

# Facebook as a media digest: user engagement and party references to hostile and friendly media during an election campaign

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### **Abstract (100 words)**

This paper investigates how parties spread news from traditional media on their social network accounts to engage followers. In particular, we address why parties would choose to include in the ‘media digest’ they carefully craft for their followers also content from ‘hostile’ media outlets and journalists. We analyze 4,586 Facebook posts published by the main Italian parties during the 2019 European election campaign, assessing the impact on readers’ engagement of counter-attitudinal and pro-attitudinal content from either hostile or friendly media. Our results show that parties skillfully exploit friendly and hostile sources alike to alternatively engage or outrage their followers.

## **Facebook as a media digest: user engagement and party references to hostile and friendly media during an election campaign**

As the boundaries between different types of media get thinner, parties and politicians have started to find ways to exploit the hybrid nature of the media system. In this paper, we investigate how parties disseminate news content from traditional media on their social network accounts in order to engage followers. In particular, we address the reasons why politicians and parties can also choose to include content from ‘hostile’ media outlets and journalists in the “media digest” they carefully craft for their followers. We analyze the content of 4,586 Facebook posts published by the main Italian parties during the 2019 European election campaign, and we evaluate the impact on readers’ engagement of counter-attitudinal news, as well as pro-attitudinal content from both hostile and friendly media. Our results not only show that parties and politicians do not shy away from openly sharing hostile media coverage, but they also skillfully exploit friendly and hostile sources alike to alternatively engage or outrage their followers.

**Keywords:** media hostility, media diet, user engagement, political communication, elections, social media

### **Introduction**

In current media systems, the boundaries between different types of media fade away. On the one hand, news from traditional media is shared and spread on social media by journalists and media outlets, political elites and politicians, and by common users. On the other hand, traditional media sometimes rely on social media as a source of news for their stories, and talk about events taking place online, or report politicians’ declarations released on Twitter and Facebook, which can thus affect the political agenda. The huge coverage given by newspapers and television to Donald Trump’s tweets in the US, or to

the Facebook posts and videos published by Matteo Salvini in Italy, are just some examples of this process.

Despite their mutual relationship with journalists, some politicians, especially populist right-wing ones (Jacobs, Sandberg, & Spierings, 2020; Soontjens, Remoortere, & Walgrave, 2020), have distanced themselves from the media landscape and increasingly shame individual journalists, or attack and criticize the whole media system. Examples are provided by Trump, who has shamed the former Fox anchor Megyn Kelly and referred to traditional media as “fake news media,” Joe Biden, who was recently caught insulting the Fox News journalist Peter Doocy, or by Salvini who has claimed to be under attack from established newspapers (“*giornaloni*”) and journalists such as Lucia Annunziata, Lilli Gruber, and Gad Lerner.<sup>1</sup>

A mutual and close relationship between journalists and politicians still holds value in the eyes of political elites, who are constantly involved in a struggle over visibility with their competitors (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). However, in an era in which social media provide politicians with new opportunities to communicate with voters, and media audiences are more and more fragmented, the relationships between media and politics might have changed substantially (van Dalen, 2021). This gives rise to a wide debate on the degree of politicians’ perception of media hostility (Matthes et al., 2019b; Soontjens et al., 2020) and to a related stream of literature that has recently started to investigate the behavior of politicians deliberately engaging in adversarial relationships with journalists, by mentioning and shaming traditional media on Facebook

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<sup>1</sup> Annunziata, Gruber and Lerner are popular journalist and talk show hosts commonly considered as left leaning.

and Twitter (Jacobs et al., 2020). This trend is particularly relevant in Italy, where left-leaning editors and journalists seem overrepresented in the media system (Ceron, Splendore, Hanitzsch, & Thurman, 2019), and some political actors, especially the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League (LN) have actively fueled hostility toward journalists and the media, depicting them as a detached elite that neglects citizens' interests (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015).

Taking our cue from the literature on media selectivity (e.g., Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015) and from studies on hostile media, as well as the effects of cross-cutting exposure to disagreeable pieces on the news (Bail, Argyle, & Brown, 2018; Matthes, Knoll, & Valenzuela, 2019a), this paper investigates the effect of spreading different types of news, and the reactions of readers (namely, the followers of the party's account) in terms of engagement and mood. First, we describe the extent to which political parties spread news from traditional media (Heidenreich, et al. 2022), by sharing and commenting on news items on their social media accounts during election campaigns. Then we detect the slant of the news (pro-attitudinal, when the news aligns with the party message, or counter-attitudinal when it does not) and its source (hostile or friendly media), in order to compare the impact of counter-attitudinal news in comparison to pro-attitudinal items coming from either hostile or friendly (consonant) media outlets.

This allows us to answer two questions. First, we examine the mobilization power of pro-attitudinal news coming from friendly sources compared to those coming from hostile media. Second, we shed light on the link between counter-attitudinal news and engagement, also focusing on anger activation.

For this purpose, using content analysis we analyzed 4,586 Facebook posts published by the five main Italian parties during the recent 2019 European election campaign. As the effects of posting political news on Facebook are especially compelling for those politicians that feel a hostile media bias, and given its peculiar and intensive communication strategy aimed at publishing a disproportionately huge number of posts, we primarily focus our research question on Salvini's League, contrasting these results with other Italian parties (which adopted a more parsimonious style of communication on social media).

Results of statistical analysis show that, when posted, counter-attitudinal news clearly generate user engagement, in particular by fostering negative reactions caught through the "angry" emoticon. This suggests that parties are able to exploit hostile media coverage to mobilize their followers. Conversely, we only find partial evidence of selectivity with respect to pro-attitudinal news. Indeed, news from friendly sources are shared more; apart from this, in terms of reactions and comments we found almost no difference when comparing positive news from either friendly or hostile media. Overall, we argue that parties make use of news content to produce a sort of "media digest"—especially when their audience feels distanced from the traditional media—which combines pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal news to inform their followers, stimulate peculiar reactions, and to provide them with arguments to resist negative media coverage.

