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**Popular culture in Italian political communication:
from Berlusconi's *Pop Politics* to Salvini and Meloni's *Online Pop
Politics***

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INTRODUCTION

Looking at today's political debate, it is not uncommon to observe elements that relate to the mixing of popular culture and political communication, politicians acting like celebrities, and a sort of *spectacularization* of politics. All these elements are part of the popularization of politics, namely "the attempt to engage large sections of a population with politics" (Street, 2016). This dissertation aims to describe this phenomenon and its digital adaptation, with a focus on the Italian political landscape. Furthermore, three emblematic cases of popularization will be analyzed: those regarding Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini and the current President of the Council Giorgia Meloni.

Therefore, the first chapter of this dissertation, "Popularization of politics", will be concentrated on describing the rise of this phenomenon throughout the world. Moreover, to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, this chapter will be further divided into four sections (an introduction and three subchapters). The introduction will be focused on framing popularization through a brief historical background, as well as providing some information and examples related to the convergence between popular culture and politics - according to the further subdivision suggested by Van Zoonen (2000). The first subchapter - "The rise of popularization in Western democracies" - will then demonstrate the great American impact on contemporary Western popularization, together with citing some American and European cases. The last two subchapters will finally relate to "The Italian case" - an excursus on how popularization became widespread in Italy - and "The social media revolution", namely consisting of an explanation of how the Internet contributed to the rise of popularization.

Furthermore, in the second chapter "*Pop politics: The Italian anomaly*", emphasis will be given to the Italian take on the phenomenon. Recurring to Mazzoleni and Sfardini's (2009) definition of *pop politics* as well as their vision of Berlusconi's pervasive relevance in the Italian political scene as an anomaly. This chapter will be further broken into three sections (an introduction and two subchapters) to present a thorough analysis of the Italian case. Therefore, the introduction will describe the concept of *celebrity politicians*, along with their coverage in gossip magazines - referring to Stanyer's (2012) distinction between consensual and non-consensual coverage. The first subchapter will investigate TV formats "*Infotainment and politainment*", relying on the assumption that television is one of the main drivers of popular culture (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). Finally, the second subchapter will address Berlusconi's case, and more specifically "Berlusconi's cultural impact on Italian society."

Lastly, the third chapter “*Online pop politics and the rise of Italian right-wing populism*” will provide an overview of *online pop politics* (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019) - namely the digital adaptation of popularization. Moreover, the focus will be on the ascent of Italian right-wing populism, as well as on the people-elite juxtaposition described by Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008). The introduction will then describe these phenomena through the concepts of online politainment, digital activism, *user-generated political satire* and *participatory propaganda* (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019). In conclusion, the last two sections will address Salvini and Meloni’s cases regarding *online pop politics* and right-wing populism. In “Salvini: the (ordinary) *superleader*”, Salvini’s popularization case will be analyzed starting from his ambivalent communicative approach (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020). Coming to Meloni’s case, in “The rise of Meloni and the building of personal storytelling” an analysis of Meloni’s popularization process will be proposed.

CHAPTER 1: POPULARIZATION OF POLITICS

The popularization of politics can be described as “the attempt to engage large sections of a population with politics” (Street, 2016). To reach this goal, politics (meaning political personalities, political communication and political movements) acquires popular culture’s styles, containers and characters. After having quickly retraced the origins of popularization, its main aspects and the academic debate around it, this chapter will be focused on how it has developed around the world (and in Italy), as well as how the social media revolution impacted it. The idea that politics benefits from a close relationship with the *zeitgeist* is not new. Its roots can be traced back to the dawn of political philosophy: from Plato to Adorno, passing through Rousseau and Nietzsche, traces of this concept can be found. However, phenomena such as personalization and mediatization of politics dramatically increased the process of popularization. The emergence of *celebrity politics* is likewise connected with that boost of popular culture’s elements in politics (Street, 2004).

Moreover, in the 20th century, the popularization of politics became an important tool for social and political movements, such as the suffragette movement (1903), which sought to secure the right to vote for women. The rise of mass media, such as newspapers and radio, also played a significant role in popularizing politics by making information and political ideas more accessible to the general public. After the end of the Second World War - alongside the rise of Western democracies - popularization took on new forms with the advent of television and the internet. Television became a fundamental tool for political actors for reaching a wider audience and connect with voters. Furthermore, the internet and social media have also played an important role in popularizing politics by providing a platform for political communication and information sharing, as will be investigated in subchapter 1.3 and chapter 3.

Despite the fact - pointed out by Neil Postman in “Amusing Ourselves to Death” (1985) - that the roots of the idea of popularization can be found in many ancient and modern authors to the point of becoming commonplace, it is observable a lack of historical analysis on the topic.

Moreover, most of the philosophers and sociologists that addressed such themes (at least until recent times) harshly stigmatized them. Postman himself condemned those connections outright, as well as Bourdieu, Habermas and many others. Nevertheless, as argued by Professor Liesbet van Zoonen (2005), “Notwithstanding the continuous lamentation over the role of entertainment in politics, its presence and relevance have only intensified. Keeping up with politics by watching the relevant television programs is in competition with sports, comedies, or quiz shows. Politics thus must

compete with a large offer of diversion to gain people's attention, interest, and involvement" (Van Zoonen, 2005).

Altheide and Snow (1979) – among the first researchers analyzing that phenomenon – highlighted the link between popularization and mediatization, namely the mixing of *media logic* and *political logic*. According to their studies, in a society characterized by the growing centrality held by mass media, the only way for politics not to become irrelevant is to adapt itself to the logics, codes and symbols of media. The resulting process is called mediatization and is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of popularization (Altheide, Snow, 1979). Furthermore, political communication has started exploiting the popular culture, but at the same time - given the great interest that politics and its characters can arouse if presented in an entertaining and soft way – the entertainment started being influenced by, for instance, political stories and scandals.

In this sense, in "Popular Culture as Political Communication" Van Zoonen (2000) identifies three ways in which popular culture and political communication merge. The first one, "Pop culture as a political fiction" regards the fact that – as mentioned above – politics and its characters are frequently subjects of, for instance, television series, movies or novels. Then, "Pop culture as a political stage", occurs when politicians appear in a pop culture context (for instance, participating in an entertainment show). This phenomenon can also be defined as *politainment* and will be analyzed in chapter 2. Coming to the third way, "pop culture as political practice" refers to the power held by opinion leaders - like popular music stars - in affecting the political discourse.

Given the fact that television has been – and, despite the digital revolution, continues to be – the main driver of popular culture (thus, the media where the popularization process usually takes place), there are other two main fields in which this circumstance appears: music and sport. From the 1960s on, in fact, *popular heroes* like pop stars, movie stars and sports(wo)men have increasingly appeared as political supporters. In the following sub-chapters, some Italian and international examples of this phenomenon will be shown. At the same time, political communication has used - and uses – music and sport in various ways.

For what concerns music, it is not uncommon for pop, rock and rap musicians to write and perform party anthems, or even to perform duos with candidates on the stages of campaigns. Regarding sports, as stated by Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), "Political leaders don't shy away from riding football fandom, being caught back at the stadium supporting the national team or watching the Sunday game

of their favorite one” (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). Indeed, sports help politicians gain popular support that they may draw upon during elections, and in this sense, Berlusconi’s case – which will be addressed later – is paradigmatic, as he was the owner of one of the most popular Italian soccer teams.

Finally, it is observable that by being seen with, referring to – or even quoting – singers, entertainment, television and sports personalities, politicians demonstrate to the electorate that they share the same popular culture and that they are in tune with it. In this way, they are often perceived as more sympathetic and show affinity to the average citizen. In recent years, the popularization of politics has become increasingly important in Western democracies, as citizens have become more politically engaged and entertained in following the political public discourse. This has been driven by a combination of popular cultural elements in political communication, increased access to information, as well as an undeniable desire for greater political participation among Western citizens.

CHAPTER 1.1: POPULARIZATION IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

Western liberal democracies are embedded in popularization elements for several decades. Being a phenomenon that has the personalization of politics among its prerequisites - together with mediatization – it is not surprising to discover that the United States (a presidential republic) is one of the first countries to which it expanded widely. Essentially, the United States can be considered the birthplace of modern popularization (Street, 2020). This circumstance led American politicians and communication experts to experiment with new communication techniques focused on the use of elements of popular culture. For example, it has come to be the norm for White House candidates to host and be backed by musical artists on the stages of their campaigns. Among the many, there is Frank Sinatra for Ronald Reagan in 1980, Barbra Streisand for Al Gore in 2000, Hillary Clinton backed by Beyoncé and Jay-Z in 2016.

If the endorsement of “popular heroes” has become increasingly common in other Western countries, their active political participation remains an American record – even though it is possible to notice several European and Italian examples, as will be shown later. In fact, besides the election of Donald Trump (a former TV character), other representative examples are Ronald Reagan’s past as a Hollywood actor and the election in California of former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2005. In America’s hyper-personalized and mediatized political arena, it is relatively easy for an entertainment star to use their success in the *showbusiness* into electoral consensus.

Media literacy has long been a prerequisite for political communication in the USA, as well as the production of TV series and movies dedicated to political events (Street, 2020). Furthermore, two more particularly paradigmatic examples of how popularization has become an endemic element of American politics will be briefly illustrated below: the TV show "American Candidate" - which has contestants-candidates running for office in a mock presidential election – and the Trump case.

Conceived by R. J. Cutler in 2004, “American Candidate” consisted in showing the behind-the-scenes of an electoral campaign through the competition between ten unknown participants. Backed by real communication experts and strategies, the ten contestants found themselves challenging each other on a set that flawlessly mimics the reality of an American presidential campaign. Finally, it was then the vote of spectators that would determine the winner of the competition – proclaimed president. The show – probably one of the most striking examples of the process of popularization in the United States – paved the way for the broadcasting in 2005 of a reality with a very similar format in the UK: “Vote for Me”. Referring to the subdivision suggested by Van Zoonen (2005) - mentioned in the introduction to this chapter - for analyzing the merge between popular culture and political communication, it can be said that realities such as “American Candidate” and “Vote for Me” are examples of “popular culture as a political fiction”, or as a format that goes even beyond that definition.

