although different in terms of their ideologies and organizations, FI and LN have long been accepted by scholars as populist (e.g. Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007). The LN has often been classified as ‘populist radical right’, however we consider it best understood as an ethno-regionalist populist party (Spektorowski, 2003; McDonnell, 2006). Whether advocating independence for Padania in the mid-1990s or federalism/devolution for the regions of northern Italy thereafter, it has always appealed to a specific territorial area and ethnically defined people, along with opposing immigration and strongly criticizing national and supranational elites. In terms of electoral results and institutional roles occupied, the LN has been one of Europe’s most successful regionalist parties over the past decade, serving in right-wing governing coalitions led by FI/PDL’s Silvio Berlusconi from 2001-2006 and from 2008-2011 (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). After the resignation of the Berlusconi government in 2011 and a series of scandals involving the party establishment, in 2012 the party founder Umberto Bossi was replaced first by Roberto Maroni, and then by Matteo Salvini in 2013. The current leader of the LN is redefining the ideological positioning of the party, by supporting views closer to those of populist radical right parties on issues such as nationalism (instead of regionalism), the anti-Europeanism and immigration.

Berlusconi’s parties - first Forza Italia, since 2008, the PDL, then in 2013 Forza Italia again - have been Italy’s most electorally successful party of the new century. FI in 2001 and the PDL in 2008 were the main components of victorious right-wing coalitions, which governed Italy from 2001 to 2006 and from 2008 to 2011. The shock caused by the economic crisis and the intervention of the European Commission led Berlusconi to resign (in November 2011) and contributed to the poor election result in the subsequent General Election in 2013 where the PDL was resulted as the third party (21.56%), behind the M5S (25.56%) and the PD (25.43%). Berlusconi’s parties have generally been seen by scholars as more moderate than the LN, with FI termed ‘liberal-populist’ (Taguieff, 2003: 104) and ‘neoliberal populist’ (Mudde, 2007: 47). While we agree that the lack of a strongly emphasized anti-immigrant and nativist stance means that we are not dealing with a radical right populist party, we think the ‘liberal’ label is problematic. In fact, both FI and the PDL have often adopted strongly illiberal positions regarding the checks and balances of Italian democracy (such as media freedom, the judicial system, the Constitution, and the President of the Republic). For our purposes here, however, is it sufficient to say that FI and the PDL are safely classifiable as populist parties located on the centre-right/right.

The M5S is harder to classify due to its short history, its eclectic mix of policy proposals and its unique organizational characteristics. The movement was founded in October 2009, building on the success of Grillo’s political blog and the ‘Beppe Grillo meet-up’ groups which came into existence in 2005 and 2006 respectively (Bartlett, Froio and McDonnell, 2013: 21-22). Nonetheless, there
has already been broad agreement among scholars that the M5S discourse - and particularly the statements of its founder, Beppe Grillo, both before and after the movement’s foundation - is ‘populist’ (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Lazar and Fabbrini 2013). Certainly, Grillo’s exaltation of ‘good’ citizens whose wellbeing and democratic rights are oppressed by all political elites - along with his framing of this as a very serious crisis - fits the key elements of populism, which have been presented in the previous section. The M5S is not, however, a case of right-wing populism: in its policies it combines a range of themes from different ideologies (Left, Right, environmental) and there is no clear identification – and denigration - of ‘the other’ in its discourse (Bartlett, Froio and McDonnell 2013: 25-27). After the 2013 elections, the M5S has become a leading political actor, able to compete with the two main centre-left and centre-right parties, both at local level and at national level (Conti e Memoli 2015).

The PD is the main Italian centre-left party. It has been founded in 2007 by the merging of the Democratic Left and the Daisy – Democracy and Freedom, the heirs of communist and catholic political cultures. It is currently the leading Italian party. Its leader, Matteo Renzi, has been the Prime Minister from February 2014 to December 2016, followed by another prominent member of the party, Paolo Gentiloni, after the defeat of Renzi at the Constitutional Referendum. Thanks to the change of leadership and the agenda-setting power of Renzi as Prime Minister, the party has moved from a share of 25 per cent obtained at the 2013 general election to more than 40 per cent reached at the 2014 European elections (Guidi 2015). Although some authors have described the Renzi’s persona as populist (Tarchi 2015; Newell and Carbone 2015) or a leftist Berlusconi (Bordignon 2015), PD is mainly a party inspired by social-democrats ideals and pro-European positions.

NCD is a centre-right junior party that supports the PD government. Created by former members of Berlusconi’s party (PDL) in 2013, its importance within the Italian partisan system is mainly due to the fact that several members of this party are part of the PD’s government.

Finally, SEL is the only party that represents the left within the Italian parliament. Ally of the Democratic Party during the General election campaign in 2013, later it has joined the opposition when Enrico Letta, before, and Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni then, have created a coalition government with the centre-right parties support.

Table 1. Main Italian Political Parties in 2014 European Parliament elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of MPs</th>
<th>% of votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ITALY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5S</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LN</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCD-UDC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEL (Lista Tsipras)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Main French political parties

Over the past twenty years France have been several times studied as a country where populism has rise, nonetheless French scholars have reluctantly used this analytical category. According to Hubé and Truan (2016), populism in France is often linked with right-wing parties and with other similar concepts: ‘boulangism’, ‘cesarism’, ‘poujadism’, ‘bonapartism’ (Julliard 2010, Mayaffre 2013, Nicolas 2005, Taguieff 2007, Winock 1997). This particular frame of the problem is due to the French history and the existence of at least three major populist movements: the boulangism (Garrigues 1992), the cesaro-bonapartism and the poujadism (Fonvieille-Alquier 1984). Taguieff (2007: 84) stated that populism could adapt to any kind of ideology. This is why, according to him, populism is based on an ‘ensemble of rhetoric devices implemented by the symbolic using of some social representations’ (2007: 80; see also the special issue Taguieff directed in the journal Mots, 1998). According to Touraine (1997: 242), populism ‘represents neither a political theory, nor an economic programme’; it is a ‘political style’. On the contrary, Surel (2003: 114) maintains that populism ‘is not only a rhetoric tool, but has a normative, coherent and stable hard core’.

