

# For better or for worse: politics marries pop culture (TikTok and the 2022 Italian elections)

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**ABSTRACT:** This contribution focuses on analysing political communication in Italy during the 2022 national elections, with particular attention to the TikTok platform, where prominent Italian political leaders have appeared. To this end, we used a combination of social analysis tools, including Fanpage Karma and Blogmeter Live Insight. The collected data were scrutinized using a multidisciplinary approach that combines Political Communication Theory and Media Analysis. The aim is to explore the role of pop culture in political communication and understand how this phenomenon influences political participation and users' choices. Furthermore, the possible consequences of the growing popularity of pop political communication on political representation are examined, as well as whether this is a momentary or long-lasting phenomenon.

**KEYWORDS:** political communication, election campaign, TikTok politics, pop politics, electoral engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Certainly sudden and at times unusual, to say the least short, and not very exciting, also because of the almost predictable outcomes. One of the few new elements of the latest election campaign for the national elections in Italy is the definitive arrival of leaders and candidates on the Chinese platform TikTok. This study focuses on the analysis of political communication through a comparison of the results of the main Italian political leaders on social media platforms during a specific period

between July 25 and September 23, 2022. Operationally, the analysis focuses on different observation levels: in the first part, a theoretical framework is offered around the phenomenon of digital political communication and change through social media, accompanied by a snapshot of the current context in the Italian scenario. Only after that will we delve into the heart of the matter under examination, allowing us to understand and redefine some political dynamics gradually intended to reconfigure the communicative scenario. Considering this very recent evolution, the research question can be declined on multiple fronts: What causes the growing popularity of pop political communication? How does the transformation of political communication towards pop culture influence political participation and user choices? What are the consequences of changing pop political communication on political representation? And above all, is this a momentary or long-lasting phenomenon? What is certain is that the implications of this process will need to be evaluated, paying particular attention to not articulating too hasty diagnoses and considering the possible future of the communicative turning point.

### EVOLUTION OF THE DIGITAL CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES

For some time now, thanks to the internet, politics has had a new and straightforward communication channel with voters, allowing politicians to strengthen their image through more immediate language (Novelli, 2018). The days when newspapers, like political rallies, represented the maximum exaltation in reaching the militants and sympathizers of a particular political area are essentially gone. The politician is seen as a close, everyday character, reachable with whom the audience can identify (Bentivegna, 2014; De Rosa, 2014; Giansante, 2014). The internet is, therefore, not only a functional space for increasing the visibility and coverage of one's own content or for striking the opponent, but it represents much more. It creates an environment that offers a series of tools and options that serve the creation of meaning and the dissemination of value, rather than simple unilateral communication tools such as television and newspapers. Digital media, moreover, have become a pervasive presence and, thanks to mobile devices, generate a phenomenon of permanent *mediamorphosis* in a transformation process that includes social reality as much as language and culture (Castells, 2009).

For this reason, it is useful to open up to a basic assumption, namely the absolute awareness of being immersed, thanks to this deep mixing, in a true and permanent electoral campaign (Blumenthal, 1980). Therefore, it is increasingly undeniable that classically understood politics is linked to the transposition of the media in the digital version, whose language is governed by different principles. Social media offer an indispensable universe of debate, configuring itself as an essential added value that political actors use. Following commercial logic, they manage with accurate strategic approaches to achieve pre-established programmatic objectives. Leaders and professionals use the internet to bypass more traditional media and spread their message more quickly. In most cases, the goal is to favour media exposure in the process of disintermediation of politics, which leads the political subject to build their relation-

ship directly and referentially with his or her electorate, not going through traditional media reporting (Parisi & Rega, 2010). In the current political context, characterized by constant and relentless activity to influence public opinion in pre- and post-election phases (Palmieri, 2016), analysing the communication strategies used by politicians on social media represents an important challenge that arises from the constant evolution of the political communication landscape. In an era where digital media increasingly dominate political communication, it is necessary to evaluate its effects.

The increase in the use of social media and the recent trend represented by TikTok radically changed how politicians communicate with citizens. This phenomenon denotes an increasingly relevant field of study, as political communication is becoming increasingly influenced by algorithms, data analysis, and digital communication strategies. Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the need to better understand the role of digital media in democratic participation, as most political activities have shifted online. In this sense, the contribution aims to critically analyse these phenomena and evaluate their impact on democracy and society. Furthermore, it is established that adapting to online technologies has transformed both media and the public (Diaz, 2010; Rodríguez et al., 2012) within the conditions of contemporary media ecology (Scolari et al., 2018). Moreover, Web tools and current communication strategies advance in this direction, proposing a system of inter-creativity (Fernández-Castrillo, 2014). So much so that there is now a continuity between the offline dimension and the digital one in which citizens move and act to express opinions and share their feelings in a social climate of increasing media personalization, in line with a multi-dimensional dimension of life that unfolds between online and offline (Boccia Artieri, 2012).

### A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

The Census report highlights a strong increase in internet usage by Italians between 2021 and 2022, reaching 88.0% of users, with a 4.5% increase compared to the past. Additionally, 88.0% of users use smartphones, with a 4.7% increase compared to the past. Finally, the number of social network users has increased by 5.8%, reaching a total of 82.4%. In truth, democracies around the world are undergoing a great transformation in communication systems that also affect the political sphere. So much so that it seems like a distant era when the arrival of television brought a wave of changes to the political scene after World War II. And even the times when politicians were reluctant to join and land on various social media platforms seem very far away (Bentivegna, 2014).

