Article

Knock, Knock! The Next Wave of Populism Has Arrived! An Analysis of Confirmations, Denials, and New Developments in a Phenomenon That Is Taking Center Stage

Daniele Battista

Departments of Political and Social Studies, University of Salerno, 84084 Fisciano, Italy; dbattista@unisa.it

Abstract: Giorgia Meloni has long been one of the most important figures on the political scene. Her strength has been, from the very beginning, clear and effective communication, combined with a populist style based on the credibility of her path. Our contribution will attempt to highlight the interweaving that links this discipline to the complex and varied representation of populism. The analyses are based on extensive documentation of data for a period from July 2020 to September 2022, the month in which the vote was held in Italy. This periodisation allowed us to have a broad view of the phenomenon and a consequent linear picture of the state of the art. Moreover, in this way, we were able to cover three years of particularly intense political debate, allowing us to outline the underlying motivations that led to electoral success. Based on existing research, the phenomena are described and then framed in relation to the social and political context in which they were experienced, taking into account the interconnection with communication. In this sense, this contribution aims to introduce a perspective that corrects most analyses in this field, which assume that populist parties have lost ground in Europe with the advent of the pandemic. In fact, this study argues that the communication strategies linked to some of Giorgia Meloni's political choices, including all forms of populism, have generally succeeded in attracting greater public interest while maintaining the characteristics of a phenomenon with pop traits that favoured its rise.

Keywords: political communication; populism; leadership; social networks; electoral participation

1. Introduction

Populism is a difficult phenomenon to understand, especially given the apparent ease of use of the term in political discourse. Moreover, it is well established that the literature in the field of political science and political theory has not yet been able to provide a universal definition of this phenomenon. Indeed, it is not entirely obvious what the conceptual contours are when speaking of populism, so much so that it always takes on different meanings depending on the context. For some time, in fact, we have witnessed a generalisation with ambiguous terminological contours and a relegation of the term to simplistic slogan use. To remove the looming chaos, one need only consider all the political leaders branded populist in the international political arena. From the right to the left, progressives and conservatives, are all under the same populist label. Among them, we also include Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who will be the focus of our analysis. Against this backdrop, this contribution also aims to provide a quick, and not exhaustive, overview of the populist phenomenon and to establish a fair assumption: we live in a historical period that is rightly called a 'permanent electoral campaign' (Blumenthal 1980). In this regard, the questions raised in the article will help to bring order to what has happened in Italy, with an excursus of what happened to the current leading party Fratelli d'Italia and its leader Giorgia Meloni, from the pandemic to the last electoral campaign that saw her triumph. This study aims to demonstrate and identify the specific structural factors that have determined this exploit, especially on social networks, as well as to understand some of the political trends that have contributed to its growth. Indeed, populism has

polarised meanings and has had a strong or weak effect on the quality of democracy depending on the power dynamics in which it operates: whether in opposition or as a governing force (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Thus, it is clear from the evidence that it has benefited from the choice to continuously and permanently oppose the last government of national unity. However, in order to best approach the analysis carried out, we obtained information on the different notions of populism and the health status of the phenomenon. To date, populism does not possess a universal definition under which to encapsulate the phenomenon but turns out to be a mixed concept with an even respectable political history. Therefore, it seemed of paramount importance to us to open a thorough and meticulous examination by exploiting the many different contributions already present in the literature and to enter into the debate between the different meanings given to this term. Thus, the definition of populism is part of one of the most controversial political debates, dividing and uniting different lines of thought on the subject. The long debate, therefore, on its nature, has even seen the term associated with an insult directed at political opponents. In this regard, the French scholar Jean Leca has noted that when we find a certain position convincing, it is called popular, while when we disagree it can instead be called populist. Perhaps only one aspect can bring the different theoretical orientations into agreement, namely, that populism takes root more where a real process of depoliticisation is taking place—in an era, ours, where the gulf separating the people from the ruling political class has widened further (De Benoist 2017). With this research, we do not aim to discover what the entanglements and origins of populism are, nor will we attempt to coin a universal definition, but at the same time, the study carried out may represent a further compass of orientation in the Italian case.

The most ambitious work among those we consider is certainly the Oxford Handbook of populism (Stanley 2017), in which the contributions of thirty-eight scholars outline an arc of analysis that extends in multiple directions. The sections of the ponderous handbook propose a geographical approach to the spread of the phenomenon studied, spanning all the continents of the planet. The text addresses the relationships with media, parties, and movements, and the affinities with various ideological strands, starting with nationalism and fascism, and also aims to suggest more precise avenues of discussion to researchers, inviting them to fill in the gaps that still leave the manifestations of the populist phenomenon in some specific areas of the world poorly or not well explored. As far as I am concerned, the proposed work could not go in this vein due to the consistency of the contribution and the difficulty in examining the different ramifications related to the issue. In principle, it could certainly be a useful tool for defining the different facets and boundaries that have seen the phenomenon grow in Italy, combining them with a permanent social vision.

The methodological approach that characterises the studies reflected in this contribution represents an example of qualitative research that starts from the roots and then expands and develops into a dynamic vision in the primary object of research. This broad examination is then advanced in listing the various ramifications related to the practical impact the phenomenon generates in politics and society. Subsequently, the detailed descriptive analysis served as the empirical basis for this analytical report and aims to provide a better understanding or causal explanation of the case under examination. This report considers the general context of the Italian case, without neglecting the social, political, and historical aspects. At the same time, it offers an interpretative view due to a deeper interest in the data processed, while referring to existing hypotheses or theories. The research began in July 2020 and overall provides an in-depth knowledge of the reality after having reviewed the literature and sources that included statements and speeches of the party leader, statistical data, and other data that were often only available on a platform dedicated to processing data from social networks. Transparency from the point of view of methodological reconstruction requires at this point to specify how the research questions were illustrated so far and, above all, how they were formulated—broken down in their own singularity and then recomposed in the relationship of mutual influence

and relationship—to represent a process of reconstruction in progress. In fact, qualitative research is distinguished by the recursiveness (Cardano 2003) of the relationship between data collection, data analysis, theoretical reflection, and writing—all phases that cannot be distinguished in rigidly sequential terms, being contemplated in a dense relationship of interdependence.

2. Analysis between Theory and Clash with Reality

The operational analysis focuses on different levels of observation. The first part provides a theoretical basis for the phenomenon of populism and briefly describes the current state of the Italian scenario for further research. It highlights a timeline that makes the research diachronic and provides a linear picture of the state of affairs. This is to understand and redefine certain political processes that have gradually seen the traditional parties lose ground.