The only point on which there is an almost complete consensus among scholars (with the notable exception of Collovald 2004), is that most of them consider the Front National as a populist party (Mudde 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Nonetheless, populism appears only as one of the characteristics ascribed to the French extreme right. Mondon (2013) stresses that beside right-wing populist style and discourse, also denunciation of parliamentary democracy, a strong symbolic leadership, ethno-exclusivism or neo-racism stand out. This implies that populism elements play only a secondary ancillary role in the FN election manifestos (Reungoat, 2010). The renewal of the party led by Marine Le Pen (daughter of the FN founder Jean-Marie Le Pen) have initiated a process of normalization of the party, namely the acceptance of the FN as a democratic force within the French political field, by using ‘a softer strategy of personalization (less “charismatic”), a more mainstream and softer racism, giving the impression of not criticizing Islam per se, but rather “only” criticizing its perceived disrespect for the principle of laïcité (secularism)—a crucial concept in the French constitution’ (Hubé and Truan 2016: 184). Although someone has raised the question whether the new image of the FN could be still ascribed to populism (Béja & Padis, 2014)?, recent empirical studies have confirmed that the FN led by Marine Le Pen has maintained its populist and extreme right characteristics in continuity with the Jean-Marie Le Pen one (Ivaldi 2016).

Recent electoral success the FN party is probably the basis of changes in strategy by the Républicains (formerly the Union for a Popular Movement, UMP), the conservative party of the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy. In particular its policy of droitisation (“turning to the right”) ‘is intended to open the way for its leaders to adopt a more populist campaign style’ (Hubé
and Truan 2016: 184). Actually, Sarkozy has been already described as a populist or a wishful populist previously (Charaudeau, 2011; Mayaffre, 2013. As well, also other right-wing political leaders were defined as populist: this is the case for example of Chirac during the electoral campaign of 1995 (Mény and Surel 2000) or of Bernard Tapie in the 90’s (Riutort, 2007).

The Mouvement démocrate (Democratic Movement, MoDem) is a centrist political party, founded by François Bayrou in 2007. Successor of the Union pour la Démocratie Française (Union for French Democracy, UDF), it would follow an independent centrist strategy, and not engage in electoral alliances with the left or right field. After the good result in the first round of the 2007 presidential election (18.6% see Bréchon 2008), the party has achieved alternate results and, generally, it failed to establish itself as a major player, mainly due to the volatile nature of his electorate (Bréchon 2016). In 2014 he ran for the European elections obtaining 9.94% of the votes, in alliance with another small centre party, the Union des démocrates et indépendants party (UDI, Union of Democrats and Independents, UDI), Neither the party nor its leaders have never been defined populist, even in the public debate.

On the left side, the Parti Socialiste (Socialiste Party, PS) is the leading party and its leader, François Hollande, is the current President of the French Republic. The Hollande presidency was characterized by several defeats of the party at the electoral level (Kuhn 2014; de Luca 2015), enough to push the incumbent president to decide not to run again for the 2017 Presidential elections. Moreover, as a result of Hollande and his Prime Minister Emanuel Valls policies especially on security, national identity, and secularity (laïcité), an intense political, media and scientific bate has opened on the droïtisation of the party (Behrent 2016). Europe Écologie – Les Verts (EELV, Europe Ecology – The Greens) is an environmentalist party, close to the left. It was a junior party supporting the Ayrault Government, from 2012 to 2014. Following the election of Valls as Prime Minister, it has not longer supported the PS government. The EELV has never been linked to populism.

The only left-wing party labelled as populist both in public debate, and partly by academics is the Parti de Gauche (Left Party, PdG) led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. It is part of an electoral federation - Front de Gauche (Front of the Left) - created for the 2009 European elections and then extended for the subsequent elections. Although the PdG leader, Mélenchon, is consistently presented as a populist in the media, only few scholars have addressed this issue. One of these is Mouffe (2013) that, comparing Le Pen and Mélenchon, defined two divergent types of populism: the right-wing xenophobic and exclusive populism of the FN, on the one hand, is opposed to the left-wing and inclusive populism of the PdG, on the other hand.

Table 2. Main French Political Parties in 2014 European Parliament elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of MPs</th>
<th>% of votes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRANCE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>FN</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24.86</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
LR (UMP) 20 20.81
PS 13 13.98
UDI-MoDEM 7 9.94
EELV 6 8.95
FdG (including PdG) 4 6.61

3.2 Main Spanish political parties

The 2015 Spanish general election put an end to the two-party system that had governed the country for the previous three decades (Orriols and Cordero, 2016: 469). The mainstream parties Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and People’s Party (PP) were challenged by two new political parties, Podemos (Ps) and Ciudadanos (Cs) (Simon, 2016). Their electoral success made impossible to form a majority government in 2015 and a new election had to be held in 2016. Even if this time a Government could be formed, Spain confirmed to have become a multi-party system. The loss of support for mainstream parties may be explained by the economic crisis that has hit Spain since 2008, the several corruption scandals affecting the PP, and the connected political crisis (Orriols and Cordero, 2016:472). Moreover, the incapability of the existing minor Spanish parties to capitalise the growing disaffection towards mainstream parties, widened the Spanish political space and permitted the emergence of the new political forces (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). Consequently, in 2016 the Spanish political landscape resulted to be characterised by six parties.

The Spanish mainstream parties have been founded respectively in 1879 (PSOE) and in 1976 (PP with the former name of Alianza Popular, modified in 1989) and have interchanged at the government of Spain since 1982. The PSOE, the Centre-Left party, had obtained clear parliamentary majorities in the early 1980s and had controlled the executive for the most part of the Spain democracy (Orriols & Lavezzolo, 2008). Currently, it is led by Pedro Sánchez and it is the second party in Spain. The conservative PP became a real challenger to PSOE only in the 1990s, when its ideological profile moved towards the centre (Orriols & Lavezzolo, 2008). Its leader is Mariano Rajoy and it is the governing party in Spain. Even if these two parties belong to the opposite sides of the political spectrum, they both have supported the Spain participation to the European integration process.

