

Populist and Popular?

Tracking Citizen Interest in Anti-Establishment Parties with Google Trends

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Background

In recent years, support for populist anti-establishment parties has soared across the European Union. Established news media organisations tend to cover populist groups less than 'mainstream' parties and typically characterise them as 'protest' or 'fringe' parties [1]. This increases the importance of the internet for populist groups for communicating with potential voters. Given that search engines remain the main channel for gathering online information for most internet users [2], it is important to understand how voters in different democratic contexts search for information on populist parties, their leaders and policies. This can help to distinguish between genuine transnational trends and local factors in the rise of populist movements, which at first might look like a fairly homogeneous European phenomenon.

Research questions

To understand how voters search for information about populist parties in different EU countries, this study addressed three main questions:

1. Are anti-establishment parties more or less popular on search engines than 'mainstream' parties and their leaders?
2. Are voters more likely to search more for information on populist parties or their charismatic leaders?
3. Do searches about populist parties appear to supplement or challenge traditional mass media coverage in elections?

Method

This study focused on a three-month period (March-May) during the **2014 European Parliament (EP) election**, comparing key search trends for information about the **UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom** – a Euro-sceptic country – and the **Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy** – a Europhile country where popular opposition to the Euro has grown in recent years. UKIP has a more traditional party structure, while M5S relies on online 'meet-ups' and e-campaigning. However, both these parties have charismatic leaders (ex-investment banker Nigel Farage and ex-comedian Beppe Grillo) and formed a joint group at the EP. While UKIP won the biggest number of seats in the UK, M5S suffered a serious setback in 2014, losing over three million votes compared to the 2013 Italian parliament election.

Key search trends for UKIP, M5S and their leaders were explored with **Google Trends** [3]. This is a free application that shows how likely Google users were to search for information on specific topics, events or people over a given time period generating scores between zero (least likely/no searches) and 100 (most likely). Fluctuations in search popularity on Google.co.uk and Google.it were compared to a timeline of key campaign events, news coverage and search trends for 'mainstream' parties and leaders.

Results

1. Anti-establishment parties were more popular on both Google.co.uk and Google.it than 'mainstream' parties

Throughout the period analysed for this study, Google users were

Results (continued)

more likely to search for information on UKIP and M5S than any other political parties in the United Kingdom and Italy respectively. This trend, which became stronger as election day approached in each country (22 and 25 May respectively), resonated with the 'underdog' status of UKIP and M5S that may reasonably prompt voters to look online for information on lesser-known parties.

2. TV appearances by leaders were key drivers of search

This was perhaps expected for the UK, where radio and TV debates took place between Farage and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on 26 March and 2 April, and were linked to an increase in news media coverage for UKIP (Figures 1 and 4).



Figure 1 – The Farage v Clegg debate that aired on BBC on 2 April 2014. Such media appearances seemed to be linked to an increase in search queries relating to both Farage and UKIP. Data collected from the Nexis database also showed that newspaper coverage of the party peaked in the aftermath of Farage's appearances on programmes such as BBC Question Time (8 May).

In contrast, this was a **watershed moment for M5S in Italy**. Unlike the 2013 Italian parliament election, when Grillo outperformed all other party leaders on Google.it without taking part in any TV programmes, in 2014 **nearly all the main search 'peaks' for key M5S figures occurred in conjunction with their TV appearances** (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 – Search popularity of M5S and its key politicians on Google.it (March-May 2014)