For what concerns the Trump case – the presidential campaign and the resulting election of Donald Trump as President of the United States – can be seen as the final product of decades of popularization in American politics. Referring to Van Zoonen’s subdivision (2005), it can be framed as a striking example of “pop culture as a political stage” or *politainment*, since “Trump’s success is the demonstration of how a political persona can be created and disseminated via popular culture. His appearances in Hollywood movies and on TV shows, his wrestling and Miss Universe franchises, and, of course, his role in The Apprentice/Celebrity Apprentice, have all been cited as evidence of how he has become a politically prominent figure, of how he has been made *electable*” (Street, 2020).

Whereas the popularization of politics has become an endemic trait of American society, the phenomenon is comparatively fresh in Europe, where the rise of commercial television in the late 1980s has been the driver of the “American model” applied to politics. Indeed, commercial broadcasting is dominated by infotainment genres, which feature human interest stories and interviews with regular people and celebrities discussing their private lives and feelings, far more so than conventional European public broadcasting (Van Zoonen, 2000). Following the above-cited media logic, commercial competition led “serious informative programs of public broadcasters to

incorporate entertainment conventions” (Brants, Neijens, 1998). On the same path, all popularization’s traits started to emerge in the European arena: politainment, merging between popular culture and political communication, the political involvement of *popular heroes* etc.

As happened before in the United States, politicians previously belonging to the entertainment world recently have started appearing in Europe and in other regions of the world. Among the many possible examples, some of the best-known are the 2013 electoral success of former Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, the election of Imran Khan – Pakistani cricket champion – as prime minister in his country and, above all, the election in 2016 of Volodymyr Zelensky as president of Ukraine - role he had previously played in a TV series called “Servant of the People” (Street, 2020).

CHAPTER 1.2: THE ITALIAN CASE

As regards the popularization of Italian politics – in line with what happened in other Western European countries - the first significant examples of the phenomenon can be traced back to the late 1980s (i.e., with the rise of commercial television) In particular, 1984/1985 “Berlusconi decrees” implemented by Craxi’s government and the Mammi Law - emanated under Giulio Andreotti’s sixth government – reorganized and regulated Italian commercial television system, paving the way for the consolidation of Silvio Berlusconi’s mediatic power. However, if compared to other Western democracies, the Italian case is exceptional for three main reasons: the delay in the popularization process because of the parliamentary form of government, the boost of the personalization (and popularization) process due to *Tangentopoli* and, thirdly, the emergence of a personality like Silvio Berlusconi.

For what concerns the delay caused by the Italian form of government, it is indeed evident that parliamentary democracy - and in particular the political system of the so-called *First Republic* – has slowed down the personalization process (which, as mentioned above, is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the rise of popularization). Indeed, the Italian political system between 1948 and the early 1990s was based on strongly ideological mass parties rather than political leaders, and this certainly disfavored the merge between popular culture’s elements and politics.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that following the crisis of political participation that emerged in the Eighties, together with the influence of commercial television and Craxi’s more “American” attitude, something changed. Essentially, the crisis of the political system of the *First Republic*

prompted the declining mass parties to find new ways and new “pop” personalities to capture the interest of an increasingly post-ideological electorate. For instance, what happened in the 1987 political election is paradigmatic: Gerry Scotti (a showman working for Berlusconi’s TV network), Gianni Rivera (former soccer player), and even Ilona Staller (a pornstar) were candidates and resulted elected in Parliament, respectively with the Italian Socialist Party (Craxi’s party), Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Radicale.

A few years later, in 1991 a massive corruption inquiry called *Tangentopoli* emerged, essentially involving all the main Italian parties and leading to their quick dissolution. The process was rapid and brutal, paving the way - as mentioned above – to a more personalized and populist approach to politics. However, as pointed out by Professor Carlo Marletti during a *lectio magistralis* at the University of Bologna in 2009, *Tangentopoli* should be seen more as the last straw than as the systematic cause of the collapse of the *First Republic* model: according to him, it is in the gap created in the 1980s “between the wide range of communication made possible by the development of the media and the restrictive use which the party apparatuses continued to make of them” that we must look for “the systemic cause of the sudden collapse suffered by the self-referential model [...] of the first republic. Thus, ‘Tangentopoli’ has been the last straw of this process” (Marletti, 2010). This explains, above all, the rapid and unexpected success of Silvio Berlusconi in the 1994 elections.

As will be deeply analyzed in the following chapter, Silvio Berlusconi certainly is one of the exceptional characteristics of the Italian case when coming to popularization. In fact, it can be noticed that - favored by the distrust towards politics and by the dissolution of mostly all traditional parties - his first victory (and, largely, of the two following ones in 2001 and 2008) was driven by his media literacy. Indeed, Berlusconi “possessed resources, skills and instruments which enabled him, from the outset, to better interpret the changes that have taken place, to reduce the gap between media development and poor communication by parties.” (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). It should be highlighted that not only he was the owner of one of the biggest TV networks in Europe (and was therefore directly prompted by it) but because of the Italian delay in the matter of popularization due to its political stagnation, he could rely on and being inspired by foreign models of popularized political communication.

Returning to the 1994 elections, it is undeniable that – probably for the first time in the history of Italian politics – the campaign was systematically influenced by the popularization of politics, especially through television. An example of this evidence could be the occurrence of the first

“American style” direct TV debate between the two coalition leaders – and *in pectore* candidates to the Presidency of the Council: Silvio Berlusconi and Achille Occhetto.

Moreover, the symbolic importance of that moment, together with the centrality of television, led to a sudden acceleration of the popularization process: the appeal to vote/endorsement of several entertainment personalities, such as TV presenter Mike Bongiorno, Raimondo Vianello (a showman), and singer Iva Zanicchi. A 16 years-old TV presenter, Ambra Angiolini, went so far as to declare: “The Heavenly Father supports *Forza Italia*, while the Devil, as we know, holds for Occhetto.” These endorsements were mainly made in Berlusconi’s TV network by Berlusconi’s employees. Years later, that inevitably brought several arguments in public opinion which led the Amato government to enact a *par condicio* law in 2000: “This Act promotes and regulates, to ensure equal treatment and impartiality for all political actors, access to the media for political communication.” (Art 1, law n.28 22nd February 2000).

From 1994 on, with the advent of the “Second Republic” the popularization process increased dramatically. The party democracy began to disappear in favor of a more personalized *public democracy* described as a characterized by the representation of interests between parties and voters, the government, and people, as well as the progressive relaxation of subcultural ties. The Italian political landscape is therefore largely characterized by the distrust towards politics, as well as the supremacy of media logic and a demagogic approach that over the years has become increasingly populist, up to the rise of right-wing populism that will be addressed in chapter 3. However, before analyzing it, it is fundamental to briefly focus on another substantial Italian populist phenomenon: the *Five Star Movement (M5S)* – a catch-all party founded in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and the IT entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio.

Established at the turn of the late 2000s financial crisis, the *Five Star Movement* benefited from the rising feeling of political distrust fostered by Mario Monti’s technocratic government (2011-2013). Indeed, the welfare cuts implemented by Monti’s government due to the disastrous economic situation of the country “entrenched frustration with mainstream politics in some quarters. When elections were held in 2013, the *M5S* benefited from discontent.” (Bock, 2021). Indeed, *M5S managed* to obtain respectively over 25% and over 32% of the vote share in the 2013 and 2018 political elections.

Nevertheless, those results were not only linked to the populist and post-ideological nature of the party but largely also to the pop elements and digital structure which shaped its political communication. Those two characteristics were originally embodied by the two founders: while Grillo (former comedian) incarnated pop culture's elements in the party's campaigns and rallies becoming "the Movement's popular figurehead", Gianroberto Casaleggio "was instrumental in setting up online platforms and driving the technological side of *M5S*" (Bock, 2021). Indeed, Grillo and Casaleggio's *Five Star Movement* perfectly mixed anti-political, populist, and – at least apparently – post-ideological solutions with the pop codes mentioned above (including a classic element of popularized politics: music – specifically a song written for an *M5S*'s event in 2014 by Italian rapper Fedez, which will be the subject of further analysis later).

However, the electoral success of *M5S* was made possible by the abovementioned combination of pop and populist elements, but most importantly through the implementation of an innovative digital structure based on an extremely popular blog (*beppegrillo.it*) useful to share the battles and the issues of the party, but also to encourage "followers to set up local groups, so-called Meetups (Lanzone, Tronconi, 2015), to discuss the themes that would later become the five policy objectives, or five stars, of the *M5S*: retaining water supply in public hands; environmental protection; improving public transport; internet-based sociality and communication; and sustainable development" (Bordignon, Ceccarini, 2013).

Moreover, *M5S* embraced e-democracy, and more specifically direct online participation, in order to allow activists to make decisions on the party line, as well as to choose the candidates for both Parliament and local elections. This system was first embodied in Beppe Grillo's blog, but later it was (and still is) entrusted by Casaleggio's platform called "*Piattaforma Rousseau*", with a clear reference to Rousseau's theories on direct democracy.

CHAPTER 1.3: THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION

As emerged in the Five Stars Movement case, starting from the 2010s the main carrier of popular elements in political communication – and, in general, one of the main arenas of political debate – is the Internet (and social media in particular). Social media are said to provide a connection between social networks, personal information channels, and the mass media (Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, 2012). Therefore, they deeply influence public discourse, and that would make them perfect to be used in the political sphere.

According to Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan's view (2012), the "mainstream adoption of social media applications has changed the physics of information diffusion. Until a few years ago, the major barrier for someone who wanted a piece of information to spread through a community was the cost of the technical infrastructure required to reach a large number of people", while nowadays, with the widespread of the Internet, this barrier has been extensively limited. Moreover, it is important to highlight that – for what concerns the political sphere – social media are increasingly used by both citizens and political institutions (e.g., political personalities, parties, and political foundations).

Regarding the use of social media (in particular, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram) by political institutions, it should be firstly noted that social media changed the traditional scheme of political communication (characterized by television exposure, street advertising, and public rallies) representing an "ideal vehicle and information base to gauge public opinion on policies and political positions as well as to build community support for candidates running for public offices" (Zeng et al. 2010). It is therefore fundamental for them to be actively present on social media, especially during election campaigns.

Again, regarding the use of social media by political institutions and personalities, it is interesting to note how often they are used as a driving force to promote their activities and personal image. Indeed, already in 2010 Golbeck et al. – focusing his analysis on the US Congress – found out that Congress members used Twitter largely to disseminate personal information, including links to news items about them and to their blog postings, and to report on their daily activities (Golbeck et al., 2010). Particularly on Twitter, Instagram, and, more recently, TikTok, politicians usually tend to view social media as platforms for self-promotion. As will be deeply explored in chapter 3, these activities are also often embedded with popularization phenomena and pop elements.