The data mentioned above shows that politics must increasingly confront the digital transformation of the media system. The question that seems to be emerging forcefully concerns the change in politicians' narratives, codes, and communication behaviours on various platforms. Given its inevitably processual and open nature, the question cannot receive a definitive answer: indeed, different politicians, at any latitude and of any party, can always interpret their presence on the same platforms according to different formulas. However, the action of the individual politician can, in

fact, be sensible and effective only if it is inserted coherently within a certain media culture which, in turn, contributes to forming and making its own communication clear. Furthermore, the relationship between social media and politics does not arise out of anywhere, but develops in relation to the long and complex history of the relationship between mass media and politics.

Suppose social media have brought novelties to the panorama of political communication. In that case, these can only be appreciated in the complex relationships of continuity, intersection, and differentiation with the still dominant pop-television model. On the other hand, the Italian process began precisely with television, specifically in 1994, when Silvio Berlusconi, owner of three analogue television channels, entered politics. This is generally considered in Italy as the beginning of the process of the mediatization of politics, an appendix that is immediately considered strong and incisive (Hjarvard, 2013).

The scenario may change, and perhaps the actors too, but the principles and methods remain unchanged. In today's Italian reality, when we talk about political communication, we immediately think of the candidate in an election campaign, the politician speaking at a party event, or making a live social media video, or the various politicians dealing with different entertainment talks on television. All of these activities fall within the scope of political activities aimed at maintaining or increasing consensus. While programs and parties lose importance (Mancini, 2011), and there is a simultaneous downgrading of the role of the parties themselves, which records a significant loss of trust (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2003), identification with the party is replaced by identification with the leader (Ceccobelli, 2017). From this, it can be inferred that the trend towards *presidentialization* responds to the need to capture the floating electorate, poorly represented by the parties but attracted by a leader seen as more intimately close. And today's leaders, from Giorgia Meloni to Giuseppe Conte, from Matteo Salvini to Matteo Renzi, try to adapt to the demands of entertainment-oriented politics (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009), with their personalities responding to the overall tendency towards the showcase effect (Codeluppi, 2007), that is, the visibility of their private life. The privatization of politics marks the shift in importance from television to social media, where the fluctuating public is less interested in administrative qualities and more in personal ones, or rather in characteristics that bring politicians closer to people in their daily lives.

All of this corresponds to the progressive reduction of citizens' formal political commitment: focusing on the politician's person rather than on the organization, and the program also legitimizes the values and political actions conveyed by the public figure (Rega & Bracciale, 2018). Furthermore, it is evident how the leaders themselves push towards the personalization of politics; just think of the different names of Italian leaders included in the party symbol. For example, the Partito Democratico, which since 2013 has included the name of the party's secretary in its logo. From Renzi to Zingaretti, up to the most recent Enrico Letta. More generally, the emphasis is on personal qualities of affability and likability, convinced that emotional consensus can overcome the resistance of a public little attracted to formal politics (Langer, 2010). This leads to a shift from the democracy of parties, intermediaries for citizens, to the

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democracy of the public (Manin, 2013), based on the direct political and communicative bond between leadership and citizens. Here, the logic of representation is transformed into those of representation, where the depth of analysis and confrontation typical of elected assemblies gives way to the search for deliberative speed favoured by the media (Sorice, 2009).

### **THE BROADER CONTEXT IN WHICH WE ARE ENVELOPED: THE RECONFIGURATION BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

In redefining the development of the concept of political communication and determining its scope of impact, it is essential to trace its origin and transformation into the current model. The current political system consists of a set of entities within which there exists a system of relationships. This also includes non-institutional entities: parties and leaders, movements and various figures, interest groups, or actors not strictly political (Cotta et al. 2001). The communicative system is inherent in political systems, represented by a series of input/output processes (Almond & Powell, 1978) or interaction systems that authoritatively appropriate scarce values in a given society (Easton, 1953) through exchange, custom, and political imperatives. The other actor represented consists of the complex media system and its conceptual design, which originated with the birth of mass media. From the outset, in fact, the convoluted media system has been identified as the set of media institutions that produce and distribute knowledge, information, ideas, and culture (McQuail, 2012). On the other hand, the mass media that composed the traditional structure headed by television, followed by radio, press, books, recorded music, and cinema, were added with the development of the internet and interactive digital media: social networks, platforms, and mobile applications. These tools stand out for capturing a large amount of engagement and public attention globally (Waisbord, 2020). This happens because they self-generate messages, manage the definition of their audience, and self-select specific messages from the internet and electronic communication networks. In this regard, a hybrid system is spoken of to outline changes in the information and communication technology system and in the political system (Chadwick, 2013).

In fact, politicians now effectively use old and new media to manage power and information. They assume a chameleon-like role depending on their objectives, often acting as spokespersons for public opinion and, at the same time, as institutional counterparts. The other actor that emerges in the reality we live in is represented by what is considered less structured than the other two. Nevertheless, the citizen has the potential to create groups and associations and, therefore, to accredit themselves in some way under the banners of a broader category. In fact, the so-called public opinion is a virtual concept detected by opinion polls on a topic, just as the concept of a voter is only detected at the time of the vote. In this hybrid ecosystem, citizens are digital users but also producers and users of political content in the name of digital citizenship (Ceccarini, 2015). Furthermore, they possess the ability to mobilize and dialogue, a potential attitude that politicians and political institutions must confront.

The transformations of values and social systems, advances in technology and

communication, ideological and political crises, and economic and cultural globalization have shaped the evolution of communication and political strategies over time. This process affects the different phases of political communication, but it maintains its relevance to principles and methods. In this historical dimension, online political communication actors multiply their presence, promoting actions and initiatives far from mainstream standards and using unconventional schemes and content compared to traditional party communication. However, in some democracies such as Italy, the television system still maintains a dominant aspect and struggles with the communication dynamics in progress, which testify to a politics increasingly permeable to the changes induced by the network. Hence the confirmation that we witness an information overload in the iridescent and modern media ecosystem (Chadwick, 2009), that is, a situation in which individuals have more choices of sources and situations to consume content. Furthermore, intentionally or not, exposure to political content unwittingly leads us to political information and opinions, creating a vortex that can influence future experiences. Depending on their functional characteristics, social media can further facilitate this process and confirm with those soft pop contents with a political background, the paradox of the monitoring citizen, that is, a social actor only marginally informed on political and social issues but still selectively inclined to act on issues that they consider particularly important (Schudson, 1988).

