



**Libera Università Internazionale degli  
Studi Sociali Guido Carli**

Department of Political Science

BSc in Politics: Philosophy and Economics

Chair in Political Science

**The Impact of Social media on Political  
Communication and Voting Behaviour: a  
Historical Analysis and Case Studies**

Prof. Lorenzo De Sio

Teresanna Leuci  
099602

---

Supervisor

---

Candidate

Academic Year 2023/2024

*Alla mia famiglia,  
certezza e costante della mia vita,  
la parte migliore di me.*

# Table of contents

INTRODUCTION.....	6
<b>1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PERIODIZATION OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	8
1.1 PERIODIZATION OF THE USE OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ..	8
1.3. THE U.S. CASE: 2004-2020.....	11
1.3.1. The 2004 democratic primaries.....	11
1.3.2. The 2006 midterm elections .....	12
1.3.3. The 2008 presidential elections.....	13
1.3.4. The 2010 midterm elections .....	13
1.3.5. The 2012 presidential elections.....	14
1.3.6. The 2014 midterm elections .....	14
1.3.7. The 2016 presidential elections.....	15
1.3.8. The 2018 midterm elections .....	16
1.3.9. The 2020 presidential elections.....	16
1.4. ISRAEL CASE: 1996-2013 .....	16
1.4.1. The first phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (1996-2009).....	16
1.4.2. The second phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (2009-2013).....	17
1.4.3. The third phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (2013 elections) .....	17
1.5. THE UNITED KINGDOM CASE: 2010-2019.....	18
1.5.1. The 2010 general elections .....	18
1.5.2. The 2015 general elections .....	18
1.5.3. The 2017 general elections .....	19
1.5.4. The 2019 general elections .....	19
1.6. BRAZIL CASE: 2010-2022 .....	19
1.6.1. The 2010 presidential elections.....	19
1.6.2. The 2014 presidential elections.....	20
1.6.3. The 2018 presidential elections.....	20
1.6.4. The 2022 presidential elections.....	21
1.7. ITALY CASE: 2008-2022 .....	21

1.7.1.	The 2008 general elections .....	21
1.7.2.	The 2013 general elections .....	22
1.7.3.	The 2018 general elections .....	23
1.7.4.	The 2022 general elections .....	23
1.8.	CONCLUSION .....	24
2.	<b>THE THEORETICAL AND TECHNICAL DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND VOTER INFLUENCE</b> .....	25
2.1.	INTRODUCTION.....	25
2.2.	MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS .....	25
2.3.	<b>THEORIES OF MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE OVER POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR</b> .....	26
2.3.1.	Agenda setting effect theory .....	26
2.3.2.	Framing theory (Scheufele, 1999).....	27
2.3.3.	Spiral of silence theory.....	28
2.4.	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR</b> .....	30
2.4.1.	Agenda setting theory applied to social media (Guo, 2012).....	30
2.4.2.	Framing theory applied to social media .....	30
2.4.3.	Spiral of silence theory applied to social media .....	31
2.5.	<b>ENGAGEMENT METRICS AS INDICATORS OF POLITICAL SUPPORT</b> .....	31
2.5.1.	Analysis of Twitter engagement metrics .....	32
2.5.2.	Analysis of Facebook engagement metrics.....	32
2.5.3.	Analysis of engagement metrics of Italian political leaders during 2022 electoral campaign .....	32
2.6.	<b>ENGAGEMENT METRICS AS INDICATORS OF POLITICAL VISIBILITY</b> ...	34
2.6.1.	Visibility of politicians on mass media (Amsalem et. Al, 2020).....	34
2.6.2.	Visibility of politicians on social media .....	35
2.7.	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE OVER VOTING BEHAVIOUR</b> .....	35
2.7.1	Direct and indirect effect of social media (Spierings et. Al, 2014) .....	36
2.7.2.	The concept of “correct voting” .....	36
2.7.3.	Influence of the structure and the content of social network over correct voting .....	37
2.8.	<b>ECHO CHAMBERS</b> .....	39
2.8.1.	The definition and creation of echo chambers (Cinelli et. Al, 2021) .....	39
2.8.2.	The functioning and operation of echo chambers (Cinelli et. Al, 2021).....	40
2.8.3.	Peer influence (Brugnoli et. Al, 2019).....	40
2.9.	CONCLUSION.....	41

<b>3. CASE STUDIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE, THE CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA SCANDAL AND THE USE OF TIKTOK BY ITALIAN POLITICIANS DURING 2022 ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN</b> .....	42
<b>3.1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	42
<b>3.1.1. Connection to previous chapters</b> .....	42
<b>3.2 THE CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA SCANDAL</b> .....	43
<b>3.2.1. myPersonality app</b> (Rehman, 2019).....	43
<b>3.2.2. The origins of Cambridge Analytica and the first works</b> .....	44
<b>3.2.3. Thisisyourdigitalife</b> (Rehman, 2019).....	45
<b>3.2.4. Personalized advertising to electors</b> (Rehman, 2019).....	45
<b>3.3. DATA HARVESTING MECHANISMS</b> (Henriksen, 2019) .....	46
<b>3.3.1. Data scraping</b> .....	46
<b>3.3.2. Microtargeting techniques</b> .....	46
<b>3.3.3. Algorithmic data analysis</b> .....	46
<b>3.3.4. Integration with broader systems</b> .....	47
<b>3.4. IMPACT ON VOTER BEHAVIOUR</b> .....	47
<b>3.5. PRIVACY CONCERNS AND LEGAL CONSEQUENCES</b> .....	49
<b>3.6. TIKTOK AND ITALIAN POLITICS IN 2022</b> .....	50
<b>3.6.1. Overview of the political use of TikTok</b> (Cervi et. Al, 2021).....	50
<b>3.6.2. Usage of TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign</b> .....	51
<b>3.6.3. Public reaction and effectiveness</b> .....	53
<b>3.7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CASE STUDIES</b> .....	53
<b>3.7.1. Similarity: use of social media with engagement purpose</b> .....	54
<b>3.7.2. Similarity: data driven strategy</b> .....	54
<b>3.7.3. Similarity: impact on voter behaviour as final purpose</b> .....	54
<b>3.7.4 Similarity: media resonance</b> .....	55
<b>3.7.5. Similarity: watershed moments</b> .....	56
<b>3.7.6. Difference: ethical and legal implications</b> .....	56
<b>3.7.7. Difference: targeted audience</b> .....	57
<b>3.7.8. Difference: transparency and content nature</b> .....	57
<b>3.8. CONCLUSION</b> .....	58
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	59

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays social media are becoming always more fundamental for everybody in everyday life. They help individuals to keep in touch with their families, their friends, but also, and especially, with the whole world. Furthermore, they can be used to share particularly funny moments through pictures, videos, and stories, to share thoughts through comments and posts which allow people to debate and share opinions also with total strangers. In general, social media platforms are highly interactive because they allow people to share, co-create, discuss, and modify contents.

Once social media came up, they immediately became popular especially among the young generation, but now things are changing and they are popular also among adults, who are often renamed as “boomers” by the the Gen Z: this nickname specifically refer to those people who were born between 1946 and 1960, i.e. during the baby boom which followed the second World War, but it is used by young people to generally indicate how adults often use social media in a “cringe” way, which means clumsy. Nowadays, both adults and young people use social media for everyday life information seeking (ELIS), which includes not only looking for information, but also asking questions and seeking advice (Sin, 2016). They are also used for getting real-time updates and news also by using trends and hashtags to keep informed about current events and topics of interest, and they can do so through microblogs such as Twitter.

Social media are very efficient in all the functions which have been just presented, but they also present a lot of challenges: the amount of information provided by social media may be so vast to be perceived as overwhelming by users which could find difficulties in processing it, managing it and filtering it to understand if it is useful or not.

Nowadays, one of the most challenging difficulties on social media is the particularly fast diffusion of fake news, which signed a turning point in the development of social media themselves. Indeed, the credibility of information is often questionable, and users need to verify the reliability of sources which is often not that simple. The problem of the spread of the fake news emerges in a lot of areas, in this thesis the problem of fake news will be analysed as far as the political field is concerned.

As far as the use of social media within the political landscape is concerned, they notably increase political engagement and can also influence party membership engagement by involving those who do not belong to any political party. One of the examples par

excellence of a party which decided to use social media to increase its own party membership was the Five Star Movement in Italy (Movimento 5 Stelle) and it managed to do so by allowing those who registered on the leader's blog to vote in primaries and international referenda (Vaccari et. Al, 2016).

The example of the use of social media by the Five Star Movement embodies the aim of this thesis, which is to understand and analyse what is the impact of the use of social media by politicians on citizens' behaviour and voting choice. To this purpose, two case studies have been selected, i.e. the Cambridge Analytica scandal which occurred in the United States of America during 2016 Presidential elections and exploded in 2018 and the use of TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign for the general elections of the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2022.

In the first chapter of this thesis, the focus will be put on the periodization of the use of mass media first and of social media after. This will also explain how the direct connection between political actors and citizens is becoming always more relevant and this will lead to the description of the development of the use of social media with political and electoral purposes in different countries of different parts of the world, i.e. United States of America, Israel, United Kingdom, Brazil, and Italy. It is appropriate to dedicate the first chapter to the more historical aspect of the purpose of this thesis to completely understand the different uses of social media through the course of the time and in the different parts of the globe.

The second chapter will deal with the theories and the most technical aspects of mass media first and social media after as tools of political communication, as tools which allow politicians to gain a lot of visibility and popularity and finally as a source of influence on the voting behaviour of citizens. This more analytical and technical study is fundamental to fully understand how and why social media have become fundamental in the political field.

Finally, the third chapter will deal with the analysis of the two selected case studies which both represent two examples par excellence of the use of social media with political and electoral purposes. This chapter will also include a comparative analysis which will show their similarities and differences: this study allows to understand why these two specific case studies have been chosen and also how the final purposes were similar if not the same, but the strategies were declined in very different ways.

# **1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PERIODIZATION OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the use of social media by politicians as tools of political communication and direct engagement with users to understand if and to what extent this has an impact on individuals' political opinions and voting choices.

This chapter will delve into a historical outline of the development of mass media<sup>1</sup> first and subsequently of social media, which are still going through six phases of development. Afterwards, an analysis will be developed on the periodization of the use of social media by politicians during electoral campaigns in some countries of different parts of the world.

## **1.1 PERIODIZATION OF THE USE OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

The periodization of social media must be included within a wider analysis, i.e. the development of mass media. Indeed, mass media have been going through four phases of development. In the first phase, mass media are focused mainly on communication as transmission; in the second phase, communication is seen as dialogue; the third phase of development is marked by the arrival of the Internet and of social media; finally, the fourth phase is characterized by the arrival of Web 3.0 together with issues such as fake news and disinformation (Sorice, 2020).

Web 1.0 started with the arrival of the Internet, and it consisted in a mere interconnection between computers. Subsequently, the passage from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 started at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the expression "Web 2.0" was used for the first time by O'Reilly in 2005 and he also described the main features of Web 2.0 which distinguish it: the initialization and emphasis of mechanisms of participation (and not only of contents publication) which allowed users to become active contributors and not mere participants, the enrichment of the so called "user experience" and a higher degree of autonomy for users (O' Reilly, 2005 as cited in Sorice, 2020). Web 2.0 brought more friendly platforms

---

<sup>1</sup> Mass media have chosen as the point of departure to fully understand when and how social media arrived.



which are much easier to be used and this led to an optimistic view towards the world of the Internet (Sorice, 2020).

The increase of participation and inclusion of users which has been mentioned in the previous paragraph will find its highest expression with social media. We can identify four distinctive features of social media (Van Dijck, 2013, as cited in Sorice, 2020):

- Technological feature: it represents the foundation of social media because technology permits their existence.
- Social feature: it includes all the possible uses (also the potential ones) that users can make of social media.
- Cultural feature: it allows social media to represent a space of aggregation and reunion for users.
- Economic feature: it is the organizational model of social media which makes them functional to the logic of the economic market.

It is also possible to identify four affordances of social media (boyd<sup>2</sup>, 2008; 2010; 2014, as cited in Sorice, 2020):

- Persistence: contents of social media continue to be available online.
- Disseminability: social media make the diffusion of contents and information easier.
- Visibility: thanks to their disseminability, social media give a lot of visibility to their contents.
- Searchability: social media allow to search for contents and information and to find them easily.

As far as the periodization of the use of social media is concerned, a reference can be made to the reconstruction realized by Vittadini in 2018. She identified 5 phases of development of social media: the first phase is called “auroral phase” (1997-2002) and during this phase the first social media are born, such as SixDegrees, MiGente and Live Journal: they allowed users to create their personal profile, find their friends and connect with them by sending messages. Their main features were network building, ethno-

---

<sup>2</sup> Lowercase letters have been used to mention the name of this scholar out of respect of her precise wish.

cultural ties, collaborative writing and collaborative blogs. They highlighted techno-cultural traits and were based on various ethnic groups.

Subsequently, there is the transitional phase (2002) with Friendster as social media which gave the possibility to create personal profiles, which represent the most evident element of specificity, and to have friendship, which allows to increase connection opportunities.

Then there is the third phase which corresponds with the first wave of expansion (2003-2005) characterized by the implementation of the already-existing platforms and by the arrival of new social media such as Delicious, LinkedIn, MySpace, Digg, Flickr, Reddit and also Facebook, even if its use in this period was still limited among Harvard students. These platforms were all destined to specific and professional use where image was used as an object of exchange: they allowed social bookmarking, profiles' personalization and audience's personalisation.

Afterwards, there is the fourth phase of development which corresponds to the second wave of expansion (2006-2010) with the use of Twitter, Facebook (which started to be used by a larger public), Friendfeed, Foursquare and Whatsapp: they are characterized by localised diffusion, contents flow, microblogging, geolocation and messaging for mobile systems. During this phase, social media became always more important also from an economic point of view.