Coming to the use of social media by the electorate, it is observable that social media have the potential for increasing participation and discussions among citizens (Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, 2012). Therefore, those platforms are used by citizens to express political positions publicly, *de facto* making them an active part of the public debate. However, it is also undeniable, due to the ability of algorithms – by making a given social media content viral – of putting the political opinion of an ordinary citizen at the center of public debate, in the same way, the same algorithms can have the effect of polarizing the debate, creating *bubbles* (with the risk, at times, of significantly worsening the quality and objectivity of the political debate).

Nevertheless, as previously stated, one of the key results of the social media revolution is that traditional public communication - which has typically been initiated and managed by political and media elites - is fundamentally changing and has substantially declined (Chadwick, 2006). Indeed, due to its democratic nature, the advent of the Internet as a political communication tool has made it possible to disrupt traditional media's rule, while reinforcing the "media logic" mechanism identified by Altheide and Snow (1979). In fact, by creating a great variety of *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990) – namely, publics challenging the *status quo* via media - social media could be said to have partially undermined the public-political elite binomial pointed out by Schroeder (2018)

However, it could be also noticed that online-generated phenomena such as the rise of microblogging, digital activists and *web gurus*, which according to Schroeder's "Social Theory after the Internet" (2018) can be considered part of the abovementioned political and media elites. In fact, according to Pregliasco and Diamanti (2021), many web personalities (non-traditionally political stakeholders) have the capacity of giving instant centrality to political topics and discussions due to their very extensive online communities.

In that frame, it is interesting to analyze how *politainment* has changed after the social media revolution: if, as previously shown, in the past many celebrities intervened in the political arena by being candidates (directly affiliating to a party or a political leader), today web celebrities "seem to prefer more indirect and lateral forms of intervention" (Pregliasco, Diamanti, 2021). The crucial difference, however, is the pervasive communicative power held by web celebrities if compared to traditional ones. Indeed, Pregliasco and Diamanti (2021) underline that, until a few years ago "even the most famous celebrities in the world could not directly reach their audience [...] They could make appeals or launch political messages during a concert or an Olympic race, but their communication was filtered by someone."

On the other hand, public figures nowadays hold a sort of *intangible heritage* consisting in their social media fanbase, that is possible for them to instantly reach and, when necessary, mobilize by raising awareness about a given political or social issue. This tendency - sometimes referred as "online *politainment*" - will be addressed in the introduction of chapter 3 "*Online Pop Politics and the Rise of Right-wing Populism in Italy.*" Moreover, it will be retraced few examples, together with their origins and possible consequences.

CHAPTER 2: *POP POLITICS*; THE ITALIAN ANOMALY

Taking a temporal step backward in comparison with the previous topic, this chapter will be focused on the popularization of Italian politics (and political communication) that took place after the end of the First Republic in 1994. Before focusing on the substance of the issues dealt with in this chapter, it is important to clarify the meaning of its title by making two terminological considerations.

Firstly, for what concerns the expression “the Italian anomaly” is a term used by Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) to describe Silvio Berlusconi’s case as a TV network and football team owner (and therefore, a sort of popular culture idol) and contemporarily the Prime Minister of Italy (in 1994, between 2001 and 2006 and in the 2008-2011 period). This anomalous circumstance has resulted in an outstanding scenario for the Western Democratic panorama. Indeed, the Second Republic’s political arena “is dominated by a political leader (Berlusconi) who controls an extremely broad part of the media system.” (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). Moreover, Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) highlight that “in Italy, Berlusconi expresses the peak of personalization of political leadership and the highest degree of spectacularization of political communication” as will be further explored in the following subsection.

On the other hand, the term *pop politics* (namely, popularized politics) is used to describe the fact that political communication (and the entire political system) are evolving towards popularized, spectacular and individualized forms. This process is usually prompted by media, but it is mainly carried by politicians themselves who now accept this system as one of politics’ *rules of the game*. Ciaglia, Mazzoleni, Mazzoni and Splendore (2014) also underline that the expression *pop politics* “is used to describe certain areas of political communication that have been eluded for a long time from the media-logical and political analysis, i.e., those areas in which political communication blends with the many forms of popular culture produced and disseminated by cinema, theatre, music, press and television.” (Ciaglia, Mazzoleni et al., 2014). Furthermore, the two main configurations of *pop politics* – which mainly manifests itself through television - are indeed infotainment and *politainment*. These phenomena will be analyzed in the following subchapter.

However, before focusing on its main products, it is necessary to acknowledge how *pop politics* works itself. Besides the previously made considerations, in this introduction *pop politics* will be briefly investigated through the analysis of *celebrity politicians*. *Celebrity politicians* essentially are those officeholders and candidates attempting to gain public opinion’s approval by exploiting the mass media and other entertainment and pop culture promulgators. (Wheeler, 2013).

Moreover, as already stated in the introduction of the previous chapter, the emergence of *celebrity politics* relates to the rise of popular culture's elements in the political sphere (mostly in political communication). Therefore, *celebrity politicians* are directly connected to the rise of popularization. Indeed, as highlighted by Professor John Street in "Popular Culture and Political Communication", politics has become a form of popular culture. Political popularity is consequently determined by the quality of the "performances" given, as well as the ability of the *celebrity politicians* in leveraging the archetypes and the instruments of popular culture.

Therefore, the modern *celebrity politician* "must demonstrate his ability to relate to the media of communication, assimilating its logic, and modulating its message based on the rules that govern them. In fact, the political leader of the Western democracies is 'treated' to all intents and purposes as a celebrity (Wheeler, 2013), with a spasmodic attention to the private dimension." (Ciaglia, Mazzoleni et al., 2014).

The contamination between politics and entertainment - together with the new role of "celebrity" played by the modern politician – leads to the *intimization* of the political leader (Corner, Pels, 2003; Stanyer, 2012). Consequently, *celebrity politicians* have become aware – to gain and maintain their popularity – of the fact that they need to share intimate aspects of their personalities such as personal preferences on pop culture products, private aspects of their work, and backstories about their family. These elements help them arising empathy among the electorate but are also suitable by the mass media for entertaining the public.

Before illustrating some examples of this phenomenon in the Italian scene, it is necessary to underline the distinction between the concepts of consensual coverage and non-consensual/scandalous coverage, introduced by Professor James Stanyer (2012). Consensual coverage comes through a negotiation between the political personality and the media, resulting for instance, in an interview or a planned photo shoot in a gossip magazine. On the other hand, non-consensual coverage refers to the cases in which the private life or the political activity of a politician is either interested in a scandal or just put in the media spotlight without a negotiation. According to Stanyer (2012), both types of coverage can contribute positively (or negatively) to the construction of the image of the political actor involved.

For what concerns the consensual coverage of *celebrity politicians* in the Italian media system, its most paradigmatic examples are the articles and the attached photo shoots published by gossip magazines such as “Chi”, “Oggi” or “Novella 2000”. Italian politicians (or a member of their family) usually give an interview in one of these magazines on extraordinary occasions of their career. Such as when they have just become prime minister, when they are gaining political consensus and are willing to popularize their image, but also if they need to regain popularity after a political defeat (Mazzoni, Ciaglia, 2015).

Among the many examples of consensual coverage in Italian gossip magazines that could be cited, the most recent and emblematic regard former Prime Minister Mario Monti (2012), Matteo Renzi (2013), Matteo Salvini (2014), and Giorgia Meloni (2020). Furthermore, Silvio Berlusconi’s case on this topic will be addressed in subchapter 2.2. Reconnecting to the expression “the Italian anomaly”, the peculiarity of this case is that “Chi”, one of the main Italian gossip magazines, is part of Berlusconi’s media empire. Therefore, the negotiation that leads to the coverage of his and other *Forza Italia* members’ image is (and was) consistently biased in favor of his interests.

In “Il Gossip al Potere” Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2015) argue that “family members play a decisive role in the process of *popularizing* the politician. A process aimed at softening, humanizing and normalizing the public personality” (Mazzoni, Ciaglia, 2015). Indeed, for what concerns Mario Monti’s case - consisting of an open-hearted interview given by his wife for “Chi” - Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2015) pointed out that this episode is a clear example of the attempt of a political figure (through the words of a person in his family) of softening his image. During his mandate (2011-2013) operations of this kind happened frequently, perhaps because of a particular need to humanize a technical government that was broadly perceived as austere in the public eye.

Coming to Renzi, Salvini and Meloni’s cases (respectively, on “Chi” in 2013, on “Oggi” in 2014 and on “Novella 2000” in 2020), their consensual performances in gossip magazines are linked by the fact that occurred in phases where the polls indicated a rise in their parties’ consensus. Therefore, Renzi, Salvini and Meloni were allegedly trying to capitalize on that consensus to turn it into personal popularity. If this speculation is correct, these three cases would show that their strategy was successful. In fact, together with winning the following elections after the articles (Renzi’s *Democratic Party* in 2014, Salvini’s *League* in 2019, and Meloni with *Brothers of Italy* in 2022), they increased their personal popularity.

On the other hand, scandalous coverage in Italian gossip magazines is a more widespread phenomenon. According to Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2015), its consequences on the *celebrity politician* can be positive or negative depending on the topic and the current political climate. Berlusconi's *Ruby Gate* (started in 2010 and still ongoing) is the most significant example of non-consensual coverage of a *celebrity politician* in Italian gossip magazines. Moreover, this scandal drew the attention of the Italian and International press to the point of jeopardizing the reputation of the entire country. It is therefore identified as one of the reasons that led President of the Republic Napolitano to ask him to resign in November 2011.

Nevertheless, despite a physiological decline in the popularity of the leader right after the outbreak of the scandal, *Ruby Gate* did not preclude a satisfying result for his party in the 2013 election (21%) which *de facto* prevented the victory of his opponents. Moreover, the sexual scandal helped him to construct an even more popularized image as it shortly became a thrilling political soap opera, to the point of being staged in a two-part movie in 2018 (*Loro* by Oscar prize winner Paolo Sorrentino). *Ruby Gate* will be taken up later in subchapter 2.2 regarding Berlusconi's cultural impact on Italian society.

After clarifying and having made an *excursus* on the phenomenon of *celebrity politicians* in Italy, the following subchapter will instead be focused on the two main formats showing the mixture between popular culture and political communication in the Italian panorama: infotainment and *politainment*.