The new parties emerged in Spain, Ps and Cs, present common traits but they diverge deeply at the same time. Podemos originated from Spain’s 2011 Outraged Movement, and was founded by Pablo Iglesias (its leader) in January 2014. Even if it was a new party, Ps obtained 1.2 million votes at the 2014 European Parliament elections, becoming the third party in Spain, a result confirmed in 2015 election. Podemos is considered a populist party and in particular an ‘anti-elitist populist party’ (Sanders, Berganza, De Miguel, 2016). Moreover, although it claims to be neither...
left nor right, it is generally conceived a left-wing party (e.g. Carlin, 2015). This interpretation is in line with Ps choice to ally with the radical leftist party Izquierda Unida in 2016 election with the (unsuccessful) aim to overtake the PSOE (Simons, 2016). Regarding the European Union, Podemos highly criticizes its current institutional architecture and its policies related to the implementation of austerity measures, but at the same times it asks for more EU regulation in some policy areas and for more democratic institutions (Lupato and Tronconi, 2016). Finally, Ps political discourse insists on four themes: corruption, anti-casta rhetoric, call for ‘new participatory politics’ and for ‘common-sense politics’ (Sanders, Berganza, De Miguel, 2016). Ciudadanos was founded in 2005 but until 2014 was considered a Catalan regional party (Sanders, Berganza, De Miguel, 2016). Led by Albert Rivera, Cs became successful nationwide in 2015 when gained 13.9% of the votes thanks to its capability to capitalize the framing change introduced by Podemos: also Ciudadanos presented itself as a champion of the new against the old (Sola and Rendueles, 2017: 13). As Podemos, Cs is considered a populist party (Sanders, Berganza, De Miguel, 2016) and it counts among its main themes the criticism towards political corruption and the insistence on the need for democratic regeneration (Rodríguez-Teruel and Barrio, 2015). Nevertheless, it profoundly differs from Ps. Firstly, Ciudadanos has been defined a case of ‘technocratic populism’ since it emphasizes the depolitizing of economic issues in favour of experts (Sola and Rendueles, 2017: 13). Secondly, not only opinion leaders and voters tend to place Ciudadanos closer to the right (Rodríguez-Teruel and Barrio, 2015), but Cs has also benefited from voters leaving the PP (Sola and Rendueles, 2017): it has pushed some media to label Cs as “the Podemos of the right” (Sola and Rendueles, 2017). Finally, differently from Ps, Ciudadanos favours a stronger European Union with a federal perspective, and it opposes the instance of independence advanced by Catalonia nationalist forces (Rodríguez-Teruel and Barrio, 2015).

The most important minor parties in Spain are Izquierda Unida (IU) and Esquerra Republicana De Catalunya (ERC). IU is a traditional state-wide radical left wing party founded in 1986 by the Spanish Communist Party and other minor political forces (Gomez-Reino et al., 2008); its leader is Alberto Garzón. IU presents both traditional left-wing materialist stances (e.g. defence of workers’ rights) and classical post-materialist issues (e.g. minorities’ rights, increase of democratic control, etc.) (Gomez-Reino et al., 2008). Accordingly, IU is in favour of the European integration, but it asks for a Union that ‘guarantees a European social model and the economic and social rights associated to the welfare state’ (Gomez-Reino et al., 2008: 135). ERC is a regional party in favour of Catalonia independence, founded in 1931 (Lansford, 2014) and currently led by Oriol Junqueras. Beyond being a left-wing party, it may be defined a Nationalist Party since its goal is to separate Catalonia from Spain (Marcet and Argelaguet, 2003). However, ERC favours independence only in the long term and as part of Europe of the Peoples project (Keating, 2004: 369). Its action is deployed throughout State mechanisms such as the presence in national institutions in order to obstruct or confront the governing parties (Marcet and Argelaguet, 2003). In
2016 ERC achieved the best electoral result ever in the Spanish general elections establishing itself as the main pro-independence political force in the new Spanish parliament (European Free Alliance, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of MPs</th>
<th>% of votes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSOE</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidos Podemos (including PODEMOS-IU-EQUO)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERC-CATSÍ</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
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Table 3. Main Spanish Political Parties in 2016 Spanish National election

4. Data and design

4.1 Research questions

As explained in the introduction, this article focuses on the main Italian, French and Spanish parties. Our main research question relates on how the communication of populist and not populist parties differ from each other and whether populist elements are also present in the public discourse of those parties commonly defined as not populist. This allows us first to assess the spread of populism at different party systems level and to clarify the structure of the populist discourse, by verifying the relevance of the key elements and their combination. In addition, the analysis also allows to assess which factors better explain the success of populist messages on Facebook and, more in general, whether the users engagement with populist and not populist parties communication follow similar or different patterns.

Three different research questions are thus addressed in this paper:

RQ1: How much populism is widespread within the Italian, French and Spanish party communication?

RQ2: Which features distinguish the controlled communication of different types of populist parties?

RQ3: Which elements of populist discourse characterize the controlled communication of the Italian, French and Spanish parties on social media?

As regards features of the success posts on Facebook, literature often emphasizes the role of the web to explain the success of these new parties and movements (Bartlett 2014; Kriesi 2014). Evidences clarifying this relationship are scarce so far and even less are available to identify which elements of a populist discourse lead to success. The underlying concept of these interpretations is that populists reach a broader range of citizens through social media and thereby are able to increase support for issues that were not so popular previously. A first hypothesis is:
H1. The presence of populist elements is a factor that increases the number of likes of a given post.