Consequently, we have the fifth phase which is a consolidation and co-evolution phase (2010-2017), and it is characterized by the use of Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, Google+ and TikTok: they are characterized by the concentrations of operators, news feed, centrality of images, interoperability and the explosion of teen target. This phase assisted to the consolidation of the already existing models, but also to a diversification of strategies together with a dangerous industrial concentration.

Finally, a sixth phase of development can be added: this started with the Cambridge Analytica Scandal which damaged Facebook and its credibility. This phase is characterized by disinformation, fake news, hate speech and emergence of the bots. Social media start to be considered as forms of manipulation to influence political opinions with information disorder (constituted by disinformation, misinformation and malinformation) and the spread of fake news which have always existed, but now their spread is particularly fast (Vittadini, 2018, as cited in Sorice, 2020).

Nowadays the sixth phase is still going on: social media are going through a transformation, and this emerges from several cautions which are being adopted regarding data privacy, hate speech and information disorder (Sorice, 2020).

It is possible to involve politics and political communication within the development of social media and Web 2.0, within which several forms of online participation and cyber-activism were born, such as populism, trolling and ideologies. The new tools which are provided by Web 2.0 to political communication are crucial, because they guarantee a more direct (and sometimes conflictual) relationship between political actors and citizens (Sorice, 2020).

The increase of direct connection and relationship between political actors and citizens is becoming always more evident, especially in political strategies that candidates adopt during electoral campaigns: indeed, social media are now one of the main instruments of politicians and political parties' electoral campaigns and strategies. This furtherly emerges by analysing some of the countries and their periodization of the use of social media within electoral campaigns. We will consider the United States of America, Israel, United Kingdom, Brazil, and Italy: the choice to describe the periodization of the use of social media with electoral purposes in these specific countries aims to provide a balanced mix across different continents and political systems.

### **1.3. THE U.S. CASE: 2004-2020**

#### **1.3.1. The 2004 democratic primaries**

As far as United States of America are concerned, the Internet entered the voting scene with Facebook in 2004. Within this context, the figure of Howard Dean emerged: he was a democratic candidate for the 2004 Presidential elections, he became very popular and he still is remembered nowadays for being the first politician to use technological strategies in order to become more popular and to gain more visibility, to the point that he is often referred to as "internet-made candidate" (Ramirez, 2021) who managed to revolutionize the use of social media: indeed, both the Internet and social media became inseparable from the political scenario. Dean had a lot of faith on the Internet, he thought that it would have improved human nature and in this he was suggested by the younger membership of the staff of his campaign.

Furthermore, Dean's speech of the conclusion of the electoral campaign became viral because he started to scream and for this reason Dean is also considered the first viral political meme. There are even some people who associate his defeat (he was not presented as the democratic candidate of 2004 US Presidential elections because he achieved the third place) to this event, but Dean has never agreed with this point of view, because he says that events like this do not damage officials because of public understanding of social media.

Dean laid the foundation for social media to develop into a widespread phenomenon in the political arena and they revealed themselves to be innovative in the use of the Internet. Indeed, following his political campaign, a digital strategy was developed, the Blue State Digital and this firm helped Barack Obama to secure his democratic nomination as President of United States of America both in 2008 and 2012. For this reason, Dean can be defined a sort of "Obama ante-litteram" (Costa, 2010).

### **1.3.2. The 2006 midterm elections**

These elections were particularly relevant because most of the candidates had their own campaign website, which represented their main tool for communication and fundraising. Furthermore, political candidates continued to look for other online tools and they found Facebook, which was the most used social media in these years. Facebook provided with standard template for candidate profiles which then had to be personalized through passwords distributed by the national committees of the parties. These profiles allowed candidates to spread contents, information and to engage directly with voters. In that moment still few people used Facebook: democrats and well-financed candidates who were running for competitive races were more likely to adopt Facebook as a campaigning tool, while college-educated and young people were more likely to use Facebook not only for entertainment purposes, but also to get information, especially because they started to find it attractive also as a platform for voter outreach.

Eventually, it emerged that only 16% of party candidates had personalized their profiles and that the most enthusiasm was found among Democratic candidates: this low percentage showed that there still was an initial hesitance in using Facebook and directly engaging with this platform. Despite this, a growing importance of the use of social media within electoral campaign in the US was already recognised, especially because they were

evidently changing both the conduct of campaigns and the relationship between candidates and voters. The use of social media during 2006 Presidential campaigns was cautious, but also a notable beginning of the integration of social media in campaigning strategies (Williams, 2012).

### **1.3.3. The 2008 presidential elections**

As far as 2008 US Presidential elections are concerned, within this context Obama's Internet campaign changed politics: some journalists associated the use of the Internet by Obama to the use of television by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, because they both used an innovative tool with political purposes and these tools eventually changed politics forever (Miller, 2008).

Barack Obama's campaign consisted in the use of Web 2.0 tools which allowed him to mobilize thousands of people. Furthermore, he decided to use YouTube for free advertising rather than television ads and this eventually revealed to be much more efficient, because viewers chose to watch them or received them from a friend instead of having their television shows interrupted. This video used for advertising had been watched for 14.5 million hours and this not only had a very positive impact on voters, but was also cost-efficient, since buying 14.5 million hours on Television would have had a cost of 47 million dollars (Miller, 2008).

### **1.3.4. The 2010 midterm elections**

The use of the Internet and of social media furtherly increased during the political campaign of 2010 midterm elections: they started to be used also by the older part of the population to get and share info, to engage in a campaign-related activity like watching a political video, to fact check a political claim or to share and discuss information.

On the other hand, the problem of fake news emerged: 61% of adults in America agreed on the fact that the Internet exposed to a very wide range of political views, but at the same time they were concerned about the quality and value of the information; furthermore, 56% of Internet users believed that it was usually difficult to differentiate information they found on the Internet that was true from information that was not true. Therefore, many adults in the United States lacked trust towards information that they found on the Internet, but at the same time this lack of trust furtherly encouraged them to

use social media, because that is where they also found information and recommendations provided by their trusted friends (Preston, 2011).

### **1.3.5. The 2012 presidential elections**

During 2012 electoral campaigns, social media were used especially to humanize candidates by showing their personal lives and relatable moments to connect and engage directly with voters. With an analysis of the volume of posts, the variety of content and of engagement strategies, it emerged that Barack Obama was much more efficient in doing this rather than his opponent, Mitt Romney: Obama's campaign was more able to draw followers, likes and engagement over several platforms. This will lead to a relevant increase in the use of social media by electors who can express their support, share campaign content, and even influence undecided voters through online activity.

Furthermore, in 2012 the targeted advertising started to be used to personalize the campaign experience for each single individual and to make sure that effective and useful messages were sent to potential voters. The use of targeted advertising was what furtherly changed the political landscape and strategies adopted in political campaigns. This regarded especially Barack Obama's campaign, which was able to mark a significant evolution in campaigning strategies. The targeted advertising was based on data tracking: this was realized through campaign websites and consisted in sifting users' previous internet research, site visits and online activities to collect information about users' behaviour, interests, and activities and to realize advertisements and content which could match their profiles, interests, concerns and beliefs, so that the likelihood of engagement could increase. An example of targeted advertising may be represented by a user searching on the Internet for specific content regarding a candidate: subsequently, he or she might later see a tailored advertising urging to donate or vote. As previously said, Barack Obama's campaign particularly succeeded in the adoption of targeted advertising strategy especially because of the low cost-per-click, which indicated a relevant success in engaging users in this way (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).

### **1.3.6. The 2014 midterm elections**

During 2014 midterm electoral campaigns, social media were still limited to being used as broadcasting and advertising tools, the level of engagement and communication with voters was very low. The content shared by parties included promotional material for their

candidates, critiques towards competitor parties and discussions on electoral issues and events.

Furthermore, the integration of social media within campaigning strategies lead to the professionalization of campaigns, since there was the need for new professional figures, such as political communication strategists, which were skilled in digital systems.

Finally, the environment of social media was very polarized because liberals and conservatives preferred different sources and occupied very different spheres (Kiyohara, 2016).

### **1.3.7. The 2016 presidential elections**

As far as 2016 presidential elections are concerned, a transformation occurred in the role of social media within political communication, since they started to be used to interact directly with the electorate for the first time. Traditional media were overcome by social media as the primary information channel for both parties.

A reference could be made to the use of Twitter by Trump which was quite unconventional because his tweets were very direct and unfiltered: since this *modus operandi* was totally in contrast with the more controlled and professional tone typical of political campaigns, Trump was positioned as an “authentic outsider”. Furthermore, Trump often retweeted content directly from users so that not only could he engage directly with them, but also have the strategies of communication under control. The amateurism of Trump’s campaign, mainly characterized by personal involvement and spontaneity, was completely in contrast with Clinton’s campaign, which continued the trend of professionalization of digital campaigning (Enli, 2017).

Within the context of 2016 Presidential elections in the U.S., it is appropriate and relevant for the purpose of this thesis to refer to the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Trump employed Cambridge Analytica, a firm of political consultancy, for his electoral campaign. The main tools that Cambridge Analytica adopted for Trump’s campaign was the Facebook app called “thisisyourdigitalife” which had been previously created and developed by Aleksander Kogan: this app managed to gather the data of 87 million of users which were eventually all sold to Trump’s campaign and used to build psychological profiles that could foster and influence voters’ behaviours and choices. A scandal inevitably emerged, especially because it raised several concerns regarding users’ data

privacy, consent, and the manipulation of the democratic process. Nonetheless, these activities inevitably influenced electoral campaign and its strategies, especially because they allowed for extreme precision in tailoring personal messages (Rehman, 2019).

### **1.3.8. The 2018 midterm elections**

As far as 2018 midterm elections are concerned, they were characterized as well by the pivotal role which had been played by social media and especially by Twitter, which has always been and still is the most popular social media in the U.S. A lot of tweets related to the election with the hashtag #Ivoted started to spread, and it emerged that the number of these tweets is strongly correlated with the actual number of votes, suggesting that social media can reflect real-world behaviours. On the other hand, social media presented several limitations, such as the number of bots which managed to amplify disinformation, to spread of fake news, and to manipulate people's behaviours and decisions (Deb et. Al, 2019).

### **1.3.9. The 2020 presidential elections**

During 2020 electoral campaigns, social media, especially Twitter again, proved to be able to reflect real-world users' behaviours and preferences: indeed, through a real-time data analysis, it was already possible to foster the advantage of Joe Biden over his competitor Donald Trump. Furthermore, another strong correlation emerged between real-world events and online discussions and debates since the former influenced social media discussions. This confirmed the pivotal role which was played by social media in shaping public opinion (Belcastro et. Al, 2022).

## **1.4. ISRAEL CASE: 1996-2013**

### **1.4.1. The first phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (1996-2009)**

It is possible to identify three phases of the evolution of the use of social media during electoral campaigns in Israel. The first phase was of early adoption and evolution, and it went from 1996 to 2009. Indeed, the first use of an online medium can be traced back to



1996, when Dayan, member of the Knesset, i.e. the Israeli Parliament, created an information website during his electoral campaign for the primary elections. Subsequently, always more candidates started to create websites providing biographical notes and information about their political views during 1999 electoral campaign.

By 2003, most of political parties had their own information website, but they were still very static and provided a one-way communication. An important turning point was represented by 2006 elections, during which the Internet was used for the first time as the main tool for propaganda, organization and political communication, even if the features and abilities were still very limited (Haleva-Amir et. Al, 2015).

#### **1.4.2. The second phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (2009-2013)**

The second phase presents 2009 as its turning point because the intensification of trends which occurred during this phase were subsequent to Barack Obama's successful electoral campaign in the U.S. in 2008: websites were gradually abandoned and electoral campaigns became always more personalized and individual-centred and not party-centred anymore, meaning that individual candidates generated content independently from their party and dynamic of the campaign; furthermore, new patterns started to emerge, such as memes and smartphone campaigns (Haleva-Amir et. Al, 2015).

#### **1.4.3. The third phase of the evolution of the use of social media within electoral campaigns (2013 elections)**

The third phase was signed by the 2013 elections during which the trends of 2009 had been furtherly intensified. These elections were won by the right, whose politicians exhibited higher levels of activity on social media in terms of number of posts, likes and shares; on the other hand, centre-left wing supporters would have complained that they were sure of a centre-left victory because this was shown by their Facebook feeds: the truth is, indeed, that algorithms created a quite large gap between electoral expectations of citizens and the reality and this could be considered as a distinguished product of social media politics. Politics of social media was told to may be able to affect behaviours, preferences and value systems of individuals and social groups operating on social media platforms (Haleva-Amir et. Al, 2015).

Nowadays, this third phase of evolution is still going on: social media platforms are used by politicians and candidates for several reasons: firstly, social media allow them to interact directly with citizens and voters; secondly, they give the possibility to personalize their messages and send them specifically to their own audience; finally, social media allow candidates to advertise without paying. However, the main aim behind the use of social media by political actors in Israel is to reach especially the younger generation and to make it more engaged with politics and elections (Maslow, 2019).

## **1.5. THE UNITED KINGDOM CASE: 2010-2019**

### **1.5.1. The 2010 general elections**

The first case study which should be considered when talking about the development of the use of social media within electoral campaigns in UK would be the 2010 elections<sup>3</sup>: they are particularly relevant because of the high use of Twitter by major political parties and by their leaders as well. However, the use of social media in the case of UK 2010 elections aimed only to provide unidirectional information in order to create a more controlled and structured approach to communication, so that it could be easier to control the flow of information towards electors: we see no direct engagement or any kind of interaction or dialogues with electors themselves. The adoption of social media as an instrument to manage information aimed to maximize visibility across the electorate. Social media already had a great potential for the realization of more interactive forms of campaign, but this was not used at all during 2010 electoral campaigns in UK: their use remained mainly limited to the traditional political communication, serving as a tool which provided with information (Jensen et. Al, 2014).