CHAPTER 2.1: INFOTAINMENT AND *POLITAINMENT*

In '*Politica Pop*', Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) state that "the media have a *reality-creating power* which can determine what political (or non-political) aspects are relevant for the public discourse. Mainly driven by the need to attract an ever larger and more undefined audience, political actors have adapted to appear on the commercial television scene to ensure maximum popularity. The result is that politics is abandoning its original function to take on the connotations typical of entertainment." In their view, there is a clear reference to Altheide and Snow's *media logic* theory (1979). Moreover, television and its formats are believed to be the fittest media for framing *pop politics* - since at the time of their research, TV was the main driver of popular culture (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009).

Furthermore, in "Entertaining the citizen: when politics and popular culture converge" Professor Van Zoonen (2005) divides the phenomenon of popularization into two different modalities: the "pop"

representation of politics in medial contexts, and the use of “pop codes” by political actors when they appear in media, i.e., the adaptation of politics to the imperatives of mediatization.

The division into two modalities suggested by van Zoonen (2005) lies at the heart of the reasoning about the attitude of political actors toward 21st-century television, and vice versa. By analyzing infotainment, it can be noticed that the approach of the format to the national and international issues can be serious, but the key feature of infotainment shows is that serious topics are always addressed in an entertaining way to make them more popular and debatable.

The term infotainment is therefore a *crasis* between “information” and “entertainment”, indicating the above-cited technique of presenting information in a manner intended to be entertaining. The sensationalist tone and the focus on political scandals rather than, for instance, on international affairs are typical features of infotainment all over the world, together with the use of *soft news* - namely, news told with a sensationalist accent, often made summarizing politicians’ declarations in a few *sound bites*.

Favored by phenomena such as the personalization of politics following the collapse of 20th century ideologies and the spread of commercial television, infotainment became a hugely successful format from the 1990s onwards. Critics (e.g., Bobbio, 1994) see infotainment as a dangerous drift of the cultural industry for multiple reasons, for instance, because media should aim for the high purpose of enabling the citizen to develop an informed opinion. On the other hand, authors like Van Zoonen (2005) observe that - through entertainment - television intercepts audiences that would otherwise have no interest in following the political agenda.

Moreover, Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) identify three factors that could be seen as the reason why infotainment has taken place in Italy: one is cultural, one is economic-institutional, and the last one is sociologic. The cultural factor has its roots in a widespread mechanism characterized by “the privatization of the public sphere and the publicization of the private one”. Coming to the economic-institutional one, competition between television networks and the financial imperatives of the market are crucial elements that brought infotainment’s diffusion. Lastly, the sociological factor refers to the Italian television audience, mostly medium-low educated. For what concerns the economic-institutional factor, a crucial role was played by the implementation of a more accurate television audience measurement (i.e., *Auditel*) from 1986 onwards. This obliged broadcasters to seriously

consider the audience of their programs, resulting in dramatic changes in the media approach towards information, with a rise of spectacularization.

Furthermore, it is possible to identify three main typologies of infotainment: Infotainment 1.0, Infotainment 2.0, and Infotainment 3.0 (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). The first version mostly refers to TV magazines - e.g., “Verissimo” and “La Vita in Diretta”, both launched in the 1990s and still airing - characterized by a style of journalism based on scandal hunting and other typical forms of entertainment such as the “TV of Pain”. Instead, Infotainment 2.0 includes talk shows that spectacularize *hard news* to make them more attractive for their spectators, e.g., “Ballarò” (2002-2016) and “Dimartedì” (2014-ongoing). As regards Infotainment 3.0, Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) describe it as a more subtle discursive strategy based on the denunciation of serious topics by *super partes* charismatic figures such as comedians (e.g., Maurizio Crozza and Luca e Paolo’s monologues in Infotainment 2.0’s talk shows).

By analyzing Infotainment 3.0, it is observable that - by using the comedians’ satirical or parodistic sketches – TV shows have the possibility of both entertaining and increasing public awareness of specific issues. Moreover, during these sketches, it is recurrent that the hosted political actors non-verbally react (e.g., smiling and laughing) or directly interact with the comedians’ jokes. In this way, infotainment creates potential popularization opportunities for politicians seeking to improve their public image by playing along with the rules of entertainment. Furthermore, whether the public particularly appreciates the interactions between a political actor and a satirical/parodistic one, they may even decide to collaborate on a sketch together. This is the case of Pierluigi Bersani (former leader of the Democratic Party) lending himself in a performance with Maurizio Crozza in his show ‘Italialand’ (2011).

However, for what concerns Infotainment 1.0 and 2.0, it is frequent for journalists to hybridize their image of professionals with that of TV presenters (e.g., Vespa, Santoro, Costanzo). Analyzing this kind of format, Professor Enrico Menduni (2007) noticed that “there is a theatricalization of the passage to the new policy in which the figure of the journalist-television host (Vespa, Santoro, Costanzo) assumes demiurgic traits” (Menduni, 2007). According to Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), that comes down to “a transformation of television from an institutional subject to a social agent that duplicates daily environments and discourses” (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009).

Taking up the division into two modalities (when addressing the popularization of politics) suggested by Van Zoonen (2005), it is possible to say that the first modality (the one concerning the “pop” presentation of politics in medial contexts) is strongly present in infotainment, whilst the second one (the use of “pop codes” by political actors when they appear in the medial arena) is the key feature to explain the phenomenon of *politainment*.

Coined in the early 2000s by David Schultz, the term *politainment* is a *portmanteau* word composed of “politics” and “entertainment” referring to the cases where political agents enter broadcasters (e.g., TV shows) that would normally not belong to their sphere of medial stakeholders. However, it could also be used for describing the cases in which entertainment personalities decide to pursue a career in politics, as many already mentioned examples (Ilona Staller, Gerry Scotti, Zelensky, etc.)

As regards its main definition, *politainment* essentially consists of a strategy applied by politicians to gain sympathy by seeking notoriety in a non-political context. The primary result of this phenomenon is to change how political agents are perceived by citizens. According to Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), “*politainment* is the result of the strategies through which television (and other mass media) makes messages and political figures *entertaining*” (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009).

Furthermore, it may also happen that reiterated *politainment* performances lead *celebrity politicians* to take a further step towards the entertainment sphere, leaving their political careers to, for instance, appear in a reality TV show. This eventuality represents the ultimate stadium of *pop politics*. Prominently because it shows how deeply the political and the entertainment spheres are interconnected and how political actors are becoming able to utilize the popular culture codes.

Even though it is a quite recent phenomenon, there are at least three main examples that can be made. The most evident cases range from the participation in 2008 of former Member of Parliament Vladimir Luxuria in the reality show “L’Isola dei Famosi” to former minister Nunzia De Girolamo taking part in the famous TV dance competition “Ballando con le stelle” in 2019. Moreover, a former member of the European Parliament Alessandra Mussolini – after many decades during which she both hold political roles and participated in TV shows as a columnist, guest, singer, etc. – finally decided to fully pursue a career in the entertainment world in 2020.

Given that, according to Professor Jörg-Uwe Nieland (2008), *politainment* can generate two different phenomena: “entertaining politics” and “political entertainment.” The former consists of a strategy

applied by politicians to gain sympathy outside the political field, whilst the latter refers to the presence of political agents (or political themes) in the various products of popular culture. Political entertainment essentially refers to the transformation of political themes into outputs engaged in popular culture's formats. The above-cited phenomenon of gossip magazines addressing political scandals and movies such as "Loro" (2020) are clear examples of political entertainment.

The latter, "entertaining politics", is described by Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) as "the politician's show-off on TV of his personal, authentic qualities, trying to legitimize himself according to the canons of notoriety. [...] Many politicians love to be filmed with popular culture's stars on the media stages, to suggest the idea of a strong affinity between their image and the culture shared by the audience" (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). This is the case of the participation of Piero Fassino - former secretary of left-wing party DS - in the variety show "C'è posta per te" in 2005 to meet his old nanny after many years. Moreover, as shown in the analysis of Infotainment 3.0, the demonstration of self-mockery ability is another way for the political actors to gain the spectators' sympathy. A teased politician laughing at the jokes addressed to him will show a positive self-image, an aspect that may influence a future voting decision.

By framing infotainment, political entertainment and *entertaining politics*, there is further evidence that, from the 1990s on, the logic of entertainment has heavily influenced Italian political communication. Due to that, some elements of popular culture - probably favored by the urge to renew the political environment after the "Mani Pulite" 1992 inquiry - have been incorporated into the political language. To better understand the reasons beyond this shift, the next subchapter will be focused on what Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009) define as an "Italian anomaly": Silvio Berlusconi's unparalleled influence on Italian popular culture and political communication.

Although at first glance the convergence between politics and popular culture may seem to be detrimental to the democratic process, Van Zoonen (2005) stresses the point of the positive influence of this circumstance. In her view, "entertaining politics" helps to bring the concept of political citizenship closer to cultural participation, while strengthening democratic awareness. Coming to infotainment and *politainment*, the success of those formats (and the derived modern political communication) suggests that, if presented in an engagingly, audiences are receptive to political issues. Furthermore, those new forms of political programming "can offer voices, positions, perspectives and critiques not found in traditional political television" (Van Zoonen, 2005)

Nevertheless, to get an accurate description of the effects of popular culture on politics, it is necessary to consider the lack of sympathy of critics towards the latter, as well as towards its main driver. As highlighted by Van Zoonen (2005) in “Entertaining politics”, “criticisms on television are rarely built upon analyses of actual audiences and claims about its supposed detrimental effects on democracy almost never conduct or refer to direct studies of audiences to prove their point”. However, as will be shown in the following subchapter, this is not entirely true: even though there are no relevant studies on the pernicious consequences of infotainment and *politainment* on democracy, it has been shown that entertainment TV can have negative effects on citizenship.

CHAPTER 2.2: BERLUSCONI’S CULTURAL IMPACT ON ITALIAN SOCIETY

In order to frame Silvio Berlusconi’s impact on popular culture and political communication, it is necessary to make an initial distinction between his entrepreneurial and political sides. Notwithstanding this division, it is also important to notice that the blending between these two aspects lies at the heart of the popularization process carried out by Berlusconi. Due to the above-cited “Italian anomaly”, – consisting of the unparalleled influence on popular culture and political communication in Italy – it is possible to argue that Berlusconi had an overall impact on Italian society.

Concerning the entrepreneurial side, the previously mentioned Berlusconi’s empire ranges from the TV networks of *Mediaset* to the biggest Italian publishing company: *Mondadori* - which publishes ‘Chi’, the gossip magazine cited in the introduction of this chapter. Moreover, for over thirty years (1986-2017) Berlusconi was the owner of one of the most widely recognized football clubs in the world, *AC Milan*. As will be shown later, he managed to exploit the engagement and entertainment produced by his empire (in particular, *Mediaset* and *AC Milan*) to popularize his image, increase his personal popularity, and, finally winning three political elections (1994, 2001, 2008).

