

A midsummer night's dream: political communication during the Italian 2022 electoral campaign

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Abstract:

By adopting a political communication perspective, this article describes the Italian electoral campaign of 2022. First, we reconstruct the coalition formation phase and discuss the issues at the center of the electoral campaign. Second, we describe the communicative macro-frames at the heart of the political strategies of Italian political actors and how these macro-frames are declined to campaign on more specific issues. Third, we delve into the hybrid communication strategies of Italian politicians. To do so, we integrate the analysis of legacy media, showing their enduring centrality, and that of social media. In conclusion, we remark that the 2022 election was marked by many novelties, such as the unusual national summer campaign, the massive use of Instagram, and the introduction of Tik Tok in the parties' communication strategies. At the same time, elements of continuity were present, such as leaders' reliance on traditional media and the high political instability forcing the Italian political system to intense and hurried electoral campaigns.

Keywords:

Italian Elections; Political Communication, Social Media; Legacy Media; Electoral Campaign.

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Introduction: the 2022 Italian general election

Three governments alternated during the 18th legislature of the Italian Parliament. After the sudden end of Draghi's government, President Mattarella called early elections for September 25, 2022. For the first time, elections did not take place during the first six months of the year, as it usually happens to overcome difficulties related to summer holidays and the draft of the national budget law. Therefore, parties and leaders had 30 days to organize their communicative efforts while still having to form electoral coalitions. The election was characterized by a pronounced asymmetry of power among political formations since, as early as the end of August, right-wing parties were firmly ahead in the polls (Youtrend and Cattaneo & Zanetto, 2022), and eventually won the elections by a large margin (Chiaromonte et al., 2023). This arrangement meant that parties and leaders had to campaign from different positions. Right-wing leaders had the dual goal of establishing the weight of their party within the coalition, while also mobilizing their voters to the polls. In contrast, the leader of the left-wing coalition was forced to chase the right-wing coalition, which dictated the public agenda, and marched undisturbed toward victory. Finally, leaders of the center parties did not join these factions, seeking to win independent voters.

This article describes the 2022 general election by adopting a political communication perspective. Therefore, we will explore the relationships between politicians, voters, and the media (McNair, 2017). Section 1 analyzes the supply and demand side of these elections. First, we briefly describe the Italian political landscape and the delicate phase of coalition formation. Then, we outline the issues that dominated the public debate showing how these were differently framed by parties. Section 2 deals with the messages and content conveyed by political actors. Here we analyze the macro-frame of their political communication while highlighting how this was declined concerning particular issues. We also discuss issue ownership and the occurrence of salient episodes that heavily influenced the development of the campaign. Finally, Section 3 delves into the hybrid political communication strategies adopted by leaders and parties. To do so, we focus on legacy media, describing leaders' presence on television channels and the impact of the social media accounts of traditional media outlets. Lastly, we examine digital ones, such as Tik Tok, Instagram, and Facebook. Consistently, the conclusions highlight that the 2022 Italian electoral campaign was marked by a dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity. Indeed, even if newer social media (such as Instagram and Tik Tok) gained centrality in the political communication arena, older media retained their importance.

Section 1: Context and Constraints

In communicating with their audiences, politicians are context-dependent, as their communication strategies are usually tailored to audience perceptions (Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006). Moreover, citizens' voting behaviors are strongly influenced by the economic and socio-political scenarios in which elections take place (Schmitt, et al., 2021). Therefore, this section highlights the most important features characterizing the socio-political milieu of Italian politics on the eve of the 2022 general elections.

1.1 *Supply side: the starting conditions*

Italy is known for its high political instability (Gratton et al., 2021; Ippolito and Cicatiello, 2019). Following this trend, three governments ruled during the eighteenth legislature: the first Conte government, which included the Five Stars Movement [Movimento 5 Stelle - M5S], and the League [Lega]; the second Conte government, supported by a coalition that included the M5S, the Democratic party [Partito Democratico - PD], Italy Alive [Italia Viva] and Free and Equal [Liberi e Uguali]; and the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi, supported by a coalition of ‘national unity’, which included all parties except for Brothers of Italy [Fratelli d’Italia - FDI] and Italian Left [Sinistra Italiana - SI] (Marangoni and Kreppel, 2022; Russo and Valbruzzi 2022). Draghi was in office during the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Oil, gas, and food prices skyrocketed in March 2022, and experts forecasted a drastic impact on European economies (Mbah and Wasum, 2022). This contributed to an increase in citizens' perceived insecurity, thus making the war and its economic consequences the most salient issues in the elections (Lami and Sahota, 2022; Mannoni et al., 2022; see Section 1.2). After the end of Draghi’s government in July (Corriere della Sera, 2022a), President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella called for a national election on September 25th (Ansa, 2022a).

The right-wing coalition¹ included Giorgia Meloni’s FDI, Matteo Salvini’s League, Silvio Berlusconi’s Go Italy [Forza Italia - FI], and Us Moderates [Noi Moderati - NM], led by Maurizio Lupi. The left-wing coalition included PD, led by Enrico Letta, Emma Bonino’s More Europe [+Europa - +E], Luigi Di Maio’s Civic Commitment [Impegno Civico], and the Greens Left Alliance [Alleanza Verdi Sinistra - AVS], a unified list of SI and Green Europe, led by Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli. Both the M5S, led by Giuseppe Conte, and the Third Pole [TP], a centrist alliance

¹ Given that the ideological composition of this coalition is strongly skewed to the right, some authors (Chiaramonte, 2022; Panarari, 2022) started to question the label “center-right” for this coalition, preferring “right-center”. To address this concern, we label the alliance as the “right-wing” coalition.

formed between Carlo Calenda's Action [Azione - A] and Matteo Renzi's Italy Alive and led by the former (Agi, 2022; De Cicco, 2022), ran without a coalition.