Several scholars have pointed out that populists use an emotional communication style especially in blame attribution: anger and fear are the frames commonly used to communicate that the people are threatened by the elites or by the others (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Ruzza & Fella, 2011). In a recent article, Hameleers et al. (2016) addressed precisely the question of how emotionalized blame attribution could affect the persuasiveness of a populist message. Based on an experiment on a sample of Dutch citizens, they found that the emotionalized style of the populist message influenced its effectiveness in terms of both blame perception and populist attitudes. Similarly, our purpose is to contribute to experimentally observed explanations by analysing the populist communication in Italy and France. In particular, we aim to assess the role of emotions as a possible explanation for the popularity of online Facebook posts. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H2. The presence of emotionalized messages increases the number of likes of a given post.

Finally, the presence of a charismatic leader is frequently identified as a crucial factor for understanding the relationship between a populist party and its followers (Caiani and Graziano 2016; van der Brug and Mughan 2007; Weyland 2001). Populist leaders usually create and strengthen the bond with their supporters, thanks to a peculiar style and rhetoric (Mazzoleni, 2003). As pointed out by McDonnell (2013), in many cases the relevance of the leader tends to transform populist parties into 'personal parties', where party communication focuses on the leader and the leader dominates the party. Frequently, these leaders are 'outsiders' who present themselves as morally authorised to speak on behalf of 'the people' and to celebrate both 'spontaneous action at the grassroots and a close personal tie between leader and follower' (Canovan 1999: 6). The third hypothesis is consequent to this literature:

H3. Messages posted by the leader increase the number of likes of a given post.

4.2. Sample

To tackle these questions, a quantitative content analysis of the messages posted on Facebook profiles by the six main Italian, French and Spanish political parties and their leaders was carried out. Facebook has been selected as source since digital politics and social media are becoming increasingly relevant for both political parties and citizens: in 2016, Italy had 66% of Internet penetration and 31,000,000 monthly active Facebook users (FB penetration 52%), France 88% and 36,000,000 (56%), Spain 82% and 25,000,000 (54%) (Digital in 2017, 2017).
The analysed accounts, in total, have been 36. All messages posted on these accounts - except for shares, links, images or event announcements, without any commentary text - were gathered and analysed in a period of 30 days randomly selected between January 1 and 31 December 2015. In total, the sample consists of 2,007 posts: 1,016 in Italy, 370 in France and 621 in Spain. Political parties accounts were much more active \((n = 1097, 54.7\%)\) than those of the leaders \((n = 910, 45.3\%)\). On this regard, some differences can be found between our three case studies: in Italy political parties’ posts are 51.9% and a similar proportion is found also for French political parties (50.8%), while Spanish political parties result more active on FB (61.5%) if compared to their party leaders (38.5).

It is worth to underline that our random selection of days to be covered by the analysis included a series of crucial events. As it is well known 2015 is a quite difficult year for France. In January, a terrorist command assaulted the editorial office of the satirical newspapers Charlie Hebdo. Our sample includes the days immediately following the terrorist attack. In November, France suffered another terrorist attack in Paris. Even if our sample in this case does not include those days it is obvious that the resonance of the event, both in France and Italy, is present in posts sampled for November and December. Moreover, our date selection includes the last days of the 2015 Regional election campaign in France. As concerns Spain, due to the particular electoral schedule occurred in the country during 2016 we have included in our sample several days of the election campaign period.

According to the literature, for descriptive and inferential analysis we consider FI, LN, M5S, FN, PdG, Podemos and Ciudadanos as populist parties; PD, NCD-UDC, SEL (Lista Tsipras), LR (UMP), PS, UDI-MoDEM, EELV, PP, PSOE, ERC, IU as not populist parties.

4.3. Populism Measures

The three key elements - élites, the others, the people - are dichotomous variables to which the coders had to answer yes \((1)\) or no \((0)\). In addition, we also measured whether a message contain a reference to the ‘economic crisis’, ‘migrants’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘Europe’, that we have previously identified as crucial issues within the discourse of contemporary European populist parties. Two coders content-analysed the messages. The intercoder reliability, conducted on a subsample of around 10% of the entire sample yielded satisfactory results.

In the category ‘élites’ we classified criticism/blame attribution towards politicians, banks, the media, the judicial system, the EU, etc.; for ‘others’, criticism/blame attribution towards immigrants, Roma community, Muslims, homosexuals, welfare recipients; for ‘the people’, the references to the «common man», Italian identities, local identities, Christian tradition, etc.; for ‘economic crisis’, criticism/blame attribution for unemployment, low salaries, austerity measures, public debt, banking crises; for ‘migrants’ all references concerning migrant crisis and its management at local, national or international level; for ‘Terrorism’ the references to terrorist attacks, as well as all reference to

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2 The Spanish sample was selected between January 1 and December 31, 2016.
management of terrorist threat (i.e. procedures for boundaries control, proposal for suspension of Schengen Treaty); for ‘Europe’ the references to issues concerning the EU policies, institutions, actors, etc.

To assess the extent to which the published posts were or were not populist, we accounted for the three key elements of populist discourse outlined in section 2: ‘elites’, ‘the people’ and ‘the others’. These are dichotomous variables to which the coders had to answer yes (1) or no (0). In addition, we also assessed whether a message was framed in an emotional way (Hameleers et. al. 2016, Kühne 2014, Nabi 2003), searching for the presence of ‘anger’, ‘fear’, ‘hope’, and ‘happiness’ frames. They were coded as dichotomous variables. Finally, data for the likes count of each post were retrieved directly from the Facebook accounts through Netvizz. Two coders content-analysed the messages. The intercoder reliability, conducted on a subsample of approx. 10% of the entire sample yielded satisfactory results.

In the category ‘the people’, we classified the references to the ‘common man’, Italian identities, local identities, Christian tradition, etc.; in the category ‘elites’, criticism/blame attribution towards politicians, banks, the media, the judicial system, the EU, etc.; in the category ‘others’, criticism/blame attribution towards immigrants, Roma communities, Muslims, homosexuals and welfare recipients. Starting from the typology of populist discourse by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), we then combined these three key elements into five different types of messages, according to their content:

− **Complete populism**: posts containing references to all the three key elements;
− **Empty populism**: posts containing only references to ‘the people’;
− **Anti-elitist populism**: posts containing references to ‘the elites’ + posts containing references to the ‘people’ and ‘the elites’;
− **Excluding populism**: posts containing references to ‘the others’ + posts containing references to the ‘people’ and ‘the others’;
− **Contentious populism**: posts containing references to ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’.