### **Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

Previous research has thoroughly investigated which politicians make it into the news, showing that journalists report more often and more positively about politicians with

whom they have personal contact, and about those politicians who hold similar political views. In turn, politicians exploit the hybrid media system, and try to control the news cycle, nudging journalists to cover them.

By analyzing parties' Facebook accounts, we investigate the other side of the coin, discriminating which news content makes it into the parties' online communication (Heidenreich, et al. 2022) in order to shed light on the level of user engagement that these different contents generate.

The literature on selective exposure suggests that people prefer opinion-reinforcing information. When dealing with news that is inconsistent with prior personal beliefs and opinions, cognitive dissonance arises, causing citizens to avoid, discard, or consider less credible such inconsistent information (Garrett, 2009).

Media consumers tend to reject counter-attitudinal content; instead, they are more willing to consume and expose themselves to pro-attitudinal news from ideologically consonant media sources, which are biased in the direction of their own views, as they usually perceive such sources to be more reliable.

Consequently, media diets reflect the partisan preferences of consumers. This pattern is strengthened during election campaigns, particularly on social media, as voters (especially partisan ones) can decide to expose themselves to messages and media sources that are more consonant with their political views, and will consume more pro-attitudinal information than dissonant viewpoints.

This increases the tendency toward fragmentation, as different media outlets address the demand of a polarized public, offering a wide range of outlets that account for the diverse ideological preferences of consumers (e.g., Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011).

Nevertheless, scholars point to a potential media bias, as some viewpoints, usually the liberal ones, can be overrepresented (Ceron et al., 2019). Consequently, although traditional media seem able to accommodate a wide array of political views, several politicians in different countries feel that the media are biased against them and produce overall unfavorable coverage (Soontjens et al., 2020). Politicians' criticism of the media as biased is quite common, especially among right-wing politicians (Soontjens et al., 2020). Populists are particularly prone to adopt delegitimizing strategies against the media (Egelhofer, Aaldering, & Lecheler, 2021).

Likewise, scholars have introduced the concept of "anti-media populism," which opposes the "pure people" against the "corrupt journalists" who divert citizens from their true interests through their biased reporting, thus favoring the status quo. This concept of populist citizens (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021) can indeed be strategically exploited by populist parties.

In addition to right-wing and populist politicians, the literature on the hostile media phenomenon also suggests that right-wing citizens consider journalists to be biased in favor of liberal stances and left-wing parties (Lee, 2005; see also: Fawzi, 2019).

While several political actors are disappointed by the media coverage, during election campaigns parties seem to craft a sort of "media digest," and select news that their audience is willing to read. In so doing, parties can spread news that supports the party line, and provide their followers with additional (pro-attitudinal) information and



arguments useful for reinforcing their beliefs and getting out the vote.<sup>2</sup> Such arguments can also be useful when discussing politics with other friends and social media users, when trying to win their support. The spread of pro-attitudinal news can also mobilize party followers, increasing their level of engagement and spreading the favorable news beyond that circle.

In fact, political actors are usually only able to directly reach a (relatively) narrow group of already converted followers (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). Conversely, thanks to the dissemination logic of social media, based on “virality”, parties can indirectly spread their messages to a much wider audience when their followers engage with the party’s social media content, through reaction emojis, comments, and shares (Bene et al., 2022). Indeed, posts where reaction has been high are more likely to be shown in the users’ news feed, and can also be seen by the friends of the user that interacted with them.

Consequently, political actors can pro-actively shape their posts in order to trigger reactions from their followers (Bene et al., 2022; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Jost, Maureer, & Hassler, 2020); parties can post pro-attitudinal news with the aim of exploiting the logic of “virality” to maximize the diffusion of favorable content beyond the circle of their followers.

Given that hostile environments promote avoidance in terms of interpersonal discussion, political participation, and engagement, when parties share pro-attitudinal news, their followers will interact less with positive contents coming from hostile media

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<sup>2</sup> Facebook posts can mobilize citizens, increase voter turnout, boost donations, and enhance participation in offline political rallies (Bronstein, 2013).

than with positive contents coming from friendly sources (trusted by the party's audience).

*Hypothesis 1 (H1): Posting pro-attitudinal news from friendly media will generate more engagement in terms of reactions, comments, and shares, compared to posting pro-attitudinal news from hostile media.*

In terms of engagement, negativity has proved to be a powerful mobilization tactic, and a number of studies confirm that negative content triggers more reactions (Bene et al., 2022; Heiss et al., 2019), as people tend to pay more attention to negative information, and the fact that such content generates a stronger psychophysiological response (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Indeed, the use of partisan news aimed at eliciting an emotional angry response in the audience increases the flow of information shared among users on social media during election campaigns (Hasell & Weeks, 2017).

Framing politics in terms of conflict and drama is an effective communication strategy to gain public attention, especially when dealing with a hostile media system (Matthes et al., 2019b). Moreover, the perception of hostile coverage from media sources reinforces partisanship among citizens, thus, providing an incentive for politicians to vilify the media in order to increase the perception of hostility, and to redirect voters toward sources that are more slanted in their favor (Kleinnijenhuis, Hartmann, Tanis, & van Hoof, 2020).

In this regard, news that is negative for the party (i.e., that runs against the party line) can be suitable for the generation of engagement, and also can possibly attract voters. Indeed, some studies have found a positive relationship between exposure to

cross-cutting communication and different forms of political participation (for a review, see Matthes et al., 2019a).