### **1.5.2. The 2015 general elections**

During 2015 political campaigns, the social media which was used the most was Twitter. However, the development of the use of social media in 2015 compared to 2010 is still very limited: an improvement occurred in the creation of a more direct and reciprocal communication between campaigns and the public, but the involvement of ordinary citizens was still restricted and mainly concentrated within smaller parties, while larger

---

<sup>3</sup> The periodization of the use of social media within electoral campaigns in the UK started with 2010 general elections, during which Twitter started to be used as one of the tools of campaign strategies for the first time.

parties, such as Labour and Conservative parties, still used social media as an instrument to shape their own identities and not to engage in a direct dialogue with citizens (Jensen, 2017).

However, some studies demonstrated that the use of Twitter as a broadcasting tool is more helpful in gaining votes rather than interactive communication: indeed, using this social media as a tool to spread campaign messages corresponds to an increase in vote; despite this, the increase in vote is still very slight, meaning that the impact of Twitter in this sense is still very narrow (Bright et. Al, 2020). Nevertheless, even though still limited, this impact remains relevant.

### **1.5.3 The 2017 general elections**

As far as 2017 elections are concerned, they confirmed the trend which emerged during 2015 elections, meaning that Twitter had an impact on the electoral result, but it still was quite limited and continued to be used as a broadcasting tool and not as an instrument to directly interact with citizens because it turned out to be more efficient this way. Furthermore, an increase in the use of Twitter by candidates from 2015 to 2017 has been recorded (Bright et. Al, 2020).

### **1.5.4. The 2019 general elections**

During UK 2019 political elections, an important change occurred: communities started to coordinate on Twitter and this coordination of behaviours turned out to play a very important role in amplifying political messages, narratives and in influencing the perceptions and discussions of the broader public: indeed, it emerged that the Conservative Party, which managed to display a higher level of coordinated strategies, achieved also a broader reach and was the most voted party. Furthermore, 2019 elections were signed by the advancement of new digital strategies (e.g. bots), which also represented a higher sophistication in the use of Twitter (Nizzoli et. Al, 2021).

## **1.6. BRAZIL CASE: 2010-2022**

### **1.6.1. The 2010 presidential elections**

An important and crucial point of departure for the development of social media in Brazil was represented by the privatization of most of the telecommunication industry which occurred in 1998: this caused the shift of political communication towards digital technologies and subsequently towards social media, to the point that they became arenas for political debate and dissemination of information, altering the role of traditional media's role in politics (Gilmore et. Al, 2014).

At this point it would be appropriate to analyse the use of social media during the 2010 Presidential elections in Brazil<sup>4</sup>. The background of these elections was constituted by a very high presence of digital media within Brazil political culture: digital platforms had become the main arenas for political debate and dissemination of information. During the elections, it emerged that social media provided both minor parties and newcomers with electoral advantages which allowed them to level the political landscape which was dominated by large and established parties. Furthermore, social media totally changed the nature of political elections by providing instruments for direct engagement with and for voters and the democratization of the electoral process which became accessible for more candidates (Gilmore et. Al, 2014).

### **1.6.2. The 2014 presidential elections**

As far as 2014 presidential elections in Brazil are concerned, they were very important because of the emergence of tools of computational propaganda, i.e. bot networks, fake news and algorithmic manipulation. The main purpose of this propaganda was to send messages against the elected government and in favour of the opposition, in order to shape public opinion and behaviour. Eventually, these online strategies proved to be successful for their aim because the president of the elected government Dilma Rousseff was impeached (Arnaudo, 2017).

### **1.6.3. The 2018 presidential elections**

As far as the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil are concerned, they were particularly important because they represented the first instance of the use of a new social media, i.e. Instagram, which played a significant role in political campaigns, especially in voter engagement and participation: indeed, an increase in the engagement of voters with

---

<sup>4</sup> The periodization of the use of social media within Brazil political elections started in 2010 presidential elections, during which social media started to play a pivotal role for the first time.

political content was noticed on this platform. Moreover, a strong correlation emerged between the number of followers on Instagram and the number of votes of each candidate, while no strong correlation was found between the number of posts on Instagram and the number of votes. This suggests that the impact of social media over political campaign had changed since 2010, with Instagram becoming always more influential in political contexts because it provided with more visual and direct engagement platforms, and this reflected a relevant change in social media's role in political communication (Brito et. Al, 2019).

#### **1.6.4. The 2022 presidential elections**

During the last Brazilian elections, which took place in 2022, the arrival of another innovative social media occurred: TikTok. It arrived in 2016 and immediately became one of the most used and influential social media platforms: this is the reason TikTok has been used as an electoral tool within this circumstance. Indeed, the main candidates created their own personal profiles during the electoral campaign, and this inevitably had an impact both on the electoral outcome and on modern political processes in general. By an analysis of the data collection process regarding the tracking of posts and the interactions on official candidates' profiles, the results showed first of all that the elected candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, showed a very strong public connection, despite his lower number of followers. Furthermore, a correlation clearly emerged between the use of TikTok and the electoral outcome, especially as far as the first round was concerned. This is the final proof which demonstrates how social media play a pivotal role on election dynamics (Lima et. Al, 2023).

### **1.7. ITALY CASE: 2008-2022**

#### **1.7.1. The 2008 general elections**

Social media entered the Italian context of elections and electoral campaigns for the first time in 2008; however, the political situation, alignments and sentiments were quite stable, so their influence was not that pronounced. Furthermore, political candidates were just starting to understand the function of social media, and for this reason in 2008 these platforms merely strengthened the already existing and traditional communication without creating new channels yet: in particular, their use was experimental and limited to basic tasks, i.e. spreading information and posting updates. Traditional strategies were

still dominant, while technological and social media tools were going through developmental stages (Campus et. Al, 2015).

### **1.7.2. The 2013 general elections**

Contrarily to 2008 elections, when the role of social media was still emergent, during 2013 political campaign and elections they became pivotal: this shifted the focus from traditional to a more technologically centred campaign strategy and for this reason 2013 general elections can be considered as a significant historical moment in this sense. The introduction of social media in electoral strategies and political campaigns provided a direct channel of communication between candidates and electors, who could interact quickly: these factors all had a positive impact on voter engagement and participation which started to increase homogenously, meaning that people sharing similar political views all discussed within the same networks.

This rise was linked to the growing disenchantment, the mistrust towards traditional political movements and the emergence of new political actors: the example par excellence is the Five Star Movement with his leader, Beppe Grillo, who managed to combine the use of social media with public rallies. This was a hybrid strategy, because it was composed of both traditional and innovative and technological tools and it involved a very large portion of Italian electorate, especially young voters who were particularly active online (Rossi et. Al, 2013).

The success of the Five Star Movement proved how social media managed to create and shape new political dynamics, since it gave the possibility to new and less established political parties, such as the Five Star Movement itself, to compete against bigger and well-established political parties. This demonstrates how the use of social media as electoral tools in Italy changed not only political communication, but also public participation and shaped political dynamics.

Eventually, it emerged that social media use during 2013 elections helped candidates in gaining more visibility, which did not always translate in a higher electoral turnout. Indeed, there were also some cases in which parties gained popularity which was driven by negative publicity, and this regarded especially the *Partito Democratico* (PD): this proves that social media have a dual-edge nature, meaning that they offer an environment where not only support, but also criticism and political disaffection spread easily and quickly and this is exactly what happened in 2013 (Rossi et. Al, 2013).

The use of social media during 2013 elections proved to be very useful because it helped candidates in mobilizing and directly engaging with a lot of supporters: this allowed parties and candidates to gain popularity, but this popularity does not always translate into electoral success, because it can also correspond to negative popularity.

### **1.7.3. The 2018 general elections**

With 2018 political campaigns, traditional media were completely bypassed by candidates who started to use almost exclusively social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, as their channel of communication with citizens. Indeed, social media guarantee a direct interaction with electors, and this represents a favourable factor for the diffusion of populist messages dealing especially with topics such as immigration: they gained a lot of success because they gathered the highest number of likes and shares and were the most effective in mobilizing support. The parties who adopted populism on social media the most were M5S and Lega: they achieved the highest level of popularity and support on social media which in this case also translated in electoral success, since they also gained the highest number of votes (Radicioni et. Al, 2021). Furthermore, in 2018 social media, especially Twitter, strengthened what had already started in 2013, when a homogenous growth in political and public participation was recorded, to the point that “echo chambers” were created, meaning that users engaged almost exclusively with contents and people aligned with their political views and this intensified the already existing political division (Bobba et. Al, 2018). In 2018, social media shifted from a vertical communication to a horizontal structure, where users directly interact with each other and can debate and express opinions.

### **1.7.4. The 2022 general elections**

In 2022 elections, populist strategies continued to be always more adopted within social media, to the point that it is possible to make a distinction between intrinsic populism and populist communication style, where the former makes reference to populist content, such as anti-elitism, while the latter refers to the way through which the message is delivered, including emotional appealing and direct language. In particular, it emerged that at least 31% of the posts contained at least a populist element, respectively 15% of intrinsic populism and 16% of populist communication. Facebook continued to be one of the main tools for digital campaign during 2022 to reach voters and engage with them directly. Contrarily to what had happened during the 2018 electoral campaign, in 2022 populist

contents did not gain a higher level of engagement, which means that populist content might lead to a higher degree of attention, but not necessarily to higher engagement. Nonetheless, populist parties obtained more engagement than the other parties because of their identity and their broader appeal (Coloricchio, 2022).

However, the most innovative aspect of 2022 Italian political campaign and elections was the use of a social media which had never been used by most politicians as a tool of political communication: TikTok. The use of this new platform represented a definitive shift in political campaign strategies and also from the democracy of parties to the democracy of public, based on a direct communication and bond between leadership and citizens. Furthermore, on TikTok politicians managed to follow the trend of the platform by integrating both traditional political communication and pop culture elements and by adopting a more visually engaging and direct messaging: Italian politicians started to give visibility to their private life on TikTok, being aware of the fact that the public they were interacting with was more interested in their personal qualities rather than administrative qualities (Battista, 2023). The main purpose was to involve younger citizens as much as possible: this was fundamental because a very high level of abstentionism had been fostered, especially among under-30 voters. At the end of the day, this new platform turned out to be very powerful, but on the other hand it also presents a great potential for misinformation and for this reason it needs careful management and attention. Furthermore, even if the main purpose of the use of TikTok was to avoid the very high level of abstentionism which had been fostered especially among young citizens, they did not manage to do so: indeed, 2022 elections registered the lowest percentage of electoral turnout, i.e. 63,9% (Conflavoro, 2022), which also represents one of the lowest percentage compared with those of other European countries (CISE, 2022).

## **1.8. CONCLUSION**

From the analysis of the development of social media through history and in different parts of the globe it emerges the great potential of social media as tools of political communication and of direct interaction between political actors and citizens.

In the following chapter, we will delve into the theoretical approaches and the technical aspects of social media to fully understand their great potential for political purposes.



## **2. THE THEORETICAL AND TECHNICAL DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND VOTER INFLUENCE**

### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

After the historical-journalistic description of the periodization of the use of social media with political purposes through the course of the time and in different countries all over the world, it is now possible to focus on the most scientific and technical aspects of social media by delving into the general literature regarding the influence of media on politics first and then specifically of social media.

### **2.2. MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS**

The relationship which exists between mass media and politics presents some complex dynamics which can be analysed, especially to understand how the former influences the latter. It can be outlined by adopting three different theoretical approaches (Street, 2005).

- **Pluralism:** it emphasizes how media provide voters with the knowledge they need to make informed choices and to enable debate. Media bring diverse points of view and information regarding candidates, policies, and political events and this allows voters to hear from multiple perspectives. On the other hand, media can also influence the importance given to specific topics: this is known as the agenda-setting effect which will be furtherly explained later. Moreover, pluralists state that media enhance political participation because they motivate citizens to vote and to engage in civic activities.
- **Constructivism:** it considers media able to construct political reality and to shape both public opinion and the political agenda. Media manage to represent politics in a way that can significantly impact on voters' behaviours, choices, perceptions, and it can even overshadow political reality. Furthermore, constructivism emphasizes the framing aspect of media, meaning that the frame of a message leads to different emotional and cognitive responses by voters. Finally, the ability of media to shape political reality may lead voters to see it through a lens provided

by media themselves and this leads to a manipulation of information first and of electoral outcome after.

- **Structuralism:** it refers to socio-economic structures which outline the influence of media over electoral behaviour. Media's power is seen within the context of capitalism and state policies which can shape public opinion through the dissemination of controlled information. A reference can be made to media ownership which can shape agendas and eventually influence electoral behaviour. The example par excellence is represented by Mediaset, which was owned by Silvio Berlusconi, the former political leader of Forza Italia, an Italian centre-right wing political party. Indeed, Berlusconi's Mediaset empire was and still is influential in Italy since it controls publishing companies, three national TV stations, national and local newspapers, which means that Berlusconi controlled most of the Italian media system and public discourse (Rossi et. Al, 2021).

These three theoretical approaches show the dual-edged nature of media which provide with information and play a pivotal role in setting agendas and influencing voter behaviour: this demonstrates how political entities and media shape each other, leading to a symbiotic relationship.

### **2.3. THEORIES OF MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE OVER POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR**

After describing the main theories dealing with the relationship between politics and mass media, it is appropriate to describe the theories which explain specifically how mass media influence political behaviour.

#### **2.3.1. Agenda setting effect theory**

The first analysis of the agenda setting effect was realized in 1972, when McComb and Shaw conducted a study on the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill (USA): this research consisted in a comparison between the contents presented by the media and the contents which were considered important by a selected public of one hundred electors; eventually, it emerged that as a consequence of the actions of television, newspapers and other means of information, people tended to consider or neglect those contents and topics which were either considered relevant or neglected by mass media (Shaw, 1979).

