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An electoral weapon by populists?

Assessing Facebook use by populist parties and their electoral success in Europe

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Abstract

The role of Facebook in national elections has increasingly gained the attention of scholars and policymakers. Yet, despite minor exceptions, previous contributions have largely ignored whether Facebook use by political forces ultimately leads to more votes. In addition, considering the recent surge of populist parties in Europe, scholars have identified preliminary suitability between them and Facebook, but have not systematically proven whether the latter can be held as an electoral weapon. This thesis shows that this supposed fit is not backed by empirical evidence. By considering 202 parties running in 24 national elections between 2016 and 2019, it emerges that Facebook use does not exclusively impact support for populist parties but all political forces in general. Specifically, the results highlight that users, contrary to parties, are the most incidental actors in election times to increase the online visibility of their preferred political forces.

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Acknowledgments // *Ringraziamenti*

Why should we read this research?

The last decade has witnessed the abrupt chaining of many pervasive crisis elements that have significantly impacted voters' choice in Europe. Besides the current COVID19 crisis, which falls outside the scope of this thesis, voters have faced unprecedented issues, spanning from the 2008 Great Recession, the Eurozone crisis, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, the recent refugee crisis, growing environmental concerns, to alleged Russian infiltrations in Western electoral contexts. These eventually translated into growing support for populist parties, as confirmed by the outcome of the Brexit Referendum, the "*giallo-verde*" coalition in Italy, and the new composition of the 2019 European Parliament. As Freitas, Laki and Stetter (2018) show, by the end of 2018, at least "30.3% of Europeans have voted for a populist party" (p. 8).

Parallelly, our societies have observed the increasing role played by social media channels in democratic elections, both in increasing participation and campaigning outreach, but also in threatening fair processes. Starting with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, scholars and policymakers have watched, almost helplessly, the powerful display of fake news' propagation and automated bots in influencing the online conversation. Social media platforms thus constitute the "new normalcy" in electoral contexts and are widely exploited by all parties to enlarge their electoral bases. Likewise, they are strongly utilized by voters to access political information, as confirmed by a study of the Pew Research Center (2018) reporting that 67% of adults in the United States use social media to discover news. Today, Facebook alone almost has 3 billion users, more than the populations of India and China combined (Statista, 2020a).

Yet, the academic debate seems not to have devoted sufficient attention to the intersection of these trends as, on the one hand, scholars have tended to study populist parties mainly in "isolation" by neglecting comparisons with their opponents. On the other hand, though they have demonstrated that populists seem to be extremely prolific in the online sphere, it remains unclear whether they benefit more in election times than their mainstream counterparts. In addition, while Twitter has so far been the preferred medium of the literature, the role of Facebook in national elections has largely been unexplored. Hence, this thesis aims to fill the gap by investigating whether, and why, Facebook use impacts support for populist parties in Europe.

By considering a sample of 202 parties across 24 Member States, this thesis can help in shedding light on those electoral dynamics while placing renewed emphasis on policymakers to tackle the current "infobesity" (see Johnson, 2015). Besides the growing difficulty for voters to distinguish and filter political content, recent events have shown the struggle by regulators to keep social media accountable. Emblematically, the latest ban of Donald Trump's Twitter account sets a dangerous precedent for online platforms to act against public figures without the typical checks and balances of democratic societies. If not addressed, this scenario may lead to the suboptimal situation where "cyber-reinforced" human rights, such as the freedom of speech, expression and information, are to be circumscribed by online community guidelines instead of offline written Constitutions. Therefore, this emerging political landscape calls for renewed responsibility, both for the academics and policymakers' community, to strengthen existing partnerships and sharing of best practices.

1. Introduction

> In Kenya, whole villages are in WhatsApp (…) groups together, including their representatives. In recent campaigns around the world – from India and Indonesia across Europe to the United States – we have seen the candidate with the largest and most engaged following on Facebook usually wins. Just as TV became the primary medium for civic communications in the 1960s, social media is becoming this in the 21st century. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

The "Building Global Community" manifesto was written by Mark Zuckerberg in 2017. Not only does it outline Facebook's mission statement to bring the world closer "by moving fast and breaking things", but it also points at one core issue that has recently gained increasing attention by scholars and policymakers: the role of social media in democratic party elections. The emerging perception is that online communication channels have become the routine for politicians because they provide the unprecedented opportunity to establish a direct, immediate and unmitigated link with voters, especially in comparison to the traditional media era (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). Notably, the turning point can be considered the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns where the US president employed data analytics and social media on an unprecedented scale to increase his electoral base (e.g. Abou-Chadi, 2016; Bimber, 2014). There seems to be consensus on the fact that candidates who invest more resources on their digital profiles and interact with voters receive more electoral preferences than those who do not (e.g. Bright et al., 2018; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Gilmore, 2012; Kruikemeier, 2014).

In this discussion, populist parties have also been the object of special academic attention. Specifically, research has mainly revolved around their communication strategies (e.g. Enli and Rosenberg, 2018) and style of discourse (e.g. Groshek and Engelbert, 2013). Scholars hold that populists tend to utilize social networks more consistently than other parties since they tend to be active also outside of election cycles (Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020). This can be attributed to the fact that they are mostly in the opposition spectrum of politics as social networks are essential for them to attack opponents (Krämer, 2014; Moffit, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of professional gatekeepers allows them to circumvent the existing media constraints which tend to depict them negatively (Barlett, 2014) and, therefore, establish a "close connection to the people, a crucial element for populism to flourish" (Ernst et al., 2017, p. 1350). Ultimately, the parallel demise of newspaper outlets and rise of "daily me" information consumption (Sunstein, 2009; see Turow, 2013) seem to assist those political outsiders that bank on polarization to gain consensus, thus suggesting *prima facie* suitability of populism with social networks.

Nonetheless, although scholars have demonstrated that populist parties are extremely prolific in the online sphere, it still remains unclear whether they benefit in electoral terms from their presence on social networks. Many factors that account for populist parties' support have been identified as they can be clustered around five main explanations: opposition to immigration (e.g. Norris, 2005), actual and perceived macroeconomic performance (e.g. Golder, 2003; Kriesi, 2012), voters' educational level (e.g. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016), low trust in public institutions (e.g. Zulianello, 2018) and Euroscepticism (e.g. Taggart, 1996).

Yet, a gap emerges as the debate has not investigated whether their social networks' use is also conducive to their electoral success. In addition, notwithstanding few notable exceptions (e.g. Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2015; Engesser et al., 2017; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016; Shein, 2019), scholars have tended to study populist parties mainly in "isolation", thus neglecting comparisons with their opponents. Hence, this thesis aims to shed light on whether one of the factors leading to the growing electoral success of populist parties is also their degree of Facebook usage and whether they benefit more than their rivals from this relation.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant because voters' information acquisition in the online sphere, and populist parties' share of votes, have together increased significantly in the last years. Some scholars even discussed the existence of a "populist *zeitgeist*" in Europe (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020; Krämer, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug, 2014). This can be mainly traced back to 2016, which is considered a turning point in European public opinion because of some notable events. These included the Brexit Referendum, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India, and the European migration policy crisis. According to Freitas, Laki and Stetter (2018), these translated into growing support for populist parties as, by the end of 2018, at least "30.3% of Europeans have voted for a populist party" (p. 8). This was notably encapsulated in Italy by the coalition government between the League and the Five Stars Movement but also by the unprecedented results of the 2019 European Parliament's elections (Moschella and Rhodes, 2020). Likewise, it was largely mirrored across Western and Eastern Europe as Alternative for Germany, the National Rally in France, and Fidesz in Hungary consolidated their share of votes.

Considering these trends, this thesis aims to address the following research question: Does Facebook use impact support for populism in Europe? And, if so, why? Specifically, this thesis focuses on Facebook because of its wide diffusion at the mass-level that makes it a "political weapon" for campaigning (Wills and Reeves, 2009, p. 265). Although Twitter has so far been preferred by the literature for its microblogging services and convenient methods for tracking and downloading data, it mainly constitutes an "elite-type" channel of communication (Adi, Erickson and Lilleker, 2014). Therefore, as Enli and Moe (2013) suggest, an analysis of Facebook would greatly benefit the literature because of "the mismatch between the widespread uses of Facebook both by publics / voters, and by politicians, and the limited research devoted to Facebook as a tool for political communication" (p. 643).

To address the research question, this thesis considers the Facebook accounts of 202 parties that ran in twenty-four national elections between 2016 and 2019 across Europe. The focus is on this timeframe because it constitutes the recent aftermath of critical junctures in European politics that have strongly impacted voter's choice in the last two decades. These notably include, *inter alia*, the recent asylum policy crisis, the Brexit Referendum, and the 2008 Great Recession (i.e. Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose, 2019). These issues have eventually been assessed by voters as the great majority of Member States have at least experienced one national election in the last four years, thus making it a well-suited timeframe to assess populist parties' support in a comparative setting.

By building on the framework developed by Vaccari and Valeriani (2015), and Bene (2017), a party's direct online presence is defined as its total number of Facebook publications. At the same time, its volume of interactions, specifically the total amount of likes, reactions, comments and shares that a party has received per publication in the same timeframe, constitutes its indirect online presence. Finally, its sheer size of online followers during the electoral campaigning period is operationalized as popular online presence. By employing Facebook data collected through Key Performance Indicator (KPI) analyses, the impact of these three independent variables is examined across parties and countries to understand whether the use of Facebook increases electoral support for populist parties.

The results confirm that social networks are decisive for parties' electoral success, specifically that indirect and popular online presence play a significant role while direct communication is statistically insignificant. Although populists appear to be extremely prolific across all three variable dimensions, it emerges that populism does not have a moderating effect on the mean of parties' votes as the effects of indirect and popular presence are independent of whether a party is classified as populist or not. Concretely, this means that Facebook use does not seem to constitute an electoral weapon for populists alone, but for all parties in general. In addition, it emerges that online users, instead of parties, are in the powerful position to strengthen the online visibility of their preferred political actors, ultimately influencing the flow of the political conversation. Hence, online commons, through peer-to-peer communication flows, seem to have the greatest incidence in election times. Specifically, through indirect online presence, they can maximize the electoral result of their preferred political forces twice as much as with popular online presence.

These findings bear important implications for society, scholars, and policymakers beyond the digital politics community. Concerning societal relevance, the centrality of this research is outlined by the fundamental role that social media play in national elections. As by 2019 it is estimated that 72.54% of the world's population has access to social networks (Statista, 2020c), these findings can inform voters about their role in increasing the online visibility of their preferred party. Likewise, for policymakers, this thesis can shed more light on the potential threats associated with online campaigning in democratic party elections. Moreover, it can be beneficial for political parties too as they can become more knowledgeable about their most prolific online strategies. Finally, from an academic standpoint, this thesis can be useful in understanding whether populist parties are also increasing their support because of their Facebook use, which is a problem that the research community has not sufficiently analyzed.

This thesis is structured as follows: first, it gives an overview of the academic debate about populism and online communication. Second, it explains how Facebook enables political actors to reach out to larger lots of the electorate and, therefore, to win more votes. In doing so, it develops hypotheses on why populist parties can increase their electoral support more than their mainstream counterparts. Third, the research design and data section illustrates how the collected data are analyzed, and how countries and parties have been selected. Finally, the results are discussed in light of their contribution to the debate and venues for further research are suggested. At the end, the conclusion summarizes the discussion and formulates policy recommendations.

2. Interdisciplinary state of the art: populism and online communication

This chapter deals with the current academic debate on populism. First, it clarifies the concept of populism by defining populist and mainstream parties. Then, it presents classical theories discussing the drivers of electoral support for populist parties in national elections. After that, it introduces the role of the online sphere by unfolding the theoretical framework as it explains how political parties can benefit from social networks in a one-step and two-step flow of political communication. Building on these, it develops hypotheses on why populists benefit more than their counterparts from their Facebook use.

2.1 Populist and mainstream parties

Populist parties have long been the object of scholarly attention. Although this thesis does not aim to contribute to the long-debated issue of whether populism is a style of communication (e.g. Moffit, 2017), an ideology (e.g. Mudde, 2004) or an attitude (e.g. Hakwins, 2010), they exhibit specific traits that must be defined before proceeding. Given that this thesis aims to identify and compare populist parties against mainstream forces across countries, definitions are of substantive importance for the scope of the research.

Starting with populism, despite the variety of definitional paths, the literature seems to have converged around an "ideational approach" that broadly defines populist parties as political forces that emphasize a moral and Manichean contraposition between the "pure people" and the "elite" (e.g. Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2007; Pauwels, 2014; Rooduijn, 2019; Van Kessel, 2015; Zulianello 2020). Precisely, this conceptualization is derived from Mudde's (2004) work that understands populism as:

> an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonist groups – "the pure people" versus the "corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (p. 543)

From this definition, two main ideological tenets can be deduced: "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism". The first one refers to the core belief that politics should represent the general will of the people. Populist parties advocate for their centrality and, ultimately, to rule according to them. Anti-elitism, instead, indicates their repudiation of mainstream elites which are denigrated as corrupted, self-rooted, and inevitably anti-people. This aversion is profoundly stressed as populist parties valorize their pure and honest character, as opposed to the establishment.

Despite convergence on the concept of populism, the distinction between populist forces and their competitors remains blurred. This mainly arises because populism constitutes a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1669) that can be easily attached to other ideological tenets depending on the electoral context. These potential intersections, shown in Figure 1, are underpinned by the fact that populism is not an exclusive and fixed concept as it can prove to be highly contentious in terms of measurement across countries. This is because, as Rooduijn (2019) illustrates, it can be linked to various ideological elements, such as far-right, far-left, Euroscepticism, and the level of incumbency of a party. Consequently,

cross-country analyses have tried to conceptualize populism by combining it with these interrelated concepts (see Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). Yet, they have fallen short in providing overarching results given the great "ideational varieties" in Europe (Zulianello, 2020, p. 327).
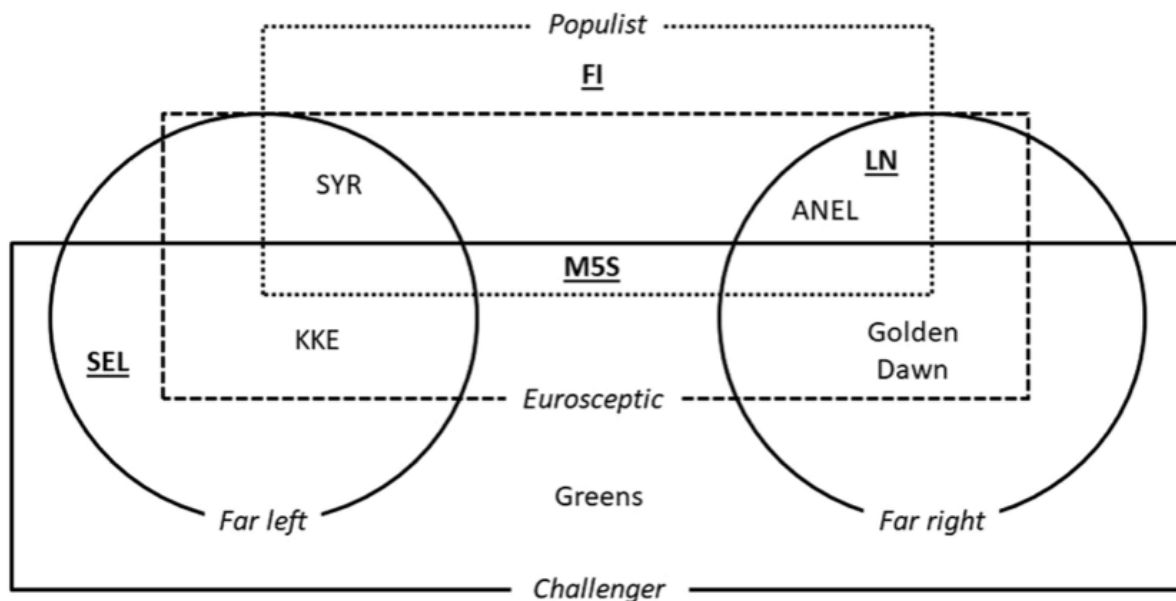
Figure 1: Some of the main contemporary populist, far left/right, Eurosceptic and challenger parties in Italy and Greece (Rooduijn, 2019, p. 366).

For instance, when considering far-right populist parties, the two concepts are clearly interrelated, though a populist party might not always be positioned on the extreme right. This is because far-right parties are rooted in the concepts of nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism means that "States should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that nonnative elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous state", while authoritarianism is "the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely" (Mudde, 2007, pp. 19-22). On the contrary, far-left populist parties, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, do not share this nativist view. Instead, they mainly reject the socio-economic power structure of contemporary capitalism and call for a major redistribution of resources from existing political elites (March, 2012). Yet, they are also classified as populists.

Similarly, when applying Euroscepticism to the populist dimension, it emerges "that not every Eurosceptic party is necessarily populist (…) and not every populist party is necessarily Eurosceptic" (Pirro and Taggart, 2018, p. 256). For instance, in Western Europe, this is the case with the Green niche parties, Forza Italia, and the British Conservatives, whereas in Eastern Europe, these parties include Freedom and Solidarity in Slovakia and the Czech Civic Democratic Party (Kneuer, 2019; Pirro and Taggart, 2018). These forces might frequently blame Brussels for policy failures and demand stronger national powers but, in practice, they are not against the European integration project as they acknowledge the need of supranational cooperation in many areas (Kneuer, 2019; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004).

Finally, when assessing the "opposition element" (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016), it seems that many incumbents have instead entered into government or supported it from the outside (Kriesi, 2014; Zulianello, 2020). This is recent as populist parties have increasingly taken up representative functions across Europe to voice people's discontent against the mainstream political elite, thus suggesting a new "golden age" of populism (Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2015; Chryssogelos, 2013; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Renterghem, 2010). According to Kriesi (2014), these are SYRIZA in Greece, the League in Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Freedom Party of Austria, and the Danish People's Party. Hence, traditionally called "challenger parties", despite attacking the mainstream political consensus, appear to have recently become acquainted with government participation.