As far as I am concerned, I agree with those who argue that Habermas' model is the most suitable for describing the media-political ecosystem of contemporary political communication in a digital and interactive public sphere where mass communication is less partial and political actors are not central (Mazzoleni, 2015). In any case, this direct communication with the public is based more on image than substance (Campus, 2010), where social media allows for a more emotional connection with users, generating a perception of proximity (Enli, 2015) and thus focusing on a large extent on the goal that guides politicians in the use of these social devices (Gibson et al., 2015).

### **FROM ABSTRACTION TO CONCRETENESS: A TANGIBLE ANALYSIS OF REALITY**

After an introductory work that allowed us to acquire a preliminary knowledge of the object of study and to plan the research, we now delve into the focus of the contribution. This will be done by describing the object of study in its context and illustrating the selected material and tools. The electoral campaign for the Italian General Election held in 2022 was characterized by the definitive relocation of Italian political leaders to social media platforms, and in particular, by the long-awaited landing on Tik Tok.

In fact, the era of politicians reluctant to step onto social networks seems distant (Bentivegna, 2014). In the framework that has emerged, the new Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, has undoubtedly been one who has managed to navigate the intricacies of political communication excellently. She has developed and controlled her own narrative, aligning each individual story with the character and political ob-

jectives she has set for herself in the shared creation of a symbolic and value-based world (Cacciotto, 2011). A style of political communication focused heavily on personalization and spectacularization for the construction of the political-celebrity (Amado, 2016) on a symbolic terrain integrated into a panorama of affections and senses (Alexander, 2010). This has also occurred in a more focused message on her person and her experiences, distancing herself from party membership (Holman, 2015; Freschi, 2020). In addition, there is a remarkable ability to identify what we could define as the perfect timing, that is, a perfectly-identified timing with a meticulous analysis of the political scenario (Diamanti, 2020).

Another daring personalization is represented, also and above all, in the 15.6% achieved by the Five Star Movement, which has undergone a genetic mutation in this last electoral appointment that effectively crowns Giuseppe Conte as the leader of the Movement at the expense of Beppe Grillo. In this handover, the emotional traction, that is, the emotional bond that the citizen-voter has had with the former Prime Minister during the period in which he found himself managing the pandemic, effectively limiting the intervention of rational judgment (Simon, 1955), was decisive. Moreover, the skilful combination of emotional weight, influence and persuasive narration produces great results. But the phenomenon cannot be trivially attributed to the “rally around the flag” that has driven citizens to gather around their stronghold of the time, in the hope that it could, in a certain way, assist and protect them in such a difficult moment. In the case of the current leader of the Five Star Movement, the social narrative has been built over time by emphasizing not only the content of political messages but also the gestuality, clothing, aesthetic register, and many other aspects that have become important in the era we live in (Sorice, 2011).

It's worth noting that the Facebook page “Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte”, which was created in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic to ironically highlight the physical and aesthetic aspects of the former people's lawyer, is now followed by around 135,000 people. The Partito Democratico, on the other hand, seems to have lost its connection with its electorate. According to polls, it is now even risking its status as the major centre-left political force. The party faced the last election campaign in total identity and leadership crisis in the midst of an internal struggle leading to an announced debacle. Furthermore, it immediately appeared to be struggling from a communicative standpoint and frantically chasing after its opponents' issues. In this regard, it is symptomatic to underline an aspect that highlights what has been said so far about the Partito Democratico. In the era of the spectacularization and personalization of politics, which has now become popular (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019), where there has been a powerful acceleration that has led to the emphasis on the leader and a simultaneous downgrade of the role of parties that have recorded a significant loss of trust (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2003), the party's secretary Enrico Letta is the only Italian leader who has not created an account on TikTok.

Moreover, to invigorate the figure of the leader as a true brand (Barile, 2014), it would have been necessary to create a story around values and ideals that could convince the electorate but, above all, emotionally involve them, thus bridging any distance. Just as it happens for a brand, it becomes crucial today to build a recognized identity and

image, but above all, a convincing narrative that involves the electorate in different ways. Political leaders use a sort of permanent narration that unfolds through a constant presence on print, TV, and social media (Ventura, 2019), and this has not fully happened in practice. In general, in light of what emerges from the electoral contest and the analyzed results, several considerations echo. First of all, the genetic mutation of the centre-right into a centrist right-wing with the excessive growth of Fratelli d'Italia, which reaches 26%, consequently adjusts the balance of power among the four constituent components and the leaders.

Above all, Salvini, despite confirming himself as the Italian politician with the highest number of followers, totalling a total fandom of 9.5 million across the four social media platforms, fails to revive the League. For a handful of consents, he risked being overtaken by Forza Italia, led by a rejuvenated Silvio Berlusconi in his pop version. Another fundamental angle to consider in these anticipated elections is represented by the consecration, for the first time in republican history, of female leadership. That of female leadership (Campus, 2013; De Blasio & Sorice, 2014) is an issue increasingly sensitively used in the public debate by parties to position themselves on the gender equality theme, and therefore of considerable interest for the analysis of electoral and digital communication.

