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Luca De Luca Picione, Domenico Trezza

# Digital politics and voting geography

## Potential connections between online storytelling and electoral results in the Campania regional elections

### DIGITAL POLITICS AND VOTING GEOGRAPHY. POTENTIAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ONLINE STORYTELLING AND ELECTORAL RESULTS IN THE CAMPANIA REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Digital political communication has undergone a revolution due to the emergence of new digital media platforms, significantly impacting electoral campaigns. However, there remains limited understanding of the implications of digital communication in local elections and its correlation with territorial vote concentration. The objective of this study is to investigate these relationships during the 2020 regional elections in Campania. Specifically, the focus is on four candidate profiles from the outgoing president's political list. The employed methodology follows a quantitative approach, entailing a secondary analysis of an extensive dataset encompassing the candidates' digital profiles and electoral outcomes within the Naples district. The digital content from their public Facebook pages is extracted using Api strategies, encompassing textual aspects, language style, political communication sentiment, and follower engagement. Through spatial analysis of the candidates' obtained votes, potential relationships between the geographical distribution of votes and candidates' digital activity are identified and summarized using the Digital activity index. The findings suggest promising avenues for future research concerning the evolution of political communication in the digital era and its interplay with electoral outcomes.

**KEYWORDS** *Digital Political Communication, Elections, Local Politics, Social Media, Territorial Vote Concentration.*

*The contribution is the result of the joint work of the two authors. However, Luca de Luca Picione is assigned par. «Electoral context, data and methods», par. «The Voting Geography. Analysis of the concentration of electoral preferences», and par. «Rivers of digital words: the lemmas and themes of electoral storytelling». Domenico Trezza is assigned par. «Consensus in the age of social media», par. «The candidates' digital profiles», and par. «The Digital activity index and relation to voting». Introduction and Conclusions are in common.*

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## 1. Introduction. Digital politics and election outcomes: what relationships?

In the contemporary context, the centrality of digital technologies in political communication and, consequently, in politics in general, is widely recognized and extensively studied (Calise and Musella 2019; Mancini 2015; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019). Today's politicians rarely overlook the importance of having an individual digital profile, as subscribing to one or more social platforms has become one of the primary strategies for establishing direct contact with citizens and, potentially, with their electorate. Social media provide powerful tools for electoral propaganda, as they allow candidates to present themselves without the filters of their political party, creating a «disintermediated» image (Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández 2019) that appears closer to ordinary people (McGregor 2018). Consequently, social media have contributed to the exacerbation of the personalization process in politics (Calise 2011), blurring the boundaries between a politician's private and public spheres and transforming political activity into a permanent election campaign (Novelli 2018). Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of social media in political communication and electoral strategies (Stier *et al.* 2018), there is still a knowledge gap regarding the link between social media usage and electoral outcomes. Often, this connection is only explored in major international cases (such as the famous 2008 Obama election campaign) or national elections (such as the success of the Five Star Movement in 2013). However, this gap becomes particularly evident when considering local elections, where the political context and voting dynamics can significantly differ from national elections. This study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the relationship between social media usage and electoral outcomes, even in local contexts. In other words, this work seeks to investigate the potential connections between candidates' digital activity in terms of engagement and the territorial distribution of votes.

The 2020 regional elections in Campania provided an exceptional opportunity to explore this relationship. The extraordinary nature of the 2020 health emergency nearly eliminated all forms of offline campaign organization, significantly accelerating the digitalization of candidates' communication strategies (Lilleker *et al.* 2021). An analysis was conducted on the activity of the digital profiles of the elected councilor candidates on the list of the incumbent president Vincenzo De Luca, in order to explore the relationship between online consensus factors, measured through a statistical index, and actual electoral results, using spatial analysis of the vote. The approach adopted in this study incorporates a local dimension of analysis, considering the distribution

of votes in the municipalities of the province of Naples. This analytical strategy, frequently employed in previous research (Forest 2018), plays a crucial role in achieving the objectives of this study. The geographical mapping of the vote, as observed from the results, will enable the identification of various vote concentrations in the various municipalities under consideration.

The contribution is organized according to 6 sections plus an additional concluding paragraph. The theoretical sections provides a framework for the work in relation to the processes of consensus building in social media. The sections devoted to the methodology of the work presents the electoral context and the ways of construction of electoral and digital data. The analysis sections are divided into the part on the spatial analysis of voting and the analysis of digital pages. Finally, a sections is devoted to the discussion of the results with the commentary on the Digital activity index and the association with the election outcome.

