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Università di Genova

AIQUAV 2019

VI Convegno Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana per gli Studi sulla Qualità della Vita

Benessere Collettivo e Scelte Individuali

Fiesole (FI), 12-14 Dicembre 2019

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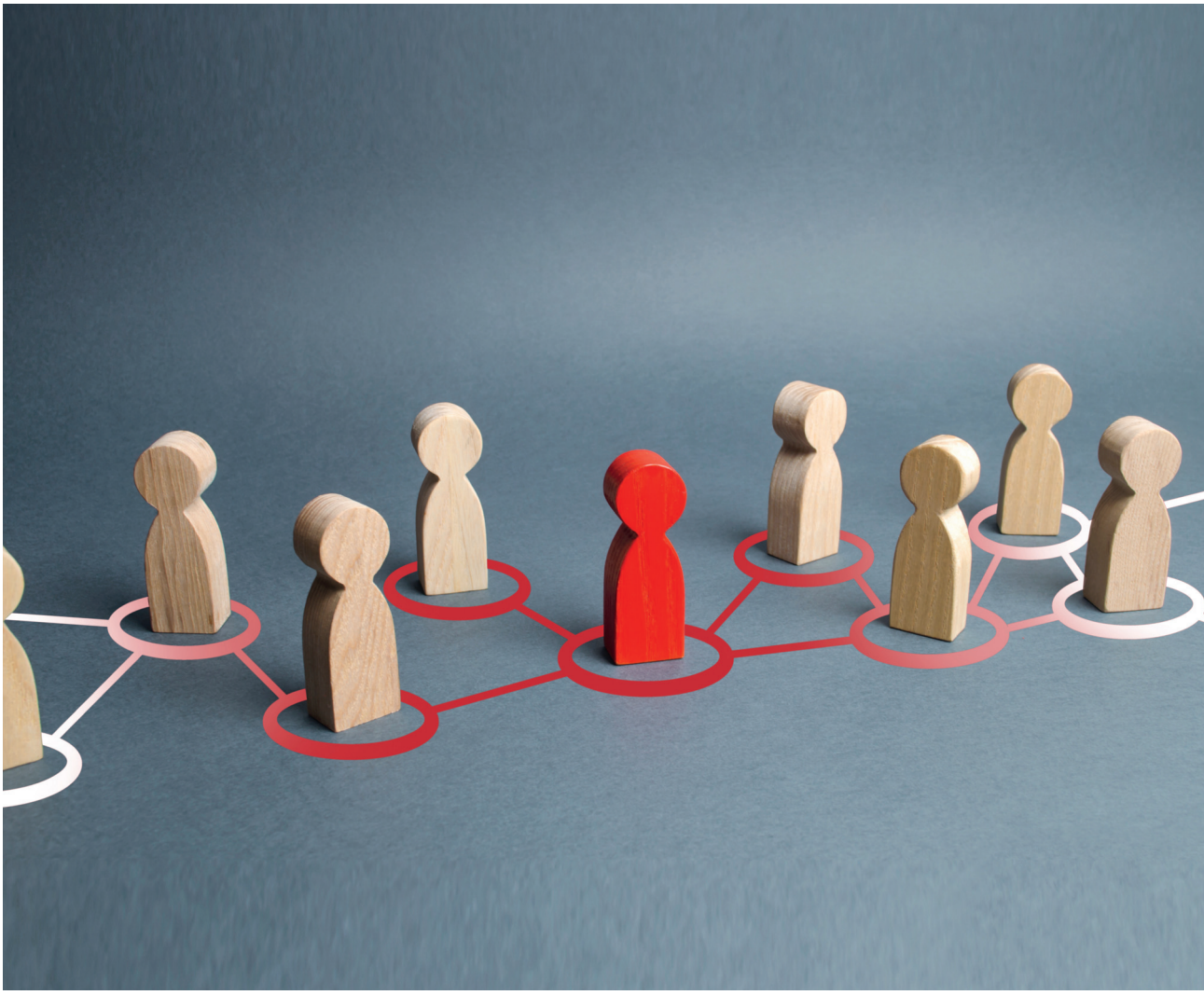
a cura di
Leonardo Salvatore Alaimo, Alberto Arcagni, Enrico di Bella,
Filomena Maggino e Marco Trapani



