

What Are Crises for? The Effects on Users' Engagement in the 2022 Italian Election

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Abstract

Crises were highly relevant in the 2022 Italian general election. The label of “crisis” was associated with multiple policy issues, ranging from the environment and health to foreign policy. Previous studies have extensively discussed the impact of crises on voter behavior, demonstrating that voters are particularly concerned with parties' valence attributes, such as the effectiveness of policies and leaders' ability to resolve emergencies. However, limited attention has been paid to assessing how parties mobilize the crisis paradigm on social media. This study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the impact of crisis-related content on Facebook user engagement, with a special focus on distinguishing the relative effectiveness of populist versus mainstream parties in deploying such narratives. Moreover, this research explores how the intertwining of crisis narratives with portrayals of party responsibility or irresponsibility influences the virality of social media posts. To answer these questions, we manually coded 4,827 election campaign posts to create an original dataset. The evidence shows that crises have an impact on boosting user engagement, although this effect seems to be limited to populist parties. The results also suggest that irresponsible claims cease to be rewarding during a crisis. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic use of crisis narratives by political parties on digital platforms and underscores the complex interplay between crisis communication and public engagement in the contemporary political landscape.

Keywords

crisis; populism; responsibility; social media; valence issue

1. Introduction

Crises occupied a prominent place in the 2022 Italian election campaign. Throughout the electoral campaign, the crisis narrative was associated with multiple policy issues. For example, concerns about military escalations related to the Russo-Ukrainian war (Lami & Sahota, 2022) as well as the consequent increase in electricity and gas prices known as the energy shortage (Improta et al., 2022). The heritage of the Covid-19 pandemic also played a role (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021), as well as the environmental challenge of climate change (Biancalana & Ladini, 2022) and the immigration crisis (Conti et al., 2018; Giuliani, 2022).

A novelty, thus, seems to be represented precisely by the concomitant presence and interplay of different crises—a phenomenon renamed by some scholars as polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2022)—that together contribute to feeding voters' perception that the ruling coalition will necessarily navigate turbulent domestic and international scenarios when taking office.

Obviously, parties did not assign equal weight to different crises: While we can expect that the Ukraine war, the energy shortage, and the Covid-19 crises were mobilized more homogeneously by different parties, others, such as fighting climate change, have been more vigorously mobilized by some, like the Greens and Left Alliance, and not by others, e.g., the League (Biancalana & Ladini, 2022).

Previous studies have already extensively discussed the impact of crises on voters' behavior (Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Serani, 2023). As a matter of fact, during elections in times of crisis, voters might care about parties' valence attributes as they are more concerned with the effectiveness of policies (Krebs, 2009) as well as leaders' competence in promptly solving the emergency (Lipsky, 2020). Accordingly, voters may be more attracted by a clear course of action proposed by one party or coalition, while they will negatively judge contradictory voices (Talving, 2018).

Shortly after the 2008 economic crisis, scholars analyzed its impact on party competition and political representation (Conti et al., 2018). More recently, researchers have explored how parties and leaders mobilized the crisis paradigm following the Covid-19 outbreak (Legnante & Splendore, 2021; Rullo & Nunziata, 2021). Many of these studies highlight the populist use of crisis rhetoric to exploit public discontent (Martella & Bracciale, 2022), with a particular focus on the prominence of populist leaders in their communication strategies (Watkins & Clevenger, 2021).

With these premises in mind, we contribute to the literature by investigating whether and to what extent the use of crises pays off also in online digital campaigns generating more user engagement on social media. Based on previous studies related to user engagement on Facebook (Bene et al., 2022), we hypothesize that the higher the emphasis on crisis, the higher the level of users' engagement. We analyzed the Italian 2022 election campaign manually coding 4,827 Facebook posts to create an original dataset. Our aim is to investigate whether significant differences exist between non-crisis and crisis issues, in terms of user engagement, and to what extent the impact of crises interacts with other strategies such as references to a responsible or irresponsible behavior in handling them. We further distinguish between populist and non-populist parties.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Crises and Their Electoral Impact

How to define a crisis? Among the various definitions provided, this article acknowledges that crises are not only related to objective exogenous conditions but can also be the outcome of a narrative frame (Hay, 1999). Political actors may refer to crises in relation to existing issues such as inflation, while in other cases they may apply the crisis framework to self-identified issues and alleged emergencies, such as immigration (Moffitt, 2015). Regarding this dual nature, several authors have recently highlighted that among the stylistic elements of populist communication (emotional tone, patriotism), one is precisely the *crisis rhetoric*, i.e., portraying a situation of crisis through the use of exaggeration, emergency rhetoric, or the declaration of a scandal (Ernst et al., 2019).

