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Une approche comparée

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**The role of primary elections in the public debate:
a comparison between France and Italy**

The role of primary elections in the public debate: a comparison between France and Italy¹

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1. Introduction

Although in recent decades primary elections have become popular and widely used in Europe, as is well known they were born and have established themselves as a tool for selecting candidates in a specific country: the United States. The US is the birthplace of primary elections (Ware, 2002), even though, within the States, it is possible to find a wide variety of systems and procedures, which does not allow us to define a single ideal type of primary election. The principle of primaries, however, is becoming widely common even beyond the USA: In Latin America (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich, 2006), in Asia (Narita *et al.* 2013), Israel (Rahat and Sher-Hadar, 1999; Hazan, 1996) and also in Europe. Primary elections are quite common in Belgium, where a significant number of parties uses this type of inclusive process (Wauters, 2009). A similar situation can also be observed in Iceland (Indriðason and Kristinsson, 2013), Spain, Portugal (Barberà, Lisi and Rodriguez-Teruel, 2013), and in Great Britain (Hopkin, 2001) – in which this method of selecting has been adopted for a long time – and of course in Italy (Pasquino and Venturino, 2010) and France (Lefebvre, 2011; Audemard and Gouard, 2014).

In this general context, Italy and France are special and interesting cases within the European experience of primary elections. In fact, primaries have been addressed to all citizens in only these two countries. Political parties, that have organized and promoted them, decided to adopt the maximum level of inclusiveness, as in the US primaries. This choice in favour of ‘open primary’ makes the comparison of these two case studies very promising. This is also in light of the fact that the success of Italian and French experiences seemed to have some effects on other political parties across Europe. It happened for instance within the Labour Party in July 2013. While Ed Miliband was presenting a plan of reorganization of the party he announced the intention to resort to open primaries for the selection of the mayoral candidate on the occasion of London's municipal elections². Another example comes from Spain where the PSOE is crossed by a lively discussion on open primaries especially at a regional level (Andalusia and Cataluña)³.

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² See for example: ‘Labour and the unions: Mr Miliband rolls the dice’, *The Guardian*, 9 July 2013.

³ About Andalusia see, for example, ‘Primarias fallidas’, *El País*, 22 July 2013. For Cataluña see the official website of primaries aimed at selecting the mayoral candidate for Barcelona.

Little attention has been devoted so far to the comparison of primaries between the two countries. Major studies have indeed addressed the issue from a national perspective. In Italy, the research group ‘Candidate and Leader Selection’ focused on the participation (De Luca and Venturino, 2010; Pasquino and Venturino, 2010; Venturino, 2007; Diamanti and Bordignon, 2006), communication (Bobba, Rombi and Seddone, 2012; De Luca, Vicentini and Seddone, 2013) and the organisational dimension (Bernardi and Valbruzzi, 2012), analysing not only the national but also the primary consultations held locally (Seddone and Valbruzzi, 2012; Pasquino and Venturino, 2009). In France, the issue has been the subject of some scientific interest ever since the primaries nominated Ségolène Royal as a candidate in the presidential election of 2007 (Dolez and Laurent, 2007; Dupoirier, 2007). However with the exception of the book by Rémy Lefebvre (2011) and two other explorative studies on participation (De Luca, 2011; Audemard and Gouard, 2014) research entirely devoted to understanding this phenomenon is lacking.

Moreover, the impact on public debate is still entirely missing in the current studies on primary elections in Europe. This article aims to fill this gap, by clarifying what is the meaning that parties give to the primaries and how the main national newspapers cover this particular type of election. The paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we discuss the origin and development of primary elections in France and Italy. In the third section, we provide brief background of the two elections we analysed and we explain the methodology used in the study. Section four, five and six presents the results, showing evidences about visibility, negativity, personalization and popularization of primaries within the public debate. Finally, in section seven, we discuss our initial findings.

2. Case studies

Origins and development of primary elections in France and Italy

Primaries are part of recent history for France and Italy. Commonly in both countries, they were organized by leftist parties and there has been a highly successful level of participation. Nevertheless, the decision to adopt an ‘open primary’ has followed different paths.

In Italy, open primary elections were introduced in 2004 in several small towns to select left wing mayoral candidates, while in 2005 the centre-left coalition organised primaries in the region of Apulia (Southern Italy). In these occasions, local and national media began to emphasise the success and potential advantages in terms of participation and mobilization ensured by primaries. A similar discussion involved all the parties of the left until just before the 2006 general election.