The agenda setting effect can be divided into two phases.

- Themmatization: it consists in choosing the amount of importance to be given to a specific issue with strong social and collective impact. It can also happen that media choose to give relevance to news which are not that significant, or even create new ones: in the latter case, the reality provided by media is different from the reality.
- Hierarchization: once the most relevant topics and contents are selected by media, they are ordered from the most to the least important.

Furthermore, it is possible to recognize two theories of the agenda setting effect (Tedeschi, 2010).

- Strong theory of agenda setting: it establishes that media are able to act directly over collective behaviours and perceptions. Newspapers tend to have a strong agenda setting effect because they can properly elaborate contents.
- Weak theory of agenda setting: it establishes that people can integrate the media's agenda with their own and subjective agenda. The television tends to have a weak agenda setting effect because it is more focused on the emotive emphasis of contents.

The strength or weakness of the agenda setting effect depends on the themes which are covered: a strong agenda setting effect is determined by themes which are not known very well by people.

### **2.3.2. Framing theory (Scheufele, 1999)**

Framing can be defined as the way mass media present information, which inevitably influences the way people perceive and interpretate it. This theory establishes that it is possible to shape the perceptions that people have of a specific topic by highlighting specific aspects of it while neglecting others.

For clarity, it is important to make some distinctions. The first distinction is the one between audience frames and media frames: the former refers to the interpretations and structures which people use to process and understand messages sent by media; the latter refers to the angles and perspectives which are adopted by journalists to construct news content. Furthermore, framing research can refer either to independent variables or to dependent variables: the former are represented by those shaping factors which influence people's perceptions; the latter are represented by the outcomes influenced by external factors, i.e. societal norms or political context.

As far as the framing process is concerned, this can be divided into four steps.

- **Frame building:** it consists in understanding how news contents are constructed, in order to understand if they are influenced by journalists' ideologies, professional norms or organizational pressures.
- **Frame setting:** it consists in considering how media frames prioritize certain aspects of an information rather than others to make them more impactful for the audience.
- **Individual-level processes of framing:** the purpose of this step is to analyse how individual cognitive systems and pre-existing knowledge interact with media frames, so that it is possible to produce specific reactions.
- **Feedback loop:** it consists in an interaction between audience reactions and media reporting takes place and at this point the former furtherly influences the latter.

These features and this specific process allows framing to influence political and voter behaviour, together with policy discussions and legislative actions, by shaping the public discourse around them.

### **2.3.3. Spiral of silence theory**

The first scholar who referred to this theory was Noelle-Neumann in 1947, which means that this is the oldest theory of the study of mass media influence over political behaviour. Noelle-Neumann established that an individual's willingness to express his or her opinion is a function of how he or she perceives public opinion.

Before describing this theory, it is appropriate to refer to a distinction of the concept of public opinion in two concepts (Noelle-Neumann, 1995, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000).

- **Public opinion as rationality:** in this case public opinion represents a tool for the process of opinion and decision-making within democracy. This is achieved once most of the members of the citizenry agree on a decision taken by an individual after a reflection on an issue (Palmer, 1936, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000). In this case there is a rational public which wants and can participate in a political process (Childs, 1965, Wilson, 1933, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000).
- **Public opinion as social control:** in this case public opinion has the role to promote social integration and to make sure that there is a sufficient level of

consensus, which represents the basis on which decisions are made. This concept, which represents the basis of the spiral of silence theory, consists in a system which threatens individuals with social isolation to get their consensus in order to be successful (Noelle-Neumann, 1995, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000). To be more precise, it consists in opinions that can be expressed without risking social isolation or as opinions that must be expressed to avoid social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1983, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000).

After describing the two concepts of public opinion, it is now possible to describe the spiral of silence theory, which establishes that individuals constantly scan their environment to be always informed on the distribution of opinions on a specific issue and to subsequently align to these opinions.

When outlining the spiral of silence theory, Noelle-Neumann referred to five assumptions under the form of hypotheses (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000).

- Threat of isolation: society threatens with social isolation those who violate the consensus in order to create collective cohesion which needs a specific level of agreement on values and goals.
- Fear of isolation: this has an impact on individuals' willingness to speak out and it is the main factor which determines conformity.
- Quasi-statistical sense: this is a direct consequence of the fear of isolation and it consists in individuals scanning their environment to check the distribution of opinions.
- Willingness to speak out and tendency to remain silent: individuals express their opinion when they perceive it to be socially acceptable, otherwise they tend to remain in cautious silent.
- Spiral of silence: the interactions of all these hypotheses lead to the spiral of silence, a process in which the tendency of the one to speak up and of the other one to remain silent increasingly establishes the opinion of the former as the prevailing one (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, as cited in Scheufele et. Al, 2000).
- Role of media: this further factor needs to be added because the processes of the spiral of silence acquire sense only if media take a position in the conflict.

## **2.4. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR**

It was fundamental to use mass media once again as the point of departure to analyse the theories which explain their influence on political behaviour, especially because these same theories can be applied to social media as well for the same purpose. In the following description of these theories applied to social media, it emerges how their potential is fully exploited and improved, because the effects of these theories are more dynamic and complete.

### **2.4.1. Agenda setting theory applied to social media (Guo, 2012)**

As far as the agenda setting effect theory is concerned, this can be furtherly enhanced if applied on social media, because the context of social media spreads information and the dynamic nature of content news can create complex networks of information that improve the agenda setting in multifaceted ways. Furthermore, traditional media's agenda and public's agenda interact in real time within social media: this interaction is more dynamic than in traditional media because users can directly influence the agenda by both creating and consuming content and therefore covering an active role.

The analysis of social media is fundamental for the purpose of the agenda setting effect because they provide with deeper insights into how certain issues or topics become important in the public discourse. Moreover, when the network analysis is applied to understand the agenda setting effect in social media, significant relationships between the perceptions of the public and the attributes provided by social media emerge.

### **2.4.2. Framing theory applied to social media**

As far as the framing theory is concerned, this has an effect also when applied to social media: indeed, differently framed messages sent by social media have different impacts on political engagement and behaviour users.

In this sense, it is appropriate to refer to this study (Özdemir, 2016) which analysed messages sent on Twitter, how they were framed (if positively or negatively or if they had symbolic language or not), and how they influenced users' response in terms of agreement, comprehension, persuasion, confidence, and willingness to share messages. In particular, messages sent by politicians could be framed with positive or negative toning and with the use of symbolic or neutral language, while users' engagement was

measured through their interaction, i.e. the number of likes, comments and shares, whose role of indicators of engagement metrics will be further analysed later.

This study found out that negative and symbolically negative messages tended to have stronger influence in persuading users compared to positive messages: this means that within the context of social media, which is constantly full of a wide variety of contents, users are more attracted by negative messages rather than positive messages.

This specific analysis of the impact on political behaviour showed also that framing process and effect can also influence electoral outcomes, because what becomes viral may gain a disproportionate amount of attention. Finally, it emerged that the use and application of the framing process is fundamental for political strategists because it allows them to involve different demographic segments of social media.

#### **2.4.3. Spiral of silence theory applied to social media**

As far as the spiral of silence theory is concerned, its application to social media is relevant because users can interact with real-time feedback on opinions, and this allows them to scan their environment and socially accepted opinions; however, public opinion formation follows more complex and less predictable dynamic in social media environments due to the rapid dissemination of information.

Furthermore, a study developed in 2019 (Sohn, 2019) demonstrated that the spiral of silence and silencing effects within social media emerge more at a local scale rather than at a global scale, where the whole community engages in self-censorship. At the same time, the spiral of silence can occur also at a global level only if there is homogeneity in public opinion and media representation.

### **2.5. ENGAGEMENT METRICS AS INDICATORS OF POLITICAL SUPPORT**

After having analysed the most theoretical aspects of the use of social media with political purpose, it is now possible to delve into the most technical aspects and elements of social media which provide them with such a great potential to influence political behaviour.

The first technical element which must be taken into account is represented by the engagement metrics (i.e. likes, shares, comments, etc.). They are considered as indicators

of political support in several studies which deal with social media use and how it influences political participation itself.

However, some recent analyses showed that engagement metrics of social media measure political participation and attention of users towards political topics rather than political support. The following paragraphs deal with two studies focused on Twitter and Facebook engagement metrics and they prove that it is not reliable to use engagement metrics as measures of political support.

### **2.5.1. Analysis of Twitter engagement metrics**

The study which was conducted on Twitter (Jungher et. Al, 2017) demonstrated that engagement metrics are not reliable in predicting electoral outcomes and that they are more suitable to indicate public attention towards politics rather than political support. This analysis realized a comparison between Twitter metrics and the electoral outcomes and opinion polls: it emerged a very strong engagement with the political content of Twitter, but it did not translate into political support. Indeed, a high engagement on social media towards political content can also be negative, as an expression of dissent, or it can also be simple curiosity rather than endorsement. However, knowing which political contents, issues or candidates manage to gain a specific amount of public attention at a given time can be fundamental for political campaign strategies.

### **2.5.2. Analysis of Facebook engagement metrics**

The study which was conducted on Facebook (Ferrucci et. Al, 2020) combined Facebook traced data with survey data in order to see if there is a correlation between them: once again, it emerged that engagement metrics on posts which present political contents do not indicate political support, they more accurately indicate levels of engagement and interest which do not necessarily translate into political support. This distinction is crucial for political campaign strategies which must take these metrics and use them carefully: indeed, these data are useful to assess the spread and reception of political messages, but they also need to be interpreted prudently.

### **2.5.3. Analysis of engagement metrics of Italian political leaders during 2022 electoral campaign**

The results of these analyses align with the case studies which were mentioned in the first chapter, especially with the one dealing with the 2022 Italian general elections. Italian politicians used social media as one of their main tools for political campaign strategies, including TikTok, to avoid the high level of electoral abstentionism which had been



fostered especially among under-30 citizens. Within this circumstance, politicians managed to gain a lot of popularity: regarding this, it is interesting to observe the table of Figure 1 which was inserted in a study of 2023 analysing the political communication adopted by Italian political leaders during 2022 political campaigns (Battista, 2023).

Leader	Engagement	Mentions	Sentiment		
			POSITIVO	NEGATIVO	MISTO
<b>1</b>  <b>Giorgia Meloni</b>	<b>34.6M</b>	151.9K	37%	<b>52%</b>	11%
<b>2</b>  <b>Giuseppe Conte</b>	<b>11.9M</b>	145.4K	49%	<b>41%</b>	10%
<b>3</b>  <b>Silvio Berlusconi</b>	<b>10.2M</b>	29.4K	34%	<b>53%</b>	12%
<b>4</b>  <b>Enrico Letta</b>	<b>8.3M</b>	49.8K	26%	<b>62%</b>	12%
<b>5</b>  <b>Matteo Salvini</b>	<b>5.7M</b>	52.2K	35%	<b>54%</b>	11%
<b>6</b>  <b>Matteo Renzi</b>	<b>4.4M</b>	28.8K	33%	<b>54%</b>	13%
<b>7</b>  <b>Carlo Calenda</b>	<b>3.0M</b>	32.5K	27%	<b>59%</b>	13%
<b>8</b>  <b>Luigi Di Maio</b>	<b>3.0M</b>	19.0K	25%	<b>63%</b>	12%
<b>9</b>  <b>Gianluigi Paragone</b>	<b>927.4K</b>	10.0K	30%	<b>59%</b>	11%

Figure 1. Total engagement social profiles political leaders

Source: Authors' processing carried out through Tool Liveinsights-Blogmeter, reference period 25/07/2022 – 23/09/ 2022.

This table is particularly interesting since it specifies not only the engagement, but also the percentages of positive, negative and mixed sentiment of citizens on social media for each political candidate. This means that even if a politician achieves a high level of engagement and popularity, it does not necessarily lead to political support by users: the table shows how the negative level of sentiment is actually the highest percentage in most of the political leaders' profile, exception made for Giuseppe Conte, leader of Movimento

5 Stelle, who achieved the highest percentage in the positive sentiment with a very high level of mentions and engagement. However, this was not enough for his coalition to achieve the majority, since it achieved the third place after Fratelli d'Italia and Partito Democratico.

When talking about negative sentiment, it is appropriate to mention some of the reactions to the arrival of Italian political candidates to TikTok: Emma Galeotti, a young TikTok content creator, accused Italian politicians to send the message that “young people are malleable and bonkers” (The New York Times, 2022). The mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, also expressed his dissent during the presentation of the calendar of Milan Fashion Week. He said: “Fashion Week will use TikTok a great deal, probably doing it better than many of the politicians who have embarked on this social network in a somewhat pitiful way.” (The Telegraph, 2022).

To sum up, the role of engagement metrics as indicators of political support has become fundamental especially because nowadays social media are the main tools which are used within campaign strategies, and they are expected to become always more important and central. On the other hand, they must be used carefully in this sense, because what they reflect can be easily misunderstood. It is important to remember that a high level of engagement does not necessarily correspond to a positive sentiment or to political support, it can and often does represent a negative or neutral sentiment by users towards politicians and their contents, as well represented by the table of Figure 1.

## **2.6. ENGAGEMENT METRICS AS INDICATORS OF POLITICAL VISIBILITY**

Engagement metrics are also very suitable in measuring and indicating the visibility that politicians manage to gain. This is another aspect which must be deepened to fully understand how social media influence political and voting behaviour.

### **2.6.1. Visibility of politicians on mass media** (Amsalem et. Al, 2020)

Starting from mass media, here visibility is a fundamental key of success because it allows politicians to inform their public about their decisions, their agendas, and the policy-making processes. Furthermore, visibility of politicians on mass media allows users to gain more familiarity with them.