On the one hand, it has been argued that politically oppositional information leads people to deeply reflect on their own political viewpoints. According to the theory of motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), exposure to counter-attitudinal news can generate an oppositional media hostility effect (Levendusky, 2013), causing citizens to resist and counter-argue such information, for instance by posting a comment, or by expressing anger and disagreement.

On the other hand, exposure to disagreeable information can foster polarization, thereby enhancing participation. For instance, a field experiment showed that Republicans and Democrats reinforced their pre-existing attitudes after being exposed to Twitter bots that shared opposite political viewpoints (Bail et al., 2018). Accordingly, parties can also mobilize their followers by sharing counter-attitudinal news commenting on it to attack and criticize the media outlet that released the news.

Recent studies have started to investigate politicians' adoption of a hostile rhetoric toward journalists and the media elite on social networking sites, including Facebook (Jacobs et al., 2020; Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Focusing on the Dutch case, Van Kessel and Castelein (2016) found that the right-wing party leader Geert Wilders used to attack journalists when he received negative media coverage. This strategy can be useful to reduce the credibility of (hostile) media, and to shield politicians and their followers from any future criticism from that media outlet (Smith, 2010).

Additionally, criticizing the news media on Facebook can be a further strategy to mobilize a broad audience by activating anger (Jacobs et al., 2020). On Facebook,

mobilization is often triggered through emotional appeals (Bronstein, 2013), including fear, resentment, and anger. Scholars have found that, across different parties, harvesting anger on social media can be an effective strategy for gaining attention, as posts “receiving relatively more anger are on average shared and commented on more” (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 625).

The peculiar architecture of Facebook, which also allows users to express a reaction by using a specific anger emoticon, seems well-suited indeed to activate anger among citizens. In fact, negative messages do stimulate angry reactions expressed through the anger emojis (Eberl, Tolochko, & Jost, 2020).

From this perspective, given that anger is a powerful mobilization tool (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017) that can be very useful during election campaigns, parties can share counter-attitudinal news framing them to criticize the media. When this happens, we can expect a strong level of engagement from their social media followers, especially in terms of anger reactions.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Posting counter-attitudinal news will generate strong engagement in terms of reactions (especially that of anger), comments, and shares.*

## **Case selection and data**

### ***Facebook and its architecture***

To test our hypotheses, we analyzed Italian parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 European election campaign focusing on the League, and by investigating the differences between this and other parties.

Each social networking site differs from all the others in terms of affordances of a social and technological nature, thus affecting how actors create content, and the way people

react to, or interact with, the content they see on social media. Such specific peculiarities are internalized by politicians (or by their spin doctors) while formulating their strategic choices regarding political communication and campaign strategies (Stier, Bleier, & Lietz, 2018).

With this in mind, we focused on Facebook for a number of reasons. First of all, when compared to other platforms, Facebook features the broadest user base. Second, the specific articulation of demography and political interests of Facebook users is particularly well-suited for our research purposes, given that on Facebook most accounts are private, and the point that communication takes place primarily through one-way or reciprocal friendship channels. Consequently, the audience of Facebook posts consists primarily of people who already “like” a party page and show interest in a party’s political stances (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013; Stier et al., 2018; see also: Barberá, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, a recent development in the architecture of Facebook allows users to differentiate their reaction to posts using emoji buttons other than the standard “like” (thumbs up). The use of different reactions—including the anger emoji—actually influences how the News Feed appears to specific types of users. This feature can be exploited by candidates who monitor Facebook analytics to shape their strategy accordingly, and to capitalize on the potential spillovers of triggering anger on social

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<sup>3</sup> If many partisan supporters of rival parties would engage with a party’s post, turning it into a battlefield for contestation and virtual clashes (by commenting on it), we would have observed a difference when analyzing the comments compared to “likes” or shares. Instead, we found similar results on the different outcome variables.

media (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 625). This feature is particularly useful for our research purposes as it allows us to directly observe how users react to party contents differently.

### ***The Italian case and Salvini's League***

We have investigated the Italian case, which is particularly compelling. In fact, Italians retain extremely low levels of trust in news, with only Greece and the UK scoring worse in Western Europe (Newman et al., 2020). Skepticism toward the news in Italy is reinforced by the perceived ideological distance between journalists and the public.<sup>4</sup>

Such evidence is particularly interesting in light of studies that reveal the partisanship of Italian news media (Mancini, 2013). According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the integration between newspaper media and (party) politics is one of the key features of the so-called “Polarized Pluralist” media system. The Italian media system (together with that of other Mediterranean countries) is traditionally characterized by a high degree of political parallelism. Thus, where partisanship and political polarization are mirrored by the media, newspapers are “the principal participants in struggles among diverse ideological camps” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 131), and “try to take active part in the decision-making process by setting the symbolic context within which this process takes place” (Mancini, 2013, p. 337).

High degrees of political parallelism can also influence the “insularity” of patterns of online media consumption and engagement around political news, with

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.lavoce.info/archives/43279/il-giornalismo-e-gli-italiani-una-crisi-di-ideologia/>

supporters of Italian populist parties being particularly prone to rely on partisan “insular” outlets (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti, & Marino, 2019).

Our analysis focuses on the League for several reasons. In the last decade, the party started to stress its populist stances amidst internal scandals, and underwent a significant transformation. Under Salvini’s leadership, the League has turned from a regionalist party advocating for the independence of Northern Italy, to a nationalist and “sovereigntist” party, that has shifted attention to the defense of national physical and metaphorical (e.g., cultural) borders, against external enemies, such as immigrants and the European Union. The shift was rewarded at the 2018 general elections; the League quadrupled its votes, going from 4.1% (in 2013) to 17.4% and, after months of political instability, was able to form a government with M5S.

