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Political propaganda through decades: an
overview of Blair's, Obama's and Salvini's
political communication strategies

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Abstract

This dissertation has the aim to trace the timeline of some of the most pivoting political campaigns in the western world. Starting from Tony Blair, passing through Barack Obama and ending with Matteo Salvini, the various campaigns all presented developments and innovations in the field of strategic communication and propaganda with electoral purposes. However, the focus of this work is on the so called “spin-doctors”, a term often used to refer to communication managers or campaign managers. The names of the experts in exam are Alastair Campbell (Blair’s campaign manager), David Plouffe and David Axelrod (Obama’s managers) and Luca Morisi (Salvini’s spin-doctor). It is in fact their expertise which allowed the candidates to win the elections.

For the sake of comparison, sociopolitical and cultural differences between countries will be set aside. Each campaign will be analyzed based on the ad-hoc communication techniques which could be applied to any democratized country with freedom of speech and fair elections. This work will focus rather on the style of each political personality, but most specifically on the mediatic tools used to send propaganda messages to targeted audiences. Which media outlet was the most effective for the election? On what levelled message did the campaign team put its focus in order to gain the support of a certain share of the population? The answers to these and more similar questions will be elucidated throughout the dissertation, which will also embed a semi-comparative analysis of the various strategies.

The difference in the kind of institutional roles for which the various candidates are running for will be instead ignored. While it is evident that a presidential election may have some features which are different from a parliamentary one, the propaganda will be examined as the social and communicational process through which a politician gets support, aside from the role he or she wants to obtain.

1. Introduction

In front of a great electoral success, one cannot help but wonder which is the tool, the strategy which determined the unprecedented result. What is the key factor which sets the difference between a failed and a won election? What should we look at in order to understand the defining features of successful campaigns? Political sciences scholars would argue that it not mere luck, but rather carefully curated propaganda.

Throughout modern years, a set of interesting ways of political communication can be observed. Of course, each politician has its own communication style, its own personality. The same can be said for the various parties. Even if we can cluster them within a group with common characteristics, it is also true that due to the cultural differences, political orientations, specific social issues at stake and many more reasons, this classification is rather broad and incomplete. Instead, looking at the course the scientific progress all around the world, a single common factor emerges, namely, technology.

The creation of the so called “internet of things” has in fact substantially changed the way we interact with one another. Many have studied which are the changes brought about from this unprecedented fabrication, and what we can say with certainty is that internet and technological progress made us enter a new era. The social sphere of life is now substantially changed: many human interactions moved from the physical to the digital, behaviors, traditions and communications have changed. If talking between colleagues, family and friends underwent a change which made it simple and immediate, we can see how logical it is that also political communication and propaganda had to be updated, adapted to the new technological discoveries.

Being the firsts to foresee and uptake such a radical change cannot but be an advantage, a turning point which will be taken as an example to be somewhat

copied by the politicians, the parties and every other political entity which will come next. Because of this reason, the scope of this thesis is to analyze the most relevant and innovative political communication strategies during the time of fast growing technological innovation and the invention of social media. However, the three famous politicians mentioned in the title, namely, Tony Blair, Barack Obama and Matteo Salvini will not be at the center of the discussion. As a matter of fact, the masterminds behind the public communication of the aforementioned men, and therefore the creators of the image the public received are their so called “spin doctors”. The Oxford dictionary gives the definition of spin doctor as “a person whose job is to present information to the public about a politician, an organization, etc. in the way that seems most positive”. This task is therefore crucial in shifting the voter’s opinion favorably on the candidate’s behalf.

It follows that the true subjects of analysis of this thesis will be Alastair Campbell, David Plouffe, David Axlerod and Luca Morisi, respectively Blair’s, Obama’s (both Davids) and Salvini’s campaign managers who led them to win the elections. Each of them had to face different challenges, given mostly by the situation in which their party verted at the starting of the campaign. It will be in fact proven that the starting point of the campaign is crucial in shaping the very foundations of the campaign strategy. This is because some politicians are faced with the problem of having to regain the approval of the electorate after predecessors lost it. Others, instead, ought to focus more on the shaping of their personal brand in order to collect the support of different and news cleavages and electorates.

2. Alastair Cambell: New Labour, New England

It is summer 1994, British journalist Alastair Campbell just decided to accept Tony Blair's proposal to become his campaign manager. Great Britain's parliamentary elections would have taken place only four years later, but he had to make haste to be ready on time. Blair had full trust in Campbell's strategic communications abilities. In his own words, as written in Campbell's autobiography (2008) "he wanted the best", and he knew he was. The rather blunt assumption was soon found to correspond to the truth. Campbell, in fact, had among many other, the fruitful intuition of what would soon have become the Labor Party slogan: "New Labor, New England".

