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Italian politicians and racialized language on social media: The norming effect on racial attitudes and behaviors towards immigrants

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Introduction

Between 2002 and 2011, over 3.5 million non-citizens immigrated to Italy (International and internal migration, 2013). While there has been a decreasing trend in the number of incoming immigrants since the peak in 2007 (over 500,000), there were still over 119,000 migrants who came to Italy in 2017 (International and internal migration, 2013; International and internal migration, 2017; Operational Portal Refugee Situations, 2017). So far in 2018, over 18,000 immigrants have landed in Italy (Operational Portal Refugee Situations, 2018). Due to Italy’s geographic location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, it is the first location to feel the waves of migration and has become the unofficial gateway for refugees and economic immigrants fleeing to Europe. As expected, these continuous waves of incoming immigrants have sparked conflicts and resentment, and those attitudes are reflected in Italians’ conversations (Pagliai, 2009) with one another on social media. While immigrants and refugees do not necessarily leave their homelands in synonymous situations, those who display a visible racial difference from the native Italian population, they are frequently treated similarly in cultural practice and the situation of refugee is conflated with that of the migrant into a generic “other.”

For centuries, Italy’s national identity has framed itself as white and catholic. The recent arrival of refugees and migrants who are neither of those has created a social panic (Orton 2011a, 2011b). Italy’s new identity as a multicultural society began approximately at the same time that social media became widely used in the country, especially once Facebook opened to everyone in 2006 (Facebook expansion, 2006). Thus, Italy’s burgeoning multiethnic society is an ideal test case for examining the social impact of politicians’ racialized language in social media.

Methodology

In order to determine if there is a correlation between the new Italian government’s racialized language and hate crimes in Italy, I examined the Facebook posts of two Italian politicians: Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. These specific two leaders were selected in particular due to their positions as head of their respective parties, Movimento 5 Stelle and La Lega respectively, and because they are two of the key players that swung the March 4, 2018 elections dramatically from the center to the right (Hughes, 2018; Italian elections, 2018). Their Facebook posts over a one-year period (March 4, 2017 – Feb. 27, 2018) were gathered into a corpus by adapting a preexisting Facebook scraper computer program (Woolfe, 2016). The derogatory/pejorative terms used in these posts were then analyzed for the individual word frequencies and the total number of different Facebook posts in which these words appear. While Salvini and Di Maio seem to use racially associated words with roughly the same frequency (396 times for Salvini and 363 for Di Maio), I evaluated how each word was used in order to determine if they truly were being used in racial contexts. To do this, I read each individual post to determine if the words accounted for were, in fact, racial in nature.

Discussion
From the word frequencies alone, it is clear that Matteo Salvini uses pejorative language more frequently than Luigi Di Maio when referring to racial topics as seen in his use of more derogatory terms such as “marrochini” (‘Moroccans’ – culturally used to communicate ‘dishonest’) and “neri” (‘Blacks’- culturally more equivalent to the n-word in America).

Since the formation of Italy’s new government on June 1, 2018, Salvini has wasted no time as the new interior minister in cracking down on immigration, as he had promised before the election. By closing off Italy’s ports to ships carrying refugees and immigrants from Africa, as well as publicly condemning the nations of the European Union for their lack of assistance over the years with immigration, Salvini has been the face of Italian news sites.

Due to Salvini’s overwhelming presence in the media, any news about politically-motivated violence towards immigrants or other hate crimes have been more difficult to find without some digging. A handful of incidents involving non-white immigrants have occurred in the few weeks following the new government’s formation. In Isernia, located north of Naples and east of Rome, a “casa per rifugiati” (‘house for refugees’) was set on fire and two Nigerian immigrants were shot in Latina Scalo (Migranti, a Isernia, 2018; Latina, colpi pistola, 2018). While these factors suggest that there are more incidents that have occurred, these are just two that have occurred in the second week of July alone.

However, incidents involving immigrants in Italy have also been found where the non-white immigrants are the perpetrators of violence. The practice of the Italian news media is to focus on the ethnic origins of the perpetrator sends the clear message that race is a contributing factor to the criminal incident. Regardless of whether or not the immigrants are the victims or the perpetrators of violence, the media’s tendency to points out the race of any non-white person involved while simply commenting on the age of a white person involved reflects the cultural and racial attitudes present in Italy. This kind of reporting suggests that ethnicity is a motivating factor behind the violence. While data is insufficient to accurately assess whether or not there has been a definitive increase in hate crimes against immigrants in Italy post-election, it is worth noting that there have already been several recorded violent instances in the few weeks since the current Italian government was formed.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings of the use of inflammatory, and sometimes derogatory, racialized language of Matteo Salvini and the violent incidents involving immigrants in the few weeks following the formation of the new Italian government, appear to be correlated. While the data and analyses are insufficient to determine causation with certainty, there are similarities between the current events and previous findings involving the Italian government in 2008 and in the year following Donald Trump’s election in 2016 in the United States (Everyday Intolerance, 2011; Williams, 2017). In each of those incidents, anti-immigration and inflammatory racial language was prevalent during campaigning, which language has since been attributed to upticks in hate crimes and violence involving immigrants. These findings suggest that there is power behind the racialized words used by those in positions of political power to shape public opinion and actions through the norming effect their words have on racial attitudes and behaviors.