## 2. Consensus in the age of social media

Social media are profoundly influencing the political landscape, especially during election campaigns. Due to their broad reach and ability to engage a wide audience, social media have become an indispensable tool for seeking independent consensus apart from the party system. This communicative autonomy translates into an even more personalized stage of political communication than in the past (Calise and Musella 2019), enabling experimentation with new political languages and narratives (Liebhart and Bernardt 2017). Through digital platforms, political leaders can directly reach a wide audience and promote political messages in a simple and engaging language, often based on «memetic» elements (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019). Social media have become an ordinary communication channel for political leaders, and the data provided by these platforms enable them to precisely identify their target audience. A significant example is Obama's 2008 election campaign, regarded as the first digital campaign with exclusively online marketing strategies. Similarly, Trump's presidential success in 2016 is widely attributed to his communication through social media platforms, particularly Twitter (Enli 2017). This transformation is evident in the Italian context as well, where the focus of political debate and electoral challenges has progressively shifted from television to social media. Social platforms have become a key factor in propaganda, to the extent that they can partly determine the effectiveness of electoral campaigns and consensus building (De Blasio and Sorice 2018). Consensus building through new media transforms the operating logic of the whole me-

dia ecosystem. New media are hybridized by traditional logics. For example, the use that political actors have made and continue to make of websites as propaganda tools, mainly by adopting them as «bulletin boards» (Vaccari 2013), not unlike what they did in the past with posters, flyers or commercials; or Facebook pages that reproduce video excerpts of TV talk shows or tweets that comment on images, news, or dialogues produced by newspapers, television or radio. Alongside these more traditional methods, new digital forms are emerging to measure consensus, such as «likes», «sharing» and «reactions» which build the engagement of political figures, and which are widely used especially during the electoral phases of politics. Digital content, even in the forms of political storytelling, has a priority strategic purpose, especially in the most significant moments of politics such as election campaigns.

Social media have become ubiquitous communication channels for candidates during election campaigns. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow candidates to reach voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the public agenda (Stier *et al.* 2016). The organizational imprinting of parties that have emerged in the last two decades implies the central importance of social platforms and their organizational impact (Mancini 2015). A good deal of empirical literature studies the way campaigning is done in the time of networked politics. «The digital campaign is scientific in its method, data-driven, or at least data-oriented, in its approach, high-tech in its infrastructure, professionalized and specialized in its roles and functions, micro-targeted in its communication strategies, participatory and high-tech grassroots in its basic structure» (Cepernich 2017, 53).

However, there is not much work that seeks to explore the effects of this online appeal on election outcomes. Election campaigns on social media have been extensively studied as researchers have examined how election campaigns unfold, how candidates are integrated into communication networks, and how they interact with each other and the public (Boulianne 2016; Jungherr 2016b). However, this literature is limited in several respects: first, most studies have focused on an isolated platform, primarily Twitter and only rarely, Facebook. Second, only a portion of this work has focused on actual communication content beyond metadata (i.e., digital traces left behind by communication artifacts such as posts, retweets, likes, or hashtags). We must consider that social media is not only used to address political issues that are important to a mass audience, but it serves several other functions in election campaigns. Kobayashi and Ichifuji (2015), for example, identified three functions: promoting problematic positions, demonstrating positive personality traits, and improving candidate recognition. Jungherr (2016a) proposed a fourfold typology that distinguishes between organizational uses, active campaigns in

information spaces, resource collection and allocation, and symbolic purposes. A considerable part of online campaigns should therefore be devoted to mobilizing supporters, organizing campaigns (Nielsen and Vaccari 2013), and representative and symbolic purposes. It is true, however, that studies in this area have often neglected local political contexts in which campaigns have often been conducted locally and disinclined to adopt the methods, languages and tools of mainstream politics. We have, however, highlighted above how the health emergency has accelerated the process of digitization of local politics, which was, in any case, already underway for some time.

The main Italian political leaders have, indeed, a social profile that is often more popular than the page of their party of reference (Bracciale *et al.* 2021). Although social media appear to influence popularity and electoral success, it is interesting to analyze how this dynamic applies to local political contexts. Local voting behavior may differ from national patterns, influenced by motivations, expectations, and, in many cases, direct knowledge of the electorate (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015). Nevertheless, local politics is gradually becoming familiar with the digital context, accelerating the digitization of election campaigns, even in regional elections.

