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Does populist rhetoric boost user engagement? The case of the 2019 Italian European elections

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Populist rhetoric is commonly linked to an effective and straightforward mode of communication with supporters and the broader electorate. This study aims to investigate whether the use of a populist style of communication on Facebook social media is associated with higher levels of engagement by examining distinctive elements: reactions, comments and shares. Additionally, the study examines whether there are significant differences depending on the type of political party considered. By analysing 4,586 posts published by the major Italian parties (Lega, Pd, M5s, Fi, and Fdl) during the campaign for the 2019 European elections, the study reveals that adopting a populist communication strategy proves advantageous for all parties. In fact, it is associated with higher levels of engagement, both in terms of positive and total reactions. Interestingly, the benefits that parties derive from embracing populist rhetoric appear to vary. While the electorates of traditional populist parties (Lega, M5s, and Fdl) show greater receptiveness to this style of communication, such effect is lower for mainstream parties such as Pd and Fi.

KEYWORDS *Populism, Communication, User Engagement, Italy, European Elections.*

1. Introduction

The campaign for the 2019 European elections was a test case for Italy's populist parties. While the previous 2014 election signalled a partial shift in the political landscape, with the emergence of Euroscepticism, the clear victory of Renzi's center-left, and the decline of traditional center-right parties (Maggini 2014), five years later the change proved more dramatic. In March 2018, an unprecedented coalition government formed between the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle*, M5s) and the League (*Lega*). The strategy adopted

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by both parties included a major investment in their online presence and the extensive use of populist rhetoric in their communication style (Mosca *et al.* 2015; Bobba and Roncarolo 2018). Indeed, the first year of government was characterised by the pursuit of policies at the antipodes of the ideological scale such as the combination of the promotion of welfare policies, emphasised by the M5s, and the crackdown on immigration, prioritised by the League. In this context, the ability of the League, led by its leader Salvini, to exploit media communication seems to be one of the factors that contributed to the growth of this party's electoral consensus and to overturn the balance of power between the two parties in the coalition (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019). In fact, studies on the rhetoric of populist leaders once in power show that right-wing populist parties, e.g. Salvini's League, keep their populist rhetoric once in office, whereas non-right-wing populists, such as the M5s, move toward a less negative, less assertive and more task-focused language (Ceron *et al.* 2021). In this framework, the striking electoral success obtained by the League in the 2019 European elections, as well as the growth of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI), seems to suggest how a populist communication can be suitable to attract political support, especially from populist audiences (Ceron *et al.* 2023).

Although used to a greater extent by parties labelled as populist (Nai 2021), it is interesting to note that in Italy, as in other European contexts, the use of a populist style of communication has contaminated the entire party system (Bene *et al.* 2022). One example is the increasing use of negative campaigning even by parties usually defined as mainstream, such as the Democratic party (*Partito democratico*, Pd) and Forza Italia (Fi) (Ceron and d'Adda 2016). Nevertheless, various contributions in the literature confirm that although the use of populist communication is transversal, populist parties and their leaders are still able to attract more engagement for their content on social media than mainstream parties are (Ceccobelli *et al.* 2020; Bracciale *et al.* 2021; Larsson 2022).

Furthermore, studies conducted on how parties interact with their followers on social media and on how these platforms, such as Facebook, relied on the virality-based dissemination logic to indirectly spread their messages beyond such users (Klinger and Svensson 2015) have shown that when posts go viral they appear in the feeds of other users' social profiles reaching a broader influence (Bene 2017). This implies that if party followers interact with the posts through reactions, comments and shares, they increase the likelihood that this content will also be viewed by their network of contacts. By doing so, parties are able to exploit the fact that peer-mediated content has greater effects than content posted directly from the party account (Anspach 2017).

Two main consequences follow from this: the first is that party political communication is designed to stimulate user engagement (Bene *et al.* 2022) and that parties are more likely to discuss an issue on Facebook if it generates a higher level of user engagement (Ennser-Jedenastik *et al.* 2022). In addition to this, the increasing variety of tools available for Facebook interactions (Eberl *et al.* 2020) has made user engagement, measured through the number of likes, comments, and shares, a crucial factor.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the online mobilising power of populist rhetoric during the 2019 European elections. In particular, the study focuses on two aspects: the first concerns whether the use of populist rhetoric on Facebook by parties is associated with a higher level of engagement (reactions, comments and shares). At a second level of analysis, the study examines whether this effect differs when comparing populist parties, such as the League, the M5s, FdI which are more likely to have a populist Facebook audience, and non-populist ones (Pd and Fi). To test our hypothesis, we manually coded 4,586 Facebook posts published on the official pages of the five main Italian parties in the last four weeks before the European elections (the elections were held on 26 May 2019). We focus on Facebook since it is the social networking site most used by Italians (Rullo and Nunziata 2023); furthermore, it is emblematic that 56% of Italians claim to inform themselves not only through traditional media but also by using this platform (Cepernich and Bracciale 2019; Newman *et al.* 2020).

