

Crowds and smiles: Visual opportunity structures and European political leaders' communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic

Moreno Mancosu
(**University of Turin, Collegio Carlo Alberto**),

Gaetano Scaduto
(**University of Milan-Bicocca**)

SISP Conference 2023
University of Genoa
September 15th, 2023

The Visual Opportunity Structure

Hypotheses

Data and methods

Results

Discussion

Toward a conceptualization of the Visual Opportunity Structure

Political communication through visuals

- ▶ Pictures of a candidate influence likelihood to be voted (Rosenberg et al., 1986)
- ▶ The effect is mediated by the presence of smiles and positive emotionalization (Barrett and Barrington. 2005; Masch et al., 2021)
- ▶ The visual element stimulate emotional responses and persist in long-term memory (Grabe and Bucy, 2009; Lilleker, 2019)

Two popular visual features of political communication

- ▶ **Emotionalization**: usually in a positive direction through smiling pictures published in social networks (Sampietro, 2020; Bast, 2021; Farkas and Bene, 2021)
- ▶ The **crowd archetype**: the depiction of the crowd is an attempt to decrease the distance between the leader and their followers. Especially employed during campaign trails (Dobkiewicz, 2019; Haim and Jungblut, 2021)

The VOS argument 1/2

- ▶ The **Visual Opportunity Structure** (VOS) concept derives from the framework of the political and discursive opportunity structure (**POS** and **DOS**)
 - ▶ The capacity to mobilize citizens around a specific topic is partly due to the **constraints and opportunities** that characterize a given political, institutional, and media system (McCammon, 2013)
- ▶ Politicians have to deal with the legitimacy and the appropriateness of their claims, in a similar way with respect to less influential political actors (De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021; Koopmans and Muis, 2009)

The VOS argument 2/2

- ▶ Previous literature has investigated the effects of inappropriateness of politicians' reactions (Bucy, 2000)
 - ▶ Audiences react with negative emotions and lower evaluations of leaders' traits (credibility and trustworthiness)
- ▶ The VOS approach argues that *the visual strategies of political actors are conditioned by what is considered as **socially and politically appropriate** in a given moment, by a given audience*

Peculiarities of visual political communication

Visual elements in political communication present two theoretical differences that must be taken into account

- ▶ Visual political communication is **not strictly political**
 - ▶ In order to understand the possible changes of visual strategy, elements that do not present a strictly political meaning must also be taken into account (Bast, 2021)
- ▶ Images are **not path-dependent**
 - ▶ Political actors tend to pass in a relatively easy way from images that tackle serious issues to scenes in which they are portrayed in a private/informal setting (Haim and Jungblut, 2021)

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic

▶ **Quantitative effects:**

- ▶ Social media were used more and greater attention was given to profiles of politicians (Trevisan et al., 2021)
- ▶ The number of hours spent on social media rose, but the number of likes almost halved (Trevisan et al., 2021)

▶ **Qualitative effects**

- ▶ Pictures of social occasions become rare in lockdown time (Nabity-Grover et al., 2020)
- ▶ It has become normal to share health information on social media (Nabity-Grover et al., 2020)

During the lockdown, posts containing neutral or positive emotionalizations were found to be more relevant on Instagram than negative ones (Rafi et al. 2020)

Hypotheses

Hypothesis #1

- ▶ According with the VOS framework, we expect that the impact of the pandemic on political leaders' social communication will be far from neutral
- ▶ The **appropriateness** of positive emotionalizations by political leaders would produce a dissonance in a moment in which hundreds of people die everyday because of the virus

The first hypothesis will thus read as follows

H1. The likelihood of portraying positive emotionalization in politicians' images decreases in the post-pandemic period, with respect to the pre-pandemic one

Hypothesis #2

- ▶ The transmission of the virus is based on short-range aerosol
- ▶ The institutional reaction has been that of dramatically limiting the possibility for people to participate in **crowded events**.
- ▶ This change causes the shrinking of the opportunity of depicting the “crowd visual archetype”

We thus hypothesize the following:

H2. The likelihood of portraying crowds in politicians' images decreases in the post-pandemic period, with respect to the pre-pandemic one

Hypothesis #3/4

- ▶ The COVID pandemic is not a single event, but rather a dynamic process that has been depicted, pretty efficiently, in **waves**
- ▶ We expect that political actors will behave consistently with the expansion/reduction of the dangers caused by COVID-19

The third and fourth hypotheses thus reads as follows:

H3. The likelihood of portraying positive emotionalization in politicians' images decreases in times when the pandemic hits harder, with respect to the inter-wave periods.

H4. The likelihood of portraying groups and crowds in politicians' images decreases in times when the pandemic hits harder, with respect to the inter-wave periods.

