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Voter's irrationality: how social media affect citizens' electoral choice.

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Introduction

The 2018 Italian parliamentary elections for the renewal of the two branches of Parliament – the Senate of the Republic and the Chamber of Deputies – were held on March 4th 2018. The results saw the centre-right emerge as the most voted coalition, with about 37% of the preferences, while the single most voted list, the Five Star Movement, collected over 32% of the votes. After an institutional crisis lasting 89 days, the President of the Republic – Sergio Mattarella – entrusted the task of forming a new government to Giuseppe Conte, a jurist and university lecturer appointed to preside over a coalition government between the Five Star Movement and the League. The Conte I government took office on June 1st, 2018, receiving the trust of the Senate on June 5th and the Chamber of Deputies on June 6th.

As stated by Anthony Downs (1957), every citizen will tend to vote for any party that will enable them to achieve maximum utility. Rational choice theory is based on this aspect, that agents – people – make choices with the aim of maximizing happiness, or utility. This theory, in relation to politics, states that the behaviour of the agent is rational "if it is goal-oriented, reflective (evaluative), and consistent (across time and different choice situations)" (Quist-Adade 2018, p. 142). However, even though this theory has been very successful, most of the time, human beings do not tend to act rationally. It frequently happens that emotions prevail over rationality and lead us to choose the path that does not benefit us the most. It is also vital to consider that when there is fear or crisis, the irrational part of the brain prevails over the cultural part. Moreover, social media have an important role to play in this process, as non-rational people can easily be influenced by what they find written online. Hence, the aim of this dissertation is to dismantle the rational choice theory and to understand

whether the last Italian elections have been affected by the social media phenomenon.

As a result, the first chapter poses its attention to the concept of rational choice theory and its criticism, namely the paradox of voting, for which people's political behaviour is governed more by emotions than rationality and that voting itself is an irrational decision and the voter's irrationality, explained by Bryan Caplan (2007). According to him, the voter is not ignorant. He is an irrational subject who acts in full awareness, but who is guided not by objective knowledge of the issues but by a series of often distorted interpretations of the reality of the problem. For this reason, the voter tends to make an irrational voting choice. The second chapter analyses the use of social media in election campaigns, focusing on the use made by political leaders and how they influence people's behaviour. It is necessary to state that politicians are much more rational than voters, because they are guided by their political survival instinct. Furthermore, social media increases interactions between people, but always with those who have similar points of view to theirs, which is why the digital environment is an actual engine of irrationality. Finally, the third chapter explores the theme of social media and news engagement, focusing on the outcome of the 2018 Italian elections and the media coverage of election issue, developed by MINE – Mapping Italian News, a project of the Department of Communication Sciences of the University Carlo Bo of Urbino. Accordingly, this thesis is also intended to determine whether, and when, success is a specific social strategy.

Chapter One: An electoral choice

1.1 Rational Choice Theory

The concept of rationality in the economic sphere has a precise meaning. Agents are rational if, after considering all the information they possess, they will act in a way that maximizes their utility – in non-economic terms, happiness or satisfaction. This kind of rationality is purely instrumental, because the agent uses all the information and resources at his disposal – good or bad, it makes no difference. For economists, human beings are not crazy; on the contrary, they behave in a totally predictable way, since every choice they make is consistent with the previous choice. In fact, the Rational Choice Theory, the school of thought that explains the concept of instrumental rationality, is based on three core assumptions: "(1) individuals have selfish preferences, (2) they maximize their own utility, and (3) they act independently based on full information" (Wittek 2013, p. 688). The rational agent is considered to be a real *homo economicus*, who is both a consumer and a producer and it is crucial to affirm that the core of the Rational Theory is based on the fact that "both consumers and producers are assumed to be optimizers in seeking the best outcome for themselves; consumers are assumed to want to maximize utility and producers assumed to want to maximize their profits" (Blink & Dorton 2020, p. 32).

The pillars of rational theory are preferences, beliefs and constraints. With regard to preferences, economic theory affirms the existence of three premises that apply to most people in many situations. They are completeness, transitivity and more is better than less. The concept of

transitivity is of vital importance to explain the coherence of actions taken by the *homo economicus*. According to the concept of transitivity, if a person prefers object A to object B, and object B to object C, he or she will consequently prefer object A to object C. Illustrated with a practical example, if someone prefers a Ferrari to a Mercedes, and a Mercedes to an Aston Martin, then he or she will have to prefer a Ferrari to an Aston Martin.

The Rational Choice Theory is also increasingly being applied to other areas, namely politics, sociology and even anthropology. According to the Rational Choice Theory, when it is time for citizens to vote, they will choose the candidate, or the party, whose objectives will enable them to maximize their utility. These choices cannot be inconsistent because they are in line with the personal preferences of citizens and them, as a fully rational human beings, act following the assumption of transitivity.

Nonetheless, in 1953 Maurice Allais, a French physicist and economist, questioned the concept of transitivity through the paradox that took his name. Allais made an experiment, using as subjects the so-called rational agents, all aware of the utility theory. These subjects had two choices to make. The first choice consisted in choosing between alternative A and B, and the second choice consisted in choosing between alternative C and D, and each of these alternatives respected a certain level of risk.