At the end of August, FDI and PD were neck to neck for first place in the polls (respectively at 24 and 23.7 percent). The League was predicted to get 13.4 percent of the votes, M5S 10.9, FI 8.4, TP 5.9, AVS 3.4, and minor parties followed below the 3 percent threshold (Youtrend and Cattaneo Zanetto & Co., 2022). However, because of the mechanism of the Italian electoral law and the consequences of the 2020 constitutional referendum on the electoral collegia (Grosso, 2021; Legislative Decree 23/12/2020, n. 177), the right-wing coalition was predicted to win nearly two-thirds of the seats in both chambers (Youtrend and Cattaneo Zanetto & Co., 2022). In early September, FDI continued to grow in the polls, although the right-wing coalition did not increase its total vote share due to the League's loss of support. M5S made an unexpected comeback, and less rapidly, though steadily, TP also gained support. FI's percentages remained stable throughout the campaign (Politico, 2022). The share of abstained and undecided voters remained constant throughout the summer and eventually coincided with the percentage of voters who abstained (SWG, 2022).

1.2 Demand side: *"It's the economy, stupid!"*

Political issues are often conceived as exogenous variables explaining voting behavior. Scholars tend to distinguish between valence (Stokes, 1963) and position issues (Green, 2007). The formers are broadly supported by voters, and parties can only argue about who is the most credible actor to achieve the goal; the latter are divisive, and parties tend to take sides for or against such issues, politicizing social cleavages (Congleton et al., 2018). From a communicative point of view, valence issues are topics on which parties try to present themselves as the best interpreters of the popular will while building their own identity by selecting the position issue most valued by their constituents. Therefore, we will highlight how valence issues are framed in political manifestos, while stressing which position issue they cover or neglect.

Tables 1 and 2 present CISE data (Mannoni et al., 2022, fielded between August and September 2022) on the perceived salience of valence and position issues. Regarding valence issues, Italians were particularly concerned about the economy. The energy crisis, unemployment, poverty alleviation, inflation, economic growth, tax cuts, and tax evasion were among the most salient issues. The most important non-economic issues were the fight against gender violence and environmental issues (supported by 89 and 82 percent of the sample).

Political manifestos greatly emphasized valence issues, and the difference in the communication frames was particularly visible regarding unemployment. Both the PD and M5S insisted on youth unemployment. The PD proposed a "dowry for 18-year-olds," which should provide economic support for leaving the household. In contrast, the M5S insisted on enhancing "citizenship income" and reducing working hours. FDI proposed strengthening basic training courses, also using European funds. Finally, the League's manifesto mentioned "unemployment" only when discussing the integration of migrants into Italian society. In particular, the League supported the extension of residence permits only in cases of involuntary unemployment, to avoid situations of "social marginality".

Table 1: Valence issues

| Valence issue | Salience |
|---|-----------------|
| Ensuring sustainable gas and electricity prices | 92% |
| Fighting unemployment | 90% |
| Fighting violence against women | 89% |
| Reducing poverty in Italy | 87% |
| Supporting economic growth | 86% |
| Fighting inflation | 86% |
| Reduce jobs taxation | 86% |
| Fighting tax evasion | 84% |
| Fighting global warming | 82% |
| Making Italy count more in Europe | 72% |

Source: CISE data (Mannoni et al., 2022, fielded between August and September 2022)

Table 2 shows position issues grouped by categories. The most salient economic topics were minimum wage, citizen income, retirement age, and tax progressivity. Regarding the economy in general and taxation in particular, the audience was anchored on progressive positions, with 78 percent of the sample willing to preserve progressivity and 67 percent supporting higher inheritance taxes. In the M5S and PD manifestos, the minimum wage is discussed and defended in specific sections. In contrast, FDI did not mention the topic. The pattern recurred for citizenship income, which the M5S wants to expand, and the PD to improve and maintain. Additionally, the PD and M5S supported an increase in minimum pensions and the introduction of special funds for young workers. Also, FDI proposed an increase in minimum and disability pensions. The League, on the other hand, suggested lowering the retirement age.

Table 2: Position issues

| Position issue | Approval | Disapproval | Salience |
|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| <i>Economy</i> | | | |
| Introduce a minimum wage | 84% | 16% | 79% |
| Maintain citizenship income | 39% | 61% | 76% |
| Reduce retirement age | 79% | 21% | 76% |
| Maintain tax progressivity | 78% | 22% | 75% |
| Reduce income differences | 79% | 21% | 69% |
| Increase inheritance tax | 67% | 33% | 53% |
| <i>Climate</i> | | | |
| Preserve the ban on nuclear power | 47% | 53% | 74% |
| Prioritize environmental protection | 66% | 34% | 74% |
| Reject new gasifiers | 24% | 76% | 65% |
| Keep the 110% super bonus | 69% | 31% | 63% |
| <i>International issues</i> | | | |
| Suspend sanctions toward Russia | 43% | 57% | 75% |
| Stop the supply of weapons to Ukraine | 59% | 41% | 72% |
| Remain in the EU | 72% | 28% | 70% |
| Remain in NATO | 73% | 27% | 63% |
| <i>Values and Identity</i> | | | |
| Keep welcoming migrants | 32% | 68% | 73% |
| Legalize euthanasia | 86% | 14% | 70% |
| Ensure that abortion is available | 82% | 18% | 68% |
| Increase punishment for homophobia | 71% | 29% | 61% |
| Ease legislation on citizenship | 57% | 43% | 52% |
| Legalize soft drugs | 56% | 44% | 49% |

Source: CISE data (Mannoni et al., 2022, fielded between August and September 2022)

The second category of Table 2 is climate policies. As we have shown in Table 1, 82 percent of respondents were willing to fight climate change. However, this consensus is fragmented when looking at concrete policies. Nearly 70 percent of the sample prioritized climate defense over economic growth and supported the 110% bonus, which incentivizes building refurbishing for thermic efficiency. Yet, these intentions come up against the public rejection of nuclear power plants and regasifiers. The PD and M5S greatly emphasized this issue. In PD's manifesto, the environment is the "first pillar" of the "Italy 2027 Plan". For the M5S, "there are three main axes of sustainability: PEOPLE, ENVIRONMENT, and DEVELOPMENT" (M5S's manifesto, p. 11). A trade-off between

economic growth and environmental protection emerged in their programs. In contrast, right-wing parties framed the climate crisis as an economic challenge. The League had a section of its program titled "Respecting the environment while protecting jobs", and FDI never used the expression "climate change", even claiming that tourism represents Italy's "happy growth", alluding to a critique of the concept of happy degrowth, defended instead by the M5S (Damiani and Viviani, 2019).