Scholars have also scrutinized the role played by crises during elections from different perspectives. A body of literature has examined the impact of a single crisis or the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises on voting behavior (Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Serani, 2023; Talving, 2017). The evidence suggests that, in such contexts, voters tend to place greater importance on certain distinct factors, such as the valence attributes of political parties, as constituents are more concerned with policy effectiveness (Krebs, 2009), or the competence of leaders in formulating prompt and clear strategies to address the crisis (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Lipsky, 2020). During the decade, from 2010 to 2020, two crises played a major role: the economic crisis and the migration crisis (Mader & Schoen, 2015; Talving, 2018). Longitudinal analyses of electoral outcomes across European countries demonstrate that incumbent parties were penalized by voters when the economy performed poorly, and sometimes the same occurred when immigration levels increased (Giuliani, 2022).

However, as the presence of these (multi-faceted) crises intensified and persisted, researchers shifted their focus toward other consequences, such as the changes in the structure of the party system. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of studies examining the effects of crises on party competition (Charalambous et al., 2021) and political representation (Conti et al., 2018). For instance, Mader and Schoen (2019) analyzed the impact of Chancellor Merkel's shift in the CDU's traditional stance on immigration during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis (which moved from a hostile position to a more pro-immigration one). Studies on the impacts of the economic crises on political representation and party competition have primarily focused on Southern European countries, such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. These studies have examined specific aspects, such as the influence of the economic crisis on the emergence of new political parties or on the policy agendas of existing parties, including anti-elite sentiments and Euroscepticism (Muro & Vidal, 2017), as well as changes in the relationship between government and opposition parties, leading to increased polarization (Giuliani & Massari, 2017; Hutter et al., 2018).

More recently, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, much of the crisis discourse has shifted in this direction. Given the intensity and the global impact of this event, scholars have considered it as a critical juncture that generated consequences on the political landscape, especially on political participation and electoral turnout (e.g., for France see Haute et al., 2021). In Italy, Covid-19 dominated the agenda, at least between 2020 and 2022, and studies have shown its effects on party and coalition dynamics (e.g., the advent of the Draghi government) as well as on electoral competition and on the whole party system (Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022, p. 186).

2.2. The Relation Between Crises and the Responsibility–Responsiveness Paradigm

Two aspects are strongly associated with the notion of crisis: responsibility and responsiveness (Mair, 2009). In times of crisis, indeed, the expectation that political entities demonstrate responsibility is heightened. This concept of responsibility extends beyond mere responsiveness, which refers to complying with popular, short-term demands. It indicates a principled dedication to the long-term welfare of society (Bardi et al., 2014). Responsibility involves actions such as respecting international agreements and fulfilling governmental obligations, even when these actions may not align with the short-term voters' wills (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020; Linde & Peters, 2020). We interpret irresponsibility as a political behavior that neglects this forward-looking principled stance in favor of responsiveness—a focus on meeting current and popular demands, in spite of their long-term consequences.

In our analysis, responsibility and irresponsibility are not mere policy views; instead, they emerge as valence characteristics of political parties and can be particularly relevant in times of crises. Following Green (2007) and Adams et al. (2011), we distinguish between different types of valences. Differently from positional issues, which define peculiar policy preferences of parties and voters, valence issues are defined by their lack of ideological contention, so that almost all parties (and almost all voters) tend to agree on a common standpoint (for instance, fighting corruption or promoting economic growth). Another type of valence is character valences, which concern the overall competence, integrity, and qualities of political entities.

Within this analytical framework, responsibility is identified as a character valence issue, particularly relevant in times of crisis (Karremans, 2021). It represents the expectation that responsible parties will take actions designed to yield benefits in the future and do their best to fulfill past commitments and agreements. When they erupt, crises tend to heighten the focus on responsibility, leading public opinion (at least in the short run) to prefer parties that exhibit such responsibility, thus promoting the country's long-term welfare and stability by making difficult choices to deal with the emergency.