EXPERIMENT 1	
A	B
100% → $1MM	89% → $1MM
	10% → $5MM
	1% → $0

EXPERIMENT 2	
C	D
11 % → $1MM	10% → $5MM
89% → $0	90% → $0

If we consider the axiom of transitivity, if a rational individual prefers alternative A to alternative B, then will have to prefer alternative C to alternative D. However, the outcome of the experiment was not the following. On the contrary, the majority of the subjects who took part in the experiment preferred A to B and then they preferred D to C. According to Allais' paradox, these subjects prefer alternative A because they have the certainty to win, compared to B since it is associated to the probability to win nothing (1%) but also to win more than A (10%). Although alternative B has a bigger utility compared to alternative A, subjects give more weight to probability than to the prize. In the second experiment instead, the risk is present in both choices, but the subjects prefer alternative D, because it has a higher gain compared to C even if it has a lower probability. Consequently, in the second experiment subjects give more importance to the premium and not to probability. The paradox, therefore, questions the axiom of transitivity.

Hence, is it possible to affirm that human being then is not a purely rational subject? If Allais' paradox shows how human beings are not coherent in choices that involve a risk, how can we say that they can be perfectly rational in sociological, political or anthropological terms? As a matter of facts, the very concept of rationality in relation to the human being cannot be seen from an economic point of view. People are frequently irrational; they make choices dictated by feelings or emotions and can easily be influenced by external factors. When faced with conditions of uncertainty, ignorance or risk, the human being commonly does not make an evaluative analysis of the costs or benefits and does not act rationally, as the emotional part of the brain prevails over the cultural part.

1.2. Paradox of voting

In the political arena, voting and electoral choice are very often seen as purely rational decisions. However, in recent years there have been several studies on human behaviour and in particular on political behaviour. The outcome of these studies has been that our political behaviour is guided less by rationality and more by emotions. In the political sphere, this type of behaviour is referred to as 'paradox of voting'. According to this paradox, the cost of voting exceeds the expected benefit, yet if the decision taken is to be rational, it should result in a benefit that exceeds the cost of the effort. But each of us, separately, has practically little influence on the outcome of the election and hardly any result of an election was determined by an individual vote. Nonetheless, it is fair to admit that this phenomenon has been observed in some situations. As a matter of facts, a study by the University of Chicago reported that, out of the fifty-seven thousand votes considered, this phenomenon has happened eight times (Linkiesta 2017). Nevertheless, the numbers themselves confirm that this seldom happens.

Why do we vote anyhow? Can we consider it as an emotional and recreational activity? A research paper written by Esteban Klor and Eyal Winter (2017), has shown that turnout schemes in state elections are similar to football match attendance schemes. In fact, according to Winter (2015), fans are more likely to go to the stadium if the two teams are close competitors and if their favourite team is more likely to win. It is not ambiguous to admit that if the cheering team wins, you will definitely enjoy the match more. It is interesting to see 'the world of elections' as a great football match, especially when there is a heated rivalry between the competitors. Indeed, the reaction of the voters is even more appealing, as

they take the side of politicians as if they were the captains of their favourite teams. This is because, as successive studies have shown, people's political reasoning is influenced by their subjective moral feelings.

The concept of ideology has its importance in this area. An ideology is the complex of beliefs, opinions, representations, values that guide a particular social group. Unfortunately, it happens that ideology can distract us from our reasoning and at the same time means that, since we covet ideology, we like our politicians to be ideologists too. The problem is that politicians are more rational than voters, because they are guided by their politically survivalist instincts and they use ideology on their behalf. According to some psychological studies, it has been found that citizens tend to vote for those who resemble them the most, whose personalities are closest to their own. How do politicians show us their personality? Through ideology. The result is that people identify psychologically with the leaders, or the parties themselves, feeling a sense of attachment and an almost emotional orientation. Once again it is the feelings and emotions that drive voters to make a choice, not rationality.

1.3. Voters' irrationality

"Like moths to the flame, voters gravitate to the same mistakes.
They do not cancel each other out; they compound"
Bryan Caplan

The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies is a book written by economist Bryan Caplan (2007). He debates the idea that voters are reasonable people and furthermore, he argues that voters

are irrational in the political sphere and have partisan ideas about the economy.

As previously written, neoclassical economics assumes that people are rational. Caplan (2007) quite agrees with this view, as he states that people are largely rational when it comes to choosing a job, for example. At the same time, he claims that rational choices are made because the cost of making mistakes is too high. Sometimes, however, it is nearly free for the individual to carry on to his/her biased beliefs, and other people relish akin beliefs.

In this regard, Caplan introduces the term 'rational irrationality', stating that when it is economical to rely on something – right or wrong that is – it is rational to believe it. Caplan's explanation for voter ignorance goes beyond rational ignorance, as he states that: "since delusional political beliefs are free, the voter consumes until he reaches his 'satiation point,' believing whatever makes him feel better. When a person puts on his voting hat, he does not have to give up practical efficacy in exchange for self-image, because he has no practical efficacy to give up in the first place" (Caplan 2007, p. 132). Therefore, irrationality can provide self-satisfaction at practically no cost.