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Anatomy of a government crisis. Political institutions, security, and consensus

Francesca Greco e Alessandro Polli[1]

Abstract *We present an application of the Emotional Text Mining (ETM) in the field of political science. The research aims to identify the symbolic categories that have set the communications of Twitter users on the subject of the government crisis that occurred in Italy in August 2019. The ETM allowed identifying the causes of the fluctuations in the consensus expressed to the actors involved in the affair. The main conclusion of the study is that the political representation and the needs of citizens, that struggle to encounter at a local level, find in the Web a new meeting space, where consensus emerges and vanishes with striking evidence.*

Parole chiave: Emotional text mining, Public opinion, Government crisis.

Gruppo tematico: 12. Qualità della vita e democrazia.

1 Introduction

In common language, the concept of "institution" refers to an apparatus that performs functions and tasks linked to the public interest, in a broad sense, while in the social sciences the institution is a model of behavior that has a binding force in a given society.

Nevertheless, binding force is not the only requirement that identifies an institution. Restricting the field to political institutions, which play a central role in the pursuit of collective well-being, it is essential to consider, alongside the cogent function, the relational one, indicated by Poulantzas as a "strategic field" of confrontation and structuring of the power relations and in which a dialectic is established between "civil society" and "political society" [1].

On the one hand, the pursuit of collective well-being by an institution appears to be inseparably linked to its ability to meet citizens' needs like security, which is one of the main determinants of collective well-being. More specifically, the pursuit of the two objectives represents the main source of legitimization of political institutions, which build their consensus on the alleged ability to guarantee both.

On the other hand, the link between political institutions, well-being and consensus has profoundly changed following the growing global interdependence triggered by

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globalization processes. More specifically, the transfer of powers from the States to the markets [2] has led to the eradication of political institutions from their territorial base [3].

Therefore, both the representation of collective well-being and the most suitable measures to achieve it have changed. Concerning security, in recent past, it included the concept of social security guaranteed by a welfare system, while today it seems to be substantially limited to geographical-structural aspects [4].

The resulting crisis of representation caused the rise of movements with strong identity connotations that focus on overcoming the current forms of representative democracy and on security issues as central elements of their political agenda.

The present study aims to investigate the public perception on social media of the recent government crisis that broke out in Italy in August 2018. In particular, in this preliminary study, we analyze the public perception of the Lega leader's decision to call for the polls, which is the first step in a wider research project aiming to investigate the public perception of all the political actors involved in the government crisis.

In the social sciences, the difference between objective reality and its public perception is well known, as evidenced by the studies carried out above all in the field of ecology, health and deviance, and what role the media play. The public perception of government stability does not limit its effect exclusively to social and political aspects but also affects structural aspects such as economic growth, income, employment.

The focus on a specific topic, which characterizes public opinion in alternate phases, is not the direct product of media communication or political rhetoric, although both these factors play an important role to its declination, as Garland points out [5].

Nevertheless, the experience of real events that occur in everyday life and the practical adaptations that derive from it determine the sensitivity to the topic, even if the positioning of political institutions and the dissemination of information can affect its representation.

On closer inspection, this is the same meaning with which the topic has become the object of particular attention by public opinion, becoming central to the Italian political debate. It is a question, then, of understanding if and to what extent the media have played a role in putting the "government crisis", thus redefined, at the centre of the Italian public agenda.

2 Methods

We adopted the Emotional Text Mining (ETM) methodology to explore the public perception of the Lega leader in Twitter communications. ETM is an unsupervised procedure, which allows the profiling of people based on their communication. Essentially, this methodology follows a bottom-up semiotic approach to classify unstructured data through a multivariate analysis.