Therefore, starting from the awareness of how difficult it is to identify in depth the causes that contributed to the victory of the centre-right coalition that crowned Giorgia Meloni premier with the weakening of the parties of the now old majority around Mario Draghi. The populist message, even if initially weakened, has returned amidst the state of health emergency and the economic crisis resulting from the accentuation of the division that has gripped all the political systems of western democracies, effectively threatening the stability of the political system. The analysis focuses, therefore, on a structured time frame in order to give the study some credibility and avoid hasty diagnoses in a country such as Italy that has experienced different phases related to the phenomenon. The first phase followed the collapse of the traditional party system in 1992–1993 and saw the emergence of parties with highly personalised leadership, such as Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord, as well as the Italia dei valori founded by former magistrate Antonio Di Pietro (Tarchi 2015). The second phase can be traced back to a more recent form of populism, the Five Star Movement, which arose to fill the void linked to dissatisfaction with the political class as a whole. The current phase in which we are immersed, which we could count as the third, has been marked by the rise of Fratelli d'Italia. Populist parties in Italy have been successful in the transition from 'party democracy' to a new regime dominated by media communication and the personalisation of politics. Berlusconi's media populism successfully rode these trends using all the tools of advertising marketing. Forza Italia was initially seen as a temporary anomaly in Italian political life, a short-lived virtual party. In reality, Berlusconi had also initiated in Italy, in an accelerated manner, the process that in many European countries had already transformed 'party democracy' into a 'democracy of the public' (Manin 1995). In its early years, Berlusconi's party went to extremes, in an almost ideal-typical form, abandoning the traditional political and organisational profile of political parties, with the substantial disappearance of the role of the membership and militant base, and a direct relationship between the voters and the leader, who relies on a small, professionalised central core, specialised in the collection of financial resources, communication, and campaign management. Over the years, other Italian political forces have also adapted to these trends in many cases. The 'light' party and the 'personal' party became increasingly popular models, as did the prevalent use of media to communicate with voters (Calise 2010). Populism has historically presented itself in very differentiated forms, depending on the epochs and contexts in which it has asserted itself. There is of course no organic and univocal ideological elaboration, but some common traits can be identified that characterise all political formations historically defined as populist (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). The term populism is probably one of the most recurrent in the public debate of recent decades. It is used and perhaps abused in every conceivable sphere, both in field studies and in political communication. Therefore, the definition of populism is one of the most compelling political controversies, dividing and uniting different ideas on this issue. The disquisition on the nature of populism is extensive and controversial. By some scholars the phenomenon is identified as an ideology (Mudde 2004, 2007; Taggart 2000), by others as a communication style (Aalberg et al. 2017;

Moffitt 2016), and still by others as a political strategy (Weyland 2001). On the other hand, the explanation of populism is undoubtedly associated with rather complex concepts. However, despite numerous attempts, the literature has not been able to give a definitive and indisputable definition (Diamanti and Lazar 2018); in fact, it is considered one of the most used but least meaningful words because it generates too many conflicting meanings (Urbinati 2017). Delving deeper into this case study, one can find some similarities with the AUR, which presents itself as the only opposition party in Romania. Among its various political objectives, it emphasises the Christian faith, freedom, and traditional family values. During the pandemic, it campaigned against closures, the use of masks, and the vaccination campaign, developing an opposition linking the management of the pandemic phase to deeper issues such as homeland, family, and religion (Doiciar and Creţan 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have accentuated reactions as virus control measures increased health and socioeconomic inequalities. In addition, low-skilled workers and the poor were disproportionately affected (Mocanu 2020), and this was the case at all latitudes with a consequent rise in unemployment that increased dissatisfaction with the government. The pandemic has framed the rise of the AUR as well as Fratelli D'Italia, dialectically creating space for the active assertion of a populist opposition centred on a communicative style that exploits opportunities for conflict. From what can be deduced, therefore, the phenomenon paradoxically still remains a cryptic issue, so much so as to lead one to hypothesise a sort of 'Cinderella complex' (Tarchi 2004), to define the immense doctrinal effort expended in creating a slipper, which desperately and without much success has been trying for decades to fit this or that political movement or party, in Italy as well as around the world. There are many reasons for the objective difficulty of unambiguously defining the meaning of this term of the phenomenon behind it. Firstly, its spatial and temporal diffusion: populism is a phenomenon that has characterised political movements or parties present in almost all corners of the planet at different historical moments, especially since the birth of modern representative democracies. To this must be added its peculiar transversality with respect to the traditional division of the political universe into the classical right–left division, so much so that we have witnessed and still witness in many countries left-wing populisms and right-wing populisms, and we know that no doctrine can be right-wing and left-wing at the same time (Bobbio 1994). So much so that today, to ascertain the confusion that gravitates around the concept of populism, we need only think of all the political leaders who have been assigned the label of populist on the international political scene. Among them: Donald Trump, Hugo Chavez, Matteo Salvini, Santiago Abascal, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, Pablo Iglesias Turrión, Giorgia Meloni, and Nayib Bukele. These are political figures who are profoundly different from each other in many ways but are united by the fact that they are considered 'populists'. A concept reminiscent of the South American populism that still endures today is made up of transversal construction by leaders continuously occupied with the conquest of the free electorate and less concerned with classic right/left facets (Nyenhuis 2019). As an example, European populism shows itself differently and allows us to identify the way in which radical right-wing groups draw on localised concerns to generate support, linking administrative failure to prejudiced attitudes towards marginalised communities, implementing a process of anti-Rom stigmatisation as a key mobilisation tactic (Creţan and O'Brien 2019).

From this characteristic trait, the lack of political exclusivity of populism emerges. In fact, rather than a rapprochement to the right or left, it can be considered a 'container' (Mastropaolo 2005). Having empirically defined that it is not a passing phenomenon but, on the contrary, is like a karst river that constantly resurfaces (Zanatta 2013), and having ascertained that there is currently no handbook of populism, with the present research we do not aim to discover what the entanglements and origins of populism are, nor will we attempt to coin a universal definition. Rather, we will try to highlight the intertwining linked to populist-motivated strategies of political communication on social networks that have allowed Fratelli d'Italia to be the leading party in Italy. Modern-day politicians make

massive use of social networks in their election campaigns. Politicians being reluctant to land on social networks seems like a distant era (Bentivegna 2014), so much so that the 2022 election campaign will go down in history because it saw the definitive move of Italian political leaders onto social platforms, in particular the long-awaited landing on TikTok. One fact to highlight is that it is not surprising that most of these figures are counted under the big populist banner. A large body of research has examined the use of social media by populist leaders (Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Gründl 2020; Hameleers and Schmuck 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). The existence of 'style' is emphasised (Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Hameleers et al. 2020) and the evaluation of its effectiveness in terms of political consensus (Casero-Ripolles 2021; Pérez-Curiel and Limon-Naharro 2019). Some argue that social media enhances the consistency of populist leaders, making it easier to perceive them as trustworthy and authentic (Enli and Rosenberg 2018).