Caplan asks himself this question: Are the beliefs of the average voter true? In his book he focuses primarily on the mistaken beliefs of citizens in the economic sphere and also suspects that these errors go beyond the economy.

Political scientists have often blamed economists for assuming that voters are selfish. In this regard, Caplan states that "no matter how much you know about a voter's material interests, it is hard to predict how he is going to vote. In contrast, if you know what a voter thinks is best for society, you can count on him to support it" (2006). However, before deducing that policies that are improved for society will indeed prevail, we should contemplate the assumptions debated by Caplan, particularly that the beliefs of the average elector are true. If his beliefs are erroneous, his intentions lead him to support sub-optimal, and merely dangerous, policies.

He describes democracy as a popularity contest and if the average voter believes that a certain policy is the best for the society, then democracy will reward the politics and the parties who agree with that policy. Regardless of what is going on in the minds of politicians, because we do not know whether they share popular prejudices or whether they are just indulging them to get a reward, we can expect democracy to listen to the average voters, even when they are wrong.

How is it possible that people keep making political mistakes, year by year, without learning anything? Economists refer to this phenomenon as the aforementioned 'rational irrationality'. Is the voter merely irrational or, perhaps, ignorant? Caplan believes that voter is not ignorant, and his answer is that "irrationality, like ignorance, is sensitive to price, and false beliefs about politics and religion are cheap" (Caplan 2006) and that when voter's "views are completely wrong, he gets the psychological benefit of emotionally appealing political beliefs at a bargain price" (Caplan 2006).

Nevertheless, the social cost of irrationality is extremely high and dangerous. Caplan makes an example about pollution to explain his point: if just one person contributes to the pollution, no one notices it. But if 6 million people contribute to the pollution it is a huge problem. In this regard, if 6 million people share irrational thoughts, harmful policies will prevail. In conclusion, the matter with irrational voting is that the those who do it do not solely damage themselves and that if the average elector is irrational, we all ought to suffer the implications of their harmful decisions.

Chapter Two: A focus on politicians and their use of social media

> *"The whole art of politics consists in*
> *directing rationally the*
> *irrationalities of men."*
> *Reinhold Niebuhr*

2.1 Emotionalism and media as engines of irrationality

Emotions, whether positive or negative, have always been an element that guides human actions and politics and voting is not an exception. Today, when we flip through newspapers, watch television or browse social media, we can see that there are many references to the word emotion. In Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain (1994), Antonio Damasio explains how the most irrelevant environmental circumstances and the most hidden desires can generate scenarios that are impossible to evaluate with a certain rationality. Emotions have the function of indicating which problems reason must face and support, suggesting a series of solutions when the number of options available is too vast.

Unfortunately, this continuous recourse to emotions and little rationality has generated countless damages to society, especially in the political sphere. It is necessary to state that political actors, as previously written, are guided by an instinct of survival that allows them not to fall into the trap of irrationality, and consequently of emotionalism, and that nowadays they have become, more than problem-solvers, amplifiers of

emotions, which are fed and intensified by the net and social media. And it is in this context that they become theatrical and interpret a script, responding more or less effectively to the emotionality that dominates.

Social media is the context in which this 'magic' happens. According to an article published by the University of Copenhagen, on the EurekAlert! website (2014), social media damage our ability to act rationally. In fact, they represent a real arena in which people publish, click and share whatever comes to their minds. Also according to the study held by the University of Copenhagen (2014), "with the advent of modern information technology, we more often than not base decisions on aggregated public signals such as likes, upvotes or retweets on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter rather than taking the time to reflect and deliberate ourselves, with possibly severe consequences for democracy". The result of this situation leads most of the time to the creation of fake news. Fake news is "those sources that completely invent information, disseminate misleading content, and exaggerate the real news"[1]. (Sky Tg24 2017). As a result, the use of social media without enough attention and careful information, leads them to become engines of irrationality, which will then have a significant effect on the vote.

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[1] English translation made by the author of this dissertation.

2.2 The political actor and the media

Among the interpretative models of electoral behaviour, in support of the thesis whereby emotions are key elements in relation to the political sphere, it is possible to find the Columbia approach, guided by the studies of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) and the Michigan approach, based on the work The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960). The former assigns to the complex of affections and family and social relations of individual citizens the function of stabilizing political preferences. The role of the media and electoral propaganda is aimed at bringing to light an image already imprinted, that is – psychologically speaking – a latent predisposition from which socially rooted convictions emerge, shared with other members of the same group. The second approach also considers emotional and extra-rational elements central in the choice of the vote, but adds the consideration of the political party, even before the media, as a mediator of news and opinion-formers that the majority of citizen-electors would not be able to process autonomously.

When the mass media, and television in the first place, became a decisive instrument of political propaganda, the party began to take over from the candidate, an actor in the campaign who, by shifting the primary focus from content to representation and personification, reinforced the emotional reception of the message. Political actors are "individuals who have obtained at least some measure of political power and/or authority in a particular society who engage in activities that can have a significant influence on decisions, policies, media coverage, and outcomes associated with a given conflict" (Wolfsfeld 2015).