However, the Net, although considered by some scholars as a sort of manosphere (Nagle, 2017), offers numerous creative possibilities for an alternative gender narrative based on new tools, such as the meme (Bracciale, 2020), or new strategies, such as the use of intimate politics, irony, or active involvement of users/followers. In a context that intersects two worlds, the manosphere and politics, so defined by an almost hegemonic male presence, the rise of Meloni and her victory takes on a particular flavour, giving rise to possible responses in this controversial research crest. Observing some data, one realizes how confirmations and denials emerge in the radiography of digital health by political leaders, worthy of in-depth analysis and full of some underlying awareness.

As we can see from Figure 1, during the two-month election campaign from July 25th to September 23rd, Giorgia Meloni stood out as the queen of digital attention, with the highest number of mentions and the highest engagement. Although Giuseppe Conte came close to Meloni in terms of total mentions, his engagement did not match hers. Furthermore, Enrico Letta was able to gain around 50,000 mentions thanks to his divisive narrative, with an engagement that falls halfway between that of Berlusconi and Salvini. However, he was unable to compete with the more successful leaders in terms of engagement. As for the *Terzopolo*, Matteo Renzi's decision to leave the front runner role to Carlo Calenda and become a free hitter did not lead to great results in terms of engagement.





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

Figure 1. Total engagement social profiles political leaders

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

Furthermore, by examining the engagement timeline, at least three important data points emerge. These data suggest that the engagement of political leaders is not constant over time but depends on various factors such as the current political agenda, initiatives taken by candidates, and communication strategies used. Additionally, these data demonstrate the importance of a consistent and well-planned digital communication strategy for political leaders who want to succeed in modern politics.

The first significant aspect that emerges (Figure 2) in relation to political leader Giorgia Meloni is her ability to engage the digital public, as demonstrated from the beginning of the election campaign. The leader of Fratelli D'Italia has effectively used social media and online platforms to spread her political messages and interact with her supporters. However, since the end of August, there has been a shift in the digital landscape of Italian politics, with Giuseppe Conte making a comeback in generating

online participation. This means that Conte has started to use social media and other digital platforms more effectively to engage the public and spread his political messages.

## Top Engagement

The engagement timeline highlights at least three phenomena:

1. **Giorgia Meloni is the leader who has engaged the most with digital audiences since the beginning of the election campaign;**
2. **Since the end of August, Giuseppe Conte's upswing in generating online participation has begun;**
3. **Silvio Berlusconi's peak is determined solely by the first three videos posted on TikTok.**

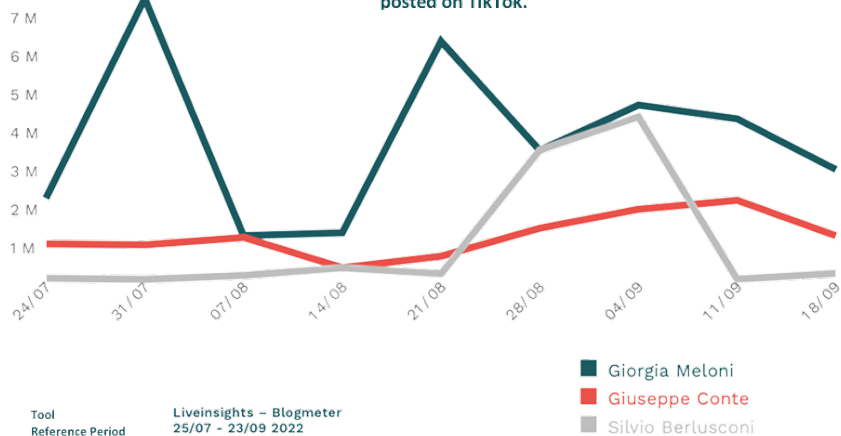


Figure 2. Top Engagement podium

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

At the same time, it is apparent that Silvio Berlusconi has not yet adopted an effective way to use all online platforms, as demonstrated by the fact that his peak of attention on social media was limited to the first three videos posted on TikTok. The comparative study gives us a social thermometer that is completely shared and linear with the offline aspect. What it shows is not only that Meloni is currently one of the most followed platform leaders, but more generally demonstrates how the digital and physical destinies of the party are inseparably linked to the political trajectory of all the leaders mentioned in the study. Identification with the party is replaced by identification with the leader (Ceccobelli, 2017), delegating to the personalization of leadership an indisputable structural factor. These data also highlight the now widely recognized proximity between the offline and digital dimensions in which citizens move and act to express opinions and express their feelings in a social climate that sees an increasing personalization of leaders at this point. A place where figures and events from entertainment, politics, and news are mixed and rethought in a popular format

that aims at the dramatization of public and private affairs (Diamanti, 2014). What is clearly evident is that along with the growing disaffection and mistrust towards political parties and the phenomenon of political personalization, the awareness of being more than ever at the centre of what (Manin, 1995) defines as the “democracy of the audience” remains indissoluble.

At the same time, the increasing attention that the media focuses on politicians as people necessarily brings to light aspects and characteristics that are not strictly related to their role. In this summer election campaign, more than ever before, pictures or facts that portray politicians in situations that fall within the personal sphere have become effective tools for making the private sphere known outside political boundaries (Corner, 2003; Stanyer, 2004, 2007; Street, 2001; Van Zoonen, 2005). For example, the image that shows a leader with their children aims to show a piece of that leader’s routine, making them more human, less institutional, and therefore less estranged from ordinary people. And as proof of what has been expressed, it is not surprising that the embrace with daughter Ginevra, published on the Saturday before the vote, is the post that has received the highest number of interactions. The trend towards presidentialization responds to the need to interest the fluctuating electorate, poorly represented by parties but attracted to a leader seen as intimately closer. Leaders better adapt to the needs of political spectacle, with their personality responding to the overall trend towards commercialization towards the visibility of the private. The privatization of politics marks the shift in importance from television to social media, where the fluctuating public is less interested in administrative qualities and more in personal ones, or rather in the characteristics that bring them closer to people in their daily lives. This also corresponds to the progressive downsizing of formal citizen political engagement: directing interest towards the politician’s person rather than the organization and program legitimizes the values and political actions conveyed by the public actor (Rega & Bracciale, 2018). Some describe how leaders themselves push towards the personalization of politics by relying on personal qualities of affability and likeability, convinced that emotional consensus can overcome the resistance of an audience little attracted to formal politics, but often the values conveyed diverge from those expected by the public or those exposed, causing a detachment to their detriment (Langer, 2010).