The third category groups international issues. A relative majority of the sample supported NATO and the EU, but the first institution was quite marginal in manifestos, indeed, the M5S did not mention it. In contrast, the League and PD explicitly endorsed it. In contrast, FDI was silent on this issue, only stating that: "Italy must return to standing tall in international fora, as a full member of the G7 and as a founding state of the EU and NATO" (FDI's manifesto, p. 4). Finally, while support for the EU was transversal, the war in Ukraine divided Italian parties. The PD framed it as "Putin's war". The Movement avoided the topic but expressed a generic repudiation of any war. According to the League, however, "the war in Ukraine proves [...] that peace is precarious and by no means a foregone conclusion, therefore [...] defense investments are necessary to implement the principle of deterrence" (The League's manifesto, p.40).

The last category relates to Values and Identity issues. Almost 90 percent of the sample endorsed euthanasia, and 82 percent said abortion should be more strongly and efficiently guaranteed. Euthanasia is explicitly condemned by the League and not mentioned by FDI. In contrast, the M5S cited it as a virtuous example of a propositional referendum. Discrimination against LGBTQ people and the legalization of soft drugs were both slightly less endorsed and considerably less central in the public arena. Italians were generally less progressive on immigration. More than 40 percent of the sample opposed easing citizenship legislation for immigrants and 68 percent wanted to restrict immigration. Interestingly, immigration was less salient than in the previous campaign, during which the League campaigned aggressively on it (Roncarolo and Mancini, 2018; Maggini and Chiamonte, 2019). Nevertheless, immigration remained a pillar of right-wing programs. FDI framed this issue as an attack on the security of Italian citizens, alongside the "Mafia, terrorism, and corruption" (FDI's manifesto, p. 31). The League dedicated an entire section to the topic, stating that "We can really help the most disadvantaged areas of the planet by supporting projects there, certainly not by welcoming everyone. Africa in Italy does not fit!" (The League's manifesto, p. 91).

Besides examining public attitudes and political manifestos, it is also important to assess how different policy proposals captured different electorates. Indeed, crucial information can be obtained by CISE data examining the profiles of voters of the main Italian parties (Improta et al., 2022). Supporters of both FDI and the League were characterized by a low level of education and tended to

be middle class. Voters of FI tended to be upper class, and this party was particularly appealing to voters aged 18-29 and 30-44. Similarly, PD voters were usually either very young (18-29) or very old (65+) but showed a higher educational level. This party was supported by members of the upper class, mirroring the results of the general election of 2018, where the PD was labeled as the “Elite’s party” (De Sio, 2018). Finally, M5S’s electorate was particularly heterogeneous, meaning that Conte intercepted different population strata with the same efficacy.

1.3 *Continuity and Discontinuity in Italian Politics*

The dichotomy continuity/discontinuity is a suitable interpretation line to read Italian politics on the eve of the 2022 election. On the one hand, the previous legislature generated three different parliamentary majorities, one of which was led by a technocrat. Since 1948, Italy has been governed by 68 prime ministers. Although the Italian Constitution provides for a five-year term, governments have lasted an average of about 400 days, and the longest one has been in office for less than four years (Berlusconi II, from June 2001 to April 2005). Moreover, the Draghi-led executive represents Italy's fourth technical government. The first two date back to the 1990s (Ciampi and Dini), and the third was the Monti government, in office between 2011 and 2013 (Giannetti, 2013). These data hide another trend in Italian politics: executives are often composed of ministers not affiliated with any party. This was visible since the beginning of the Republic (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2018), but it intensified in the Conte I government, which was led by several experts (Valbruzzi, 2018).

On the other hand, the political context before the 2022 elections also presented some elements of discontinuity. First, Draghi's technocratic government was profoundly different from Monti's (Grazia and Karremans, 2021). The latter was a "fully technocratic government," since all its ministers were experts with no party affiliation. In contrast, Draghi headed a "technocratic-led partisan government," since most of his ministers were not technicians (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014). Moreover, unlike Monti, Draghi enjoyed higher popularity rates and, as a result, received higher parliamentary support (Grazia and Karremans, 2021). Moreover, unlike previous technocratic governments, Draghi was in charge of managing the most impressive package of expansionary policies in the post-World War II period, rather than being compelled to implement *austerity* measures. Third, the eighteenth legislature ended during a tragic international context -the outbreak of the Ukrainian war. Finally, for the first time in the history of the Italian Republic, national elections were held in the second part of the year.

Section 2: Messages and Content

This section describes the messages and communicative style adopted by Italian political actors. Section 2.1 presents the macro-frame of their political communication. Section 2.2 shows how these general claims were declined regarding particular issues. Finally, we present important events of the electoral campaign to show how the leftist coalition systematically chased the right into its field rather than being able to impose more favorable issues in the political arena.