### 3. Electoral context, data and methods

The context for this research is the 2020 regional elections in Campania<sup>1</sup>. The analysis focuses on the four elected councilors of the civic list «De Luca presidente» for the electoral district of Naples. The candidates are Valeria Lettieri, candidate and elected to the regional council with 11,147 votes; Lucia Fortini, outgoing councillor and elected with 10,517 votes; Carmine Mocerino, outgoing councillor, and elected with 10,239 preferences; Paola Raia former councillor, elected with 9893 votes (Table 1). We have decided to choose them because they are exponents of a civic list and not of a national party, and this probably gave them more action in their campaign, breaking free from party communication logics. The second motivation is linked to the presidential candidate of the list (outgoing president and then re-elected) who

<sup>1</sup> The regional elections in Campania were held on September 20 and 21, 2020. The election had been scheduled for May 31, but then was delayed due to the Covid-19 health emergency. The region is divided into five electoral districts that correspond to the provinces of Campania, that is Naples, Salerno, Caserta, Avellino and Benevento. The electoral system guarantees 27 seats for the electoral district of Naples, 9 for Salerno, 8 for Caserta, 4 for Avellino and 2 for Benevento.

has distinguished himself for his very popular social communication, so we expect that his candidates are also inclined to this type of communication.

TAB. 1. *Candidates of the list «De Luca presidente»*

Candidates	Nr of votes
Lettieri Vittoria	11,147
Fortini Lucia	10,517
Mocerino Carmine	10,239
Raia Paola	9893
Venanzoni Diego	8858
Tufano Antonio	8629
Simeone Gaetano	7616
Gargiulo Leone	6937
Renzi Luigi	5437
Longobardi Alfonso	5051

*Source:* Our elaboration on the Ministry of the Interior data.

The timeline considered for the analysis starts from June 30 to September 18, 2020, during which we identified two sub-phases, the pre-election phase (June 30-August 20) and the election campaign phase (August 21-September 18). Different types of data were considered, so the construction of the base involved the integration of multiple sources. With regard to the spatial data on the regional vote in the municipalities, we have referred to the official sources of the Ministry Eligendo platform<sup>2</sup>, the integrated system that disseminates open election data. Data from all municipalities in the Naples and Province District were considered for each of the four candidates. We have constructed the data by limiting ourselves to the municipality and not the electoral sections, because being a focus on a single province, the municipal level could already be sufficient for the purposes of the paper. However, the size of some centers, such as the capital Naples or some other municipalities, could encourage further focus on electoral sections. As far as social content is concerned, we have considered the posts on the official Facebook pages of the candidates. We have used Facebook because it is the social channel most used by the candidates and also the one with the most textual content. The policies of the platform, in fact, do not present particular limitations on text messages (limitations that are present on other platforms such as Twitter that does not allow to exceed the limit of 280 characters per message). For each post we have considered not only the information relating to the content of the message, but

<sup>2</sup> Link: <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it>.

also the characteristics of engagement (i.e., number of comments, likes, shares). The model of analysis adopted is a part of the widely known paradigm of digital methods (Rogers 2013), which focuses on the use of web environments platforms for the extraction and analysis of digital data; moreover, procedures have been defined that are mainly quantitative for scraping and analysis, and qualitative for the deepening of some content parts. This mixed model<sup>3</sup> (Amaturo and Punziano 2016) defined by the spatial analysis of electoral data and the content analysis of Facebook posts are summarized in the comparison between the two indices of the two analytical paths.

#### 4. The voting geography. Analysis of the concentration of electoral preferences

We have observed that among the first four elected there are no relevant differences in the number of votes. Between the first elected and the fourth, in fact, there is a difference of only 1324 votes. The differences, however, emerge if we observe the territorial distribution of the vote<sup>4</sup>.

Figure 1 compares the maps of the vote, accompanying it with a normalized balance index (Marradi 2007) to highlight the different distribution of the vote in the constituency. There are three types of distribution: one of strong concentration, one of equilibrium and one intermediate. The first includes the case of the candidate Lettieri whose preferences are almost all concentrated in the north-western area of Naples, specifically in the area of Acerra, which collects almost 65% of the total votes of the candidate. The balance index confirms what can be visually guessed by marking a low value (0.589). In the second, that of greater balance in the distribution, we have founded the profiles of Fortini (0.948) and Raia (0.947). In these two cases, the distribution of preferences appears to be more extended over the province, obviously with some differences between areas. In the case of Fortini, the votes are concentrated

<sup>3</sup> This design required the use of multiple search tools for both extraction and analysis. Regarding the extraction of Facebook content, the FanPage Karma application was used, Pro version, which is the interface tool of the Facebook Api allowing unlimited scraping of posts. FanPage Karma returns a large set of indicators related to post engagement, i.e., type of reaction, number of likes and comments. The program also provides a range of data-viz tools useful especially to assess the growth trends of the fan-base of Facebook pages. The analysis of text mining with the construction of the vocabulary of lemmas and n-grams was instead carried out through R software, using the package «tm». The spatial analysis of voting was instead carried out using Qgis software that allowed to map the distribution of voting.