The amount of visibility that politicians manage to acquire through mass media depends also on their personality traits: indeed, it was demonstrated that specific traits such as extroversion, openness to experience and emotional stability (i.e. low neuroticism) significantly influence their media appearance, because they make them more appealing to journalists, more likely to engage in behaviours that attract media attention and to actively seek for public engagement and to be innovative. Furthermore, politicians who tend to be less agreeable and more confrontational or controversial may gain more media attention, because media tend to prefer content involving conflict.

### **2.6.2. Visibility of politicians on social media**

As far as social media are concerned, in this case politicians adapt the contents of their political communication to the perceptions and expectations of their audience: they try to satisfy them as much as possible to obtain positive feedback and, consequently, positive visibility. Furthermore, different political parties have different types of audience which have different expectations: for example, it emerges that minor parties deal with an audience which expects them to criticize other politicians or journalists more strongly rather than their counterparts of major parties. Moreover, politicians of minor parties use a more interactive type of communication than politicians of major parties and they do so because they perceive their audience to expect an interactive and critical communication (Kelm, 2020).

However, when analysing the visibility that politicians gain by social media, traditional media cannot be neglected, because they influence each other: the visibility of a politician on a traditional media, such as a newspaper, can lead to an increased visibility also on social media platforms and vice versa. However, these dynamics are not uniform, because they depend also on the party's size, popularity and on the nature of media coverage. Furthermore, politicians' visibility can also be influenced by their status within their party, their seniority, and the nature of their public engagement (Kruikemeier et. Al, 2018).

## **2.7. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE OVER VOTING BEHAVIOUR**

After having analysed the most technical aspects of the influence of social media over political behaviour and communication, it is now possible to understand how social media influence voting behaviour specifically. Indeed, social media can do it especially because they provide, unlike traditional media, with a two-way interaction between politicians and

citizens, which is particularly strong and effective because it allows voters to feel a stronger connection which might translate into preferential votes. Furthermore, social media allow politicians to tailor and personalize their messages and political campaign strategies, and this can be particularly efficient in resonating with individual's preferences and concerns, influencing their voting choices.

### **2.7.1 Direct and indirect effect of social media (Spierings et. Al, 2014)**

Social media may have two types of effects.

- Direct effect: it simply suggests that the number of followers over a social media profile translates into additional preferences for the single candidate considered. It can also be called “advertisement effect” because social media serve as some sort of campaign posters. However, the correlation between the number of followers and the number of preferential votes of a specific candidate is quite limited and weak if isolated from the whole social media strategy adopted by the politician in question.
- Interaction effect: it suggests that the number of followers will have a significant impact on voting choices only if the candidate actively engages with the social media profiles that follow him or her, meaning that the mere presence on social media is not enough, engagement and active communication are needed to convert online popularity into actual votes. This effect is stronger than the direct one, which means that it is important for a politician to be active and to directly engage with his or her followers in order to eventually get their preferential votes.

Several studies have been conducted regarding the impact of social media on voting behaviour and choices, and it emerged that there is a strong relationship indeed between social media usage by politicians and their number of followers, meaning that their engagement and activity on these platforms favours the increase in the number of followers and, consequently, of their popularity as well. On the other hand, the effect of popularity on social media over voting preference is quite small, which means that social media is only one of the many factors that can influence voting behaviour.

### **2.7.2. The concept of “correct voting”**

When analysing the impact of social media over voting behaviour, it is appropriate to introduce the concept of “correct voting” (Lau et. Al, as cited in Sokhei et. Al, 2012) which defines the correct vote as aligned with the voters' true preferences and interests if

they were well-informed. This concept assesses the quality of the decisions which are taken by voters rather than the mere outcomes. It was developed after an experiment which consisted in creating an election environment where participants voted and then they were given complete knowledge regarding the candidates in order to potentially revise their decision; eventually, some voters changed their decision, while others did not and the latter were considered to have voted “correctly”.

This concept is fundamental to understand the impact of social media over voter behaviour, because social media help users in making decisions which align with their preferences and interests without necessarily having an extensive knowledge regarding every candidate and every issue. Social networks do not educate voters in a traditional sense, but they present prevalent attitudes which guide users in taking informed decisions aligning with their own interests and preferences. This function of social media is fundamental because it notably reduces information costs because it allows individuals to get information by trusted and familiar channels with less personal effort.

To be more specific, it is necessary to distinguish the effects of disagreement networks and support networks: the former may lead to a less accurate voting because the presentation of conflicting points of view within one’s close social circus may create ambivalence, confusion about preferences and complications in the forming process of a political stance, while the latter promotes the correct voting because it provides with a clear and consistent message regarding the choices which align the most with the voter’s preferences. This inevitably simplifies decision-making by reinforcing consensus and reducing the cognitive burden of the individual voter. Furthermore, supportive networking is crucial for democratic competence.

### **2.7.3. Influence of the structure and the content of social network over correct voting**

Moreover, it emerges that both the structure and the content of social network exercise an influence on political behaviour and voting choice.

As far as the structure is concerned, this specifically refers to how individuals are interconnected with each other within social media platforms. It is possible to analyse three factors of the structure of social networks.

- **Composition:** it refers to the mix of individuals, their political stance and their level of knowledge. The composition crucially influences the quality of

information which circulate, which means that a network composed of politically knowledgeable individuals is very likely to help members in making voting decisions which align with their preferences. Furthermore, the composition of a network needs to be homogeneous in order to provide clear and consistent messages, while a diversified composition offers a wider range of information, but on the other hand creates confusion about electoral choices.

- **Disagreement:** this is very likely to lead towards a less correct voting because it often introduces ambivalence and uncertainty about how to vote and this can hinder individuals from making voting choices reflecting their interests and preferences.
- **Density:** it refers to the closeness and frequency of interactions within the network. Specifically, high-density networks, meaning those networks within which users frequently communicate and keep close ties with one another, are more likely to disseminate information and norms about political participation and engagement. Therefore, they are more effective in facilitating correct voting due to their ability to operate as unified and cohesive.

As far as the contents are concerned, they must be accurate and relevant and provide with high-quality information to positively affect the ability of individuals to make correct voting decisions, while highly biased contents can mislead individuals about candidates' positions or the political landscape. Furthermore, the content of the message needs to be persuasive, emotionally framed, and deliberative, which means it has to enhance discussion and encourage open and respectful debates, in order to build an informed electorate which manages to make decisions based on a comprehensive understanding of issues.

When analysing the content of social network, this study also deals with the formation of echo chambers within networks themselves. They consist in virtual spaces where users reaffirm their existing beliefs and biases. On the one hand, echo chambers strengthen the community bonds, but on the other hand it might limit the exposure to opposing views and consequently reduce the likelihood of correct voting. In this sense, it is appropriate to also mention the filter bubbles, which make sure that users are exposed only to contents which perfectly align with their views: this increases political polarization and therefore hinders democratic dialogue.

## **2.8. ECHO CHAMBERS**

The concept of echo chamber which has been introduced in the previous paragraph needs to be furtherly analysed especially because it can be considered as a sort of natural extension of all the dynamics of social media as a tool for political communication and as a source of influence in voting behaviour.

### **2.8.1. The definition and creation of echo chambers (Cinelli et. Al, 2021)**

Echo chambers can be defined as virtual spaces where only users who have similar opinions and views debate and this reinforces their already existing views. They are constituted by two elements.

- **User learning:** it consists in the determination of users' political or topical leading based on their interactions with specific contents, such as likes, shares, comments, etc.
- **Interaction networks:** it consists in the analysis of the social interaction networks and how they are structured around similar or divergent opinions.

Furthermore, the creation of echo chambers is determined by both the homophily in interaction networks, i.e. users prefer to connect with like-minded individuals, and a bias in information diffusion, i.e. users are more likely to receive and disseminate information which align with their views.

Taking into account these factors which determine the creation of echo chambers, it emerged that the homophily in interaction networks is very strong on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where users tend to interact within groups which reflect their views and therefore the echo chamber effect is very strong, while the latter constitutes one of the main bases of the existence of echo chambers, because bias in the dissemination of information make sure that users are exposed only to contents which align with their opinions: this inevitably increases polarization within the public discourse because viewers are less exposed to counter beliefs and more entrenched in their own beliefs and this consequently strengthens echo chambers. However, the functioning and the strength of echo chambers differs in each social media platform, and this is due to their specific algorithms and interaction models.

### **2.8.2. The functioning and operation of echo chambers (Cinelli et. Al, 2021)**

The functioning and operation of echo chambers are very important to be analysed for the purpose of this thesis. Indeed, echo chambers themselves have significant impacts on political communication and policy-making processes because they can shape public perception and opinion and reduce the efficiency of democratic deliberation.

Echo chambers own a very strong potential for polarization which inevitably impacts on political communication because it hinders productive political debates and increases societal divisions and, therefore, consensus becomes much more challenging to be achieved.

Furthermore, echo chambers facilitate the fast spread of misinformation: this is due to the creation of this small and homogenous groups within which it is easier to make information circulate fastly and with less control. This may lead to having a misinformed electorate which inevitably impacts on public trust in democratic institutions.

Moreover, echo chambers are very useful for political communication because they can be used by political actors and interest groups to send tailored messages to specific groups. This is very useful especially during elections and referenda, because influencing the opinion of a well-defined group can effectively define the outcome.

The specific groups that are created by the echo chamber effect are segmented publics which engage only within their ideological confines: this segmentation inevitably reduces the diversity of information and public discussions and this consequently limits the exchange of ideas which is fundamental and defines a healthy and stable democracy.

### **2.8.3. Peer influence (Brugnoli et. Al, 2019)**

The outline of the concept of echo chamber must include the concept of peer influence as well, a mechanism which operates within echo chambers through challenge avoidance and reinforcement seeking: the former refers to the tendence of users to avoid information which contradicts their own beliefs; the latter refers to the tendence of users in actively seeking information which confirms their beliefs and opinions.

Furthermore, peer influence strengthens the confirmation bias effect, which refers to users' tendency to look for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one's opinions and perceptions. This tendence also favours the creation of polarized groups sharing the same views and beliefs.



## **2.9. CONCLUSION**

From the analysis of the most technical aspects of social media as tool for political communication and as a source of influence over voting behaviour which has been developed in the previous paragraphs of this chapter, it emerges that there are several mechanisms which increase the fragmentation and polarization of political debate and diffusion of information. However, this is not always true: on the one hand, political blogs have the tendency to link with experiences having a similar political orientation, but on the other hand it is not unusual for them to dialogue with other blogs with different political positions with the purpose to share information. For this reason, political blogs and the online community must be considered as an important space for information and social representation (De Blasio & Sorice, 2010).

### **3. CASE STUDIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE, THE CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA SCANDAL AND THE USE OF TIKTOK BY ITALIAN POLITICIANS DURING 2022 ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN**

#### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

After the presentation and the analysis of the most theoretical aspects and technical elements of the use of social media with political purposes, it is now appropriate to delve into the two selected case studies, i.e. the Cambridge Analytica Scandal which occurred in 2016 in the United States of America and the arrival of Italian politicians on TikTok during 2022 electoral campaign.

These case studies represent examples of the use of social media by politicians with political and electoral purposes and of the impact on citizens. This chapter will describe their background, the single events connected to them and the consequences they brought.

Finally, this chapter presents a comparative analysis between the two case studies to demonstrate that even if they have some points in common, such as their purposes, there are still a lot of differences between them.

The final aim is to analyse two cases which are examples par excellence of the use of social media with political and electoral purposes to understand concretely their potential in this sense, but also to understand their challenges and limits.

#### **3.1.1. Connection to previous chapters**

These case studies have both already been mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

Firstly, the Cambridge Analytica scandal was mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis within the periodization of the use of social media: it has been said that Cambridge Analytica determined the beginning of the sixth phase of development of the use of social media, characterized by disinformation, hate speech, the emergence of the bots and the spread of fake news which have always existed, but this new phase their spread has become particularly fast. Furthermore, during this phase social media start to be used to manipulate and influence political opinions of citizens.

Moreover, this scandal was mentioned within the outline of the periodization of the use of social media during the electoral campaigns of the United States of America in the paragraph dealing with the 2016 US presidential elections.

As far as the use of TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign, this case study was mentioned for the first time within the description of the periodization of the use of social media during electoral campaigns in Italy in the paragraph dealing with the 2022 Italian general elections.

Finally, this case study was mentioned when dealing with the study of engagement metrics of social media as indicators of political support: in particular, it has been demonstrated how engagement metrics, i.e. likes, shares, comments, etc., often do not represent political support, but they rather present levels of engagement and interest towards politics, which does not always translate into an effective political support and into a vote. Indeed it has demonstrated that even if it is important to understand the popularity and visibility gained by a politician through social media, which could also encourage the single individual to go to vote, it is oversimplifying and also misleading to give the equation 1 like = 1 vote for granted (Giordano, 2023). Moreover, a table was shown and it represented the number of engagement metrics achieved by most of the Italian candidates in 2022 and the sentiment of these engagement metrics, which could be positive, negative or mixed. This was a very important factor to analyse because it demonstrates that high engagement metrics can also represent negative or critical sentiment, or even a neutral sentiment, which can be represented by a user who simply wants to gather information before going to vote.

### **3.2 THE CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA SCANDAL**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2018 several newspapers, including the New York Times and the Britain's Observer, published articles suggesting that Cambridge Analytica had obtained several data of millions of Facebook profiles and that they had been used during the electoral campaign of Donald Trump for the US Presidential elections of 2016. A scandal then exploded and it caused serious reputational damage not only for Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook (now known as Meta), but also for Facebook itself (Rehman, 2019).