Social psychology has shown that individuals, during the opinion-forming process, tend to use clues and shortcuts to save them the trouble of searching for more complete and precise information and to focus on certain aspects, for example while interacting with a person, focusing on the face. However, the image of a political leader cannot be limited to the face, but it acts as a cognitive representation that includes, in addition to political affiliation, character aspects related to behaviour and personal history that the citizen keeps in mind when looking at a politician and his message. According to Westen (2007), subjects feel touched only by leaders who arouse emotional implications in them.

2.3 From mass to social media

The degree of personification and emotionality brought by the affirmation of the television medium as a privileged space for political communication is even higher with the advent of social media. Within platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the links between candidates and voters are even closer in a framing that reflects the same world view, bent by the real-time data available to the leader and his/her team of social media strategists to the orientation of the reactions of fans and followers.

In Italy, the evolutionary trajectory of political propaganda from TV to the net and in particular to social media is represented by the analysis of data on the online presence of political parties and their leaders. Before the advent of social networks, the spectacle of politics and a real turning point in political and electoral communication were implemented by Silvio Berlusconi; with him the aforementioned spectacle passed definitively from

newspapers and State TV to private television stations. However, with the advent of web 2.0 and the gradual shift of the political scenario from television to social networks he has irremediably lost pace with the times. Apart from Facebook, where he has a million followers, his online presence is almost imperceptible both on Instagram (281,000 followers) and Twitter (108,266 followers), compared to other political actors who have established themselves in recent years.

The personalistic evolution of politics is also confirmed if the comparison between leader and party is extended to all the major national political forces, starting with the Five Star Movement itself, which was the real, first digital innovator of politics with Beppe Grillo's Blog. Yet, if we analyze the use of digital media by Matteo Salvini, the Italian politician who is now the most followed on all the main social channels (Facebook, 4.2 million fans; Instagram, 2.1 million followers; Twitter, 1.2 million), we see a new turning point in political communication that passes from the time of the blog to that of Facebook, Twitter and, especially today, Instagram: personalization leaves all the space to the character. The personal profile is no longer a news repeater or the unmediated space for personal comments on political events, but the scene of an individual narrative that, by humanizing the figure of the politician, bringing it closer to the daily life of the followers, leverages politics and elections on their continuous emotional involvement, measurable in terms of *engagement*.

2.4 The hyperleaders

Self-narrative is an important element if you want to become a successful social media personality. In an article published by The Guardian,

John Harris (2019) describes these *hyperleaders*, stating that "all of these individuals present themselves as people from outside their countries' establishments, and draw their energy from vast numbers of devoted supporters who gather online".

These hyperleaders are able to reverse the relationship between the politicians and the party to which they belong to. The latter make use of a very broad social media base and are above the party, thanks to the media visibility they get through clicks and shares.

Thanks to social media politicians are ordinary people. We don't see they just making speeches in Parliament or involved in purely political activities, but we experience them 24 hours a day in their daily life. They show us what they eat for breakfast, what their children study and so on. Politicians give us continuous updates on the course of their daily life. And we like them, because we remember that before being politicians, they are ordinary people like us. The problem arises when the preference for them is due to this feeling of being close to the people who show to be on the social media, rather than on the political level.

We must add that we live in a period of deep suspicion towards collective organizations. Twenty years ago, the end of the party was predicted and those who opposed to it have now led to the digitization of the party itself. Despite the efforts, public confidence in the old structures is slowly fading, and while this is happening, through social media there is a return of personalized and charismatic leadership. In this context, the hyperleader has become the bridge between the populace and its party.

Chapter Three: Social media and news engagement

Whereas the first chapter focused on how voters are irrational and the second on how the media, especially the social media, are drivers of irrationality, this last chapter will focus on the 2018 Italian general election. The latter was studied by the University of Urbino. A project was carried out at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies of the aforementioned university by a team led by researchers with a considerable experience in the field of social media analysis and political communication. It has been named MINE, which stands for Mapping Italian News and it was born with the aim of creating a mapping of media coverage on political issues produced by the Italian media in view of the Italian elections in 2018. As a result, a report was written in which the level of engagement produced around certain news on Facebook and Twitter was analyzed, estimating the political trend of the different sources and measuring the level of polarization of online audiences with respect to these sources.