Coming to the concrete influences of Berlusconi’s entrepreneurial activity in Italian society, according to “The Political Legacy of Entertainment TV” (Durante, Pinotti, Tesei, 2019), in past decades Mediaset had an impact on Italian citizens’ voting behavior and cognitive sophistication. Indeed, Durante, Pinotti and Tesei (2019) found a connection between the heavy exposure to *Mediaset*’s all-entertainment content in the early 1980s and future populist electoral preferences.

In particular, Durante et al. (2019) noticed that the citizens living in the municipalities in which *Mediaset* was broadcast before 1985 were more likely to vote *Forza Italia* between 1994 and 2008 and the *Five Star Movement* in 2013.

Moreover, the aforementioned research revealed that “individuals exposed to entertainment TV as children were less cognitively sophisticated and civic-minded as adults, and ultimately more vulnerable to Berlusconi’s populist rhetoric”. Further consequences of 1980s *Mediaset*’s all-entertainment content are therefore the decrease in civic engagement and cognitive sophistication. Considering these findings, it can be said that Berlusconi’s TV network contributed - at least during the period under consideration - to the cultural impoverishment of the electorate and had indeed a negative consequence on Italian citizenship.

Nevertheless, in the analysis of the relationship between entertainment TV exposure and political attitudes, it is important to underline the relevance of other influent actors such as education, age, gender, and employment status. The attempt to find a scapegoat in television may therefore lead to jumping to hasty conclusions about the cultural, cognitive and civic impoverishment of Italian citizens.

The subsequent debate about the consequences on citizenship - and on democracy - of the significant presence of entertainment content in the media, as well as *online pop politics* and other forms of popularization, will be further explored in the following sections.

It is therefore evident that one of the main aspects of Italian society that have been (indirectly) impacted by Berlusconi regards Italians’ civic and cultural attitudes (Durante et al., 2019). Moreover, Durante, Pinotti and Tesesi’s theory (2019) concerning a hypothetical correlation between early entertainment TV exposure and electoral populist preferences during adulthood will be one of the premises for addressing the rise of right-wing populism in the next chapter.

For what concerns the political side, it is evident that Berlusconi had an important impact in fostering the process of popularization – and in introducing popular culture’s elements into Italian political communication. As a matter of fact, his political debut in 1994 and his following electoral success pushed public opinion to wonder how much television and popular culture influenced his electoral results (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). The issue of the popularization of politics and its implication for the exercise of citizenship became crucial points of the political and scholarly debate.

Furthermore, during Berlusconi's second and third governments (2001-2006), Italian media and political systems started being increasingly interdependent. Suffice it to say that Berlusconi went too far as to influence both *Mediaset* (the main private TV network) and Rai (the national radio and TV network) with partial and indirect governmental control exercised through "political" appointments in key roles of the Italian national network (which is a conventional practice in Italian politics).

Moreover, during Berlusconi's last three governments (2001-2006 and 2008-2011) – he finally started interpreting his role as President of the Council in a strongly "pop" way. For instance, through his spectacular TV performances (e.g., the signing of the "Contract with the Italians", *Porta a Porta* 2001, and his fights with journalist Marco Travaglio, *Servizio Pubblico* 2013), which have irrevocably changed the way of campaigning in Italy (Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009).

In "Il Gossip al Potere", Mazzoleni and Ciaglia (2015) even report that the Italian edition of the rock music magazine "Rolling Stone" once awarded Berlusconi as the "rockstar of the year" in the monthly issue of December 2009. The motivations under this decision were the following: "Always *beyond*, a worshipper of parties, and songs, and of hot girls. No doubt about it. Berlusconi is the greatest rocker of the year, not only in Italy. [...] The international audience looks at him with disbelief. Meanwhile, he dreams of stadiums full of fans".

Being backed by his own economic and "cultural" empire, Berlusconi succeeded in creating a whole collective image around his figure – still heavily visible today - becoming the first Italian political *pop icon*. As stated by Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), "Over the years television revives and reinforces this image of a leader in the constant search for popular *affection*. His gaffes, his look, his jokes, his health kick and his aesthetic obsessions make him an extremely pop figure."

Among the many examples of Berlusconi's unique application of popular culture in his political communication, it is possible to cite at least three more "pop" elements used by Berlusconi to create an even more popularized portrayal of himself: the first refers to sport, one is connected to music and the latter to photography.

Regarding the use of sport as a means for popularization - as stated in chapter 1 – *celebrity politician* usually looks forward to manifesting their enthusiasm for football, showing up to the stadium to cheer on their favorite team or the national team (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). Indeed, the stadium is an

occasion for popularization, as well as it is a perfect environment for being perceived as a “normal guy” with “pop” feelings and habits.

Berlusconi went far beyond this mechanism since he actively participated in *AC Milan*’s success as the president of the team. Moreover, as noticed by Professor Brandon Blair Schneider in “Berlusconi Between Politics and Popular Culture” (2014), Berlusconi “has repeatedly leveraged the victories of Milan, his soccer club, to exemplify his own managerial talent and to burnish his image of dynamism and normalcy. In this last case, football’s widespread popularity in Italy, which cuts across political and class divisions, has allowed Berlusconi’s use of football metaphors to simplify political language and cognitive frames, while also making him just one of the guys — knowledgeable and passionate about his favorite team” (Schneider, 2014).

Like sports, music is also an important driver of popular culture in the political sphere. In fact, as stated in the introduction of chapter 1, “it is not uncommon for pop, rock and rap musicians to write and perform party anthems, or even to perform duos with candidates on the stages of campaigns.” For what concerns Berlusconi, he even actively performed (by singing and playing piano) several times in his political career, perhaps to strengthen his popularity and reinforce his storytelling depicting him as a charming self-made man (when he was young, he effectively worked as a singer on cruise ships and in a Paris cabaret).

Furthermore, before the 1994 elections, in 1999, and for the 2008 elections, he commissioned three party anthems: “Forza Italia”, “Azzurra Libertà” and “Menomale che Sivlio c’è” (in this case, an official video clip was also produced). The idea of producing an anthem as an electoral slogan was one of the many innovations that accompanied Berlusconi’s entry into the Italian political scene. Instead of inviting, for instance, a pop star to perform on stage, he chooses to realize three anthems that could be played – often in karaoke version – at the end of every rally or political event.

Moreover, according to the poet Edoardo Sanguineti (2008), “these jingles possess the infantile seduction of advertising and with their occult persuasion they act in the unconscious of simple souls remaining nailed to memory”. The impact of *Forza Italia*’s anthems was such that – on the occasion of 1996 national election – the center-left coalition *L’Ulivo* also decided to adopt a party anthem i.e., “La canzone popolare” by singer and songwriter Ivano Fossati.

Coming to photography, in 2001 Berlusconi and his cultural consultant Sandro Bondi conceived and published a photography book called “An Italian Story” on Berlusconi’s private and public life which was sent - given the subsequent elections - to all Italian families. The book was a collection of pictures documenting Berlusconi's early political career and the history of Italy between his first government and the upcoming elections (1994-2001) and included photographs of Berlusconi with world leaders, as well as images of events such as the G8 summit in Genoa, the 2000 Jubilee of Christianity and pictures showing more private aspects of his personality.

In this sense, it is “An Italian Story” is interesting as an electoral operation for its extent and capillarity, but most importantly for its peculiarity as a popular cultural element used for political propaganda. Through photography, the book reinforced the idea of Berlusconi as a self-made man and incredibly helped popularize and soften Berlusconi’s public image (Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009). As shown in the introduction of this chapter, photography - in the form of photo shoots - is broadly used by *celebrity politicians* in the shape of consensual coverage (Stanyer, 2012). Owning the gossip magazine ‘Chi’, Berlusconi a fortiori recurred to this kind of coverage both directly and indirectly (giving the spotlight to the many women in his inner circle).

Therefore, as pointed out by Schneider (2014) Berlusconi often included attractive women in his electoral lists “as a political strategy built around the image of beautiful women. Former government ministers like Mara Carfagna or the ex-Lombardy Regional Council Member Nicole Minetti become symbols of the Berlusconi lifestyle, decorations that surround him and add to his aura of, among other tropes, the good life and vibrant sexuality.”

Coming to what Stanyer (2012) identifies as non-consensual coverage, the most striking case concerning the figure of Silvio Berlusconi is the already mentioned *Ruby gate*, a political scandal that occurred during his premiership in 2010-2011. The scandal involved allegations of exploitation of underage prostitution of a young woman named Karima el-Mahroug, also known as Ruby, who was alleged to have been paid for sexual favors by Berlusconi and to have attended parties at his residence.

The scandal led to widespread media coverage and public outrage, with many accusing Berlusconi of abuse of power and misconduct, as well as a broader public conversation about the ethics of media coverage and the responsibility of journalists to protect the privacy of individuals caught up in political scandals. Notwithstanding the severe repercussion that *Ruby gate* had on Berlusconi’s political credibility - the case is widely regarded as one of the elements responsible for his political

decline - Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2013) argued that the scandal helped reinforce Berlusconi's image as a 'normal guy' and as a 'playboy' politician.

Nowadays, despite his advanced age, Berlusconi is considered a declining but still relevant political leader in Italy. He continues to be a major figure in the country's political and economic landscape, as he still is the leader of *Forza Italia* and the owner of (downsized) economic and mediatic empire. For instance, he sold *AC Milan* in 2017 and became president of a minor soccer team, *AC Monza*, in 2018.

Moreover, on the last national elections (in September 2022), Berlusconi tried to rebrand his digital political communication through the opening of a TikTok channel. TikTok is a young video platform often used by political figures as an attempt to appeal to younger and digitally savvy voters. Despite the involuntary comical effect that this type of content often arouses, Berlusconi's operation can probably be considered successful, demonstrating once again his ability in acknowledging the importance of popular culture and adapting to the rules of *online pop politics*.

CHAPTER 3: *ONLINE POP POLITICS* AND THE RISE OF ITALIAN RIGHT-WING POPULISM

The basic idea behind this chapter is that it is not possible to describe the phenomenon of *online pop politics* in Italian political communication without taking into consideration the spread of right-wing populism that occurred in Italy in the last decade. Before framing the two most striking cases of *online pop politics* and right-wing populism in the Italian scenario (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni), it is necessary to draw attention to the meaning and the scale of these two phenomena.