2.3. User Engagement: Relevance and Connection With Crisis and Responsibility

Crises are frequently portrayed in the media (Legnante & Splendore, 2021). Studies have revealed that media exposure had a significant influence on citizens' expectations regarding the development of the crisis (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). Therefore, in various European countries, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse and narratives surrounding a specific crisis (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Recently, there has been an increasing trend among political parties and citizens to engage with each other through various social media platforms (Kalsnes, 2016). Until now, Facebook has been the most widely used platform for electoral campaigns in Italy. All major political parties and their leaders have a large number of followers on this platform (Rullo & Nunziata, 2023) and they exploit Facebook to mobilize their supporters and reach voters. While most parties' followers agree with the party's line, the virality-based dissemination logic of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) allows parties to indirectly spread their messages beyond such users, reaching a broader audience (Bene, 2017). Consequently, parties' communication on Facebook can be specifically designed to stimulate user engagement (Bene et al., 2022). In turn, political parties are more likely to discuss an issue on Facebook if this generates a higher level of user engagement (Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022).

The increasing variety of tools available for Facebook interactions (Eberl et al., 2020) has made user engagement, measured through the number of likes, comments, and shares, a crucial factor. In this regard, studies have shown, for instance, that users are more inclined to engage with posts that address certain topics (Bene et al., 2022), such as immigration and domestic politics, rather than others (the environment and economic issues). Furthermore, the virality of posts on Facebook is influenced by the presence of an emotional communication style (Bobba, 2017). By incorporating an emotional tone and associating it with a real or perceived crisis, parties can try to increase the visibility of their posts. Therefore, during the 2022 election campaign, characterized by various real or alleged crises, parties—especially populist ones—could strategically emphasize crises in their Facebook posts.

3. Hypotheses

Political parties frequently leverage crisis narratives in their communication strategies to influence public opinion. This approach has been particularly evident during the eurozone crisis, when populist parties adopted emotionally charged language to engage with citizens (Redlawsk, 2006). Research indicates that on platforms like Facebook, negative or highly emotional contents, especially when coupled with calls to action, memes, or videos, tend to achieve greater virality in terms of likes, comments, and shares (Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020).

This pattern was clearly observed within European right-wing populist parties during the 2015 migration crisis, which focused public attention on security and immigration issues (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021). The League, for example, persistently framed this topic as a crisis (Colombo, 2018; Richardson & Colombo, 2013), even in the context of other significant global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby sustaining public interest and engagement (Pirro, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic itself had a profound impact on Italy, affecting its economy and healthcare system and prompting then-Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to use Facebook as a direct channel of communication with the public, blending political campaigning with governance (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021). Mario Draghi, who succeeded Conte in early 2021, initially adopted a more informative and less emotionally charged communication style (Amoretti et al., 2021). However, the subsequent Russo-Ukrainian war, and internal disagreements over Italy's response to it, underscored the complexity of crisis management and its implications for public communication and political discourse. These events culminated in Draghi's resignation and a call for early elections in September 2022 (Chiaromonte et al., 2023). This situation highlighted how crisis narratives could dominate political communication, especially when compounded by the socio-economic effects of simultaneous crises, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war and its associated impacts like rising energy costs and inflation.

Given the significant overlap and the deep socio-economic impacts of all these recent or ongoing crises, it is reasonable to anticipate that public sensitivity to how these issues are discussed and proposed to be managed by political entities would be heightened. Indeed, crises are typically defined as events that threaten significant harm to a country's population or to its values and structures, forcing it to make high-stakes political decisions under uncertainty and time pressure (Lipsky, 2020). These elements can perfectly apply to exogenous events as well as to contexts framed as such by politicians using crisis rhetoric. All these three elements, the threat, the uncertainty, and the time pressure (urgency), lead us to understand that citizens should pay stronger attention

to posts framed in terms of crisis. Consequently, on platforms like Facebook, where direct engagement with content is measurable, posts addressing these crises are likely to elicit stronger reactions from users. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Posts referring to crisis are likely to receive higher engagement on Facebook.