#### **3.2.1. myPersonality app (Rehman, 2019)**

Before describing in detail what happened during the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it is appropriate to refer to a psychometric study which was realized by the University of Cambridge in 2007: David Stillwell, who at the time was a grad student of the University

of Nottingham, now a lecturer at the University of Cambridge, created a Facebook app called myPersonality which allowed users to participate in this psychological research by filling in a personality quiz, then they could choose to share their results on Facebook: from 2007 to 2012 a total of 6 million volunteers joined this project of research and did this test. In 2008, Stillwell together with Michal Kosinski, who at the time was a grad student at the University of Cambridge and now is a professor at Stanford University, assessed the users who had participated on five personality traits also known as the Big Five or OCEAN, an acronym standing for openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extroversion and neuroticism. Subsequently, they compared the results of the test with the Facebook profiles of their users and with their information, such as age, gender, place of residence, and activity, such as likes, posts and shares.

Eventually, it was noticed that it was possible to conclude very reliable deductions from online actions. Furthermore, in 2012 Kosinski and his team established that it was possible to understand even an individual's skin colour or association with the Republican party or the Democratic party starting from a Facebook user's interactions (with an average of 68 likes). This research provided with a solid and important basis for the realization of the "*thisisyourdigitalife*" app which will be at the centre of the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

### **3.2.2. The origins of Cambridge Analytica and the first works**

Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's conservative strategist, started to leverage data technology in order to influence public opinion and lead it towards conservatism. In doing so, he was directly involved in the early stages of Cambridge Analytica to define its strategies and goals.

Bannon wanted to use an aggressive messaging tactic in order to move the US electorate to the right. With this purpose, he co-founded Cambridge Analytica together with the hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah Mercer in 2013. The name of this firm was an act of "prestige appropriation", but also represented an active recruitment of Cambridge data scientists. Cambridge Analytica was presented as the US-branch of Strategic Communication Laboratories Group, a British company specialized in behavioural change programs, and the British director Alexander Nix covered the role of bridge between Cambridge Analytica and SCL. The latter was divided into four

divisions, and the one dealing with elections was the closest to Cambridge Analytica (Laterza, 2021).

Subsequently, Cambridge Analytica started to work already in 2014 during the midterm elections by applying its psychographics with the use of Facebook data to shape the personality individuals and subsequently to understand and influence it (Reston, 2018).

### **3.2.3. Thisisyourdigitalife (Rehman, 2019)**

In 2014, Aleksandr Kogan, a Moldavian scientist, in a partnership with Cambridge Analytica, developed an app called “*thisisyourdigitalife*” consisting in a personality quiz which millions of users completed in exchange for a fee offered by Cambridge Analytica itself. Consequently, not only did the app record all the data obtained from the quizzes, but Kogan was able to collect further information on these people from their Facebook account by analysing their personal information, their activity and interactions which were furtherly analysed through algorithms in order to psychologically profile them. Moreover, Kogan was able to do so also with their Facebook friends. Within few months, Kogan together with Cambridge Analytica had gathered data of about 87 million users who had agreed to share them on their Facebook profile, but not to sell them to Cambridge Analytica which turned them into a political tool for Donald Trump’s political campaign.

### **3.2.4. Personalized advertising to electors (Rehman, 2019)**

The actions of Cambridge Analytica aimed to favour Trump’s election as President of the United States of America were focused on undecided voters and in particular on those who had been classified as neurotic towards highly personalized advertising, and hence vulnerable towards Trump’s messages; many of these voters were identified especially in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

At this point, Cambridge Analytica decided to use a feature of Facebook called dark post which allows to send to specific people personalized messages that disappear after a few hours. These messages were often in favour of Donald Trump and against his rival Hillary Clinton: for instance, if the firm recognized an individual as being in favour of carrying arms, then he or she would have been targeted with ads such as “do you know that Hillary Clinton wants to take your arms away?”.

### **3.3. DATA HARVESTING MECHANISMS (Henriksen, 2019)**

#### **3.3.1. Data scraping**

Following the description of the background and of the single events connected to the CA scandal, it is now appropriate to delve into the technical mechanisms which have been adopted by the political firm.

One of the main data harvesting mechanisms which have been used by Cambridge Analytica was the non-authorized scraping of personal data of more than fifty million users to subsequently create detailed psychological profiles.

Data scraping specifically consists in extracting data from websites and other digital platforms without consent. In the case of Cambridge Analytica, this has been possible through the app *thisisyourdigitalife* as it has already been said. Indeed, the app managed to take advantage of Facebook's then API policies in order to collect data not only of the users who had interacted with the app, but also of all of their network of friends: since about 270.000 people used the app, it was possible to extend the scraping to about fifty million people due to the nature of social connections through Facebook and the permissions that at the time were guaranteed to the app.

The purpose of data scraping was creating detailed psychological profiles in order to predict personal attributes, including political preferences, to apply a highly targeted political advertising. The creation of this psychological profiles was realized through the categorization of individuals based on the Big Five which had been found by Stillwell and Kosinski with the myPersonality app. Furthermore, the data scraping process inevitably facilitated the process of microtargeting, which will be furtherly analysed in a few paragraphs.

#### **3.3.2. Microtargeting techniques**

Microtargeting techniques represented very important data harvesting mechanisms of Cambridge Analytica. They consist in the segmentation of potential voters which is based on their demographic and psychological characteristics, their behaviours, and their preferences in order to deliver personalized messages. This process was based on the data scraping and the psychographic profiling which have been previously outlined.

#### **3.3.3. Algorithmic data analysis**

The operation of Cambridge Analytica relied a lot also on the algorithmic data analysis, consisting in the quick process of a wide amount of data with the purpose to identify patterns which can predict individuals' behaviours and preferences and consequently determine the most efficient way to influence specific groups of people. This means that algorithms do not only analyse past behaviour, but also try to predict future behaviour: they try to predict the reaction of users to different types of contents, so that they can shape the content of the messages to be sent and therefore shape users' perceptions and voting choice possibly. This process allowed to segment the population of users with an unprecedented and unique precision. Furthermore, algorithmic analysis allowed Cambridge Analytica to tailor messages responding to real time shifts in public sentiment or engagement levels, so that the campaigning was even more precise and efficient.

#### **3.3.4. Integration with broader systems**

All the techniques which have been previously outlined revealed so efficient especially because they integrated different data sets, including Facebook data, but also data from external brokers, which themselves collected a vast amount of data and personal information from various sources to sell them to third parties, including also those engaged in political campaigning.

In particular, data brokers gather data from a multitude number of sources, such as public records, public histories, online activities and other datasets. All these data include any type of information, from basic demographics to more detailed psychographic profiles assessing personal traits and behavioural tendencies.

The integration of these data brokers with the data gathered from social media platforms, i.e. Facebook, allowed Cambridge Analytica to facilitate the microtargeting techniques and to send messages which very highly personalized.

### **3.4. IMPACT ON VOTER BEHAVIOUR**

The main purpose of Cambridge Analytica operations was to influence users' perceptions first and their voting behaviour after. However, a debate emerged regarding the real efficiency of these techniques: on one hand, some scholars argue that these methods manage to sway voter behaviour, albeit in a non-ethical and illegal way, but on the other hand there are other scholars who are skeptical about the extent to which these methods

adopted by Cambridge Analytica have effectively altered the final electoral outcome of 2016 presidential elections (González, 2017, as cited in Laterza, 2021).

Indeed, it is possible to think that CA<sup>5</sup> managed to shape and influence voting behaviour especially because they managed to access to several data of a lot of users with an extreme and unique precision, with the purpose to reinforce the bias which the users involved already had or to introduce them new points of view which aligned with the campaign objectives, in order to increase voter engagement and turnout for Trump (Ozden et. Al, 2019). On the other hand, Cambridge Analytica provided with very questionable services, sometimes even non-ethical and illegal, which were substantiated and somehow justified by the idea that the company's approaches were based on big data-driven methods (Richterich, 2018).

This debate regarding the efficiency of Cambridge Analytica in influencing voting behaviour is still going on. However, it is possible to make references to some studies which have been subsequently conducted regarding the efficiency of the regression models which have been used by CA to predict personality traits. These models have been analysed by David Sumpter, a professor of applied mathematics at the University of Uppsala in Sweden: he discovered that their biggest limitation effectively stood into the accuracy of personality predicting models and in particular of the OCEAN model. Indeed, following an experiment that he did using based on this model, he discovered that the model taken into account matched the correct ranking only around the 60% (Sumpter, 2018, as cited in Rathi, 2019).

Furthermore, it is possible to make reference to the contents of the testimony of the people who were investigated after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Indeed, the lack of reliance of the regression models had actually been confirmed by Kogan in his testimony to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, during which he stated that it was “scientifically ridiculous” to establish that those regression models lead to reliable results regarding the prediction of people's personality traits. (RT UK, 2018, as cited in Rathi, 2019). Kogan also established that it would have been much better for CA to use Facebook advertising platform, because it would have made much easier to get personality details of certain people. Subsequently, Nix confirmed these results and even

---

<sup>5</sup> CA stands for Cambridge Analytica.



added that Kogan's dataset had not been used that much (Concordia, 2016, as cited in Rathi, 2019).

At this point, it can be concluded that the influence of these actions of Cambridge Analytica have often been hyperbolized especially by media, but on the other hand these actions must not be neglected not only because of the great potential of social media which inevitably emerges, but also because they brought several privacy concerns and legal issues which will be described in the following paragraph.

### **3.5. PRIVACY CONCERNS AND LEGAL CONSEQUENCES**

The Cambridge Analytica scandal caused several issues regarding privacy concerns and the fairness and transparency of elections. In this sense, some legal regulations were adopted as well.

Firstly, the data scraping process raised concerns with the privacy, since it represented a violation of Facebook's policies and especially highlighted some gaps which existed in the protection of the data of users and with their consent on social media platforms. Consequently, stricter regulations were demanded for the regulation of data privacy and the use of personal information for political campaigning purposes. All of this led to a significant scrutiny of Facebook's data practices (Henriksen, 2019).

As far as the process of algorithmic data analysis is concerned, this advanced issues regarding the integrity of the democratic process. Furthermore, this analysis allowed to influence users' voting behaviour with extreme precision and efficiency, and this posed several questions regarding the fairness and transparency of elections (Henriksen, 2019).

Facebook was tremendously damaged by this event because users inevitably started to lose trust towards this platform. Furthermore, the hashtag #DeleteFacebook became viral in March 2018 (The Economist, 2018). Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook (now Meta) had to testify to justify the role of his corporation in exposing users' data without their consent in front of the European Parliament. Furthermore, in May 2018 both CA and SCL declared bankruptcy in the United Kingdom first and subsequently in the United States of America and they were both legally investigated (Richterich, 2018). On the other hand, several efforts have been made to strengthen the protection of personal

data, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a European regulation aiming to give individuals more control on their own data (Henriksen, 2019).

### **3.6. TIKTOK AND ITALIAN POLITICS IN 2022**

#### **3.6.1. Overview of the political use of TikTok (Cervi et. Al, 2021)**

Political parties have started to recognize the always higher potential of TikTok and especially its influence among young generation. Indeed, they became aware of the unique opportunity which is offered by this platform to engage with younger voters in a space where they feel comfortable and at ease and are very active: this is crucial because it could translate into a higher degree of political participation among young citizens.

Furthermore, TikTok presents a relevant potential for virality. Due to algorithms, political messages can easily go viral and reach a much broader audience than through traditional media and campaigning methods.

Therefore, politicians started to adopt communication strategies which could fit with the platform and its unique language and technical features, including especially its specific formats like short videos, talking directly to the camera and also interactive formats, such as polls and challenges. In particular, TikTok political contents often include direct political messaging, some behind-the-scenes videos into politicians' lives and work and contents generally aimed at humanizing politicians to let users perceive them closer.

The main purpose of this new strategy recently adopted by political parties is to engage with young citizens, since they are the most difficult to interact with, especially through traditional media. Indeed, it is much easier to interact with young voters on TikTok because this platform allows a more informal engagement. Indeed, politicians use TikTok not only as a broadcasting tool, but also and especially as a tool for direct interaction with users, which includes responding to comments, participating to the popular trends and challenges and using the general features of TikTok to create dynamic contents which encourage the audience engagement and participation.

Furthermore, the use of TikTok by political parties lead to the introduction of a new concept, i.e. technopopulism. It consists in the combination of technology with populist messages which allow a direct interaction between political actors and their audience without any type of mediation which is often covered by the press or the television. A

wider definition of technopopulism is provided by Deseriis as “a discursive formation or a materialized ideology that is predicated upon the belief that the government of the people, by the people, for the people is achievable by means of networked information technologies” (Deseriis, 2017, as cited in Cervi et. Al, 2021).

Another concept which was introduced with the arrival of politicians on TikTok is “politainment”: it consists in the infusion of political messages with elements of entertainment to make them more attractive for the average user of TikTok. The strategy of politainment ensures that political messages are more likeable and shareable, so that a high level of engagement by users is granted, by adapting the contents of these messages to the tendency of the platform towards fun and light content.

On the other hand, TikTok presents some challenges and criticisms that politicians must pay attention to, but unfortunately, they often do not. Indeed, TikTok presents a high risk of oversimplification of important political issues together with the risk of misinformation. Furthermore, the informal nature of this format may lead users not to take politicians seriously anymore.

### **3.6.2. Usage of TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign**

As it has already been said in the first chapter when outlining the use of social media by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign and political elections, the use of TikTok as a tool for political communication and especially for campaigning strategy was a real innovation, since this platform had never been used before for electoral purposes. Indeed, many Italian politicians were skeptical regarding the efficiency of this platform, exception made for Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni who created their personal profiles between 2019 and 2020 (Giordano, 2023).

The main purpose of the use of TikTok by Italian politicians was to directly engage with young voters and to involve them as much as possible to avoid the high level of abstentionism which had been predicted especially among the under-30 generation. The New York Times adopted an appropriate metaphor to describe this situation by saying that Italian politicians were on a “virtual hunt” for votes (The New York Times, 2022).