It is important to point out an important study on the Italian reality and the use of social media. After all, argues Gerbaudo (2018), there seems to be an 'elective affinity' between social media and pop communication: the mass networking capabilities of social media, at the time of a 'mass network' involving billions of people worldwide, provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and appeals to people typical of populism. Indeed, a significant change is taking place in the forms and styles of political rhetoric of populist parties, especially on the right. As a result, politics is being simplified and reduced to a few slogans that are apparently understandable to the general public. As argued by Ellinas (2008), the media communication and appropriation used in the recent success of right-wing populist parties cannot be overlooked.

On the other hand, social media are changing the way politicians communicate with their constituents all the time. In particular, it has been observed that they provide a powerful tool that populists can use to mobilise their followers, in addition to traditional political communication channels (Kriesi 2014).

Ultimately, the process of adaptation to the media logic by the actors of populism, defined by (Mazzoleni 2004) as 'mediatised populism', seems to have intensified and populists have adapted their communication styles to the new media environment provided. The first case, in fact, may have been that of Matteo Salvini's Lega, which, owing to the aid of this modality, implemented a profound process that allowed the party to become a national and no longer a regional force (Bobba 2019). In essence, populism is qualitatively different because of the new media that have advanced populism more than any other form of politics (Moffitt 2016).

Summing up all the positions expressed so far, we have seen that populism can be defined as: ideology, syndrome, movement, social phenomenon, strategy, and political style but also sentiment and state of mind. All this is as far as the sphere of form is concerned, while from the point of view of substance, we can trace it back to a central core through an extreme simplification, constituted by the idea that there is a virtuous and sovereign people that are in danger because they are threatened and betrayed by a series of enemies. Theorist Cas Mudde states that populism is "an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, i.e., 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde 2004).

The populist push was initially categorised far too loosely. Only with the passage of time did we realise the jolt it generated, as the wave continued to grow and did not stop in a short time. This is the starting point, the keystone from which all the theoretical arcs and practical declinations that we will go on to see later branch off.

What emerges, at least initially, could allude to a rapid rise of Giorgia Meloni's populism in Italy. This is partly true, as populist parties thrive in times of crisis, but it should be noted that it is premature to draw hasty and simplistic conclusions about the path that brought Fratelli d'Italia into government. Italy's current Prime Minister has been able to tune in to the needs of the people, impose his own media agenda and make his message go viral via social media; he has also zeroed in on those distances with the population by

implementing an increasingly winking profile of pop politics (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). The affinity between social media and populist politics in the era of a mass web involving billions of people worldwide provides a suitable channel for mass politics and appeals to the people typical of populism (Gerbaudo 2018). Fundamental, therefore, is the connection to the different meanings attached to the term 'people' in the populist discourse set up. In this regard, (Canovan 1999) recognised four declinations of people. The first sees a people united under the banner of a nation as a cohesive but endangered entity. The second refers to a common people understood as the working people as opposed to the ruling class. The third, on the other hand, concerns ordinary people where the demands of the citizens are ignored by the political class. Finally, the fourth conjugation envisages an ethnic people where the people are bound by an identity and a set of cultural, religious, linguistic, and racial traditions that must be defended against outsiders, immigrants, and foreigners. Mèny and Surel (2001), however, postulate three other meanings in the use of the term by populists. The sovereign people, the foundation of the political legitimacy of government, is the original holder of power, exercised in its name by its representatives who must fight if its mandate is betrayed. The people understood as the anonymous masses who suffer the negative consequences of decisions have become hostages of lobbies. Lastly, a people referring to a nation united by geographical, linguistic, historical, and biological ties, whose integrity is threatened by the creation of a multi-ethnic society.

What scholars have argued fits perfectly with the populist rhetoric advanced by Meloni in recent years. Just think of the first two words, true founding gems of her discourse: fatherland and family. In her populist narrative, the people is understood as an ethnic group based on descent and a common culture and religion. Moreover, it continually claims the right to decide who can enter its territory and under what conditions. All this is in the name of tradition and against claims of social reformism that threaten the family as the fundamental unit of the nation. This political agenda seems to be closely linked to the battle waged in the name of identity. In this case, there is no better explanation than Giorgia Meloni's famous refrain, which also helps to make the character stand out more and trace part of the success and ideology back to the opening with this phrase: 'I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am Italian, I am a mother, I am a Christian, you won't take that away from me'.

Gender, nationality, family roles, and religious order are all dimensions of identity threatened by 'globalist' forces and cosmopolitan elites that not only encourage mass immigration but also corrupt the traditional cultures of nations. Thus, especially in terms of culture, traditions, and values, populists reject attempts to threaten the defence of their sovereignty. Essentially, it is a matter of protecting their conservative way of life from the threat of global migratory flows and open societies. Hard borders seem mainly functional to produce a reassuring image of the world, in which a clear separation between the concept of us and them as foreigners can be recognised. The homeland of the patriots, as leader Meloni[1] repeatedly emphasised, then functions as that of the heartland, the land at the heart of the collective imagination, which according to Paul Taggart gives shape with its emotional charge to the idea of the people of populism. This narrative has provided the leader with a pervasive efficacy that has grown to such an extent that it has become a veritable social wave that in the long run has supported his establishment in no small measure. However, there is no doubt that the pandemic caused an unprecedented situation of cognitive loss in the country, therefore, acting as an accelerator of a growth process that was already largely underway. The adaptation to the emergency and the rethinking of their political strategies was sudden, despite the many difficulties in their communication style, which has always been one of populism's strong points. In light of the effects of the pandemic crisis, it was more important than ever to be able to convey the unique messages, values, and characteristics that distinguish the politics of the current Italian premier. These messages are easily identifiable in the broader political theatre and classified as a penetrating communicative profile because they are 'close', 'everyday', and 'reachable' by the general public (Bentivegna 2014; De Rosa 2014; Giansante 2014). In our case, however, an aspect that we reported earlier emerges, namely, a constancy that has

contributed significantly to the narrative of Fratelli d'Italia's leadership: consistency. This characteristic has allowed it to create an aura as a champion of inorganic change and, in particular, to highlight its significant differences with other centre-right political partners. The reinforcement of this status has achieved its narrative coherence through a journey that goes back a long way. In fact, the first-ever boom was recorded in the thirty days straddling January and February 2021, in a passage of strong political and social polarisation where the onset of the third wave of the pandemic and the failure to get the vaccination campaign off the ground begin to produce widespread public unease. To all this is added a key element: the deflagration of the government majority and the questioning of the former Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte. This extraordinary conjunction allows Meloni to ride on the inabilities and anxieties of the government forces by placing herself in the oppositional 'solitude'. On the one hand, the very large majority puts the Five Star Movement, Forza Italia, Lega, and Partito Democratico under the same umbrella, and on the other hand puts Giorgia Meloni with Fratelli d'Italia. After all, this turns out to be a relevant and decisive explanation for Fratelli d'Italia's exploit. Being the only party not to support Mario Draghi's government, given the electoral results, was a winning choice.