For that competition the centre-left coalition already had selected a strong leader: Romano Prodi, former president of the European Commission, who had gained cross-party support within the coalition. Nevertheless, he had never been formally recognised as the leader of the coalition party and he lacked legitimacy from the parties. In a situation like that, Prodi and the centre-left party elites found in the primary elections a way to legitimate his candidacy. They did so by providing him with legitimacy and support not only from the parties that had endorsed his candidacy but also from a larger basin of consensus. The primary elections were held on October 16th, 2005 and were open to all the citizens who had officially subscribed to the ‘left manifesto’. Participation was also subject to a one-euro symbolic fee. More than four million voters took part in the election, which gave rise to highly enthusiastic reactions from both the centre-left parties and public opinion.

The success of this national primary vote had a number of consequences. First, from 2005 onwards the PD, Partito Democratico (Democratic Party)⁴ officially adopted the primaries to select its party leaders: 2007 for Veltroni; 2009 for Bersani; and 2013 for Renzi (Pasquino, 2009; Pasquino and Venturino, 2010; Pasquino and Venturino, 2014). Second, over the last ten years, more than 400 municipal candidates have been selected through the primaries (Seddone and Venturino, 2013; Pasquino and Venturino, 2009)⁵. Third, the tool of primaries has rapidly spread both vertically (it is indeed used to select candidates for the districts, regions and parliament) and horizontally (it has resulted in centre and right parties using primaries to select their candidates and leaders⁶).

In France the first open primary election was held at a national level in 2011, after several closed primaries within the PS and the Green party had taken place. Since 1995 and the first designation of the presidential candidate by the PS members, primary elections have become an unavoidable form of leadership selection for the PS, but also for other parties, including the UMP. In 1995, the decision to organize a PS primary election followed the tensions in the process of organisation and the absence of a ‘natural candidate’. Indeed, Michel Rocard and Jacques Delors were either out ruled or denied becoming official candidates. The decision of organising primary elections was criticised by a large number of leading figures of the party. For instance, Ségolène Royal, who would exploit this new tool of leadership selection eleven years later, encouraged the militants to

⁴ Democratic Party is the main centre-left party in Italy, it has been founded in 2007 by the merging of the Democratic Left and the Daisy – Democracy and Freedom, the heirs of communist and catholic political culture. It is necessary to underline that the birth of the party has been celebrated by an open primary election aimed to select the new party leader.

⁵ For further information please refer to Candidate and Leader Selection website.

⁶ Indeed, several local candidates has been selected through open primary elections by the centre-right coalition in municipal elections; the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement) adopted this procedure in order to select its candidates for national parliament both in 2013 General Elections and 2014 European Elections; Northern League and Brothers of Italy (a right wing party) adopted closed primary election for select their leaders.

cast blank or invalid votes in order to make public their opposition to this internal election (Lefebvre R., 2011: 32). The combination of the lack of support and consensus to this procedure and a feeling of emergency resulted in a very brief two-week campaign. Finally, Lionel Jospin won against Henri Emmanuelli, thanks to a more effective image in public opinion polls.

In the 2002 Presidential election, Lionel Jospin, at that time the outgoing Prime Minister, was designated as candidate without any party members involvement, since Jospin had a strong legitimacy due to his institutional position. Nevertheless, after the great failure of Jospin, who did not reach the second round of the presidential election, the PS decided to once again hold the intra-party primary election in 2007. On this occasion, the strength of the partisan alignments seemed to be lower, while party leaders, members and the media mostly focused on opinion polls, with the aim of selecting the candidate with the best chances to win the presidential election. Ségolène Royal was the candidate who best exploited this new situation. By insisting on her independence and often openly in opposition with the party's elite, she was able to develop effective communication that was amplified by numerous columnist and journalists. Paradoxically, the success of Ségolène Royal who won the primary first round with 60,62% of the votes (81,97% of the members participated in the elections) led to the weakening of the party organization since the new candidate had bypassed the party networks and support.