2.1 *The parties' communication macro-frames*

In the last weeks of August, the communication frames adopted by Italian parties were revealed through the static billboards that appeared all over the country, in a revival of a strong tradition of Italian political communication (Novelli, 2021). FDI used images of Meloni's calm and smiling face with the claim "Pronti - A risollevere l'Italia" ("Ready - To make Italy rise again"). The League portrayed a smiling Salvini accompanied by the claim "Credo" ("I believe"), which was declined on different issues related to League's electoral program. This claim was later framed in two ways: as a statement of belief in certain issue positions and a statement of faith towards the leader and his party (Corriere della Sera, 2022b). The M5S used the claim "Dalla Parte Giusta" ("On the just side²"), with pictures of a smiling Conte. This phrase recalled the idea of moral integrity and social justice, in continuity with the populist discourse of the M5S (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2015). +E initially used Bonino's pictures and the claim "Io sono Emma" ("I am Emma", mocking an old viral speech from Meloni), underlining the differences between the only two women leaders in this election. In a subsequent phase, they used the campaign slogan "Cara Italia, il 25 settembre, resta libera" ("Dear Italy, stay free on September 25th"). By including the idea of freedom in their claim, +E established continuity with its roots in the Italian Radical Party and its fights for civil rights issues (Bonfreschi, 2019). TP used Calenda's image with his arms folded and the claim "L'Italia, sul serio" ("Italy, seriously"), aiming to depict themselves as the most serious and competent alternative, competing with the PD in depicting themselves as the option in continuity with Draghi's government. FI used a smiling picture of Berlusconi with the claim "Una scelta di campo" ("A choice of field"), the same claim he used in his 1994 political debut (Lauria, 2022), while also using text-only billboards containing policy proposals. AVS used pictures of their candidates holding signs containing handwritten policy proposals, with the claim "Facciamolo" ("Let's do this"). Finally, the PD opted for a two-phase strategy: in the first weeks of the campaign the billboards only included written text regarding their policy proposals and party symbol; starting from September, billboards included a

² "Dalla parte giusta" also translates as "On the right side". We opted for an alternative translation to maintain the framing aspects related to the theme of justice.

comparison between a policy position imputed to the right-wing coalition on a dark gray background and a policy position of the PD with a bright red background with Letta’s smiling face claiming “Scegli” (“You choose”). Hence, the two-folded PD’s communicative plan featured a final phase characterized by a negative campaign toward the right-wing coalition. This is not surprising and could be intended as a political communication strategy matching the well-known propensity of Italian voters to rely on negative voting (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2021; Garzia and Passarelli, 2021).

Figure 1: Static billboards of the main political parties



Although some authors suggested that static billboards lost relevance in the communicative strategies of the parties because of their cost and the fact that cities were less populated during summer holidays (Panarari, 2022), parties adapted to this setting, presenting in the billboards a series of communication frames that could be remixed (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019), in both ironic and more serious context, through the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). Enrico Letta tried to force the *memization* of the center-left communication strategy by publishing - on the very same day that the “You choose” billboards appeared - a meme that used “You choose” as a macro (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019) to ironically comment on culinary debates (Panarari, 2022). The League declined its claim on various issues, producing different graphics that appeared both on static billboards and social media which stated “I believe - In a safe Italy” regarding migration, “I believe - In a clean Italy” regarding nuclear energy, and “I believe - No Italian should be left behind” regarding the lowering of taxes, among others.

The campaigns’ discourses mainly focused on the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine. Cost of living, inflation, taxes, salaries, and subsidies dominated the public discourse in September. The main economic talking points of the right were the *flat tax*, a single-rate fiscal regime, and the abolition of the citizenship income. Salvini also used as a flagship proposal the reintroduction of nuclear power plants in Italy, linking it to the rising energy costs. The PD tried to present itself as in continuity with Draghi’s government, especially on foreign and economic policies, regarding tax cuts for the working class and the introduction of a minimum wage. The AVS mainly focused its communication on the environment and income inequalities, while +E focused on civil rights. M5S also focused on economic policies, centering its communication on the defense of citizenship income

and the introduction of a minimum wage. The TP competed with the PD in picturing themselves as the true heirs of Draghi's policies, called "The Draghi Agenda".

The communication strategies of the parties diverged depending on their role and their position in the polls. While FDI was focused on reassuring voters, by depicting itself as a mature party ready for the government and showing its most moderate side, the League tried to shift the public debate towards economic themes that were included in their program (above all, the *flat tax*). The PD tried to polarize the debate (Panarari, 2022), framing the campaign as a duel between them and FDI, giving visibility to FDI's proposal in a negative frame while picturing themselves as the only viable alternative. +E, AVS, M5S, FI, and TP campaigned mostly on issues they owned: civil rights (especially euthanasia and legalization of soft drugs) for +E, the citizenship income for the M5S, the environment for AVS, tax cuts for FI, and energy policies for TP, trying to distinguish themselves from all the other parties while fighting the narrative of the "useful vote" (Sanchez, 2002).

2.2 *Issue ownership and positions*

Section 2.1 discussed the macro-frames of each party's political communication. These frames were instanced in different forms and with different styles about the most salient issues of the election campaign. This section deepens the communicative strategy of the main Italian parties regarding these particular issues.

As anticipated in Section 1.2, the left-wing coalition, the M5S, and the TP agreed on the need for a minimum wage (Pagella Politica, 2022). The PD dedicated a billboard to this topic with the slogan: 'Work is dignity. Minimum wage, fight against precariousness and undeclared work', thus insisting on the individual right to have an adequate job. The M5S has supported this battle since 2019 and described this measure as an act of social justice that aligns Italy with the European context (Il Manifesto, 2022). Finally, TP proposed a minimum wage of 9 euros per hour and provided details on the budget coverage of this measure emphasizing the importance of economic competence (Azione, 2022).

PD and M5S also agreed on keeping the citizenship income (Pisaniello, 2022). In particular, the M5S praised the social consequences of this public policy. For example, Conte stated that the citizenship income "has also represented a concrete possibility for many who, although squeezed by the yoke of hunger, have been able to escape the blackmail of criminal organizations" (Pertici, 2022).

Surprisingly, the right-wing coalition managed to politicize tax progressivity, a right guaranteed by Article 53 of the Italian constitution. In particular, the League formulated an alternative policy, the *flat tax*, and FDI and FI supported the measure, proposing only minor changes (Carli et al., 2022).

The League also released a billboard that reads “Pay less to pay all. Flat Tax at 15%”. Interestingly, this slogan seems to stress that taxes must be cut to enable all Italian citizens to abide by the law.