Silvio Berlusconi, who at the time was the leader of the centre-right wing political party Forza Italia, became one of the most popular candidates on TikTok. He published his first video on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2022 and it gathered more than ten million views and more than 700.000 likes and more than 40.000 comments. In this video, Berlusconi used his

voice strategically by raising and lowering it to give a dramatic effect. He presents himself and his first video on TikTok and directly talks to the users by saying that he is a bit envious of them because of their young age: “On this platform, you guys are over five million, and 60 percent of you are less than 30. I am a little envious” (The New York Times, 2022). The following contents which were published represented mainly snapshots from Berlusconi’s TV appearances or his classic jokes.

As far as Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing political party Lega, is concerned, he had been already on TikTok for some years and used it to talk about the main topics which are covered by his political programme, i.e. security and immigration and he continued to do so during 2022 political campaign.

Carlo Calenda, the leader of the centre-wing political party Azione, subscribed on TikTok by saying that he would have not used this platform to post dancing videos because he dances “like a drunken bear” (The Telegraph, 2022) as he said in the first video of his profile. Instead, he sent short political messages, discussed books and answered questions. He was very appreciated especially by university students, but did not gain that much popularity, even though his first video became viral.

The Partito Democratico, a centre-left wing political party, offered a plurality of voices by posting thematic videos dealing with topics discussed by politicians who embodied the issue discussed, such as Alessandro Zan for the battle for civil rights. Enrico Letta, who at the time was the leader of the Partito Democratico, encouraged users to go to vote for anyone they preferred in order not to allow other people to decide (The New York Times, 2022). This is the only institutional profile since it is not the personal profile of Enrico Letta, but the profile of the party (Giordano, 2023).

Giorgia Meloni, leader of the right-wing political party Fratelli d’Italia and then the elected President del Consiglio dei Ministri, recorded a lot of success on TikTok especially during the months of the electoral campaign. Indeed, in September 2022, she gained more than 100 thousands of followers, an increase of total engagement of almost 2 million and she totalled 4.610.615 reactions to the 64 videos posted on her profile since the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2022, while one month before the reactions were 349.960 (Giordano, 2023).

It can be concluded that TikTok allowed all Italian political leaders to achieve extraordinary percentages of engagement and interaction with users, but Giorgia Meloni

came out undoubtedly as the queen of the Web (Giordano, 2023) and of TikTok in particular: her video published in the morning of the election day, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022, which depicts her holding two melons and saying “25<sup>th</sup> September, I’ve said everything! (25 settembre, ho detto tutto!)” still is the most viewed of all the electoral contents published on TikTok; furthermore, Giorgia Meloni is the first social leader who gained more than one million followers on TikTok, and the apex of this increase was recorded between 25<sup>th</sup> September and 26<sup>th</sup> October 2022 with 502.000 new followers.

### **3.6.3. Public reaction and effectiveness**

A mention shall be made to the efficiency of the strategies which have been adopted on TikTok by Italian politicians which likely contributed to an increase in political awareness and participation among young voters. This was due especially to the informal nature of TikTok which allowed politicians to be perceived as more accessible by users and this accessibility is crucial to engage with that portion of the population which otherwise would be almost totally disinterested in traditional political discourse.

On the other hand, it is quite difficult to understand and measure the actual impact of the use of TikTok on the final electoral outcome. Furthermore, this platform also presents the risk of oversimplification of political contents and the risk for politicians not to be taken seriously. Indeed, these contents have also been criticized and some examples of critics are represented by what the TikTok content creator Emma Galeotti and the President of Lombardia Giuseppe Sala said, as outlined in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the arrival on TikTok of Italian politicians did not make a good impression abroad either and this is proved by some articles of newspapers about this topic. An example is represented by an article of the UK newspaper “*The telegraph*” which defined the videos posted on TikTok by Italian political leaders “cringe”, i.e. embarrassing (The Telegraph, 2022). A reference must be made also to the creation of several memes involving the Italian political candidates and their videos on TikTok, to the point that it is possible to make reference to a sort of parallel electoral campaign made of memes (Sky TG24, 2022). However, it can be generally implied that this platform turned out to be a valuable tool in mobilizing young voters and influencing their participation in the political process.

## **3.7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CASE STUDIES**

The two case studies which have been deeply outlined through this chapter can be considered examples par excellence of the use of social media by politicians with electoral purpose which eventually had an impact on citizens, their engagement and their behaviour.

It is possible to outline a comparative analysis between the CA scandal and the use of social media by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign to identify their similarities and differences.

### **3.7.1. Similarity: use of social media with engagement purpose**

The initial purpose of politicians who decide to use social media as tools for political communication is mainly the direct engagement with their citizens, and this emerges in these two case studies as well. However, we have two different types of engagement: indeed, CA used Facebook to engage with users and eventually target and realize their psychographic profiling; on the other hand, Italian politicians used TikTok to really engage with users as much as possible through a more informal and interactive content.

### **3.7.2. Similarity: data driven strategy**

Both strategies which have been adopted rely a lot on big data, which anyway have been used in two different ways. CA used big data to make their microtargeting and algorithmic analysis as much precise and accurate as possible, while Italian politicians used data to understand users, their beliefs, perceptions, preferences to consequently tailor and adapt their contents and make them as much appreciable and satisfying as possible.

### **3.7.3. Similarity: impact on voter behaviour as final purpose**

If the direct engagement is the first purpose of the use of social media by politicians, the impact on voter behaviour can be considered the final one. The direct engagement comes first because it allows politicians to involve users, convince them and eventually shape their voting behaviour. This applies for CA scandal and for Italian politicians using TikTok as well, but we still find differences.

On the one hand, CA final purpose was to shape voting behaviour by manipulating users and this emerges especially by the fact that their main objectives were those people who were seen as vulnerable and consequently easy to manipulate. The main target was represented specifically by those people who were classified as neurotic, because they were likely to be the most vulnerable to Trump's messages. It was possible to identify these types of users because they were categorized on the basis of the Big Five, five

personality traits also known as OCEAN, which stands for openness, consciousness, agreeableness, extroversion and neuroticism.

On the other hand, the final purpose of Italian politicians usage of TikTok can be considered more genuine, since the need to shape voter behaviour was aimed to involve the young generation in the political field and eventually convince them to vote to avoid very high level of abstentionism which had been predicted especially among under-30 citizens.

### **3.7.4 Similarity: media resonance**

Both these case studies received a lot of mediatic attention.

As far as Cambridge Analytica is concerned, the mediatic attention started in 2018, when the scandal exploded, i.e. when the House of Commons Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published a report on fake news (DCMS, 2018, as cited in Heawood, 2018) which did not deal specifically with fake news, but with Cambridge Analytica stories which had just started to spread. The House of Commons Committee specified that Cambridge Analytica played on the fears of some specific individuals who could be easily lead to think that they needed to own a gun in their houses to feel protected by strangers and intruders (DCMS, 2018: 28, as cited in Heawood, 2018) and that this strategy which had the final aim to alter the electoral outcome was invasive, it spread false information and it could have lead to a democratic crisis (DCMS, 2018: 3, as cited in Heawood, 2018). From that moment on, several newspapers started to write articles talking about Cambridge Analytica actions and accusing it of having violated privacy of users by using their data without their consent. The mediatic attention arrived on social networks as well, since on Twitter the hashtag #DeleteFacebook became viral and this represents very well the lack of trust towards Facebook which started to spread among people (The Economist, 2018).

As far as Italian politicians use of TikTok is concerned, it received a lot of mediatic attention as well especially because it represented an innovation, since it was the first time at this platform was used with electoral purposes. The mediatic attention came from several newspapers, both Italian and foreign, as it has been previously outlined by making reference to The New York Times, an American daily newspaper, and The Telegraph, an English daily newspaper. But the main form of mediatic attention was the public reaction towards the TikTok contents of Italian politicians, especially under the form of jokes and

memes among young people. Finally, a reference shall be made again to the reaction of famous people, such as Emma Galeotti, young content creator on TikTok who has got more than 900.000 followers on TikTok, and Giuseppe Sala, President of Lombardia region.

### **3.7.5. Similarity: watershed moments**

Both the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the Italian politicians use of TikTok represent two events which marked respectively the beginning of a new phase of the development of the use of social media and a shift in electoral strategies and methods.

As far as Cambridge Analytica is concerned, as outlined in the first chapter, this can be considered as the event marking the beginning of the sixth phase of the development of social media: this phase is still going on nowadays and it is characterized by disinformation with the always faster spread of fake news. Furthermore, during this phase social media start to be considered also as a source and form of manipulation of political opinions and behaviour of people. All the characteristics of this sixth phase of development are all embodied in the Cambridge Analytica scandal as well.

On the other hand, the Italian politicians use of TikTok during 2022 political campaign represent a shift from traditional to more digital electoral strategies and methods. This shift had already begun during 2013 Italian electoral campaign, when social media started to play a pivotal role for the first time. Subsequently, traditional media were furtherly bypassed during 2018 Italian electoral campaign which can be defined hybrid since traditional media, i.e. Tv, newspapers and press, were combined with digital media, i.e. Internet and social media. The result coincided with a more complete and comprehensive communication strategy which maximized the strengths and potentials of both traditional and digital media (Bracciale et. Al, 2018). Afterwards, the 2022 electoral campaign represented the definitive shift towards the adoption of digital strategies for political and electoral purposes.

### **3.7.6. Difference: ethical and legal implications**

As outlined before, the two case studies present some common points and similarities, but they also present several differences. Some of them have already been explained, but there are others which must be considered. To begin with, they differ in the ethical and legal implications which involved Cambridge Analytica and its inappropriate use of data



of users without their consent. This caused several complaints by people who not only started to lack of trust towards Facebook, but also started to demand for stricter regulations for the sake of their data privacy and for the use of personal information with political and electoral purposes. Furthermore, the actions of CA put into question the fairness and transparency of democratic elections with the risk to start a democratic crisis (DCMS, 2018: 3, as cited in Heawood, 2018).

In contrast, the Italian politicians use of TikTok was very innovative, but did not cause any legal and ethical implications since this innovation did not involve an inappropriate use of personal data, they only relied on them to understand what type of content they had to post in order to achieve the highest possible level of visibility, popularity and consensus.

### **3.7.7. Difference: targeted audience**

One of the similarities which has been previously found between the two case studies is the initial purpose coinciding with the direct engagement with an audience. However, the targeted audience was different.

On the one hand, Cambridge Analytica had a broad audience, and this emerges by the tremendous number of users (more than fifty million) whose data had been gathered and subsequently scraped. Subsequently, CA proceeded with the psychographic profiling and with the identification of people who were particularly neurotic and could be targeted with personalized messages which played with their vulnerabilities and fears (DCMS, 2018, as cited in Heawood, 2018).

In contrast, the use of TikTok by Italian politicians was addressed to a specific type of audience, i.e. under-30 generation, from the very first moment. For this reason, they decided to arrive on TikTok, where more than the 60% of the users are under-30 years old. The target audience of Italian politicians has always been very clear, and this emerged also from the type of content most of them decided to publish, i.e. mainly informal contents. This came up also from the lexicon they used in their videos and especially from the fact that they used a lot the vocative “guys” (“ragazzi”) to talk directly with their followers and with people interacting with their posts (Giordano, 2023).

### **3.7.8. Difference: transparency and content nature**

The last difference which can be found between the two case studies which have been considered in this thesis stands in the transparency and in the nature of the contents.

From one perspective, Cambridge Analytica used contents which were secretive and focused on a subliminal and hidden influence on specific types of people.

From the other perspective, the use of TikTok by Italian politicians leveraged on very transparent, informal content. However, this represented also one of the critics which have been revolved towards Italian leaders using TikTok: they usually lacked credibility to the eyes of young users who could not really take them seriously. Indeed, this represents one of the risks of the use of this type of platforms, together with the oversimplification of political contents.

### **3.8. CONCLUSION**

The case studies which have been analysed within this chapter evidence the potential and the power of social media use with political and electoral purposes. On one side, there is the CA scandal which brought several ethical and privacy concerns connected to its attempt of manipulation towards users and this also led to several legal issues. On the other side, there is the arrival on TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign, which demonstrated to be a way through which politicians wanted to directly interact and engage with people, especially with the younger generation to increase their political participation and convince them to vote.

It was appropriate to conclude this thesis with the description of these two case studies specifically because they embody the dual-edged nature of social media, which offer significant opportunities for political communication and direct engagement with citizens, but they also present significant challenges regarding data privacy and misinformation due to the spread of fake news.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social media now play a very important role in people's everyday lives: they are used as an entertainment, as a means to get to know other people, to be adjourned about friends and relatives, to get information, and they've become a very important tool also in the political field: this last aspect has been analysed in this thesis, starting from the periodization of mass media; subsequently, social media have been analysed and in particular how they have been developing through the six phases which have been outlined.

Afterwards, a historical description of the development of social media within electoral campaign has been presented and different countries from all over the world have been taken into consideration, i.e. USA, Israel, UK, Brazil, and Italy. The first chapter presents several historical contents, and the aim was to fully understand social media, their functioning and how they developed through the course of the time and in different parts of the globe.

The second chapter analysed the theoretical aspects and the most technical elements of the use of social media as tools for political communication and how they influence individuals and their voting choices.

The point of departure was represented by the analysis of mass media and in particular of their relationship with politics and this was done by presenting three theoretical approaches, i.e. pluralism, constructivism and structuralism. Subsequently, the theories of mass media influence over political behaviour have been analysed, i.e. the agenda setting effect theory, the framing theory and the spiral of silence theory. Afterwards, it emerged how these theories could be applied to social media as well to analyse their influence over political behaviour.

Furthermore, the technical elements of social media have been analysed, starting from engagement metrics: it emerged that engagement metrics do not measure political support, but they rather measure the political attention of users towards specific topics and their political participation; moreover, it emerged how engagement metrics can be considered as indicators of political visibility, i.e. the level of popularity that politicians gain through their activities on social media.

Afterwards, the specific influence of social media over voting behaviour has been studied and it was possible to do so by analysing the direct and interaction effect of social media and with the introduction of the concept of correct voting.