3. Results

The analysis (Figure 1) conducted on the LiveInsight platform (Blogmeter) collected all the written speech published by users on the Internet associated with two search keys: 'Giorgia Meloni' and 'Fratelli d'Italia'. This survey uses a double time window, with the first one analysing the sentiments of network users for each month from July 2020 to the end of June 2021 and the second one attempting to provide an overall picture. The information from the Internet was simultaneously reflected in the trends of SWG's monthly poll on party voting intentions. The comparative annual approach provided a thermometer of conversations on social media and the web built around the two keywords 'Giorgia Meloni' and 'Fratelli d'Italia'. What resurfaces is not only that Meloni is today one of the most followed platform leaders, but in this specific case shows how, at the moment, the digital and physical destinies of the party are inextricably linked to its political parabola, so much so that we can coin the symbolic definition of Giorgia's Brothers. Identification with the party is replaced by identification with the leader (Ceccobelli 2017), delegating the personalisation of leadership as an indisputable structural factor. It can be defined as a process that corresponds to a reduction in the political weight of the group and the consequent acceleration that has led to the elevation of the role of the leader and a simultaneous downgrading with a loss of confidence in the role of the parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2003), elevating the leader to the main repository of citizens' expectations and hopes, since the parties no longer perform the function of intermediaries between the government and the voters as effectively as they once did (Campus 2016). This has led to a de facto replacement of party democracy with the democracy of the public and a crisis of party credibility exacerbated, moreover, by the economic crisis that has affected much of the global economy since 2008 (De Blasio 2018) It must be emphasised that this tendency towards personalisation belongs to all politics in modern democracies (Mancini 2011).
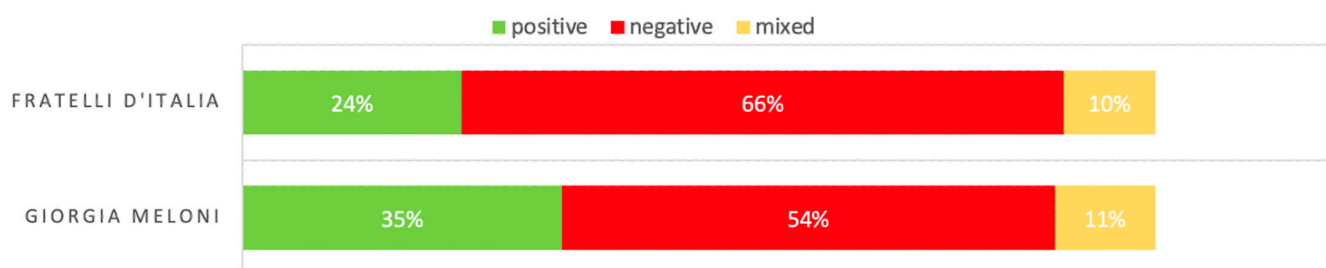
Figure 1. Automatic scanning by the tool FanPage Karma. Reference period: July 2020–June 2021.

Meloni's popularity, from July 2020 to the end of June 2021, stands at 35%, surpassing by 11 percentage points that of Fratelli d'Italia, which stands at 24%. A pull that demonstrates the stubbornness of political personalisation, after succumbing to the logic of the media (Altheide and Snow 1979). For example, according to Ixè, in July 2020, Italians' trust in Meloni was at 31%, while in May this year in the Ipsos surveys, it stood at 37%.

The most telling statistic is connected to Meloni's success on the number one social platform in terms of the number of users and interactions, namely, Facebook. So much so that in that period, 72% of the talk about her was absorbed by Mark Zuckerberg's social network (Figure 2).
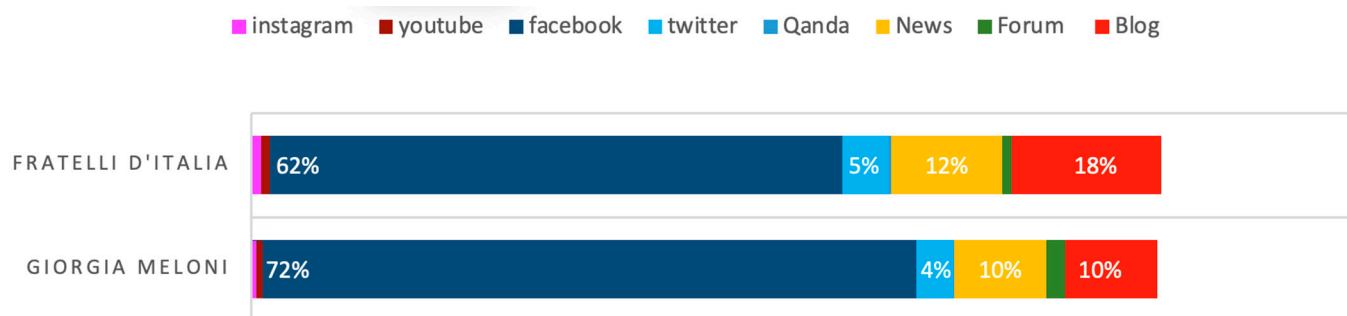
Figure 2. Automatic scanning by the tool FanPage Karma. Reference period: July 2020–June 2021.

It is also not possible to depart from these data in order to give a deeper and more prospective interpretation of Fratelli d'Italia's run-up in the polls (Figures 3 and 4). Moreover, in the period in question, the demoscopic surveys of all the institutes have shown a growth in the consensus on Meloni's party from 4.5% to 7.5% on average, and this result cannot be improperly dislodged by the presidium that Meloni has made of Facebook.