Additionally, research has highlighted the tendency of populist parties and their leaders to resort to crisis rhetoric (Ernst et al., 2019) by depicting the country as affected by major troubles and emergencies, emotionalizing and dramatizing their arguments (Wirz et al., 2019). As pointed out by Martella and Bracciale (2022), populism tends to flourish within the communicative openings presented during political and economic crises, especially within the hybrid media system. These elements are particularly accentuated during election campaigns, and often establish a link between crises and populism. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H2: Posts on crisis-related issues are more effective at boosting user engagement when published by populist parties.

In a complex political landscape intertwined with multiple crises during an electoral campaign, the interplay between responsiveness and responsibility holds significant importance. Responsiveness often refers to electoral promises, leading parties to make more irresponsible claims that mirror voters' viewpoints (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020). However, crises can temporarily promote responsibility, compelling governments and ruling parties to abide by rules and international agreements (Karremans, 2021).

As previously mentioned, during crises, voters pay stronger attention to parties' valence attributes, prioritizing policy effectiveness and leaders' competence in handling the crisis (Krebs, 2009; Lipsky, 2020). Given this, it is reasonable to anticipate that citizens would value responsible proposals, suggesting that the party is committed to following the right course of action and doing whatever it takes to overcome the crisis, generating future benefits (even at the expense of present sacrifices) as well as respecting and fulfilling past commitments and agreements. Therefore, a party presenting itself as responsible is expected to gain a more favorable valence (at least in the short run, when the crisis and its rhetoric are putting pressure on political actors), being seen as capable of effectively addressing the crisis by offering long-lasting solutions. Thus, our third hypothesis is:

H3: Crises-related posts conveying messages of responsibility tend to increase user engagement.

4. Data and Variables

We collected and analyzed 4,827 Facebook posts published by the official accounts of 15 Italian parties over the four-week election campaign period, spanning from August 29th to September 25th, 2022. Following a coding scheme developed within the DIGIWorld project, each post was manually analyzed by the authors. We coded the textual content, the first minute of any video, and the linguistic and visual elements of images.

The dependent variable measures *user engagement*, which is the sum of post shares and reactions, excluding comments. Most cases tend to cluster on the lower end of the variable, resulting in a highly skewed distribution.

Given the over-dispersion of this count data, our approach involved employing a longitudinal negative binomial regression with fixed effects by party accounts. This decision was also made because the alternative Poisson model, which limits the conditional variance to match the dependent variable's conditional mean, was excluded due to the variance's greater value than the mean.

Our primary explanatory variable is a dummy variable equal to 1 when a post directly mentions crises or contexts related to crises and equal to 0 otherwise. This includes instances where the term "crisis" is explicitly used, as well as references made to specific and objective ongoing crises (even without mentioning the word "crisis," e.g., the Russo-Ukrainian war) and posts in which parties adopt a crisis rhetoric communication strategy (even in absence of a real exogenous crisis: for instance, if they frame migration flows as an emergency whereas the actual number of immigrants inflow is objectively low). Analogously, this variable also accounts for statements that highlight a crisis claiming that "the incoming Parliament will face multiple emergencies."

The list of independent variables also includes several dummies relating to a series of political topics. These encompass *polity*, addressing institutional and normative facets of politics like laws, structures, and institutions, and *politics*, encompassing procedural aspects such as election forecasts, public opinion, polls, and party campaigning. Furthermore, we included additional dummies representing substantive policy domains linked to recent and current crises: (a) *labor and social policy*, (b) *economy and finance*, (c) *health*, (d) *environment and energy policy*, (e) *domestic and immigration policy*, and (f) *international relations*.

In our dataset, 8.74% of the posts specifically discussed various forms of objective or alleged crises. Overall, several types of crises were mentioned with respect to specific policy issues. Crisis-related posts concerning environmental and energy issues constituted the largest portion, accounting for 5.26% of the total, followed by economic and financial matters (1.86%) and international relations topics (1.47%). Labor and social issues were also represented, making up 1.22% of the total, whereas health-related matters were addressed in 0.80% of the posts, and domestic policy was discussed in 0.68%. Finally, a few posts addressed polity (0.31%) or politics-related aspects (1.02%) rather than specific policy issues.