3.1 2018 Italian general election

After the dissolution of the Parliament, which took place on December 28th, 2017, by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, the Italian general election was held on March 4th, 2018. For this election 630 members of the Chamber of Deputies and the 315 elective members of the Senate of the Republic were elected. Where the Five Star Movement, led at the time by Luigi di Maio, received the majority of votes, the centre-right coalition, whose leading party was the League, headed by Matteo Salvini, obtained a significant number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, while

the centre-left coalition, guided by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi came third. In spite of these results, no political party or group reached the majority and it was possible to form the government only three months later, exactly on June 1st, through a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the League, resulting in the Conte I government – led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Between August and September 2019, Italy faced a government crisis, triggered by Matteo Salvini, who revoked the support of the League in government and asked the President of the Republic to call a snap election. This led to the resignation of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on August 20th, 2019, in particular because of a motion of no-confidence presented by the League, which was then withdrawn during the same parliamentary debate. Starting on August 21st, the President of the Republic began consultations with all parliamentary groups. On the same day, the Democratic People's Party supported a possible government with the Five Star, based on topics such as green economy, sustainable development, etc. Unfortunately, the consultations with Mattarella did not have a clear outcome, so a second round of consultations was announced in the coming days. During these days there was a confrontation between the Democratic Party and the Five Star Movement, while the Free and Equal Party claimed to support a possible coalition between the two. On August 28th, Nicola Zingaretti – the leader of the Democratic Party – announced at the Quirinale his position in favour of the formation of a new government with the Five Star and Giuseppe Conte at the helm. On the same day, Mattarella summoned Count to the Quirinal for August 29th to entrust him with the task of forming a new cabinet. On September 5th the Conte II government was established.

3.2 Mapping Italian News

What comes out of the MINE project is that whoever is social wins the elections. The novelty of March 4th is not so much in the affirmation of the Five Star or the defeat of the Democratic Party, but rather in the use of social news and the ability to create negative or positive sentiments which, starting from digital reality, influence public opinion even in important moments of democratic life, such as elections.

The project works in this way: the volume of interactions produced around these news on Facebook and Twitter is measured, the political trend of the different sources is estimated, the level of polarization of online audiences of these sources is assessed and problematic information cases that have had a significant impact on the campaign climate or that have managed to effectively manipulate media attention are analyzed.

3.2.1 The method

The project was based on a collection of 84,815 current affairs articles on Italian politics published between September 1st, 2017 and March 4th, 2018. MINE researchers have designed a technological infrastructure, based on Huginn open source software, in order to collect in real time a news dataset with their respective level of engagement on social media, in particular Facebook (in terms of comments, reactions and shares) and Twitter (retweets and favorites). The news was collected from three sources: Google News, the Global Database of Society (GDELT) and Twitter. User interactions with media sources on Twitter and Facebook have provided a wider perspective on the influence and role of media sources on people engaged in politics through social media. The differential media sharing

models of supporters of the diverse Italian parties on Twitter enabled a deep insight into the role of partisanship in the formation and functioning of media structures. Finally, content analysis has made it possible to track topics over time among media sources, whereas qualitative media analysis of individual case studies has improved the comprehension of the role, structure and patterns of partisan media coverage.

3.2.2 The analysis

The analysis carried out by these researchers was aimed at creating a profile of the political actors that catalysed the interactions with social media. In addition, a series of strategies used by different communities to magnify the number of contents in relation to their worldview was illustrated, and these strategies were aimed at resemantize negative coverage through the use of comments. What the researchers noted is that partisan and hyper-partisan sources were able to capture a large number of social interactions made by online users during the campaign period. Finally, the most salient topics analyzed during the research period were immigration, corruption and elite privileges. These arguments, invoked as the main cause of the state's failures to protect the rights of the weakest, such as individuals and families on low incomes, pensioners, the elderly, victims of natural disasters, etc., were among the main arguments during the election campaign and the months leading up to it. As a result, the strong calls for stricter immigration policies have provoked the reactions of supporters of inclusion policies, giving rise to bitter discussions triggered by accusations of incitement to violence, discrimination, racism and, therefore, fascism.

Even if the University of Urbino's project was dedicated to the observation of social media, traditional media such as television and newspapers also had a certain importance. In fact, television is still today the main information channel. The news that created a higher level of engagement during the whole period of study, with the highest levels of involvement on Facebook refers to an Italian music festival, Sanremo, broadcast on television. The engaging news that is in first position, published later on Rai's profile on Youtube, concerns a monologue performed by Pierfrancesco Favino – an Italian actor – about the problems of an immigrant forced to flee his homeland because of the war. The researchers of the project refer to this case as one of *pop politics*, a kind of hybrid political communication, in which the products of popular culture meet political issues. Moreover, a great number of videos featuring political themes extracted from programs in television are then published on websites, where they are seen, clicked and shared by users, and frequently they are published with titles built according to the logic of clickbait.

3.2.3 Sources and interaction

Data collected by researchers from both Twitter and Facebook platforms showed how online activism by League and Five Star Movement followers shifted users' attention to certain sources of information and news. In this regard, the League was able to attract the highest number of online sources, while the sources of the Five Star Movement reached the largest number of interactions on Facebook. In fact, the first two media sources that gained attention during the search period were ilblogdellestelle.it and beppegrillo.it, two official channels of the Movement. Then, in the top five

there are cross-partisan newspapers, such as repubblica.it, ilfattoquotidiano.it and corriere.it.