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature review and the main hypotheses; the following section presents the empirical analysis from the data collection process and the operationalization of the variables. The last two sections present the descriptive commentary on the data and the main findings. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the main contributions of the study.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

The academic literature tends to identify three basic features of populist rhetoric. The first coincides with an emphasis on the centrality of the people. The second, anti-elitism, emphasises an all-encompassing critique of the political, administrative, bureaucratic, economic, and cultural elites of a given context. The third, with its emphasis on direct democracy, takes the form of an appeal to the general will (Mudde 2004). Over time, in recognition of the fact that populist communication represents a dynamic mix of substance and style, several stylistic elements specific to this type of communication have be-

en juxtaposed with these three characteristics (Wodak 2015; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Krämer 2021; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2022). For example, Ernst *et al.* (2019) identify three of them, defined as follows: negativity, emotionality, and sociability. The former corresponds to the use of emotive language that appeals to feelings of anger, fear, and sadness, combined with negative campaign to criticize the elite (Van Kessel and Castelein 2016; Hameleers *et al.* 2017). Studies have also noted that this component is often linked to an emphasis on political issues that lend themselves to a crisis and emergency narrative (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Martella and Bracciale 2022; Rullo and Nunziata 2021; Serani 2023). Secondly, emotionality is generated through the sharing of emotions and appeals to patriotism. Finally, sociability combines the informality of language with the extensive use of intimisation to convey the idea that the tastes and preferences of the populist leader are similar to those of the average voter.

Scholars have also pointed to the existence of a certain elective affinity between populist communication and social media (Gerbaudo 2018; Jacobs and Spierings 2018). The ability of these platforms to enable direct and unmediated connections rewards simplified and emotional communication, such as populist communication (Engesser *et al.* 2017; Castro *et al.* 2021). Indeed, several studies have already found that in many countries, populist parties receive more engagement on social media (Ceccobelli *et al.* 2020; Bracciale *et al.* 2021; Larsson 2022). However, in a recent study, Davidson and Enos (2024) provide a more nuanced reading of the phenomenon. Analysing a dataset of more than four hundred political parties in 30 European countries from 2010 to 2020, the results presented by the two authors show that populist parties received more engagement on Facebook than others; however, the same result does not extend to platform X (Twitter). Differentiating between right-wing and left-wing populist parties, only the former received substantial benefits from their online communication. Finally, these analyses also show that populist parties gained more engagement in contexts characterised by negative economic trends and high immigration (Davidson and Enos 2024).

In addition to analysing how populist parties achieve greater results in terms of engagement, studies have begun to focus on the content of messages published on the official pages of political parties, regardless of whether the party under analysis is populist (Ernst *et al.* 2017; Bobba 2019). In fact, following the great electoral success of populist parties, the use of such communication has been adopted to some extent by all major Italian parties (Bene *et al.* 2022). In this respect, Bobba and Roncarolo (2018) observed that, in the context of the 2018 Italian general election, messages containing populist statements generally received more 'likes' than non-populist messages. However,

as several studies have observed, populist parties post more frequently on average than other parties and continue to be more popular on social media than other parties (Davidson and Enos 2024).

Based on the literature presented above, we raise the two following hypotheses:

Hp1: On Facebook, the populist communication strategy is associated with higher levels of engagement.

Hp2: On Facebook, the populist communication strategy promoted by populist parties is associated with higher levels of engagement compared to mainstream parties.

3. Methodology and construction of the empirical base

Initially, our dataset consisted of 4,647 posts published on Facebook between 28 April and 26 May 2019, the last four weeks of the election campaign, by the five main Italian parties: Lega, Pd, M5s, Fi and FdI. The posts were downloaded using the Facepager software (Jünger and Keyling 2019), along with data related to our engagement-related dependent variables, i.e. the number of reactions, comments and shares. During the data collection stage, we excluded a small number of sponsored posts (61 in total) to ensure consistency. Therefore, the final dataset comprises a total of 4,586 posts. The posts were manually coded by three experienced coders, considering the entire content of the post: the text, images, and videos based on a joint coding scheme. To test the intercoder reliability (Icr), the three coders coded a shared randomly-selected sample of 124 posts and Icr was then calculated based on the Holsti index. Overall, the Icr index was close to or above the desired threshold for almost all the categories included in our analysis. On average, across the categories, the value of the index was 0.88, indicating a good level of reliability.