VOTING GUIDELINES: 13/07/2020

	17/7/2020	6/7/2020	TREND
LEGA	26.3	26.6	−0.3
PARITITO DEMOCRATICO	19.6	20.0	−0.4
MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	15.3	15.7	−0.4
FRATELLI D'ITALIA	14.5	14.0	+0.5
FORZA ITALIA	6.3	5.9	+0.4
SINISTRA ITALIANA/MDP	3.7	3.8	−0.1

Figure 3. Polls retrieved by Swg, July 2020.

VOTING GUIDELINES: 28/06/2021

	28/6/2021	21/6/2021	TREND
FRATELLI D'ITALIA	20.7	20.5	+0.2
LEGA	20.3	20.6	−0.3
PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	18.8	18.6	+0.2
MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	16.6	16.0	+0.6
FORZA ITALIA	7.0	6.8	+0.2
AZIONE	3.9	3.8	+0.1
SINISTRA ITALIANA	2.7	2.5	+0.2

Figure 4. Polls retrieved by Swg, June 2021.

February, however, can be considered a turning point. SWG released the results of the Italians' voting orientation and to no little surprise Fratelli d'Italia breaks the 17% consensus wall, a figure that for the first time leads analysts and commentators to speak of a possible overtaking of Meloni's party against the Partito Democratico (Figure 5).

VOTING GUIDELINES: 22/02/2021

	22/2/2021	15/2/2021	TREND
LEGA	23.1	23.5	−0.4
PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	18.3	18.8	−0.5
FRATELLI D'ITALIA	17.5	16.2	+1.3
MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	15.4	15.4	=
FORZA ITALIA	7.5	6.9	+0.6
AZIONE	3.9	4.3	−0.4
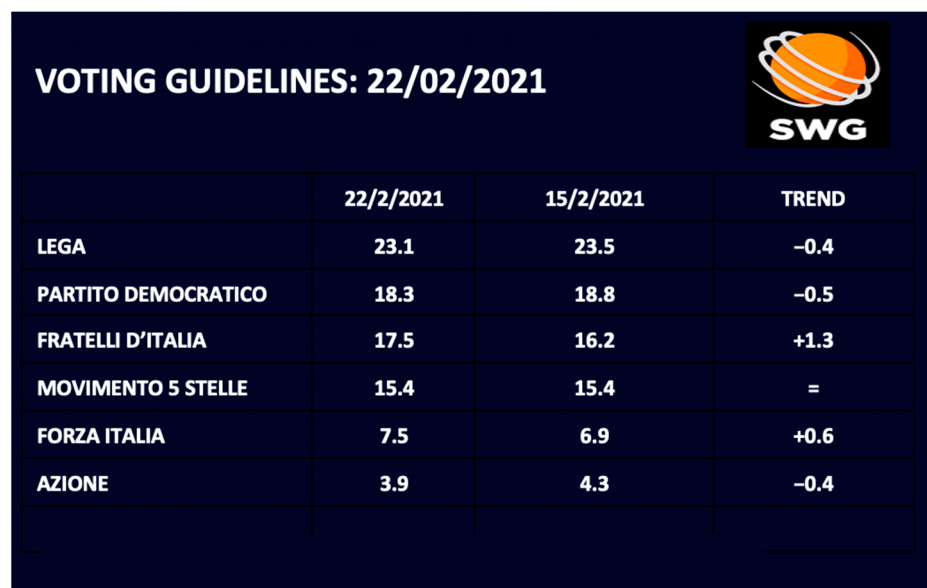
**Figure 5.** Polls retrieved by Swg, February 2021.

Once again, as was the case in September 2020, every leap of a percentage point or more in the polls is matched by a parallel growth on Facebook as the priority digital territory of the talk focused on the keyword 'Giorgia Meloni'. In February, as can be seen, 75% of all discussions are on the social platform (Figure 6).

instagram **youtube** **facebook** **twitter** **Qanda** **News** **Forum** **Blog**

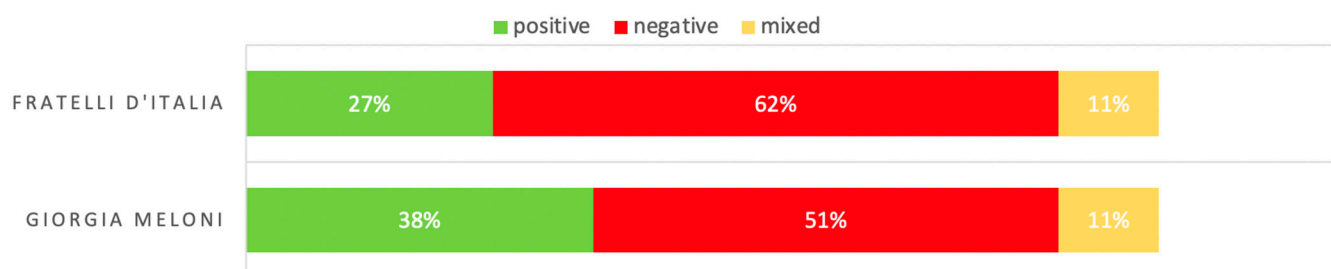|		
GIORGIA MELONI	75%	3% 7% 5% 9%
FRATELLI D'ITALIA	64%	12% 18%
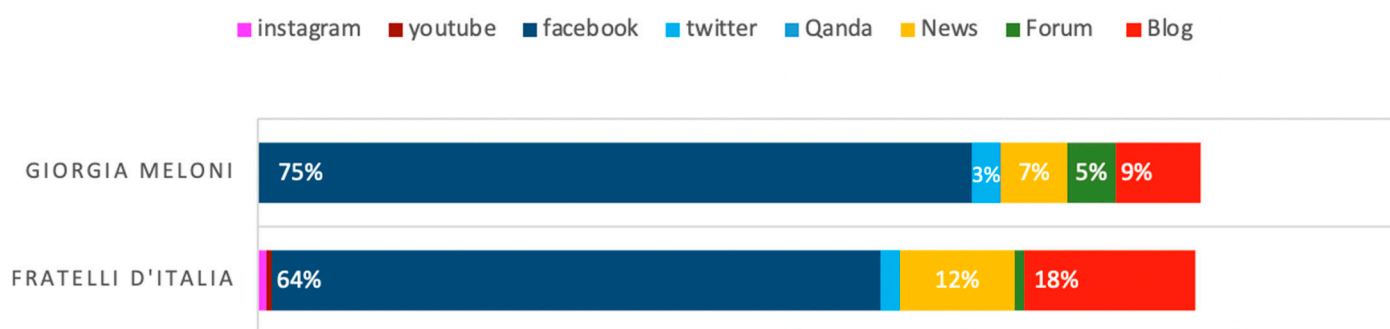
Figure 6. Automatic scanning sources of spoken language by the tool FanPage Karma. Reference period: February 2020.