As mentioned earlier, the research revealed that different strategies were used by communities to transform content by adapting it to their worldview while at the same time dismantling conflicting content. Where sharing and reactions were needed to adapt content, comments were used to dismantle negative content. All metrics showed signs of correlation between reactions, such as likes, comments and shares. The researchers studied the similar relationship between comments and shares and found that news with negative coverage on the Five Star Movement or positive coverage on Renzi always showed the same pattern, with many more comments than shares. On the other hand, positive coverage of news about the Five Star Movement received a higher number of shares than comments. The strategy was an attempt to reshape a negative news story that was not aligned with the party's visions through a massive use of comments in the related social media post. The goal was to exploit Facebook's algorithm that pushes content with more interactions upwards in order to show opinions that contradict those expressed in the news.
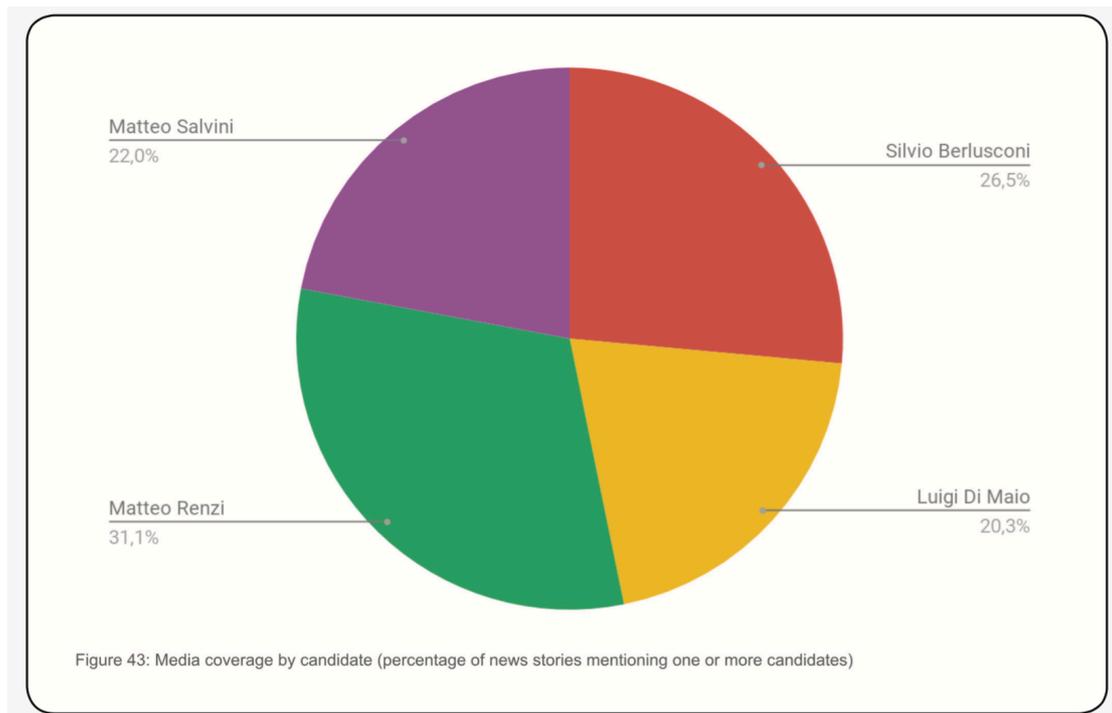
3.2.4 Distorted sources

Before proceeding with the analysis of the media coverage of politicians, it is necessary to explain how social media are tools of irrationality, very often used by misinformed people. In this regard it is vital to explain that party information sources often appear on the list of the most popular sites. Among them there are three problematic sources, namely llfatto.it, italia24ore.com and inews24.it, which have managed to enter the

top 25 of the most shared news. Where inews24.it is a site known for spreading anti-immigration and disinformation news and italia24ore.com represents the category of fake news, Ilfatto.it has a specific section where readers are informed about how some news are inaccurate or invented. Nevertheless, the article published by this site the day before the elections, which reported the news of 500,000 ballots with the logo of the Democratic Party discovered in Sicily, was widely shared on Facebook during the election day, so as to be the sixth most engaged article of the entire dataset.

3.2.5 Online media coverage of political leaders

Analyzing the media coverage and the related volumes of social media engagement, it was noted that the most frequently quoted leaders were Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi. The interesting fact is that most of the news about them was negative, such as allegations of corruption or scandals personally related to the leaders or parties they belonged to. Explicitly partisan and hyper-partisan sources were involved in this process, reporting a significant share of interactions.

Investigating the political leaders' media coverage data, it turns out that media coverage is not necessarily an automatic indication of increased popularity. Through the image below it is possible to see that Di Maio was the least quoted leader.

Figure 43: Media coverage by candidate (percentage of news stories mentioning one or more candidates)

Nevertheless, articles about him were very popular on Facebook. Di Maio's news reached on average about 1,043 interactions, while there were 790 for Salvini, 687 for Renzi and 684 for Berlusconi. In addition, Di Maio's news reached the peak of commitment in the last week prior to the elections. These data show that, although digital media coverage was relatively lower, the former leader of the Five Star Movement, compared to the other candidates, managed to gain a successful and prestigious position in the media.