ETM is a development of sentiment analysis based on a socio-constructivist approach and a psychodynamic model [6]. ETM allows for the identification of the elements setting people’s interactions, behaviour, attitudes, expectations and communication. Thus, according to a semiotic approach to the analysis of textual data, this methodology performs social profiling. ETM has already been applied in different fields among which

the study of the political debate, to profile social media users and to anticipate their political choices [7, 8, 9, 10, 11], and the impact of the law on society [6, 12].

We gathered data in the period following the government crisis, scraping all the messages in the Italian language produced from August 20th to August 25th, 2019, which contain the word "Salvini", from the Twitter repository. The data extraction was carried out by the twitteR library of the software R [13].

Due to a large number of tweets produced and the limitations of the software, we selected the first 99,000 tweets (77.6% of which were retweets), resulting in a corpus of 1,846,011 tokens. To test the feasibility of statistical data processing, we calculated two lexical indicators, the type-token ratio and the percentage of hapax (TTR = 0.024; HP = 57.9). Considering the large size of the corpus, both lexical indicators highlighted its richness and allowed to proceed with the analysis [14].

In the first step of ETM, the data were cleaned and pre-processed with the software T-Lab [15], choosing a subset of keywords. In particular, we used lemmas as keywords instead of type, filtering out “Salvini” and low rank of frequency lemmas [7, 11]. Then, on the tweets per keyword matrix, we performed a cluster analysis with a bisecting k-means algorithm based on cosine similarity [16]. The algorithm was limited to 20 partitions, excluding all the tweets that did not have at least two keywords co-occurrence. We calculated the Calinski-Harabasz, the Davies-Bouldin and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ρ) indices to detect the optimal number of partitions. Finally, we performed a correspondence analysis [17] on the cluster per keywords matrix, and the sentiment was calculated according to the number of messages classified in the cluster and its interpretation.

3 Results

The results of the cluster analysis show that the keywords selected (n= 549) enable the classification of 88% of the tweets. The clustering validation measures show that the optimal solution is four clusters (Calinski-Harabasz = 1363.3; Davies-Bouldin = 5.323; ρ = 0.045). The correspondence analysis detected three latent dimensions. Table 1 summarizes the inertia explained by each factor, while in Figure 1 we can appreciate the factorial space of the Lega leader emerging from the Italian tweets, and how the clusters displace in the factorial space.

As shown in Table 2, Twitter users symbolize the Lega leader by means of three main categories: the leader, his actions, and the reaction. The first factor concerns the Lega leader categorization: a reflective person, to whom one can rely on, or an impulsive one, who could be unreliable. His choice to call for the political election and the government crisis, was so unexpected that brought citizen to his recategorization. The second factor reflects his actions consequences: they are harmful, and the consequences could be critical for the country, or they are inexperienced, and the consequences can be overcome. Finally, the third factor symbolizes citizen’s reaction: to go to polls, which implies an individual decision, or to debate, which implies the social interaction and, perhaps, a collective decision.

The interpretation of the factorial space highlights the symbolic categories by which the Twitter users emotionally categorize the Lega leader, and support the cluster interpretation according to their positioning in the symbolic space (Table 2).

The four clusters are of different sizes (Table 3) and reflect different representations of the Lega leader's decision. In the first cluster, the Twitter users seem to agree with the leader proposition to call for the polls, perceiving him as reflexive and able to take responsible political decisions; the second cluster represents it as the result of the political class unreliability that disregards the general interest; the third cluster perceive the choice as a desperate move, the result of an impulsive decision; finally, the fourth cluster, which is the smallest one classifying only 19% of the messages, consider the leader decision a political suicide, calling for the need to debate on a harmful decision.