PD campaigned aggressively on civil rights but was penalized by the low level of salience accorded to these issues, as reported in Section 1.2. Its strategy on this point is particularly interesting. These issues were emphasized through the manifesto and static billboards. About the latter, the PD declined its communication macro-frame as follows: “Discrimination/Rights. You choose” (See Figure 1). Finally, the importance of civil rights was emphasized in a series of Tik Tok videos published by MP Alessandro Zan, who was the proposer of a law against homo and transphobia. In this way, the PD ensures that its messages are conveyed by a credible speaker.

Regarding immigration, TP and M5S aligned with the center-left coalition again. Here, PD strongly campaigned in favor of the *ius scholae*, a law recognizing citizenship for migrants who were born in Italy or arrived before the age of 12, reside legally, and have attended at least five years of school in Italy. On this issue, the right-wing coalition balanced institutional tones in political manifestos with more heated communicative styles on social media. For example, a tweet by Meloni proposed the *naval blockade* as the only solution to stop irregular immigration (Twitter, 2022a).

Finally, parties diverged even regarding their proposal to face climate change. The first difference lies in party manifestos. Right-wing political platforms mainly focused on concrete policies to develop energy production infrastructure. In contrast, both PD and M5S inserted the climate issue at the center of their political vision (see Section 1.2). The PD also declines its communication macro-frame in a poster with the slogan “Fossil fuels/Renewable energies. You choose”. A second difference emerges when examining the policies advocated by the two largest coalitions. The right-wing coalition promoted nuclear power plants. As anticipated in Section 2.1, the League insisted on this issue through static billboards with the sentence “I believe - In a clean Italy”. Instead, the TP and, more tepidly, the center-left coalition, insisted on the installation of new regasifier systems. In particular, the PD electoral program is unclear on this point. The PD endorsed "The European FitFor55 package, with its goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050" (PD's manifesto, p. 6), but it did not lay out precise guidelines on how to achieve it.

To assess the effectiveness of these communication strategies, it is important to investigate parties' and leaders' issue ownership. A party holds ownership of an issue if voters perceive it as the most appropriate political actor to address it (Petrocik, 1996). CISE data shows that Meloni was considered trustworthy mainly on cultural issues, especially regarding restrictions on immigration and fighting against women's violence. Salvini scored positively on immigration, and he was also perceived as

credible on tax reduction and suppression of citizen income. FI was unparalleled in economic issues and was considered the optimal actor for tax reduction and GDP growth. TP campaigned decisively against Euroscepticism. Consequently, voters trusted the position of Calenda, who declared to be aligned with NATO and the EU. Yet, the PD was considered the most credible actor when promising to remain in the EU and owned the issues related to civil and social rights, like those of the LGBTQ+ segment and those of immigrants (De Sio et al., 2022).

2.3 *Salient episodes of the electoral campaigns*

Single episodes can carve political campaigns by attributing salience to certain issues or by giving visibility to political leaders. The first relevant event occurred when Meloni shared on social media the video of a woman being raped by an immigrant in Piacenza (Sky Tg 24, 2022). Meloni managed to set the public agenda on order and security issues, a field in which right-wing parties retain strong issue ownership, forcing Letta and Calenda to chase her in this field.

Another episode revolved around the hashtag “#devianze” (“deviances”). Meloni published a Facebook video proposing to fight drugs, violence, and deviance - allegedly spreading among the youngest - by reinforcing sports public policies (Facebook, 2022a). Letta replied with a tweet (Twitter, 2022b), trying to overturn the hashtag as “#vivaledevianze” (“Long life to deviances”). Therefore, the left chased the right once again, being forced to take a stance on a right-owned issue rather than being capable of giving salience to more favorable topics.

Another relevant episode is mediatic in kind. In the urge of communicating to the young generation, and given the atypical summer campaign, many leaders created their own Tik Tok accounts. This has received considerable attention from the mainstream media. Several newspapers reported on the use of Tik Tok by Italian politicians. For example, La Repubblica covered Berlusconi's arrival on this platform in an article discussing the development of the campaign (Vecchio, 2022). On the other hand, the newspaper Il Corriere and the website Pagella Politica published a piece dedicated to the political use of Tik Tok, comparing the accounts of the main leaders (Corriere della Sera, 2022c; Lo Guercio, 2022).

Another important mediatic event was the debate between Meloni and Letta, hosted by the website of Corriere della Sera (2022d). This practice is unusual in Italy, although famous precedents include Berlusconi's debates against Occhetto and Prodi (Cacciotto, 2019). Meloni accepted a confrontation with Letta, with director Fontana as the moderator. In the debate, the leaders were allowed to interact and answer some shared questions while receiving some other inquiries tailored to their electoral

program. The main topics were international relationships, measures against the rising prices of gas, economics, and security issues.

Section 3: Means and Channels

Section 3 deepens the communicative strategies adopted by the main parties and leaders. First, we situate these tactics into the theoretical frame of the hybrid media system. Second, we discuss the enduring relevance of legacy media. Third, we focus on digital media strategies.

3.1 Hybrid political communication strategies

In the third phase of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999), marked by a mediatic model of political communication (Mazzoleni, 2012) and mass self-communication (Castells, 2013), the concept of media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979) cannot be applied if not used in its plural form. It is precisely the interplay between newer and older logics that shapes the current hybrid media system. In an attempt of updating the literature on this topic, Klinger and Svensson (2015) have recently proposed the concept of network media logic. According to the authors, this logic features non-professionalism and bottom-up content publication at the core of media production (Bruns, 2008). Media distribution is no longer chained to institutionalized media players, and spreadable content (Jenkins et al., 2018) flows through homophilic relationships (McPherson et al., 2001). More in detail, social media use is characterized by interactions with like-minded others, and, while doing so, users indirectly tailor what information they will hear about. In other words, “users construct and organize their social realities through networks” (Klinger and Svensson, 2015; p. 1250), also thanks to the role social media algorithms play in this process (Klinger and Svensson, 2018). These characteristics of social media websites were immediately linked to the great success of European populist parties, for which it was essential to find freedom from the press (Mazzoleni, 2008; 2014) while also opening new channels of communication with their atomized public (Gerbaudo, 2018). However, social media has rapidly become central in the communicative strategies of all Italian political leaders (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018). Thus, all the political actors employed hybrid communication campaigns.