Complete and empty populism are operationalized as in Jagers and Walgrave: in the first case a post includes all the key elements together, while in the second one only refers only to ‘the people’. As regards Excluding and Anti-elitist populism, besides considering the simple references to ‘the Elites’ and ‘the Others’ in a given post, also their combinations with ‘the people’ are taken into account. This is because references to ‘the people’ are often rhetorical while those to ‘the Elites’ and ‘the Others’ usually determine the meaning of a populist message. Finally, Contentious populism is a combination that highlights the aggressive and confrontational nature of this type of messages that are simultaneously against ‘the Elites’ and ‘the Others’.

As regards emotional frames, we operationalized our variables by following the distinction between four distinct emotions. The ‘fear frame’ variable detects those messages in which fear conditions are emphasized. Thus, the variable was coded as ‘fear frame’ when the message
presented explicit elements related to alarm, anxiety, apprehension, catastrophism, confusion, consternation, defeatism, dismay, distress, fear, fright, horror, hostility, nervousness, panic, pessimism, restlessness, tension, terror, tragedy, worry. The variable ‘anger frame’ identifies those messages in which anger conditions are emphasized. This identified messages with explicit elements related to anger, atonement, condemnation, disappointment, discontent, disgust, dishonour, dislike, dissatisfaction, frustration, hatred, humiliation, impatience, insult, irritation, malice, moodiness, nervousness, penalty, penance, punishment, retaliation, revenge, shame, spite and wrath. The variable ‘hope frame’ detects those messages relating to the concept of hope, expectation, prospect, ambition, anticipation, belief, confidence, desire, dream, faith, light at the end of the tunnel, longing, and, in general, the belief that collective action might be successful in producing the required change to overcome inequality. The variable ‘happiness frame’ detects those messages containing reference to happiness, beatitude, cheerfulness, contentment, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, exuberance, felicity, gaiety, joy, light-heartedness, merriment, pleasure, prosperity, satisfaction, and wellbeing.

5. Findings

This work is based on the idea that populism is extremely multifaceted and thus congruence between populist ideology and communication cannot be taken for granted. In other words, we expect that the use of populist rhetoric is not only a typical trait of parties ideologically close to populism. On the contrary, we argue that populist communication may be a dimension permeating even non-populist parties, with different magnitude and connotation.

We address the analysis of communicative dimension by two main strategies: the first one aims to clarify the systemic differences between Italy, France and Spain; while the second one focuses on infra-country analysis with the purpose to understand differences between parties within the same political and communication system (Tables 4, 5 and 6).

As regards the use of social media the three systems appear as very different: considering the total amount of 2,007 FB posts analysed in this research, about the 51% pertains only to the Italian political actors (parties and leaders), suggesting that the use of social media - and FB in particular - is far more significant in Italy than in the other systems (France 18%, Spain 31%). This mere quantitative data is combined with the picture concerning the magnitude of populist communication conveyed through FB by parties and leaders. Indeed, even if in both countries the majority of FB posts does not report any element of populism, in Italy populist communication is a larger portion (43.3%) than in France (18.6%) or Spain (15.9%).

Moving to infra-country analysis, when considering the communicative dimension among Italian political parties (Table 4) we can easily see that two among those parties normally defined by scholars as populist are also the most active on social networks. Indeed, the Lega Nord and its
leader Matteo Salvini - if compared to other Italian political actors - are characterized by a frenetic activity, more than a half of the whole posts' sample come from their account (n. 551). The Movimento 5 Stelle and Beppe Grillo with 189 posts are also very active with an average of more than 6 posts published per day. Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi – despite their ideological tension towards populism – are less present on FB (n. 76 posts). This is not surprisingly, since, traditionally, this party and its leader are more at ease with legacy media, especially TV arenas. A remarkable activity on social network is, instead, observed when looking at figures concerning Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà and Nichi Vendola (n. 138), while the two parties in government, NCD and PD, along with their leaders, respectively Angelino Alfano and Matteo Renzi, record a lower number of posts published (both of them posted 31 messages during the period considered for the analysis). Therefore, about the 80.4% of the posts included in our Italian sample have been published by parties ideologically classified as populists. Furthermore, according to these data, FB seems to be as an important communication environment for opposition parties while parties in government and their leader are less present (and interested) on this platform.

Thus far, we have considered the magnitude of parties and leaders activity on FB, we delve now deeper into populist traits. On this regard, it emerges clearly that parties ideologically classified as populist are also those showing higher levels of populist communication (ranging from 68.4% of FI up to 53.4 of M5S, LN is in the middle with 59% of posts containing populist references). FB messages posted by parties without populist ideological traits, instead, are less focused on populist issues. The highest portion of populist posts (mainly concerning anti-elite rhetoric, 32.6%) can be found in SEL’ and Vendola’s accounts (34.1%). Alfano and NCD, which as underlined were not so active in FB, posted populist messages in the 29% of the cases, focusing in particular on excluding populism, namely immigrants. This pattern could be related to the role of Alfano, serving as Interior Minister and thus responsible for the managing of migrant crisis. Figures on PD and Renzi are even more significant. Indeed all their FB messages classified as populist (25.8%) present only reference to the “people”. In other words, the call to people can be considered just as a rhetoric artifice, without any real populist connotation, an empty populism. As concerns M5S and Beppe Grillo, the core of their populist communication relies on anti-elite messages (47.1%), the other two parties identified as ideologically populist provide a more multifaceted populist communication. Forza Italia and Berlusconi controlled communication on FB presents a large emphasis on anti-elite criticism (56.6%) along with few reference to “the others” elements, namely excluding populism (3.9%) as well as contentious populism (2.6%). The anti-elite rhetoric is prominent also in LN and Salvini activity on FB (25.6%), but in this case excluding populism is more relevant than in all the other Italian parties (14%) and the same could be pointed out also concerning contentious populism.