<sup>4</sup> Jenks natural breaks method (North 2009) was used to classify the vote distributions.



mainly in the coastal area, on the islands and in the city of Naples. In the case of Raia, in the northern area of Naples. Mocerino records an intermediate distribution, although with an index slightly lower than the previous ones (0.937).

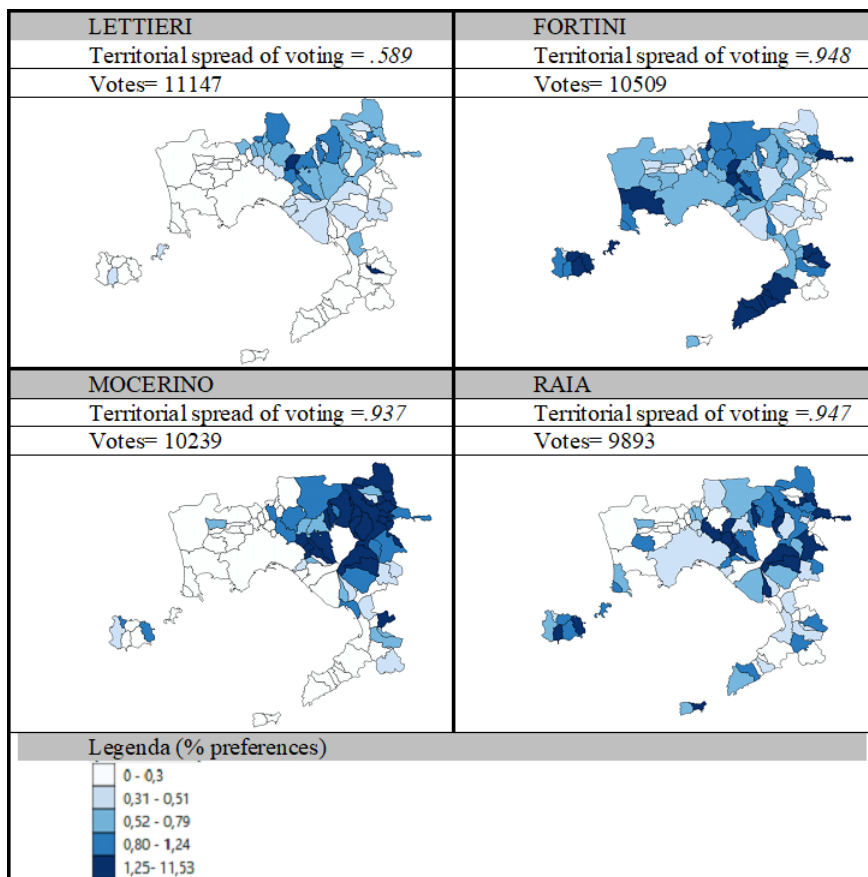


FIG. 1. Map representation of district vote distribution (%).

Source: Our elaboration on Ministry of the Interior data.

From the respective cartographic representation, it can be seen that the preferences are mainly concentrated in the internal area of the province. It is plausible that these geographies of the vote are explained, in part, by different electoral behaviors. The extended vote is probably an opinion vote (for example, the Fortini and Raia case), the concentrated one could be related to the vote of territorial belonging. What are the factors that can explain this different morphology of the vote? They could certainly be identified in the political experience of the candidates, in their different influence on the territory and,

above all, reflect the different use of political communication strategies. For example, some have preferred social media channels, and this could have a relationship with the different extension of the vote.

## 5. The candidates' digital profiles

The analysis of candidates' digital profiles focuses on their public Facebook spaces. We considered two dimensions of analysis, one related to page following («fanbase») and another related to engagement data («reactions, comments, shares», «likes», and «comments» proportionate to the number of posts) during the campaign phase. For both dimensions, we took into account the trend during the entire election period. When comparing the four pages, significant differences were observed in terms of following and the extent of communication. These differences likely indicate variations in the candidates' emphasis on online communication. One of the most useful indicators for evaluating the profiles is the size of their fanbase. Table 2 shows the number of fans for each profile taken on the last day of the time frame (September 18, 2020). In the analysis of the profiles of the four candidates, a significant difference in the number of followers is observed, which can be attributed to various reasons. Lucia Fortini's profile stands out with a large fanbase of approximately 55,000 followers. This could be due to her incumbent position as a councilor, which has allowed her to accumulate an already established following over time. On the other hand, Paola Raia and Carmine Mocerino have a much smaller following, with around 2600 and 1700 followers respectively. These numbers may reflect lower visibility or less active presence on social media by the candidates. Lastly, Vittoria Lettieri's social page has an even smaller audience, with fewer than 1000 followers, which could be attributed to a less pronounced online presence or a campaign strategy with less emphasis on social media. On the other hand, if one looks at the trend during the election period (Figure 2), as expected there was a surge in followers for almost all pages, probably due to the implementation of strategies to engage more people.