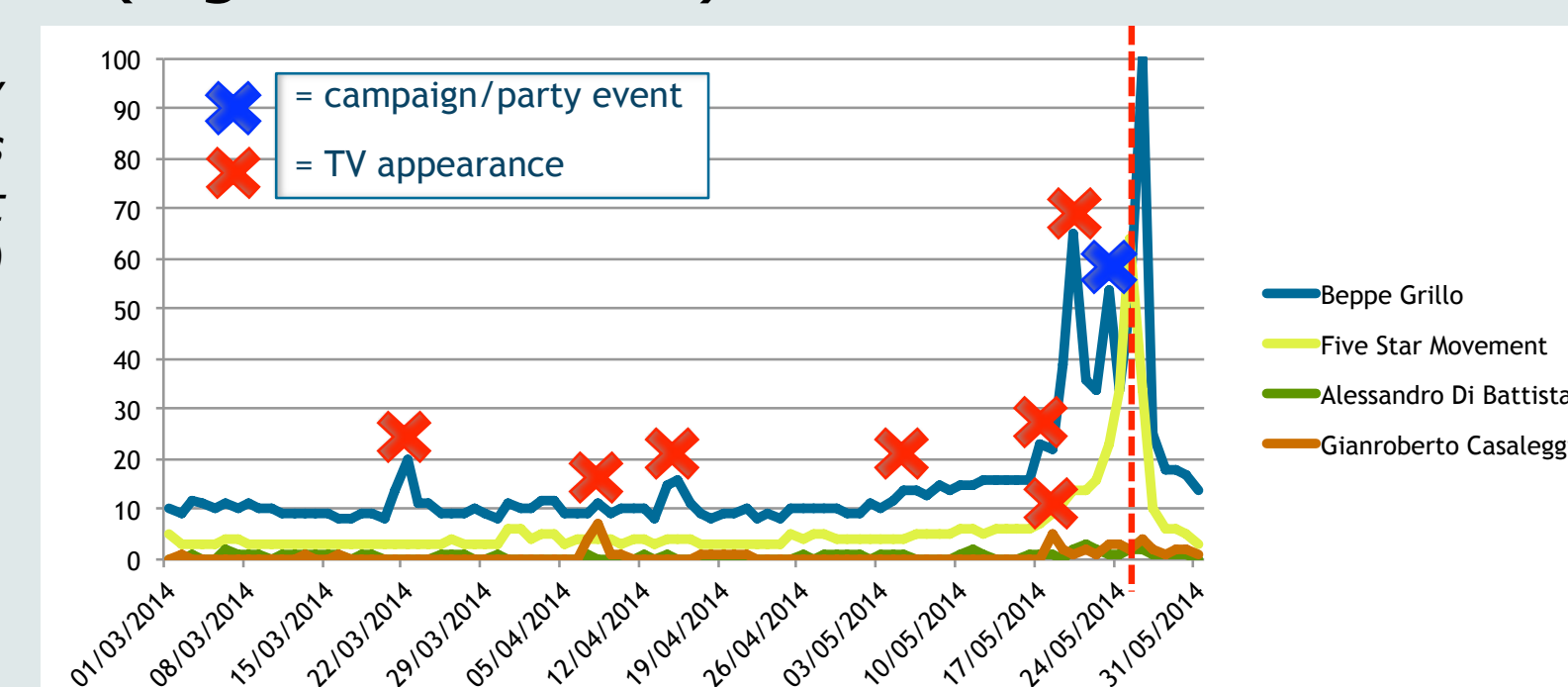


Figure 3 – Beppe Grillo during RAI's flagship political talk-show 'Porta a Porta' on 19 May 2014. This reversed M5S's long-standing decision to disengage from traditional mass media, with key figures taking part in several extended televised interviews during the 2014 EP election campaign. This change of strategy, which admittedly sought to 'reach new audiences', highlighted the limitations generated by online-only election campaigns.

These results appeared at odds with the supposed tendency for M5S supporters to distrust established Italian media due to their closeness to traditional parties and use the internet as an alternative rather than complementary source. M5S seemed to no longer be 'in control' of the search agenda among Google users, 'normalising' its relationship with the news media in such a way that could threaten its image as a radically innovative party.

3. Personality trumped party in Italian searches, while party trumped personality in the United Kingdom

While both Farage and Grillo appeared to generate more interest than any other key figures in their respective parties, British voters

Results (continued)

tended to search for UKIP as a whole rather than its leader, who was in front only during the debates with Clegg (Figure 4). This suggested that **UKIP may be finally shedding its image as a 'one man band'**. However, it should be noted that no other UKIP politician generated a Search Volume Index during this period.

