Populism as Communication Style: How Party Leaders’ Tweets Affect the Twittersphere?

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Abstract

Financial and political crisis in Europe seem to have catalysed some electoral consensus towards those political parties whose communication styles are strongly characterized by populist references. As a result of the success achieved by political actors traditionally considered as populist, it has started a sort of emulative process of their populist communication style. The adoption of a populist communication style seems to be the key to getting closer to citizens, often playing on anti-political feelings.

Thus the aims of this research project are, firstly, to identify the attributes of the concept of populism as a political communication style and, secondly, to recognize the adoption of this style by political leaders. In a context shaped by personalization and disintermediation processes, the representation of the political forces is closely linked to both the figure and the communicative performances of the leaders. We have chosen to monitor mainly Italian leaders’ Twitter timelines: @matteosalvinimi, @beppe_grillo, @matteorenzi, @GiorgiaMeloni and @NichiVendola. All these leaders have adopted Twitter as a daily communication tool in order to be in contact with their sympathizers. The content of each timeline has been analysed and classified in order to highlight populist aspects.

The results lead to the conclusion that Italian leaders adopt different populist strategies in their online communicative performance. These strategies differ above all in the degree of populism and especially for the particular style or rhetoric adopted.

Keywords: Populism, Twitter, Italian political leaders

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Introduction

The latest European elections have stressed some supranational tension elements that have been propagated by both mainstream and social media. The financial crisis, the refugee emergency, and terrorism have exacerbated the welfare conditions of many European citizens, contributing to the aggravation of their distrust regarding politics. These critical issues have catalysed some political consensus towards political parties that are characterized by populist references (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Kriesi, 2014). Even though research on European populism has been traditionally focused on right-wing parties (De Raadt, Hollanders, & Krouwel, 2004), it also concerns present leftist or mainstream parties which have been involved in this process of “populization” of politics (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In this political context, the situation in Italy deserves special emphasis, due to the communication style, the anti-political roots and the spread of populist actions that go back to the early ’90s (Biorcio, 2007, 2015). In the last years the growing discontent with mainstream parties (Bordignon, 2014; Roncarolo, 2014) has reached its peak with the success achieved by the Five Star Movement – anti-caste, anti-system, anti-Europe movement – during the political elections in February 2013 (Diamanti, 2013).

As a result of the success achieved by political actors traditionally considered as populist, it has started a sort of emulative process of their populist communication style while their political parties are accused to be populist (Mudde, 2004). The adoption of a populist communication style seems to be the key to getting closer to citizens, often playing on anti-political feelings. Populism thus becomes a style, a language, a discourse that fits with media needs and with the mediatisation processes (Diamanti, 2010; Mazzoleni, 2014).

In order to understand this dynamic, we have first to define the foundations for the concept of populism as a political communication style. In fact, the concept of populism is vague and slippery (Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Taguieff, 2003), closely linked to the context (Taggart, 2000) and to the historical period in which it is used (Merker, 2009), so that often the label of populist is given without any systematic empirical justification (Hawkins, 2009).

Thus the aims of this research project are, firstly, to identify the attributes of the concept of populism as a political communication style and, secondly, to recognize the adoption of this style by political leaders. This work is in its early stages and represents an attempt to develop a different point of view in order to study populism as a communicative style inside the social media realm.

In the first part of the article, the analysis will focus on the definition of the concept of populism as a communication style, identifying its diverse constitutive dimensions and their specific indicators as emerged in the review of the existing research that have operationalized the concept of populism in its various declinations. In the second part, it will be analyzed the different degree of diffusion of the communication style used by Italian leaders through the analysis of the indicators, the synthetic index of each dimension and the overall synthetic index of populism.

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