Starting with *online pop politics*, it is an expression used by Professors Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Roberta Bracciale (2019) that can be easily described as an evolution of *pop politics*. It can be also considered as the *celebrity politicians'* attempt to adapt to the codes introduced by the social media revolution. In addition to that, it consists of a series of formats, behaviors and strategies implemented by political actors to acquire and maintain their relevance and popularity online.

Indeed, similarly to what has been previously observed in the traditional media, political content on social media must be adapted to the logic of entertainment in order to compete with other forms of content (including sport, gossip, cooking, etc.) (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019). However, as observed by Shepherd and Hamilton (2016), "Digital media have expanded the places where pop culture manifests itself making almost invisible the distinctions between cultural, political and popular" (Shepherd, Hamilton, 2016).

The above cited merging between political content and pop culture can lead to *online politainment* - the most widespread format through which *online pop politics* manifests itself. Recovering the equivalent expression used to frame *pop politics*, *online politainment* essentially refers to political actors' habit to invade the entertainment sphere on social media, and it indeed is a form of political communication (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019). Furthermore, this term can also be used to describe the social media trend consisting of entertainment actors occasionally addressing political topics.

For what concerns this trend, it can be further divided into two broad categories: digital activism and *user-generated political satire* (Rill, Cardiel, 2013). The first involves digital influencers occasionally embracing social and political struggles, whilst the latter mainly relates to memes. As will be shown below, both phenomena result in the agenda-setting function of online entertainment actors.

Starting with digital activism and its agenda -power, it has already been mentioned how many web personalities can be considered as sort of non-traditional political stakeholders. Indeed, web influencers performing digital activism hold an intangible heritage made up of their social media audience, which they can instantaneously connect with and - when necessary - mobilize, by bringing attention to a particular political or social issue (Pregliasco, Diamanti, 2021).

Given the pervasive communicative power held by celebrities nowadays through social media, the occasions for them to spread unfiltered political messages grew enormously. In this frame, in “Politica Netflix” Pregliasco and Diamanti (2021) noticed a significant difference from the past. Whereas - as previously shown - before the social media revolution many entertainment celebrities entered the political sphere by running for office (directly aligning themselves with a party or a political leader), web celebrities now favor more lateral and indirect modes of engagement (Pregliasco, Diamanti, 2021).

Social media indeed offer the chance to pick specific political battles without having to fully support the positions of a party or a movement. In this sense, Pregliasco and Diamanti (2021) pointed out that “almost ten years ago Fedez wrote and sang the hymn for the campaign of the *M5S*, supporting almost entirely a political proposal. Nowadays, he instead decides to choose single issues, conveying them through social media platforms [...] Those different choices are dictated by the times and by the possibility of communicating simpler messages: Fedez will probably never launch battles for tax reform or pensions, but he often supports easier and more polarizing battles” (Pregliasco, Diamanti, 2021).

A perfect example of a simple and polarizing battle launched by digital activists - and consequently supported by web influencers - is the mobilization concerning the DDL Zan in 2021. DDL Zan was a bill proposed by the Democratic Party concerning the expansion of the Mancino Law (1993) in a way that would incorporate measures to prevent and combat discrimination and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and disability. What emerged in here is that web activism, whether performative or not, can have a great impact on the agenda - media pressure forced parliament to debate and vote on the bill - but little or no effect on the parliamentary vote.

Coming to *user-generated political satire*, in “Politica Pop Online” Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) observed that the main vehicle for spreading satirical messages on today’s platforms is the meme. A meme is generally defined as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through

online transmission” (Davison, 2012). Furthermore, a meme is usually “characterized by the speed with which it spreads and the fidelity it maintains to the original memetic frame, that is, to the shape it took in its first appearance, despite the changes that occurred during its transmission” (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019).

Moreover, it has been shown that memes on political topics “can play an agenda-setting function, by trivializing the issues on the agenda to increase user comprehension and spread. Memes so turn into helpful allies for group involvement in the public discourse since they enable more people to participate in the discourse.” (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019). As part of the popularization process, political memes are indeed able of engaging a broad part of the public that would otherwise be excluded from feeling part of citizenship. Therefore, this virtuous - though oversimplifying - process can strengthen democracy through the propagation of entertainment tools (memes) that become functional elements for bottom-up participation. In the frame of popular culture in politics, Van Zoonen (2005) indeed spoke of “a resource that can make citizenship more enjoyable, more engaging, more inclusive”.

As mentioned above, the term *online politainment* can also be used to refer to political personalities’ habit of strategically invading the entertainment sphere on social media. This phenomenon can be described as *participatory propaganda*, namely, the intentional and systematic attempt to influence perceptions, orient behaviors, and co-opt grassroots audiences to activate them in the dissemination of information in line with the broadcaster's objectives (Wanless, Berk, 2017). Moreover, *participatory propaganda* allows memetic production and can have two functions: supporting or opposing the ideas of one’s party or leader (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019).

To have a clearer picture of how this mechanism is activated, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) analyzed a 2019 Italian example of *participatory propaganda* involving the popular fantasy series “Game of Thrones” and two *celebrity politicians’* attempts to fit in its memetic flow. As shown by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019), following the airing of the third episode of its final series (spring 2019), Giorgia Meloni tried to trigger a memetic process by publishing a meme proposing an iconic expression of the abovementioned episode - “Not Today” - as a reference to her tough stance against immigration. Shortly after, +Europa’s leader Emma Bonino attempted to fit into the same flow, addressing the expression to the “sovereignists” (thus including Meloni).

What emerges from this case is that these two communicative operations “had the dual objective of addressing fans of the series and to fit into a flow of communication that was almost monopolizing online exchanges, given a large number of fantasy fans. It is a mode known as instant or real marketing that allows you to make your way in conversations taking advantage of themes and events particularly widespread at a specific time, in order to meet audiences other than their followers.” (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019). By converging to a single element of popular culture, Meloni and Bonino participated in the trend with two opposite purposes: Meloni participated to support her party’s nationalist thesis, whilst Bonino for showing her opposition to Meloni’s rhetoric.

Notwithstanding its positive consequences on democratic participation, *online pop politics* can also have detrimental effects on democracy. By encouraging an oversimplified type of communication focused on unfiltered polarizing messages, social media platforms can be used to spread post-truths, as well as to foster discrimination (e.g., against minorities) in the digital environment. In this frame, it is possible to say that right-wing populism all over the world leveraged the polarizing effect of social media to increase their electoral consent, often even spreading misinformation and hate speech. According to Maréchal (2022), “Social media platforms [...] have become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and xenophobic rhetoric, which has helped to fuel the rise of right-wing populism in Italy and other countries.”

Right-wing populism can therefore be described as a strategy involving “a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elite and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi, McDonwell, 2008). Due to this dichotomy, populist leaders attempt to be portrayed as one of the “people” fighting against a corrupted and culturally distant “élite” (Maréchal, 2022). Moreover, popularization can be a tool for appearing in touch with ordinary people by leveraging shared popular culture references.

In the following subchapters, the popularizing strategies of the two most prominent right-wing populist leaders of the Italian sphere (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni) will be analyzed. Both Salvini and Meloni can indeed be described as *celebrity politicians*, and they both were able to use online platforms to build a large following, finally making their parties become the most popular in Italy (Salvini’s *League* in 2019-2020, Meloni’s *Brothers of Italy* in 2022-2023).

CHAPTER 3.1: SALVINI: THE (ORDINARY) *SUPERLEADER*

In “*Il superleader (ordinario)*”, Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2020) coined the expression of “ordinary *superleader*” to frame Matteo Salvini’s ambivalent communicative approach. Referring to Kane and Patapan’s “paradox of the democratic leader” (2012), this term shows the necessity for the populist leader to appear in a double guise: as a statesman (“above us”) as well as an ordinary man/woman (“like us”) able of “producing an identification with the community itself” (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020). Essentially, as highlighted by Van Zoonen (2005), popularization provides that *celebrity politicians* can create the right mix between special and ordinary.

Moreover, Salvini’s aggressive rhetoric perfectly reflects the people-élite populist juxtaposition described by Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008). Becoming the leader of the *Northern League* party in 2013 after a historical defeat in the 2013 election (4%), he changed progressively the party line, putting aside *Northern League*’s federalist, autonomist, and sometimes secessionist instances (Passarelli, Tuorto, 2018). He finally transformed the party into a right-wing populist - sometimes even nationalist - personality-based party. As a matter of fact, in 2017 Salvini changed the name of the party in *League for Salvini Premier* (commonly referred as *League*).

Therefore, Salvini’s new *League* proved to be successful, achieving excellent electoral results. His popularity indeed peaked in 2019, when the *League* scored an unprecedented win: conquering 34 percent of the votes in the European elections. To reach this result, Salvini “intervened on his personal ‘style’, looking for a more direct relationship with its ‘people’, through a massive use of social networks” (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020). Moreover, he “accentuated the anti-system positions already present in the party, addressing issues such as the effects of globalization, the role of borders, the identity of the people and distrust of elites and power” (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020).

Furthermore, Salvini fully embraced the strategy of the “permanent campaign”, described by Sidney Blumenthal (1980) as the political leaders’ attempt to continually cultivate their consensus by maximizing, differentiating and making it stable in time (Blumenthal, 1980). According to Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2015), “this effort must be made day after day, regardless of the immediate task of an election”. In this frame, Salvini’s permanent campaign was made possible by the combination of three main levels: his constant presence on television, online, and in personality-based rallies - spread throughout the country.

In these contexts, Salvini alternated his self-representations as *superleader* and as an ordinary man depending on the occasion and what the current political situation required. Following Berlusconi's path, Salvini finally became an omnipresent character in the media landscape, alternating different narrative frames. Moreover, as underlined by Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2020), "like Berlusconi ten years ago, even Salvini is not only at the center of the political debate, but even of soft news, as proved by its interventions in entertainment shows or its coverage in gossip newspapers. Moreover, like Berlusconi, Salvini also makes his body a central element of his communication, making it a real iconic and linguistic ideology. This makes Salvini a real 'pop icon', emblematic of an era and culture, specifically contemporary popular culture" (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020).

Notwithstanding the similarities with the leader of *Forza Italia*, Salvini's popularization process took place mainly through social media. Salvini indeed systematically leveraged disclosing private information and pictures online and occasionally exposing the "behind-the-scenes" (Meyerovitz, 1985) of his life. In doing so, he became a "glamorous figure [...] capable of being noticed not just for his political actions but also for his behavior and attire. His electors can be viewed as 'fans', more than militants or supporters" (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020).