On the other hand, in illustrating and explaining the dimension of pop politics (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009) emphasize that political actors must present themselves as normal and ordinary. Moreover, it is important to consider that the modern era is characterized by an increasing inclination towards voyeurism, that is, the tendency to peek into the lives of famous personalities. It is no coincidence that the great success of “Grande Fratello Vip” continues. The show airing on Canale 5 is steadily at 20% of the audience share with a peak listenership of 38.5% audience share and 4.257.000 total viewers. The reality show, on the day of its airing, also on Twitter with the official hashtag #GFVIP, is consistently at the top of the podium of the most discussed topics of the day in Italy and in first place in the Trending Topics. In the case of politicians, this happens as a consequence of an increasingly strong link between political communication and the logic of entertainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Jones,

2005; Postman, 1985; Zaller, 2003). The establishment of such a link has favoured the development of a revealing process that implies the publicization of information and images are taken from what we would generally understand as the personal life of a politician in what we could define as an absolute accentuation of intimate politics, where a strong disclosure process is carried out that involves the publication of information and images that are usually perceived as the private life of a politician (Stanyer, 2012). In this increasingly expanded dimension towards these forms of politics, TikTok, although a relatively new but constantly evolving phenomenon, fully fits among the main tools of digital communication strategy in the coming years. But in addition to offering various opportunities to reach a wide audience, especially among young people and active social media users, the use of this platform also presents challenges and risks that must be carefully considered.

### **TIKTOK POLITICS: THE SPREAD OF POP DIMENSION IN THE NEW SQUARE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

As we have seen for years, social networks allow for greater opportunities for participation and resource sharing, as well as the sharing of emotional experiences in interpersonal relationships and wider cultural, social and political contexts. They are also important because, under certain conditions, they can be used as motivational tools to increase interest in various disciplines and activate forms of participation and engagement, even in politics, in line with what Confucius said: "Tell me and I will forget, show me, and I may remember, involve me, and I will learn". Therefore, the social circuit symbolizes a vital space for expression and socialization, especially for young people (Boyd, 2014; Way & Malvini, 2017), offering a wide and varied interactive window on the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of entire generations. It is undeniable that with the pandemic that began in the spring of 2020, young people worldwide experienced a sudden transition to online learning. This state of affairs has contributed significantly to elevating social platforms, especially TikTok, to the role of spokesperson. Over time, the Chinese platform has become increasingly important in the lives of young people (Kale, 2020), as in isolation, they have turned to TikTok for entertainment (Easter, 2020; Willingham, 2020), socializing and sharing their daily experiences, including online learning experiences (Crellin, 2020; Haasch, 2020).

On the other hand, we live in a society in which social media are so pervasive in everyday life to the point of constituting, along with the physical environment, a single world-system in which individual experiences their life, constructs their identity and learns about the world. Today's social networks can be considered habitats similar to the physical environment because they provide cognitive, social and emotional experiences that are no longer unparalleled. It is precisely on these theoretical premises that our reflection is based, which sees in TikTok a possible environment for learning and discussion, even in a political key. This observation arises despite the limits of the platform's terms of service under the heading of electoral integrity policies pursued by the Chinese platform:

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TikTok is a home for entertainment, interconnectivity, and expressiveness. While this often means light hearted creative expression, it can also encompass issues that touch the lives of members of our community, including political or election-related content. We welcome all content that falls within our community guidelines, which help us ensure that TikTok remains a safe and welcoming place for all.

TikTok is not a destination for accessing the latest news and we do not accept paid political advertising, but we are committed to combating the spread of false or inaccurate information on the platform, including by supporting our users with authoritative and educational information on important issues for the public, such as political elections. Our goal is to help TikTok remain a place where authentic content thrives.

TikTok represents an innovation compared to traditional social networks as it allows users to navigate through content without the need for a pre-established network of contacts. In the recent Italian election campaign, it was presented as the new square of political communication, but nevertheless, many political leaders opened their profiles on the platform without a well-defined strategy, often appearing awkward, disoriented, fake or out of place. In fact, the landings made in recent days not only lose credibility but have little effectiveness. However, it is significant and interesting that everyone was afraid of losing the novelty train. Moreover, guarding the platform requires specific skills that no Italian leader seems to possess properly to this day. Despite this, from July 25th to September 23rd, the three posts that, in absolute terms, have received the highest number of reactions were all published on this platform.

As shown in Figure 3, the record goes to Silvio Berlusconi with his first video, “Ciao ragazzi”, which collected 833,000 reactions until the last monitoring day. In the second place, but with a significant gap, is Giuseppe Conte with 510,000 reactions, followed immediately after, at the lowest step of the podium, once again by the Cavaliere with another 451,000 total reactions. In this context, we witnessed yet another entry into the field by Silvio Berlusconi, who was able to reach astounding numbers in just a few hours. In less than 24 hours, in fact, Berlusconi went from zero to 320 thousand followers. Moreover, in the first nine hours alone, he had already attracted 207 thousand followers, surpassing Giorgia Meloni, who had stopped at 105 thousand followers after six months on the Chinese site. The reason for this exploit also lies in the confirmation of a fact that is now clear and unequivocal. The engine of TikTok is entertainment, and yet, this expansion of the dimension of the Politics-Pop duo can escape and run to such an extent as to further reconfigure the main actors who are no longer identified as the result of a boring and serious product but now as something to be subjected very closed to commercial logic.