The 2011 French and the 2012 Italian primary elections

In Italy, after the 2005 primaries, the second most important primary elections took place in 2012. On that occasion too, the centre-left coalition was called on to select its candidate for the 2013 general elections. In this case, several elite members of the Democratic Party openly opposed the decision, asserting that Pier Luigi Bersani, the PD party secretary, should be declared as the coalition leader outright and considered the primary process disadvantageous for the party. Furthermore, the PD statute clearly stated that the party leader is to be the only candidate for the premiership⁷. Nevertheless in July, Bersani – together with the PD's national assembly – reaffirmed the decision of allowing other PD members to take part in the competition. The primary election was therefore announced. Together with Bersani, two other members of the elite of the party participated in the primary competition: Matteo Renzi, mayor of Florence, and Laura Puppato, regional councillor. In addition to the three PD candidates, Nichi Vendola, leader of Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (Left Ecology and Freedom), and Bruno Tabacchi, leader of Nuovo Centro Democratico (New Democratic Centre) also joined the pool of candidates.

⁷ On October 6th, the PD National Assembly amended the statute in order to allow other candidates from the party – besides the general secretary Bersani – to run for the upcoming primary elections.

The 2012 primary elections acquired a very different meaning when compared with those of 2005. In 2012, the centre-left was perceived as the ‘right-holder’ of the primaries. Therefore, the left felt the pressure by public opinion to adopt this tool to select its candidate for prime minister. Furthermore, the economic crisis and the declining support for the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, as well as the crisis of Berlusconi’s political image, caused the primaries to be framed in a new way. Primaries were perceived by both parties and public opinion as an event that could launch the general election campaign. In other words, by involving supporters and members, primaries were organized as the event that would lead the centre-left to winning the general elections.

The election consisted of a two-round system with a run-off between the two front-runners if no candidate secured more than 50% of the vote. The primary campaign was characterised by the constitution, on 13 October, of a centre-left coalition, named ‘Italia. Bene Comune’, and by the presentation of a common political platform, called the ‘Pact of Democrats and Progressives’.

Bersani started his campaign as the front-runner and had been able to gather the support of nearly all representatives of the democrat party (received about 90% endorsements of the over 300 PD MPs). However, his leadership was quickly challenged by his principal competitor, Matteo Renzi, a skilled communicator who embodied in the public debate the role of the ‘anti-establishment’⁸ candidate. Renzi’s action was mostly aimed at renewing the Italian left. As a matter of fact, the contrast between the two principal candidates was about the rule of pre-registration, which was opposed by Renzi because it was feared to reduce the turnout and favour the party apparatus and its official candidate. The conflict on the rule shows that by changing the rule itself, the party risked losing control over the process of candidate and leader selection. The two candidates also discussed their different political platforms: moderate social-liberalism for Renzi and a mainstream social-democratic programme for Bersani. The other three candidates placed themselves close to Bersani’s programme, disputing in particular Renzi’s approach.

In November, the open primaries were attended by over 3,110,210 voters, but no candidate acquired 50% of the votes. The two with the highest numbers of votes, Bersani and Renzi, took part in the second round, in December, when finally the leader of the PD, Bersani, gained 60.9% of the 2,802,382 votes.

⁸ Renzi reached public relevance at a national level in 2009. He ran (and won) primary elections organised in Florence for selecting the candidate at municipal elections. His primary election campaign was characterised by antiparty rhetoric blaming, in particular, his own party. The criticism against the party elite earned him the evocative surname of “scrapper” (Seddone A., 2011). He continued to play the role of outsider within his own party even after his victory at municipal elections, claiming to aim for the renewal of the PD, and more in general, at the renewal of the whole Italian political system.

In France, the 2011 open primary election set a new step in the presidentialisation and the marginalization of intra-party democracy within the PS. Looking at the political meaning that the first open primary organized in France has had and at the reason for their adoption, we find at least two types of explanations. As proposed by Lefebvre a first set of reasons can be classified under the label of ‘external causes’. It refers to the influence exerted by actors who do not belong to the party (media organizations, journalists, intellectuals and several outsiders in the party who have considered primaries as a way to climb up the organization’s hierarchy). For example, ‘Libération’ and ‘Le Nouvel Observateur’ had been strong defenders of the organization of open-primary elections. At the end of March 2009, Laurent Joffrin, editorialist at ‘Libération’, wrote: ‘we have to face the facts. The way parties designate their candidates is over. This is why the left-wing people chose with wisdom this system of primary elections, which appointed Prodi in Italy and above all Obama in the US. The caciques have to understand this evolution’ (Lefebvre, 2011: 67).