Among the many examples of Salvini's application of popular culture in his online political communication, the following paragraphs will be focused on what can be considered the three main components of his "pop" iconography. The first will be focused on food, the second on clothing whilst the latter will concern his propagandistic use of religion.

Starting with food, is such a recurrent topic on Salvini's online platforms that Niola (2019) coined the expression of "gastro-posts" referring to Salvini's "application of food porn as a gastro-nationalist device" (Stagi, Benasso, Guzzetti, 2022). Essentially, Salvini embraced the aesthetic of food porn - a social media trend that consists in sharing pictures of abundant and greasy meals - to counterpose his "lo-fi" lifestyle - detectable in his social media contents - to the alleged "high cuisine" attitudes and knowledge of intellectual leftist elites (Stagi et al., 2022).

On the assumption that Italian food is a crucial component of Italian popular culture and tradition, Salvini's "gastro-posts" seem to have two main configurations: if a large share of food content seeks to portray him embodying the traditional ideal of masculine hunger (Stagi et al., 2022), the latter concerns the *League*'s struggle against the supposed homologating effect of EU directives on national food products and peculiarities (Stagi et al., 2022).

In the first configuration, he indeed appears to stress “a clear distinction between his manly hunger and the obsessive – and again intellectual, classy and ‘feminine’ – attention for diet ascribed as a typical trait of subordinate masculinities (Connell 1995), such as the so-called ‘new men’ and ‘metrosexual’ ones” (Stagi et al., 2022). On the other hand, the second one can be framed “as a tool for rebranding Italian sovereignty and potential autarchy against the supposed interference of EU regulations” (Stagi et al., 2022). Recovering to Mazzoni and Mincigrucci’s idea (2020) of Salvini’s ambivalent communication, it is possible to notice that the first configuration deals with Salvini’s self-representation as an ordinary man, whilst the latter has more to do with his *superleader* rhetoric.

As concerns Salvini’s political use of clothing, it can be pointed out that, as well as in the food case, this strategy concerns his body. Indeed, as already mentioned before, Salvini’s body is a crucial element of his communication and iconography (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020). Concerning the use of clothes, Salvini has demonstrated a strong capacity for audience adaptation, depending on the current communication demands (Barile, Vagni, 2019). For instance, during his first years as the leader of the *League*, Salvini frequently wore sweatshirts bearing the name of the city where he was holding a rally or meeting his supporters. On the other hand, during his disruptive term as Minister of Internal Affairs (2018-2019), he used to wear policeman’s and fireman’s shirts, up to show himself shirtless at the beach multiple times (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2020).

His extravagant attire (given his institutional role) finally caught the attention of the media and began to be frequently criticized by his political opponents. Nevertheless, these happenings were strategically used by Salvini to depict the opposition as lacking serious arguments against his figure. Moreover, Salvini’s casual clothing style is a further demonstration of his ability to embody the traditional masculinity models, as well as to recreate an ordinary iconography - enabling a strong identification with his personal attitudes and tastes.

Coming to his propagandistic use of the Catholic religion, it should be noticed that Italian right-wing populism frequently stresses the assumed link between Christianity and national identity (Pew Research Center, 2018). Therefore, Salvini finds it useful to display and utilize religious symbols for propaganda purposes (Marchetti et. al., 2020).

Indeed, according to Stagi et al. (2022), “in the last years [...] Salvini has constantly invoked the protection of the Holy Virgin and Saints, he has displayed and kissed religious symbols like crosses

and rosaries in front of his political supporters, and he has stressed the importance of the protection of Christianity against the invasion of non-Christians, and especially of Muslims.” (Stagi et al., 2022).

In this frame, Salvini’s unscrupulous publicization and politicization of religion (Marchetti, 2022) can be seen as a functional element to right-wing populist’s attempt to engage and mobilize the *losers of globalization*. Furthermore, this far-right and anti-globalist mobilization usually targets minorities-including immigrants and other marginalized groups (e.g., queer people, Muslims, etc.) - seen as responsible for the presumed degeneration of contemporary societies.

CHAPTER 3.2: THE RISE OF MELONI AND THE BUILDING OF A PERSONAL STORYTELLING

In September 2022, Giorgia Meloni’s party (*Brothers of Italy*) - in coalition with Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* and Salvini’s *League* - won the election obtaining more than 26 percent of votes. Despite Meloni being leading in the polls from the beginning of the election campaign, this result looks sensational, considering her party’s modest result (4%) in the previous 2018 election. Moreover, Meloni’s ability to broaden her electoral base is further significant if considering that her political roots - as well as the ideology and iconography of *Brothers of Italy* - are in the far right of the Italian political spectrum.

Indeed, after a career in the youth sections of the Italian right, in 2012 Meloni founded *Brothers of Italy* on the ashes of *Alleanza Nazionale* (1995-2009). *Alleanza Nazionale* was namely the Second Republic’s adaptation of the post-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (1946-1995), founded by the allies of Mussolini after the end of the Second World War. Considering this solid and polarizing political connotation, it is evident that Meloni’s popularization process deviates from those previously analyzed. Thus, it is worth analyzing her political communication and the popular cultural tools used by Meloni to reach unexpected levels of popularity.

This section will analyze Meloni’s *online pop politics* by distinguishing her popularization strategy in two macro-phases: her antagonistic phase (until 2022) and her softening phase (2022-present). Meloni’s antagonist phase will focus on her disruptive and “pop” rise and communication (Redazione PrimaOnline, 2021). Lastly, her softening phase will relate to Meloni’s attempt (starting from the 2022 election campaign) to build reassuring personal storytelling (Maréchal, 2022).

For what concerns Meloni's antagonistic phase, it should be mentioned that *Brothers of Italy* - from its foundation in 2012 to its electoral victory in September 2022 - has never taken part in the six governments that occurred in ten years, representing an exception across the parliamentary spectrum. As a result, Meloni had the chance to play the role of the outsider, while growing her popularity and structuring *Brothers of Italy's* right-wing populist identity.

Therefore, through her disruptive digital communication, Meloni shaped her antagonistic identity (Redazione PrimaOnline, 2021), mainly through aggressive speeches, e.g., in Piazza del Popolo (October 2019) and in support of Vox (June 2022). Moreover, Meloni exploited these events to increase her popularity by embracing the popularization process triggered by those speeches. In particular, the case related to Meloni's speech in Piazza del Popolo (2019) is paradigmatic. Indeed, a remix of her speech - centered on the catchphrase "I am Giorgia / I am a woman / I am a mother / I am Christian" - was published on Youtube with a parodic and pro-Lgbtqi intent, "reaching millions of views and generating a meme shared and reworked by hundreds of thousands of people on all social networks" (Bianchi, 2019).

Furthermore, "The pop and ironic key that has characterized the processes of *viralization* of the meme has emptied it of its ideological connotation, making it a catchphrase which has been reappropriated by different audiences and often in antithesis" (Bracciale, 2019). Notwithstanding the mocking and parodistic intent of the meme, Meloni herself embraced the trend, cleverly transforming the catchphrase into her personal mantra. Then, she further exploited the meme by titling her autobiography "I am Giorgia" (2021).

During her antagonistic phase, Meloni also seemed to try reinvigorating the popular culture pantheon of the Italian right, traditionally linked to fantasy (Il Post, 2022). In her speeches and digital communication, Meloni indeed used references from fantasy products (Bianchi, 2019) such as "The Lord of the Rings" and "Game of Thrones". Moreover, Meloni often attempted to engage the Millennial manga aesthetic by showing herself singing anime themes, visiting the "Romics" cartoon festival etc. Therefore, these happenings triggered a memetic process (Bianchi, 2019) that consequently contributed to the further popularization of her image.

Finally, the rise of Meloni as a pop icon has strongly contributed to the rise of *Brothers of Italy*, which became the most popular party in the country since the beginning of 2022. However, another element that is worth to be considered is that Meloni's party has been the only one in opposition to Draghi's

government (2021-2022). Born as a national unity government in a complicated moment in Italian history (during the Covid-19 pandemic), Draghi's government resulted to be unsatisfactory to a significant portion of the Italian population. Consequently, Meloni's party benefited from the widespread unhappiness of Italian citizens (Capetti, 2022).

Therefore, in 2022 Meloni started laying the groundwork for the following election, giving rise to her softening phase, consisting in Meloni's attempt to build a personal storytelling by further mediatizing her personal life and conveying a relatable self-portrait (Maréchal, 2022). Indeed, according to Maréchal (2022), "the founder and leader of *Fratelli d'Italia* has gradually made her privacy, in particular her family life, a pop topic, by taking up different codes and logic of the celebrity industry. Indeed, even though most of her communication revolves around critics of the government, she still has strengthened the storytelling around her private life" (Maréchal, 2022).

Meloni's softening phase essentially consists in portraying herself "as a common and everyday woman, through the emphasis of her flaws and doubts and her ordinary roles of mother, partner, sister, daughter, friend, etc." (Maréchal, 2022). Meloni's new narrative is therefore focused on her presumed authenticity, as well as her roles inside her family. Moreover, these softening elements are particularly present in her interviews on talk shows, "in which her storytelling is regularly coupled with melancholic music and old photos" (Maréchal, 2022). Furthermore, Meloni's digital communication mirrored her new everyday approach, even after she was elected as President of the Council. On her social media profiles, she indeed alternates political "cards" - graphic elements consisting in the pairing of images and high-impact copies (Redazione PrimaOnline, 2021) - and spontaneous selfies, as well as photos and stories about her family members (e.g., her daughter, husband, sister, mother, etc.).

Finally, Meloni started embodying the characteristics of an *everyday celebrity politician*, namely a *celebrity politician* "seeking to appear human and relatable in the eyes of voters" (Maréchal, 2022). This strategy - aimed to de-demonize the image of her nationalist right-wing party, which was frequently viewed as excessively radical, in order to appeal to a larger portion of the voters - recalls the one adopted by Marine Le Pen in her 2022 election campaign in France. Like Meloni, Le Pen attempted to adopt softer rhetoric, besides portraying herself as relatable (Maréchal, 2022).

In conclusion, similarly to Salvini, Meloni seems to have the ability to adapt her image to the various circumstances that the political agenda requires (Capetti, 2022). Since the 2022 election campaign,

Meloni even appears to have adapted some of her positions to the political and international context. For instance, from the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (February 2022), Meloni softened her position regarding the EU and NATO, advocating a cooperation strategy with the European partners and rigorously backing the Atlantic Alliance in support of Ukraine and against Russia.