It is clear that after two months of unrepeatable intensity, in March and April, there was a retreat for two reasons that are by no means secondary: the first, was linked to the launch of the Draghi government that deflated the polarisation of public debate and, the second, occurring in the weeks following the appointment of General Francesco Figliuolo as the new extraordinary commissioner for the COVID-19 emergency, was determined, to be the result of the start of a vaccination campaign that between April and May began to grind out important numbers that were expected by all. Thus, while in March Meloni's positive rating was still at 33%, in April it suffered a slight drop and stood at 30% at the end of the month.

Finally, the last two months of the analysis (Figures 7 and 8), May and June 2021, are, so to speak, the harvest months for Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia, after the long winter sowing of January and February. This period was postponed to late spring only because, as mentioned earlier, the agenda of discussions on the web was all built around one priority that engulfed all others, namely, the vaccination campaign. It was only when Italians were able to see for themselves how the new organisational model set up by Figliuolo reached, between the end of April and the first ten days of May, the announced threshold of 500,000 daily inoculations, that the debate partly turned to other topics, including the Zan bill, and the issue of re-openings and the end of the curfew, with the inevitable result of the division between those in favour and those against, and between apocalyptic and integrated.

positive **negative** **mixed**

FRATELLI D'ITALIA	31%	58%	11%
GIORGIA MELONI	37%	51%	11%
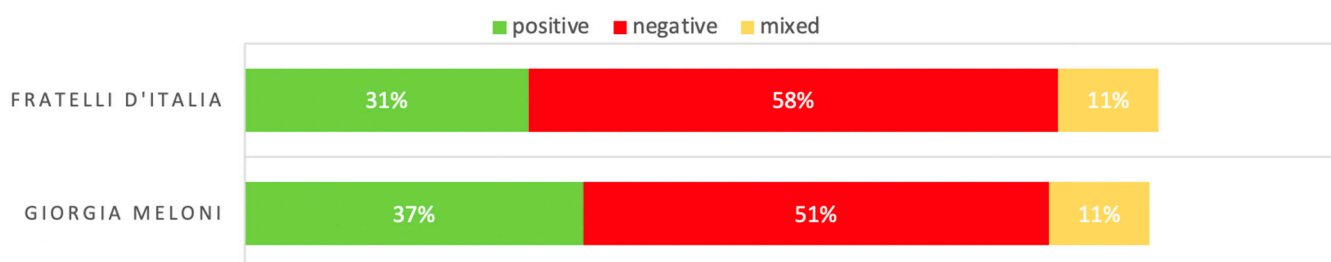
Figure 7. Automatic scanning by the tool FanPage Karma. Reference period: June 2021.

positive **negative** **mixed**

FRATELLI D'ITALIA	27%	62%	11%
GIORGIA MELONI	38%	51%	11%

Figure 8. Automatic scanning mood by the tool FanPage Karma. Reference period: May 2021.

The last two months of this journey backwards closes with Giorgia Meloni surpassing the medial step of the 35% rating that she takes home after having sown in winter (in May the rating is 38% and in June it is 37%) and is also consecrated with the 20% medal, the new frontier that SWG attributes to Fratelli d'Italia in the Italians' voting intentions.

The preponderant aspect that is more solidified in the latest election campaign is the pop aspect of the leader of Fratelli d'Italia. There are those who relate popular politics with the phenomenon of populism and consider pop politics and celebrity politics as tools for the popularisation of political leadership and found in populist phenomena (Mazzoleni 2004). Cas Mudde (2004) spoke of the 'Populist Zeitgeist', i.e., the existence of a certain 'soft' populism in many mature democracies and often also exhibited by leaders who do not pursue populist policies. Giorgia Meloni's populist style also seems to fall into this casuistry, as the powers in government, the ruling party, and the media are personalised and identified in one person. The recently concluded election campaign has confirmed and to some extent armoured everything we have highlighted so far. Let us start from these data.

ENGAGEMENT: 34.6 M

Indeed, the leader was the one who engaged and stimulated her audience the most via social media. This was achieved through a compelling mix of institutional and more playful tones to bring other target audiences together. The growth of all insights between the first and second month of campaigning testifies to the predictive power of digital data on polling results. The followers of Giorgia Meloni's 4 official accounts, as well as the engagement and the number of mentions—increased by over 20 thousand from August to September—are proof of how much the leader of Fratelli d'Italia has become the queen of the social audience. No less significant is the increase in positive sentiment, which at the close of the polls was around 39% compared with the average of 36% recorded in the previous month.

On the other hand, with the development of multimedia information and social networks, and according to the data received, the leader of Fratelli D'Italia has shown herself to be highly capable of making use of the tools that stand out for their enormous involvement and ability to attract the attention of the global audience. The hypothesis, therefore, goes in the direction of corroborating the thesis that the populist leader perfectly espouses pop dynamics and is at the top thanks to a strong connection with her electorate.

Meloni's success happened thanks to a fascinating mix that included institutional tones and more playful tones to approach other types of targets. The growth of all the insights between the first and second month of campaigning testifies to the predictive

ability of digital data on the results of the polls. The followers of the four official accounts of Giorgia Meloni, as well as the engagement and the number of mentions—increased by over 20 thousand from August to September—are proof of how the leader of Fratelli d'Italia has become the queen of the social audience. Nevertheless, there was also a significant increase in positive sentiment, which at the close of the voting booths was at about 39% compared with the average of 36% recorded in the previous month (Figure 9).

25 JULY TO 25 AUGUST

SOCIAL	FOLLOWER	POST	ENGAGEMENT	BEST DAY FOR INTERACTIONS
Facebook	20.21K	157	4.0M	25/08
Instagram	26.84K	151	2.6M	25/08
Twitter	33.39K	144	273.1K	22/08
TikTok	25.0K	14	155.0K	22/08

25 AUGUST TO 25 SEPTEMBER

SOCIAL	FOLLOWER	POST	ENGAGEMENT	BEST DAY FOR INTERACTIONS
Facebook	32.53K	188	5.039M	24/09
Instagram	31.9K	169	3.808M	25/09
Twitter	19.72K	123	274.43K	22/09
TikTok	139K	64	1.8M	20/09

Figure 9. Automatic scanning by the tool Liveinsights-blogmeter. Reference period: July 2022–September 2022.