Conclusion

So far, this dissertation has been intended to illustrate how the voter is an irrational subject. When it comes to making certain choices, the economic rules of rational theory do not apply. In fact, it is emotions that guide the human being in certain circumstances. In the political arena, emotions also come from leaders, and are then fed by the media, particularly social media.

The focal point of this thesis is to understand how irrationality and social media can influence an election outcome. The case study explained in the third chapter, whose subject is the 2018 Italian general election, presents a series of typical situations of engagement. What emerges is that news from party sources have received more attention than traditional newspapers. It is no coincidence that when talking about newspapers with more interactions, Five Star Movement's blog and Beppegrillo.it were in first and second position. What comes out from the analysis conducted is that this engagement had its roots in the Five Star Movement official website and all those sites that were not official affiliates, but which expressed the same content.

What was found by the researchers is that, behind each party, there was a very organized media community that was activated in presence of certain news or automatic forms of sharing and increasing the volume of interactions. As a result, there has been a high level of engagement with certain news, and consequently with the politicians or parties mentioned, which has affected the decisions of the voters.

The 2018 general election is an example of how emotionalism, social media and the rationality of political actors are focal points of an election campaign. Interactions on social media are the most important element, and it is clear from the research how they influence the electorate.

It would be interesting in the future to study the upcoming Italian elections to understand if this is an isolated case or a trend that continues over time.

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Riassunto

La seguente tesi si propone di analizzare il modo in cui i cittadini votano, nonché le possibili conseguenze generate dalle loro scelte.

Il primo capitolo si focalizza sul concetto di razionalità che assume un significato ben preciso in ambito economico in quanto, secondo la teoria della scelta razionale, ogni decisione presa dalle persone è coerente con quella precedente e, di conseguenza, perfettamente razionale.

Il concetto di coerenza delle azioni intraprese dall' *homo economicus* può essere spiegato dall'assioma della transitività per cui, presi in considerazione tre tipi di beni, che chiameremo A, B e C, se il consumatore preferisce il bene A al bene B, e il bene B al bene C, allora preferirà di conseguenza il bene A al bene C. Applicando la summenzionata teoria allo scenario politico, al momento di votare, il cittadino sceglierà il candidato, o il partito, i cui obiettivi gli permetteranno di massimizzare la sua utilità. Qualsiasi opzione scelta non potrà essere incoerente, poiché si troverà in linea con le preferenze personali dei cittadini e, questi ultimi, in quanto esseri umani pienamente razionali, agiranno seguendo l'assioma della transitività.

Ciò nonostante, nel 1953 Maurice Allais dimostrò, attraverso il paradosso che prese il suo nome, come l'assioma della transitività potesse essere messo in discussione, introducendo i concetti di rischio e probabilità. Essendo questi ultimi elementi chiave della sfera politica, si può affermare come il concetto stesso di razionalità, con riferimento all'essere umano, non possa essere osservato dal punto di vista economico.

A tal riguardo, è possibile affermare come il nostro comportamento politico sia guidato meno dalla razionalità e più dalle emozioni. Secondo questo tipo di comportamento, definito "paradosso del voto", il costo del voto supera il beneficio atteso; tuttavia, se la decisione presa fosse razionale, si tradurrebbe in un beneficio maggiore del costo dello sforzo. Inoltre, il ragionamento politico delle persone è influenzato dai loro sentimenti morali soggettivi. Il problema sorge quando l'ideologia entra in gioco. Gli attori politici sono più razionali degli elettori, perché sono guidati dal loro istinto di sopravvivenza e usano l'ideologia a loro favore. Grazie all'ideologia, le persone si identificano psicologicamente con i leader, o con i partiti stessi, sentendo un senso di attaccamento e un orientamento quasi emotivo.

Bryan Caplan afferma che gli elettori sono attratti dai loro stessi errori, così come le falene sono attratte dalla luce. Egli mette in discussione l'idea che gli elettori siano persone ragionevoli e inoltre sostiene che gli elettori sono irrazionali nella sfera politica e hanno idee di parte sull'economia. A questo proposito, Caplan introduce il termine "irrazionalità razionale", affermando che fare affidamento su qualcosa, giusta o sbagliata che sia, ma economicamente vantaggiosa, è razionale.

Caplan inoltre afferma che "non importa quanto si sappia degli interessi materiali di un elettore, è difficile prevedere come voterà. Al contrario, se si sa cosa un elettore pensa sia meglio per la società, si può contare sul suo sostegno". Egli descrive la democrazia come una gara di popolarità in cui, se l'elettore medio ritiene che una certa condotta sia la migliore per la società, allora la democrazia premierà la politica e i partiti che sostengono tale condotta.

Caplan ritiene che l'elettore non sia ignorante e, a tal riguardo, afferma che "l'irrazionalità, come l'ignoranza, è sensibile al prezzo, e le false credenze sulla politica e sulla religione sono a buon mercato" e che quando le opinioni dell'elettore "sono completamente sbagliate, egli ottiene il beneficio psicologico di appellarsi emotivamente alle credenze politiche ad un prezzo stracciato". In conclusione, colui che vota in maniera irrazionale non solo danneggia sé stesso, ma anche gli altri in quanto tutti subirebbero le conseguenze delle sue decisioni dannose.