At the time, the only media outlets available were the newspaper, the radio, and the TV. The first social network, Six Degrees, would only be created in 1997 (Marville University), triggering an impulse of constant renewal, discoveries, and fast-growing expansion within the so called *internet of things*. The numerous social networks created later, were undoubtedly the milestone which set the beginning of a revolutionary era of communication. The drastic change in regard to the many ways through which propaganda was used to switch people's opinion had to be reshaped to adapt to the fast-spreading development of modernity.

It is because of this reason that back when Blair was running as candidate there was not much room left to social media creativity. The only innovations they could work with were those in the speech style and in the message they wished to send to the electors. It is certainly not a coincidence that one of the first ideas that Campbell had was to carry on a "shock therapy" within the labor party foundations and previous political direction (Dye, 2015). Their party had in fact been part of the opposition for a while, as signifying that voters probably did not like something about the way it operated. The British Labor Party, between 1972 and 1992, had lost four elections in a row (Whickham-Jones, 2005/2006), trend which was soon

to be reversed. Some political scientists found that the reasons behind Labor's loss of consent was to be found in its ideological extremism which collocated the party far from the median voter, namely, the voter with quite moderate ideologies and willing to vote for the candidate closer to their political views but not necessarily corresponding to them. Blair's spokesman promptly understood where the problem was and oriented his campaign strategy accordingly.

He soon started to brainstorm on how to deliver a message of change and rupture with the past Labor way of operating. The goals Campbell had in mind for the campaign were two. First, to render clearer the center-left party's collocation on the center rather than emphasizing its collocation on the left (Campbell, 2008), so to attract the favor of voters with ideologies closer to the center. Secondly, with the motto *New Labor*, he aimed to deliver the message of a new country, a new way of ruling, a change for the better. Also, the recent death of the previous leader of the Party, John Smith, who was promptly substituted by Blair as head of Labor, in a way rendered this break with the old ways much easier. The aforementioned change, along with the new architecture of the party and the removal of the 4th clause of the labor party, would have been, in Alastair's plans, the recipe for a successful campaign.

A point of relevance is in fact the very peculiar matter of the party's 1918 constitution 4th clause. Ideologically, the latter was part of the identity of the party (Gani, 2015). It indeed underlined the primary aim of "common ownership of the means of production", a goal which never before managed to be successfully let aside nor forgotten by most of the party. Blair action in this regard was unprecedented: not because of the attempt of modernizing such a traditional aspect of the party (previously then Party leader Hugh Gaitskell failed in this endeavor in 1959), but because the idea was found to be worthwhile (Howell, 1997). The choice was certainly hazardous: it is believed that it was because of it that Labor started a rapid downfall (Gani, 2015). To dismiss altogether one of the most heartfelt principles of laborers was disapproved by the majority of voters, and members of

the party itself. At the time, such revolution was not perceivable nor needed, hence, to have brought up the matter had been one of the poorest party considerations strategically talking. It is important to keep in mind that Campbell, initially, was too against such change. He in fact believed that the unsuccessfulness of Labor was not a matter of ancient ideology, but rather of unsatisfying initiatives and proposals to be attributed to the *Old Labor*. Clause 4th was therefore used by the spokesman as a way of furtherly emphasizing the break from the past. If back then the sole idea of removing such a clause was not perceived as possible, it now would have meant that the New Labor was in fact a novelty perfectly capable to achieve even the impossible. Campbell soon understood the importance that such a powerful message could mean for the candidate, he therefore took it upon his sands to write Blair's speech in favor of the removal of Clause 4th. It is believed that the latter was some of his more important accomplishments throughout the campaign (Campbell). Through a vote, the clause was in fact removed. This event was one of the many factors which altogether pointed at the fact that the New Labor was willing to distance itself from its socialist past to win the favor of the middle voter, and hopefully, the elections.

In order to properly deliver the carefully curated messages, Alastair Campbell paid attention especially to what was being said and portrait through the most important media outlets of the time: newspapers. The strategy consisted in controlling the way in which events were reported, so to give a positive interpretation of the party's action and a negative view of others. The aim was to transform the gathering of news in a market within which the party could sell itself in a favorable way (Heffernan, 1998). A considerable amount of monetary resources was deployed for the 1997 elections campaign. About two million pounds were spent to refurbish the Millbank Tower, a London Building which was destined to become the Party's new media Headquarters (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996). The important center of propaganda-manufacturing was headed by Peter Mandelson, the Labor's Chief Election Strategies appointed in 1995 by Tony Blair (Heffernan, 1998). Among the

many function that this political center had, there was that of monitoring the news in order to provide for each event related to the Party or the campaign for a spokesperson to publicly respond to the claims or accusations. The thorough gathering of data and articles was carried out by about two hundred fifty employees and an instrument called “Excalibur” (a hi-tech database and storage retrieving all relevant information useful for the campaign). Perhaps the immediacy of response to the events and the instrumentalization thereof, were some of the most useful communication techniques of the Labor’s 1997 campaign.