Leader	Post/Video	Data	Total Reaction
1  <b>Silvio Berlusconi</b>	 Ciao Ragazzi, eccomi qua. Vi do il benvenuto sul mio canale ufficiale #TikTok per parlare dei temi che stanno più a cuore a Forza Italia e al sottoscritto e che vi riguardano...	1/09	<b>833.7K</b>
2  <b>Giuseppe Conte</b>	 Occhio ragazzi! Guardate la proposta confezionata per voi da Giorgia Meloni. Un'assurdita! #giuseppeconte_ufficiale...	04/08	<b>510.5K</b>
3  <b>Silvio Berlusconi</b>	 Mi hanno chiesto di descrivere con un aggettivo gli altri #leader: ecco cosa ho risposto!...	16/09	<b>451.4K</b>

Figure 3. Successful social podium posts

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

Like all communicative platforms, TikTok is a space that can be used instrumentally and profitably, with structural characteristics that we must deal with. The Chinese social network was born with a vocation for entertainment, with both temporal duration and video and music channel characteristics that are difficult to reconcile with political communication. Instead, it can be effective when the politician can decline messages in soundbites or convey messages, or even more so to suggest and adhere to these communicative modalities. The centre-right arrived first, and Berlusconi's entry into the field confirms the predisposition to communicative innovation on the part of conservatives or declared right because a politics made up of sometimes apodictic slogans that follow deep trends in society can better fit in this container. If previously, most scholars tended to associate Berlusconi's entry into politics with a renewed vigour of political communication through television (Marletti, 2010), today, with these numbers at hand, we can decree that Berlusconi has been able to adopt, embody and fully implement the codes of pop politics even on TikTok, tracing the boundaries between the public and private realm, or between what (Goffman, 1959) defines as the front stage and the backstage of an organization. So, is TikTok really ready to face this turning point?

As already highlighted, the Terms of Service establish the impossibility of doing politics on the platform. Moderators are provided with a long list of heads of state who cannot be mentioned, and announcements in favour of or against a politician or party are not allowed. These guidelines, which are visible to all users, represent the basic rules for correct use, and if the directives are followed to the letter, politics is no longer a taboo. The real challenge is to reach the new generation through the entertainment nature of this social network with a new way of communicating. This is because the language has changed, ideals have changed, and the way of fighting for what one believes in has changed. A social network with unexplored features that, with a new language, focuses on personal branding work and responds to the leader's need to be popular, a tool that reduces the distance between the politician and their

potential voter. Yet initially, the adoption of the Chinese social network as a tool for political communication was limited due to the high level of personal exposure required to achieve success. However, the current landscape of political communication emphasizes the importance of developing exclusive content tailored to the specific characteristics of the platform rather than using it as a space to recycle material from other platforms.

This change in approach highlights how citizen engagement on the platform depends on politicians' ability to develop innovative, creative, and platform-specific content. In other words, it is necessary to develop an integrated communication strategy that takes into account the specific characteristics of each platform in order to achieve the goal of engaging the audience. Therefore, it is necessary to develop an adequate political communication strategy for each platform used based on the analysis of the specific characteristics of its users and the creation of high-quality content tailored to their needs and preferences (Sánchez-Castillo, 2021). The current leaders of the centre-right coalition have adopted a communication strategy focused on the young audience, achieving more significant results both quantitatively and qualitatively. On the other hand, the counterparts on the centre-left have continued to be bogged down in old communication strategies and use the platform as a simple promotional showcase (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). This limited approach has resulted in less visibility and engagement from the public, especially young people, who represent a significant part of the platform's users. Among Italian politicians, Matteo Salvini has made the most intensive and effective use of TikTok in terms of adaptation and frequency of use. Furthermore, he understood the importance of using it strategically, stimulating interaction, especially in the final period of the election campaign when the public's attention is more focused on politics and its spectacles. Indeed, the most requested content by the follower community is the clashes and accusations between leaders, the personalization of candidates, humour, and challenges (López-Fernández, 2022), and in general, all politicians show a predominance of game frames with a language based on emotions and not on specific sectoral criticisms (Cervi et al. 2021). Moreover, politicians also play the game of emotions, often posting emotional content on political, moral, or social issues in an attempt to express their point of view and try to influence others (Rothert, 2022). But it is always necessary to balance the emotional and rational dimensions around what revolves in the political universe to ensure full and conscious democratic participation (D'Ambrosio, 2022). In light of the events that occurred during the Italian election campaign, it is evident that political communication on TikTok presents some similarities among various political leaders; however, it remains characterized by significant differences.

Overall, there is a notable increase in the number and rate of publications, which indicates an improvement in the parties' communication strategy, in line with the growth of the platform and its audience. However, political parties and their leaders have not fully realized the opportunity that TikTok offers to spread their messages. It can be said that Italian political actors have accelerated their presence on this network, considering it an excellent tool to connect with young people, but nevertheless, the communication strategy adopted was not sufficient to promote the debate

and social participation required by new generations. In this sense, political parties have still preferred one-way communication to avoid the risk of reputational crises, as opening debates means committing to transparency, naturalness, and active listening, aspects that could be disadvantageous for political parties in the virtual space. The tones and forms employed during the election season often bounce off hate speech in virtual communities, which absorb and project increasingly polarized accusations. As with the communication of Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, whose language and arguments appealed to fear, stigmatization of immigrant groups or left-wing movements, political disaffection, and patriotism, even indicating enemies and managing an exaltation of patriotic sentiment and belonging. The videos published on this trajectory express greater impact, indicating that emotional and more aggressive ideological speeches have a clear advantage over specific sectoral criticisms (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022).