To capture all the distinctive elements of «populist rhetoric» outlined in the previous section, this variable was constructed and operationalised as follows. First of all, two distinct variables were created from the three characteristics defined by Mudde (2004). The first, defined as «anti-elitism», includes both the dimensions of anti-elitism and wilfulness. This variable takes a value of 1 if (a) the post blames the elite for the country's problems and holds them responsible for situations that are considered harmful to the citizens, or (b) the post refers to the people's resistance against the elite and against the ideas and

ideology of the establishment (with an emphasis on popular sovereignty). The second variable, labelled «people», refers to the dimension of the centrality of the people. It is equal to 1 if the contribution contains references to the people, understood as a homogeneous social entity as distinct from internal and external minorities. Secondly, three other variables were created from the stylistic elements specific to populist communication, as summarized by Ernst *et al.* (2019). The variable «negativity» equals 1 if the post contains negative emotional content or explicitly uses negative campaigning to attack rivals (political or otherwise). The next variable, «dangerous minorities», equals 1 if the post contains explicit references to external groups that are considered particularly threatening or dangerous (e.g. ethnic, cultural, and ideological minorities depicted as dangerous). Finally, the last variable relates to «intimisation». This variable equals 1 if the post contains references to a politician's private life and personal sphere (explicit references to tastes, hobbies, and leisure time also fall into this category).

These five variables were analysed both individually, to measure the effect of each on the different components of engagement (reactions, shares, and comments), and as a single variable, renamed «populist rhetoric», to capture the overall effect of posts containing at least one of the elements attributed to populist rhetoric. In addition, the variable «populist rhetoric» was interacted with another *dummy* variable created to distinguish mainstream (non-populist) parties, i.e. Pd and Fi, from populist parties (Lega, M5s and FdI). In this way, it is possible to examine whether the effect of populist rhetoric is the same for all or only applies to parties that have already been labelled as populist. Finally, as it has already been observed that negative campaigning is a strategy used by all parties, a second variable has been created, renamed «explicit populist rhetoric», without taking into account the dimension of negativity.

Our list of control variables includes the geographical level of the post (local/regional, national, or European issue), its topic, whether it relates to «polity» (institutional, constitutional, and regulatory aspects of politics), «politics» (the conflict/competitive aspects of politics and the decision-making process, which includes elections, voting, lobbying), or policy. In the latter case, the study distinguishes between «economic policy» (taxation, public debt, budget), «social policy» (employment, welfare, pensions, and education), «immigration», «law and order» (crime and domestic policy in general, excluding immigration issues), and finally the residual category «other policy», which includes, among others, environment, culture, infrastructure, and foreign policy. Finally, other control variables allow us to control for any request made to the followers to engage with the post («interaction») or to mobilize («mobilisation»), for online/offline events and activities. We also

control whether the post contains a «link», an «image», or a «video», as well as whether it contains reference to different type of news (pro- or counter-attitudinal, from friendly or unfriendly sources). Lastly, we account for the «days until the election».

Descriptive statistics

During the period examined the League alone published a record of 3,586 posts, equal to 70,4% of the total. In terms of engagement, the official account of the party led by Salvini generated more than 1 million reactions (1,093,812) and 173,412 shares, as well as numerous comments. Despite these impressive numbers and having resorted to the use of gamification techniques (e.g., Win Salvini) with the evident scope of pushing users to increase reactions and shares, the League ranks behind the M5s in terms of engagement as the average impact generated by each post results to be rather modest. This can be at least partially explained by: i) the high number of posts published and the ii) frequent repeating of posts on the same content or merely advertising the participation of Leagues' candidates in minor local events or in political talk shows on Tv. The M5s, despite sharing far fewer posts than the League (607 or 13.3% of the total) recorded the best result in terms of absolute engagement. In particular, it generated 1,338,284 reactions, over 1 million shares (1,068,483), and about 200,000 comments. This result is also confirmed in relative terms. In fact, on average M5s posts got over 2,000 likes and almost 2,000 shares. These results are not surprising for at least two reasons: first, because the official M5s page had a higher number of followers (over 1.5 million) than all other Italian parties; second, because of their historical focus on digital communication and online mobilisation (Mosca *et al.* 2015).