Campbell, such as every other spin-doctor worthy of its name, had the fundamental task to curate a strategy and a different response for each of various newspapers. In order to do so, he kept in contact with every British journal (Campbell, 2008). What he did, was to deliver targeted information to certain journals, fix interviews, push for certain articles to be published and omit information that could endanger the party’s or the candidate’s public image. He treated the candidate as if he was a product to be sold to the so called political marketplace where voters were the customers (Heffernan, 1998). The more likeable what Blair and the party had to offer, the more votes they would gain. Its other tasks were to draft speeches alongside Blair, calculate the damage that certain stories could do and find immediate solutions to remedy to the opponent’s attacks. Among his major accomplishments, other than the New Labor idea and the draft of the 4th clause notable speech, there is the fact that he managed to convince the Sun newspaper, after a long work of persuasion, to support Labor for the 1997 elections (Campbell). Data shows that thanks to the endorsement of the Sun, the party gained approximately 525,000 votes from readers of the journal, therefore strongly participating in the results obtained at the elections.

As previously anticipated, thanks to Campbell’s strategy, Tony Blair became Great Britain’s Prime Minister in 1997, May the 2nd. The accomplishment remained fix in history insofar he managed to lead Labor to a win after 18 years of being part of the opposition (Campbell, 2008). He remained in office till 2007 making him the

longer standing Labor Prime Minister (The Rt Hon Tony Blair). At his side, his former campaign manager and spin-doctor Alastair Campbell, who continued to work for him as the architect behind the Prime Minister's public image.

3. David Plouffe and David Axelrod: Yes, we can!

Just as Tony Blair is getting ready to leave 10 Downing Street, London, in 2006, a wind of change is just starting to rise from a country not so close to England, besides the shared language and ancestors, of course. The United States of America are in fact getting closer to the Presidential Elections. A young black democrat senator with, in the words of David Plouffe, “no chance, no money and the funny name” (Plouffe, 2010) is starting to build an unequalled campaign such grand that it would have led to an unexpected win only two years later. The man in question was Barack Hussein Obama, an ivy league graduate given as loser from the beginning, especially due to his name that somewhat recalled the alleged mastermind behind the 11 September 2001 twin towers attacks. Other than strategical weaknesses given by factors which were out of his control, some of his personal traits such as his ability to forge consensus and a strong ambition to change the United States of America for the good helped in convincing David Plouffe and David Axelrod, both experts in the field of political communication and strategy, in helping him in the audacious mission of becoming the next President of the United States of America (Axelrod, 2016), along with Robert Gibbs and a restricted group of experts. The formers were equally chiefs of the electoral campaign. Each of them was involved in certain specific aspects on the media, communication, and propaganda fields of operation. While both played fundamental roles in the shaping of Obama’s public image, it is possible to differentiate their roles in two macro categories.

Overall, Axelrod had a strong focus on the qualitative communication aspects of the campaign. He took care of Obama’s public image portrayal, how he was perceived to the public and what arrangements could be done in order for him to appear as an appealing candidate. The aim was to make people feel like they knew and felt connected Barack at a personal and intimate level, not in a cold candidate-

elector way (Wallace-Wells, 2007). A great example of his approach was the fact that since he had started working as a campaign strategist for Obama, he had a troupe filming the latter for four years while in situations in which he was in public, talking to people or travelling. The videos were then used to launch Obama's presidential campaign. Axelrod believed that it was important to catch the attention of the viewer through a sort of "hybrid, part political commercial, part news (Wallace-Wells, 2007)" shoot, while also portraying him as a loving, friendly and authentic man.

Plouffe, instead, had a more quantitative approach, focusing on data. At the center of analysis of Obama's campaign there are the so called *Big Data*, a term used to define, according to Microsoft: "Data that is so large, so complex or collected at such a fast pace that it challenges the capabilities of traditional data management systems. Any organization looking at their current data infrastructure and seeing a significant shift the volume, variety or velocity of data is experiencing Big Data (Microsoft SQL Server Team, 2013)".

One of the ways Obama's campaign team used to gather data, was for volunteers to knock on doors and recite a specific script to understand which topics were the most beneficial to talk about to get a positive outcome from interactions with people of different ages, races, and sexes. For information to be categorized, it was collected in the form of spreadsheets, metrics, and performance reports (Issenberg, 2012) to be read and used to make strategic decisions. If a certain category of citizens preferred to talk about a certain issue to be convinced to vote for the candidate, volunteers were instructed to start a conversation about it, so to have statistically better chances of earning support.

