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The words of populism on social network. Analyzing users interaction of four Italian political leaders in European election of 2024

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Abstract

This study analyzes populist rhetoric on social networks by examining user interactions on Instagram profiles of four Italian political leaders (Meloni, Schlein, Conte, Salvini) before the 2024 European elections. Employing NLP, text analysis, and a dictionary-based approach, a signed network of interactions was constructed to identify anti-elitist and sovereignist language. Results reveal strong discourse personalization around leaders, with Giorgia Meloni emerging as dominant in comment volume and network centrality. Populism manifests distinctly across factions: anti-elitist for Conte's Five Star Movement and markedly sovereignist for Salvini's Lega. The study concludes that social media amplifies polarization, fundamentally shaping varied populist discourses in Italy.

Keywords: *NLP; Signed network; Dictionary based; European elections*

1. Introduction

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of populism is complex (Diehl & Bargetz, 2023). The literature, in fact, does not reach consensus on a single definition of populism (Hunger & Paxton, 2022). It has been shown that populist attitudes can take on different connotations depending on multiple context-specific factors (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2024): territory (Mazzoleni, 2023), the left–right ideological dimension (Davis, 2025), ethnic belonging (Spierings & Jacobs, 2025), socio-economic status (Bláha, 2024), and so on. In an attempt to simplify such a complex concept, two broad semantic dimensions can be identified: populism as anti-elitism and populism as sovereignism (Brigevich & Wagner, 2025). In the first case, populism frames politics as a conflict between a virtuous people and a corrupt, illegitimate, self-referential elite (Pacześniak, 2024). Anti-elitist rhetoric mobilizes resentment against elites by alleging that they betray the will of the people (Gerbaudo, 2023). In the second case, populism manifests as sovereignism: a rhetoric that places national sovereignty and popular

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political control above supranational institutions (e.g., the EU) (Paris, 2022). State sovereignty is emphasized, and, in the name of popular sovereignty, any transfer of powers to supranational bodies is rejected.

In light of the foregoing, the following pages attempt to identify elements of populism among supporters of the main Italian parties that can be articulated as either anti-elitist or sovereignist. To this end, we focus on discussions appearing on the social media profiles of leading Italian politicians around the 2024 European elections. The literature has demonstrated the important role social networks play during election campaigns (Jensen & Schwartz, 2022; Shmargad & Sanchez, 2022; Bright et al., 2020). On the one hand, social networks give candidates the opportunity to steer the political debate (Arman, 2024), setting the agenda; on the other hand, they induce followers to polarize into distant positions (Belcastro et al., 2022), which can often be used to predict electoral outcomes (Brito et al., 2021). Topic selection and polarization within social-media debates are closely linked to the phenomenon of populism, both in its anti-elitist and sovereignist forms (Engesser et al., 2017).

2. Data and methodology

Methodologically, text-analysis techniques were applied to highlight semantic differences in comments across profiles. The use of text analysis and semantic network in the study of populism has been adopted by several authors. Gründl (2022) analyzed populism in Germany using a dictionary of populist terms, Wagne et al. (2024) created a database for automated detection of populism in textual data using machine learning. Other authors have attempted to measure the populist content of social media using corpus of images (Trillò, 2025) or using textual analysis on post and comments (Kluknavská, et al., 2024; Jungherr et al., 2024; Thiele, and Turnšek, 2022). In this work, building on the Gründl (2022) vocabulary, we extracted some keywords in order to identify two main political beliefs in the user's community: sovereignism and anti-elitism.

For this purpose, we collected comments on the posts on Instagram of four Italian political leaders: Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, of Brothers of Italy (FdI) (a right-wing party), Elly Schlein, leader of the Democratic Party (PD) (a center-left party), Giuseppe Conte, leader of the Five Stars Movements (M5S) (a center-left party) and Matteo Salvini, leader of Lega (center-right party). The dataset covers comments from April 12, 2024 to June 7, 2024 which represent the period preceding the European Election.

Table1 Distribution of the number of comments for each leader

Leader	Party	N. comments	% total
Conte	M5S	42,815	11,8%

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Salvini	Lega	55,841	15,4%
Schlein	PD	39,328	10,8%
Meloni	FdI	217,949	60,0%
Total	—	**355.933**	**100%**

Our analysis focuses on the concept of populism, recognized through notions as national identity, border control, and the "will of the people," as well as Anti-elitism, which refers to the perceived antagonism between the "people" and the "corrupt elite."