The third party labelled as populist in the Italian party context, FdI, produced the lowest number of posts (167 or 3.6% of the total). Such a low number of published posts may be the result of a strategy aimed at focusing more on the quality than the quantity of the posts, which in fact are characterised by a polished and original content. In absolute terms, FdI generated only 154,923 reactions and 31,443 shares. However, if one considers the level of engagement in relative terms – which in the case of the party led by Giorgia Meloni was around 1,000 reactions and 200 shares per post– FdI ranks second behind only the M5s. Finally, a very different discussion, starting with the investment made by the parties on their Facebook pages and the numbers of posts published, must be made with reference to the two parties labelled as mainstream. Pd and Fi, in fact, published 254 and 324 posts during the time period under analysis (5.5% and 7% of the total, respectively). In terms of reactions, the Democrats

obtained only 146,857 reactions and 41,376 shares, while the party founded by Berlusconi generated 78,000 reactions and 18,157 shares. Both parties have shown, since the advent of social media, a certain degree of difficulty in using these tools. This may be partly due to the composition of their electorate - the majority of their support comes from the over-65 segment of the population - and to communication strategies that, although increasingly focused on social media, Facebook above all, tend to invest more on traditional media.

In terms of issues addressed, the three parties classified as populist (two in government and one in opposition) expressed themselves in a manner consistent with their roles. In order to defend the actions taken on welfare and labour (e.g. citizenship income, minimum wage proposal) the M5s devoted 159 out of 607 posts (26.2%) to these issues (for instance, in one post the M5s wrote: «Aren't you tired of TVs announcing that our bills will lead to economic catastrophe? Facts say otherwise. More than two million people are benefiting from the citizenship income»). This strategy took into account the clear objective pursued by the M5s to refer to the left-wing electorate. To maximise the fruits of this strategy, the M5s promoted an explicit negative campaign against the Pd. The League, in order to please the right-wing electorate, focused on the core issues of right-wing voters: crime and anti-immigration policies – 796 posts were dedicated to these issues (24.6% of its total posts; for instance, in one post the League reported a news from an online outlet saying that: «Viminale, in 2018 – 15% of violent crimes. Salvini: this is due to law enforcement»). In this context, it is not surprising that an emphasis was placed on describing Salvini as the only leader capable of keeping illegal immigration under control. Also, in relation to issues, FdI was the only party to include several explicitly Eurosceptic messages in its posts. Due to the peculiarity of being the only party labelled as populist in opposition, FdI also wanted to amplify the engagement of its followers on these issues through the use of gamification strategies (e.g. the «anti-Italian tournament», where followers were asked to vote and elect the character or object that most represented anti-Italianism: «Choose your anti-Italian: here's the first challenge!»).

On a purely descriptive level, it is interesting to point out that, except for some specific cases, there are no huge differences in the level of populist rhetoric between the different parties. Overall, looking at the variable «populist rhetoric», it is possible to note that on average 31.2% of the posts (1,432) contain at least one of the five constituent elements of populist rhetoric outlined above. Excluding the negative ones – using the variable «explicit populist rhetoric» – the same figure drops by almost 10 points down to 21.7% (995 posts). Considering the five elements together, the two non-populist parties, Pd (54%, e.g. «Either the Salvini-Di Maio government, or the Italy of the people. Vo-

ting for the Pd is the only way to send them home») and Fi (57.3%, e.g. «the judiciary's plan to prevent a centre-right cabinet»), use them in relative terms almost as much as FdI (59.5%, e.g. «Brothers of Italy standing tall in Europe to reaffirm that Italy is not a colony!») and even more than the M5s (43.3%, e.g.). Excluding negativity, the FdI stands out with 52.4% of posts containing at least one populist element (88 out of 168), while there are no major differences between the Fi (26.3%), Pd (28.3%) and M5s (30%). For the League, the percentages are lower (23%, 17.6% excluding negativity) mainly due to the large number of non-rhetorical posts published by this party (e.g. «ON THIS ISSUE IT IS TIME FOR CITIZENS TO MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD, COME AND SIGN THIS WEEKEND! Parliament can no longer turn a blind eye!»).