Four dummies, derived from concepts of "responsibility" and "irresponsibility," are used to test interaction effects with the crisis variable. The first pair of dummies pertains to the fulfillment of government duties (*responsibility-pact*) versus disregarding external constraints and pre-existing commitments (*irresponsibility-pact*). The second pair focuses on the perceived costs associated with the proposed policy reform. A post is coded as responsible when it prioritizes the long-term benefit of the country, even if it necessitates a sacrifice from citizens in the short term (*responsibility-cost*). Conversely, it is coded as irresponsible if it pursues immediate benefits despite the potential for future harm (*irresponsibility-cost*).

Figures 1 and 2 present social media posts identified as explicitly referencing crises, which diverge in their approach to fiscal responsibility and adherence to agreements. Figure 1, from the League party, advocates for immediate fiscal policy relaxation to lift economic pressures on businesses, challenging the balanced budget requirements and suggesting short-term financial flexibility could reduce future unemployment costs. This is marked as *irresponsibility-cost* due to its potential risk to long-term financial stability. In contrast, Figure 2 from MoreEurope criticizes this approach, calling for responsible governance and adherence to fiscal and regulatory commitments during the crisis, highlighting the importance of sustainable policy measures.



++ ENERGIA, LEGA: 30 MILIARDI OGGI PER NON METTERNE 100 DOMANI ++

"Migliaia di aziende rischiano di chiudere, milioni di italiani di rimanere senza lavoro, ma il Pd preferisce tacere o parlare d'altro. Occorre immediatamente uno scostamento da 30 miliardi per evitare di doverne mettere 100 tra qualche mese per pagare cassa integrazione e disoccupazione. Il punto non è se serva fare extra deficit oppure no, ma farne meno oggi per salvare imprese, lavoro e il bilancio stesso de... See more

Figure 1. Example of a post conveying messages of irresponsibility while explicitly referencing a crisis. Source: Lega – Salvini Premier (2022).

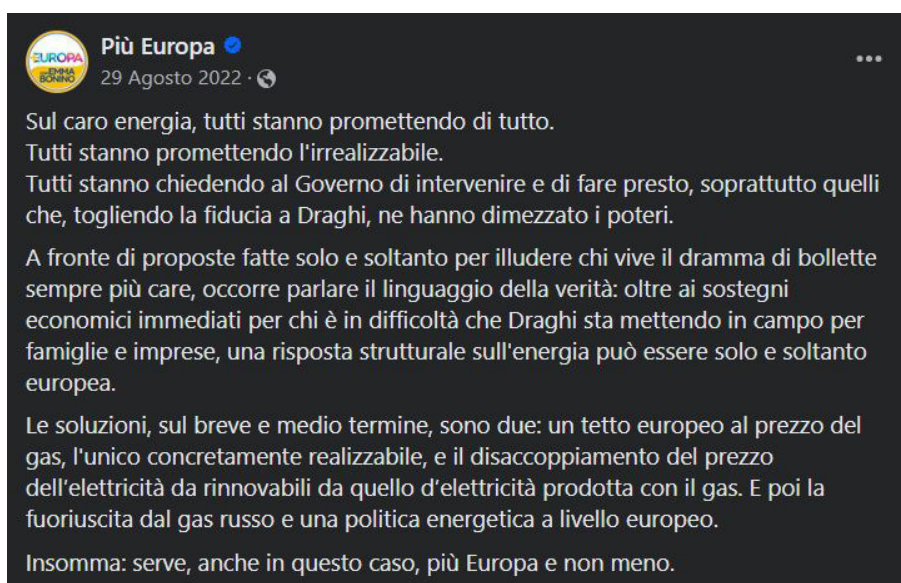


Figure 2. Example of a post criticizing rivals' messages of irresponsibility while explicitly referencing a crisis. Source: Più Europa (2022).

In all models, we control for the negative tone of a post, which is deemed highly relevant by existing studies (for a review see Bene et al., 2022). This approach is driven by the discernible impact of negative versus positive contents, due to the pronounced virality of negative messages (Eberl et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019), since negativity is one of the main elements driving engagement. Defined at the individual post level, our *negativity* variable assigns one of three possible values: -1 for exclusively positive posts that praise the party or its candidates (acclaim), $+1$ for purely negative posts that critique opponents (attack), and 0 for those with a neutral tone, which includes content either lacking any criticism or praise or containing both. Even when differentiating posts that feature a combination of both attack and acclaim from those devoid of either element, the main findings of our analysis remain unchanged. In particular, we notice that the effect of crises holds only for populist parties (as in H2) and the relative benefit of irresponsibility (versus responsibility) vanishes in times of crisis (sending back to H3). Both attack and acclaim include any mention of a candidate's appearance, rhetorical skills, and professional and personal competency, or a party's reputation and integrity, past issue stance, and projected performance. Note that by adding this control, we assess the impact of the crisis, independent of the post's tone.

