Section 5 – Comunicazione politica

Panel 1. Politics and (social) media participation
Chairs: Luigi Ceccarini, Cristian Vaccari

This panel will deal with the implications of social media for citizens' political participation in and outside the web. Social media shape the communicative eco-system, constrain and enable social action, as well as being influenced by social practices and elites' strategic behaviours. Social media are both affected by, and contribute to shaping, the cultural dimension of media participation in politics, and the tools citizens employ to develop meaning in their everyday lives. In this environment, common forms of collective selfrepresentation are generated by means of the production, remixing, sharing and appropriation of content by individuals, groups, and organizations.

The outcomes of these changes are by no means predetermined by the technologies enabling them. On the one hand, the online engagement of citizens of advanced democracies suggests an expansion of democratic voice and opportunities. On the other hand, concerns about systematic disinformation and manipulation— whether by political elites, media elites, or outside actors—can be seen as potential challenges to democratic civic and political life. Moreover, while most research tends to start from the implicit or explicit assumption that more citizen participation is in and of itself desirable for democracy, the time is ripe for a more thorough discussion on the normative premises and implications of digitally-enabled citizen participation.

Against this backdrop, there seem to be some important differences between Southern European countries (such as Italy), and Northern European and North American democracies. In the former group of countries, citizens are often portrayed as less civically minded and less engaged in public life by comparison with the latter. The extent to which the democratic challenges outlined above threaten democratic governance across different political systems is also unclear, as most of the public debate and empirical research on these issues has tended to focus on the United States and the United Kingdom.

The panel aims to address critical questions such as:

I. Have social media affected citizens' engagement styles and political culture?

II. How can we understand the role of social media with respect to different political goals and agendas? Under what conditions do social media yield democratically desirable or dysfunctional outcomes?

III. What kinds of organisational frameworks characterise the various expressions of online civic engagement and political involvement?

To address these issues, we aim to discuss academic work based on:

a. case studies (drawing either on single countries or comparative analysis) focusing on online campaigns, web-based parties, civil society organizations and government watchdogs;

b. research on social media, adopting a range of research methods and techniques, e.g., big-data analysis, opinion polls among e-citizens, qualitative interviews with e-activists, and content analysis of social networks or websites.

To this end, we welcome papers that focus on the relationship between the Internet, political participation and citizens' involvement, particularly from a multidisciplinary perspective and employing mixed-methods approaches.