Subsequently, the League fulfilled its (popular) flagship electoral promises: It adopted stricter stances on immigration policy and approved the pension reform “Quota 100” (allowing workers to retire earlier). As a result, the League steadily increased its support—mainly at the expense of its government ally M5S—overturning the power relations within the Conte I Cabinet. In this context, the 2019 EP elections represented a great opportunity for the League to certify such vast popular support. Indeed, the party made a huge communication effort (taking advantage of a large and dedicated staff), and devoted a lot of resources to online communication, producing a massive number of posts on Facebook, more than double compared to all the other parties (see below).

Lastly, the League stands out as an interesting case study because of its relationship with both social and traditional media. Populist parties and leaders seem quicker and better at adapting their communication style to new media; this is particularly true for social media platforms, whose architectures offer favorable

opportunity structures for populist messages and styles (Ceron, Gandini & Lodetti, 2021), which favor emotional messages (Bobba, 2019) and the incendiary rhetoric that is often associated with populism. However, the League did not shy away from exploiting traditional media as well. It relied on tabloids and television, to promote its candidates and policy proposals. This approach marks a striking difference compared to another populist party, the M5S, which refused to engage with traditional media in its infancy.

### ***Data collection and main variables***

In the last four weeks before the election (May 26th, 2019) we collected all the Facebook posts of parties that obtained more than 5% of votes using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). We omitted sponsored content (publicly discernible on Facebook) which could bias the reactions. The final dataset consisted of 4,586 posts, though the League alone published 3,231 messages (more than 70%).

We selected four dependent variables, retrieved through Facepager<sup>5</sup>: the count of Shares (how many times a post was shared); the count of Comments; the total number of Reactions (“likes” plus all the other emoji-reactions); and the number of Angry reactions (which is a specific subset of the previous Reactions variable).

We performed content analysis on the posts (taking into account pictures and videos as well as the text) to measure several independent and control variables.

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<sup>5</sup> We collected them four weeks after the election to avoid bias for posts that were published late.



Overall, we reached good levels of inter-coder reliability, especially for our main independent variable (Krippendorff's Alpha: 0.83; Holsti: 0.90)<sup>6</sup>.

We tested our hypotheses relying on the following main independent variable: "Media content," which captures the interplay between the party, the content of the news mentioned in a party post, and the slant of the media source. A considerable amount of the campaign content that parties share online is of a hybrid nature, and appears first in other news media before migrating to Facebook, or vice versa.

Political actors can exploit media sources on Facebook in different ways, from simply posting a hyperlink to a news piece (e.g., one LN post reports this news item from an online outlet: "*Viminale, in 2018 -15% of violent crimes. Salvini: this is due to law enforcement*")<sup>7</sup>, to sharing soundbites and videos from interviews and televised debates (the Democratic Party, PD, often posted videos from political talk shows), or to producing more elaborate content combining original political messages with newspaper excerpts and video footage from news media (one M5S post says: "*Months of lies and economic catastrophism promoted by elite newspapers and TVs,*" followed by a list of news pieces that criticized the acts of the M5S-led government).

For each post, we first controlled for the presence of media-related content of any kind; then we determined whether or not the media content presented by the party was in line with their party-political positions; finally, we assessed whether the source, be it a media outlet, a specific show or an individual journalist, could generally be considered as hostile or consonant with the party.

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<sup>6</sup> See the Online Appendix for details.

<sup>7</sup> "Viminale" is the colloquial name of the Ministry of the Interior.

In detail, each Facebook post was coded, and sorted into one of four categories: (a) posts that do not contain any reference to news media; (b) posts containing counter-attitudinal media content—content that goes against the stances of the party—coming from a source considered as non-friendly towards the party; (c) posts containing media content that is pro-attitudinal with respect to the party line, and coming from a non-friendly source; (d) posts containing pro-attitudinal content coming from a friendly, consonant, news source.

To classify the traditional orientation of media sources, assessing whether they were friendly or hostile to specific parties, we took into account findings of previous research, which highlighted in great detail the political leanings of the media in Italy, based on historical characteristics of the Italian media and political system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mancini, 2013), journalists' self-assessment, and the relative positions of the audience on the political spectrum (Barisione et al., 2014; Ceron & Splendore, 2018). In our classification, we complemented and updated such existing studies, providing our additional expert knowledge in order to grasp the current evolution of the mass media's political orientation. Accordingly, we classified all media outlets owned by Silvio Berlusconi and his family as being consonant with the center-right or right parties (LN; Go Italy, FI; Brothers of Italy, FdI). Furthermore, in order to classify public television and radio (RAI), we followed the traditional subdivision (*lottizzazione*) of channels between governing and opposition parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Finally, we considered consonant with one party those media whose broadcaster or editor explicitly expressed support for a specific political party (for instance, the anti-establishment newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, which has endorsed the M5S), or a clear ideological line (for instance, *La Repubblica* takes positions which are very close to

those of the PD). Table D, in the Online Appendix, summarizes the political orientation of the main news outlets, showing when these were classified as friendly media overall, or friendly just in some specific instances (due to a specific show or journalist referred to online by the party).

Summing up, the categorical variable “Media content” is equal to: 0 (reference category), if the post does not contain any reference to a media or media-related content; 1 if the post refers to counter-attitudinal contents, slanted against the party line, (these all come from non-friendly media); 2 if the post contains pro-attitudinal content from non-friendly media; 3 if the post contains pro-attitudinal content from friendly media.

### ***Control variables***

We included a set of dummy variables as controls. Three dummy variables were equal to 1 if the post contained, respectively, a reference to the “Local/regional level”, the “National level,” or the “European level” (and 0 otherwise). We distinguished between posts discussing “Polity” (the constitutional foundations of political institutions) and “Politics” (processual aspects of politics), as two additional variables.