In addition, we control for the populist style of communication (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). Following Mudde's (2004) definition, we considered three different elements of populist communication, related to the following concepts:

1. **Anti-elitism:** This involves a wide-ranging critique of "the elite" as a unified body. Although we differentiated between sectors of the elite (political, economic and financial, bureaucratic and administrative, media and journalistic, social media, and supranational) and the type of criticism (calling for resistance against the elite, blaming the elite for problems and grievances that the people suffer, accusing the elite of betrayal, and questioning the elite's legitimacy to take any decision), we combined these data into a unique dummy variable. This variable takes the value of 1 for posts that contain criticism against any elite.
2. **People-centrism:** Posts can refer to the collective people in either a political or ethnic sense by distinguishing "the people" from "the elite" and "the others." To identify this category, we looked for phrases like "will of the people," references to "our nation," mentions of "the citizens," etc., or expressions such as advocating for the people, aligning oneself with the people, claiming to represent the people, and so on.
3. **The exclusivity dimension (dangerous others):** This criterion encompasses posts that depict groups—distinct from the elite—as posing a threat to the people or being separate/excluded from the people. These groups can be framed as either political or cultural and ethnic others.

Notice that our results remain the same even if we control for populism through a dummy variable equal to 1 for parties that are commonly deemed populists in the academic literature (i.e., Brothers of Italy [Fdi], the Five Stars Movement [M5S], and the League). Finally, our analysis includes binary control variables for posts containing images, videos, or hyperlinks. Additionally, we account for the days remaining before the election.

5. Statistical Analysis and Results

Before conducting the analysis, we checked intercoder reliability (ICR) on a subsample of 140 posts coded by the three authors. On average, the ICR is high, with a 0.9 Holsti coefficient (the results of the test are

presented in Table 1A of the Supplementary File). The analysis unfolds in two stages. Initially, we delve into the main effect (Model 1 [M1]) and interaction effects (Model 2 [M2]) between crisis and responsibility/irresponsibility (Table 1). Subsequently, we examine the joint impact of crises-related topics and populist parties on our dependent variable (Model 3 [M3] in Table 2).

In M1, we observe that using a crisis framework leads to a positive shift of 0.10 in the differences within the logs of expected reaction counts, while keeping other predictors constant. In line with H1, this suggests that explicit references to crisis have a pronounced impact on users' engagement, increasing it by 10.3%.

Among the four dummies stemming from responsibility and irresponsibility, only *irresponsibility-pact* exhibits a significant positive coefficient in M1, boosting engagement by 26.6%. In M2, however, the negative interaction term indicates that posts adopting a crisis paradigm while disregarding governmental duties towards international bodies tend to generate lower user engagement. This suggests that while irresponsibility alone has a positive effect on engagement, when this strategy is placed in the context of a crisis, its effect becomes no longer statistically significant (M2). If the content conveys a party's inclination towards irresponsibility over honoring external treaties and commitments in a crisis context, Facebook users are less likely to engage with it. Therefore, in the context of a crisis, irresponsibility does not seem a rewarding strategy. In this regard, the findings partially support H3.

Table 2 outlines the marginal effects of the interaction terms in M2. Except for those related to baseline conditions, most interaction terms do not reach statistical significance, with many exhibiting a negative trend.