TAB. 2. *Fanbase of Facebook page (a.v.)*

Page	Fanbase
Fortini	54,874
Mocerino	1723
Raia	2580
Lettieri	1500

*Source:* Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

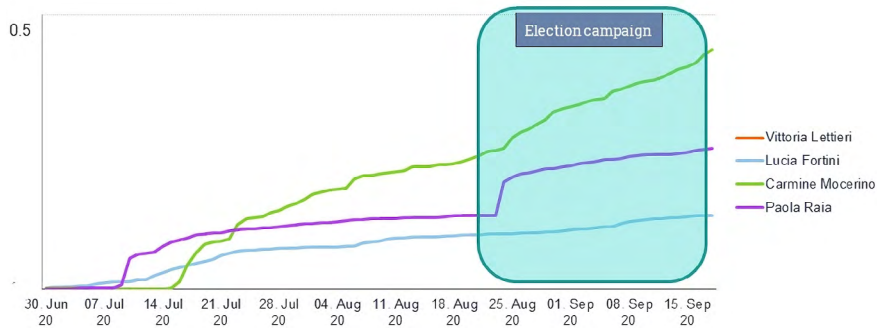


FIG. 2. Fanbase growth Jun 30-Sept 18 (%).

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

Regarding the level of engagement, the four profiles exhibit different situations, not only in terms of the number of posts produced but also the emotional involvement they generate. On one hand, there are those who have been highly active but have received varying levels of engagement. This is the case with Fortini and Mocerino. Fortini has achieved a satisfactory level of engagement despite posting a high number of posts, whereas Mocerino has generated many posts but received little engagement. A similar situation can be observed with Lettieri and Raia. Lettieri has shared a few posts that have garnered significant attention, whereas Raia has posted sparingly and received minimal emotional feedback.

The graph regarding engagement values (Figure 3) over time, on the other hand, follows an opposite trend from the fanbase. This is probably due to the intensification of posts in the last election period. This has created a dispersion of engagement, although with values changing significantly for each of the four candidates.

TAB. 3. Number of posts and engagement (mean by post)

Page	Post	Post	Likes	Comments
Lucia Fortini	86	86	8.9	2.5
Vittoria Lettieri	18	18	16.5	3
Carmine Mocerino	68	68	2.8	0.5
Paola Raia	20	20	3.9	0.3
Total	192	192	8	1.6

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

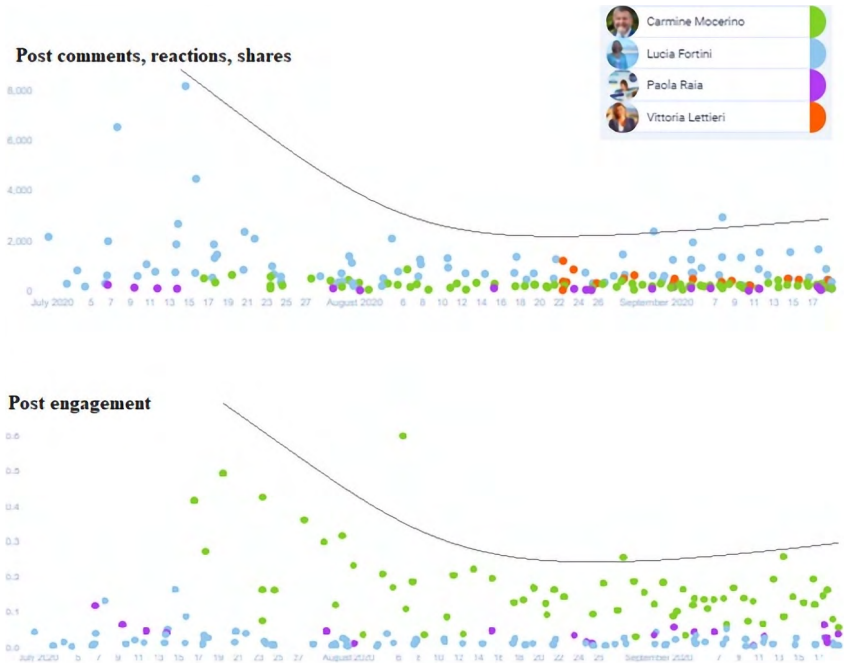


FIG. 3. Trends in comments, reactions, shares and engagement (%).