Concerning the policy areas, we added five variables equal to 1 if the post referred to one of the following specific areas: “Economic policy,” including taxation, national debt, the budget; “Social policy,” including labor, welfare, pensions, and education; “Immigration”; “Crime,” including criminality and domestic policy in general, unrelated to immigrants; “Other policy”—this was a residual category which included environment, culture, infrastructures, and foreign policy, amongst others.

The dummy “Interaction” is equal to 1 if the post contains a call for interaction (encouraging some forms of interactive behavior from the audience); the dummy “Mobilization” is equal to 1 if it includes a call for mobilization (online or offline). We controlled for whether the post contains a populist reference against alleged (ethnic, political, or cultural) “Dangerous groups,” or a reference to the “People.” The dummy “Negative campaigning,” is equal to 1 if the post expresses negative emotions or statements against political opponents. Three dummy variables assess whether the post contains a “Link,” an “Image,” or a “Video.” Finally, a continuous variable accounts for the “Days left” before the elections.<sup>8</sup>

### **Preliminary findings**

Although parties often complain against an alleged biased and a hostile media system, they devoted a considerable amount of space to mass media, journalists, and news content: a quarter (24.7%) of their posts include references to media-related content (with some differences across parties). The M5S mentioned media content the least (12% of their posts), followed by PD (17%), FdI (20%), the League (27%), and FI (30%).

Surprisingly, only around a quarter (27.7%) of media-related posts came from friendly media, while the majority of them (65.1%) contained pro-attitudinal news produced by non-friendly media sources. However, while some parties engaged predominantly with hostile media sources (i.e., LN, with 71.4%, and M5S, with 63.9% of hostile sources out of all posts containing a media content), others preferred friendly

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<sup>8</sup> See the Online Appendix for descriptive statistics and details on data collection.

media sources (posting scarce content from hostile sources, respectively: FI, 37.8%; PD, 35.7%; FdI, 15.6%).

The M5S mentioned news from hostile media to emphasize the positive results of their policies. In one post, they commented on Italy's positive economic outlook (published by a right-leaning newspaper): "*LET EVERYBODY KNOW! The results are becoming evident and more objective coverage is starting to emerge!*" They also exploited this kind of content for the purposes of negative campaigning (against the PD in the next example), citing the following pro-attitudinal news from hostile sources: "*THE LAST GIFT BY PD: '1,800 PEOPLE FIRED'*".<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, the LN exploited hostile sources by skillfully crafting and selecting favorable content and news (often mentioning Salvini's statements too), as a sort of "media digest," especially with respect to immigration-related crimes, in order to trigger angry or outraged reactions from its audience. They shared news like this: "*NINETY-YEAR OLD WOMAN ROBBED AND MURDERED, 5 ROMA ARRESTED: SALVINI IS FURIOUS*" or this: "*#SALVINI: EUROPE IS BECOMING AN ISLAMIC CALIPHATE.*"

Interestingly, apart from FI, parties engaged to some extent with hostile media, even when they produced negative coverage of the party line or party leader. The M5S often employed counter-attitudinal news (19.4%) while making explicit reference to the hostility and unfairness of the media environment. For instance, they expose the (alleged) biased nature of media elites in judging the effects of their flagship measure, the "citizenship income": "*Aren't you tired of TVs announcing that our bills will lead to*

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<sup>9</sup> The post refers to an Italian furniture producer and retailer, whose crisis and subsequent shutdown is attributed by the M5S to the choices taken by the previous cabinet.

*economic catastrophe? Facts say otherwise. More than two million people are benefiting from the citizenship income.*” Similarly, in another post, they shared video segments of journalists and media outlets criticizing their economic measures, commenting ironically: “*OFFICIAL DATA DISPROVE MONTHS OF LIES! WHAT ARE THEY GONNA LIE ABOUT NOW?*” Parties also refer to specific hostile journalists, reporting their statements to attack them; in particular, the LN especially highlights Salvini’s ability to blast journalists perceived and depicted as enemies during live or recorded TV shows: “*Are you enjoying how the Captain is answering... Gruber??? Number 1!!!*”; or, similarly: “*ARE YOU WATCHING??? YESTERDAY THE CAPTAIN ... BLASTED EVERYONE AT GRUBER’S! WATCH THIS!*”<sup>10</sup> More subtly, journalists perceived as hostile are singled out for the very fact of pressing Salvini. For instance, the League reported the content of the show while stating: “*#Salvini: Today I have been hosted by Annunziata! [...] If you have as much patience as I had, you will understand why on May 26 the League is going to get a landslide of votes!*”

Summing up, these preliminary qualitative remarks point to a possible strategy behind the apparently paradoxical way in which parties approach the media in their online campaigns. Parties combined a careful selection of media content—from hostile and friendly sources alike—that might have eluded the public, with an effort to frame counter-attitudinal content in order to disarm possible criticism, and which explicitly tackles the hostility of the media environment. This strategy can be seen as a “media digest,” namely, a set of content from traditional media that party readers are likely to engage with.

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<sup>10</sup> The “Captain” (“*il Capitano*”) is the nickname of Salvini.

The League's strategy can be considered paradigmatic. First, LN fully embraced the hybrid nature of the media system, combining online and traditional media sources to provide a continuous feed of carefully selected pro-attitudinal news, regardless of their source. Second, LN maximized its candidates' pervasiveness in traditional media, by editing and presenting clips of their appearances on newspapers and TV shows. Third, LN adopted a particularly aggressive stance towards hostile media, by frequently denouncing its biased nature, and by personally attacking journalists unpopular among its electorate. Fourth, LN made a considerable investment in the campaign, both offline and online, as confirmed by its massive number of Facebook posts in comparison to other parties.