On the contrary, mainstream parties have been conventionally studied in juxtaposition to their niche competitors. This division was first introduced by Meguid (2005) to describe an umbrella of emerging parties that competed on a different set of issues than conventional centrist forces. Accordingly, niche parties must fulfil three criteria to be qualified as such: first, the issues they raise must fall outside of traditional class cleavages; second, these shall constitute a narrowly defined and owned set; third, they have to span across partisan alignments (Meguid, 2005). Consequently, party families such as green, radical-right/nationalist, populist, communist, and ethno-territorial parties have been traditionally conceptualized as niche since they mostly campaign on single-issue topics like immigration, the environment, European integration, or social liberalism. Hence, it emerges that a party owns a niche profile if it concentrates on topics which other parties cover little (Meyer and Wagner, 2013).

Differently, mainstream forces tend to prioritize traditional portfolios to the detriment of emerging political issues which are instead captured by marginal incumbents. For this reason, Meguid (2005) defines mainstream forces as "electorally dominant actors in the center-left, and center-right blocs on the Left-Right political spectrum" (p. 348). As indicated by Wagner (2011), this in practice means that niche parties have, by definition, a non-centrist party program, and typically do not campaign on economic portfolios *sensu lato* while mainstream parties tend to emphasize the importance of the economic dimension (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2010). In Figure 2, where the *x-axis* represents economic issues, and the *y-axis* non-economic ones, mainstream forces tend to enclose niche parties in the areas of low economic and high non-economic salience, thus signaling the latter's narrow political profile on unconventional topics.

To better grasp the academic and societal relevance of the populist-mainstream divide, the next section presents traditional explanations for the electoral support of populist parties to the detriment of mainstream forces. Specifically, these can be clustered around five main explanations *sensu stricto*, spanning from immigration, economic performance, voters' educational level, trust in public institutions and in the European Union (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnel, 2015; Betz, 1994; Golder, 2003; Hobolt, 2016; Ivarsflaten and Stubager, 2012). Yet, as Jacobs and Spierings (2019) allude to, it remains unclear whether the online sphere is also a factor, "given this suitability of social media for populists" (p. 1).
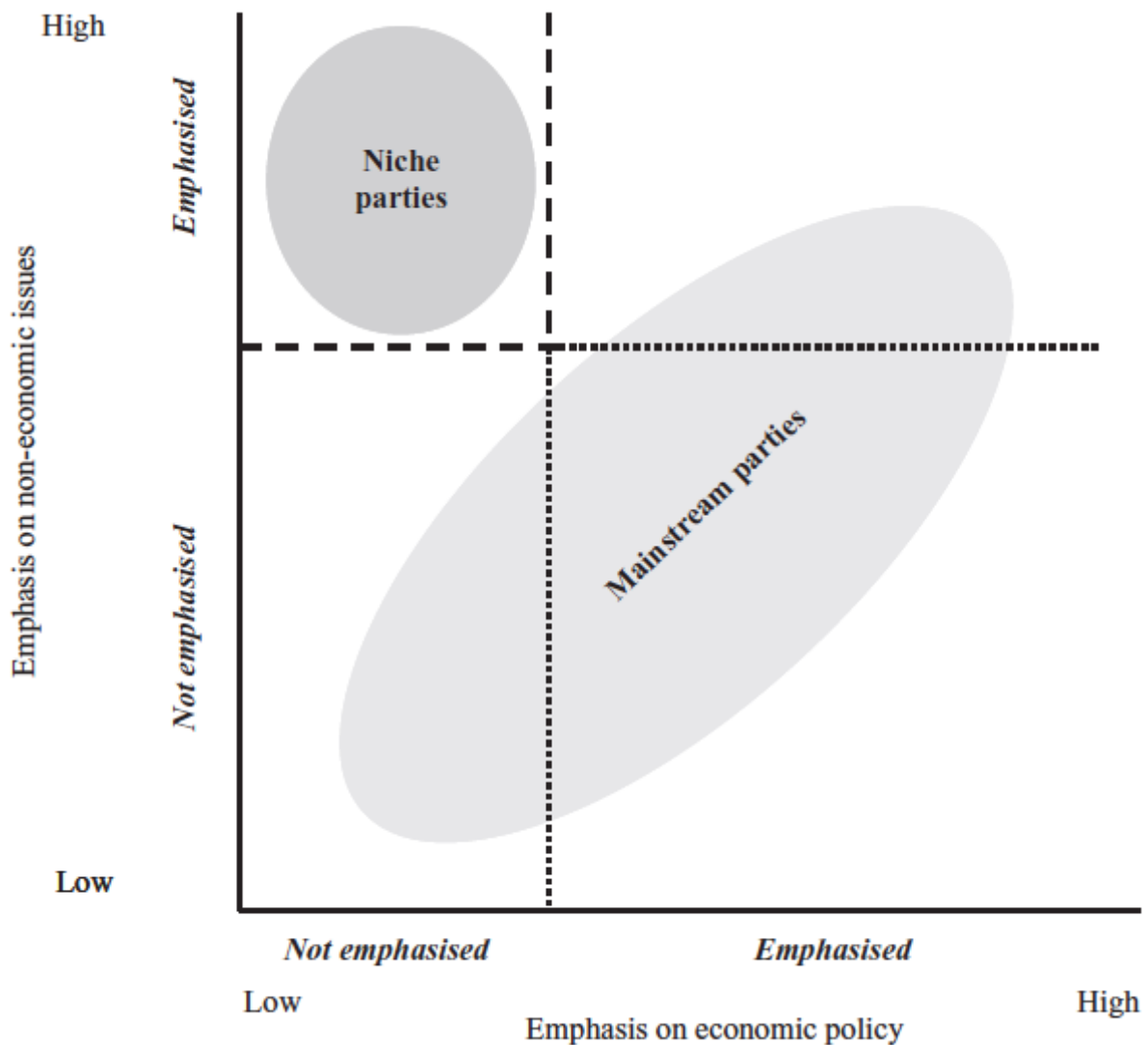
Figure 2: Schematic representation of niche and mainstream ideologies (Wagner, 2011, p. 848).

2.2 Populist parties and the drivers of their support

A first theoretical account for populist parties' electoral success is offered by the role of migration. Scholars agree that globalization has substantially fostered the possibility to move across countries, especially from developing countries to more consolidated economies (i.e. Azmanova, 2011; Castells, 2012). This process has in turn made Western societies ever-more interconnected and multicultural but, arguably, it has conversely awoken a counter feeling of nativism across certain electoral segments (Norris, 2005). As advanced by Mudde (2007), this seems to be particularly true for local inhabitants, which increasingly feel that their identities are under attack by cultural outsiders. Precisely, what seems to play a role is religion as it represents an essential link between the people and their local communities (Immerzeel, 2015), and negative socio-economic factors because immigrants are perceived as economic threats (Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers, 2002). Emblematically, these factors were crucially displayed during the European migration policy crisis as voters have largely sanctioned their governments for the poor policy response due to the absence of cooperation between Member

States (Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2015; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). This, in turn, has favored anti-immigration parties that have been able to exploit citizens' anger as well as their fear of cultural outsiders (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Negative economic trends are also considered decisive. For instance, macroeconomic metrics, such as national unemployment rates, declining wages, and benefit cuts are strongly associated with votes for extremist parties (Golder, 2003; Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Kriesi, 2012). As argued by Visser et al. (2014), this is because negative economic trends are imputed to the government's failure to take the necessary measures. According to Tooze (2018), economic voting has inflated considerably following the 2008 Great Recession as people share the general feeling that governments have not adequately responded to the financial crisis. In Europe, this seems to be particularly the case in Southern Member States where stringent counter-cyclical austerity measures were adopted in response to the sovereign debt crisis (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2012). Moreover, an additional driver of support can be linked to the individual-level evaluation of economic performance (Beissinger and Sasse, 2014; Nieuwbeerta, 1996). As Ramiro (2016) explains, voters' perception of economic downturn implies self-identification with the working class which, in turn, increases the chances of voting for the extreme populist left. This seems to be related to the perceived absence of improvement of personal conditions following the adoption of new policies by the government (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Tsatsanis, Andreadis, and Teperoglou, 2018). Therefore, it emerges that populist parties score better in times of perceived and actual poor economic performance.

Scholars have also focused on the impact of education, which is fundamental in the current knowledge society. The current labor market, in evolution and extremely competitive (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016), increases the returns of additional education years, leaving those with less credentials ill-suited to compete in the knowledge economy (Bornschier, 2010; Coffé and Michels, 2014). Policies that aim to fight inequality are found to end up creating dualization, namely a rising divide between outsiders, who are usually low-skilled workers that tend to get hold of unsecure jobs or temporary contracts, increasingly at risk of being replaced by automation, and insiders who hold secure jobs and occupy a safer place in society (Dahlin, 2019; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Thelen, 2014). Specifically, Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2016) have found that labor market institutions are central to this problem as the failure to negotiate unemployment benefits and dismissal regulations is associated with far-right support. For this reason, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) believe that universities, and other higher institutions, are instrumental in spreading liberal norms and beliefs into society which then lowers the chances of extreme voting. Thus, the absence of education is associated with future material constraints, such as lower and worse employment opportunities, and greater income disparities. On the contrary, additional years of education are considered to spread wealth, tolerance, and liberal values in society (Ivarsflaten and Stubager, 2012; Werfhorst and de Graaf, 2004).

Another significant factor is the low level of trust in public institutions. Barr (2009) claims that general dissatisfaction with the ruling political class fuels anti-establishment appeals because mainstream forces are associated with the complicated functioning and safeguards of representative democracy. Precisely, what seems to play a role is the societal perception that

the governing establishment is not accountable to the people's will (i.e. Betz, 1994; Geurkink et al., 2020; Keefer, Scartascini and Vlaicu, 2019; Poguntke, 1996). This can be traced back to the general feeling that the ruling class is corrupted, rooted in the system, and too distant from the citizens (Zulianello, 2018). In particular, the biggest losers from this process of political dissatisfaction – the so-called *Politikverdrossenheit* – would be mainstream forces because of their *modus operandi* rooted in sclerotic organization and inability to respond to citizens' demands (Ignazi, 2020). By contrast, populist parties present themselves as divergent from their rivals because they emphasize their complete aversion from ordinary political actors and offer panaceas to solve pressingly perceived issues (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004; Mudde, 1996). As a result, extreme voting would be justified by poor performance of the general system and by the societal dissatisfaction with their representatives.

Finally, Euroscepticism is deemed to boost consensus for populist parties. This can be largely ascribed to globalization and the so-called growing divide between the "socio-economic winners and losers", where the former support international cooperation and European integration while the latter oppose them (Evans and Mellon, 2019; Teney, Lacewell, and De Wilde, 2014). As Rodrik (2012) argues, this antagonism can be linked to the inherent struggle of democracy with capitalism as unskilled and semiskilled workers are easily substitutive in a globalized economy. Accordingly, those who do not benefit from this process are more likely to vote for populist parties as these forces mostly place themselves against the European integration process, thus demanding more national sovereignty (Hobolt, 2016; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). Specifically, citizens with lower levels of education and income tend to have adversarial views to Brussels (Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Hooghe and Marks, 2005), as well as those owning strong national identities (Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2006).

Concerning the role of the online sphere, scholars have also examined populist parties, but mostly in light of their discourse and adoption strategies (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018; Vliegenthart, 2012). For instance, Bobba and Roncarolo (2018) report that populist politicians adopt social networks in a "Manichean way" by emphasizing their deep difference from moderate forces. This mostly recurs by "shifting the blame" (Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016, p. 595) since populist actors amplify their message as a vehicle for "injustice frames" to recruit followers and organize political opposition (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011). As Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese (2016) confirm, emotionalized blame attributions seem to have the strongest effects for citizens with weaker identity attachments. Moreover, the opportunity to establish personalized communication with voters is an additional factor that seems to match with the populist ideology, represented by campaigning opportunities provided by social networks (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson, 2017; Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Accordingly, right-wing populist parties that center leadership and consensus around a "strong man rhetoric" benefit most from social media campaigning (Stier et al., 2017). Also, Ernst et al. (2017) conducted a comparative study of the Facebook and Twitter posts of politicians across six countries and discovered that populist candidates adopt social networks more aggressively, thus seeming in a state of permanent campaign against dominant mainstream forces (Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2011).

Overall, it seems that social media are particularly suited with the personalized and dichotomic logic of populism because their unmediated, simplistic, and immediate nature allows them to reduce the complexity of issues and make them more appealing to voters (Schaub and Morisi, 2020). In addition, this can be ascribed to the fact that social networks are non-hierarchical (Barlett, 2014) and do not have professional gatekeepers, but are rather constituted by horizontal peer-networks (Aalberg et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). As Groshek and Engelbert (2013) underline, these characteristics offer populists an essential extra-channel of political communication with voters because they can circumvent the mainstream media which tend to depict them negatively and, therefore, gain more visibility. If one follows this logic, it would at first glance appear that while "pre-Internet meant expertise, post-Internet means populism" (Morozov, 2013, p. 178).

However, this does not necessarily imply greater electoral support for populist parties. While scholars have identified how social networks are essential for populist parties and how they tend to be extremely active in the online sphere, it remains unclear whether they constitute a factor themselves. The gap emerges as the debate has not sufficiently investigated whether their Facebook use can also be held conducive to their growing rise in Europe. To the author's knowledge, only Schaub and Morisi (2020) have studied the impact of broadband Internet connectivity on the rise of populism in Europe by focusing on the Five Stars Movement and Alternative for Germany. Yet, the role of Facebook, and social media in general, has largely been unexplored, with the notable exception of Twitter which has so far been the preferred medium of scholarly attention (Enli and Moe, 2013). To solve these deficiencies, this thesis aims to shed light by looking at twenty-four national elections that took place between 2016 and 2019. However, before turning into that, the next section explains how political forces can exploit social networks to gain more votes in a one-step and two-step flow of political communication.

2.3 Why online communication matters: the one-step and two-step flow of communication hypotheses

Social networks provide political actors a multitude of opportunities. Whether it is Facebook, Twitter or other platforms that are adopted for political campaigning, they constitute unprecedented channels to reach out to more people without mitigation. To this end, the concept of "virality" is crucial, that can be defined as "network-enhanced word of mouth" or "the process which gives any information item the maximum exposure, relative to the potential audience, over a short duration, distributed by many nodes" (Nahon et al., 2011, pp. 1-2). When applied to parties' online campaigning, virality refers to the possibility of maximizing the consumption of specific social media content across voters where information access and knowledge is linked to the professional and amatorial activity of each node of the network (Larsson, 2017; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). This is possible, as Benkler (2007) notes, due to the technological openness and flexibility of the Internet where individuals hold the power over the creation and exchange of information since they "are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century" (p. 2). Through a logic of mass production and consumption of information, political actors therefore have the

possibility to maximize their exposure across voters as popular content can be enhanced in terms of visibility.

Online exposure is ensured by algorithms that, in the context of social media, are "a system of criteria which are used to make decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of material and which aspects of said material to present in an algorithmically driven news feed" (DeVito, 2017, p. 754). Precisely, as this thesis focuses on Facebook, the algorithm at stake is "EdgeRank" – "the kingmaker for digital content providers" (Pasquale, 2015, p. 71) – that determines the content of the center column of a user's homepage and represents a constantly updating list of stories from "friends" and "pages". Although there is little to no knowledge about the current version of EdgeRank because of trade secrets and recurring updates, scholars have extensively tried to reconstruct the various components of the algorithm by employing fictitious data, and by conducting interviews with experts and former Facebook engineers (e.g. Birkbak and Carlsen, 2016; Bucher, 2012; Carter, 2008; Helmond, Nieborg and van der Vlist, 2019; Lee, Hosanagar and Nair, 2018; Voorveld et al., 2018). What emerged from these studies is that Facebook, akin to the logic of Google and other search engines, is governed by an automated and predetermined selection mechanism that establishes which "objects" (i.e. content) are relevant. As Bucher holds (2012), this occurs since every interaction in the form of like, reaction, comment or share creates an "Edge" that obtains a popularity score. It follows that Edges which have higher ranks obtain increasing exposure across users. According to Vaidhyanathan (2018), this is rooted in the core engineering idea of Facebook to promote items that generate strong emotional reactions and engagement with users. Therefore, for political actors, this means that their visibility strictly depends on the extent to which they manage to craft publications that mobilize their online followers.

Despite the recent nature of research on social media campaigning, communication flows have actually been the focus of the academic debate for a long time. This tradition can be traced back to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), when the scholarship was mainly concerned with the effect of mass media consumption on the general public opinion. Accordingly, the authors elaborated a communication hypothesis, known as the two-step flow of communication, that is still the object of study in the Web 2.0 era. This theory holds that the wider population is mostly influenced by "local opinion leaders" who are those initially exposed to mass media content. As they interpret and frame this content based on their own opinions and beliefs, they also shape the wider public opinion by favoring the circulation of specific information to "opinion followers". It follows that, because of this two-step sequence, the mass is inevitably influenced by how these issues have been initially framed by opinion leaders. As a result, a logic of two steps of communication is *de facto* created as those who define issues in the first place can then spread specific content to other people who, in the second step, consume it and conversely transmit it to their peers.

This communication hypothesis was then applied by scholars in the context of Web 2.0 to understand how certain types of information are consumed by online users (e.g. Anspach, 2017; Bene, 2017; Bennet and Manheim, 2016; Choi, 2014; Karlsen, 2015). In a nutshell, as Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) explain, this is because social networks offer politicians two main channels of communication to a potentially larger public: narrowcasting and broadcasting.