Finally, the concepts of echo chambers and peer influence have been introduced and tested: they are fundamental because they represent a sort of natural extension of all the dynamics that social media present when used as a tool to influence users' behaviour and their voting choices.

The third chapter delves deeply into the two selected case studies, i.e. Cambridge Analytica scandal and the use of TikTok during 2022 electoral campaign.

After a recap of what had been already said in the previous chapters regarding these two case studies, the point of departure was represented by Cambridge Analytica scandal, which has been analysed as first mainly for chronological reasons. First of all, the background of this scandal has been outlined, by making reference to the previous research which led to the creation of myPersonality app, then to the origins and the first works of CA, and finally to what CA actually did in 2016 with the thisisyourdigitalife app.

Subsequently, the data harvesting mechanisms adopted by CA have been analysed, i.e. data scraping, microtargeting, algorithmic data analysis and the integration of data from broader systems.

Subsequently, the impact on voting behaviour of these actions has been analysed, and it emerged that a debate is still going on regarding this issue, but it can be concluded that the influence of CA actions on the final outcome of 2016 presidential elections has been emphasized and hyperbolized by the media, but these actions cannot be neglected because they brought several privacy concerns and legal consequences which damaged Facebook and even caused a democratic crisis.

As far as the analysis of arrival of TikTok by Italian politicians during 2022 electoral campaign is concerned, the point of departure was the general overview of TikTok and how it is used for political purposes. In this regard, some interesting concepts have been introduced, such as technopopulism and politainment.

Afterwards, the specific case study has been deepened, by analysing how most of Italian politicians decided to use TikTok. Subsequently, a reference was made to the reaction of

the public to this innovation and to its efficiency and it emerged that on the one hand this platform inevitably played a role in involving people and engaging directly with them, but on the other hand it is still quite difficult to measure the actual impact of the use of TikTok over the electoral outcome. Furthermore, all the risks of this app have been described, together with some negative feedback expressed by some famous people, i.e. Emma Galeotti and Giuseppe Sala. However, it is not possible to deny the usefulness and the opportunities that TikTok offered in mobilizing young citizens and influencing their participation in the political process.

Finally, this chapter ends with a comparative analysis which evidences the similarities and differences which stand between these case studies. It emerged that despite they have some points in common, such as their purposes, i.e. direct engagement and the use of data, they also are very different, because the engagement was declined in two different ways, since the engagement acted by CA was aimed to target and profile the users, while Italian politicians on TikTok really tried to directly interact and engage with users to make them feel more involved in the political process. Furthermore, they differ in their target audience: CA targeted a vast amount of users to subsequently target and profile them, while the target audience of Italian politicians was very precise and specific since the very beginning and it was represented by the young generation, in particular under-30 generation.

From the analysis which has been developed within this thesis, it emerges that social media have a great potential as tools for political communication and participation. For this reason, it is very likely that in the future they will be always more used by politicians and by individuals who want to gather information regarding the political field and engage with politicians. However, it is fundamental for political leaders to use social media carefully to not incur in the risk of not being taken seriously by citizens. On the other hand, users must use social media carefully in this sense as well, meaning that they must not refer only to how a politician behaves on social media to understand if he or she deserves to be voted or not. The choice of vote must be as rational as possible and to make a rational voting choice, it is fundamental for citizens to gather information from official and reliable sources regarding politicians, their political party, what they have done in the past, and what they intend to do in the future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amsalem, E., Zoizner, A., Sheafer, T., Walgrave, S., & Loewen, P. J. (2020). The effect of politicians' personality on their media visibility. *Communication Research*, 47(7), 1079-1102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218758084>
- Arnaudo, D. (2017). Computational propaganda in Brazil: Social bots during elections (Working Paper No. 2017.8). University of Washington.
- Bobba, G., & Roncarolo, F. (2018). The likeability of populism on social media in the 2018 Italian general election. *Italian Political Science*, 13(1), 51-62.
- Bracciale, R., & Cepernich, C. (2018). Hybrid 2018 campaigning: The social media habits of Italian political leaders and parties. *Italian Political Science*, 13(1), 36-50.
- Bright, J., Hale, S., Ganesh, B., Bulovsky, A., Margetts, H., & Howard, P. (2020). Does campaigning on social media make a difference? Evidence from candidate use of Twitter during the 2015 and 2017 U.K. elections. *Communication Research*, 47(7), 988-1009. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219872394>
- Brito, K., et al. (2019). Social media and presidential campaigns – Preliminary results of the 2018 Brazilian presidential election [Preprint].
- Brugnoli, E., Cinelli, M., Quattrociocchi, W., & Scala, A. (2019). Recursive patterns in online echo chambers. *Scientific Reports*, 9(20118). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-56191-7>
- Campante, F., & Durante, R. (2017). Politics 2.0: The multifaceted effect of broadband internet on political participation. *Journal of the European Economic Association*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx044>
- Campus, D., Ceccarini, L., & Vaccari, C. (2015). What a difference a critical election makes: Social networks and political discussion in Italy between 2008 and 2013. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 27(4), 588–601. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edv045>

Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali (CISE). (2022, September 26). In Italia nel 2022 uno dei maggiori cali dell'affluenza in Europa occidentale. Retrieved from <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2022/09/26/in-italia-nel-2022-uno-dei-maggiori-cali-dell'affluenza-in-europa-occidentale/>

Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., & Marín Lladó, C. (2021). TikTok and the new language of political communication: The case of Podemos. *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación*, 26, 267-287. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6035/clr.5817>

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(9), e2023301118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>

Coloricchio, M. (2022). The 2022 Italian general election campaign: Measuring different levels of populism on Facebook and assessing its impact on engagement. Master's Thesis, University of Twente.

Concordia. (2016, September 27). Alexander Nix [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Dd5aVXLCc>

Conflavoro PMI. (n.d.). Elezioni politiche 2022: Dati finali. Retrieved from <https://www.conflavoro.it/elezioni-politiche-2022-dati-finali/>

Costa, F. (2010, October 19). I politici che hanno rovinato tutto: Le storie dei candidati che in pochi minuti hanno compromesso un'intera campagna elettorale. *Il Post*. <https://www.ilpost.it/2010/10/19/gaffe-politici-america/>

Dalton-Hoffman, M. (2012). The effect of social media in the 2012 presidential election [Preprint]. Trinity College Digital Repository.

De Blasio, E., & Sorice, M. (2010). Italian politics in the web 2.0: Participation, mistrust and disintermediation processes. CMCS Working Papers, 1. Centre for Media and Communication Studies "Massimo Baldini", LUISS University.

Enli, G. (2017). Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: Exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 50-61.

Ferrucci, P., Hopp, T., & Vargo, C. J. (2020). Civic engagement, social capital, and ideological extremity: Exploring online political engagement and political expression on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 22(6), 1095-1115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819873110>

Generazioni al lavoro oggi: Baby boomer, Gen X e Millennial. (2019, December 30). *Laborability*. <https://laborability.com/consigli-sul-lavoro/generazioni-al-lavoro-oggi-baby-boomer-gen-x-e-millennial>

Gilmore, J., & Howard, P. N. (2014). Digital media and the 2010 national elections in Brazil. In *The internet and democracy in global perspective* (pp. 43-55). Springer.

Giordano, D. (2023). *La regina della rete: Le origini del successo digitale di Giorgia Meloni*. Graus Edizioni.

Guo, L. (2012). The application of social network analysis in agenda setting research: A methodological exploration. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(4), 616-631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732148>

Haleva-Amir, S., & Nahon, K. (2015). Electoral politics on social media: The Israeli case. In A. Bruns, E. Skogerbo, C. Christensen, O. A. Larsson, & G. S. Enli (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to social media and politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Heawood, J. (2018). Pseudo-public political speech: Democratic implications of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *Information Polity*, 23(4), 429-434. <https://doi.org/10.3233/IP-180009>

Henriksen, E. E. (2019). *Big data, microtargeting, and governmentality in cyber-times: The case of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal* [Master's thesis, University of Oslo]. DUO Research Archive. <http://www.duo.uio.no/>



Jensen, M. J., & Anstead, N. (2014). Campaigns and social media communications: A look at digital campaigning in the 2010 U.K. general election. In *The internet and democracy in global perspective* (pp. 57-81). Springer.

Jensen, M. J. (2017). Social media and political campaigning: Changing terms of engagement? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(1), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161216673196>

Jungherr, A., Schoen, H., Posegga, O., & Jürgens, P. (2017). Digital trace data in the study of public opinion: An indicator of attention toward politics rather than political support. *Social Science Computer Review*, 35(3), 336-356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439316631043>

Kelm, O. (2020). Why do politicians use Facebook and Twitter the way they do? The influence of perceived audience expectations. *Studies in Communication and Media*, 9(1), 8-34. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2020-1-8>

Kiyohara, S. (2016). An analysis of the campaign context in the U.S.: How did political parties use social media in the 2014 midterm election campaign? [Preprint]. J-STAGE.

Kruikemeier, S., Gattermann, K., & Vliegenthart, R. (2018). Understanding the dynamics of politicians' visibility in traditional and social media. *The Information Society*, 34(4), 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2018.1463334>

Laterza, V. (2021). Could Cambridge Analytica have delivered Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory? An anthropologist's look at big data and political campaigning. *Public Anthropologist*, 3(1), 119-147. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25891715-03010007>

Lima, J., et al. (2023). The use and impact of TikTok in the 2022 Brazilian presidential election [Preprint].

Maslow, J. (2019, December 24). How is social media influencing elections? The Times of Israel. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/how-is-social-media-influencing-elections/>

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.

Miller, C. C. (2008, November 7). How Obama's Internet campaign changed politics. The New York Times. <https://archive.nytimes.com/bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/>

Nizzoli, L., Tardelli, S., Avvenuti, M., Cresci, S., & Tesconi, M. (2021, May). Coordinated behavior on social media in 2019 UK general election. In *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (Vol. 15, pp. 443-454).

Özdemir, B. (2016). *Social media usage in politics: The framing effect and political involvement* [Master's thesis, Middle East Technical University]. Graduate School of Social Sciences.

Ozden, K., & Tanko, A. R. (2019). From Cambridge Analytica to 'O To Ge' (Enough is Enough): The dynamics of political canvassing and elections in a social media environment. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, III(XII), 185-193. Retrieved from <http://www.rsisinternational.org/>

Pianigiani, G. (2022, September 25). TikTok and Italy elections: A look into digital influence. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/world/europe/tiktok-italy-elections.html>

Preston, J. (2011, March 17). Internet users turned to social networks in elections, survey finds. *The New York Times*. <https://archive.nytimes.com/mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/internet-users-turned-to-social-networks-in-elections-survey-finds/>

Radicioni, T., Saracco, F., Pavan, E., & Squartini, T. (2021). Analysing Twitter semantic networks: the case of 2018 Italian elections. *Scientific Reports*, 11, Article 13207. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-92337-2>

Ramirez, C. (2021, September 16). Let's get digital: The social media persona and its purpose in politics. *goldengatexpress.org*. <https://goldengatexpress.org/97904/city/lets-get-digital-the-social-media-persona-and-its-purpose-in-politics/>

Rehman, I. (2019). Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data harvesting: What you need to know. *Library Philosophy and Practice* (e-journal), (2497). <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/2497>

Richterich, A. (2018). How data-driven research fuelled the Cambridge Analytica controversy. *Partecipazione e Conflitto: The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, 11(2), 528-543. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v11i2p528>

Rossi, L., Giglietto, F., Orefice, M., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2013). Social media in the 2013 Italian election. In *Selected Papers of Internet Research 14.0* (pp. 1-3). Denver, USA.

Rossi, L., Righetti, N., & Marino, G. (2021). (Nearly) Ten years of social media and political elections in Italy: Questions, platforms, and methods. *Social Media + Society*, October-December 2021, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063460>

Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49(4), 103-122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x>

Scheufele, D. A., & Moy, P. (2000). Twenty-five years of the spiral of silence: A conceptual review and empirical outlook. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 12(1), 3. <https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/12/1/3/739823>

Sin, S.-C. J. (2016). Social media and problematic everyday life information-seeking outcomes: Differences across use frequency, gender, and problem-solving styles. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 67(8), 1793-1807. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23509>

Sky TG24. (2022, September 27). Meme e le elezioni 2022. Retrieved May 24, 2024, from <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/approfondimenti/meme-elezioni-2022#00>

Sohn, D. (2019). Spiral of Silence in the Social Media Era: A Simulation Approach to the Interplay Between Social Networks and Mass Media. *Communication Research*, 49(1), 139-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219856510>

Sokhey, A. E., & McClurg, S. D. (2012). Social networks and correct voting. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3), 751-764. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000461>

- Sorice, M. (2020). *Sociologia dei media: Un'introduzione critica*. Carocci editore.
- Spierings, N., & Jacobs, K. (2014). Getting personal? The impact of social media on preferential voting. *Political Behavior*, 36(2), 215-234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9228-2>
- Street, J. (2005). Politics lost, politics transformed, politics colonised? Theories of the impact of mass media. *Political Studies Review*, 3, 17-33.
- Tedeschi, E. (2010). *I pubblici della comunicazione di massa: Lezioni di sociologia della comunicazione*. Altrimedia.
- The Economist. (2018, March 22). The Facebook scandal could change politics as well as the internet. Retrieved January 19, 2024, from <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/03/22/the-facebook-scandal-could-change-politics-as-well-as-the-internet>
- Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2016). Party campaigners or citizen campaigners? How social media deepen and broaden party-related engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 66(6), 1039-1061. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161216642152>
- Williams, C.B. and Gulati, G.J. (2012). Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the Congressional elections of 2006 and 2008. *New Media & Society*, 15(1), 52–71. doi:10.1177/1461444812457332.
- Wilson, R. (2019). Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, and influence operations: A case study and anticipatory ethical analysis [Preprint].