In Section 2.3 we have already described an event that well exemplifies the functioning of the hybrid media system. Most politicians opened a Tik Tok account to fulfill a double objective. Firstly, Tik Tok’s adoption must be intended through the lens of *pop politics* in general (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009), and *meme politics* in particular (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019). Having to engage in the nerve-racking mission of communicating to an uninterested public, Italian politicians tried to establish a common ground with them by exploiting and shaping popular culture. Therefore, the first

objective of Italian politicians was to create dedicated content for Tik Tok to intercept the youth audience. Moreover, an analysis of videos posted between 2021 and 2022 showed that Salvini's communication on this platform is rarely negative. Most of his content on Tik Tok aims to create engagement or entertainment (Albertazzi and Bonansinga, 2023). This means that Salvini has well-differentiated his political communication according to the logic of the platform on which he publishes, as he has been shown to spread messages characterized by negative emotions on Facebook (Bobba, 2019), while generally displaying positive emotions on Instagram (Scaduto and Mancosu, 2022). Secondly, by subscribing to Tik Tok politicians likely wanted to receive legacy media coverage. This allowed them to interact with younger audiences -directly on Tik Tok- and the older public -through the intermediation of newspapers.

Table 3 shows that the leaders adopted Tik Tok at different times and that this resulted in varying sizes of their audiences. Salvini has been a member since 2019 and has the largest fanbase. Meloni and Berlusconi quickly gained many followers by posting soft and funny content. Indeed, a quantitative analysis of Tik Tok videos published by the major political leaders in the summer of 2022 revealed that Berlusconi produced the two best-performing posts. Interestingly, both were on the character of Berlusconi and not on his policy proposals (Battista, 2023). Conte posted only after the end of his government but accumulated a conspicuous number of followers. Finally, Letta and Bonino are the only leaders without personal accounts.

Table 3: Leaders on Tik Tok³ by followers (thousands)

| Position issue | Followers | First post |
|------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Salvini (League) | 756 | December 11, 2019 |
| Meloni (FDI) | 752 | March 2, 2022 |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 713 | September 1, 2022 |
| Conte (M5S) | 488 | April 22, 2022 |
| Calenda (TP) | 26 | August 26, 2022 |
| +Europa | 17 | September 14, 2022 |
| Democratic Party | 7 | September 1, 2022 |

Source: Tik Tok data. Lastly checked on 02/11/2022.

3.2 Legacy media: older does not mean marginal

Legacy media - like television and the press - play a relevant role in the Italian hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), since they retain vast audiences and high trust (Newman et al., 2022). However, Meloni and Letta could not have a television debate. The confrontation between them took place on a newspaper's website, to respect Italian law regulating media political coverage (Adnkronos, 2022).

³ Lastly checked on 02/11/2022.

Nevertheless, every leader sought collaboration with traditional media as part of his or her communicative strategy. Meloni published a series of Facebook videos in English, French, and Spanish, introducing herself as the leader of the “Italian conservative party” (Facebook, 2022b). These videos aimed at demarcating the distance between its formation and the fascist party, reassuring the international press. A few days later, Letta copied this strategy, delivering a speech in the same languages (Facebook, 2022c). His speech highlighted the importance of the EU within PD’s political platform, while also attacking Meloni, portrayed as a Euro-Skeptical, nationalistic, and far-right leader. Once again, the macro-frame of this electoral campaign was set by the right forcing the left coalition to chase.

Table 4: Minutes spent talking on television by leaders

| Leader (party) | 3-20 August | 21-3 September | 4-10 September |
|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Calenda (TP) | 556 | 280 | 153 |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 511 | 397 | 261 |
| Letta (PD) | 457 | 547 | 313 |
| Salvini (League) | 380 | 487 | 324 |
| Conte (M5S) | 350 | 363 | 486 |
| Meloni (FDI) | 323 | 401 | 218 |

Source: Data collected by Sensemakers (2022a). News channels monitored were: Rai 1, Rai 2, Rai 3, Rai News 24, Rete 4, Canale 5, Italia 1, TgCom24, La7, La7d, Nove, Tv8, Cielo, Sky Tg24.

Table 4 shows that leaders managed their national television time with three strategies. Conte was the only leader steadily increasing his television time approaching the election. Calenda adopted the opposite tactic, spending most of his minutes in the early stages of the campaign. The others were less present between 3 to 20 August, slightly increasing their presence in the second half of the month, and then reducing their quotas in the period between 4 to 10 September.

Television played an important role also at the end of the electoral campaign. On the 23rd of September, the anchorman of La7 Enrico Mentana interviewed all political leaders. Talks lasted between 11 and 29 minutes and were re-mediatised, becoming a playlist on YouTube (Youtube, 2022) and a series of videos on La7’s website (La7, 2022).

Italian legacy media also manage social media accounts, being more followed on Facebook than on Instagram. Table 5 shows the cumulative interactions obtained by the seven biggest national media outlets on Facebook and Instagram. On the latter, Corriere della Sera and La Repubblica obtain almost half of the total interactions, whereas on Facebook the distribution was more diversified. It is interesting to investigate the best-performing post published by each outlet on Facebook, between August and September. Il Messaggero's best post reports the news of Letta serving tables at a

restaurant (Facebook, 2022d). Il Giornale, Libero, and La Stampa's best-performing posts revolve around politics as well (Facebook, 2022e,f,g), and comments respectively the influencer Chiara Ferragni attacking the right-wing coalition, an Italian singer refusing to sing “Bella Ciao”⁴, and a left-leaning comment regarding the episode related to “#deviances” (see Section 2.3). Il Fatto Quotidiano, Il Corriere della Sera, and La Repubblica’s top posts are instead not political (Facebook, 2022h,i,l). They deal with the death of Queen Elisabeth, the death of the Italian intellectual Piero Angela, and with the athlete Crippa winning the gold medal in long-distance running.