It's not surprising that, according to what has been claimed, the embrace with her daughter Ginevra, published on the Saturday before the vote was the post that got the highest number of interactions by far (Figure 10). The tendency towards presidentalisation responds to the need to entertain the fluctuating electorate, poorly represented by parties but attracted by a leader seen as intimately closer. The leaders are better suited to the needs of show politics, responding with their personality to the overall trend of glazing (Codeluppi 2007) the visibility of the private. The privatization of politics marks the shift of importance from television to social media, the fluctuating public is less interested in administrative qualities and more in personal ones, or rather to the characteristics that bring it closer to people in their daily lives (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). This also corresponds to the progressive reduction in the formal political commitment of citizens: directing interest to the personality of the politician, instead of the organization and program, which also transmits legitimacy to the values and the political actions conveyed by the public actor (Rega and Bracciale 2018). There are those who also describe how the leaders themselves push the personalization of politics by focusing on the personal qualities of affability and sympathy, convinced that the emotional consensus can overcome the resistance of an audience not attracted by formal politics, but often the values conveyed deviate from those in the expectations of the public or those exposed, causing a disconnection to their detriment (Langer 2010).
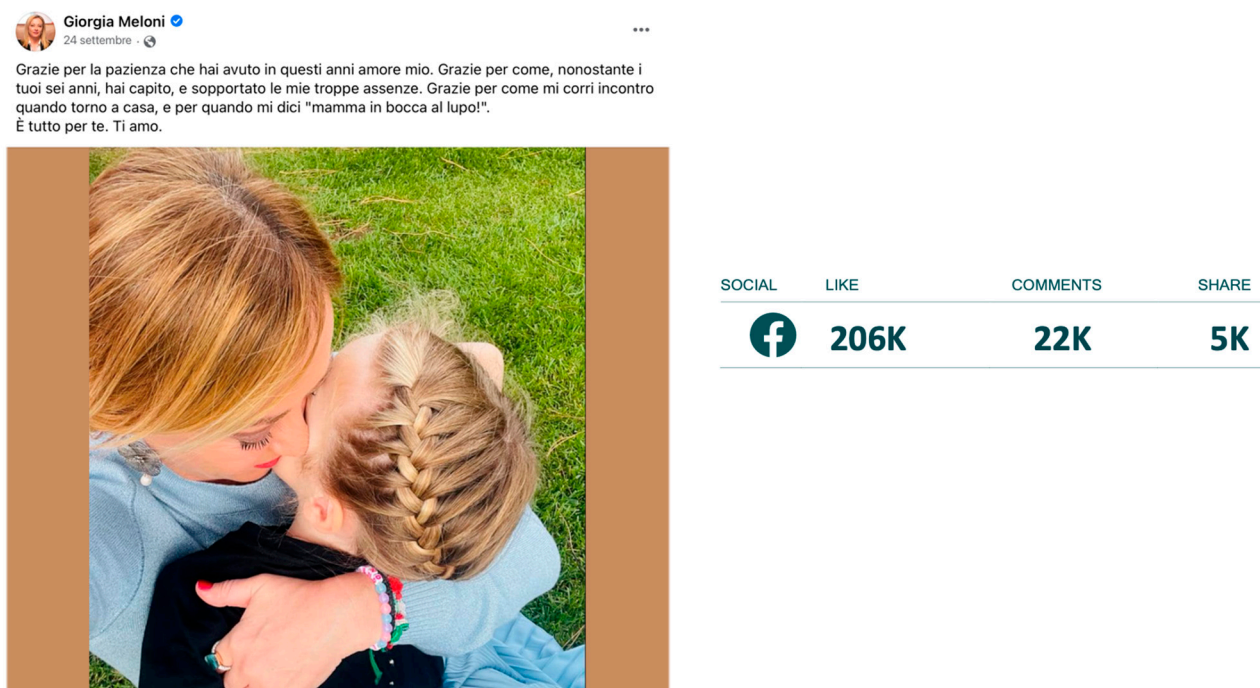
Figure 10. Data manual scanning.

4. Conclusions

In parallel and symmetrically, the language used in the media can be considered populist. Indeed, one can also speak of media populism to highlight the similarities between pop media content and the spread of populist sentiment. The boundaries between entertainment and insight are practically disappearing, everything is blurred and hybridised with an infotainment or multi-entertainment system dictated by mixed information. These data underline the now widely recognised proximity between the offline and digital dimensions in which citizens move and act to express opinions and express their feelings in a social climate that sees an increasing personalisation even of leaders at this point, a multidimensional dimension of life that runs between online and offline (Boccia Artieri 2012). A place where personalities and events from the worlds of entertainment, politics, news, and show business mingle, and they are remade, reimagined in a popular format. This is the dramatisation of public and private affairs (Diamanti 2014). Through this study, an attempt was made to focus on the curious similarity between populism and its political communication styles and the social strategies they introduce to increase their consensus. Their practice goes into this pop turn of political communication. This trend will have to be monitored and evaluated in the coming years as there are still many doubts about the issue. The dimension defined as 'pop politics' (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009), which is used to describe areas of political communication that have long escaped political analysis, is combined with the multiple forms of popular culture produced and disseminated by cinema, theatre, music, the press, and television. Tools that, given the historical phase where there is a strong disaffection to politics, and participation and political activism are at an all-time low, can be somewhat useful. We tried to focus our research on this style to determine whether it can contribute to a downgrading of politics or a reconnection of citizenship to political life. Analysing politics in its current state, which is increasingly immersed in populist communication, and delving into various topics in order to provide greater insight into all the most relevant changes that have taken place in recent years, an interesting aspect for the purposes of our research emerges. The writer is convinced that populism, after an initial phase of fading due to the pandemic, has no longer significantly lost consensus. This social populism may experience a new phase if it succeeds in linking itself to political participation and at the same time providing an interpretation

and resolution to latent issues. Obviously, further research will have to be conducted to assess the process of contagion in contemporary politics. In particular, although this work focuses on a period of 27 months, the degree of contagion will be better understood in a temporal test adopted over a long period. It will be necessary to assess whether the effects of Giorgia Meloni's election were really able to trigger the populism–social media–voter involvement mix, a key factor that at this point in time fuels the analysis carried out and accredits our hypothesis.

Note

1 https://www.giorgiameloni.it/2019/10/19/il-discorso-integrale-di-giorgia-meloni-in-piazza-san-giovanni-a-roma/ (accessed on 19 Octorber 2022).

References

Aalberg, Toril, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes De Vreese. 2017. *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. New York: Routledge.

Albertazzi, Daniele, and Ducan McDonnell. 2008. *Twentyfirst Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Altheide, David L., and Robert P. Snow. 1979. *Media Logic*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Bentivegna, Sara. 2014. *La politica in 140 caratteri. Twitter e spazio pubblico*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Blumenthal, Sidney. 1980. *The Permanent Campaign: Inside the World of Elite Political*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bobba, Giuliano. 2019. Social Media Populism: Features and 'Likeability' of Lega Nord Communication on Facebook. *European Political Science* 18: 11–23. [CrossRef]

Bobbio, Norberto. 1994. Destra e sinistra. *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia del Diritto* 71: 517.