In addition to this, a second set of reasons, labelled ‘internal causes’, may have played a role as well. After the two defeats in 2002 and 2007 Presidential elections, no strong leader stood out and, on the contrary, the party was regularly crossed by conflicts between party leaders such as Martine Aubry, François Hollande, Manuel Valls, Arnaud Montebourg, Ségolène Royal. As a result, the primary elections were considered as a way to mitigate these tensions and to pacify the party. On October 1st, 2009, 68% of the party members voted for the organization of open-primary elections. Two years later, 2,800,000 citizens participated in the designation of the presidential candidate. François Hollande won the primary elections with 57% of the votes against 43% for the party general secretary, Martine Aubry.

3. Sources and method

In addition to being a selection tool, primaries are a communication tool that has several objectives, some of which potentially conflicting: to improve the public image of the party; to increase the popularity of the candidate selected; to mobilize active voters in view of the subsequent presidential or general elections. At the same time they can produce also disadvantages to the organizers since, during the election campaign, the competition within the party can be very rough and the media can mainly focus their attention on the conflicts. In any case, primaries allow parties and candidates involved in to be at the centre of the political and public debate.

The aim of this article is to verify whether and under which conditions the public debate will be favourable to the parties and candidates involved in the election campaign, or on the contrary in which cases will be unfavourable. The sample gathered allows to study in depth three related

dimensions of analysis: (a) the political parallelism of the coverage on primaries; (b) the personalization of politics; (c) the popularization of politics.

(a) *Political parallelism of the coverage.*

Since primaries were held only by the left, the political orientation of the media outlets has an impact on how primaries are covered. Our hypotheses are that:

H1: The visibility of the primaries is higher in the media outlets closest to the left (and vice versa);

H2: The coverage tone of the primaries is more favourable in the media outlets closest to the left (and vice versa).

(b) *Personalization.*

Since primary campaigns focus attention on candidates, they amplify the process of personalization of politics, opposing not only candidates with each other, but also candidates and the party.

Our hypotheses are that:

H3: The visibility of candidates is higher than that of the party and its representatives;

H4: The level of conflict of candidates' coverage is higher than that of the party and its representatives.

(c) *Popularization.*

The primaries are a tool that aims to narrow the gap between political parties and citizens, including them in the process of selection of candidates. In some way, we can say that they are also used to 'popularize the party', in the double sense of spreading its ideas and make it popular. Our hypothesis is that:

H5: Popular media are interested in primary elections, although normally they poorly cover political events.

The article compares the last primary elections held at a national level in both countries and aimed at selecting the Italian prime ministerial and the French presidential candidates. In order to provide a comprehensive idea of the election news coverage, five national newspapers for each country were selected according to their readership and political orientation: 'Le Parisien' (centre), 'Le Figaro' (right), 'Le Monde' (centre-left), 'Libération' (left), 'L'Humanité' (left) and 'Il Corriere della Sera' (centre), 'La Stampa' (centre), 'La Repubblica' (centre-left), 'L'Unità' (left), 'Il

Giornale' (right). In addition, the two most popular news weekly magazines and two most popular tabloid weekly magazines in each country have been selected: 'L'Express', 'Le Nouvel Observateur', 'Paris Match', 'Voici' and 'L'Espresso', 'Panorama', 'Oggi', 'Chi'. Finally, the two satirical TV news broadcast in France and Italy were also collected, namely 'Les Guignols de l'info' and 'Striscia la notizia'. The period analysed corresponds to eight weeks before the vote.

The unit of coding and analysis was the individual news item and the general sample amounted to 874 in France and 1161 in Italy. Visibility and coverage tone were collected and measured for each news items. The individual actors (e.g. candidates, representatives) in the story were coded - up to 6 - when an opinion, an action or an event is explicitly reported (not when actors were just mentioned).

To measure the positive or negative coverage of primaries, the coverage tone of each news item was coded according to the NEPOCS coding standards (Esser, Strömbäck and De Vreese, 2012). In particular, following the proposal of Lengauer *et al.* (2012, 195-197) the level of negative tonality of the story was coded. This reports the overall tone of the story, allowing to understand whether the report 'convey[s] primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of politics, political records, conditions or views'⁹. This variable have four codes: negative (-1); balanced (0); positive (+1); neutral/not applicable (0). For each news items collected as well as for each actor the average level of positive or negative Coverage Tone (range from -1 to +1) was calculated.

In addition, the presence/absence of conflict within a story was coded. This relates to a news item conveying primarily 'conflictual impressions of politics, political records, conditions and views'¹⁰.