Nel secondo capitolo vengono affrontati i concetti di emozionalità e media come motori dell'irrazionalità. Le emozioni, siano esse positive o negative, guidano da sempre le azioni umane e, politica e voto, non rappresentano un'eccezione. È necessario affermare che gli attori politici, come già scritto in precedenza, sono guidati da un istinto di sopravvivenza che permette loro di non cadere nella trappola dell'irrazionalità, e di conseguenza dell'emotività. Questi ultimi, al giorno d'oggi, più che risolutori di problemi sono diventati amplificatori di emozioni che vengono alimentate e intensificate dalla rete e dai social media. Secondo un articolo pubblicato dall'Università di Copenhagen, sul sito web di EurekAlert!, i social media danneggiano la nostra capacità di agire razionalmente.

Tra i modelli interpretativi del comportamento elettorale, a sostegno della tesi secondo cui le emozioni sono elementi chiave in relazione alla sfera politica, è possibile trovare il *Columbia approach* e il *Michigan approach*. In aggiunta, secondo Drew Westen, i soggetti si sentono colpiti solo dai leader che suscitano in loro implicazioni emotive.

L'evoluzione personalistica della politica si conferma anche se il confronto tra leader e partito si estende a tutte le maggiori forze politiche nazionali, a partire dallo stesso Movimento 5 Stelle che, con il Blog di Beppe Grillo, è stato il vero primo innovatore digitale della politica. A tal proposito, il profilo personale diventa la scena di una narrazione individuale che, umanizzando la figura del politico, fa leva sul coinvolgimento emotivo degli elettori, misurabile in termini di *engagement*.

In questo contesto è possibile trovare gli iperleader i quali sono in grado di invertire il rapporto tra i politici e il partito a cui appartengono. Questi ultimi si avvalgono di una base di social media molto ampia e sono al di sopra del partito, grazie alla visibilità mediatica che ottengono attraverso i click e le condivisioni. Inoltre, considerando che mentre la fiducia dell'opinione pubblica nelle vecchie strutture si sta lentamente affievolendo, attraverso i social media si sta assistendo al ritorno di una leadership personalizzata e carismatica.

L'ultimo capitolo di questo elaborato si propone di spiegare l'esito delle elezioni del 4 Marzo 2018, che hanno avuto come protagonisti il Movimento 5 Stelle e la Lega, seguiti dal Partito Democratico. Una coalizione tra i 5 Stelle e il partito di Matteo Salvini ha portato alla creazione del governo Conte I, nato il 1° giugno 2018.

Ciò che emerge dal progetto MINE, acronimo di Mapping Italian News, è che il politico *social* ha maggiori possibilità di vincere le elezioni. La magia sta nella capacità di creare sentimenti negativi o positivi che, grazie all'aiuto dei media, influenzano l'opinione pubblica. Ad esempio, la notizia che ha creato il livello di engagement più alto durante l'intero periodo di

studio, concerne il Festival di Sanremo e in particolare il monologo di Pierfrancesco Favino, riguardante l'immigrazione – uno degli argomenti salienti della campagna elettorale.

Inoltre, i dati raccolti dai ricercatori dalle piattaforme di Twitter e Facebook hanno mostrato come l'attivismo online dei seguaci della Lega e del Movimento 5 Stelle abbia spostato l'attenzione degli utenti su alcune fonti specifiche di informazione e notizie. A questo proposito, la Lega è stata in grado di attrarre il maggior numero di fonti online, mentre le fonti dei 5 Stelle hanno raggiunto il maggior numero di interazioni su Facebook. Per raggiungere questo obiettivo sono stati capaci di sfruttare l'algoritmo di Facebook che spinge verso l'alto i contenuti con un maggior numero di interazioni.

Analizzando la copertura mediatica e i relativi volumi di impegno sui social media, si è notato che i leader più frequentemente citati sono stati Matteo Renzi e Silvio Berlusconi. Esaminando i dati di copertura mediatica dei leader politici, è emerso che quest'ultima non è necessariamente indice di aumento di popolarità. I dati presenti nell'elaborato mostrano che, sebbene la copertura mediatica digitale sia stata relativamente più bassa, l'ex leader del Movimento 5 Stelle, rispetto agli altri candidati, è riuscito ad ottenere una posizione di successo e di prestigio nei media.

Il punto focale di questa tesi è capire come l'irrazionalità e i social media possano influenzare il risultato di un'elezione. Ciò che emerge è che le notizie provenienti da fonti di partito hanno ricevuto più attenzione dei giornali tradizionali. Inoltre, i ricercatori del progetto hanno scoperto che, dietro ogni partito, era presente una comunità mediatica molto organizzata

che, in presenza di determinate notizie, si attivava aumentando il volume delle interazioni. Questo processo poteva influenzare le decisioni degli elettori.

In conclusione, le elezioni italiane del 2018 sono un esempio di come l'emozionalità degli elettori, il peso dei social media e la razionalità degli attori politici siano i punti chiave di una campagna elettorale.