CONCLUSION

The popularization of politics is a pervasive and multi-faceted phenomenon with a long history rooted in political philosophy. Nevertheless, it is observable a lack of research in the field, together with widespread stigmatization of this phenomenon from public opinion. However, in a society characterized by the growing centrality of *media logic* (Altheide, Snow, 1979), the only way for political communication to be effective is to acquire the logics, symbols and codes of popular culture. Therefore, with the evolution of mass media, politics have been adapted to the styles and containers of entertainment. This dissertation aims to describe how the rise of television and social media has greatly impacted the popularization of politics, providing new platforms and strategies for political communication.

Through the analysis of three Italian cases (Berlusconi, Salvini, and Meloni), it has been found that television and social media played a significant role in the popularization process. As already shown, television and social media are today's main drivers of popular culture, as well as holding an agenda-setting power: "the media have a *reality-creating power* which can determine what political (or non-political) aspects are relevant for the public discourse. [...] The result is that politics is abandoning its original function to take on the connotations typical of entertainment" (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009). To stay relevant, political actors must adapt to the logics of TV entertainment through *pop politics* (Mazzoleni, Sfardini, 2009) and to the social media trends through *online pop politics* (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019).

Indeed, the popularization process is characterized by the rise of *celebrity politicians* (Street, 2004), who "must demonstrate their ability to relate to the media of communication, assimilating its logic, and modulating their own message based on the rules that govern them. Indeed, the political leader of the Western democracies is 'treated' to all intents and purposes as a celebrity, with a spasmodic attention to the private dimension" (Ciaglia, Mazzoleni et al., 2014). Furthermore, *celebrity politicians* seek public approval through pop "performances", by exploiting their media literacy and popular culture elements. Therefore, the contamination between politics and entertainment leads to the *intimization* of political personalities, namely the necessity to share intimate aspects of their personality (Corner, Peels, 2003; Stanyer, 2012) In this frame, Stanyer's distinction between consensual and non-consensual coverage further highlights the importance of the media in shaping the image of a political actor.

Coming to the consequences of those phenomena on the democratic process, Van Zoonen (2005) emphasizes their positive impact. According to her research, "entertaining politics" promotes democratic consciousness while bringing the idea of political citizenship closer to cultural engagement. Notwithstanding their positive effects on democratic participation, *pop politics* and *online pop politics* can also have detrimental consequences on citizenship. By encouraging an oversimplified type of communication, popularization can lead to a superficial and parodistic view of politics, as well as polarize the electorate by fostering discrimination. In this frame, the last chapter has shown how Italian right-wing populism leveraged the polarizing effect of social media (e.g., through the people-elite juxtaposition) for electoral purposes.

Overall, it is therefore evident that studying the blending of popular culture and political communication is crucial for understanding the communicative strategies of today's political actors, as well as forecasting its potential impact on the future. Indeed, the ongoing evolution of mass media and technology will continue to shape political actors' behavior, making popularization a relevant and constantly evolving research field.

ABSTRACT

L'elaborato si occupa di analizzare il fenomeno della popolarizzazione della politica - descritta da Street (2016) come "il tentativo di coinvolgere ampie fasce di una popolazione con la politica" - con un focus sullo scenario italiano e sull'uso di elementi di cultura popolare nella comunicazione di tre leader politici italiani: Berlusconi, Salvini e Meloni. La popolarizzazione della politica è un fenomeno complesso, pervasivo e centrale nella storia della politica. Nonostante ciò, è possibile osservare una generale mancanza di consapevolezza e una diffusa stigmatizzazione di questo fenomeno da parte dell'opinione pubblica. Tuttavia, in una società caratterizzata dalla crescente centralità della logica mediatica (Altheide, Snow, 1979), l'unico modo per un agente politico di rendere efficace la propria comunicazione è quello di acquisire le logiche, i simboli e i codici della cultura popolare. Pertanto, con l'evoluzione dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa, la politica è stata adattata alle logiche dell'intrattenimento. L'avvento dei nuovi mezzi di comunicazione di massa – radio, televisione, internet e social media – ha contribuito quindi a fornire nuove piattaforme e strategie per la comunicazione politica, rafforzando la necessità per i leader politici di mostrarsi in linea con i nuovi strumenti di trasmissione dell'informazione, dell'intrattenimento e, soprattutto, della cultura popolare.

Nel primo capitolo dell'elaborato viene analizzata l'ascesa e il consolidamento della popolarizzazione della politica. In particolare, ne vengono evidenziate le origini filosofico-politiche e viene velocemente ripercorsa la storia del fenomeno attraverso dei momenti precisi: l'ascesa dei movimenti politici di fine Ottocento, la diffusione capillare del medium televisivo e, infine, la rivoluzione digitale e l'avvento dei social media. Successivamente, vengono riportate le tre modalità attraverso le quali si può creare una commistione tra cultura popolare e comunicazione politica, rispettivamente identificate da Van Zoonen (2000) come "Pop culture as a political fiction" (sull'uso di ritratti e storie politiche da parte di serie televisive, film e libri), "Pop culture as a political stage" (sull'apparizione dei leader politici in contesti legati alla cultura pop) e "Pop culture as political practice" (sull'influenza politica delle celebrità dell'intrattenimento). Vengono quindi citati due campi di cultura popolare in cui si rilevano svariati casi di commistione con la politica (lo sport e la musica), per poi passare alla descrizione di come – a partire dagli Stati Uniti - la popolarizzazione si è diffusa nelle principali democrazie occidentali. Viene dunque approfondita la diffusione della popolarizzazione della politica nello scenario italiano, identificando la legge Mammi del 1990, le inchieste di Tangentopoli e le elezioni del 1994 come punti focali del processo di popolarizzazione. In conclusione, viene descritto l'impatto tecnologico e culturale dei nuovi

media digitali (e, in particolare, dei social network) sulla comunicazione politica, partendo dall'analisi dell'ascesa del Movimento 5 Stelle.

Il secondo capitolo (come poi il terzo) è esclusivamente incentrato sullo scenario politico italiano e sull'approccio degli attori politici italiani al fenomeno trattato dall'elaborato. L'analisi contenuta in questo capitolo parte dall'espressione "politica pop" introdotta da Mazzoleni e Sfardini (2009) e dalla loro visione della figura di Silvio Berlusconi come un'anomalia italiana, alla luce della pervasività e della rilevanza in campo politico, economico e comunicativo detenuta da Berlusconi negli anni Dieci del 2000. Viene inoltre descritto il concetto di *celebrity politicians* – riassumibile nella tendenza dei leader politici ad adottare i linguaggi e gli stili comunicativi e comportamentali delle celebrità dell'intrattenimento – per poi fare riferimento alla distinzione tra copertura consensuale e non consensuale introdotta da Stanyer (2012) per analizzare le apparizioni dei leader politici nelle riviste di gossip. In seguito, l'analisi si concentra sul medium televisivo attraverso l'esaminazione dei due format TV più inclini al mescolamento tra cultura pop e politica: l'infotainment e il *politainment*, descritto come la tendenza dei leader politici di inserirsi in contesti mediatici di intrattenimento (in particolare, programmi televisivi di intrattenimento) con lo scopo di aumentare la propria popolarità. L'ultima sezione del capitolo è poi incentrata sulla figura di Silvio Berlusconi e all'impatto culturale che la sua attività politica e imprenditoriale ha avuto sulla società italiana. Questa parte include anche un'analisi delle conseguenze sulla cittadinanza della sovraesposizione di alcune fasce di elettori al palinsesto "all-entertainment" che ha caratterizzato Mediaset nei suoi primi anni in onda.

Il terzo capitolo si occupa di analizzare il fenomeno della *politica pop online* (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2019) – l'evoluzione digitale della *politica pop*, che rappresenta il tentativo del *celebrity politician* di adattarsi ai codici mediatici, ai format e alle strategie dei social network – e dell'ascesa del populismo di destra in Italia, più adatto a sfruttare le dinamiche polarizzanti del digitale e ad acquisire popolarità online rispetto ad altri schieramenti politici. Vengono poi introdotti i concetti di *online politainment*, attivismo digitale, *user-generated satire* e *propaganda partecipativa*. Per quanto riguarda quest'ultima, viene portato un esempio di *propaganda partecipativa* riguardante un *processo memetico* innescato da Giorgia Meloni e successivamente ripreso da Emma Bonino. Successivamente, verrà analizzata la popolarizzazione della figura di Matteo Salvini partendo dalla definizione di "superleader ordinario" coniata da Mazzoni e Mincigrucci (2020) per descrivere il suo approccio comunicativo ambivalente e l'adattabilità del suo linguaggio a seconda del contesto. In conclusione, l'ultima sezione è interamente dedicata a una comprensione delle motivazioni che

hanno contribuito all'ascesa di Giorgia Meloni, con un focus in particolare sul suo processo di popolarizzazione e sul suo recente tentativo di addolcire la sua immagine attraverso la costruzione di uno storytelling personale.

All'interno dell'elaborato si fa più volte riferimento alle possibili conseguenze della commistione tra cultura popolare e comunicazione politica (e, più in generale, della popolarizzazione) sul processo democratico. Secondo Van Zoonen (2005), questi fenomeni promuovono la coscienza democratica e avvicinano l'idea di cittadinanza politica all'impegno culturale. Nonostante l'elaborato sottolinei più volte i loro aspetti positivi, è importante ricordare che la *politica pop* e la *politica pop online* possono avere effetti negativi sulla cittadinanza. Ad esempio, è innegabile che queste forme di comunicazione politica siano portate a semplificare eccessivamente la realtà, oltre a proporre troppo spesso una visione superficiale e quasi parodistica dell'attività politica. I messaggi spesso discriminatori e polarizzanti del populismo di destra, rinforzati da una retorica che vede il popolo in contrapposizione con una o più presunte élite e lobby ne sono un esempio. Nel complesso, quindi, è evidente che lo studio della fusione tra cultura popolare e comunicazione politica è fondamentale per comprendere le strategie comunicative degli attori politici di oggi, nonché per prevederne il potenziale impatto sul futuro. La continua evoluzione dei mass media e della tecnologia continuerà infatti a plasmare il comportamento degli attori politici, rendendo la popolarizzazione un campo di ricerca sempre più rilevante e in continua evoluzione.

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