Table 5: Cumulative interactions of media outlets on Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG)

| Media outlet | Total interactions | | Reactions | | Comments | | Shares FB |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|--------------|
| | FB | IG | FB | IG | FB | IG | |
| La Repubblica | 10.87M | 7.22M | 6.78M | 7.10M | 3.51M | 117.9K | 573.0K |
| Il Corriere della Sera | 7.11M | 6.83M | 4.65M | 6.71M | 2.10M | 115.2K | 356.3K |
| Il Fatto Quotidiano | 7.12M | 707.0K | 3.75M | 641.2K | 2.94M | 65.9K | 423.9K |
| La Stampa | 2.46M | 1.22M | 1.62M | 1.17M | 665.0K | 47.6K | 172.5K |
| Il Messaggero | 4.24M | 297.2K | 2.54M | 285.9K | 1.47M | 11.3K | 236.2K |
| Il Giornale | 973.6K | 94.6K | 467.6K | 81.6K | 441.0K | 13.0K | 65.0K |

Source: Crowdtangle data

3.3 Digital media: the quest to maximize engagement

Electoral campaigns are costly enterprises. Table 6 shows the budget for online political advertising. Some trends emerged. First, Google ads were completely managed by parties since the leaders did not pay directly for them. Moreover, Google's budget was considerably smaller than that of Instagram and Facebook (“Meta”, in Table 6). Thirdly, Google advertising was used almost exclusively by the right-wing coalition and +E. Meta advertising was implemented with two different strategies. The PD, M5S, +E, AVS, and FDI, mostly advertised parties’ posts. On the other hand, most of the budget of the League, TP, FI, and NM sponsored leaders’ posts. Therefore, from a quantitative point of view, the social media strategies of the latter parties were more personalized and candidate-centric. At the macro level, the right-wing parties dominated this ranking. FDI and the League spent respectively 784.000 and 443.000 euros; the other parties combined spent a total of €1.209.000 instead.

⁴ Bella Ciao is a song symbolizing the fight against fascism.

Table 6: Budget for Meta and Google advertising (thousands of Euros)

| Leader (party) | Meta | Google | Leader | Total |
|-------------------|------|--------|--------|-------|
| Bonino (+E) | 132 | 62 | 6 | 200 |
| Meloni (FDI) | 209 | 132 | 102 | 443 |
| Letta (PD) | 292 | 0 | 1 | 293 |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 51 | 0 | 107 | 158 |
| Frantoianni (AVS) | 79 | 3 | 37 | 119 |
| Salvini (League) | 101 | 67 | 616 | 784 |
| Conte (M5S) | 62 | 0 | 39 | 101 |
| Lupi (NM) | 0 | 0 | 62 | 62 |
| Calenda (TP) | 68 | 2 | 219 | 289 |

Source: Ad Library (2022) and Ads Transparency (2022) data for the period between August 25 and September 25.

We will not look at the leaders' metrics regarding their communication strategies on Facebook and Instagram. Data reported in the rest of this Section refer to the timespan from August 25, 2022, to September 24, 2022, and are collected through CrowdTangle. We start by observing the number of followers at the end of the campaign and the growth percentages of followers on Instagram and Facebook.

Table 7: Followers and growth on Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG)

| Leader (party) | Total | | Growth | | % Growth | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-------|
| | FB | IG | FB | IG | FB | IG |
| Bonino (+E) | 106.9K | 42.7K | 944 | 6.9K | 0,89 | 19,44 |
| Meloni (FDI) | 2.40M | 1.05M | 30.5K | 29.5K | 1,29 | 2,90 |
| Letta (PD) | 150.1K | 96.6K | 2.9K | 7K | 1,94 | 7,81 |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 1.12M | 477.4K | 5.0K | 28.0K | 0,45 | 6,24 |
| Frantoianni (AVS) | 139.8K | 60.9K | 1.3K | 3.6K | 0,96 | 6,32 |
| Salvini (League) | 5.05M | 2.20M | 9.0K | 4.5K | 0,18 | 0,20 |
| Conte (M5S) | 4.53M | 1.78M | 709 | 7.6K | 0,02 | 0,43 |
| Lupi (NM) | 58.2K | 4.3K | 845 | 460 | 1,47 | 12,04 |
| Calenda (TP) | 296.9K | 138.6K | 18.9K | 11.1K | 6,80 | 8,71 |

Source: Crowdtangle data

In terms of the gross number of followers, both on Instagram and on Facebook, Salvini, Conte, and Meloni dominated the field. As shown by the comparison with the growth percentages, the success of Conte and Salvini preceded August 2022: Salvini only gained 9.000 new followers during the electoral campaign, while Conte only 700. Conte gained a considerable amount of followers thanks to his role during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy (Bertero, 2021), whereas Salvini steadily grew his fanbase over the years. Meloni managed to gain an important number of followers

during this campaign, both on Facebook (+30.5k, +1.29 percent) and on Instagram (29.5k, +2.9 percent), but her accounts were still substantially smaller than those of Conte and Salvini.

Table 8: Posts published by each leader on Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG)

| Leader (party) | Total | | % Total | |
|-------------------|-------|-----|---------|-------|
| | FB | IG | FB | IG |
| Bonino (+E) | 49 | 29 | 2,44 | 2,63 |
| Meloni (FDI) | 190 | 105 | 9,46 | 9,51 |
| Letta (PD) | 318 | 200 | 15,84 | 18,12 |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 178 | 76 | 8,86 | 6,88 |
| Frantoianni (AVS) | 132 | 106 | 6,57 | 9,60 |
| Salvini (League) | 406 | 194 | 20,22 | 17,57 |
| Conte (M5S) | 187 | 84 | 9,31 | 7,61 |
| Lupi (NM) | 59 | 21 | 2,94 | 1,90 |
| Calenda (TP) | 489 | 298 | 24,35 | 26,18 |

Source: Crowdtangle data

While on Instagram leaders of small parties (Bonino and Lupi) have gained more followers, because they did not have a successful account before the electoral campaign, on Facebook Calenda is the one that grew the most, by more than 6% in one month. This could be the result of a very active posting strategy, as shown in Table 8. Indeed, Carlo Calenda was the most prolific poster of the campaign both on Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook, he posted 489 posts in 31 days, averaging almost 16 posts per day, while on Instagram he posted 289 posts, with an average of more than 9 posts per day. Enrico Letta and Matteo Salvini were also among the most active, although very distant from Calenda. On Facebook, Letta published 318 posts (more than 10 posts per day) and Salvini 406 (more than 13 per day), while on Instagram Letta shared 200 posts and Salvini 194 (more than 6 per day). Maurizio Lupi and Emma Bonino have been the ones who posted less on both social networks.