Concretely, this means that parties can choose to directly reach out to their followers in a one-step flow, who represent their "primary audiences"; alternatively, they can also indirectly disseminate political content to the larger community in a two-step sequence – "the secondary audience" – as long as their followers recirculate these messages to their own followers that do not follow the politician in question.

Accordingly, in the first step, political actors make use of social networks to publish content that is directly addressed to their primary audiences, which are constituted by their close group of online followers. This direct route of communication has been defined by Bennett and Manheim (2016) as the "one-step flow of communication" where political communication is circumscribed since it is directed to a small number of lookalikes. Although this theoretical postulate has been criticized because it does not perfectly fit with the current Web 2.0 logic, Bennett and Iyengar (2010) defend that online communication is mostly directed at the individual or to an assembled group of likeminded individuals through the most efficient and narrowest channel of communication. Moreover, as social networks are increasingly seen as "online echo chambers" (e.g. Dubois and Blank, 2018; Gillani et al., 2018; Harris and Harrigan, 2015), Bennett and Iyengar (2010) contend that the one-step flow of communication is still extremely relevant for social media studies. This is because online information recipients tend to be more isolated and fragmented than in the past because of the underlying architecture of social media which tend to award content that matches users' ideological preferences (Ryan, 2010). Precisely, as Anderson (2011) notes, it is news-publishing outlets that are capable with the right code to identify and cater the specific needs and desires of online user groups, hence targeting "algorithmic audiences". Translated into political terms, in the first step, this means that parties must be capable of tailoring the right messages to each specific segment of their electorate.

On the contrary, during the second step, political actors can expand their "network's reach to a secondary audience" (Ernst et al., 2017, p. 1350) as more users can consume their online content. This occurs as their primary audiences take up the role of opinion leaders as they increase the online visibility of their preferred political actors by interplaying with their publications (Karlsen, 2015). This involves the interaction of Facebook quantitative indicators, namely likes, reactions, comments, and shares, which trigger the algorithm by ensuring more exposure to publications that are highly reacted (Anspach, 2017). As a result, an increasing number of users, who are now part of the secondary audience, find themselves exposed to the foci of political discourse which they did not choose to view in the first place (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). Consequently, politicians that are popular amongst online users have the possibility to spread political information not only to their followers but also to their followers' friends. Lessig (2012) perfectly summarizes this idea with the emblematic claim that, in the US elections, "10,000 clicks from 10 States could begin a candidate in the process towards winning the Americans Elect nomination".

To better understand the magnitude of secondary exposure, Dittrich (2017) explains that as on average each Facebook user has 150 friends, if a post gets shared 10,000 times, it can potentially be viewed by 1.5 million people. This way, parties that are popular in the online sphere can increase their network's reach to larger lots of the electorate. Although one could

argue that political actors are "popular" on social networks because of their seniority and previous electoral success, it must be taken into account that their online presence is not only determined by the total amount of activity of their Facebook pages, but also by their primary audiences (Bene, 2017). Therefore, factors such as seniority and previous electoral success surely play a role in making political actors more popular in the online sphere, but they should not be seen in opposition to other factors, such as their primary audiences. Instead, they are part of the online public opinion because followers are the ones capable of determining their web presence. Hence, during the second-step of communication, their degree of visibility is determined by their primary audiences that are fundamental in increasing the online presence of their preferred political actor.

Overall, it emerges that both communication hypotheses can help in shedding light on why parties increase their electoral outcome either by reaching out to their primary or secondary audiences. These campaigning opportunities thus constitute the analytical focus of this thesis, which aims to fill the existing gap by considering potential theoretical mechanisms that can account for populist support *vis-à-vis* mainstream forces. Given the relevance of Facebook as a communication channel in election times, and this "first sight" suitability of populism with the online sphere, the following driving hypothesis is formulated:

H1: The use of Facebook is positively related to electoral support for populist parties.

As Schaub and Morisi (2020) have identified, the diffusion of broadband Internet tools can potentially explain the rise of populism in Europe for three main reasons. First, as social networks constitute the unprecedented opportunity to bypass mainstream media outlets, populists should be incentivized to use Facebook to attack their opponents, therefore gaining greater visibility than on conventional communication channels (Barlett, 2014; Ernst et al., 2017; Krämer, 2014; Moffit, 2017). This reliance on the online sphere, which is emblematically encapsulated by Ernst et al. (2019) in the idea that "populists prefer social media over talk shows" (p. 1), would be supported by the unmitigated nature of the web to circumvent traditional information sources. Crucially, this would give them the opportunity to establish "proximity to the people" (Müller, 2016), namely the spreading of a benign and positive image in voters' eyes which, in turn, would offer a closer point of reference to the people. According to Katz, Barris and Jain (2013), this would ultimately allow them to better hear "the voice of the people" (p. 13).

Second, this potential theoretical account seems to be significantly supported by the emerging consensus that social media, and the Internet in general, tend to lower the threshold of political participation (Effing, van Hillegersberg and Huibers, 2011; Getachew and Beshah, 2019; Kristoffer et al., 2013). Lower entrance barriers would therefore give populists the possibility to convey a popular narrative of political communication that maintains an anti-elitist and people-centric stance, thus stressing a direct connection to the people (Schaub and Morisi, 2020). This would be extremely important considering that they are mostly in the opposition spectrum of politics and, therefore, Facebook would constitute a perfect opportunity to fuel discontent with the ruling political class (Engesser et al., 2017; Groshek and Engelbert, 2013; Hameelers and Vliegenthart, 2020).

Finally, and in line with the first two explanations, online platforms seem to reward the speed and simplicity of communication, something which populists tend to employ consistently via their aggressive style of communication and heavy use of alternative media to enlarge their range of followers (Bobba, 2018; Müller and Schulz, 2019; Schroeder, 2018). As previously mentioned, the social media logic of virality, besides igniting the amount of available information, would also reduce the accuracy and trustworthiness of certain content, which is usually filtered by traditional information gatekeepers (Bergmann, 2020; Monti, 2018; Nielsen, 2020). Hence, the trustless nature of the Internet would ultimately favor those political outsiders, such as populists, that tend to resort to forged content and borderline truths to gain more votes. This would be of substantive importance considering that the general public arguably seems to have lost faith in the authoritativeness of information from conventional media outlets.

In the next three subsections, to investigate this overarching hypothesis further, the use of Facebook in election times is further decomposed into three contingent research expectations to detail the explanatory mechanisms that should allow populist parties to increase their share of votes more than other forces. These constitute the independent variables of the thesis and thus relate to three factors derived from the one-step and two-step flow theories of political communication. First, to the opportunity of communicating directly with their primary audiences; second, to the prerogative of indirectly reaching out to a larger base of Facebook users; third, to the potential advantages derived from owning a greater mass of online followers.

2.3.1 Direct online presence

Concerning the first step of communication, political actors are seen to take advantage of social media to communicate directly with their followers. This constitutes an important campaigning prerogative, especially regarding the possibility of forging popular narratives for political communication. In fact, parties, irrespective of their ideologies, have the opportunity to attack their antagonists by pointing the finger at particular issues and, ultimately, establish "issue-ownership" to win voters' preferences over salient topics (see Lachat, 2014; Stubager, 2018). This seems to be particularly efficient in the current "hypermedia landscape" (Howard, 2005) where users are increasingly exposed to customized content since social media seem to aliment "homophily", that is "the tendency of similar individuals to form ties with each other" (Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson, 2014, p. 318). Unlike traditional offline channels, social networks thus strengthen interactions and information exposure between likeminded others and kindred souls, hence inflating existing echo-chambers and filter bubbles (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). Accordingly, populists should thrive in this communication landscape because they bank most of their rhetoric on polarization to stress their deep differences *vis-à-vis* their antagonists. Recurrently, these are represented by a plethora of ill-defined elites, such as the economic, financial, religious, and political establishment, the media, supranational institutions, judicial courts and non-governmental organizations (Engesser et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2010).

Moreover, populist parties can reduce the complexity of issues by utilizing a simple and easy-to-follow language, that particularly goes hand in hand with the speed and simplicity of social media (Caiani and Graziano, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Nonetheless, this prerogative tends

to be increasingly employed by other parties too as politicians seem to have resorted to a more popular style of communication than in the past (see Bischof and Senninger, 2018; Kato and Okada, 2011; McDonnel and Ondelli, 2020). However, populists are seen to take this to the extreme as they mostly center communication around "blame attribution" to convey systemic messages of fear, anger and resentment against the elites and the societal situation in general (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2016). In doing so, populist parties seem to establish a "direct, unmediated access to the people's grievances" (Kriesi, 2014, p. 63) as they present themselves as the mouthpieces of the people. On the contrary, mainstream parties give the impression of being trapped in the procedural constraints of democratic party politics, hence distant and unable to deliver cure-all solutions. Moreover, this popular narrative of communication would ultimately give populist parties the chance to glorify the figure of their strong leaders, which recurrently constitute their main channels of propaganda (Aalberg et al., 2017). Although the personalization of parties' leaderships appears to be a common trait of modern party politics (see Garzia, 2013; Pedersen and Rahat, 2019), populists seem once again to take this one step further. In fact, they are identified to ever rely on personalized communication since their leaders claim to have a direct connection with the people and the power to govern outside of existing constitutional barriers (Barber, 2019; Mamonova, 2019; Yilmaz and Bashirov, 2018). By relying on their direct online presence, they should therefore benefit more than mainstream parties from their Facebook use.

On that account, the one-step flow of political communication is linked to the possibility of narrowcasting specific messages which, in the case of Facebook, is done with predictive scoring to give users content that matches their personal views. As Davenport and Beck (2002) argue, online opportunity structures are rooted in the "attention economy": as attention is a scarce resource in the online sphere, information providers have to compete fiercely for users due to the abundance of circulating content. Translated into political terms, this means that all parties, irrespective of their ideologies, must be capable of maximizing voters' attention if they wish to increase their support (Lanham, 2006; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). Consequently, as the one-step flow of political communication enables political actors to spread content directly to users, it constitutes a crucial campaigning opportunity to enhance information circulation across primary audiences. Accordingly, the more publications a party produces, the more it is capable of maximizing information consumption by its close group of online followers. As such, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **H1.1**: Vote for populist parties increases when they publish more posts on Facebook than their opponents during the electoral campaigning period.

Overall, it is expected that populist parties benefit more than their opponents from their direct online presence. This is because "populism is particularly well-suited to be communicated online" (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1286) since simplification, emotionalization, and personalization are greatly amplified by social media. Nonetheless, such a difference in outcome may be considered minimal between populists and other factions. As scholars have identified (e.g. Abou-Chadi, 2016; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014), political forces, irrespective of their ideologies, strongly invest on their digital profiles and online communication tools. This can be largely ascribed to the fact social media constitute an

unprecedented opportunity to reach out to more people than in the past. Therefore, if one follows this logic, all parties are eager to maximize this opportunity. However, the academic debate has not found consensus here. While Bright et al. (2018) have shown that active parties in the online sphere receive more votes, Jacobs and Spiering (2019) have discovered the opposite. Nonetheless, in light of the increasing adoption of Facebook as a political campaigning tool across the whole political spectrum (Duggan et al., 2015), one would believe that all parties want to exploit direct online communication channels as much as possible to gain more votes. However, as Bego (2020) suggests, the emergence of filter bubbles and news sources' polarization is expected to lead to an erosion of public trust and demos as a public, thus ultimately benefiting political outsiders. Therefore, given this *prima facie* suitability of populism with social networks, it is expected that populist parties may gain more votes than their counterparts from their direct communication on Facebook.

2.3.2 *Indirect online presence*

On the contrary, during the second step of political communication, politicians do not preach to the converted but rather "through the converted" (Vissers, 2009, p. 1). Here, online campaigning arguably shifts from managing a social media account to the possibility of reaching out to a larger secondary audience through the growing power of online commons to filter what they see and customize what they share (Ernst et al., 2017; Turow, 2013). This is possible because of the online activity of their close group of online followers – the primary audiences – that are pivotal in ensuring the recirculation of political content across voters by triggering the underlying Facebook algorithm (Jabos and Spierings, 2019). Specifically, as the latter is rooted in the industry-specific idea to keep "as many people on the site spending as much time as possible, interacting as much as possible" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 17), the popularity of a Facebook publication inherently depends on its number of interactions and the degree of affinity between the publisher and the viewer (Bucher, 2012). This occurs since Facebook tends to award content that is more clicked by users as this leads to "more page views, more user interaction (i.e. users reveal more about their interests to the company), and, eventually, more and better advertising" (Morozov, 2013, p. 157). Translated into political terms, this means that political actors can indirectly communicate to a larger secondary audience because their primary audiences can rebroadcast their original messages to a potentially broader public (Bene, 2017). As a result, the wide-general Facebook audience can be exposed to political content that it did not choose to view for the simple reason that some of their online friends are particularly active on social networks.

Given that an increasing number of people obtain political news and information that is shared by their friends on Facebook (see Boukes, 2019; Kim and Vishak, 2008), the two-step flow of communication can have a decisive impact on the information consumption by the wider public. Although perceived credibility varies considerably across Facebook friends, politicians still have the unprecedented possibility to persuade voters they would not reach otherwise. As they aim to be more visible across voters, they also have the prerogative to maximize their exposure. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1.2: Vote for populist parties increases when they receive more interactions per Facebook publication by users than their opponents during the electoral campaigning period.

As the academic debate has identified that populist parties use social networks more consistently than other forces (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Groshek and Engelbert, 2013), it is expected that their primary audiences are also more active than their counterparts in recirculating political messages. Potentially, this can be of substantive importance since Stier et al. (2020) found that citizens with populist attitudes prefer to consume hyper partisan news than websites from the legacy press. In addition, as identified by Schaub and Morisi (2020), while broadband Internet offers established players just another platform, "for populists it has been a gamechanger, providing them with a communication channel that allows them to maintain ideological consistency and circumvent gatekeepers" (p. 753). As previously mentioned, since populist parties must find an extra-channel of political communication, it is also predictable that their online followers are extremely keen on maximizing their exposure. Therefore, it is expected that they will benefit more than their opponents from their indirect online presence.

2.3.3 Popular online presence

Finally, another element that seems to play an important role is the sheer size of online followers. This is because, as Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) underline, primary audiences have *de facto* a dualist function in both steps of political communication. On the one hand, they are the main receptors of direct communication. A large primary audience thus indicates that parties have a larger number of active listeners in the online sphere (Crawford, 2009). On the other hand, primary audiences are actively involved in the recirculation of political discourse. A high number of followers eventually represents the possibility to reach out to a larger secondary audience. Therefore, the larger the group of online proselytes, the more political actors can avail themselves of both communication opportunities.

However, there is no evidence that being a follower of a certain politician on Facebook generally translates into voting for their party. Although Beukeboom, Kerkhofa and de Vries (2015) have provided evidence that following a brand on Facebook provokes positive changes in personal evaluations, this is not entirely satisfactory from a political standpoint. Hence, in the context of online political campaigning, the role of online followers must be better considered in light of their function to maximize the overall visibility of specific political actors. For example, consider one extra follower that assumingly follows a party's page on Facebook but does not vote for it. Perhaps s/he does so just to get political information from that page and to follow the political debate around certain issues. Moreover, s/he can attack the politician at stake by commenting under her/his posts, reacting negatively to a publication, or even sharing that publication and criticizing it harshly. All these actions, whatever their nature and intention, can ultimately be beneficial to the political actor at stake. Thus, for the one-step flow of communication, one extra follower means that at least one extra person is listening to the political conversation. Though s/he might not vote for that political party, s/he is directly exposed to its political content. Similarly, for two-step flow, an extra follower that interacts with a publication inevitably boosts its Edge score, hence increasing its visibility across friends.

Although these posts might be interpreted differently by each user, they are still visualized by more people than before. Therefore, a larger number of followers, even if not being strictly related to the final size of votes, is pivotal in maximizing the exposure of certain publications to primary and secondary audiences. Hence, the third hypothesis is formulated:

H1.3: Vote for populist parties increases when they have a higher followers base than their opponents during the electoral campaigning period.

Following the previous hypotheses, as populist parties appear to be prolific in both steps of political communication, especially for indirect communication, it is also foreseeable that they have a bigger size of followers than their opponents. As previously mentioned, this can be largely ascribed to the fact that populist parties and users seem to use social networks more aggressively and extensively than other forces (e.g. Engesser et al., 2017; Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016). Therefore, if they manage to convey messages that capture the attention of their primary audiences, a higher number of followers would clearly facilitate the opportunity of having more active listeners than other parties (Crawford, 2009). This is fundamental as listeners can also become talkers in the second step since they contribute to the spread of specific information and ideas across voters. Although Cha et al. (2010) warn about "the million follower fallacy" – that consists in the followers' unwillingness to redistribute messages despite the potentially larger audience – Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) reiterate that a high number of followers is still the coveted goal. This is because such an opportunity enhances the possibility of redistributing political messages to more people and to communicate both directly and indirectly to a larger electoral base. In the case of populist parties, a high number of online followers can convey anti-establishment messages more easily and efficiently. As such, populist parties are expected to benefit more from their followers' size than their opponents.

Overall, these hypotheses can shed light on the different degree of electoral support between populist parties and their opponents by exploring the causal impact of their presence on Facebook. This is of substantive interest for the academic debate as previous contributions have not sufficiently studied populism in the context of online political communication, specifically in comparison to their opponents. In addition, concerning the wider societal implications, the importance of this comparative assessment can clarify the impact of parties' use of social networks as more and more voters access political information from the online sphere during election times. As confirmed by a study of the Pew Research Center (2018), 67% of adults in the United States discover news through social media access. Through this academic contribution, voters can be better informed about their role in maximizing the visibility of their preferred party and, *vice versa*, on the impact that Facebook exposure can have on their voting choice. Conversely, political parties can benefit from this study too since they can gain more knowledge about which online campaigning strategy is more likely to yield higher electoral preferences. Therefore, to test these hypotheses, the next chapter illustrates the research design and data which have been adopted to perform the analysis.