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

## 6. Rivers of digital words: The lemmas and themes of electoral storytelling

The analysis of the lemmas used in digital communication is useful to understand the style, the language and, above all, the themes on which the candidates have most insisted. For the four profiles we consider the 10 most recurrent lemmas, which emerged with the cleaning operations of the text of the posts (Figure 4). The communication of Fortini's page was mostly based on lemmas of an institutional and political vocabulary about his activities as political assessor for education and social policies («Campania», «region», «school», «work»). There are references to some forms of communication used («live») and to electoral slogans through hashtags («#wedonotstop»). Mocerino's social profile makes extensive use of lexical forms that refer to the city of Naples and to the Neapolitan character and, therefore, to family and friendship relations («#napoletanoovunque», «Napoli», «amici»). There are some terms that are part of the dimension of anti-camorra («state», «assets», «confiscated»). They may refer to a specific institutional activity of the candidate councilor. The vocabulary used in Paola Raia's social communica-

tion is based on a few terms. For example, the use of recurring references to the president of the Region De Luca («de luca», «president») and to professional commitments («work», «works», «plan»).



FIG. 4. Most used lemmas (a.v.).

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

Lettieri is the only one who often uses lemmas directly referring to the regional elections («vote», «September», «decisive», «regional»). This type of communication is likely conditioned by the different timing in the use of social media by the candidate who, as seen above, would have limited his social communication only to the last weeks of the electoral campaign. This would explain the motivation for a lexicon completely oriented towards the regional elections. Observing the posts in their wholeness allows us to deepen, through a hermeneutic procedure, the sense of the candidates' social communication (Figure 5). The five posts with the highest engagement are examined, that is, those that have generated the most feedback in relation to the size of the page's fanbase. Taking those with the highest engagement helps to highlight the most frequent communicative frames in the construction of interactions and therefore consensus of the four candidates. These posts have a recurring style, characterized by a familiar, direct language that, in most cases, is oriented on the person who is communicating. In some cases, one talks about one's private life (e.g., the name day of the father in the case of Mocerino's post, the family holiday for Raia), in others addressing the voters in a friendly way (the expression «My friends» in Lettieri's post) and the invitation to follow his live for Fortini. However, some differences in content can be highlighted. Three of them can be identified: «call for vote», «personal life» and «institutional

digital communication». The first frame is related to the explicit call to vote. These posts, as observed in Figure 5, and as also emerged in the previous word frequency, belong almost exclusively to Lettieri's page. These are communications produced in the final phase of the election campaign. The second frame relates to a type of communication concerning the private sphere, the narration of daily and family events, and emotional references. We find this style in the high engagement posts of Mocerino and Raia. The third frame concerns, above all, the posts of the Fortini page. It is a type of communication oriented to the institutional role of the candidate but declined on the digital ecosystem, with frequent references to all those strategies of personal communication made available by the platform (for example, Facebook live).

We can say that it is an institutional digital communication: institutional communication on the network.

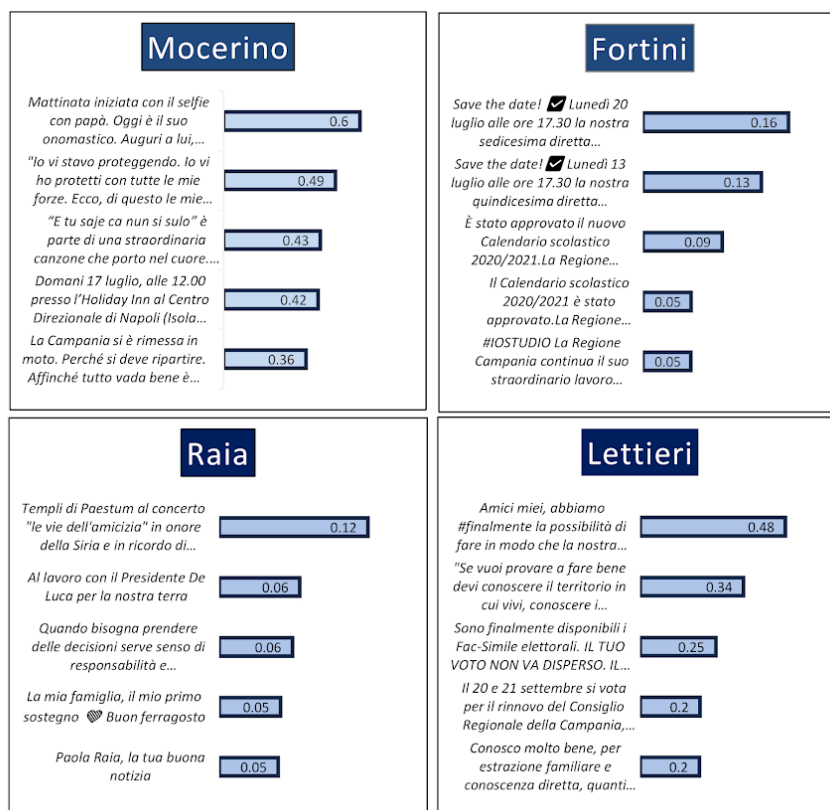


FIG. 5. Engagement value for post (0-1).