At this point a clarification is worth making. The results, both at the descriptive level, as they are discussed here, and those relating to the statistical analysis that will be presented shortly, would not have changed if, for each post, another variable of «populist rhetoric» had been created, by summing the number of all the elements of populist rhetoric contained in it (a variable that could therefore range from 0, no populist element, to 4 or 5 elements, depending on the two different formulations)[1]. On this scale, the average value of populism of the contributions would be 0.49 (0.30 excluding negativity) and the main difference between the parties would appear in relation to FdI, which tends to use several populist elements together: 1.31 overall and 0.94 excluding negativity, with values around three times higher than the average. The Pd (0.72 and 0.33) and FI (0.72 and 0.32) have similar values and are quite similar to those of the M5s (0.71), which differs only if we exclude negativity, in which case it is slightly more populist than the other two (0.45). As already mentioned, the League has lower values (0.36 and 0.26), not so much because it does not resort to populist rhetoric, but because its online communication also consists of a large number of posts with neutral or purely promotional content.

These descriptive statistics suggest that populist rhetoric was thus used extensively (in about one in three or one in five posts) by all parties during the 2019 election campaign, regardless of the variable used to operationalise the concept of «populist rhetoric» (i.e., the presence of at least one out of five or four dimensions or their sum). Only when the dimension of negativity, which characterises all parties in terms of negative campaigning, is excluded from the

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[1] It must be acknowledged that such a variable could, in this specific case, be redundant: in some posts, multiple elements of populist rhetoric are necessarily associated with each other. For instance, posts containing «anti-elitism» or references to «dangerous minorities», by definition, are also likely to include «negativity» as well.

calculation, the posts published by FdI and M5s seem slightly more populist than those of other parties.

4.   Statistical analysis and results

For each of the dependent variables related to the level of engagement, we estimated a negative binomial regression using the same set of variables of interest and controls. Since the dataset has repeated observations - posts - published by different parties, we included random effects at the party level[2]. The results are shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

The first interesting result concerns the effect of «populist rhetoric» on the total number of reactions - bearing in mind that the number of reactions is highly correlated with the number of likes. All five variables related to populist rhetoric have a positive and significant effect, increasing engagement compared to posts that do not contain these rhetorical elements. Specifically, the rate of reactions is higher when the post contains content that uses anti-elitism (+9%), negativity (+24%), intimisation (+23%), puts people first (+13%), or refers to dangerous minorities (+13%). The effect would be essentially the same (slightly lower for negativity, victimisation and dangerous minorities, +18%, +20% and +9% respectively) if instead of looking at all reactions (likes and emoji) we looked only at «likes» or only at positive reactions («like», «love», «wow»). In short, the elements of populist communication taken individually have a positive effect on followers' liking of the post. The same applies if we consider populism as a whole (presence of at least one element of populist rhetoric), the effect on reactions is very high: +37% reactions when at least one element of populist rhetoric is present in the post (or +31% when the negativity is ignored). In this sense, in terms of reactions and popularity, the populist appeal works.

A similar argument applies to shares and comments. Posts are shared more often (+44% or +29% excluding negativity) and tend to receive more comments (+56% or +39%) when even one of the elements described above is present. Unpacking the results by type, however, we find that for shares, the effect is significant only if the posts contain negativity (+41%) or references to dangerous minorities (+15%), while for comments, there are positive and significant effects produced by negativity (+53%), intimisation (+33%), or references to dangerous minorities (+19%). Overall, the results indicate a significant mobilising power of populist rhetoric, although of the different elements tested, the use of negativity seems to have the most significant effect.

[2]   Using party fixed effects instead of random effects produces the same results.

Considering the overwhelming electoral success of the League in the 2019 European elections, and the exorbitant number of posts published by this party's Facebook account, one might doubt that these results are largely due to the League's campaign. However, this is not the case. Even if we exclude the League from the analysis, the overall engagement of populist rhetoric remains quite strong. In fact, the effect of anti-elitism even tends to increase (+16% for reactions and +13% for comments), while references to the people and dangerous minorities become less important. The effect of negativity also decreases slightly, but only on reactions, remaining at +19%. Thus, we can conclude that the Hp1 is confirmed.