### **Statistical analysis**

We test our hypotheses through negative binomial regression, given the zero-inflated and count nature of the dependent variables. We mainly focus on the League, presenting its results first, and contrasting them with all the other parties later. Hence, in Models 1a, 2a, 3a, and 4a we test our hypotheses using only League posts (Table 1), while we run Models 1b, 2b, 3b, and 4b using the posts of all the other parties, including party dummies as controls (Table 2). The coefficients of our variables of interest have been shaded in gray to promote legibility.

### ***The League***

Regarding H1, we found only partial support for the effect of a hostile media environment on engagement and political discussion online. Based on media selectivity theory, we expected an avoidance of (and a lower engagement with) content from non-

friendly sources. Instead, we notice that, when compared to posts that do not display news content, pro-attitudinal news tends to produce the same effect on engagement, irrespective of whether the source is friendly or not.

For the League, the effect of posting news that resonates with the party line is positive and statistically significant, with no differences between friendly and non-friendly sources in terms of Reactions and Comments. Conversely, posting pro-attitudinal content from non-friendly, rather than friendly, sources generates fewer Shares and Angry reactions, in line with the expectations of H1 (based on a Wald test the difference between the two coefficients is significant only for Shares, p-value = 0.040, and for Angry reactions, p-value = 0.026).

Regarding Angry reactions (Model 4a), media that are slanted in favor of the League seem particularly prone to frame attitudinal content for Salvini's party (i.e., the crimes of immigrants and refugees) in a more emotional and sensational way. Our findings suggest that the League exploits this kind of pro-attitudinal content from friendly sources by including it in its media digest, in order to elicit anger from its followers (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

**[Table 1 around here]**

Regarding H2, we find substantial support for our expectation. Posting counter-attitudinal news always generates a positive and statistically significant effect on engagement across all the models. The League exploited disagreement and hostile coverage to its advantage, mobilizing their followers. As hypothesized, this effect is particularly evident in eliciting angry reactions from the audience.



Refining our analysis, we also find that the impact of counter-attitudinal content on engagement is generally stronger than that of pro-attitudinal news. In this regard, Shares represent (once again) an exception, as posting counter-attitudinal content does not seem to increase sharing behavior much more than posting pro-attitudinal content. Indeed, according to a Wald test, for LN there is no statistically significant difference between sharing counter-attitudinal content, compared both to pro-attitudinal news from friendly sources (p-value = 0.771) and to pro-attitudinal news from non-friendly sources (p-value = 0.131). Conversely, such a difference is markedly evident with respect to Angry reactions. Specifically, for LN, posting counter-attitudinal news from a non-friendly source impacts Angry reactions four times more than pro-attitudinal news from non-friendly sources, and almost three times more than pro-attitudinal news from consonant sources (both differences are highly statistically significant according to a Wald test: p-value = 0.000).

These results side with our preliminary qualitative findings: LN skillfully exploits traditional media content to create a media digest for its followers. This type of strategy enables the League to generate more engagement, but also to “control” the narrative around the party, by sharing and re-interpreting explicitly counter-attitudinal contents.

### ***Other Parties***

Turning to the other parties, we find no support for H1. Posting pro-attitudinal news, either from a friendly or a non-friendly source, has almost no impact in terms of engagement compared to posting content other than news. Compared to the League, the other parties were less able to engage users through pro-attitudinal content. We do not

find statistically significant differences between the impact of pro-attitudinal contents from friendly or non-friendly sources. The notable exception is, once again, the impact on Shares (in a similar fashion to what we just observed for the League), which is positive and significant in case of pro-attitudinal content from friendly sources, and not statistically significant when the source is non-friendly.

**[Table 2 around here]**

As we already observed for the League, there is wider support for H2 here, too. Posting counter-attitudinal media content produces more engagement than posting content without any reference to the media. The most relevant impact is on Angry reactions, suggesting that all parties, at least to some extent, are able to exploit negative coverage to outrage their followers and generate more engagement.

### ***Summary***

A substantial implication that emerges from our analysis is that parties, and especially the League, adapt their communication strategies to a hybrid media environment. They integrate content from traditional media in their Facebook posts, and exploit this content to generate more engagement. While the League appears to be the most successful at exploiting media content, regardless of its slant or the inclination of the source, all parties seem to be at least able to exploit counter-attitudinal content in order to attract more attention and generate more engagement.

Concerning pro-attitudinal news, there are some differences between LN and the other parties: Only the former successfully used them to engage users. The sources of

pro-attitudinal news did not make a difference anyway, except in the case of Shares (and, partially, Angry reactions). Why? The peculiar action of sharing a post (Model 1a and 1b) implies more attention to the source of the news, generating a possibly larger media selectivity effect. Sharing can be considered a strong explicit form of endorsement as the user reposts content on their News Feed. It is then reasonable to observe that, both for LN and the other parties, sharing is more likely to happen when it involves pro-attitudinal news from friendly sources—consistently with the selectivity framework (H1). Conversely, a (partisan) user can lack the confidence to share a post from hostile media on their News Feed, even if that content confirms pre-existing attitudes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper investigated the mobilization power of news posted on Facebook by political parties. By assessing the slant of the news (pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal) and the orientation of its source (hostile or friendly media), we compared the engagement generated by counter-attitudinal news (from hostile media) vis-à-vis pro-attitudinal items coming from either hostile or friendly (consonant) media.

The results suggest that counter-attitudinal news content boosts user engagement in terms of shares, comments, and reactions—especially angry reactions. This provides further support for the use of negativity as a mobilization strategy. Conversely, despite the scholarly emphasis on the selectivity of news media traditionally applied by news consumers, in terms of reactions and comments we found almost no difference when comparing positive news from either friendly or hostile media. The party audience was

no more willing to react and comment on positive news when the source was a friendly media outlet compared to a hostile one.