Table 1. Negative binomial models ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions	
	M1	M2
Crisis		
Explicit reference to crisis	0.10** (0.05)	0.12** (0.06)
Topics		
Polity	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)
Politics	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Economy and finance	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Labor and social issues	0.12*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.04)
Health	0.01 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)
Domestic and immigration policy	0.30*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)
Environmental and energy policy	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
International policy	0.01 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)

Table 1. (Cont.) Negative binomial models ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions	
	M1	M2
Responsibility and irresponsibility		
Irresponsibility–pact	0.24*** (0.07)	0.40*** (0.10)
Irresponsibility–pact * Crisis		−0.31** (0.14)
Responsibility–pact	0.02 (0.09)	0.05 (0.13)
Responsibility–pact * Crisis		−0.08 (0.18)
Irresponsibility–cost	0.06 (0.06)	0.01 (0.08)
Irresponsibility–cost * Crisis		0.10 (0.13)
Responsibility–cost	0.07 (0.07)	0.06 (0.08)
Responsibility–cost * Crisis		0.03 (0.16)
Populism		
Anti-elitism	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
Reference to the people	0.24** (0.10)	0.26** (0.10)
Others as danger	0.21** (0.08)	0.21** (0.08)
Other controls		
Negativity	0.16*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)
Days left to the election	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Image	0.28*** (0.07)	0.28*** (0.07)
Video	0.37*** (0.08)	0.37*** (0.08)
External link	−0.12*** (0.02)	−0.11*** (0.02)
Constant	−0.40*** (0.08)	−0.40*** (0.08)

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses.

However, the marginal effect of referencing the disregard of governmental duties during non-crisis periods (*irresponsibility–pact* = 1, *crisis* = 0) emerges as positively significant, with a magnitude of 0.27 at the 95% confidence level. The corresponding average marginal effect (AME) is 0.40 (standard error of 0.10) and it is significant at the 99% confidence level, while the AME of crisis-related posts published by populist parties is 0.09 (standard error of 0.10) and does not reach significance. This result offers a nuanced interpretation

of the outcome discussed previously. It appears that Facebook users, rather than engaging less with posts referring to irresponsible behavior towards international pacts during crises, tend to engage *more* with posts that convey messages of irresponsibility during *non-crisis* periods. Essentially, the negative coefficient in M2 indicates that non-conformity to governmental duties in calmer times enhances a post's virality.

Table 2. Marginal effects of M2 ($N = 4,827$).

Irresponsibility–pact	Explicit reference to crisis	
	No	Yes
No	−0.14*** (0.02) $n = 4,352$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 53$
Yes	0.27** (0.10) $n = 361$	0.07 (0.10) $n = 61$
Responsibility–pact		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,368$	−0.01 (0.05) $n = 37$
Yes	−0.07 (0.13) $n = 376$	−0.04 (0.12) $n = 46$
Irresponsibility–cost		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,286$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 119$
Yes	−0.12 (0.08) $n = 357$	0.09 (0.10) $n = 65$
Responsibility–cost		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,294$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 111$
Yes	−0.07 (0.08) $n = 389$	0.08 (0.14) $n = 33$

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses; the dependent variable is the number of total reactions to a post.

The second part of the analysis introduces a new variable distinguishing between populist parties—namely FdI, M5S, the League—and mainstream parties, to assess the different effects of references to crises on users' engagement between these two types of parties. Looking at Table 3, we noticed that this strategy works only for populist parties: When a crisis framework is adopted by populist parties, these posts generate more user engagement (+24.6%, average marginal effect of 0.22 with a standard error of 0.06, which is significant at the 99%), whereas crises-related posts published by mainstream parties do not boost engagement (the average marginal effect is −0.01 with a standard error of 0.06, but it is not significant).

Concerning the responsibility/irresponsibility posts, like what we observed in M1 and M2, the only relevant effect is the one related to *irresponsibility–pact*. In M3 we observe its direct effect on users' engagement, which is positive and significant (+25.7% of engagement).

The behavior of the other independent variables remains consistent across all models. Notably, *labor and social issues*, as well as *domestic policy*, exhibit significant impacts on user reactions, net of any crisis-related framework. This outcome suggests that citizens show greater responsiveness to the primary leftist theme

of the labor market and the populist right's championing of the migration issue. While posts emphasizing environmental and energy policies, issues related to the healthcare sector, and international relations do not significantly mobilize voters on social networks.