Obama had over time assembled a clear idea of how his campaign would have had to be built, starting from the composition of the campaign management team. Even if he, in the public eye, had to sell himself as a completely opposed politician to the United States President of the time, republican George H. W. Bush, he decided to nevertheless adopt one of his flagships. He, in fact, opted for a small circle of

reliable and trustworthy strategist to take the most crucial decision of his campaign. The decision was due to two strategical advantages. First, a lower risk of leaks. Second, in case of leaks, the author would have been easier to intercept. The rest of ideological choices, battles to stand for and various audience based policy decisions could be instead taken by a wider group made of the rest of his troupe and his supporters (Plouffe, 2010). However, the fact that all the people selected for the set-up of the small circle were white men, sent a strong message: perhaps within Obama's priorities, there was not diversity nor representation, being his closest consultants all white men. This accusation was overturned when this apparently incoherent choice was overturned and depicted the seemingly incoherent choice as merely one of the many reasons why Americans needed to vote for him: to change situations like this (Axelrod, 2016).

The spin doctors therefore started building a campaign strategy in 2006, after the final "green light" from Obama. Compared to Blair's, times were now changed: internet and social media were now key for a successful election. The goal set by the team was to construct a *grassroot campaign* built on the support of volunteers. It was in fact decided to refuse public subsidies which would have dramatically reduced the weight of the financial expenses to be incurred. Furthermore, this choice also stressed the democratic and collective hearth of the campaign, therefore making it be perceived as a further humble effort of citizens gathering together with the final goal of solve American society's problems (ICPSR, 2008).

The question on how to reach the right audience of potential electors, volunteers and financial contributors was answered with the instrumentalization of technology. The importance of internet was immediately reckoned as crucial for the success of the undertaking. Some websites were soon set in place, with the aim of creating a platform where people who had any interest in supporting the candidate could find each other, talk among them, exchange thoughts, get to know about initiatives and make network: a sort of social network for Obama's supporters (Plouffe, 2010).

The websites were perhaps the most useful tool to gather the support needed, along with email broadcasts. It was in fact later revealed by Plouffe himself that the recipe for 2008's US Presidential Elections was not the use of modern social medias such as Facebook and Twitter, invented respectively in 2004 (Hall, 2021) and 2006 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013) (hence quite new 'inventions' during the set-up of the communication strategy), but rather 'old school' technology such as the aforementioned (Sweney, 2009).

The portrayal of the candidacy as coming from the ground-up was believed to be the fit strategy to personally involve a certain portion of perspective voters, making them feel part of the change that the candidate wished to bring about nationwide (Wallace-Wells, 2007). Not only was this a useful way to make citizens feel more "ownership", but it also helped in covering, through donations and volunteer work, the significant funds required to carry out a presidential electoral campaign. This important feature differentiated Obama's strategy from the republican adversary's, John McCain, insofar the latter already possessed, according to Britannica, "the personal connection and financial resources needed to realize his political ambitions" (Wilentz, 2021).

Before facing McCain, however, Obama had another challenger to worry about. The first obstacle along the path directed to the US presidency was in fact democrat Hilary Clinton, being his major adversary during the primary election (Nagourney and Zeleny, 2007). Obama's team had chosen to make a grassroot mobilization effort in the Early States, starting from Iowa (Plouffe, 2010). Their tactic was that of building a solid support of Iowans citizens, that would themselves conduct a networking and campaigning operation. It was in fact believed that Obama's message would have had more of an impact if received by Iowans from Iowans, rather than "imposed from above".

Apparently, Clinton did not think about it that way. She was the expected primary elections winner, a fact which was reflected by her motto: "In it to win it". Obama's spin doctors believed the message that passed from this slogan was that she

basically had won before the elections began, something which, they believed, would probably have not been perceived positively. The motto also contrasted entirely the approach that Obama had from the start of the race. He wanted to be perceived as the man who could bring a fresh start after Bush's presidency, and who wanted and needed to do this with the help of every citizen aligned with his vision of the future. His catch-phrase was instead "Yes we can" (The New York Times, 2008). A sentence often used as a chant by his supporters during rallies and public speeches. He wanted to send the message that a difference in the lives of American citizens was feasible, a better life and optimal solutions were within reach. However, change could not be brought only by him, but together.