3. Research design and data

This chapter starts by providing the cross-country measurement of populism to show how the selected parties have been classified in light of their political ideologies. Then, it provides the operationalization of the dependent and independent variables as it reports the sources which have been consulted to retrieve the data. After that, the case selection process for countries, parties and social media is justified. Finally, the last section specifies the model that drives the analysis of this thesis.

3.1 Populist and mainstream parties: cross-country measurement

Regarding parties' measurement, there is no agreement in the literature on how to differentiate between populist and mainstream forces, given the great variety of operational approaches. As previously indicated, these are encapsulated in the long-debated issue on whether populism can be considered a style of communication (e.g. Moffit, 2017), an ideology (e.g. Mudde, 2004) or an attitude (e.g. Hakwins, 2010). Likewise, when considering mainstream parties, the theoretical difficulty arises due to the unfixed and changeable status of niche parties, depending on whether they decide to emphasize specific issues versus general ones (Meyer and Wagner, 2013; Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2011).

Concerning the measurement of populism, scholars (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Pirro and Taggart, 2018; Rooduijn, 2019) agree that an ideational approach is best suited, which is encapsulated in Mudde's (2004) definition.[1] Nonetheless, disagreement pervades its measurement. For instance, a strand of the debate (i.e. Hawkins, 2010; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Engesser et al., 2017) has approached the issue through quantitative content analysis techniques by applying pre-determined codes on parties' ideological manifestos, political speeches, party broadcasts, and social media messages. Although this approach allows to take into account both minor and major forces across countries, it can significantly "suffer from coder subjectivity" (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011, p. 98), besides being extremely time-consuming. Furthermore, as Rooduijn (2019) points out, the relation between people-centrism and anti-elitism still remains unclear, specifically on whether the two should always be present when conceptualizing populism. Finally, quantitative content analyses seem to fall short in providing sufficient clarity with large and heterogeneous samples since many ideological manifestos and political speeches are extremely hard to retrieve in comparative settings.

To obviate these deficiencies, some scholars (i.e. Bakker et al., 2020 Meijers and Zaslove, 2020; Rooduijn et al., 2019; Stravrakakis et al., 2017) have relied on technical knowledge by carrying out expert surveys. What has emerged from this method is approximate convergence in the identification of populist parties, though the number of examined countries and parties vary significantly across surveys. In light of this theoretical uncertainty, this thesis has preferred the PopuList expert survey of Rooduijn et al. (2019). Besides being rooted in Mudde's (2004) work, which constitutes the preferred definitional approach by the debate, this survey is particularly well-suited in serving the purpose of this thesis since it encompasses all

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[1] See section 2.1.

the twenty-four selected national elections, therefore allowing to identify populist parties across heterogenous and multilevel samples. In doing so, it also considers all those political forces that have at least obtained a 2% share of votes, or won one seat, in national parliamentary elections since 1989.

Likewise, for the measurement of mainstream parties, the existing scholarship also has mostly resorted to expert surveys (Hunt and Laver, 1992; Benoit and Laver, 2006) and party manifestos with Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2007). With the first approach, scholars have traditionally tried to assess the relative importance of certain policies between niche and mainstream parties. Instead, with the second, the debate has tried to delineate various policy categories by assigning "niche weight" to non-economic references against economic matters, such as foreign policy, defense, interior, justice, education, agriculture, environment and social affairs (Bäck, Debus and Dumont, 2011). The latter seems *hitherto* the most preferred approach, that is encapsulated in Wagner's (2011) contribution which operationalizes Meguid's (2005) definition with three key variables.[2] First, niche parties, to be identified as such, need to emphasize one or more noneconomic policy areas compared to their rivals; second, such policy areas must be stressed in general terms; third, the party conversely needs to deemphasize economic policy issues significantly.

By taking into consideration populist parties, it inevitably emerges that mainstream parties are those political forces that are not populists and, therefore, tend not to be necessarily classified as niche. This assumption is based on the realization that populist forces arguably constitute a subcategory of niche parties, as advanced by Van Ditmars and de Lange (2014; 2018), since they take positions which are markedly different from those of their mainstream competitors. Hence, if the three criteria introduced by Meguid (2005) are assessed, it emerges that populists could largely fulfill them, though not all niche parties are necessarily populists. Based on Mudde's (2004) ideational definition, "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism" constitute two key tenets that fall outside of traditional class cleavages. Similarly, they are sufficiently narrowly defined, owned and emphasized by populists at large. Finally, they span horizontally across the whole political spectrum.

In addition, considering Wagner's (2011) contribution, it seems that populists would tend to prioritize non-economic issues over economic ones, with the notable exception of far-left populist parties, though they oppose the financial establishment more in general. Although this purely dichotomic simplification tends to conceptualize borderline cases, like communist parties, as mainstream, the PopuList classification nonetheless defines typical niche examples, such as regional and nationalist parties, as populists. For instance, this is the case with the Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja, the Catalan "in Common We Can", the League, the Venetian League, Sinn Fein, the Nationalist Rally, Vox, Jobbik, and Law and Justice. Though not conclusive, this classification reflects the academic uncertainty on the measurement of the two concepts and can thus serve as a starting point to distinguish the two

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[2] See section 2.1.

ideological classes across large and heterogeneous samples. Therefore, with this approach, 202 parties have been considered, out of which 50 have been identified as populists.[3]

3.2 Operationalizing direct, indirect and popular presence on Facebook

To understand whether populist parties benefit most from their Facebook use, political communication mechanisms must firstly be operationalized. However, before turning to that, it is important to define the analytical timeframe. As this thesis aims to analyze parties' online presence during the electoral campaigning period, the latter must be defined in a way that is applicable across countries. Therefore, this thesis defines the electoral campaigning period as the timeframe constituted by the period of eighteen months before the national election day, thus being the average campaign length in the American presidential elections (Hill, 2017). Although there are no specific timespans for the selected European electoral races, this thesis adopts by default the American one as it provides a lengthy, equal and comparable period of time across the selected cases.

Turning to the variables that drive the analysis of this thesis, the dependent variable is constituted by the electoral support of the selected parties, both populist and mainstream. This is measured as the percentage share of votes, which has been retrieved from the ParlGov database (source: Döring and Manow, 2019).

Instead, regarding the operationalization of the first independent variable – direct online presence – the one-step flow hypothesis holds that political actors communicate directly with their primary audiences as initial mobilization depends on the efficiency of parties' communication (Bennett and Manheim, 2016). However, when it comes to operationalization and empirical testing, this theoretical postulate becomes problematic. This is because there is no consistency on how the one-step flow of communication theory is translated into practice. For instance, this could refer to the efficacy of parties' micro-targeting techniques, which in turn could require different operationalizations based on the selected indexes. Likewise, a pertinent analysis of direct communication should also involve the evaluation of which kind of content, from a qualitative point of view, could be capable of directly mobilizing the electorate. Moreover, as this theory has been mostly applied to single-case studies (e.g. Choi, 2014) and on Twitter (e.g. Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Fraia and Missaglia, 2014), there is no certainty about its cross-country operationalization and application to Facebook. For instance, this is because different electoral contexts have different Facebook penetration rates and online political cultures.

Nonetheless, Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) provide great help here. In their study on the Twitter accounts of Italian politicians during the 2013 elections, they have introduced a framework that focuses on direct political communication while allowing for interoperability across parties, voters, and countries. In addition, it is easily transferable across social media as the first step of communication, contrary to the second one, is mainly concerned with parties' direct communication with their primary audiences instead of focusing on the role of the algorithm in spreading political content across voters. Therefore, following Vaccari's and Valeriani's

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[3] The ideological classification of parties is available in the appendix in Table 5.

(2015) contribution, parties' direct online presence is operationalized as the total number of publications that parties have produced during the electoral campaigning period.

Regarding the second step of political communication, there is less theoretical uncertainty. As previously indicated, this is because indirect online presence is strongly rooted in the role performed by the EdgeRank algorithm, that can be studied according to specific quantitative indicators that reflect its components. Here, the concept of virality is crucial as visibility strictly depends on the extent to which the algorithm has been triggered. This means that the exposure of a Facebook publication is linked to whether the affinity, weight, and time components have been multiplied in such a way that a high Edge score is produced (Bucher, 2012). Therefore, in line with the academic literature, this thesis adopts the operationalization by Bene (2017) who studied the second step of political communication on Facebook during the 2014 Hungarian elections. As such, this thesis defines parties' indirect online presence as the total volume of likes, reactions, comments, and shares per publication that parties have received during the electoral campaigning period.

Finally, concerning the third independent variable – popular online presence – scholars (e.g. Crawford, 2009; Stier et al., 2018; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015) hold that the ultimate goal for parties is to become prominent across voters as to strengthen overall online visibility. Although a sizable primary audience does not necessarily mean that parties have a larger number of active listeners, it can undoubtedly facilitate both communication opportunities. This is because, as Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) underline, all parties share the ultimate goal to be popular through a large fanbase. Therefore, this thesis defines popular online presence as the party's sheer size of followers at the end of the electoral campaigning period.

The data for the three independent variables have been retrieved by running a KPI analysis of each official Facebook party page. This has been done by consulting "Fanpage Karma" (2020), a market analytics tool usually employed by corporations, governments, and non-governmental organizations to measure the overall performance of Facebook pages from 2012 onwards. In total, twenty-four datasets have been gathered, one per electoral race.[4] Since this thesis focuses on the election campaigning period, whose length is of a year and a half before the election day, the KPI analyses had to be performed according to each national context.[5] In line with the operationalization of the three independent variables, the selected indicators have been the total amount of parties' publications, their volume of likes, reactions, comments, and shares publications, and the sheer size of their followers.

3.3 Case selection: countries, parties, and social media

This thesis employs a comparative strategy by analyzing twenty-four national elections in Europe between 2016 and 2019. Although populism arguably grew stronger outside Europe than within in the last years, the focus is on European elections because of the substantial rise of populist parties that have threatened the established mainstream consensus across Member

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[4] The KPI analyses of each national election are available in the appendix between Tables 6 and 29.
[5] Table 30 in the appendix details the date of the elections for each country, the turnout figures, and share of votes per party.

States (Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose, 2019). This was particularly clear in the outcome of the European Parliament elections in 2019, but also across the national spectrums of each country as populist parties have on average increased their share of votes more than their mainstream competitors.

Specifically, the time period between 2016 and 2019 has been selected because it constitutes the recent aftermath of crucial events in European politics that have strongly impacted voters' choices in the last two decades (Immerzeel, 2015; Kriesi, 2012; Norris, 2005; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017). As previously hinted to, these include the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, the 2008 Great Recession and Eurozone crisis, the 2016 Brexit referendum, the recent refugee policy crisis, growing environmental concerns, and alleged Russian infiltrations in Western electoral contexts. On the contrary, during the last four years, the political climate has remained relatively "calmer" without such major events, until the COVID19 crisis that is not included in the scope of this thesis. Hence, an analytical focus on the years prior to 2016, and the inclusion of 2020, would have probably biased the results because such critical junctures appear to be highly correlated with populist parties' support. Therefore, the timeframe between 2016 and 2019 has been chosen to assess populist parties' rise *vis-à-vis* their competitors in Europe.

Furthermore, these twenty-four countries have been selected because they can be held representative of the whole region. [6] Accordingly, this large country sample accounts for both established (Western Europe) and less-established party systems (Central and Eastern Europe) while being representative of different Facebook and Internet Penetration rates (Internet World Stats, 2020; Statista, 2020c). This is important for the analysis as it signals that voters' access to the online sphere is not equally distributed across countries, thus indicating heterogeneity. Consequently, with this large and variegated sample, the case selection process permits to select parties based on a random sample and, therefore, avoid selection biases.

Nonetheless, the exception lies on the 2019 Austrian and the 2019 November Spanish elections as they have both been called unexpectedly. Hence, they have not been selected because of their short proclamation notice which compromised their respective electoral campaigning periods. Yet, both countries are part of the sample as they still hosted national elections in April 2019 (Spain) and 2017 (Austria). Moreover, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Malta, and Cyprus have been excluded as their electoral systems, tendentially of majoritarian vocation, significantly lower the presence of political incumbents. Done otherwise, this would have made the ideological differentiation extremely difficult because of the low presence of political outsiders, such as populist parties.

In total, 202 parties have been selected, that constitutes an average of 8.4 political forces per race. As illustrated before, 50 parties have been identified as populist, which corresponds to almost two populist parties per national election. Precisely, the case selection process for

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[6] The selected countries are Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Slovakia (SK), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) and Sweden (SE).
For the French and Lithuanian elections, the first round has been considered.

parties has been dictated by two criteria. First, the selected forces must have owned an official Facebook profile, thus signaling their commitment to use the social network as a political campaigning tool. Although this choice can initially look discriminatory because it omits those forces that are not present in the online sphere, it is worth recalling that this thesis exclusively aims to analyze parties' presence on Facebook, and not the difference in impact between their offline and online campaigning activities. The second criteria, instead, relates to their share of votes across national elections. As previously explained, this decision has been pursued following the adoption of the cross-country conceptualization of populism by Rooduijn et al. (2019), that considers those political forces that have obtained at least 2% of votes or won a seat in national elections. Done otherwise, there would have been a mismatch in the representation of populist parties against their competitors across the selected cases.

Concerning the Dutch, Greek, and Slovak elections, an important clarification must be made in regard to the selection process as the Party for Freedom, the Greek Solution, and Kotleba are unique cases in the sample because they do not have an official party page. Their online political communication is in fact channeled through their leaders, respectively by Geert Wilders, Kyriakos Velopoulos, and Marian Kotleba. Like many other populist parties, this can be ascribed to the highly personalized nature of their leaderships (Van Kessel, 2015). To solve this problem, the official profile page of their candidates has been chosen. Done otherwise, their omission would have significantly altered the analysis of this thesis as they constitute some of the major populist parties in the sample.

Finally, concerning social media selection, Facebook has been preferred over Twitter. Although research has mostly revolved around the latter, Facebook has been chosen because of its widespread penetration across voters. According to Lilleker, Tenscher and Štětka (2015), Facebook is the third most important tool for professional campaigns, after TV presence and face-to-face communication. This is because it permits to reach out to the largest number of potential voters while Twitter represents a more elitist channel of communication since it is particularly well-spread amongst wealthier and better educated segments of the population (Duggan et al., 2015). As Vaidhyanathan (2018) succinctly puts it, "Twitter, which has cultural power in some quarters, lacks both the revenue and the audience to influence lives and minds like Facebook does" (p. 16). This is confirmed by the fact that Facebook is the most popular social media with almost 3 billion active users, whereas Twitter stops at 326 million active accounts (Statista, 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, in terms of penetration across Europe, the difference between the two is substantial as Facebook has an index equal to 47.4% (Internet World Stats, 2020). Although there is no available data on the exact Twitter penetration rate across countries, it is worth assuming that such numbers are lower. As Lenormand et al. (2014) show in their research, only Western European countries, with the notable exceptions of Portugal and Denmark, can be considered countries with high Twitter usage. Hence, the adoption of Facebook can extensively benefit the research community while allowing to study the phenomenon more substantively given that voters often seem to adopt this medium over others.

3.4 Model's specification

As the sample revolves around multidimensional data about parties that are nested in national elections and countries, this thesis performs a random intercept multilevel model. It does so by analyzing the effect of parties' direct, indirect, and popular online presence on their electoral result through interaction effects based on parties' ideological identification. The latter is specified as a dummy variable scored 1 for populist parties, and 0 for mainstream. Although the inter-class correlation function indicates that only 3.78% of the variance in parties' electoral result occurs at the country-level, this model has been preferred because it allows to measure individual party-level variance across twenty-four electoral contexts by minimizing potential divergence associated with country-level variables. If a linear multiple regression model would have instead been performed, the results could have been biased by the standard errors' coefficients. This is due to the clustered nature of the dataset which reduces the estimates' accuracy. Similarly, this model has been preferred over a time-series fixed effects analysis because of the absence of temporal data on Internet penetration across countries, and Facebook presence across parties. Accordingly, this would have created an issue to the generalizability of the results given the high recurrence of missing values. On the contrary, a cross-country multilevel analysis can lead to more robust implications by adjusting for party-level and country-level factors.[7]

The model also controls for country-level factors that have been identified by the literature as conducive to the success of populist parties in national elections. Specifically, for second level fixed effects, economic performance has been quantified with voters' assessment of the economic situation (sources: Standard Eurobarometer 86, 88, 90 and 92) and with a macroeconomic metric: countries' annual GDP growth per capita (source: World Bank, 2020a). Voters' opposition to migration has been assessed with the Special Eurobarometer 469 by taking into account people's perception of migrants.[8] The data for trust in national institutions and in the European Union have been collected from Standard Eurobarometers 86, 88, 90 and 92. Finally, the impact of education has been measured with the data from the World Bank (2020b) by consulting the national tertiary school enrollment rate. Moreover, this model also controls for the different degrees of Internet penetration rate across the selected countries (Internet World Stats, 2020). Although the latter does not constitute one of the identified factors leading to the success of populist forces, its effect must nonetheless be held constant as the effect of parties' direct, indirect and popular presence inevitably depends on the degree of internet access in each country.[9]

Furthermore, to improve the overall quality of the model, nine individual party-level variables are included for the first level fixed effects, coded on a ten points scale. First, these include

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[7] The results of the linear multiple regression model are nonetheless reported in Table 31 in the appendix.

