The Personalisation of Politics in the Age of Social Media: What Risks for European Democracy?

by Andrea Capati

Social media have become the main instrument of political communication in European democracies, so much so that many have heralded the beginnings of a communication revolution, a historical transition from the "age of television" to the "age of social media".[1] The widespread use of social media in politics has changed the character of public discourse and provided political leaders with unprecedented means to influence public opinion. In this sense, social media have impacted the modalities of interaction between citizens and political leaders, in turn influencing the very functioning of democracy.

While television fosters a public discourse that is overloaded, image-oriented, unilateral and static (as the political message flows from political leaders straight to the audience), social media promote a discourse that is simple, impact-oriented, multilateral and dynamic (as the political message flows from political leaders to users, who can then share it, comment on it and provide feedback to the leader). In other words, from passively absorbing political messages through television, citizens are now taking on more active roles in sharing information thanks to social media.

The growing role of social media in our societies has reshaped the way in which political life is conducted, inevitably posing some challenges to democracy. On the one hand, social media are conducive to a more transparent and horizontal governance. They strengthen accountability and require political leaders to defend their policies not only through traditional institutional channels but also directly with their electorate.

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[1] Brian L. Ott, "The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement", in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2016), p. 66.

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In this sense, social media provide for an unmediated relationship between political leaders and citizens. The online messages of leaders instantly reach millions of people, and are in turn read and shared in a never-ending flux of posts. Anyone can join this interaction at no cost and with no restrictions. As a result, social and political hierarchies fade, as everyone appears to be on the same level, and people sense they can openly make their voice heard in the public debate.

On the other hand, by often requiring simplicity, social media risks undermining our capacity for abstraction, discussion, elaboration and ultimately comprehension – that is to say, our capacity to deal with complex phenomena, which is what politics is all about. In this respect, some have talked about "smoke signals" by referring to "a communication technology whose form excludes complex content such as philosophical argument".[2] For instance, the practice of *linking* – posting links to articles, images, videos, etc. – continuously shifts users' attention and paves the way for the "distracted mind".[3]

At the same time, the growing focus by social media on every aspect of political life is dramatically altering the speed of politics, thus increasing the workload of political leaders. Not only do political leaders need to get on with their political agenda; now, they are also urged to constantly preserve their image and to be accountable via the web. This may result in poor decisions as political leaders fail to live up to increased public scrutiny and the growing pace of politics.

In the age of social media, European democracies have experienced the emergence of a new, personalised form of politics.[4] Social media have contributed to such personalisation in two main respects. First, they have (further) shifted the focus of elections from political platforms to the personal qualities of leaders. To this effect, social media constitute a formidable instrument for leaders to promote their public image, consolidate the link with their political supporters and discredit political rivals in front of incredibly wide audiences. In short, election campaigns and voters' preferences largely rest on who the candidates *are* rather than on what they *think*.

Second, social media have weakened political parties and their function as intermediaries between political leaders and citizens, reducing their policy-making influence. As voters grow unconstrained by stable party loyalties in the age of social media, the electoral appeal of individual political leaders is what really makes the difference. To be competitive, political leaders must increasingly resort to their reputation, network of supporters and communication skills rather than to party organisation. For these very

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[2] Ibid., p. 60; Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, New York, Penguin Books, 1985.

[3] Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind. Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016.

[4] The concept of "personalisation" has been adopted, *inter alia*, by McAllister, "The Personalization of Politics", in Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 571-588.

reasons, they are conferred a sort of personalised legitimacy that allows them to exercise full control over their parties and, in case of electoral success, to govern *past their parties*.[5]

In Italy, for instance, social media have led to the definitive personalisation of politics. The emergence of the "personal party" in Italy owes much to media-mogul and former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia party, which featured a leader dominating over a weak organisational structure, and relied on Berlusconi's TV stations for its communications strategy and electoral campaigns.

With the advent of social media, the relationship between party leaders and citizens has become even more straightforward. For instance, through its blog and websites, Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) has promoted its own idea of a bottom-up democracy, based on a direct relationship between citizens and the government. The so-called *web democracy* puts the Internet at the centre of new forms of direct and participatory democracy, opposing the traditional mechanisms of political representation based on institutions and parties. This poses a serious challenge to representative democracy, making political delegation pretentiously unnecessary.

What is more, this social media-induced personalisation of politics is by no means confined to Europe. US President Donald J. Trump has also mastered social media's communication potential by putting simplicity at the service of politics. His language and style perfectly fit the underlying logic of social media. For this reason, he was able to cultivate and elevate his celebrity status to win electoral support. Trump often acted in politics as if he were in a reality TV show, and found in Twitter a valuable springboard for the promotion of his personal image.

Worryingly, if the effects of personalisation extend from the electoral and party contexts to the decision-making process, a shift towards "plebiscitary" models of democracy may occur. A plebiscitary democracy is one in which governmental power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader that is elected by citizens and maintains a direct relationship with them.[6] Plebiscitary democracies bring political leaders and citizens into an unmediated relationship, weakening the principles of representative government.

These risks are particularly manifest in Europe, where the governmental pattern does not feature any institutional separation of powers. Unlike the United States, where different governmental institutions are politically independent and often compete amongst one another, European democracies all

[5] Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, "The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis", in Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (eds), *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 22.

[6] Sergio Fabbrini, *America and its Critics: Virtues and Vices of the Democratic Hyperpower*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2008, p. 20.

present governmental systems based on a fusion of powers, whereby the prime minister also controls the legislature through his/her parliamentary majority. If unconstrained, such a drift towards plebiscitary democracies could well lead to authoritarianism consolidated without violence and checked only by the necessity of an election every few years.

The challenge posed by personalised politics in an age of social media requires effective institutional constraints on political leadership. European democracies live on checks and balances and institutional counterweights such as bicameral legislatures, the federal or regional distribution of state powers, open and plural party systems, competitive and fair elections, the presence of an independent judiciary and the rigidity of several constitutional provisions. Such counterweights need to be preserved and consolidated if representative forms of democracy are to survive.

Strong and sound politics in a strong and sound European democracy are only possible through equally strong and sound institutions and institutional constraints. In the words of Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, "nothing is possible without men: nothing is lasting without institutions".[7] European citizens and political leaders alike would do better to follow this statement and embrace it as a warning against the risks posed by the growing

personalisation of politics as we move deeper into the age of social media and the technological revolution.

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[7] Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, London, Collins, 1978, p. 304-305.

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