TABLE 1. *Analysis of the level of engagement during the 2019 Italian European elections*

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Anti-elitism	0.084* (0.049)	0.052 (0.055)	0.020 (0.057)
People	0.126** (0.050)	0.066 (0.056)	0.079 (0.057)
Dangerous minorities	0.126*** (0.040)	0.141*** (0.045)	0.172*** (0.046)
Negativity	0.219*** (0.035)	0.344*** (0.039)	0.423*** (0.040)
Intimisation	0.207*** (0.065)	0.083 (0.075)	0.287*** (0.073)
Counter-attitudinal news	0.427*** (0.082)	0.454*** (0.094)	0.946*** (0.085)
Pro-attitudinal news, unfriendly source	0.202*** (0.037)	0.259*** (0.041)	0.248*** (0.042)
Pro-attitudinal news, friendly source	0.249*** (0.049)	0.416*** (0.054)	0.301*** (0.055)
Local/Regional	-0.046 (0.032)	-0.030 (0.036)	-0.065* (0.036)
National	-0.025 (0.030)	-0.032 (0.034)	0.026 (0.035)
European	-0.020 (0.030)	0.005 (0.033)	-0.038 (0.034)
Polity	0.021 (0.057)	0.026 (0.063)	-0.066 (0.066)
Politics	-0.043 (0.031)	-0.106*** (0.035)	-0.096*** (0.035)
Economic policy	-0.114*** (0.043)	-0.063 (0.048)	-0.153*** (0.049)

(continues)

(follows)

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Social policy	0.104**	0.124**	0.093*
	(0.044)	(0.049)	(0.050)
Immigration	0.101**	0.131**	0.131**
	(0.046)	(0.051)	(0.052)
Law and order	0.034	0.039	-0.047
	(0.035)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other policy	0.003	0.039	0.005
	(0.044)	(0.049)	(0.050)
Interaction	0.057	0.016	0.160***
	(0.038)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Mobilisation	-0.257***	-0.234***	-0.343***
	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Image	0.109	0.143	0.061
	(0.088)	(0.100)	(0.097)
Video	-0.035	0.189*	-0.101
	(0.090)	(0.102)	(0.099)
Link	-0.313***	-0.334***	-0.331***
	(0.026)	(0.029)	(0.030)
Days until the election	-0.007***	-0.004**	-0.007***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Constant	0.078	-0.574***	-0.410***
	(0.102)	(0.114)	(0.112)
N	4,582	4,582	4,582
Parties	5	5	5

The reported coefficients are the incidence-rate ratios.
Standard errors in parenthesis. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: Author's own elaboration.

TABLE 2. *Analysis of the level of engagement during the 2019 Italian European elections (populist rhetoric)*

	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Populist rhetoric	0.314***	0.363***	0.444***			
	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.034)			
Explicit populist rhetoric				0.271***	0.252***	0.331***
				(0.031)	(0.035)	(0.036)
Counter-attitudinal news	0.424***	0.459***	0.926***	0.477***	0.544***	1.036***
	(0.081)	(0.094)	(0.084)	(0.081)	(0.093)	(0.084)
Pro-attitudinal news, unfriendly source	0.183***	0.243***	0.228***	0.207***	0.269***	0.257***
	(0.037)	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.037)	(0.041)	(0.042)

(continues)

(follows)

	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Pro-attitudinal news, friendly source	0.236*** (0.049)	0.408*** (0.054)	0.303*** (0.055)	0.283*** (0.048)	0.462*** (0.054)	0.366*** (0.055)
Local/ Regional	-0.050 (0.032)	-0.030 (0.036)	-0.070* (0.036)	-0.041 (0.032)	-0.018 (0.036)	-0.056 (0.036)
National	-0.032 (0.030)	-0.035 (0.034)	0.018 (0.035)	-0.016 (0.030)	-0.019 (0.034)	0.037 (0.035)
European	-0.026 (0.030)	-0.006 (0.033)	-0.051 (0.034)	-0.026 (0.030)	-0.002 (0.033)	-0.045 (0.034)
Polity	0.027 (0.056)	0.022 (0.063)	-0.075 (0.065)	0.047 (0.056)	0.058 (0.063)	-0.029 (0.065)
Politics	-0.034 (0.030)	-0.090*** (0.034)	-0.075** (0.035)	-0.016 (0.031)	-0.075** (0.034)	-0.054 (0.035)
Economic policy	-0.122*** (0.043)	-0.066 (0.048)	-0.164*** (0.049)	-0.104** (0.043)	-0.039 (0.048)	-0.133*** (0.049)
Social policy	0.107** (0.043)	0.129*** (0.049)	0.102** (0.049)	0.125*** (0.044)	0.145*** (0.049)	0.127** (0.050)
Immigration	0.108** (0.045)	0.159*** (0.050)	0.165*** (0.051)	0.128*** (0.045)	0.197*** (0.050)	0.207*** (0.051)
Law and order	0.028 (0.035)	0.039 (0.039)	-0.045 (0.040)	0.047 (0.035)	0.065* (0.039)	-0.013 (0.040)
Other policy	-0.003 (0.044)	0.031 (0.049)	--0.008 (0.050)	0.002 (0.044)	0.038 (0.049)	0.004 (0.050)
Interaction	0.047 (0.038)	0.010 (0.043)	0.134*** (0.043)	0.040 (0.038)	0.005 (0.043)	0.005 (0.043)
Mobilisation	-0.257*** (0.029)	-0.243*** (0.032)	-0.351*** (0.033)	-0.275*** (0.029)	-0.264*** (0.032)	-0.372*** (0.033)
Image	0.129 (0.088)	0.171* (0.100)	0.075 (0.097)	0.100 (0.088)	0.120 (0.100)	0.028 (0.097)
Video	-0.026 (0.090)	0.179* (0.102)	-0.113 (0.099)	-0.050 (0.090)	0.147 (0.102)	-0.140 (0.099)
Link	-0.318*** (0.026)	-0.336*** (0.029)	-0.330*** (0.030)	-0.314*** (0.026)	-0.328*** (0.029)	-0.322*** (0.030)
Days until election	--0.007*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)
Constant	0.055 (0.102)	-0.610*** (0.114)	-0.435*** (0.112)	0.083 (0.101)	-0.551*** (0.114)	-0.389*** (0.112)
N	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582
Parties	5	5	5	5	5	5