[8] This variable has been operationalized with QA2: "Generally speaking, do you think immigration from outside the EU is more of a problem or more of an opportunity for (OUR COUNTRY) today"?.

[9] The second level fixed effects variables have been respectively named as: Economic Assessment; GDP Growth/Capita; Opposition to Migration; Trust in National Institutions; Trust in the European Union; Tertiary Enrollment Rate; and Internet Penetration Rate.

Their descriptive statistics are available in Table 32 in the appendix.

ideological elements retrieved from the 2019 Chapel Hill expert survey (source: Bakker et al., 2020), such as parties' left-right placement on the political spectrum and their overall positions on social and cultural values. Second, the same dataset has been consulted to include policy-dimension variables that have been previously identified as pervasive crisis elements in Europe during the last two decades. As mentioned in the case selection section, these are parties' positions on the European Union, their stances on migration policy, the environmental dimension, and economic redistribution. In addition, variables assessing the overall degree of anti-Islam and anti-elite rhetoric have been considered together with another variable quantifying the salience of Russian interference in domestic affairs for the party leadership. Finally, three additional party-level variables assessing the overall age of the party, its presence in the last national legislature, and in the previous executive, have been included. These last two are dummy variables scored 1 for presence and 0 for absence. They have been retrieved from the Party Facts database (source: Döring and Regel, 2019).[10]

Accordingly, the formula of the random intercept multilevel model is the following, where i stands for independent variable while u_j and e_{ij} represent the country-level and party-level random components respectively. The multiplication symbols constitute the three interaction effects with the variable populism.

$$\log(Electoral\ Outcome)_{ij}$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1\log(Direct\ Presence)_{ij} + \beta_2\log(Indirect\ Presence)_{ij}$$
$$+ \beta_3\log(Popular\ Presence)_{ij} + \beta_4 Populism_{ij} * \log(Direct\ Presence)_{ij}$$
$$+ \beta_5 Populism_{ij} * \log(Indirect\ Presence)_{ij} + \beta_6 Populism_{ij}$$
$$* \log(Popular\ Presence)_{ij} + u_j + e_{ij}$$

As it emerges from the formula, the data for parties' electoral outcome, direct presence, indirect presence, and popular presence have been logged to satisfy the parameter of normality and reduce biases in the predictive capacity of the model. In addition, to avoid multicollinearity and increase the coefficients' precision, the control variables have been normalized by subtracting the mean of each variable and dividing it by the standard deviation. In this way, the variance inflation factor coefficients do not report values that are superior to 10. Similarly, the Breusch-Pagan test indicates that heteroskedasticity is not present. Therefore, as the model's requirements are satisfied, the next chapter reports and interprets the results.

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[10] The first level fixed effects variables have been respectively named as: Left-Right Placement; Gal-Tan; Stance towards the European Union; Immigration; Environment; Economic Interventionism; Anti-Islam Rhetoric; Anti-Elite Salience; Russian Interference; Age; In Parliament; and In Government.
Their descriptive statistics are available in Table 32 in the appendix.

4. Analysis

This chapter deals with the analytical part of this thesis. First, it illustrates the party-level descriptive statistics and the correlation effects between parties' direct, indirect and popular presence and their electoral outcome. Then, it assesses the overall significance of the model by interpreting its output and the estimates' coefficient. In the second section, it discusses more in depth the academic relevance of the findings, their empirical limitations, and venues for further research.

4.1 Findings

Tables 1, 2 and 3 report the maximum, mean and median values for direct, indirect and popular presence across the twenty-four selected countries. As previously mentioned, the sample revolves around 202 parties, out of which 50 have been classified as populists.

As it emerges for direct presence, populist parties have on average published significantly more than their counterparts. Thus, the populist mean is more than twice the one of other parties. In this regard, the populist party publishing the most was the League in Italy that produced more than five times the number of posts crafted by the most prolific mainstream party in this field, the Left Bloc in Portugal.

Table 1: Direct online presence of political parties in Europe measured as in publications during the electoral campaigning period (Source: own research).

	Max	Mean	Median
Populist Parties	38,122	2,084.6	943
Mainstream Parties	7,270	992.9	772.5

Likewise, the trend for indirect online presence is similar, if not more striking. Populist parties have indeed received more than eleven times the number of interactions than their opponents, as confirmed by their mean coefficients. Strikingly, Podemos in Spain is the most performing populist party with more than 162 million comments, reactions, and shares. By contrast, the most prolific mainstream force is the Democratic Party in Italy, which is however nowhere close to Podemos, with an indirect online presence coefficient of almost 3.5 million interactions.

Table 2: Indirect online presence of political parties in Europe measured as in the total number of likes, reactions, comments, and shares during the electoral campaigning period (Source: own research).

	Max	Mean	Median
Populist Parties	162,691,719	4,975,478	491,871
Mainstream Parties	3,426,193	434,991.4	204,255.5

Finally, concerning popular online presence, populist parties outnumbered their competitors once more. It emerges that, on average, they almost had three times the number of followers than their competitors. The populist party with most fans was again Podemos with more than

1.2 million online fans. Ciudadanos, the most prolific force for non-populist forces, only stopped at approximately more than 300 thousand.

Table 3: Popular online presence of political parties in Europe measured as in the sheer size of followers during the electoral campaigning period (Source: own research).

	Max	Mean	Median
Populist Parties	1,250,890	142,531.8	30,093.5
Mainstream Parties	337,238	56,366.5	27,078

Therefore, at first glance, it appears that populist parties significantly outperform their competitors in terms of Facebook presence as they are extremely prolific across the three variable-dimensions. This seems to be in line with the driving hypothesis as populists report greater coefficients for both direct, indirect, and popular presence. Yet, to explore this general expectation further, the next three figures report the correlation coefficients between the three independent variables and the dependent one, both for populist and mainstream forces.

Starting with direct online presence, which is captured by Figure 3, it emerges an opposite trend since mainstream parties (blue dots) have a stronger positive relation of 0.32 than populists (red dots), which instead stop at 0.18. Overall, the coefficient for both parties is of 0.28, which constitutes a positive relation.
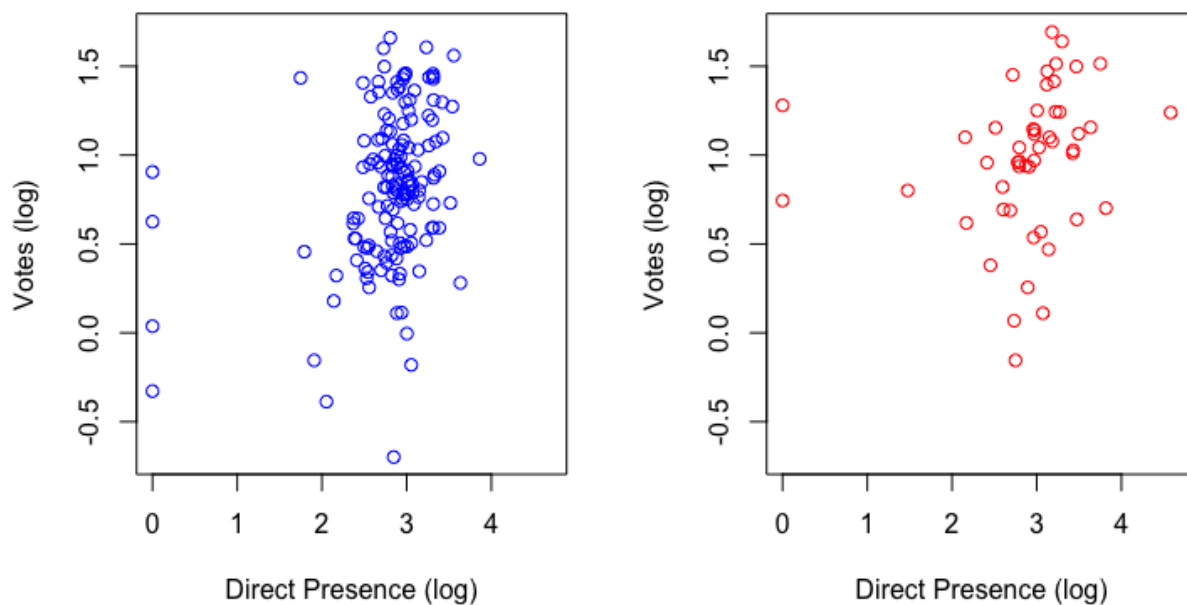
Figure 3: Correlation effects between parties' votes and their direct online presence (Source: own research).

Similarly, in terms of indirect online presence, it appears that mainstream parties have more robust relations. By decomposing the ratio between the two categories in Figure 4, mainstream parties have a positive ratio of 0.34 while populists have once again a lower coefficient of 0.22. Overall, the independent variable for both parties scores 0.34.
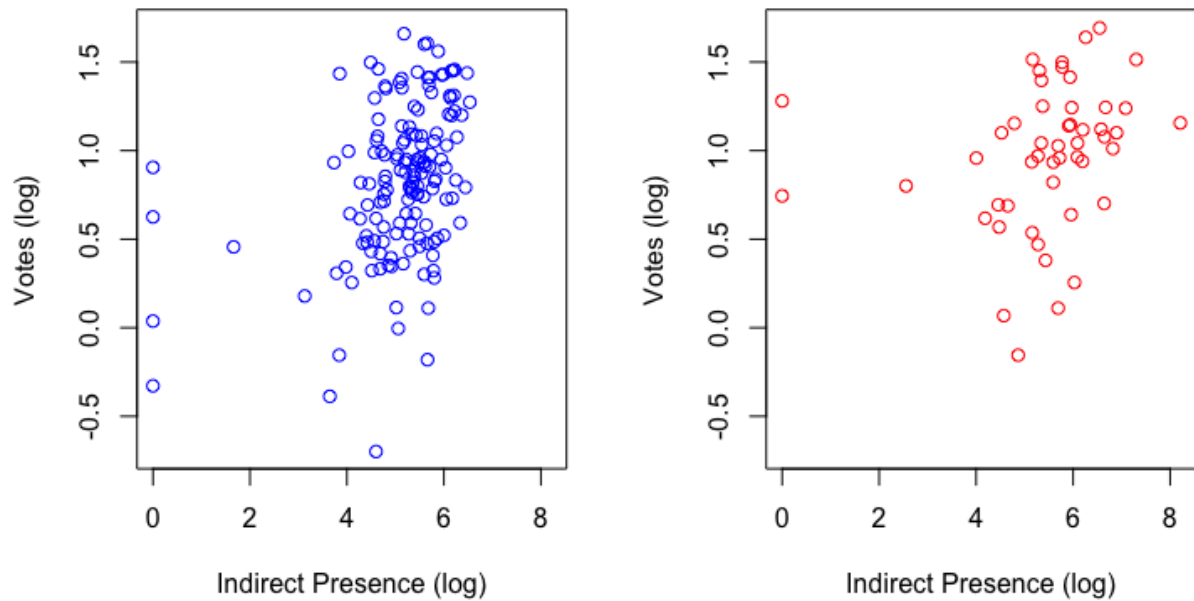
Figure 4: Correlation effects between parties' votes and their indirect online presence (Source: own research).

Finally, turning to popular online presence, the trend is instead slightly the opposite. Figure 5 shows that populist parties, this time, have a stronger coefficient of 0.46 whereas, for their opponents, it amounts to 0.35. Across the two groups, again, the correlation is a positive one of 0.38.
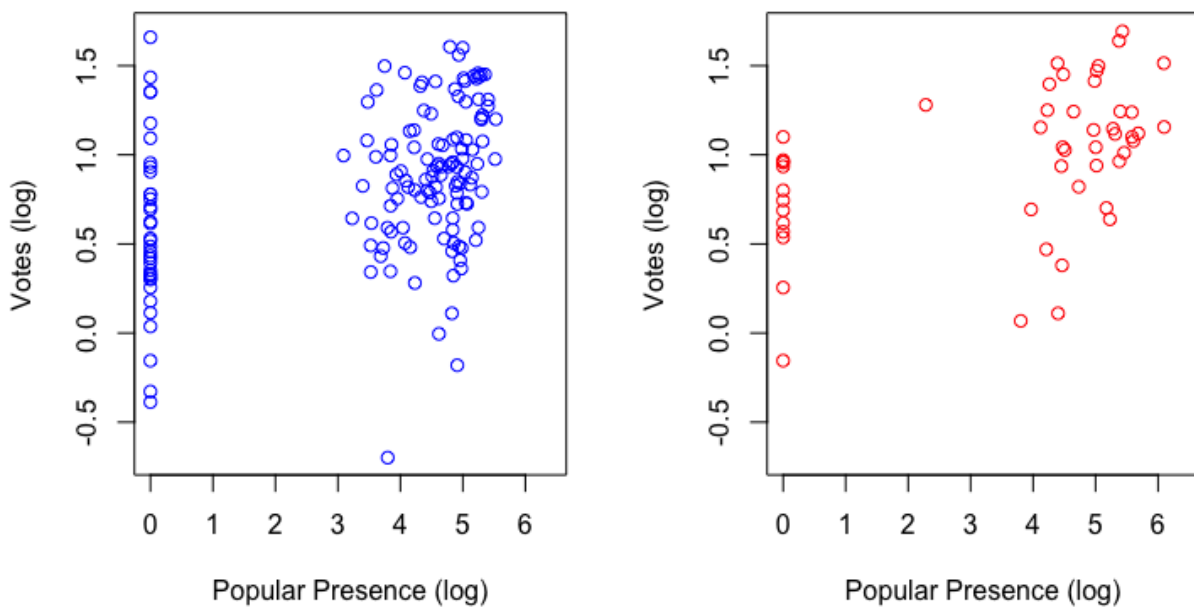
Figure 5: Correlation effects between parties' votes and their popular online presence (Source: own research).

Overall, it seems that while populists outperform their competitors from a single-unit perspective across descriptive statistics, the correlation outputs reveal stronger coefficients for their rivals, with the exception of popular online presence. These, however, are purely descriptive measures, in the sense that they might provide evidence of a positive relation without specifying whether and why Facebook presence relates to a growing number of votes for populist parties in comparison to other forces. Hence, this thesis still has to determine

whether these relations can be held significant and, most importantly, whether populism moderates the relation between direct, indirect and popular online presence and parties' electoral results. Therefore, Table 4 reports the output of the random intercept multilevel model that was performed to carry out the analysis.

Table 4: Electoral outcome predictors from the random intercept model (Source: own research).[11]

	Electoral Outcome (%)	Standard Error
Level I Fixed Effects		
Direct Presence (*log*)	- 0.122	0.092
Indirect Presence (*log*)	0.120*	0.053
Popular Presence (*log*)	0.058**	0.018
Left-Right Placement	- 0.025	0.072
Gal-Tan	- 0.001	0.049
In Government	0.068	0.055
In Parliament	0.241***	0.056
Age	0.087**	0.028
Stance towards the European Union	0.152**	0.049
Immigration	0.023	0.066
Environment	0.170***	0.045
Economic Interventionism	- 0.104*	0.044
Russian Interference	0.062*	0.047
Anti-Islam Rhetoric	- 0.013	0.049
Anti-Elite Salience	0.063	0.047
Level II Fixed Effects		
Economic Assessment	0.018	0.045
GDP Growth/Capita	0.049	0.034
Opposition to Migration	0.038	0.037
Trust in National Institutions	0.026	0.055
Trust in the European Union	0.039	0.038
Tertiary Enrollment Rate	0.010	0.025
Internet Penetration Rate	- 0.072*	0.034
Interaction Effects		
Populism: Direct Presence (*log*)	- 0.037	0.173
Populism: Indirect Presence (*log*)	0.033	0.098
Populism: Popular Presence (*log*)	0.002	0.029
Random Effects		
Constant *(log)*	0.179	0.110
σ_u	0.001	0.002
Observations	202	
Number of groups	24	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

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[11] By conceptualizing communist and green parties as populists, the results are not altered.

As it emerges, none of the country-level variables are statistically significant, except for the Internet penetration rate at the 95% level. Instead, among the first-level predictors, the valid coefficients are those constituted by parties' position to economic interventionism (95%), the environmental dimension (99.99%), the European Union (99%), and the assessed level of Russian interference in domestic affairs for the party leadership (95%). Furthermore, the age of the party and the dummy variable identifying its presence in the parliament during the previous legislature play a statistically significant role, respectively with 0.01 and 0.001 significant *alphas*. Finally, concerning the impact of Facebook use, indirect online presence is statistically significant at the 95% level while popular online presence is significant at 99% level. However, direct online presence is invalid.

Turning to the substantive interpretation of the coefficients, the control variables which are significant display important effects on the mean of parties' electoral support. In the case of parties' parliamentary presence during the previous legislature, the coefficient for presence (0.241) must be interpreted as the exponentiated *log* value of the intercept, which equals 1.272. This means that, in terms of percentage change, switching from parties' absence to presence in the previous legislature, parties' electoral outcome is expected on average to increase by 27.2%. Similarly, the overall age of the party plays an important role. Specifically, a one-year increase in age corresponds to an 9.1% increase in parties' votes since the exponentiated value of its coefficient (0.087) corresponds to 1.091.

Concerning the crises-controlled variables, the parties' stances towards the European Union bear significant effects. Here, it is worth mentioning again that these are based on experts' assessments and coded on a ten points scale. Accordingly, a one-unit increase in their positive attitude towards Brussels corresponds to an increase in votes by 16.4%. The same is observable for economic interventionism whereby a one-unit increase in parties' support for state intervention, instead of greater economic liberalism, on average corresponds to an electoral boost of 10.9%. Furthermore, the salience of Russian interference in domestic affairs for the party leadership plays a significant role. Accordingly, experts' positive assessment of the presence of external influence is deemed to increase parties' support by 6.4%, as per a one-unit increase. However, the same cannot be held true for the environmental dimension since a one-unit increase in support of environmental protection at the expense of economic growth is deemed to decrease parties' votes by 18.5%. Finally, regarding country-level predictors, the only significant value is constituted by the Internet penetration rate. It emerges a negative correlation with the electoral outcome as one-unit increase in Internet penetration translates in 7.5% votes less for parties across countries.