Pools closed and the primaries results are out: Hilary Clinton has now lost in Iowa. The rather unexpected win on the hands of Obama was an event such significant to have triggered a worrying reaction coming from Clinton's side. Her team in fact underestimated Obama's ability to gather consent (Plouffe, 2010), ignoring the fact that both candidates had strategies built on African American consent (Kornacki, 2019). As an African American himself, Obama, throughout the electoral campaign, managed to win the approval from this part of the population. The supposed advantage of having the same skin-color of a considerable proportion of his electorate, was however not such a defining factor, especially in the beginning (Kornacki, 2019). However, things now had changed: he had just become a 'real' threat for the opponent's run towards presidency, perhaps worthy of being taken more seriously from that moment on. The citizens' enthusiasm regarding Obama's candidacy kept increasing, guaranteeing him a win first in the primary elections and finally in the 2008 elections.

Another strategy his team implemented in order to achieve this result, was that of putting a strong emphasis on the element of change which they wished to bring, opposed to the republican adversary McCain. For obvious reasons, the latter had no intention of wanting to pass the message that everything would have stayed the same, but democrat's campaign managers took a strong effort in associating

McCain name with the faults and failures of Bush term with the aim of rendering Obama even more favorable (ICPSR, 2008).

The incredible result of having introduced for the first time an African American president in the White house, was replicated in 2012 with him winning a second presidential win.

Barack Obama's campaign based on the use of the power of internet and Big Data, remains one of the most exemplar examples of communicative innovation in the political field through the strategic use of technological assets. Big Data was subsequently deployed by fellow politicians such as the one who will be analyzed in the following chapter, having Axelrod and Plouffe now permanently revolutionized the concept of "Data War" for electoral purposes (Ambinder, 2009).

4. Luca Morisi: “*La Bestia*”

In 2008, the same year in which every national TV and newspaper of the world was announcing the 44th President of the United States of America, racing a straight line directed back to Europe, towards Italy, electoral propaganda was undergoing another sensational revolution. In the Mediterranean Peninsula, Matteo Salvini, is in fact joining the Italian Parliament for the first time, as one of the prominent parliamentarians of the Italian populist far-right (Lazar, 2018).

Salvini was a political actor destined to introduce fundamental innovations in the modern way of politically communicating. Throughout his years in Chamber of Deputies and then in the European Parliament, he worked to form his credibility. In 2013, instead, a turning point would have witnessed him becoming the leader of the Northern League after Umberto Bossi. The party, at the time, was undergoing a time of crisis, easily noticeable from the vote orientation pools which forecasted overall an approximate 4% of consents (Diamanti and Pregliasco, 2019). The number rapidly grew over the years, thanks to a new, more personalistic and highly controversial approach to political communication of Salvini, which made the party reach the 32% in 2018. Due to the very controversies at the hearth of the politician’s communication tactic, the name of the propaganda machine ignited by Luca Morisi was defined: “*La Bestia*”, “The Beast”.

The Beast is an unfamous appellation used to describe the set of communication tactics adopted by the manager for the sake of gathering consent. The negative connotation of the term derives from the fact that, in order to increase to a significant number of followers, various non-ethical tools were adopted. Series of fake news, manipulation of events, constant incitement to racism and so on were published daily on the politician’s Twitter, Facebook, and Twitter accounts (Barbieri, 2019). Many are the communications techniques which were adopted. First of all, every post and tweet had an object or person towards which an

announcement was made. Essentially, Salvini either announced that he would start fighting a certain category of people (always people of color or drug addicts) which committed a crime, or claimed that he would start a war against a certain issue, for example mafia, unemployment, or animal abuse. The topics he claimed to battle against were numerous and often in contrast to each other. For example, he often talked about the need to stop the damages cause by nightlife, and then would post a photo in a party with a drink in hand.

Because of the fact that the daily number of social media content published was substantial, the likely problem of people disagreeing with his strong statements did not worry Morisi. This because other than posts and tweets being many, they were also strongly incoherent one another. While one may see the aforementioned as a disadvantage, it instead was a great way not to give time to the reader to formulate a negative opinion overall. Instead, the constant flow of announcements had the task of increasing the likelihood that the next post would reflect the follower opinion, therefore increasing support (Barbieri, 2019). This strategy is called *fast politics* and it normally focuses on increasing consents in the short-term. Salvini, however, seemed to be an exception, insofar his increase in followers and supporters was a gradual process (Diamanti and Pregliasco). The Beast was in fact created in 2014 and finalized in 2016.

It is important to notice that throughout the years in question (between 2013 and 2018), social networks had already become a fixed addendum in the lives of most individuals. The most popular social medias for chatting, expressing opinions and publishing posts, namely, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, were now widely used in order to talk with one's family, friends, but most importantly keep up with artists, celebrities, and politicians. Salvini was the first Italian parliamentarian to adopt the use of social media so well to become a sort of celebrity. In fact, he became followed by millions of people interested in his content rather than his opinions in matter of policies and parliamentary initiatives (Barbieri, 2019). It must however be said that the Italian pioneer of the trend of using social media to accumulate

consent was Beppe Grillo, leader and founder of the Five Stars Movement. Nevertheless, Salvini managed to first reach and then outnumber the number of followers he had, becoming the de facto most followed Italian politician within the whole European Union (La Repubblica, 2018).