Table 4. The communicative dimension of populism in the Italian partisan system
The French case seems quite different from what presented so far about Italian parties and leaders (Table 5). As aforementioned, the infra-country analysis indeed reveals that the low magnitude of FB activity is combined also with a quite marginal emphasis on populism in controlled communication by parties or leaders. Nonetheless, as in Italy, the largest amount of posts included in our French sample (50.5%) have been published by the two parties classified as ideologically populist (FN and PdG). Out of a whole sample of 370 posts, FN and PdG messages on FB are respectively 108 and 74. The other French parties included in this investigation are far less present on social networks: Bayrou and Modem published on average only one post per day, similarly EELV and its leader Emmanuelle Cosse can count just 40 posts. And also looking at the social network activity by the main French political actors the magnitude is quite low (60 posts by Hollande and PS; 55 posts by Sarkozy and UMP/LR). These figures are consistent with findings pointed out concerning the Italian case, populist parties found in FB a profitable (and comfortable) environment where convey their messages and cultivate a close linkage and relationship with their supporters.

One of the most interesting findings that may be derived from Table 5 concerns the virtually absence of populist references in PS and Hollande controlled communication on FB. Indeed, their posts do not present any reference to populist key topic, not even rhetoric appeal to “people”. Similarly for UMP/LR and Sarkozy is registered just a marginal quota of posts containing populists elements (5.5%) pertains just to empty populism. MoDem or EELV and their respective leaders, anyhow, also register mainly empty populism (respectively: 6.1% and 2.5%) with very marginal features of anti-elitist populism (respectively: 3% and 5%). The two populist parties are instead a good examples of how may work differently leftist and rightist populism. As stressed in Statute and Chart of Values, Melénchon and PdG organize their controlled communication around one main core topic the criticism against elites: the 33.8% of their posts presents indeed a clear reference to anti-elitist populism, while just a small portion of their posts relates to empty populism (2.7%) or excluding populism (1.4%). On the contrary, the FB discourse by Marine Le Pen and le FN is more nuanced, encompassing several populist topics by a wider perspective. If populism regards only a minor portion of their controlled communication on FB (29.6%), the rightist party combines the
mere rhetoric invocation to people (empty populism 8.3%) with anti-elitist populism (13%) and excluding populism (8.3%).

Table 5. The communicative dimension of populism in the French party system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bayrou MODEM</th>
<th>Cosse EELV</th>
<th>Hollande PS</th>
<th>Le Pen FN</th>
<th>Le Pen PDG</th>
<th>Meléndez FN</th>
<th>Sarkozy LR-UMP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NON POPULIST MESSAGES</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPULIST MESSAGES</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete populism</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty populism</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elitist populism</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding populism</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentious populism</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Spanish case shows compelling features. First of all, Spain as a whole presents the lower volume of populist contents in FB controlled political communication (15.4%). Populism is thus a quite marginal portion of the political debate. This appears even clearer when looking at data of single political parties and leaders: the level of populist communications remains quite low, considering that the highest quota is reached by Podemos and Iglesias posts (24.3%). Interestingly, populist communication is not just a matter of those political parties who are generally recognized in literature as populists. Indeed, beside Podemos and its leader - with slightly less of one fourth of the FB messages containing populists elements – it is worth to underline that the PP and Rajoy present the largest quota of populist contents (20%), while Ciudadanos and Rivera posts providing populists issues are just the 16.8%. In addition, one can observe that there is a common – even though low – use of populist communication among Spanish parties: for all parties messages contain at least one reference to a key element of populism are over the 10% of their overall communication. In other words, the Spanish case does not show a high level of populism registered in Italy, but differently than in France, here some references to populism are common to all political parties, despite their ideology.

When focusing on the components of Spanish populist discourse, it clearly emerges that most of the time populist messages fall in the category of empty populism, that is the mere use of the appeal to ‘people’. This is a common feature of all political parties communication especially during the election campaign, when appeals to the people are more frequent. Exactly the election period included in the sample could probably explain why the PP led by Rajoy seems to choose this communicative strategy (17%), and more in general why it seems a common attitude shared also by the other parties included in the analysis.
In this perspective, the only type of populist communication emerged in the Spanish case is the anti-elitist discourse, namely the criticism against domestic and European elites blamed for the serious economic situation and the austerity policies implemented. Without any surprise we can see from data presented in Table 6 that among the all parties considered Podemos is the one engaging the most on this kind of discourse, while Ciudadanos, despite being recognized in literature as a populist party, lacks of populist contents in its controlled communication.

Table 6. The communicative dimension of populism in the Spanish party system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rajoy</th>
<th>Sanchez</th>
<th>Iglesias</th>
<th>Rivera</th>
<th>Cayo Lara</th>
<th>Junqueras</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NON POPULIST MESSAGES</td>
<td>80,0</td>
<td>88,0</td>
<td>75,7</td>
<td>83,2</td>
<td>89,3</td>
<td>87,7</td>
<td>84,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPULIST MESSAGES</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>12,0</td>
<td>24,3</td>
<td>16,8</td>
<td>10,7</td>
<td>12,3</td>
<td>15,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete populism</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty populism</td>
<td>17,0</td>
<td>12,0</td>
<td>11,7</td>
<td>14,9</td>
<td>5,8</td>
<td>8,5</td>
<td>11,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elitist populism</td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>12,6</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>4,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding populism</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentious populism</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In light of the data presented so far three main elements stand out. The first one concerns the fact that in Italy FB appears as an arena in which political actors in general seem to operate with greater consistency and confidence. If, in early Nineties, the entry of Berlusconi in the political scene had in fact marked the TV as a strategic environment for political communication, the birth (and the electoral success) of the Movement 5 Star has instead turned the web - and social networks in particular - as an arena for political discussion and mobilization inducing political actors (leaders and parties) to deal with the new media. The second dimension emerging from our data is that social networks online represent for opposition and populists parties an ideal medium for their controlled communication aimed at direct interaction with supporters. By contrast, the activity of FB of French and Spanish political actors is far less assiduous and continuous. But even in this case ideologically populist parties arise as more active, showing in this case an incisive ability to take advantage of the potential offered by the web.