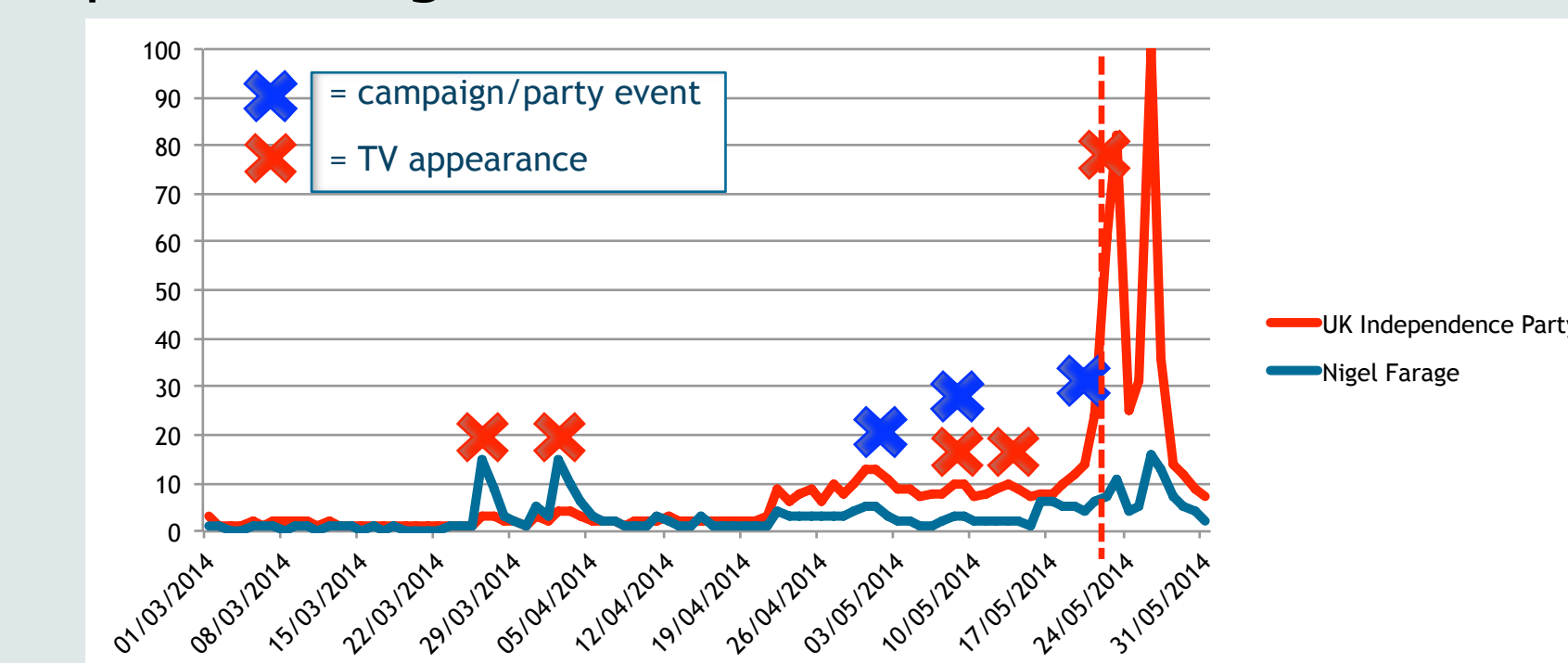


Figure 4 – Search popularity of UKIP and Farage on Google.co.uk (March-May 2014)

Italian Google users focused on Grillo (Figure 2), suggesting that they **continued to view M5S as a 'personal party'**. This **resonated with Italian news media reports**, as data from Nexis indicated that Italian newspapers regularly used Grillo's name in lieu of his party.

4. Searches for information about electoral policies varied greatly between these countries

The top 10 terms used in searches about UKIP included 'manifesto' and 'policies'. This suggested an interest among British Google users to engage with thematic information on the EU-UK relationship instead of focusing, for example, on the many gaffes made by UKIP candidates during the 2014 campaign, which did not feature among the most popular associated search terms.

In contrast, M5S policies, despite including bold proposals such as a referendum on Eurozone membership, starkly underperformed on Google.it. Users were much more likely to search for information about domestic issues such as the electoral reform ('Italicum') and tax cuts proposed by Italy's new prime minister Matteo Renzi.

Conclusion

- Populist parties appear to generate much more search interest than mainstream parties in the UK and Italy;
- However, these parties, including those like M5S that experimented successfully with innovative online-only campaign formats in the recent past, continue to need television coverage, which threatens their control over communications;
- Searches for populist parties in the EU appear to be strongly influenced by the national political and media context; for example, Italians tend to search for Grillo over M5S following the 'personal party' model introduced by Berlusconi and reinforced by media framing [4];
- Users engage with EU policies in a Euro-sceptic context, while in a typically Europhile country they appear more interested in domestic issues.

References

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