Boccia Artieri, Giovanni. 2012. *Stati di connessione. Pubblici, cittadini e consumatori nella (Social) Network Society*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Calise, Mauro. 2010. The personalization of power. Studia Politica. *Romanian Political Science Review* 10: 617–22.

Campus, Donatella. 2016. *Lo stile del leader: Decidere e comunicare nelle democrazie contemporanee*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Canovan, Margaret. 1999. Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies* 47: 2–16. [CrossRef]

Cardano, Mario. 2003. *Metodologia Delle Scienze Sociali; Ricerca Qualitativa; Etnografia; Intervista Discorsiva; Focus Group*. Roma: Carocci.

Casero-Ripolles, Andreu. 2021. Influencer nella conversazione politica su Twitter: Identificare l'autorità digitale con i big data. *Sostenibilità* 13: 2851. [CrossRef]

Ceccobelli, Diego. 2017. *Facebook al Potere. Lo stile della Leadership al Tempo dei Social Media*. Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli.

Codeluppi, Vanni. 2007. *La vetrinizzazione sociale. Il processo di spettacolarizzazione degli individui e della società*. Milano: Bollati Boringhieri.

Creţan, Remus, and Thomas O'Brien. 2019. 'Get out of Traian Square!': Roma Stigmatization as a Mobilizing Tool for the Far Right in Timişoara, Romania. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43: 833–47. [CrossRef]

Dalton, Russel J., and Martin P. Wattenberg. 2003. *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.

De Benoist, Alain. 2017. *Populismo. La fine della destra e della sinistra*. Bologna: Arianna Editrice.

De Blasio, Emiliana. 2018. *Il governo online. Nuove frontiere della politica*. Roma: Carocci.

De Rosa, Rosanna. 2014. *Cittadini digitali: L'agire politico al tempo dei social media*. Milano: Apogeo.

Diamanti, Ilvo. 2014. *Oltre la democrazia del pubblico, in "Comunicazione politica"*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Diamanti, Ilvo, and Marc Lazar. 2018. *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*. Roma: Laterza.

Doiciar, Claudia, and Remus Creţan. 2021. Pandemic populism: COVID-19 and the rise of the Nationalist AUR party in Romania. *Geographica Pannonica* 25: 243–59. [CrossRef]

Ellinas, Antonis. 2008. Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe. *Journal of Politics* 46: 231–50. [CrossRef]

Enli, Gunn, and Eli S. Rosenberg. 2018. Fiducia nell'era dei social media: I politici populisti sembrano più autentici. *Social Media + Society* 4: 1–11. [CrossRef]

Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2018. Social media and populism: An elective affinity? *Media, Culture & Society* 40: 745–53. [CrossRef]

Giansante, Gianluca. 2014. *La comunicazione politica online. Come usare il web per costruire consenso e stimolare la partecipazione*. Roma: Carocci.

Gründl, Johann. 2020. Idee populiste sui social media: Una misurazione basata sul dizionario della comunicazione populista. *New Media & Society* 24: 1481–99. [CrossRef]

Hameleers, Michael, and Desirèe Schmuck. 2017. Siamo noi contro di loro: Un esperimento comparativo sugli effetti dei messaggi populisti comunicati attraverso i social media. *Informazione, Comunicazione e Società* 20: 1425–44. [CrossRef]

Hameleers, Michael, Schmuck Desirèe, Bos Linda, and Ecklebe Sarah. 2020. Interagire con la gente comune: Come i messaggi e gli stili populisti comunicati dai politici innescano il comportamento degli utenti sui social media in un contesto comparativo. *European Journal of Communication* 36: 238–53. [CrossRef]

Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2014. The populist challenge. *West European Politics* 37: 361–78. [CrossRef]

Langer, Ana I. 2010. The politicization of private persona: Exceptional leaders or the new rule? The case of the United Kingdom and the Blair effect. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15: 60–76. [CrossRef]

Mancini, Paolo. 2011. Leader, president, person: Lexical ambiguities and interpretive implications. *European Journal of Communication* 26: 48–63. [CrossRef]

Manin, Bernard. 1995. *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

Mastropaolo, Antonio. 2005. *La mucca pazza della democrazia. Nuove destre, populismo, antipolitica*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. 2004. *La comunicazione politica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro, and Anna Sfardini. 2009. *Politica pop. Da «Porta a porta» a «L'isola dei famosi»*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro, and Roberta Bracciale. 2018. Populismo mediato dalla società: Le strategie comunicative dei leader politici su Facebook. *Palgrave Communications* 4: 1–10. [CrossRef]

Mèny, Yves, and Yves Surel. 2001. *Populismo e democrazia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mocanu, Irina. 2020. Nationalism versus globalization in times of coronavirus. *Democracy* 7.

Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, Representation*. Stanford: University Press.

Mudde, Cas. 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government & Opposition* 39: 541–63.

Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser. 2013. Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition* 48: 147–74. [CrossRef]

Nyenhuis, Robert. 2019. The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives. *Populism* 2: 263–65. [CrossRef]

Pérez-Curiel, Concha, and Pilar Limon-Naharro. 2019. Influencer politici: Uno studio del marchio personale di Donald Trump su Twitter e del suo impatto sui media e sugli utenti. *Comunicazione e società* 32: 57–75. [CrossRef]

Rega, Rossella, and Roberta Bracciale. 2018. La Self-Personalization dei leader politici su Twitter. Tra professionalizzazione e intimizzazione. *The Lab's Quarterly* 2: 61–86.

Stanley, Ben. 2017. Populism in Central and Eastern Europe. In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Oxford: Oxford Handbooks.

Taggart, Paul. 2000. *Populism: Concepts in the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Open University Press.

Tarchi, Marco. 2004. Il populismo e la scienza politica: Come liberarsi del "complesso di Cenerentola". *Filosofia politica* 18: 411–32. [CrossRef]

Tarchi, Marco. 2015. Italy: The promised land of populism? *Contemporary Italian Politics* 7: 273–85. [CrossRef]

Urbinati, Nadia. 2017. *Democrazia sfigurata. Il popolo fra opinione e verità*. Milano: Università Bocconi Editore.

Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Clarifying a contested concept: 'Populism' in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics* 34: 1–22. [CrossRef]

Zanatta, Loris. 2013. *Eva Perón. Una biografía política*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.