Hypothesis #5/6

- ▶ As the literature argues, government officials tend to be more careful in choosing communication strategies.
- ▶ If the VOS argument is correct, we argue that politicians in government will be **less likely to publish inappropriate content**, especially in moments in which the pandemic waves are at their peak.
- ▶ Actors in government will be **quicker and more radical** in avoiding problematic visual elements in their communication.

The fifth and sixth hypotheses thus read as follows:

H5. The effects hypothesized in H1 and H3 will be stronger for government politicians with respect to opposition leaders.

H6. The effects hypothesized in H2 and H4 will be stronger for government politicians with respect to opposition leaders.

Data and Methods

Data and methods

- ▶ We test our hypotheses using a dataset including all posts published by over **150 political leaders** from the 27 EU countries and UK, from March 1, 2019, to December 31, 2021 and employing automatic image and emotional recognition algorithms. In total, **72,652** observations were collected
- ▶ We have employed **image recognition algorithms (Microsoft Azure Computer Vision API & Face API)** to recognize the positive emotionalization of the image and the presence of the crowd archetype
- ▶ We linked every leader account on Instagram with party-level information obtained by the data infrastructure **ParlGov**
- ▶ We have added variables that trace the **daily situation of the pandemic** in every national context and in the EU.

We derive from the automatic visual recognition our two dependent variables

- ▶ A first variable measures **positive emotionalization** by recognizing smiling faces in the image
- ▶ The second dependent variable depicts the presence of the **crowd archetype**

These have been both coded as dichotomous variables

Data and methods

We test our four hypotheses by fitting four multilevel models, with posts nested into leaders' accounts

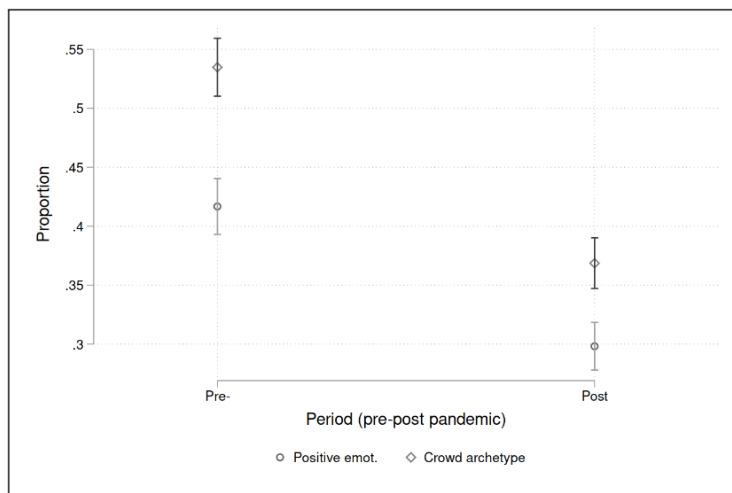
- ▶ Models 1 and 2 (H1, H2):
 - ▶ Dependent variables: positive emotionalization and crowd archetype
 - ▶ Independent variable: pre-/post-pandemic dummy
 - ▶ Control variables: left-right placement of the leader's party, strength of the party in the most recent national election, weekend dummy, country fixed-effect
- ▶ Models 3 and 4 (H3, H4):
 - ▶ Dependent variables: positive emotionalization and crowd archetype
 - ▶ Independent variables: a set of dummies that indicate the month in which the post is published
 - ▶ Control variables: same as above

- ▶ Models 5,6,7,8 (H5, H6):
 - ▶ The same as the above four models, but with an **interaction** between the relevant independent variable (pre-post pandemic period or month of publication) and **a dummy indicating if the actor belongs to a government vs opposition party** (in the moment of the publication of the post).

Results

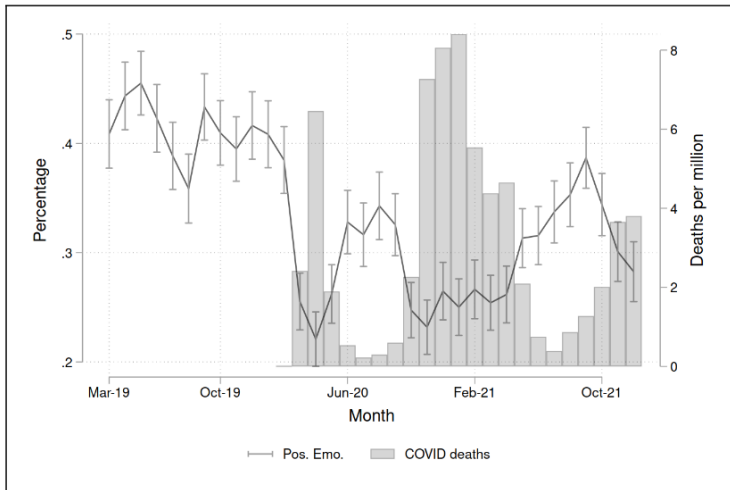
Results

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization/crowd archetype (pre-post pandemic - Table 1 coefficients)