The methodology uses a dictionary-based approach. By matching predefined keywords, we scan the corpus for specific lemmas and n-grams associated with populist rhetoric. To ensure statistical comparability across different datasets, the most critical methodological step is the normalization of frequencies to occurrences per 10,000 words.



Figure 1- The Word Cloud of each political leader

This normalization is essential because the volume of Instagram comments varies significantly between political figures (e.g., Meloni vs. Schlein). Utilizing raw counts would introduce a systematic bias toward more active profiles; this ratio, conversely, facilitates a statistically rigorous cross-leader comparison. Furthermore, we created a network of interaction among the users in order to study the dynamics of each community. Finally, using feel-it (Bianchi et al., 2021) we performed a sentiment analysis on the comments to assign to each of it a positive or negative score. This allowed us to build a signed network.

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As shown in Fig.1 the leaders names emerge (e.g. Conte, Matteo, Elly, Giorgia) and titles as “presidente” (president), reinforcing the thesis that discourse are more around the political leaders rather than the party structure. By focusing on each quadrant:

Conte emphasizes economic measures and social safety with words such as "reddito" (Citizenship Income), "bonus," and "lavoro" (work). He’s also perceived as an outsider as a "technocratic populist" distinct from the traditional political class as suggested by the word “politici" (politicians). The Salvini landscape is dominated by an external figure who is “Vannacci” (a general who ran for the Lega) that is nearly prominent as “Salvini” showing how the political campaign what almost entirely dominated by these two figures. The presence of “capitano” (captain), “avanti” (forward) reflects a populist leadership with emotional loyalty.

In Schlein’s word cloud, the presence of the word "destra" (right) confirms that much of the discourse on her profile is defined by focusing on the opposition of the current government. Unlike the other leaders, it is defined by clear programmatic and policy-oriented pillars as “diritti” (rights), “sanità” (healthcare), “salario minimo” (minimum wage) or “sinistra” (left) suggesting a less personalized discourse.

Meloni is dominated by institutional terms: "governo" (government), "Italia," and "consiglio" (Council of Ministers). The dominance of the word “presidente” (president) suggests a strong identification with her institutional role as Prime Minister. Furthermore, the presence of the words “sinistra” (left), “antifascista” (anti-fascist) suggests the ideological polarizations among the users while words such as “Italia” or “italiani” suggest discourse focused on the national and patriotic identity.

3. Results

By analyzing the four networks of interactions (Fig. 2) it emerges that the politicians' nodes display in-degree centrality measures that are higher than any other node in the network, with hub-to-mean ratios ranging from 15.3 times (Conte) to 153.7 times (Meloni). For Meloni's node, there are 391 direct mentions in comparison to a network-wide mean of 2.54. This makes Meloni's node the most dominant node among the networks. Salvini's node ranks second with a hub-to-mean ratio of 57.1 times, while Schlein's node ranks third with a hub-to-mean ratio of 33.8 times. Conte's social network ranks lowest in hub dominance with a hub-to-mean ratio of 15.3 times, consistent with a more dialogic interaction pattern between followers. More generally, the networks around center-left leaders appear sparser with more peripheral structures—especially in Schlein’s case—whereas center-right networks seem more concentrated around salient nodes.

Turning to the analysis of populist content in the texts, figure 3 shows that Conte’s community has the highest anti-elite index, nearly three time higher than Salvini supporters, and higher than

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Meloni and Schlein. This result is in line with the anti-establishment rhetoric on which 5SM was founded, focuses on the fight against the power paradigm and the caste.