Factor	Eigenvalue	%	Cumul. %	Label	Neg. Pole	Pos. Pole
1	0.525	39.6	39.6	Leader	Reflexive	impulsive
2	0.440	33.2	72.8	His action	Harmful	Unskilled
3	0.361	27.2	100	Reaction	Debate	Vote

Table 1: Correspondence analysis results

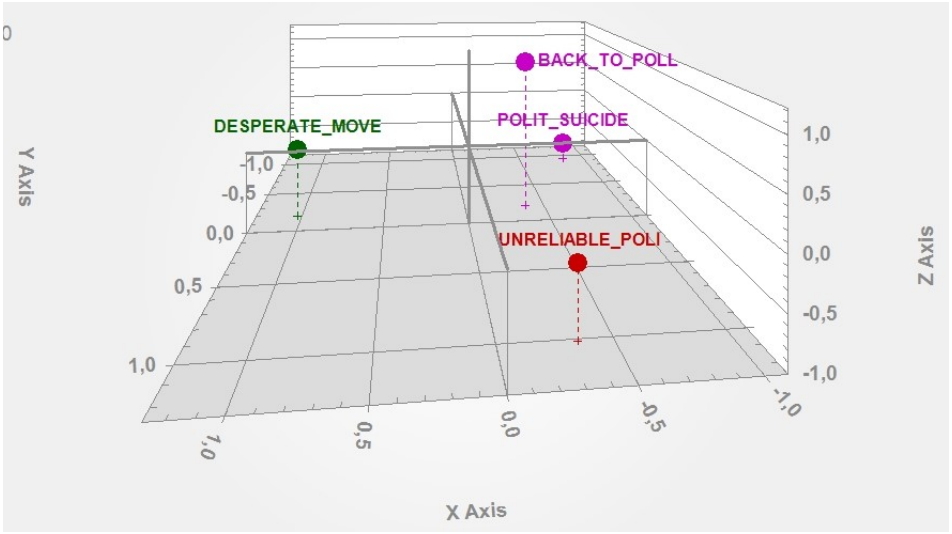

Figure 1: Factorial space

Cluster	Label	Factor 1 Leader	Factor 2 Action	Factor 3 Reaction
1	Back to the poll	Reflexive -0,38		Vote 0,98
2	Unreliable politicians	Reflexive -0,34	Incompetent 1,01	Debate -0,30
3	Desperate move	Impulsive 1,03		
4	Political suicide	Reflexive -0,84	Harmful -0,94	Debate -0,75

Table 2: Cluster location in the symbolic space (under the factor polarity interpretation is reported the cluster coordinate of each factor)

The clusters interpretation leads to the identification of four representations of the decision of the Lega leader, which refer to specific communities of Twitter users. We classified negative these representations of the choice of the leader as due to the unreliability of politicians (25%), as a desperate move (29%) and as a political suicide (19%), while we considered positive the representation of the choice as an attempt to come back to the polls (27%) (Figure 2). It is worth noting that two of the three negative representations target the leader of the League, while the remainder (unreliable politicians) generalizes this judgment to the entire political class.

Cluster	Tot Tweet classified	Size	Label	keyword	N Tweet	Sentiment
1	23,623	27.1%	Back to the poll	Pd	5,067	Positive
				M5S	4,426	
				votare	3,315	
				Governo	3,459	
				lega	2,353	
				perdere	1,299	
2	22,213	25.4%	Unreliable politicians	Conte	8,943	Negative
				Lega	3,480	
				discorso	1,910	
				uscire	1,849	
				asfaltare	1,518	
				spolpare	1,221	
3	25,071	28.8%	Desperate move	Governo	4,115	Negative
				disperato	3,119	
				mossa	3,051	
				Pd5stelle	3,038	
				Quirinale	2,486	
				ministro	2,337	
4	16,264	18.7%	Political suicide	vedere	2014	Negative
				parlare	1802	
				prendere	1342	
				Maio	1134	
				sentire	988	
				presidente	966	

