Strategic Use of Social Media by Political Parties: Evidence from Italy

by Eugenio Levi | Federico Boffa | Steven Stillman | Giacomo Battiston | Libera Università di Bolzano | Libera Università di Bolzano | Libera Università di Bolzano | Rockwool Foundation Berlin

We investigate how politicians in Italy strategically use news events and political communication to increase their support in the electorate. Using machine-learning techniques, we extract events about immigration and the economy from newswires. We then test a causal chain connecting events, online political communication, salience of particular cleavages, and support for parties measured with individual voting intentions data, with a specific focus on communication by populist anti-immigration politicians. We identify the impact of communication on polls by leveraging high-frequency communication data and variation in the 4G exposure of Italian municipalities as a shock to the accessibility of political communication online. In addition, we measure the relevance of such effects in explaining support for parties by calibrating a structural model of political competition informed by the relationships uncovered by our reduced-form analysis. We use the model to evaluate (i) a counterfactual scenario where political parties compete in the absence of communication events, and (ii) where parties cannot affect migration salience with communication. Comparing these counterfactual scenarios to the baseline support for anti-immigration parties, we show that immigration communication has a much larger importance than immigration events in explaining the support for these parties.