Turning to the independent variables of this thesis, parties' indirect and popular presence are statistically valid and positively correlated with the electoral outcome. As depicted by Figure 6, indirect presence has an effect on the mean of parties' votes. Specifically, such effect is assumed to be the same across populist and mainstream parties as a 10% rise in the number of interactions (i.e. likes, reactions, comments, and shares per publication by followers) yields, on average, an increase of 1.1% in electoral support. Accordingly, a 50% increase translates into an electoral boost of 4.9%. However, as demonstrated by the invalid coefficient of the interaction term, the dummy variable populism does not have a moderating effect between

indirect presence and the mean of parties' votes. Hence, the effect of indirect presence is independent of whether a party is classified as populist or not.
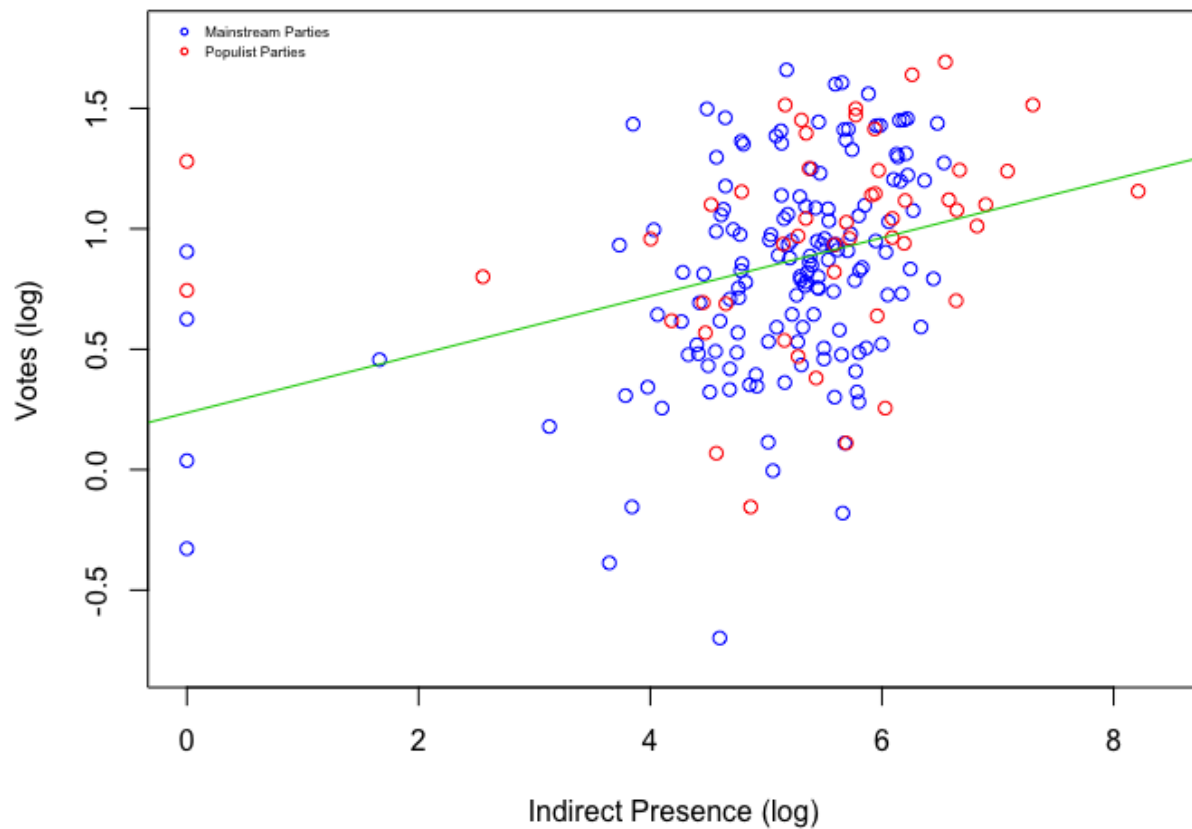
Figure 6: Electoral outcome regressed by indirect online presence (Source: own research).

Regarding parties' popular online presence, the conclusion is substantially similar. The third independent variable has an impact on votes, though such an increase is assumed to be constant for both populist and mainstream parties as once again suggested by the statistical insignificance of the interaction term between popular online presence and populism. As in the previous case, the effect of popular presence on the mean of parties' votes is independent of whether a party is classified as populist or not. Nonetheless, as shown by the flatter curve in Figure 7, a 10% increase in the number of online followers during the electoral campaigning period results on average in a 0.5% electoral boost at the ballot box. Likewise, a 50% increase in the number of fans means, on average, 2.4% more votes for a party. Hence, this assessment seems to suggest that indirect online presence, for both populist and mainstream parties, approximately yields as twice as the number of votes than popular online presence.
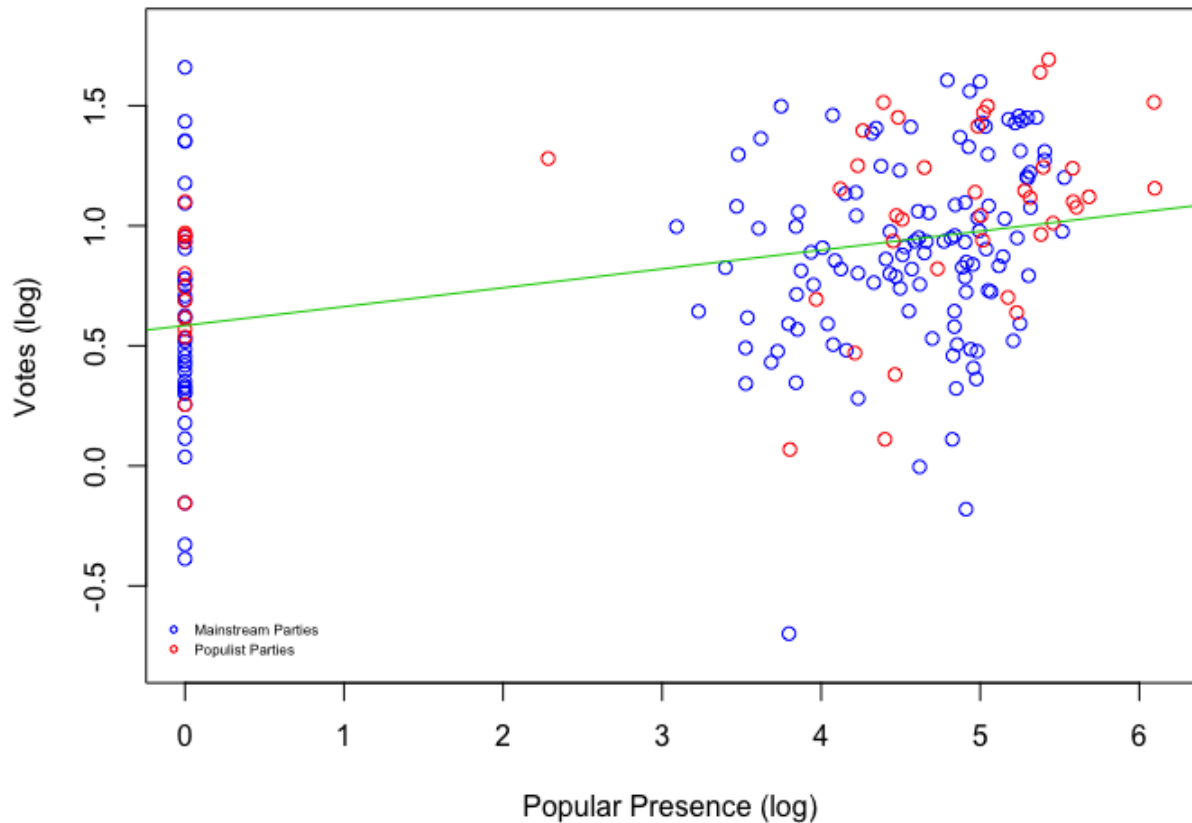
Figure 7: Electoral outcome regressed by popular online presence (Source: own research).

Overall, these findings have important implications, both for society and academia. Facebook use during the electoral campaigning period does play a role for parties' electoral outcome, though there is no statistical significance pointing to greater impact for populists. While populists, on average, publish more than twice than other parties, receive more than eleven times the number of interactions than their opponents, and almost have three times the number of followers than their competitors, they do not necessarily benefit more from their Facebook use. As shown by the model's output, indirect and popular online presence are both important determinants of parties' electoral success, with the former independent variable yielding twice as much the number of votes than the latter. Yet, there is no moderating effect across populist and mainstream parties. As such, it is possible to conclude that **H1** is rejected since Facebook use does not exclusively impact support for populist parties but for all political forces in general.

Similarly, concerning the three sub-hypotheses, direct, indirect and popular presence are not significantly moderated by parties' ideological classification. While indirect and popular presence are both statistically valid and have a significant effect on the mean of parties' votes, such an increase is assumed to be the same across populist and mainstream forces. Therefore, in line with the previous inference, **H1.1**, **H1.2** and **H.1.3** are also rejected given that indirect and popular online presence impact both party categories equally while direct online presence is invalid. To better grasp these implications, the next chapter further discusses the academic relevance of the findings as it tries to collocate the contribution of this thesis in the academic

debate. In doing so, it also outlines their empirical limitations, thus suggesting venues for future research.

4.2 Discussion

The academic debate has advanced the claim that online communication tools, in particular social media, constitute a populist paradise of political communication, given the apparent good fit of populism with the Internet. However, this thesis reveals a contrasting pattern, namely that such first sight suitability does not translate into practice. Thus, the findings highlight that populist parties do not benefit more than their antagonists from their Facebook use, despite their thriving direct, indirect and popular online presence. Therefore, this contribution notably confirms the work of Jacobs and Spierings (2019) who criticized the idea that social media necessarily implied a good communication fit for populist actors. Nonetheless, in doing so, it also rejects previous contributions which hold an opposite view.

Starting with the work of Schaub and Morisi (2020), who studied the impact of broadband Internet connectivity on the rise of populism in Europe, this thesis positions itself against the general consensus holding that online communication channels are "gamechangers" for populists. While the findings confirm the importance of Facebook in providing parties an opportunity to extend their network outreach, such an advantage is found to be consistent across all parties, irrespective of their ideologies. Nonetheless, it still remains to be determined whether these mechanisms can also be generalized to other platforms, such as Twitter, Youtube, Reddit, Linkedin, Instagram, and TikTok, which are extensively adopted by populists to campaign against mainstream political actors. Therefore, this preliminary research framework could potentially be extended to other venues by combining the well-grounded academic foundations in the study of social media in election times with political communication theories (e.g. Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Enli and Moe, 2013; Ernst et al., 2017; 2019; Fraia and Missaglia, 2014).

Likewise, if the strand of the debate focusing on populist online communication is closely assessed (e.g. Barlett, 2014; Engesser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2014; Moffit, 2017), it emerges that scholars tend to agree that the personalized and dichotomic logic of populism is particularly well-suited to be communicated online. Specifically, the existing scholarship seems to have converged on the shared position that the unmediated, simplistic and immediate nature of social media strongly matches the ideological connotations of populism (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). As previously mentioned, this is because, first, Facebook would help in bypassing traditional information gatekeepers (Ernst et al., 2019); second, it would assist in spreading popular narratives that maintain an anti-elitist and people-centric stance that stresses a direct connection to the people (Hameelers and Vliegenthart, 2020); third, it would award the speed and simplicity of communication, ultimately favoring those political outsiders that tend to resort on forged content and borderline truths to gain more votes (Bergmann, 2020; Bobba, 2018; Monti, 2018; Nielsen, 2020). Consequently, if this thesis is taken as a reference point against the debate, it thus appears that these factors do not necessarily translate into more votes for populist parties. It is true that populists are extremely active on Facebook and that such high activity may be due to the good communication fit of

populism with the Internet. However, it cannot be held that Facebook *per se* constitutes an electoral advantage, despite the evident correlation.

Nonetheless, this claim should be better calibrated in light of three important limitations. First, a significant omission of this thesis is represented by the analytical absence of the personalization hypothesis of party politics (see Aalberg et al., 2017). This is of substantive importance considering that social media channels are seen to aliment the personalization of political leaderships, something which populists heavily rely on to channel adversarial communication in the online sphere (Engesser et al., 2017; Garzia, 2013; Pedersen and Rahat, 2019). As such, it would be ideal for future studies to also consider candidates' Facebook profiles, instead of party pages, since a different unit of analysis might reveal contrasting empirical trends. As most emblematically encapsulated by Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen, populists tend to have two separated pages, one for the party and the other for the leader, where the former is tendentially more active, popular, and interacted than the latter. This methodological choice, which has been avoided by this thesis to mitigate the risk of masked-man fallacies, should be considered by future research, together with the possibility of integrating unofficial political pages, which seem to be highly popular amongst voters in election times.

Second, these findings should be complemented by qualitative analyses assessing which type of content is more likely to mobilize users on social media, specifically for populist voters. As previously explained, this is of substantive academic importance considering that the debate has mostly studied populism by focusing on its style of communication and online adoption uses (e.g. Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018; Enli and Rosenberg, 2018; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2016; Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016; Vliegenthart, 2012). Hence, qualitative assessments of campaigning messages and videos could potentially reveal different contingency patterns which might simply be overlooked by quantitative methods, as potentially with this work.

Third, the results are significantly limited by the "Internet-centric" approach of this research. As Morozov (2013) warns, this tendency "to talk about technology as a black-and-white, pessimism-versus-optimism battle" (p. 56) might be moving the debate out of touch from the real world. For instance, this thesis has not considered the differential impact between offline and online campaigning tools as more "on-the-ground strategies" are likely to yield greater electoral outcomes than mere Facebook use. Furthermore, if the digital divide is considered, these findings are subject to the digital constraints of today's societies as they can only be representative of those segments of the voting population that are present in the online sphere. Although social networks are increasing their number of subscribers year by year, they are not yet spread enough to draw encompassing conclusions on their impact for the whole population. Nonetheless, as these platforms are increasingly trusted by voters to gain political information, and their penetration rates are mounting at constant paces, these findings are backed by their strong popularity amongst voters (Pew Research Center, 2018; Statista, 2020a). Therefore, this thesis can serve as a springboard for further research to investigate how social media platforms have an incidence on the different segments of our societies, precisely taking into account factors such as Internet access, demography, and geography.

Finally, turning to the debate on the theoretical significance of the one-step and two-step flow hypotheses of political communication, this thesis supports the empirical validity of the two mechanisms. Specifically, these are found to hold not only on Twitter (e.g. Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Fraia and Missaglia, 2014) and in single-case studies (Choi, 2014) but also on Facebook and across 24 different electoral contexts in Europe. Precisely, the second step of political communication is strongly backed by empirical evidence as primary audiences appear in the central position to strengthen the online presence of their preferred party (Anspach, 2017; Bene, 2017; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015). However, such primacy of the two-step flow hypothesis could be attributed to the theoretical difficulty in conceptualizing and operationalizing direct online presence with potentially different indicators, including micro-targeting techniques and quantitative content analyses. These should indeed constitute the object of further research, together with analyses taking into consideration the impact of organic and paid content on these theoretical mechanisms.

Nonetheless, this thesis has overall shed light on the pivotal role that online commons play in election times, as demonstrated by the substantive impact of parties' indirect and popular online presence, each of 1.1% and 0.5%. per 10% respective increase. In particular, these findings stress the importance of the bottom-up dimension of online campaigning as followers, more than parties' official pages, are found to bear the highest electoral incidence. In line with the Web 2.0 hypothesis, this contribution highlights the substantive impact of peer-to-peer information consumption and abuzz mouth-to-mouth exchanges across online proselytes in election times. Instead, direct communication strategies typical of top-down party campaigning do not appear to be as incidental in electoral terms.

5. Conclusion

On the 6th of February 2018, Matteo Salvini, the Italian leader of the populist party the League, launched "*Vinci Salvini*". This online initiative was a gamified competition where users were awarded a personalized score based on the number of interactions given to his posts. Accordingly, those liking, commenting, and sharing the most had the chance of winning a one-to-one coffee with him, besides being celebrated as the most engaged fans by the League's official Facebook page.

This initiative represents a perfect campaigning example aimed at increasing indirect and popular online presence. This is because, first, it mobilizes primary audiences to interact with specific political content; second, in doing so, it boosts the Edge score of particular publications, thus gaining greater online visibility; third, it ultimately increases the overall exposure of certain political actors in the online sphere, theoretically leading to more followers. As encapsulated by the two-step flow of communication, this mechanism is supposed to have an impact on the League's share of votes since a larger number of voters would be exposed to the foci of political discourse that they did not choose to view in the first place. In this case, when one's Facebook friends were Salvini's primary audiences, one would have also visualized their friends' preferred content. A strong correlation with the electoral result appears: while the extreme-right populist party was polling 13.4% at the beginning of 2018, by the end of the year it totaled 31.1% of votes (Forti, 2018).

Although it would be incorrect to fully attribute the League's electoral success to its Facebook use – in particular to Luca Morisi, Salvini's social media manager – one could conclude, through preliminary assessments, that such online strategy might bear electoral incidence. This thesis suggests the empirical validity of these types of deductions. In particular, the findings demonstrate that indirect and popular online presence play an important role for parties' electoral success, while direct communication strategies are found to be statistically insignificant. However, this thesis shows that, despite widespread consensus on the *prima facie* suitability of Facebook with populism, this is not exclusive for populists. On the contrary, while Facebook might constitute a particularly well-suited medium of populist online communication, this thesis reveals that there is no moderating effect of populism between parties' votes and their direct, indirect and popular online presence. This means that Facebook use does not exclusively impact support for populist parties, but for all political forces irrespective of their ideologies. In other words, the *Vinci Salvini* initiative, despite having a significant impact on the mean of the League's votes, does not necessarily yield greater electoral outcomes in comparison to mainstream forces. As such, Facebook use does not seem to constitute an electoral weapon by populist parties in Europe.