Table 3: the *Lega* leader representations and sentiment

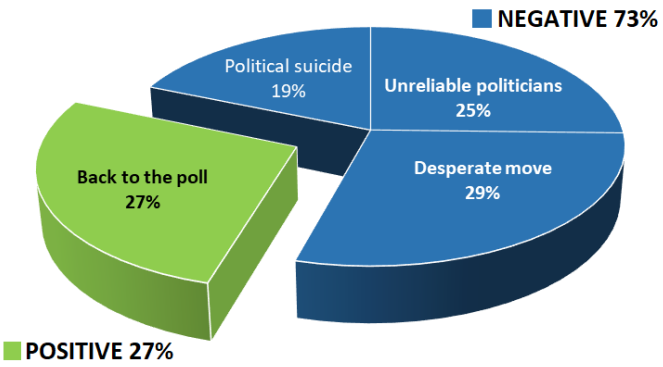

Figure 2: the *Lega* leader representations and sentiment

4 Discussion and conclusion

This paper presents an application of Emotional Text Mining in the field of political science, more specifically in the field of the analysis of political transitions, with a particular emphasis on the issue of government crises [18].
The application of the ETM on a large corpus composed of tweets, collected during the recent government crisis that occurred in August 2019 in Italy, allowed to identify the symbolic categories that set Twitter users' communication on the subject of the ongoing government crisis, and their sentiment.

The results show that a large part of public opinion has negatively evaluated the choice of the Lega leader Matteo Salvini to provoke the government crisis just one year after its formation, judging it to be a rash decision, a desperate move or even political suicide, while only 27% of users favourably considered returning to the polls.

Not only the decision of the Lega leader surprised public opinion, but also led to a climate of great uncertainty, in response to the deterioration of the political framework.

The result was a sudden fall in the polls of the Lega leader. The government crisis, in other words, has triggered a domino effect also on the balance of power within the majority parties. The climate of growing uncertainty on social networks has rewarded the head of the executive, who in the ten most thrilling days of the government crisis saw his consensus increase on social networks, while Salvini lost many followers.

Given the centrality of social networks in the strategy of consensus-building adopted by the Lega leader, therefore, the opening of the government crisis has proved to be a wrong decision and, as such, recognized by public opinion.

The results seem to confirm the basic hypotheses of this work. The pursuit of collective well-being by political institutions and their ability to respond to citizens' need for security are the main source of legitimization of the institutions.

The relations between well-being, security and consensus have changed profoundly in the era of globalization, with a concept of security that would also include the stability of the political framework, with the latter being a prerequisite to ensuring the former.

To conclude, we are witnessing two contradictory processes. On the one hand, the crisis of representation that is determined by the eradication of political institutions from

their territorial base. On the other hand, a need for security that increasingly refers to its geographic-structural dimension.

With an intriguing hypothesis emerging from the results of our research: the political representation and the needs of citizens, that struggle to encounter at a local level, find in the Web a new meeting space, where consensus arises and vanishes with striking evidence.

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La costruzione del benessere collettivo è un obiettivo che sempre più convintamente gli Stati perseguono sia al loro interno che nell'ambito di strategie internazionali. Il raggiungimento di questo obiettivo pone in primo piano il potenziale contrasto tra gli interessi individuali dei singoli cittadini o dei singoli paesi e l'interesse delle collettività nazionali e internazionali. La formalizzazione di obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile, la sigla di protocolli d'intesa e le legislazioni nazionali hanno l'obiettivo di coordinare l'azione complessiva in modo tale da evitare che l'interesse individuale prevalga sull'interesse collettivo. Ciò nonostante, un'analisi del panorama internazionale mostra come il problema del free riding – il godimento di beni o servizi da parte di alcuni senza una contribuzione al loro pagamento, di cui si fa carico il resto della collettività – sia estremamente attuale. Il rapporto tra benessere collettivo e scelte individuali si presenta come un tema estremamente complesso, che ben si adatta ad un'analisi multidisciplinare tipica dei convegni AIQUAV.

Our societies are characterized by rapid changes that affect various aspects of well-being. Migration, urbanization, technologization of everyday life, environmental and climatic changes, demographic trends are all causes and consequences of more general phenomena typical of post-modernity such as globalization, increasingly individualized ways of living, the processes of secularization. The task of scholars is to monitor contemporary social, economic, cultural, political and environmental changes and, in the case of quality of life researchers, to estimate the extent to which social and economic well-being is affected by these changes, both from the point of view of theoretical conceptualization and with regard to methodological and analytical trajectories. The conference aims to share national and international experiences of research and intervention to assess the local effects of phenomena with global dimensions.

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