The reported coefficients are the incidence-rate ratios.
Standard errors in parenthesis. $***\ p < 0.01$, $**\ p < 0.05$, $*\ p < 0.1$

Source: Author's own elaboration.

In order to investigate Hp2, we tested the interaction of the variable «populist rhetoric» with a dummy variable that distinguishes parties generally considered populist (Lega, M5s and FdI) from those generally considered mainstream (Pd and FI). As shown in Table 2, the results are interesting and in some respect surprising. Both in terms of reactions, shares and comments, posts with populist rhetoric generate more engagement in the audience of populist parties than mainstream parties (with additional benefits compared to mainstream parties ranging from +27% to +36%, depending on the topic of analysis). But, even for Pd and FI, using populist rhetorical styles still generates more engagement than not using them (with increases in engagement rates of +13% for shares and +16% for comments, while the +10% effect on reactions barely fails to reach statistical significance). These results for mainstream parties are largely related to the mobilising power of negativity and negative campaigning (in terms of shares and comments). If we focus on reactions (total or only positive) and likes, the use of at least one element of populist rhetoric – leaving aside negativity – still gives them an advantage of +12% in the rate of reactions, but we could say, since we are talking about likes, also in the liking of the post. It should be noted that in the latter case, the additional benefit of populist parties compared to mainstream parties drops to only +16%, so that the mobilising capacity of populist rhetoric is not so different in terms of reactions and likes for the audiences of populist and mainstream parties.

TABLE 3. *Analysis of the level of engagement during the 2019 Italian European elections (populist rhetoric and interaction term)*

	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Populists	-0.577*** (0.070)	-0.694*** (0.071)	-0.758*** (0.072)	-0.561*** (0.064)	-0.705*** (0.063)	-0.765*** (0.064)
Populist rhetoric	0.097 (0.061)	0.125* (0.069)	0.148** (0.070)			
Populist rhetoric * Populists	0.239*** (0.068)	0.244*** (0.077)	0.308*** (0.078)			
Explicit populist rhetoric				0.119* (0.066)	0.031 (0.076)	0.069 (0.076)
Explicit populist rhetoric * Populists				0.181** (0.073)	0.257*** (0.084)	0.304*** (0.084)
Counter-attitudinal news	0.425*** (0.082)	0.475*** (0.094)	0.925*** (0.085)	0.471*** (0.082)	0.543*** (0.094)	1.015*** (0.084)

(continues)

(follows)

