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**Italian general election 2018: digital campaign strategies.
Three case studies: *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Partito Democratico* and *Lega*.**

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Introduction

On the eve of the vote for the general elections of 2018, Italy experienced a phase of **profound crisis in political representation**.

The crisis is linked to several factors, including:

- **the end of ideologies** that has progressively transformed the traditional forms of political participation;
- the **digitalization of the social sphere** that led to the birth of the *Network Society* regulated by *Networked individualism*;
- **the distrust** of citizens in **political parties and institutions**.

Traditional political forces in a new hybrid environment – 1

A new **hybrid society** is problematic for traditional political forces that have to measure with:

- A metamorphosis of representative democracy;
- A **networked politics** characterized by a **permanent postmodern electoral campaign**;
- A fluid electorate that must be struck by the tones of a captivating communications;
- A new political arena which sees in *social networks* the real place of political participation and discussion.

Traditional political forces in a new hybrid environment – 2

From a political point of view, the scenario appears complex:

- A return to **nationalist sentiments**, in line with international and European political trends;
- Development of **populist sentiment**, as a consequence of the conflict between people and the elite;
- **Breakage of traditional bipolarity** regulated by the right/left alternation, by the affirmation of *Movimento 5 Stelle*;
- **Fragmentation of the left-wing area**, caused by the splitting of the *Partito Democratico*;
- Growth of **abstentionism** that represents a true political force that claims its right to not choose.

Some more reflections

- According to the Law (Decree Law December 28, 2013 n. 149), the 2018 election campaign is the first in which political parties received no public funding from the State;
- The electoral campaign that needed "zero cost" instruments, has seen in the social networks the most democratic communication tool equally available to all political parties;
- The electoral result has given back to Italy a tripolar scenario characterized by very different political forces: ***Movimento 5 Stelle***, ***Partito Democratico*** and ***Lega***.

Object of research: Political parties on Facebook

The aim of the research is **identifying a clear map of the communication strategies of *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Partito Democratico* and *Lega*.**

Our attention is focused on the analysis of the digital campaign officially managed by the three political parties, directly observed by the institutional profiles of the political parties on Facebook.

We choose to focus our attention on Facebook, because it is the most widespread social network and it allows to observe the flow of communication addressed directly from political parties to the voters without any mediation. Moreover, Facebook is a real social marketing tool, indispensable to communicate politics and its propaganda.

This interest in this research originates from the **hypothesis that the new mediated political scene represents the privileged seat of negative communication strategies against the opponents, who aim to obtain the consensus by the elaboration of strongly emotional and not very rational messages.**

Research methodology

Collection of all posts and contents published by each political party in two different phases: the first and last week of the election campaign (from 5 to 11 February and from 26 February to 4 March).

The monitoring returns a sample of 1,397 documents.

After a review of the existing literature on the subject, we have constructed a data matrix to analyze each of the posts in a detailed manner, according to a series of variables considered relevant for the analysis of the communication strategy of the three political parties.

Every collected data were treated from a **quantitative** (to describe the frequency and the intensity of the post publication activities of each considered party) and **qualitative** (in order to investigate the kind of diffused material, their contents and their related functions) point of view.

The corpus of analysis and the intensity of the publication activities - 1

Table 1. Number of posts published by political party per week

Week	%	In absolute terms
February 5-February 11	48.68	680
February 26-March 4	51.32	717
Total	100	1,397

Source: Our elaboration.

The corpus of analysis and the intensity of the publication activities - 2

Table 2. Number of posts per week (% of the total number of posts)

Political Party	February 5-11	February 26-March 4	Total
Lega	37.44%	35.72%	73.16%
M5S	8.23%	11.60%	19.83%
PD	3.01%	4.01%	7.02%
Total	48.68%	51.32%	100%

Source: Our elaboration.

Tipology of posts - 1

In order to investigate the communication style of each political party, we developed an easy tool of analysis aimed at identifying the descriptive categories of the different types of post.

We built a set of analytics variables according to the following descriptive methods:

- **Link** (posts containing a link that refers to an external page);
- **Photo** (photographs and images of electoral propaganda);
- **Video** (streaming events, electoral spots, extracts of transmissions television);
- **Status** (post of written text only).

Tipology of posts - 2

Table 3. Posts publication style

Type of posts	February 5-11	February 26-March 4	Total
Photo	41.32%	49.37%	45.45%
Link	40.15%	23.85%	31.78%
Video	18.24%	25.80%	22.12%
Status	0.29%	0.98%	0.64%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Our elaboration.

Post publication styles adopted by political parties

Table 4. Posts publication styles adopted by political parties

Types of post	Lega	M5S	PD
Photo	50.78%	25.27%	46.94%
Link	34.05%	27.44%	20.41%
Video	15.17%	46.93%	24.49%
Status	0	0.36%	8.16%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Our elaboration.

Communication strategies - 1

The communication strategy adopted by political parties during the electoral campaign was investigated by elaborating a variable named "Post Function".

The variable is articulated on three general macro-categories, by describing three main strategies:

- **Negative campaign**, which contains adversary's attacks and denigration functions;
- **Political proposal**, which illustrates the program points and the actions carried out by the political parties;
- **Engagement**, that aims to involve the voters by proposing them to be militant 2.0, who act in first person on the digital campaign of the political party.

Communication strategies - 2

Table 5. Post Function

Post Function	%
Negative	8.4
Negative Comparing	2.9
Data Declaration	9.4
Irony/Parody/Sarcasm	1.9
Fear	8.8
Current Events	17.4
Past Political Achievements	1
Political Program	12.3
Political Issues	3.1
Identity Membership	1.5
Feeling good	3.6
Media Agenda	5
Territorial Agenda	11.9
Online Mobilization	11.7
Fundraising	1
Total	100

Source: Our elaboration.

Conclusive observations

- The online electoral campaign of *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Partito Democratico* and *Lega* has returned a composite picture of their communicative peculiarities.
- The overall sample of the materials collected describes an unequivocal protagonism of the *Lega*, followed by *Partito Democratico*, whose online campaign appears truthfully inconsistent and not perfectly in line with immediacy tones imposed by the network.
- If *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle* aim to hit the imagination of the electorate with images and videos of immediate use, the *Partito Democratico* produces long text posts that imply voluntary activation by the user.
- The **negative** tones play a key role. For *Lega*, news events are the basis for the elaboration of the negative political messages based on verbal and symbolic violence, without any programmatic political proposal. The target of its negative propaganda is the *left*, the European Community and the immigration phenomenon has meant as a threat to national security. The negative tones of *Lega* are full of ideological political references that refer to xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Europeanism.
- The **negative trend of *Movimento 5 Stelle*** is in line with its nature of post-ideological political movement and aims to build its image according to a denouncing and contrasting strategy towards the political adversaries. *Movimento 5 Stelle* doesn't express any ideological value. *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle* **propose an electoral campaign of attack**, unlike *Partito Democratico* **plays an electoral campaign in a defense tactics**, but considering the final electoral results and the poor digital campaign, *Partito Democratico*'s strategy did not exercise much appeal on voters.

Thanks for your attention!!!

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