Table 3. Negative binomial models distinguishing for populist parties ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions
	M3
Explicit reference to crisis	-0.01 (0.06)
Populist parties	-0.27*** (0.04)
Crisis # Populist parties	0.23*** (0.08)
Topics	
Polity	-0.07 (0.07)
Politics	-0.00 (0.03)
Economy and finance	0.00 (0.04)
Labor and social issues	0.10** (0.04)
Health	-0.01 (0.08)
Domestic and immigration policy	0.29*** (0.05)
Environmental and energy policy	-0.03 (0.04)
International policy	0.00 (0.06)
Responsibility and Irresponsibility	
Irresponsibility-pact	0.23*** (0.08)
Responsibility-pact	0.04 (0.09)
Irresponsibility-cost	0.08 (0.06)
Responsibility-cost	0.06 (0.07)
Populism	
Anti-elitism	0.07 (0.06)
Reference to the people	0.25** (0.10)
Others as danger	0.18** (0.08)

Table 3. (Cont.) Negative binomial models distinguishing for populist parties ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions
	M3
Other controls	
Negativity	0.15*** (0.03)
Days left to the election	0.00 (0.00)
Image	0.26*** (0.07)
Video	0.30*** (0.08)
External link	-0.12*** (0.02)
Constant	-0.19** (0.08)

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses.

In addition, populist elements, such as depicting others as a danger and appealing to the people, increase the engagement (and thus the virality) of a post. These findings are in line with previous research highlighting the efficacy of populist rhetoric in mobilizing users on social networks (Bene et al., 2022; Bobba, 2017).

In line with the existing literature, the variable negativity boosts user engagement. Since positive values of the variable mean strategies of attack and negative campaigning, this finding indicates that switching from a more positive tone to a more negative one increases the engagement. This is consistent with a broad body of literature demonstrating the mobilizing power of negativity on social media (Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020).

Finally, both photos and videos engage users more, while the presence of an external link reduces the engagement.

6. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that Facebook posts containing explicit reference to crisis or contents framed with a crisis rhetoric are associated with higher levels of user engagement. This result is unsurprising, as citizens pay particular attention to emergencies, monitoring how different political parties position themselves vis-à-vis various crises. When it comes to policy issues, net of being referenced in terms of crisis, only two macro-categories of policies affect user engagement: labor and social issues as well as domestic policy. Surprisingly, data show no significant effect when posts refer to other topics that have been at the center of the political discussion throughout the campaign (e.g., health issues, environment, international policy). This finding, however, is in line with Borgnino and Palma (2023), who found that parties did not significantly adjust their election pledges on such issues.

Having said that, overall posts with content that explicitly refers to crises do engage users more, even if such effect seems a conditional one. First of all, by distinguishing between populist parties (League, Fdl, M5S) and

their mainstream counterparts, we observed that posts with a crisis framework boost the engagement levels solely for populist parties. This suggests that populist parties are better suited to elicit positive audience reactions through crisis-driven narratives, a finding that aligns with extensive research on populist communication strategies. This finding confirms the pivotal role of crisis narratives in the digital strategy of populists.

Furthermore, references to crises also moderate the impact of communication strategies aimed at proposing “responsible” or “irresponsible” political actions (Karremans, 2021). While irresponsible pledges seem overall attractive for the Facebook audience (thus increasing the engagement), we noticed that making such irresponsible pledges is no longer a rewarding strategy in the context of a crisis. As such, we can argue that, in a crisis context, voters are less willing to express positive reactions to posts advocating irresponsible political behaviors. In summary, if being responsible is less rewarding than being irresponsible, this difference vanishes during a crisis. This insight reveals a novel dimension in the study of responsible versus irresponsible governance during crises, indicating that a responsible behavior ceases to be a disadvantage (compared to irresponsible claims made by rival parties).

Future research in this area could delve deeper into the audience’s reactions to responsible versus irresponsible political actions in other settings. This would help to determine whether the observed tendency of Italian Facebook users to engage more with posts conveying irresponsible messages, in the absence of explicit crisis references, represents a unique phenomenon. By comparing the communication strategies of populist and mainstream parties across different countries, researchers could uncover both universal patterns and country-specific distinctions in the impact of crisis-driven narratives. In this regard, other studies could further investigate to what extent populists’ communication strategies are rewarding (or not) for non-populist parties. Additionally, future research could assess crisis narratives within specific policy domains (e.g., health, environment, immigration). These insights could help political parties and policymakers to develop more nuanced and effective communication strategies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

To have access to the data contact the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors.

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