Finally, the issues were coded by using adapted list of topics from the German Longitudinal Election Study (www.gles.eu). A main topic was attributed to each news item.

⁹ «Indications of negative tonality are the framing of the story as political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment. Indications of positive tonality are depictions of political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment. If a report does not reflect indications of negative tonality or of positive tonality, then it has to be coded as 'neutral'». The coding instruction, concerning neutral items, is applied for the following variable too, in Lengauer G. *et al.* (2012, 195).

¹⁰ «The conflict dimension refers to at least two-sided depictions of (attempts, initiation, completion of) dispute, disagreement, discordance, confrontation, clashing positions and views or controversy» (Lengauer G. *et al.* 2012, 196).

4. Polarization of public debate and conflict vs. negativity: different ways to depict primary elections

As previously mentioned, left parties in both countries have adopted primary elections in response to the crisis of public trust in political parties. In general, they have mainly used them as a means of (re) legitimation of the party and promotion of the candidates. However, by analysing the public debate, it is possible to better investigate whether and under which conditions the public debate will be favourable to the parties and candidates involved in the election campaign.

The analysis of media coverage, during the eight weeks leading up to the vote, revealed that the Italian media system covered the election of 2012 giving more attention than the French media system did in 2011: 1161 articles compared to 874 (tab. 1). This data is coherent with previous comparisons showing that in Italy more space is systematically dedicated to politics according to the general organization of the newspapers (Bobba, 2011; Saitta, 2009).

Table 1 shows that, as a whole, the two systems covered the elections following different pattern. Although in both countries the electoral competition was hard, Italy shows a high percentage of news about disputes, mutual accusations and conflicts (42.8%), while the same indicator is less than half in the French case (17.9%). As regards coverage tone, the two systems show an opposite trend: on average, primary elections were depicted as quite positive in Italy (0.2), while the French case displays instead a more negative frame (-0.2).

When we look more in detail this first results (tab. 2), we notice that more differences emerge especially in relation to the political orientation of the news media (tabloid and satirical media data are discussed in par. 6).

Firstly, as regards the visibility given to primaries, there is not a clear confirmation of the political parallelism of media outlets. Except for 'L'Unità' - former official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, supportive of its successor the Democratic Party - in both countries we found an across-the-board interest. The three French 'quality newspapers' and the three Italian mainstream ones show similar levels, between 171 news items for 'Le Monde' and 209 for 'la Repubblica'. 'Le Parisien' and 'Il Giornale' had an average interest, while the more leftist newspaper in the French sample, 'L'Humanité', covered primaries poorly: only 54 news items, a level closest to the weekly magazines than to the newspapers (e.g. 'Le Nouvel Observateur' published 43 articles in the same period).

In both countries, primary elections have provided to the media system elements to emphasize the conflictual dimension of competition. However, while in France confrontation took place mainly between the candidates, in Italy it has also involved the establishment of the PD party that had been openly challenged by Matteo Renzi. Therefore the level of this indicator differs widely

between the two countries, as well as the political orientation of the media outlets focusing more on the conflict is different. Even in this case, in France no correlation among political orientation and the type of coverage can be identified. Media outlets, paying more attention to the conflict, does not belong to a single political field: 'Le Figaro' (28.4%) shows a value more than double that 'Le Monde' (14.8%) and 'Libération' (13.5%), but the highest values were recorded by the leftist 'L'Humanité' (31.5%), among newspapers, and 'Le Nouvel Observateur' (39.5%), among news magazines. In Italy, the main emphasis on conflicts that have marked the primaries campaign was given by 'Il Giornale', the newspaper owned by the Berlusconi family, which has focused on conflict in more than half of its coverage (53.7%). A slightly lower result was recorded by 'Il Corriere' and 'La Stampa', while the newspapers closer to the left, 'la Repubblica' and 'L'Unità', were less interested in covering this particular feature of the primaries.

The polarization of public debate about primaries and its different structures in the two countries becomes clearer by observing the coverage tone data. In the French debate the criticisms and negative assessment on primaries come from two sides. On the one hand, the tone for 'Le Figaro' is highly negative (-0.8), since, following its conservative editorial line, it strongly covered the point of views against left primaries. On the other hand, the high values recorded for 'L'Humanité' and 'Libération' showed that the instrument of primaries, far from getting consensus, raised instead many questions within the left. Italy is characterized by a more classical polarization of the debate. 'L'Unità', the newspaper closer to the PD party is the one that has covered primaries more favourably (0.7), while the newspaper more hostile to the centre-left, 'Il Giornale', was the one that showed the more negative level of coverage tone (-0.9). As in the French case, the other Italian newspapers, less directly involved in the competition, covered primaries displaying a small positive value as the result of a fairly balanced debate that gave voice to positions for and against primaries.