The only relevant difference is related to the behavior of sharing that post; as expected, Facebook users were more willing to share positive news items when these came from friendly media, in line with theories on media selectivity. This result re-opens the debate around the meaning of the action of sharing a post, which on Facebook can be viewed as a strong endorsement for both its content and its source (in contrast to what might happen on Twitter).

Overall, posting news was suitable to generate engagement, though this effect is more evident for the League. These results highlight the role of politicians and parties in terms of news gatekeeping, posing new challenges for the professional tasks of journalists and media outlets.

While traditional media used to play a mediating role alone, by spreading the news to citizens while framing and interpreting it, politicians seem now able to mediate the diffusion (and the interpretation) of news among their followers. In view of that, we argue that parties (particularly the League) make use of news content to produce a sort of “media digest,” especially when their audience feels distant from the political orientation of traditional media; politicians combine pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal news to inform their followers, to stimulate peculiar reactions, and to provide them with arguments with which to resist negative media coverage. It is possible that this could increase the fragmentation of the political information environment further, by pushing political actors to (partially) act as partisan media.

If political actors spread news (to their huge online audiences), another potentially relevant implication of our study is that in order to boost the visibility and

“virality” of their contents, traditional media can adjust coverage to stimulate actions from the politicians’ side, producing news that they want to repost; journalists might also give more attention to parties that generate stronger engagement.

A potential limitation of the study concerns the use of bots and the inauthenticity of Facebook profiles and interactions (Giglietto et al., 2020). However, any party that wants to promote a message using bots—to efficiently allocate such resources—should probably boost messages that will later become viral due to real human interaction, therefore, it will use bots to spread the type of message that the audience wants to see; as such, this issue could probably play a limited role in our analysis.

Our findings are relevant to the literature on hostile media bias (Matthes et al., 2019b; Soontjens et al., 2020), precisely because politicians can exploit the pre-existing attitudes of their Facebook audience sharing news also to promote an oppositional media hostility (Levendusky, 2013), affecting perceptions and stimulating anger; the findings align with studies on politicians’ adoption of a hostile rhetoric against journalists and the media (Jacobs et al., 2020; Matthes et al., 2019b; Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). This confirms previous findings, and highlights the importance of hostile media coverage, which can be exploited by criticizing the news media to activate anger and mobilize the audience (Hasell & Weeks, 2016), potentially increasing distrust and polarization. Such incentives to boost hostile behavior against journalists can be particularly problematic, as this could damage trust in the media, exactly when we need more objective coverage and reliable news, particularly during election campaigns.

Finally, the results also align with studies on the effects of cross-cutting exposure on political participation (Matthes et al., 2019a), confirming that the exposure

to counter-attitudinal news, mediated by political parties, can promote participation (here investigated in terms of engagement).

While political parallelism and media polarization are typical of Italy, these features also pertain to other countries belonging to the Hallin and Mancini (2004) Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist model. However, recent studies indicate that media polarization also matters in other non-Atlantic media systems, including countries belonging to the Northern European/Democratic Corporatist model, such as Germany and the Netherlands (Ceron et al., 2019). Furthermore, media bias is of concern in Atlantic countries, most notably the US (Lee, 2005). Accordingly, the analysis of the differences between friendly and non-friendly media may travel beyond the Italian case. In view of this, future research could extend this theoretical framework with a comparative perspective, to investigate how politicians exploit news content—from both friendly and hostile media—in their everyday communication across different media systems.

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Table 1. User engagement and media content (League)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Model 1a</b>	<b>Model 2a</b>	<b>Model 3a</b>	<b>Model 4a</b>
	<i>Shares</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Reactions</i>	<i>Angry</i>
Counter-attitudinal content from non-friendly media	0.968***	1.541***	0.730***	2.332***
	(0.168)	(0.172)	(0.133)	(0.162)
Pro-attitudinal content from non-friendly media	0.706***	0.535***	0.501***	0.564***
	(0.0640)	(0.0657)	(0.0495)	(0.0689)
Pro-attitudinal content from friendly media	0.914***	0.653***	0.627***	0.789***
	(0.0969)	(0.0987)	(0.0758)	(0.0993)
Local/regional level	-0.0647	-0.182**	0.0764 <sup>†</sup>	-0.143*
	(0.0563)	(0.0582)	(0.0441)	(0.0621)
National level	-0.0870	0.0803	-0.128**	0.0798
	(0.0560)	(0.0581)	(0.0439)	(0.0634)
European level	0.100 <sup>†</sup>	-0.0165	0.0689 <sup>†</sup>	-0.362***
	(0.0525)	(0.0544)	(0.0413)	(0.0590)
Polity	0.276*	0.155	0.156	-0.0150
	(0.128)	(0.134)	(0.101)	(0.133)
Politics	-0.413***	-0.367***	-0.263***	-0.516***
	(0.0620)	(0.0631)	(0.0479)	(0.0625)
Economic policy	-0.301**	-0.446***	-0.198***	-0.967***
	(0.0904)	(0.0952)	(0.0714)	(0.104)
Social policy	-0.0822	-0.279*	-0.118	-0.541***
	(0.114)	(0.120)	(0.0907)	(0.130)
Immigration	0.295***	0.261**	0.203**	0.594***
	(0.0759)	(0.0785)	(0.0604)	(0.0766)
Crime	0.0247	-0.0801	0.104*	-0.135*
	(0.0659)	(0.0671)	(0.0515)	(0.0689)
Other policy	0.0449	-0.125	0.0388	-0.245*
	(0.104)	(0.110)	(0.0819)	(0.112)