Nonetheless, such a campaigning strategy reveals profound societal implications that need to be addressed by policymakers. Precisely, in light of these findings, the greater risk to democratic party elections seems to be posed by the potential propagandistic and polarizing effects of social media bots, namely "algorithmically controlled accounts that emulate the activity of human users but operate at much higher pace (e.g. automatically producing content or engaging in social interactions)" (Bessi and Ferrara, 2016, p. 1). These "fake primary audiences" indeed constitute a profound threat to information availability in election times,

especially if deviously controlled by external interferers or political candidates, since they can steer the online conversation in particular directions. Yet, they seem to have been tendentially overlooked by policymakers as attention has mostly been devoted to the issue of fake news' propagation (see Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Political responsibility appears to have been delegated to online platforms.

However, automated bots are central to the problem as they are programmed to vehiculate certain kinds of political information over others, thus affecting citizens' rights to information and expression in election times. This was mostly evident during the 2016 US elections, where both Clinton's and Trump's bots produced about a fifth of all tweets in the campaign, but pro-Trump bots generated about four times as many tweets as pro-Clinton bots (Ferrara, 2016). Furthermore, presumed allegations seem to link the increasing online popularity of Giorgia Meloni – Brothers of Italy's candidate – to the Facebook activity of 29% of her followers, which would allegedly constitute fake profiles (Mottola, 2019). Considering the current "infobesity" (see Johnson, 2015), where voters are increasingly exposed to political information they struggle to filter and consume, automated bots can therefore have a decisive effect in determining parties' indirect and popular presence, hence "cheating against" legitimately thriving online tribes. To tackle these issues, the final section of this thesis draws policy recommendations to social media, the European Union, and national governments.

Policy recommendations
The first policy recommendation is addressed to social media platforms, which have nonetheless taken significant steps in this direction. As Nicas (2020) shows, Facebook alone reports to have blocked 4.5 billion of allegedly fake accounts in the first months of the 2020, before users could even flag them. Accordingly, such a number is equivalent to almost 60% of the world's population. Yet, this operation is extremely delicate. First, as notably exemplified by Twitter's policy, parodical and anonymous accounts are tolerated, hence affecting the accuracy of algorithmic filters in capturing bots. Second, such private sector interference in public communication fora bears important limitations to the freedom of expression and right to information, given the thin line between users' liberties and safety in the online sphere. This is why regulatory models, such as the European Union's *Code of Practice on Disinformation* (2018), have arguably passed the buck to social media platforms. However, this situation requires urgent action: Alex Schultz (2019), Facebook's vice president for analytics, still estimates that 5% of profiles are fake, hence representing more than 90 million accounts.

To mitigate these dangers, social media channels should balance the right of online anonymity by requiring users to provide more documentation to create an account, progressively moving into the direction of electronic Know-Your-Customer requirements. This could even be coupled to the creation of CAPTCHA- like tools – "I am not a robot" – to slow down the proliferation of cybots. Likewise, to increase fairness and due process, appeal mechanisms should be introduced for unjustly labeled accounts, therefore offering users the possibility to challenge deletion actions. In addition, to increase overall transparency and accountability, collaboration between governments and online platforms should become the norm to establish adequate checks and balances in the removal of fake accounts. In this light, the unilateral suspension of Donald Trump's social media profiles may represent a low point of cooperation

as it led to controversies which unnecessarily contrast the values of the freedom of expression with the regulation of online democracy. Therefore, to avoid similar circumstances in the future, policymakers could take inspiration from the legislative model offered by the *Feinstein Bill*[12] (2018) in the United States, though important definitional obstacles, such as the inclusion of commercial bots in the measure, ultimately hamper its applicability. As previously mentioned, more cooperation will be key between private and public actors to strike a fair compromise for greater information trustworthiness in electoral times.

The second policy recommendation is instead targeted to the European Union, specifically for the upcoming Digital Services Act. The latter represents the crucial opportunity to modernize the existing intermediary liability regime for online platforms in light of users' fundamental rights (see Madiega, 2020). This is unprecedented considering that social media have been conventionally classified as *mere conduits* by the Safe Harbor regime, therefore largely avoiding regulatory burdens. However, as Gillespie (2018) brilliantly notes, this constitutes a significant contradiction since online platforms are *de jure* treated as intermediaries while *de facto* "moderation, far from being occasional or ancillary, is in fact an essential, constant, and definitional part of what platforms do" (p. 207). As notably occurred throughout the COVID19 crisis, the Brexit referendum, and the 2016 and 2020 United States' elections, social media have taken the primary role of information gatekeepers as demonstrated by their heavy involvement in content regulation. Yet, they have so far largely managed to escape accountability for their actions.

This "active but passive" conduct, where presumed champions of free speech behave as content middlemen, requires a new public understanding of content moderation, where such primacy of action is not to be owned by a single gatekeeping entity but among groups that share common norms of public purpose. This is because social media's decisions to filter, remove, block, throttle, flag or label are actual judgements of human value that cannot be generally branded as neutral algorithmic choices: code codifies values. As Lessig (2006) perfectly puts it, "choices among values, choices about regulation, about control, choices about the definition of spaces of freedom – all this is the stuff of politics" (p. 78). Yet, it increasingly seems that such decisions are left in the hands of few dominant market actors, though said private actions profoundly affect online public fora, especially in election times. More public oversight is indeed needed to ensure that public values are vested in decisions determining the architecture of content moderation. To this end, the Digital Services Act potentially represents the long-awaited gamechanger to rethink social media's accountability and responsibility towards the general public in election times via greater transparency requirements and compliance mechanisms.

Finally, the last recommendation is for national governments. The cybersphere does not have typically defined boundaries, and whether public action is to be channeled through "laws, norms, markets or architectures" (Lessig, 2006), Internet regulation requires outstanding efforts to streamline normative and legal differences across countries. These ambitious efforts

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[12] Bot Disclosure and Accountability Act of 2018

aimed to reduce the ongoing "balkanization of the Internet" (see Hill, 2012) represent ultimate efforts to preserve openness and horizontality of collective "onlife" (Floridi, 2014), though these are not remotely closed to the initial principles set out by John Perry Barlow (1996) in the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Yet, they are still extremely relevant nowadays, especially when discussing social media regulation in terms of market share, privacy, content regulation, and algorithmic transparency, since they have inspired much of civil society and governmental activity worldwide. Alas, they are constantly under attack by an invisible hand shielded behind the innovation and efficiency mantras, where Internet "generativity" is increasingly being replaced by "tethered appliances" (Zittrain, 2009), though the former constitutes today's greatest source of the latter's success.

Nonetheless, generativity is in reality vested with high technical difficulty when translated into practice in the policy world, specifically in light of the intangible nature of cyberspace. To preserve openness and horizontality, instead of perfect enforcement, public action needs innovative and brilliant minds capable of drafting flexible and adaptable legislation. Yet, many of these talents seem to be over and over recruited by those actors that try to avoid regulation, rather than by those drafting it, arguably due to the lack of adequate incentives offered by the latter. Jeff Hammerbacher, former Facebook data team lead, allegedly released an emblematic quote when being interviewed by *Bloomberg* following his departure from Zuckerberg's entourage: "the best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads" (Vance, 2011). Only with motivated and capable civil servants will public action vehiculate sufficiently ambitious measures to tackle ongoing and future cyber challenges in today's world. However, this will only be achieved through greater resources for future policymakers and, most importantly, through broader public awareness capable of sparking necessary society-wide policy debates around digital regulation. To this end, a thorough assessment of citizens' needs in the current cyberreality urgently necessitates political priority. This will be crucial to disseminate adequate means, knowledge, and resources to form real "netizens" (Hauben, Hauben and Truscott, 1997), capable of thriving in increasingly pervasive digital societies.

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Appendix

Table 5: Ideological classification of the selected parties. Elaboration of the author based on Rooduijn et al. (2019).

Country	Populist Parties	Mainstream Parties
HR	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja; Bridge of Independent Lists; Human Shield	Social Democratic Party of Croatia; Croatian People's Party; Croatian Peasant Party; Croatian Party of Pensioners; Croatian Democratic Union; Istrian Democratic Alliance; Milan Bandic 365
IE	Sinn Féin	Renua; Green Party, Social Democrats; AAA-PBP; Labor; Fianna Fáil; Fine Gael
LT	Order and Justice; Labor Party; Anti-Corruption Coalition	Lithuanian List; Lithuanian Green Party; Liberal Movement; Social Democratic Party of Lithuania; Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union; Homeland Union
RO	United Romanian Party	People's Movement Party; Alliance of Liberal and Democrats; Save Romania Union; National Liberal Party; Social Democratic Party
SK	Christian Democratic Movement; OL'ANO-NOVA; We Are Family; Slovak National Party; Direction – Social Democracy	People's Party Our Slovakia; Most-Híd; Freedom and Solidarity;
AT	Freedom Party of Austria	The Greens; Peter Pilz List; NEOS; Social Democratic Party of Austria; Austrian People's Party
BG	Volya; United Patriots; GERB	Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria; DOST; Yes, Bulgaria!; Reformist Bloc; Movement for Rights and Freedoms; BSP for Bulgaria
CZ	Svoboda; ANO 2011	Mayor and Independents; TOP 09; KDU-ČSL; Czech Social Democratic Party; Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia; Czech Pirate Party; Civic Democratic Party
NL	Forum for Democracy; Socialist Party; Party for Freedom	Denk; Reformed Political Party; 50PLUS; Party of the Animals; Christian Union; Labor Party; Groen Links; Democrats 66;

		Christian Democratic Appeal; People's Party for Freedom and Democracy
FR	Debout la France; National Front; La France Insoumise	French Communist Party; Radical Party of the Left; Socialist Party; Union of Democrats and Independents; Democratic Movement; La République En Marche!
DE	DIE LINKE; Alternative for Germany	Christian Social Union in Bavaria; Grüne; Free Democratic Party; Social Democratic Party; Christian Democratic Union
HU	Jobbik; Fidesz	Momentum Movement; Democratic Coalition; Politics Can Be Different; Hungarian Socialist Party
IT	Brothers of Italy; Forza Italia; League; Five Stars Movement	Free and Equal; More Europe; Democratic Party
LV	Who owns the State?	Latvian Russian Union; Latvian Association of Regions; New Unity; Union of Greens and Farmers; National Alliance; Development/For!; New Conservative Party; Harmony
SW	Sweden Democrats	Green Party; Liberals; Christian Democrats; Left Party; Centre Party; Moderate Party; Social Democratic Party
SI	Levica; Lista Marjana Šarec; Slovenian Democratic Party	Pirate Party; Slovenian People's Party; Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia; Party of Alena Bratušek; New Slovenia; Modern Centre Party; Social Democrats
BE	Flemish Interest	Défi; Centre Démocrate Humaniste; Groen; Ecolo; Socialistische Partij Anders; Mouvement Réformateur; Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten; Workers' Party of Belgium; Christen-Democratish en Vlaams; Parti Socialiste; New Flemish Alliance
DK	The New Right; Danish People's Party	Liberal Alliance; The Alternative; Conservative People's Party; Red-Green Alliance; Socialist People's Party; Danish Social Liberal Party; Venstre; Social Democrats
EE	Estonian Conservative People's Party	Estonia 200; Social Democratic Party; Isamaa; Estonian Centre Party; Estonian Reform Party

FI	Finns Party	Movement Now; Christian Democrats; Left Alliance; Green League; Centre Party; National Coalition Party; Social Democratic Party
PL	Law and Justice	Confederation; Polish Coalition; The Left; Civic Coalition
EL	MeRa25; Greek Solution; SYRIZA	Movement for Change; New Democracy
PT	CHEGA	LIVRE; Liberal Initiative; People-Animals-Nature; People's; Unitary Democratic Coalition; Left Bloc; Social Democratic; Socialist
ES	Pomedos; Vox	Regionalist Party of Cantabria; Sum Navarre; Commitment; Basque Country Gather; Basque Nationalist Party; Together for Catalonia; Republican Left of Catalonia; Ciudadanos; People's Party; Spanish Socialist Workers' Party

Table 6: KPI analysis of the selected Croatian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Social Democratic Party of Croatia	469317	767	36570
Croatian People's Party	66687	908	0
Croatian Peasant Party	25211	669	0
Croatia Party of Pensioners	6959	81	0
Bridge of Independent Lists	390201	813	0
Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja	73536	561	0
Croatian Democratic Union	451457	1708	62085
Human Shield	4367512	6555	149314
Milan Bandic 365	104215	871	0
Istrian Democratic Assembly	390201	813	0
Electoral Campaigning Period: 11/4/2015 – 11/09/2016			

Table 7: KPI analysis of the selected Irish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Renua	9506	349	3360
Green Party	31659	546	4855
Social Democrats	21288	344	5321
AAA-PBP	123505	2427	10980
Labor Party	19091	541	13292
Sinn Féin	811804	944	92963
Fianna Fáil	121663	824	20885
Fine Gael	134207	305	22175
Electoral Campaigning Period: 26/11/2014 – 26/04/2016			

Table 8: KPI analysis of the selected Lithuanian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Lithuanian List	12623	361	0
Lithuanian Green Party	6114	337	0
Labor Party	44924	487	0
Order and Justice	-	0	0
Anti-Corruption Coalition	359	30	0
Liberal Movement	109969	402	27127
Social Democratic Party of Lithuania	44583	906	0
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	63691	685	0
Homeland Union	135898	468	0
Electoral Campaigning Period: 09/05/2015 – 09/10/2016			

Table 9: KPI analysis of the selected Romanian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
United Romania Party	188897	1381	16292
People's Movement Party	284740	1012	0
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats	219056	993	0
Save Romania Union	165791	367	41090
National Liberal Party	1334590	2075	254263
Social Democratic Party	150266	639	0
Electoral Campaigning Period: 11/07/2015 – 11/12/2016			

Table 10: KPI analysis of the selected Slovak parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Christian Democratic Movement	28633	403	9313
Most-Híd	28947	733	7471
We Are Family	387564	395	53911
People's Party Our Slovakia	0	0	0
Slovak National Party	140518	621	28347
OL'ANO-NOVA	220170	623	29717
Freedom and Solidarity	342917	919	112989
Direction – Social Democracy	201817	521	30470
Electoral Campaigning Period: 05/10/2014 – 05/03/2016			

Table 11: KPI analysis of the selected Austrian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
The Greens	68722	428905	1103
Peter Pilz List	35603	167396	236

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
NEOS	81601	183512	1216
Freedom Party of Austria	96490	864736	1600
Social Democratic Party of Austria	102572	967952	2062
Austrian People's Party	5597	30872	545
Electoral Campaigning Period: 15/05/2016 – 15/10/2017			

Table 12: KPI analysis of the selected Bulgarian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	81563	578	0
DOST	46	62	0
Yes, Bulgaria!	315625	443	67430
Reformist Bloc	66986	1014	0
Volya	15292	148	0
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	107139	772	0
United Patriots	10096	259	0
BSP for Bulgaria	7103	56	0
GERB	146109	1690	24642
Electoral Campaigning Period: 26/10/2015 – 26/03/2017			

Table 13: KPI analysis of the selected Czech parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Mayor and Independents	58238	594	7007
TOP 09	1121065	2061	117030
KDU-ČSL	216600	1385	21438
Czech Social Democratic Party	236292	1068	25531
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	127504	2127	8638

Svoboda	492838	2703	32302
Czech Pirate Party	348177	811	96311
Civic Democratic Party	630811	1820	47589
ANO 2011	593179	1331	104769
Electoral Campaigning Period: 15/05/2016 – 15/10/2017			

Table 14: KPI analysis of the selected Dutch parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Forum for Democracy	1065594	783	0
Denk	608813	666	70590
Reformed Political Party	32654	148	0
50PLUS	36590	359	3350
Party for the Animals	731158	831	71623
Christian Union	104754	242	0
Labour Party	278389	360	41666
Socialist Party	524922	596	0
Groen Links	319712	459	69252
Democrats 66	267656	457	69674
Christian Democratic Appeal	219930	508	0
Party for Freedom	1586505	942	205595
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	552207	377	84670
Electoral Campaigning Period: 15/10/2015 – 15/03/2017			

Table 15: KPI analysis of the selected French parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Debout la France	37172	540	6536

National Front	3780624	3128	483400
French Communist Party	201307	663	0
La France Insoumise	1231427	1063	100762
Radical Party of the Left	0	0	0
Socialist Party	348321	2086	139015
Union of Democrats and Independents	26043	316	14410
The Republicans	1443597	2003	198777
Democratic Movement	18616	234	0
La République en Marche!	1416991	959	198265
Electoral Campaigning Period: 11/01/2016 – 11/06/2017			

Table 16: KPI analysis of the selected German parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Christian Social Union in Bavaira	2778987	1180	201301
Grüne	883124	665	170565
DIE LINKE	1227184	627	240577
Free Democratic Party	1142201	1365	1227184
Alternative for Germany	7861531	1414	383053
Social Democratic Party	1612541	1088	178887
Christian Democratic Union	893997	906	165694
Electoral Campaigning Period: 24/04/2016 – 24/09/2017			

Table 17: KPI analysis of the selected Hungarian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Momentum Movement	632185	933	86909
Democratic Coalition	1483534	3285	111253

	247598	1502	82045
Politics Can Be Different	247598	1502	82045
Hungarian Socialist Party	1857902	2202	206928
Jobbik	0	0	192
Fidesz	3527660	1515	269267
Electoral Campaigning Period: 08/11/2016 – 8/04/2018			