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

## 7. The Digital activity index and relation to voting

As seen above, we extracted some information about the activity of each page. These can help us build a synthetic index on the digital activity of each profile. We consider four pieces of information: the fanbase, the daily average of posts, the followers' growth, and the overall value of interactions (Table 4). We calculated the index on the average of each normalized variable, achieving for each candidate a «Digital activity index»<sup>5</sup>, i.e., a relative index ranging from 0 (lowest page activity) to 1 (highest activity). The page with the highest value is that of Fortini (0.7), which as well as a very large fanbase, was the page with the most daily posts and a very high level of interactions. This is followed by Mocerino (0.4) which, despite a small fanbase, has received consistent growth in posts and followers. Raia and Lettieri present a rather low value. The first is conditioned above all by low levels of interaction. The second, instead, by a not numerous fanbase.

TAB. 4. *Characteristics of page activity*

Page	Fanbase	Post per day	Growth	Interaction	Digital activity Index
Fortini	54,874	1.1	0.1	1142	0.75
Mocerino	1723	0.8	0.4	248.7	0.45
Raia	2580	0.2	0.3	97.6	0.11
Lettieri	1500	0.2	n.a.	462.9	0.09

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

$$T_{ij} = \frac{X_{ij} - \min\{X_j\}}{\max\{X_j\} - \min\{X_j\}} \Rightarrow D.A.I. = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^p T_{ij}}{p}$$

FIG. 6. Digital activity index.

Source: Our elaboration on FanPage Karma data.

What role did digital profile activity assume in candidate voting outcomes? In their electoral success, it is likely that for some of these candidates the implementation of a social page was a key element in increasing their popularity and consensus. Others, on the contrary, marginally using the platform and digital tools to stay in touch with the electorate, have connected their electoral success likely to other types of strategies. To better explore where the four can-

<sup>5</sup> As shown in Figure 6, the index was constructed from two normalizations: the first for each of the four indicators, given the diversity in indicator values, the second normalization was made on the final index.

didates stand in the relationship between digital activity and voting outcomes, we have constructed a three-dimensional plan: «votes», «vote area coverage», and «digital activity index». The center of the axes represents the average vote and its territorial distribution, while the width of the spheres is proportional to the digitization index. In the first square (high votes and vote coverage) is placed the profile of Fortini, which presents a very high index. For this reason, it can be assumed that the activity of the candidate's social page has played a key role in building consensus in the election. In the second square we find the candidate with the most votes, however with a smaller vote extension. This is the case of Lettieri who has a very low index (Figure 7). It can be assumed that the candidate has built his electoral consensus mainly outside the digital context. This is only an apparent paradox when one considers that the content of Lettieri's communication, as can be seen from the analysis of the posts, was geared toward an explicit invitation to vote but was probably not enough to create a relevant emotional connection with his fans. The other two profiles, Raia and Mocerino, are in the fourth square. We are in the half-plane where the average number of votes obtained is lower, but the vote is on average large. There are, however, differences in the index, to the extent that for Raia it is not very relevant, as opposed to Mocerino. In the first case it is possible to think that the digital tool was important but secondary with respect to a hypothetical range of strategies developed by the candidate. In the second case, it is probable that the social page was effective with respect to the electoral output achieved. On the other hand, Mocerino's page is the one which has experienced the most substantial percentage growth in terms of followers, a sign that if an electoral strategy has been articulated, it has certainly been directed towards the massive use of the social page. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Mocerino's communication style has been geared toward a confidential register, based mostly on family and private matters. This probably may have contributed to establishing a bond of trust with his electorate. Thus, on the one hand, a vote of belonging is recognizable in Lettieri's electorate, which is highly concentrated and plausibly little driven by the candidate's social content. On the other pole could be placed precisely Mocerino, whose vote could be one of opinion because he has gathered support from those who, perhaps, liked his content.