Amongst the three politicians examined, Salvini is the one who counted on propaganda the most. The message he conveyed was mostly not policy nor law related, because the objective was to increase the number of followers (and therefore votes) based on personal feeling rather than on rational decision-making process based on the political program. Luca Morisi, in fact, created a strategy based on the so-called *sentiment analysis*, which is the automatic analysis of the of language used in social media in order to extract the emotions that a certain post provoked (Piccinelli, 2019). Then, strong sentiments are used to pull people's heartstrings for the advantage of the party. The psychological reason behind the success of this strategy has been explained thoroughly by a study carried out by scholars of the University of Michigan in 2005, which claims the following. Trough rage and fear, people will firstly lower their guard, then narrow their attention. Negative emotions are important but do not work if strong positive sentiment does not come at play (Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005). With the use of Morisi's beast, in fact, trough positive and happy feelings the reader is induced to vote for the party which they believe will protect them (Martini, 2018). Trough compassion, they will feel a connection with the candidate and be able to see his sense of right and humanity.

The way the politician dresses is another important characteristic of his public image. He in fact mostly wears a beard and hoodies and plastic bracelets with the logo of the university, city, region, or institutional body that he is visiting. This serves to make people feel represented and closer to him, perceiving him as a normal citizen: "one of them" (Barbieri, 2019). Other than the childlike elements of the bracelets, he also often wears suit jackets. Both elements which are

apparently incoherent among them, have the purpose of making him likeable for both young and older perspective voters.

Generally, “social Salvini” appears to post genuine and spontaneous photos, which are only intended to be perceived that way. In reality, every detail and choice of wording is carefully curated and is a result of Big Data analytics and calculations. Various scholars and journalists carried out studies on the development of Salvini’s communication strategy. They explained that, initially, the decision of the topics to be addressed on social media were chosen manually, based on the frequency of certain opinions written in the comments of the previous posts. If, for example, the majority of comments were about the worry that immigrants were stealing Italian’s jobs, then the following posts would have increased this fear. Later, after years of recollection of data from social network users, the Beast became able to foresee the next viral theme, therefore predicting follower’s fears and angers and consequently increasing engagement (Barbieri, 2019).

Another strategy to get better engagement and further increase Salvini’s popularity was the creation of a game called “Vinci Salvini”. The latter is a contest for which, through points gained via likes, comments, sharing of Salvini’s posts and using his hashtags, one could win the opportunity to have a chat with the politician (Berra, 2019). The increase in interactions with his posts, increased the engagement and the overall reach of the various accounts, which received peaks views especially during the two Vinci Salvini held. In order to participate, his followers had to sign up to a platform, which, according to some, was allegedly gathering personal information to be used for propaganda purposes (Angius, 2019). Luca Morisi was however promptly keen to clarify that the only data his team had access to were public info from people’s Facebook account, which they provided willingly. The data, he said, was necessary for the sake of constructing a ranking of the followers who interacted the most (Diamanti and Pregliasco, 2019). The use of the element of a ranking based on the number of points earned is an element usually deployed in videogames. Therefore, *Vinci Salvini* is a good example of the so called

“gamification”: a strategic approach useful to increase engagement and participation even in non-gaming fields such as politics, marketing, or governance (Grisolia and Martella, 2019).

His success was followed by a quite fast loss of voters which started after his incoherent declarations on the COVID19 measures, when he was openly declaring views at times pro and at times against governmental decisions (Mari, 2020). The pandemic approximately stripped him of at least 10% on the total voters, signifying an unprecedented loss since Salvini had become leader of the Northern League (La Notizia, 2021).

5. Conclusion

All propaganda techniques described demonstrate a certain degree of similarities as well as communicational differences. While the three cases do not present enough constant variables to carry out a comparative study, a qualitative analysis can be carried out. As stated in the introduction, it is undeniable that presidential and parliamentary elections present fundamental differences such as the modalities and rounds. It is because of the different nature of the elections that the first difference can be found.

As a matter of fact, Obama had to contrast an opponent part of the same party within the primaries, then had to run against a republican adversary. In Blair's and Salvini's cases, instead, the objective was to resurrect parties that were undergoing deep periods of crisis. The point therefore was to carry out a revolution within the parties in order to make people trust them again, rather than prevailing over an opponent party or candidate. To do so, they however carried out different strategies.