Interaction	0.201**	0.415***	0.150***	0.624***
	(0.0702)	(0.0729)	(0.0549)	(0.0762)
Mobilization	-0.459***	-0.581***	-0.376***	-0.864***
	(0.0560)	(0.0590)	(0.0435)	(0.0659)
Negative campaigning	0.499***	0.707***	0.301***	1.279***
	(0.0734)	(0.0726)	(0.0569)	(0.0708)
Dangerous groups	0.252**	0.438***	0.199**	0.850***
	(0.0834)	(0.0811)	(0.0639)	(0.0789)
People	0.214*	0.0877	0.217**	-0.456***
	(0.101)	(0.103)	(0.0778)	(0.113)
Image	-0.383 <sup>†</sup>	-0.209	-0.288 <sup>†</sup>	0.673**
	(0.198)	(0.205)	(0.157)	(0.229)
Video	-0.0694	-0.126	-0.297 <sup>†</sup>	0.954***
	(0.204)	(0.209)	(0.161)	(0.233)
Link	-0.563***	-0.592***	-0.521***	-0.214***
	(0.0484)	(0.0489)	(0.0374)	(0.0536)
Days left	-0.01***	-0.0166***	-0.017***	-0.013***
	(0.00277)	(0.00290)	(0.00222)	(0.00305)
Constant	4.629***	4.572***	6.503***	1.392***
	(0.227)	(0.230)	(0.175)	(0.246)
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-8,069.7	-14,205.5	-20,767.4	-7,618.1
<i>Observations</i>	3,231	3,231	3,231	3,231

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, <sup>†</sup> p<0.1

Table 2. User engagement and media content (other parties)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Model 1b</b>	<b>Model 2b</b>	<b>Model 3b</b>	<b>Model 4b</b>
	<i>Shares</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Reactions</i>	<i>Angry</i>
Counter-attitudinal content from non-friendly media	0.308 <sup>†</sup>	0.636**	0.290*	0.788**
	(0.180)	(0.201)	(0.131)	(0.263)
Pro-attitudinal content from non-friendly media	0.0120	-0.0436	0.0001	0.0612
	(0.0913)	(0.103)	(0.0666)	(0.140)
Pro-attitudinal content from friendly media	0.179*	-0.105	0.00513	0.0404
	(0.0913)	(0.104)	(0.0668)	(0.147)
Local/regional level	-0.223**	-0.0653	-0.0595	0.0117
	(0.0774)	(0.0882)	(0.0562)	(0.120)
National level	0.0768	0.162*	0.0549	0.374***
	(0.0650)	(0.0718)	(0.0463)	(0.101)
European level	-0.106 <sup>†</sup>	-0.194**	-0.0665	-0.176 <sup>†</sup>
	(0.0632)	(0.0698)	(0.0452)	(0.101)
Polity	0.0181	-0.0910	-0.00875	-0.208
	(0.0867)	(0.0983)	(0.0631)	(0.141)
Politics	0.0165	0.0848	0.0475	-0.186*
	(0.0553)	(0.0620)	(0.0400)	(0.0895)
Economic policy	-0.123 <sup>†</sup>	-0.235**	-0.137**	-0.0508
	(0.0655)	(0.0757)	(0.0490)	(0.103)
Social policy	0.141*	0.0997	0.0363	0.184 <sup>†</sup>
	(0.0624)	(0.0717)	(0.0459)	(0.0976)
Immigration	0.227 <sup>†</sup>	0.0150	0.125	0.168
	(0.125)	(0.140)	(0.0920)	(0.189)
Crime	0.0514	-0.0773	-0.0408	0.442***
	(0.0684)	(0.0762)	(0.0502)	(0.104)
Other policy	-0.126 <sup>†</sup>	-0.233**	-0.128**	-0.0569
	(0.0647)	(0.0748)	(0.0477)	(0.107)
Interaction	-0.0464	0.133	0.0321	0.233 <sup>†</sup>

	(0.0746)	(0.0837)	(0.0540)	(0.119)
Mobilization	-0.0856	-0.203**	-0.171***	-0.254*
	(0.0556)	(0.0617)	(0.0396)	(0.0887)
Negative campaigning	0.251***	0.287***	0.0857*	1.363**
	(0.0574)	(0.0646)	(0.0419)	(0.0847)
Dangerous groups	0.0694	0.164*	0.0461	0.546***
	(0.0694)	(0.0805)	(0.0516)	(0.109)
People	0.0266	0.103	0.113 <sup>†</sup>	-0.151
	(0.0852)	(0.0973)	(0.0622)	(0.135)
Image	0.469***	0.203	0.237*	0.543**
	(0.129)	(0.144)	(0.0937)	(0.201)
Video	0.615***	0.415**	0.172 <sup>†</sup>	0.462*
	(0.133)	(0.149)	(0.0975)	(0.209)
Link	-0.273***	-0.342***	-0.247***	-0.367***
	(0.0521)	(0.0593)	(0.0385)	(0.0815)
Days left	-0.0007	-0.00655 <sup>†</sup>	-0.00118	-0.0172***
	(0.00298)	(0.00341)	(0.00218)	(0.00481)
FdI	0.671***	0.140	0.727***	0.488**
	(0.0873)	(0.0996)	(0.0653)	(0.142)
M5S	1.766***	1.281***	1.291***	1.866***
	(0.0667)	(0.0758)	(0.0496)	(0.105)
PD	0.812***	0.593***	0.665***	1.095***
	(0.0785)	(0.0899)	(0.0581)	(0.129)
Constant	3.549***	3.745***	5.421***	0.500*
	(0.157)	(0.175)	(0.113)	(0.246)
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-14,459.5	-7444.8	-9523.5	-4475.1
<i>Observations</i>	1,351	1,351	1,351	1,351

Standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, <sup>†</sup> p<0.1