Table 9: Leaders' engagement on Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG)

| Leader (party) | Reactions | | Comments | | Shares |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| | FB | IG | FB | IG | FB |
| Bonino (+E) | 30.7K | 101.1K | 2.6K | 2.1K | 3.5K |
| Meloni (FDI) | 4.51M | 2.13M | 971.6K | 157.3K | 375.9K |
| Letta (PD) | 256.1K | 268.3K | 147.4K | 33.5K | 15.9K |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 360.1K | 334.3K | 101.8K | 8.8K | 26.3K |
| Frantoianni (AVS) | 212.7K | 152.2K | 38.7K | 7.0K | 30.2K |
| Salvini (League) | 2.14M | 2.19M | 552.4K | 143.5K | 166.1K |
| Conte (M5S) | 4.61M | 692.4K | 574.0K | 24.2 | 633.4K |
| Lupi (NM) | 81.4K | 0 | 34.0K | 87 | 3.8K |
| Calenda (TP) | 824.8K | 614.9K | 204.7K | 25.4K | 61.3K |

Source: Crowdtangle data

Table 9 presents the overall interactions generated by leaders' accounts. Importantly, these numbers are conditioned by the number of followers of each profile. Hence, even if they do not inform about the success in terms of relative engagement, they are nonetheless useful to observe the dominance of Meloni, Salvini, and (only on Facebook) Conte in absolute values. Interestingly, while on Facebook Conte and Meloni had a very similar number of total interactions and total reactions, Conte's posts were 70 percent more shared than Meloni's, whereas her posts were 75 percent more commented on than Conte's. Salvini came third, with less than half of the total interactions of Conte and Meloni, but still distancing all the other leaders. On Instagram, Salvini was the one with the highest number of interactions, while Meloni closely followed. Conte was a distant third. Worth mentioning is also Calenda's performance, with more than 640 thousand interactions.

Table 10: Interaction rate on Facebook and Instagram

| Valence issue | FB | IG |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Bonino (+E) | 0,75% | 7,78% |
| Meloni (FDI) | 1,29% | 2,08% |
| Letta (PD) | 0,96% | 1,67% |
| Berlusconi (FI) | 0,25% | 1,04% |
| Fratoianni (AVS) | 1,55% | 2,91% |
| Salvini (League) | 0,14% | 0,54% |
| Conte (M5S) | 0,69% | 0,46% |
| Lupi (NM) | 3,20% | 0,12% |
| Calenda (TP) | 0,78% | 1,68% |

Source: Crowdtangle data

Finally, Table 10 shows the interaction rate of each page, which is computed as the number of total interactions divided by the product between the number of posts and the average number of followers over the timeframe considered. Leaders of small parties are the ones who achieved the highest interaction rate on Facebook and Instagram. Lupi and Fratoianni scored the highest on this metric on Facebook (3.20 and 1.55 percent), although Meloni's performance is worth mentioning (1.29 percent), especially considering the great difference in the number of followers between her and small party leaders. Bonino achieved an average interaction rate of 7.78 percent on Instagram, almost three times as much as Fratoianni (2.91 percent), who comes in second. Still worth of mention is Giorgia Meloni's Instagram interaction rate (2.08 percent). Berlusconi strongly underperformed on Facebook (0.25 percent) but not on Instagram (1.04 percent), where his successful Tik Tok content was largely reshared. Salvini and Conte also had low interaction rates on Facebook (0.14 percent and 0.69 percent) and on Instagram (0.54 and 0.46 percent). Letta and Calenda share similar percentages on Facebook (0.96 and 0.78 percent) and Instagram (1.67 and 1.68 percent), performing better on the latter.

Conclusions

This contribution shed light on the electoral campaign of the 2022 Italian political election. Section 1 investigated the Italian political scenario. The sudden fall of Draghi's government led to the formation of coalitions in a very narrow time frame. Moreover, the political competition was characterized by a marked asymmetry of power, since the right-wing coalition was firmly ahead in the polls and won the elections by a wide margin. Section 2 showed that the electorate was mainly interested in economic issues, strongly owned by FDI, the League, and FI. In contrast, cultural issues such as immigration and civil rights emerged as position issues. The PD campaigned mainly on these polarizing issues, which contributed to its electoral unsuccess. Moreover, the PD was repeatedly forced to chase the right-wing coalition by discussing order and security issues, rather than being capable of setting the agenda on other topics. Finally, Section 3 showed that all parties and leaders adopted hybrid political communication strategies, engaging in cross-platform campaigns. Legacy media were important actors with which politicians had to negotiate their framing and agenda-setting power. Finally, the competition for social media engagement was won by the right-wing coalition parties and leaders. Indeed, Salvini and Meloni strongly performed on Facebook and Instagram, and Berlusconi obtained unexpected success on Tik Tok. Therefore, political communication strategies can also be interpreted through the continuity-discontinuity dichotomy that was used to describe the Italian political landscape in Section 1.3. On the one hand, leaders and parties adapted to the challenge of the first national summer campaign by employing newer media and by diluting their messages with entertainment. In this regard, Tik Tok and Instagram are among the novelties of this campaign. The former represents a clear attempt to make politics more palatable for younger generations, while the latter was employed with unprecedented efforts. On the other hand, Facebook and legacy media retained their centrality. The former is still the largest platform in Italy by number of subscribers. The latter remain powerful gatekeepers with whom parties and leaders have had to interact to reach a wider and older audience.

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