### Page role in voting

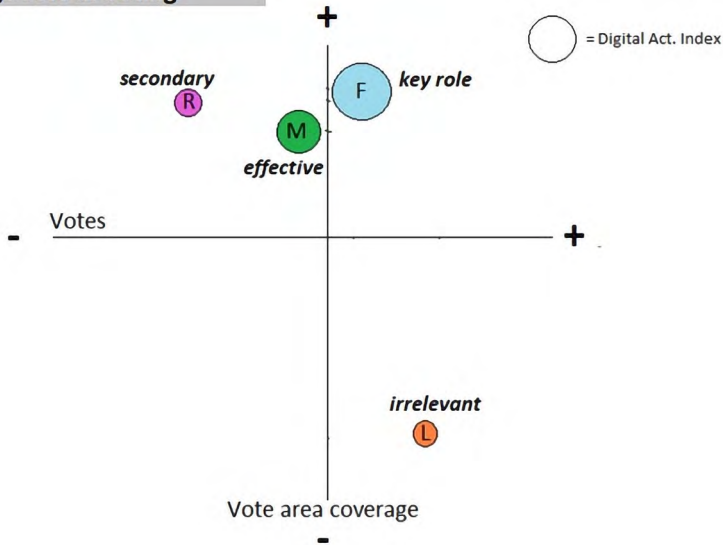


FIG. 7. Cartesian plan on page role voting, by three factors number of votes (x-axis), vote area coverage (y), digital activity index (circle size).

Source: Our own elaboration.

Note: F=Fortini; M=Mocerino; R=Raia; L=Lettieri.

## 8. Conclusions. Early signs of digital innovation in local political communication

We are in a digital environment politics era. Social media have encouraged political actors to renew not only their language, which is progressively moving towards a smarter style, but also their practices. For example, electoral campaigns. For some, we are moving into the era of digital, or «liquid», campaigns, i.e., those conducted almost exclusively with the use of the network, which does not necessarily mean not in presence, but organized thanks to social networks. The 2020 election was strongly affected by the health care crisis. This situation upset the electoral scenario, catapulting actors into a permanent online context. If for national politics conducting a digital campaign is a rather familiar exercise, for local actors (or most of them) it is still less so. Although research on politicians' communication on social media is large, few analyses attempt to explore the relationships between digital campaigns and electoral outcomes, especially with regard to local contexts. Research questions have arisen from this emerging gap in the field literature. How do local political actors campaign on social media? How did those who won the elections position themselves online and what communication strategies did they adopt? Can a

relationship be traced between the strength of the candidate's social strategy and vote distribution? The research has explored the local electoral context of 2020 in relation to the Campania region. We have examined the four elected councilors of a civic list supporting the outgoing president Vincenzo De Luca, analyzing the electoral outcomes (the vote) and the communication dimension in the context of the electoral campaign on social networks. In relation to the first dimension, the votes of the politicians have described a scenario substantially balanced, in which the first of the elected obtained a little more than a thousand votes more. Preliminary analysis of the territorial distribution of the vote began to shake this apparent equilibrium, revealing some substantial differences in the distribution of the vote. The most striking gap is that between Lettieri and Fortini, divided by a few preferences, but with a very different distribution of the vote (the first with the vote concentrated in a small area, the second with a greater extension over the area). The analysis of the social profiles during the electoral campaign has certainly highlighted an even more extensive fracture. For example, from the first descriptive analysis of the fanbase and the contents of the social narrative of the four profiles, it was immediately clear the crucial role that the platform played for the candidate Fortini whose presence on the page was constant, addressing a very wide audience. This difference has been confirmed by our index to measure the activity of each page, which recorded a value greater than half only for Fortini's page. The difference between the candidates has not only been observed in the numbers, but also in the content of the posts. For Lettieri, the page was a tool used as a megaphone to inform mainly about his candidacy. For Raia and Mocerino, it was a diary to write about family events. For Fortini, a channel to strengthen public and institutional communication, using the peculiarities of the platform (for example, live broadcasts). Despite these differences, there is a storytelling common to all. This is ascribed to the use of words, phrases and semantic content that launches politics into a new dimension, more direct in the relationship with voters, immediate and without particular filters: that is, disintermediated. Partially observing the social activity of the four candidates makes us realize that the local contexts of politics are still not very familiar with digital languages, strategies and environments. We have seen, however, that there have also been interesting experiments by candidates who have identified the social platform as a strong point not only of their campaign, but of their political activity. For example, this is the case of the Fortini page, which has been able to record very intense phases of productivity combined with effective storytelling oriented towards institutional communication. In all likelihood, this could have played a key role in electoral dynamics. On the other hand, the first evidence of this work seems to suggest that the presence on the new media is not (yet) deci-

sive for the success of candidates in local contexts, but it could become so in reaching a part of the electorate that is difficult to access with the traditional means of the old politics. The challenge is just beginning.

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