Finally, despite the limitation of numbers of our sample, we may identify some interesting differences between rightist and leftist (or, better, non-rightist) populism. Even if the anti-elitist rhetoric is the most common among populist parties, especially among leftist political actors, rightist populism appears more nuanced with references to excluding and contentious populism.
6. Success and features of populist communication on Facebook

In this paragraph we will analyse the dynamic of likeability in FB environment. We resort to the distinction between Populist Parties (PP) and Non Populist Parties (NPP). We aim here to assess differences in likeability of populist messages, namely to provide a first account on how features of populism in controlled communication may boost (or not) success in FB environment. We expect that among PP those FB posts reporting elements relating to populism will obtain greater likeability than similar posts published by NPP. Similarly, we also argue that, if compared with NPP, controlled communication providing emotional frame will obtain a larger likeability among PP, in particular when the Anger frame or Fear frame is stressed in FB posts.

As concerns PP, figures detailed in Table 7, the 48.3% of PP controlled communication on FB is characterized by the emphasis on populist elements, presenting reference to at least one of the key populist elements - 'people', 'elites', 'the others'. When considering the features of their populist communication, one may easily notice that anti-elitist narrative is the most frequent in FB posts, about 27.2% (n. 327) of them are focused on critic or attack towards elites. Nonetheless, interestingly the highest likeability of populist posts is found for excluding populism (which represents a quite marginal portion of Populist Parties FB communication – 7.5%). Table 8 illustrates instead the same data for NPP, here an inverse dynamic is detailed. Without any surprise, in this case, the largest portion of posts analysed is not focused on populist elements (83.9%), populism indeed concerns just 16.1% of the total of posts published by NPP. Going into detail, it is worth to point out that the anti-elitist rhetoric is the most relevant populist reference also in this case, while the highest likeability is obtained by empty populist posts, reporting just appeals to people without further emphasis on anti-elitist or others dimensions.

Table 7. Likeability of populist messages and key populist elements on Facebook – Populist parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIKES COUNT</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Column N %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOT POPULIST</td>
<td>4,525.59</td>
<td>7,143.41</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPULIST</td>
<td>6,275.43</td>
<td>9,717.32</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete populism</td>
<td>11,436.48</td>
<td>13,488.55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty populism</td>
<td>3,989.99</td>
<td>5,027.23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elitist populism</td>
<td>4,631.06</td>
<td>7,064.44</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding populism</td>
<td>11,557.16</td>
<td>14,772.07</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentious populism</td>
<td>7,308.21</td>
<td>10,814.12</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Likeability of populist messages and key populist elements on Facebook – Not Populist parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIKES COUNT</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Column N %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOT POPULIST</td>
<td>1,797.23</td>
<td>4,327.44</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>83.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPULIST</td>
<td>1,529.85</td>
<td>2,089.53</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete populism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty populism</td>
<td>2,463.26</td>
<td>2,616.01</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elitist populism</td>
<td>771.26</td>
<td>909.35</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding populism</td>
<td>196.75</td>
<td>277.63</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentious populism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As aforementioned, likeability may be affected also by the choice of an emotional frame reported into FB messages. Figures detailed in Tables 9 and 10 validate this expectation. First of all, we can clearly see that Populist parties tend to resort more frequently to emotional frame in their controlled communication on FB (66.5%), while Non Populist parties are less prone to use such kind of communicative rhetoric. Our data also confirm the idea that posts including emotional contents register higher likeability if compared to those messages without emotional features. Yet, there are some interesting differences. For PP, in terms of likeability, the difference between emotionalized and not emotionalized communication is almost 2000 likes (respectively, an average of 4,041 likes vs. 6,040 likes). While for NPP - even though posts reporting emotionalized frame register higher likeability (average 1,957 likes) if compared to those which don’t (average 1,603 likes) - the variance is far less significant. This suggests that the effect of emotional frame may be different for Populist and Not Populist Parties. According to these figures, the volume of emotional communication is not so different, what changes is the effect. Indeed, we see that anger frame is the most frequently used in FB posts both by PP (57.2%) and NPP (34%). But likeability is different: PP when resorting to anger frame obtain an average of 6,256 likes, while when NPP use similar rhetoric obtain the lowest level of likes (1,392). For NPP the fear frame seems to have a greater impact on likeability, obtaining an average of 2,732 likes, much higher than the other negative or positive frames adopted in FB controlled communication.

Table 9. Likeability of emotionalized style messages on Facebook – Populist parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIKES COUNT</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Column N %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANY EMOTIONAL FRAME</td>
<td>4,041.28</td>
<td>6,262.33</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOTIONAL FRAME</td>
<td>6,040.10</td>
<td>9,395.58</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger frame</td>
<td>6,256.59</td>
<td>9,856.25</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear frame</td>
<td>4,060.23</td>
<td>7,660.02</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness frame</td>
<td>5,590.03</td>
<td>7,825.16</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope frame</td>
<td>6,104.78</td>
<td>8,775.70</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. Likeability of emotionalized style messages on Facebook – Not Populist Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIKES COUNT</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Column N %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANY EMOTIONAL FRAME</td>
<td>1,603.13</td>
<td>2,226.66</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOTIONAL FRAME</td>
<td>1,957.32</td>
<td>5,640.94</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger frame</td>
<td>1,392.87</td>
<td>3,268.74</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear frame</td>
<td>2,732.74</td>
<td>6,279.63</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness frame</td>
<td>2,224.36</td>
<td>5,845.82</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope frame</td>
<td>2,445.32</td>
<td>6,975.86</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to address our research questions we rely to multivariate analyses aimed to explain whether and to what extent populist contents in controlled communication conveyed in social networks (FB) may affect the likeability of the posts published. We ran two different models: the first one includes all posts published by parties classified as Populist Parties, while the second model focuses on controlled communication by Not Populist Parties. Through these two models it will be possible to clarify on the one hand dynamics of likeability for parties differently characterized in terms of populist ideology and communication. Dependent variable in both models is represented by a continuous variable reporting the number of likes recorded per each post included in our sample. Independent variable are instead all dichotomous variables referred to three different dimensions: a) populism, resorting to a set of five variables identifying the different modalities of populism (Empty populism; Anti-elite populism; Excluding populism; Contentious populism; Complete populism); b) emotions by considering two emotional frames, anger frame and fear frame; c) personalization, including in our model a variable distinguishing between posts published by party leaders and those published by the party.