Therefore, videos with emotional tones, linked to social alarm, and adapted through multimodal linguistic elements (Jaramillo-Dent et al. 2022) stimulate participation and can become a feasible mechanism for communicating with citizens (Li et al. 2021), provided they exploit a largely colloquial and slang language, trying to speak in the same style used by young people or TikTokers (Ortega & Rodríguez, 2021). On this wavelength, TikTok is becoming more and more the stage of politainment. In this place, to boast about victories and try to destroy and stigmatize the opponent, even if this coincides with a decline in democratic quality. Moreover, the main reason why many Italian politicians turned to TikTok on the eve of the vote on September 25th, 2022, was almost exclusively to intercept and convince a predominantly young electorate at the expense of everything else. This certainly has to do with the fact that the Chinese app, which is increasingly popular in Italy, has been achieving impressive growth numbers for some time now. The trend in the use of TikTok in Italy, as of November 2022, confirms that the monthly users of the video entertainment social platform have reached over 18.3 million. Since Audiweb publicly released data on TikTok's audience in April 2021, users have more than doubled. For this basic reason, it would have been impossible not to consider TikTok content as part of the social investments for the 2022 election campaign.

However, among the most avid users of the platform are many very young Generation Z individuals who are voting for the first time or for whom the September 25th, 2022, the vote was their very first. This target audience is all too appealing to any candidate, regardless of political affiliation. Being present where citizens spend a significant part of their days and being able to interact with them directly and in real-time has often given politicians the impression that they can bridge this perceived distance. This is not surprising since the watchword has been disintermediated since political communication discovered the Internet. In other words, there is a tendency to ignore the need for traditional intermediaries and central control over the flow of information (Bentivegna, 2015; Giacomini, 2018). The Chinese platform, to be fair, is moving in this direction and allows for a form of direct and horizontal communication, without intermediaries between sender and recipient, with the potential for everyone to become both sender and recipient, without limits on topic or mode of expression.



However, the new wave of politicians who opened accounts and published videos on TikTok in view of the September 25th vote displayed awkward attempts and achieved less appreciable results than hoped, as happened to Carlo Calenda. The leader of the Action party, exactly one month before the elections, opened a verified profile on TikTok and, in his first post, immediately declared that he could not dance and could not give make-up advice, creating the opposite effect to what was desired. In a short time, users pointed out to the politician that TikTok is not just about entertaining content like beauty tutorials and dances but also about in-depth discussions of important events in the world and discussions of big topics like the civil rights of minorities. The politician then changed course and dedicated more space in his editorial content plan for TikTok to books, one of the topics that seem to be most popular among platform users, with hashtags like #booktok gathering billions of views, so much so that the app started an official book club. The Calenda affair is emblematic of how risky it can be for politicians to stubbornly hold onto digital platforms that they know little about and that, in the case of TikTok, require mastery of specific styles and grammar spoken by users who have been active on the platform for a longer period of time.

The big mistake politicians made with TikTok was to use the app like any other social media platform or, worse, “reusing” content originally intended for other social media or, at the other extreme, overplaying what appears to them as the most successful codes and phenomena on the platform, but ending up becoming memes of themselves or making avoidable mistakes. The proposal to create a sort of census of Italian politicians on TikTok during that particular period did not only mean counting who had the most followers or measuring who was able to generate more engagement through other metrics. The rest of the political proposals for the elections of September 25, 2022, seem to remain invisible on the app due to the absence of profiles of many individual candidates. The biggest absence seems to be mainly, as mentioned earlier, the left-wing area, so much so that, trying to type in the search bar “Democratic Party” or “Pd”, the first three videos that come up are “10 reasons not to vote for PD”, “Enrico Letta is Gianni Letta’s grandson” and the video of a girl with purple hair, with almost ninety thousand views, who still invites not to vote for Pd, even “to prevent fascism in Italy”. It seems to have been useless when, less than a month before the elections and from an electoral marketing perspective, the PD arrived on TikTok with a video in which the deputy Alessandro Zan, from whom the troubled bill against homophobia takes its name, starts talking about rights, citizenship, democracy and demonstrating, that is, that he tried to listen to the TikTok community and familiarize himself with the topics that are closest to their hearts. Ironically, but with a grain of truth, Matteo Orfini, one of the most well-known faces of the PD, expressed his commitment not to join the ranks of Italian politicians who landed on TikTok only because of the elections and instead invited his Twitter followers to vote for him precisely because “I WILL NOT use TikTok in the election campaign”. A mistake on the name of the platform speaks volumes about the familiarity that most Italian politicians have with the app and what happens inside it. The more the analysis becomes qualitative and focuses on what Italian politicians post on TikTok, the more the distance with the voters that online electoral marketing strategies should try to bridge becomes evident. Most