	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Pro-attitudinal news, unfriendly source	0.192*** (0.037)	0.257*** (0.041)	0.249*** (0.041)	0.212*** (0.037)	0.279*** (0.041)	0.274*** (0.041)
Local/ Regional	-0.029 (0.032)	0.002 (0.036)	-0.031 (0.036)	-0.021 (0.032)	0.013 (0.035)	-0.018 (0.036)
National	-0.013 (0.030)	-0.011 (0.034)	0.045 (0.035)	-0.002 (0.030)	0.001 (0.034)	0.059* (0.034)
European	-0.030 (0.030)	-0.013 (0.033)	-0.056* (0.034)	-0.028 (0.030)	-0.008 (0.033)	-0.048 (0.034)
Polity	0.024 (0.055)	0.015 (0.062)	-0.072 (0.064)	0.038 (0.055)	0.040 (0.062)	-0.040 (0.064)
Politics	-0.021 (0.030)	-0.074** (0.034)	-0.051 (0.035)	-0.005 (0.030)	-0.061* (0.034)	-0.033 (0.035)
Economic policy	-0.128*** (0.042)	-0.068 (0.047)	-0.171*** (0.048)	-0.116*** (0.042)	-0.050 (0.047)	-0.149*** (0.048)
Social policy	0.071* (0.043)	0.092* (0.048)	0.073 (0.049)	0.089** (0.043)	0.105** (0.048)	0.094* (0.049)
Immigration	0.123*** (0.045)	0.188*** (0.051)	0.188*** (0.051)	0.147*** (0.045)	0.225*** (0.050)	0.230*** (0.051)
Law and order	0.028 (0.035)	0.046 (0.039)	-0.037 (0.040)	0.046 (0.034)	0.071* (0.039)	-0.006 (0.040)
Other policy	-0.054 (0.044)	-0.027 (0.049)	-0.061 (0.050)	-0.052 (0.044)	-0.026 (0.049)	-0.058 (0.050)
Interaction	0.050 (0.038)	0.018 (0.043)	0.140*** (0.043)	0.044 (0.038)	0.014 (0.043)	0.130*** (0.043)
Mobilisation	-0.234*** (0.029)	-0.216*** (0.032)	-0.312*** (0.033)	-0.250*** (0.029)	-0.232*** (0.032)	-0.327*** (0.033)
Image	0.149* (0.086)	0.209** (0.098)	0.092 (0.095)	0.130 (0.086)	0.172* (0.098)	0.057 (0.095)
Video	-0.015 (0.088)	0.209** (0.100)	-0.092 (0.097)	-0.029 (0.088)	0.188* (0.100)	-0.108 (0.097)
Link	-0.324*** (0.026)	-0.341*** (0.029)	-0.334*** (0.030)	-0.319*** (0.026)	-0.334*** (0.029)	-0.327*** (0.030)
Days until election	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)
Constant	0.528*** (0.114)	-0.058 (0.125)	0.170 (0.123)	0.529*** (0.111)	-0.010 (0.121)	0.204* (0.119)
N	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582	4,582
Parties	5	5	5	5	5	5

The reported coefficients are the incidence-rate ratios.
Standard errors in parenthesis. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: Author's own elaboration.

5.   Discussion and conclusion

The present study investigates whether communication strategies characterised by populist rhetoric are associated with a higher levels of user engagement. By analysing the case of the 2019 Italian European elections, the article confirms this liaison showing that, on average, posts containing populist communicative components generate more engagement, increasing the likelihood that a post will go viral. Interestingly, the study points out that the use of a populist rhetoric is beneficial not only to the parties traditionally labelled as populist in the Italian political system (M5s, League, FdI), but also to those that are considered mainstream (Pd and FI). This is probably related to the functioning of the Facebook algorithm, which tends to favour content that evokes an immediate and emotional response from its audience.

However, looking more closely at the benefits of such a communicative strategy, we noticed that populist parties such as the League, M5s and FdI, which are likely to have an audience of supporters who are more receptive to this type of communication and therefore more likely to respond and mobilise when stimulated by such appeals, were able to generate more engagement compared to mainstream parties such as the Pd and FI. Both the Leagues, and even more so M5s, whose online presence is one of the backbones for the creation of this party, have long invested in their online communication strategies. Therefore, it is not surprising that their two constituencies are more likely to engage with and share the content of these parties. On the contrary, while Pd and Fi are trying to reduce this gap by increasing their own presence on these platforms, they still have a long way to go. However, an interesting fact remains from this analysis: when mainstream parties such as Pd and Fi publish posts that contain at least one of the elements of populist rhetoric, these posts generate more engagement.

Future research could extend this framework to assess how the impact of populist rhetoric has evolved over time. A comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2024 European elections could provide valuable insights into the evolution of populist rhetoric and its effectiveness in different political contexts over time. Furthermore, given that the different parties considered have taken on particularly different roles over the last five years, moving from government to opposition, and that the context around them has been characterised by the co-presence of different crises (Covid-19, Russia-Ukraine conflict, environmental challenges; see Ceron *et al.* 2024), it is interesting to investigate whether the effectiveness of a populist rhetoric in online campaigns can depend on specific contextual elements and can be moderated by other rhetorical strategies.

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