As regards PP’s controlled communication, as illustrated in Table 11, we found that the presence of populist elements, emotionalized style, and the leader as the source of communication positively affected the popularity of a message. Our model is significant ($R^2 = 0.293$). The first main finding emerging from this analysis is that not all the types of populist messages produces significant effects. Anti-elitist populism, despite being the most recurrent populist modalities, seems to have no effect on likeability, and the same could be extended also for Empty populism. The populist modalities that result producing a greater effect on likes are excluding populism ($6,211$) and complete populism ($5,981$). In other words, FB posts containing references to migrants and minorities in general generate higher likeability, similarly to those reporting all key elements of populism (people, elites and the others). It has to be underlined that also posts providing elements of contentious populism contribute to the explanation of likeability, even though it appeared as the variable less relevant in terms of significance and magnitude of the correlation coefficient.

Considering instead emotional frame, we find that actually it has a minor effect on likeability: only anger frame is positive and statistically significant ($1,247$), while fear is not even significant. In any case, personalization seems to be the determinant in providing the strongest contribution to the success of a post. Indeed, when the leader is the source of the message the likeability of the post is deeply affected. A post published by the party leader achieved over $8,619$ likes more than the average likeability score. This means that the populist leader are much more important than any other variable to explain the online popularity of a populist message.

Table 11. Explaining Likeability on FB posts by Populist Parties and leaders (DV= number of likes per post)

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For further details concerning operationalization please see the methods section.
Moving to Not Populist Parties and leaders (Table 12), as expected we found that the model does not contribute to effectively explain the success of a FB message published by Not Populist Parties and their leaders ($R^2=0.033$). In addition, none of the variables related to populism or emotional frame included in our second model is statistically significant. The only significant result emerging from Model 2 is that personalization also facilitates likeability of Not Populist Parties FB messages, but as shown in Table 12 the coefficient is weak and it does not help enough in explaining likeability dynamics for Not Populist parties.

To sum up, as regards Populist parties, on the one hand, we found that some types of populism message (excluding populism, in particular) as well as emotionalized frame (anger) and personalization may significantly affect the likeability of FB messages; on the other hand, as regards Not Populist Parties, social media users does not react to the same stimuli and they seem to follow different paths.

Table 12. Explaining Likeability on FB posts by Not Populist Parties and leaders (DV= number of likes per post)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>1,280.994</td>
<td>349,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty populism</td>
<td>491.668</td>
<td>1,039.172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elite populism</td>
<td>-618.281</td>
<td>821.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding populism</td>
<td>1,578.756</td>
<td>1,769.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger frame</td>
<td>-293.668</td>
<td>542.971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear frame</td>
<td>864.423</td>
<td>904.963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader vs. account</td>
<td>1,514.476</td>
<td>508.544</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2$ 0.033

***p<0.000; **p<0.010; *p<0.050
7. Conclusion and discussion

This study addressed the question of the success of populist messages on a social media. We investigated the main features of parties and leaders' communication by examining the posts they published on their Facebook pages in a randomly selected reconstructed month. We provided a content analysis on these posts in order to assess the presence of populist elements and the use of an emotionalized style, then we correlated these data with the likes count. We demonstrated that populism, emotionalized style and the leader as a source of communication may positively affect the likeability of a Populist Parties message.

Several scholars have pointed out that one of the main features of populism is its chameleon-like nature (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Taggart, 2000). It is indeed able to adapt communication to different contexts and times. The importance attributed to each key element within the populist parties discourse determines their political line, emphasizing, in turn, the exaltation of ‘the people’, the denigration of ‘elites’, the discrimination of the ‘others’ or a combination of these elements. Over the period analysed we found that not all populist messages were equally popular. Although PP put great emphasis on the ‘elites’, are the variables Excluding, Contentious, Complete populism that explain the popularity of a message posted on Facebook. This implies that populist content in itself is not necessarily popular even among the PP fans. There is therefore no direct relationship between publication of populist content and its likeability.

In accordance with evidence experimentally observed by Hameleers et al. (2016), this study also found that emotionalized style messages affects citizens: ‘anger frame’ had a positive effect on the likeability of PP posts. More in general, emotionalized communication appeared to be a promising component for a deeper understanding of the relationship between citizens and populist proposals.

The leader, and especially the relationship that links him/her to his/her supporters, is another determinant that clearly explains the likeability of the PP message on Facebook. This result underlines a crucial aspect of many populist parties, namely the presence of a charismatic leader (such as Le Pen, Bossi, Salvini, Berlusconi, Iglesias, Tsipras, etc.). This will require closer study of
the 'charismatic linkage' (Kitschelt 2000) rooted in personal qualities that involves asymmetry between leaders and followers, but also directness and great passion (Kriesi 2015).
References


European Free Alliance (2016). The Spanish state can no longer be reformed. The results of the EFA parties in the Spanish elections highlight the need for change. Retrived from www.e-f-a.org/services/news-single-view/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1000&cHash=faea3fd113e316e61cf0886d1e313341.