Italian politicians have limited themselves to reposting content originally created for other social media platforms, especially Instagram. An inevitable use of TikTok has been as a personal bulletin of the politician who followed their agenda and gave visibility to guests, live interventions, rallies, and interviews. This is what Giuseppe Conte did mostly at the beginning before opting for short videos with a direct address to the camera to address the hottest political issues of the day. The most common practice among Italian politicians on TikTok, as also seen when talking about the first content shared by Berlusconi, is to adapt the most classic styles of their communication to the vertical and short video format. You have to go back to what Salvini posted on TikTok before the 25 September general election campaign to find more TikTok-style content, such as those that ride on the most popular trends and challenges on the platform. The leader of the Lega, for example, participated in the POV wave, playing on what is expected when changing teams hoping to win the championship and what actually happens. Inizio modulo Even Renzi's first post seems like an attempt to imitate what is currently popular on the platform, as the Tuscan politician explicitly mentioned the phenomenon of cursive on TikTok and showed a deliberately self-deprecating tone when he recalled being a meme for a long time due to his English pronunciation. Of course, doing so on the soundtrack of epic music makes it even clumsier. Although they often lack originality, the content of Italian politicians on TikTok often has, as we have seen, interesting numbers. A post in which Giorgia Meloni talks for minutes and minutes about presidentialism, certainly not one of the proposals that are spontaneously thought of as most interesting to the youngest people who use the platform, can also reach several tens of thousands of views and hundreds of comments. However, it really makes a difference to see the type of comments and who wrote them. Except for the leader of the M5S, who has dozens of messages of support and encouragement under each video on TikTok, an inheritance of the consensus built by Giuseppe Conte well before the campaign for the 2022 elections and especially well outside the digital environment. In general, there seems to be a trend among TikTok users to ignore Italian politicians on the platform unless they can provide original and engaging content that reflects their concerns and interests. In conclusion, it is impossible to predict whether this phenomenon with clear popular implications will be long-lasting or whether it is a passing trend.

However, the increasingly frequent use of social media platforms as a tool for political communication seems destined to grow in the future, especially among the new generations of voters. As far as I'm concerned, pop political communication, with TikTok, can represent a way to bring citizens closer to politics and stimulate democratic participation if used consciously and effectively. However, it is important to bear in mind that political communication based solely on the pop aspect and on the spectacularization of the message risks impoverishing the political debate and accentuating the divisions between different political factions. In any case, it will be necessary to investigate the issue further to understand the impact and scope of the phenomenon fully, but be fully aware that these changes are influencing knowledge or perception in contemporary societies, which are increasingly dependent on technology (Baranowski, 2019).

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## CONCLUSIONS

In this work, we have tried to gradually understand and redefine some political dynamics to reconfigure the vast and varied communication landscape. The audience shares that emerged, combined with those of other platforms, testify to an unavoidable predictive variable of user preference towards a pop language and politics that can no longer be classified as a marginal phenomenon or something that attracts but does not move votes and consensus.

Exhaustive answers to these issues have not yet emerged from political and sociological research in our country, while a series of international studies show an increase in political participation by an audience that was previously disinterested in political life. This process is partly attributable to the great transformation of political communication, which is increasingly becoming more popular. Starting from the awareness of how difficult it is to identify the causes of the apparent pop shift and its duration, we have tried to put the social numbers under the spotlight with a medium-long-term interpretive projection. The objection that this communication segment is insufficient to guarantee informed citizenship is legitimate, but only if one argues that the vision of a participatory democracy comprised of competent and active citizens is the only possible one.

Pop politics could prove to be a necessary response to the transformation of society towards increasingly commercialized forms of communication where messages, channels, and audiences are increasingly fragmented. Thus, it could be a resource capable of reconciling citizens with politics and reaching ever-wider segments of individuals who would not otherwise be attracted to certain topics. In this perpetual self-promotion campaign, even the private dimension of politicians has become the subject of storytelling. Paying attention to intimate politics, however, is not only linked to the interest of gossip and entertainment magazines and talk shows but also to the politician's own desire to erase the distance from the public, becoming increasingly closer to these logics. This dimension of political communication, which for a long time escaped political analysis, is now fully immersed in an unprecedented hybridization with the multiple forms of popular culture. Politics that presents itself as a spectacle and entertainment are on a path that is destined to last for a long time. Over the past few decades, politics has had to deal with the uncontrollable explosion of new means of communication within a society that is increasingly shaped by their use, with TikTok perhaps representing its ultimate destination. This could be seen as an indisputable contributor to an epochal change that has replaced existing traditional models with a new vision capable of definitively imposing new trajectories and models. This process could allow us to reach an increasingly hyper-connected society with a more informed audience that directly addresses politics horizontally, thanks to the instantaneous availability of information sources and their content. However, we must be careful not to arrive at definitive judgments, as this reality does not automatically equate to engaging with an informed and prepared electorate. In fact, especially in politics, we know how often preferences are closely linked to perception, emotions, and gut instincts rather than reason.

In short, political communication with increasingly popular shades, with TikTok at the helm, is closely related to the processes that have revolutionized the world of politics and the methods of collecting and consolidating popular consensus. In the face of this revolution, several questions arise that represent a difficult-to-interpret ancient omen. Today's reality has put the repeated malevolence towards new means of communication on the shelf, but the issue of the relationship between consumption and civic engagement remains open. The concern mainly concerns the quality of political content that television offers and the quality of the same content's consumption by citizens. In other words, we wonder if this way of understanding communication can arouse interest, attraction, and participation or if this populist turn in politics is entertaining but does not move anything. To date, there is no exhaustive answer capable of bringing everyone to an agreement, as there are many conflicting findings on this topic, making expectations about the case even more interesting.

The point is to consider this popular character applied to digital media as an ally of participation rather than an obstacle. In an era like the present one, in which there is a varied choice of content, political communication must compromise with media logic and ensure the increasingly fragmented public attention. As far as I'm concerned, the popularization of politics should not be seen solely as a decline or a dumbing down of the political message but also as a search for greater appeal of the message, ease of understanding, and, therefore, the ability to reach spaces where politics cannot penetrate. The objection is that this type of approach is insufficient to ensure informed citizenship is legitimate, but only if one argues that the vision of a participatory democracy comprised of competent and active citizens is the only possible path. In essence, pop politics and the use of tools such as TikTok in politics, far from being synonymous with the decline and impoverishment of the art of politics, instead represents an obligatory response to the transformation of digital society towards increasingly commercialized forms of communication, a sort of civic lifeboat capable of reconciling the spectator-consumer-citizen with politics and reaching ever-wider segments of citizens far from this sphere.

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