Salvini decided to opt for a more personalistic approach: he not only became the only face of the party, but he also became a pseudo-celebrity, a fact which somehow overshadowed the character of the party itself. The first "side-effect" of his communication strategy is therefore the aforementioned, since it implies that for the League to keep the success it experienced with him as a party leader, it should not modify the leadership. This could generate some practical complications in the long-term since party leadership changes are inevitable and periodical.

Blair, on the other hand, did not center the Labor reformation on his presence as leader of the party. He wished to deliver a message of change for the better and of a new chapter in the history of the party, meaning that personalization is not always the key to a successful propaganda strategy. It is however undeniable that

in this specific case and starting point of the campaign this approach was more useful than not.

A point of junction between Obama and Salvini can be found in the fact that both used to refer to themselves as part of the people. Obama with his “we can do it” slogan and through the choice to carry out a grassroots campaign clearly meant to be perceived as a citizen rather than a person with a higher position in front of the rest of the Americans. His communication team emphasized this side of him and was always looking for photo opportunities which were then used to portray him as a father, a son, a husband, a neighbor and so on.

Luca Morisi, with Salvini, had a more visual and psychological approach. The visual elements of the way Matteo dressed and showed himself in public settings and social media are just some examples of the image of middle-aged dad/citizen that his team wanted to show to the world. Due to this set of strategic optical tools, Salvini’s “one of us” image appears more immediate and feels more spontaneous compared to Obama’s. Obama had to either make a speech or at least talk or make a propaganda video in order to be perceived as a normal citizen, to transmit the message that he does the things that any normal man his age would do. His public image was however more professional, meaning that the element of seriousness and the category of which he was part of, a member of the institutions, have been crucial to build the trustworthiness of his persona.

A similar analysis can be carried out for Tony Blair, a man who was always represented in an authoritative manner, rather than a “down to earth” and approachable one. It can be said that his main asset was more the ideological message rather than the visual side of his political persona.

Lastly, among the most crucial elements of divergence between the candidates’ communication, it is fundamental to mention the degree of morality of the approaches used. One of the defining features of Salvini’s propaganda is in fact the use of fake news and the act of producing hate against certain categories of people, actions, events and so on. His whole social media communication style,

as previously stated, was built around sentiment analysis and the trigger in people of strong unpleasant emotions which were then used to sort of manipulate and shift the electors' opinions in his favor. Moreover, the mere fact of hindering information to his followers or crafting stories in his advantage were regular occurrences. With difficulty can those strategies be classified as morally just or fair, and that is perhaps the most devious side of Morisi's methodology.

On the other side we have Obama and Blair, men who undeniably used various propaganda tools and also studied people's behaviors to deliver targeted messages to targeted audiences. However, they did not focus their efforts into giving doctored messages, but on providing the right people the reasons why they would have been better off voting for them.

Overall, this research has proven that an effective campaign does not have a single "recipe" of success. Different combination of actions lead to different outcomes, which depend on the initial condition of the party, the historical time in question, the general feelings of the people, the available media instruments, and finally, the historical time in which the election takes place. One of the most important data to gather regards the needs of the people: first overall, then specifically to each category of potential electorate.

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Riassunto

Di fronte a successi politici e mediatici senza precedenti come per le elezioni di Tony Blair, Barack Obama e Salvini, non possiamo fare a meno di domandarci quale siano stati i fattori che abbiano determinato questi risultati. Lo scopo di questo elaborato è dunque quello di identificare i punti di giuntura tra le campagne elettorali menzionate e le principali differenze. Tutte le tecniche di propaganda descritte dimostrano un certo grado di somiglianze e differenze comunicative. Sebbene i tre casi non presentino variabili costanti sufficienti per effettuare uno studio comparativo, è possibile effettuare un'analisi qualitativa. I veri protagonisti di questa tesi sono dunque Alastair Campbell, David Plouffe, David Axelrod e Luca Morisi, rispettivamente i manager della comunicazione di Blair, Obama e Salvini durante le campagne elettorali che portarono alla loro elezione. Come affermato in premessa, è innegabile che le elezioni presidenziali e parlamentari presentino differenze fondamentali come le modalità.

È a causa della diversa natura delle elezioni che si può trovare la prima differenza. Obama, infatti, ha dovuto contrastare una parte avversaria dello stesso partito all'interno delle primarie, poi ha dovuto correre contro un avversario repubblicano. Nei casi di Blair e Salvini, invece, l'obiettivo era quello di resuscitare partiti che stavano attraversando periodi di profonda crisi. Si trattava quindi di compiere una rivoluzione all'interno dei partiti per far sì che le persone si fidassero nuovamente di loro, piuttosto che prevalere su un partito o candidato avversario. Per farlo, però, hanno messo in atto strategie diverse.