Table 18: KPI analysis of the selected Italian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
More Europe	591460	258	90542
Free and Equal	187394	251	49945
Brothers of Italy	909492	2972	169614
Forza Italia	873513	908	190388
League	12117494	38122	380732
Democratic Party	3426193	3458	253477
Five Stars Movement	20056887	5638	1237886
Electoral Campaigning Period: 04/10/2016 – 04/03/2018			

Table 19: KPI analysis of the selected Latvian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Latvian Russian Union	315122	1136	11889
Latvian Association of Regions	39998	782	3439
New Unity	60750	1084	2500
Union of Greens and Farmers	10737	554	1231
National Alliance	142662	1059	16622
Development/For!	42906	315	2940
New Conservative Party	195572	641	14137

	61425	326	13169
Who owns the State?	61425	326	13169
Harmony	37302	2627	3014
Electoral Campaigning Period: 06/05/2017 – 06/10/2018			

Table 20: KPI analysis of the selected Slovenian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	**Reactions, Comments and Shares**	**Publications**	**Fans**
Pirate Party	48395	834	0
Slovenian People's Party	48672	759	0
Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia	26639	689	1906
Party of Alenka Bratušek	48654	466	0
New Slovenia	61938	1028	12215
Levica	188600	931	0
Modern Centre Party	37002	845	4050
Social Democrats	52041	766	6943
List of Marjan Šarec	33533	143	0
Slovenian Democratic Party	221661	1311	18248
Electoral Campaigning Period: 03/01/2017 – 03/06/2018			

Table 21: KPI analysis of the selected Swedish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	**Reactions, Comments and Shares**	**Publications**	**Fans**
Green Party	257453	562	68834
Liberals	381745	849	31323
Christian Democrats	283245	763	27029
Left Party	1080548	932	108996
Centre Party	304352	692	59179
Sweden Democrats	4678395	1662	248748

Moderate Party	1369356	961	111767
Social Democratic Party	225896	918	1543442
Electoral Campaigning Period: 09/04/2017 – 09/09/2018			

Table 22: KPI analysis of the selected Belgian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
DéFI	83338	1408	6948
Centre Démocrate humaniste	56995	646	7101
Groen	581885	943	80200
Ecolo	199030	694	29480
Socialistische Partij Anders	640056	687	77120
Mouvement Réformateur	160007	668	32504
Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	374644	847	80161
Worker's Party of Belgium	400174	1249	38706
Christen-Democratish en Vlaams	275985	773	65510
Parti Socialiste	59575	722	328284
Flemish Interest	4427714	1524	402633
New Flemish Alliance	1259732	618	196160
Electoral Campaigning Period: 26/12/2017 – 26/05/2019			

Table 23: KPI analysis of the selected Danish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Liberal Alliance	144776	324	94482
The New Right	270334	284	29120
The Alternative	447782	854	95700
Conservative People's Party	227345	582	37151

Party			
Red-Green Alliance	89803	747	674114
Socialist People's Party	239440	603	44573
Danish Social Liberal Party	154973	499	45806
Danish People's Party	1555105	738	103593
Venstre	487771	780	74558
Social Democrats	511975	465	107908
Electoral Campaigning Period: 06/01/2018 – 05/06/2019			

Table 24: KPI analysis of the selected Estonian parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Estonia 200	11552	267	1695
Social Democratic Party	57808	889	8943
Isamaa	40900	880	7196
Estonian Conservative People's Party	235500	1012	16979
Estonian Centre Party	61169	1234	4172
Estonian Reform Party	44387	973	11812
Electoral Campaigning Period: 03/10/2017 – 03/03/2019			

Table 25: KPI analysis of the selected Finnish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Movement Now	72057	498	0
Christian Democrats	207204	1981	6235
Left Alliance	413198	1019	33645
Green League	154001	684	40712
Centre Party	135582	580	16551
National Coalition Party	292010	547	31154

Finns Party	935186	1866	44549
Social Democratic Party	245713	1053	23784
Electoral Campaigning Period: 14/11/2017 – 14/04/2019			

Table 26: KPI analysis of the selected Greek parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	**Reactions, Comments and Shares**	**Publications**	**Fans**
MeRA25	143883	918	0
Greek Solution	29914	1120	0
Movement for Change	505452	2433	10197
SYRIZA	593713	2928	111200
New Democracy	395838	532	99746
Electoral Campaigning Period: 07/02/2018 – 07/07/2019			

Table 27: KPI analysis of the selected Polish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	**Reactions, Comments and Shares**	**Publications**	**Fans**
Confederation	1756017	1169	131029
Polish Coalition	5415	305	0
The Left	709019	2653	80468
Civic Coalition	3011146	1837	193286
Law and Justice	1819745	1991	237979
Electoral Campaigning Period: 13/05/2018 – 13/10/2019			

Table 28: KPI analysis of the selected Portuguese parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	**Reactions, Comments and Shares**	**Publications**	**Fans**
Livre	0	0	0

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Liberal Initiative	477008	764	66817
CHEGA	490904	1183	25159
People-Animals-Nature	998886	1794	161398
People's	0	0	0
Unitary Democratic Coalition	197214	1403	17045
Left Bloc	538494	7270	98690
Social Democrats	284403	2051	150695
Socialists	764489	3599	85978
Electoral Campaigning Period: 06/05/2018 – 06/10/2019			

Table 29: KPI analysis of the selected Spanish parties. Elaboration of the author based on FanPage Karma (2020).

Party	Reactions, Comments and Shares	Publications	Fans
Regionalist Party of Cantabria	39786	703	6273
Sum Navarre	4432	113	0
Commitment	458502	1132	81438
Basque Country Gather	114435	1005	41576
Basque Nationalist Party	1347	138	0
Together for Catalonia	630939	4313	17076
Republic Left of Catalonia	2169077	2069	177943
Vox	6618366	2658	286969
Podemos	16269719	4322	1250890
Ciudadanos	337238	1132	2330057
People's Party	1669131	1811	205429
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	1655611	2049	175421
Electoral Campaigning Period: 28/11/2017 – 28/04/2019			

Table 30: Overview of the selected national elections. Elaboration of the author based on Döring and Manow (2019).

Country	Party	Electoral Outcome
HR	Social Democratic Party of Croatia	25.8%
	Croatian People's Party	6.0%
	Croatian Peasant Party	3.3%
	Croatia Party of Pensioners	0.7%
	Bridge of Independent Lists	8.6%
	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja	0.7%
	Croatian Democratic Union	40.4%
	Human Shield	5.3%
	Milan Bandic 365	1.3%
	Istrian Democratic Assembly	2.0%
	Year: 2016; Turnout: 52.6%	

Country	Party	Electoral Outcome
IE	Renua	2.2%
	Green Party	2.7%
	Social Democrats	3.0%
	AAA-PBP	3.9%
	Labor Party	6.6%
	Sinn Féin	13.8%
	Fianna Fáil	24.3%
	Fine Gael	25.5%
	Year: 2016; Turnout: 65.1%	

LT	Lithuanian List	1.80%
	Lithuanian Green Party	2.03%
	Labor Party	4.88%
	Order and Justice	5.55%
	Anti-Corruption Coalition	6.32%
	Liberal Movement	9.45%
	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania	15.04%
	Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	22.45%
	Homeland Union	22.63%
	Year: 2016; Turnout: 50.6%	

RO	United Romania Party	2.95%
	People's Movement Party	5.65%
	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats	6.01%
	Save Romania Union	8.92%
	National Liberal Party	20.42%
	Social Democratic Party	45.68%
	Year: 2016; Turnout: 39.4%	

SK	Christian Democratic Movement	4.94%
	Most-Híd	6.50%
	We Are Family	6.63%
	People's Party Our Slovakia	8.04%
	Slovak National Party	8.64%
	OL'ANO-NOVA	11.03%
	Freedom and Solidarity	12.10%

	Direction – Social Democracy	28.28%
	Year: 2016; Turnout: 59.8%	

AT	The Greens	3.80%
	Peter Pilz List	4.41%
	NEOS	5.30%
	Freedom Party of Austria	25.97%
	Social Democratic Party of Austria	26.86%
	Austrian People's Party	31.47%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 80%	

BG	Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	2.48%
	DOST	2.86%
	Yes, Bulgaria!	2.88%
	Reformist Bloc	3.06%
	Volya	4.15%
	Movement for Rights and Freedoms	8.99%
	United Patriots	9.07%
	BSP for Bulgaria	27.19%
	GERB	32.65%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 54.1%	

CZ	Mayor and Independents	5.18%
	TOP 09	5.31%
	KDU-ČSL	5.80%

	Czech Social Democratic Party	7.27%
	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	7.76%
	Svoboda	10.64%
	Czech Pirate Party	10.79%
	Civic Democratic Party	11.32%
	ANO 2011	29.64%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 60.8%	

NL	Forum for Democracy	1.8%
	Denk	2.1%
	Reformed Political Party	2.1%
	50PLUS	3.1%
	Party for the Animals	3.2%
	Christian Union	3.4%
	Labour Party	5.7%
	Socialist Party	9,1%
	Groen Links	9.1%
	Democrats 66	12.2%
	Christian Democratic Appeal	12.4%
	Party for Freedom	13.1%
	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	21.3%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 81.9%	

FR	Debout la France	1.17%
	National Front	13.20%
	French Communist Party	2.72%

	La France Insoumise	11.03%
	Radical Party of the Left	0.47%
	Socialist Party	7.44%
	Union of Democrats and Independents	3.03%
	The Republicans	15.77%
	Democratic Movement	4.12%
	En Marche!	28.21%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 48.7%	

DE	Christian Social Union in Bavaira	6.2%
	Grüne	8.9%
	DIE LINKE	9.2%
	Free Democratic Party	10.7%
	Alternative for Germany	12.6%
	Social Democratic Party	20.5%
	Christian Democratic Union	26.8%
	Year: 2017; Turnout: 76.2%	

HU	Momentum Movement	3.06%
	Democratic Coalition	5.38%
	Politics Can Be Different	7.06%
	Hungarian Socialist Party	11.91%
	Jobbik	19.06%
	Fidesz	49.27%
	Year: 2018; Turnout: 70.2%	

IT	More Europe	2.56%
	Free and Equal	3.39%
	Brothers of Italy	4.35%
	Forza Italia	14.00%
	League	17.35%
	Democratic Party	18.76%
	Five Stars Movement	32.68%
	Year: 2018; Turnout: 72.93%	

LV	Latvian Russian Union	3.20%
	Latvian Association of Regions	4.14%
	New Unity	6.69%
	Union of Greens and Farmers	9.91%
	National Alliance	11.01%
	Development/For!	12.04%
	New Conservative Party	13.59%
	Who Owns the State?	14.25%
	Harmony	19.80%
	Year: 2018; Turnout: 54.58%	

SI	Pirate Party	2.15%
	Slovenian People's Party	2.62%
	Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia	4.93%
	Party of Alenka Bratušek	5.11%
	New Slovenia	7.16%
	The Left	9.33%

	Modern Centre Party	9.75%
	Social Democrats	9.93%
	List of Marjan Šarec	12.60%
	Slovenian Democratic Party	24.92%
	Year: 2018; Turnout: 52.64%	

SW	Green Party	4.41%
	Liberals	5.49%
	Christian Democrats	6.32%
	Left Party	8.00%
	Centre Party	8.61%
	Sweden Democrats	17.53%
	Moderate Party	19.84%
	Social Democratic Party	28.26%
	Year: 2018; Turnout: 87.1%	

BE	DéFI	2.22%
	Centre Démocrate humaniste	3.70%
	Groen	6.10%
	Ecolo	6.14%
	Socialistische Partij Anders	6.71%
	Mouvement Réformateur	7.56%
	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	8.56%
	Worker's Party of Belgium	8.62%
	Christen-Democratish en Vlaams	8.89%
	Parti Socialiste	9.46%

	Flemish Interest	11.95%
	New Flemish Alliance	16.03%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 90.01%	

DK	Liberal Alliance	2.3%
	The New Right	2.4%
	The Alternative	3.0%
	Conservative People's Party	6.6%
	Red-Green Alliance	6.9%
	Socialist People's Party	7.7%
	Danish Social Liberal Party	8.6%
	Danish People's Party	8.7%
	Venstre	23.4%
	Social Democrats	25.9%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 84.6%	

EE	Estonia 200	4.4%
	Social Democratic Party	5.68%
	Isamaa	11.4%
	Estonian Conservative People's Party	17.8%
	Estonian Centre Party	23.1%
	Estonian Reform Party	28.9%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 63.7%	

FI	Movement Now	2.25%
	Christian Democrats	3.90%
	Left Alliance	8.17%
	Green League	11.49%
	Centre Party	13.76%
	National Coalition Party	17.00%
	Finns Party	17.48%
	Social Democratic Party	17.73%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 72.84%	

EL	MeRA25	3.44%
	Greek Solution	3.70%
	Movement for Change	8.10%
	SYRIZA	31.53%
	New Democracy	39.85%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 57.91%	

PL	Confederation	6.81%
	Polish Coalition	8.55%
	The Left	12.56%
	Civic Coalition	27.40%
	Law and Justice	43.59%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 61.74%	

PT	Livre	1.09%
	Liberal Initiative	1.29%
	CHEGA	1.29%
	People-Animals-Nature	3.32%
	People's	4.22%
	Unitary Democratic Coalition	6.34%
	Left Bloc	9.52%
	Social Democrats	27.77%
	Socialists	36.35%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 48.6%	

ES	Regionalist Party of Cantabria	0.20%
	Sum Navarre	0.41%
	Commitment	0.66%
	Basque Country Gather	0.99%
	Basque Nationalist Party	1.51%
	Together for Catalonia	1.91%
	Republic Left of Catalonia	3.91%
	Vox	10.26%
	Podemos	14.32%
	Ciudadanos	15.86%
	People's Party	16.69%
	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	28.67%
	Year: 2019; Turnout: 66.2%	

Table 31: Results of the linear multiple regression model.

Coefficients	Estimates	Standard errors in parentheses
Intercept *(log)*	0.187 (0.118)	*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.5
Direct Presence *(log)*	-0.112 (0.098)	Adjusted R-Squared: 0.445
Indirect Presence *(log)*	0.113* (0.056)	
Popular Presence *(log)*	0.057** (0.019)	
Left-Right Placement	-0.022 (0.077)	
Gal-Tan	-0.001 (0.052)	
In Government	0.072 (0.059)	
In Parliament	0.238*** (0.060)	
Age	0.088** (0.030)	
Stance towards the EU	0.154** (0.053)	
Immigration	0.015 (0.070)	
Environment	0.175*** (0.048)	
Economic Interventionism	-0.106*	

	(0.047)	
Russian Interference	0.065*	
	(0.029)	
Anti-Islam Rhetoric	-0.014	
	(0.052)	
Anti-Elite Salience	0.067	
	(0.050)	
Economic Assessment	0.022	
	(0.045)	
GDP Growth/Capita	0.046	
	(0.034)	
Opposition to Migration	0.038	
	(0.037)	
Trust in National Institutions	0.026	
	(0.054)	
Trust in the European Union	0.040	
	(0.037)	
Tertiary Enrollment Rate	0.008	
	(0.025)	
Internet Penetration Rate	-0.070*	
	(0.034)	
Direct Presence (*log*): Populism	-0.019	
	(0.185)	
Indirect Presence (*log*): Populism	0.024	
	(0.106)	
Popular Presence (*log*): Populism	0.003	
	(0.032)	

Table 32: Descriptive statistics of the control variables.

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Max	Minimum
Left-Right Placement	202	0.002	0.847	1.633	- 1.854
Gal-Tan	202	0.001	1.001	1.883	- 1.861
In Government	202	0.257	0.438	1	0
In Parliament	202	0.693	0.462	1	0
Age	202	0.001	1.001	3.416	0.001
Stance towards the EU	202	0.003	1.003	1.242	- 2.715
Immigration	202	- 0.109	1.002	1.669	- 2.187
Environment	202	0.001	1.003	2.211	- 2.660
Economic Interventionism	202	0.001	1.002	2.080	- 1.935
Russian Interference	202	0.002	1.002	3.620	- 1.492
Anti-Islam Rhetoric	202	0.001	1.001	2.696	0.730
Anti-Elite Salience	202	- 0.002	1.001	2.228	- 1.510
Economic Assessment	24	0.001	1.001	1.534	- 1.571
GDP Growth/Capita	24	- 0.017	1.005	1.879	- 1.404
Opposition to Migration	24	0.001	1.001	2.346	- 1.614
Trust in National Institutions	24	0.001	1.001	1.894	- 1.242
Trust in the EU	24	0.001	1.001	1.786	- 1.560
Tertiary Enrollment Rate	24	0.003	1.002	4.092	- 1.727
Internet Penetration Rate	24	0.001	1.001	1.137	- 2.682

Public Policy Master's Thesis Series

An electoral weapon by populists? Assessing Facebook use by populist parties and their electoral success in Europe

Francesco Vogelezang

Abstract

The role of Facebook in national elections has increasingly gained the attention of scholars and policymakers. Yet, despite minor exceptions, previous contributions have largely ignored whether Facebook use by political forces ultimately leads to more votes. In addition, considering the recent surge of populist parties in Europe, scholars have identified preliminary suitability between them and Facebook, but have not systematically proven whether the latter can be held as an electoral weapon. This thesis shows that this supposed fit is not backed by empirical evidence. By considering 202 parties running in 24 national elections between 2016 and 2019, it emerges that Facebook use does not exclusively impact support for populist parties but all political forces in general. Specifically, the results highlight that users, contrary to parties, are the most incidental actors in election times to increase the online visibility of their preferred political forces.