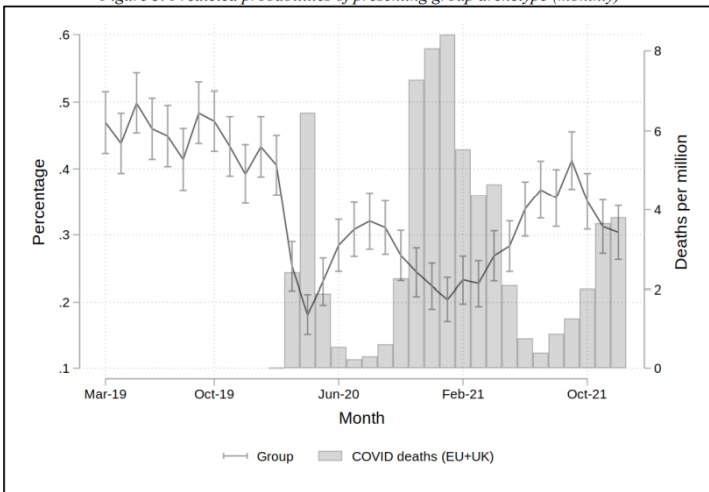
Results

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization (monthly - Table 2 coefficients)



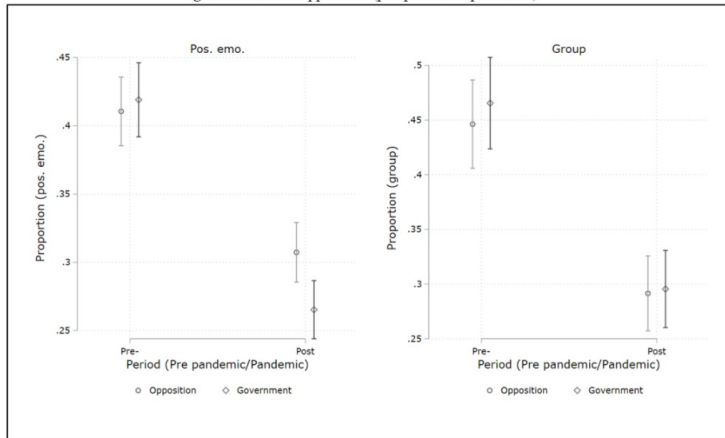
Results

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of presenting group archetype (monthly)



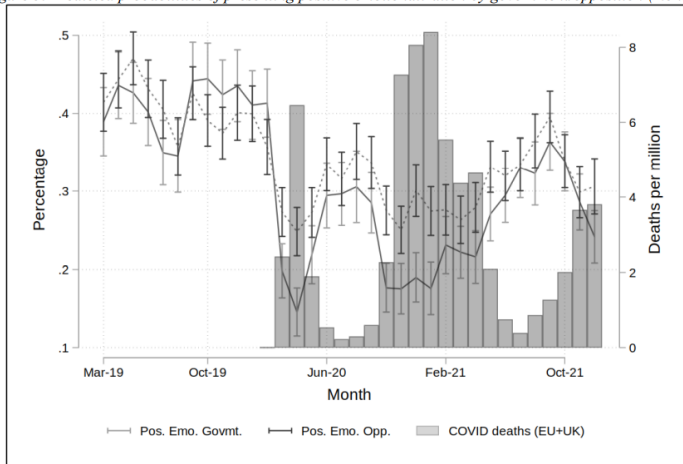
Results

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization (right panel) and group archetype by government and opposition (pre-pandemic/pandemic)



Results

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of presenting positive emotionalization by government/opposition (monthly)



Discussion

Discussion

- ▶ Consistently with the VOS argument, the pre/post-pandemic difference in the employment positive emotionalization and crowd archetype in the images published on Instagram are quite big (between 10 and 16 points overall)
- ▶ During the moments in which the pandemic hits harder, the number of published smiles and crowds reduces sensibly in all the three waves that have been taken into account
- ▶ If we look at the pre-pandemic period, we see that those features are roughly stable during the whole year before the COVID-19 outbreak. This evidence comforts us that the trend is hardly due to a seasonality effect

- ▶ **Government politicians are more careful than the opposition in portraying positive emotionalization** during the pandemic, especially during its most dramatic period. This difference does not apply to the group archetype.
 - ▶ The result is probably due to the different meanings that the two features have: positive emotionalization represents a feature connected to **inappropriateness**; using group archetype, in some countries and specific moments, might even be connected to **illegal activities**

Thank you!

For any comment, reach out at
moreno.mancosu@unito.it
g.scaduto2@campus.unimib.it