Salvini ha deciso di optare per un approccio più personalista: non solo è diventato l'unico volto del partito, ma è diventato anche una pseudo-celebrità, un fatto che in qualche modo ha oscurato il carattere del partito stesso. Il primo “effetto collaterale” della sua strategia di comunicazione è quindi il precedente, poiché implica che affinché la Lega per mantenere il successo che ha vissuto con lui come leader di partito, non dovrebbe modificare la dirigenza. Ciò potrebbe generare

alcune complicazioni pratiche a lungo termine poiché i cambiamenti di leadership del partito sono inevitabili e periodici.

Blair, invece, non ha incentrato la riforma laburista sulla sua presenza come leader del partito. Voleva lanciare un messaggio di cambiamento in meglio e di un nuovo capitolo nella storia del partito, nel senso che la personalizzazione non è sempre la chiave per una strategia di propaganda di successo. È tuttavia innegabile che in questo caso specifico e, visto il punto di partenza della campagna, questo approccio è stato adeguato.

Un punto di raccordo tra Obama e Salvini si trova nel fatto che entrambi si riferivano a se stessi come parte del popolo. Obama con il suo slogan “Yes, we can” (sì, possiamo farcela) ed attraverso la scelta di portare avanti una campagna dal basso chiaramente intesa ad essere percepito come un cittadino piuttosto che come una persona con una posizione più alta rispetto all'americano medio. Il suo team di comunicazione ha enfatizzato questo lato di lui ed ha sempre ricercato opportunità fotografiche che sono state poi utilizzate per ritrarlo come padre, figlio, marito, vicino di casa e così via.

Luca Morisi, con Salvini, ha avuto un approccio più visivo e psicologico. Gli elementi visivi del modo in cui Matteo si è vestito e si è mostrato in contesti pubblici e sui social media sono solo alcuni esempi dell'immagine di papà/cittadino di mezza età che il suo team ha voluto mostrare al mondo. Grazie a questo insieme di strumenti ottici strategici, l'immagine di "uno di noi" di Salvini appare più immediata e più spontanea rispetto a quella di Obama. Obama ha invece dovuto fare vari discorsi o/e fare un video di propaganda per essere percepito come un cittadino normale, per trasmettere il messaggio che anche lui vive la sua quotidianità nella maniera in cui la vivrebbe qualsiasi uomo della sua età. La sua immagine pubblica era però più professionale, con un'attenzione particolare all'elemento di membro delle istituzioni, categoria di cui faceva parte. Questi fattori sono stati determinanti per rappresentare la sua persona come affidabile e degna di essere votata.

Un'analoga analisi si può fare per Tony Blair, un uomo che è sempre stato rappresentato in maniera autorevole, piuttosto che “con i piedi per terra”. Si può dire che la sua risorsa principale fosse più il messaggio ideologico piuttosto che il lato visivo della sua personalità politica.

Infine, tra gli elementi più cruciali di divergenza nella comunicazione dei candidati, è fondamentale citare il grado di moralità degli approcci utilizzati. Uno dei tratti distintivi della propaganda di Salvini è infatti l'uso di fake news e l'atto di produrre odio contro determinate categorie di persone, azioni, eventi e così via. Il suo intero stile di comunicazione sui social media, come affermato in precedenza, è stato costruito attorno all'analisi del sentimento e all'innesco nelle persone di forti emozioni spiacevoli che sono state poi utilizzate per manipolare e spostare le opinioni degli elettori a suo favore. Inoltre, il semplice fatto di manovrare le informazioni da lui fornite ai suoi seguaci social o di creare storie a suo vantaggio erano azioni parte del quotidiano. Con difficoltà queste strategie possono essere classificate come moralmente giuste o oneste, ed è questo forse il lato più subdolo della metodologia di Morisi.

Dall'altra parte abbiamo Obama e Blair, uomini che hanno innegabilmente anche loro utilizzato vari strumenti di propaganda studiato i comportamenti delle persone per consegnare messaggi mirati ad un certo tipo di pubblico. Tuttavia, non hanno concentrato i loro sforzi nel mandare messaggi falsificati, ma nel fornire alle persone “giuste” i motivi per cui sarebbe stato meglio votarli.

Nel complesso, questa tesi dimostra che una campagna efficace non ha una sola "ricetta" per il successo. Diverse combinazioni di azioni portano a risultati diversi, che dipendono a loro volta dalla condizione iniziale del partito, dal momento storico in questione, dai sentimenti generali della popolazione, dagli strumenti mediatici disponibili ed infine dal momento storico in cui si svolge l'elezione. Uno dei dati più importanti da raccogliere per una campagna di successo riguarda i bisogni delle persone: dapprima i bisogni e richieste generali della popolazione

nel complesso, poi, un'attenta analisi delle necessità di ogni categoria di potenziale elettorato.