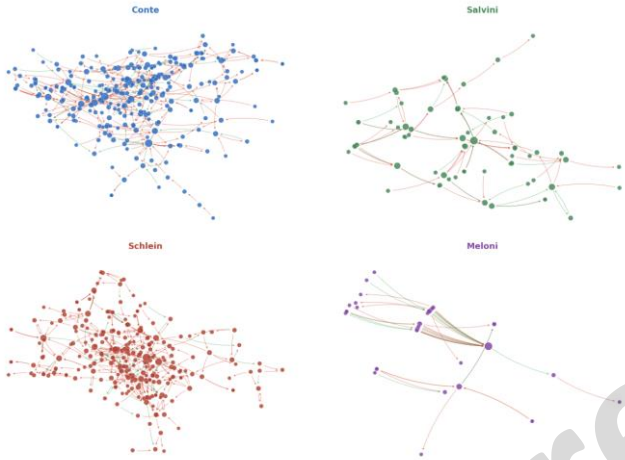


Figure 2 – The networks of each leader

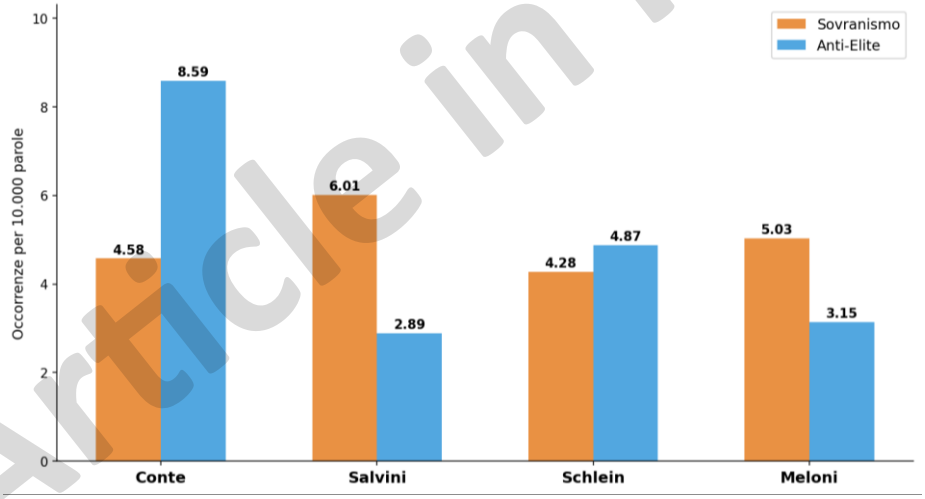


Figure 3 – Sovereigntist and anti-elitist frames in Instagram comment communities

On the other hand, Salvini's community has the highest sovereignism score, and the lowest anti-elitism score, suggesting a community organized around national-identity, borders rather than a critique of political or economic elites.

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Meloni and Schlein appears more balanced. Meloni shows a higher score on sovereignism (5.03) but comparatively low on anti-elitism (3.15), a pattern that may reflect the normalization effect of governing: right-wing populist communities tend to attenuate anti-establishment rhetoric once their preferred party holds executive power. Schlein's community, conversely, scores similarly on both dimensions (4.28 and 4.87 respectively), indicating a more diffuse populist framing without a dominant axis. In other words, populist content is present in both broad political camps. Specifically, the anti-elitist dimension is more prevalent on the center-left, whereas the sovereignist dimension is stronger on the center-right. However, differences within each field are substantial. The disparity in anti-elitism scores between Conte and Schlein is considerable (3.72), while the difference in sovereignist scores between Meloni and Salvini is slightly less than one point.

4. Conclusion and future work

The rise of populist parties in the 1990s has shaped the European political landscape over the past thirty years. What began as a discourse opposing a virtuous people to a corrupt, self-referential elite has increasingly acquired a pronounced sovereignist (and at times nationalist) character. The shift of political debate to social networks has, on the one hand, amplified and radicalized opinion polarization and, on the other, produced a high degree of political personalization. Using social network analysis and text-analysis tools, this study sought to highlight these phenomena. First, results indicate that, especially among right-wing parties, the political leader often matters more than ideology. The case of the Lega is notable: a single candidate (Vannacci) displays very high centrality within the party's network; two years later the same candidate leaves the Lega to form a new party. Second, the analysis shows that the concept of populism, while present in both major political camps, manifests differently: anti-elitist in the case of the Five Star Movement and distinctly sovereignist in the case of the Lega. In the latter case, it is noteworthy that sovereignist claims are also prominent within the governing party itself. This work contributes to the wider discussion on the topic by merging: 1. the analysis on network structures where links are not only seen as interactions among users, but are enriched by a wider identification of the type of link and discussions that occur among them (D'Agata et al., 2025); 2. by analyzing the text production of each user.

Future developments include extending the dictionary to capture finer aspects of anti-elitism and sovereignism. From a network-analysis perspective, the next step is to extend signed-network analysis to users to deepen understanding of network structure and node behavior. Finally, a broader view of user activity will be achieved by integrating textual analysis results into the network framework, thereby producing a richer, more comprehensive structural representation.

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