One last aspect that allows to further clarify the political parallelism of the two systems is the type of coverage given to candidates by different media outlets. First, it is worth noting that the media have focused on the two main candidates neglecting the others, since primaries in both countries were based on a two-round electoral system. Aubry (185) and Hollande (198) received a coverage more than double compared to Royal (82) and Montebourg (81) that follow in third position (tab. 3). Table 4 shows a similar situation for Italy: articles involving Bersani (528) and Renzi (510) are more than double compared to those involving the third candidate, Vendola (199).

As regard coverage tone, Aubry is the only one, among these four candidates, that shows a result equal to the overall average, while values for Hollande, Bersani and Renzi are well above that average. The first secretary of the PS party is adversely covered both from the right ('Le Figaro': -0.8) and the left media ('Libération': -0.3; 'L'Humanité': -0.5) and, more generally, her values

almost match with those of the overall sample. His direct competitor, Hollande, is instead the candidate who shows the best variation between the national average and his performance: +0.5. As for Aubry, ‘Le Figaro’ (-0.3) and ‘L’Humanité’ (-0.5) have been hostile, while ‘Libération’ (0.5), ‘Le Monde’ (0.5) and above all ‘Le Parisien’ (0.8) have covered the campaign of the Socialist frontrunner in a positive way. In Italy, the coverage of Bersani, although very positive, is the result of a strong polarization. On the one hand, the media outlets close to Berlusconi harshly attacked him: the coverage tone in the news magazine ‘Panorama’ is -0.6, while ‘Il Giornale’ records a tone of -1, namely in each of the 63 items was expressed a negative assessment on the PD leader. On the other hand, all the other media outlets registered very positive results ranging from 0.5 for ‘La Stampa’ to 0.9 for ‘L’Unità’. Renzi is instead the only candidate who has achieved a positive or neutral coverage from all the news media analysed. This figure is particularly interesting because he seems to polarize the debate on his campaign in the opposite way to Bersani. The media outlets closest to the left basically covered the former mayor of Florence in a neutral manner (and in any case far less positively than Bersani): the value for ‘La Repubblica’ was 0.2, while for ‘L’Unità’ is 0.0. At the same time, however, Renzi has received a slightly positive coverage from ‘Il Giornale’ which has decided to support him at least partially, against the common ‘enemy’ Bersani.

Tab. 1 Primaries elections within the public debate (entire sample)

	N	% Conflict	Coverage Tone
France	874	17.9%	-0.2
Italy	1161	42.8%	0.2

Tab. 2 Visibility and framing of primaries elections in France and Italy within news media

	N	Conflict	Coverage Tone		N	Conflict	Coverage Tone
France	820	19.5%	-0.2	Italy	1104	41.9%	0.2
Monde	171	14.8%	0.2	Corriere	191	48.7%	0.1
Figaro	183	28.4%	-0.8	Stampa	175	47.4%	0.1
Libération	193	13.5%	-0.3	Repubblica	209	38.3%	0.2
Parisien	140	11.4%	0.0	Unità	384	35.2%	0.7
Humanité	54	31.5%	-0.5	Giornale	123	53.7%	-0.9
Nouvel Obs	43	39.5%	0.4	Espresso	8	25.0%	0.4
Express	36	19.4%	0.0	Panorama	14	28.6%	0.0

Tab. 3 Visibility and framing of primaries elections candidates within news media coverage in France

	Aubry		Baylet		Hollande		Montebourg		Royal		Valls		Tot
	185	-0.2	24	0.2	198	0.3	81	0.6	82	0.0	45	0.2	615
Monde	36	0.3	7	0.1	40	0.5	12	0.8	14	0.0	6	1.0	115
Figaro	44	-0.8	1	-1.0	50	-0.3	18	0.1	19	-0.3	6	-0.3	138
Libération	43	-0.3	6	1.0	42	0.5	22	0.4	20	0.1	14	-0.5	147
Parisien	28	0.2	8	-0.2	31	0.8	19	1.0	15	0.4	13	0.6	114
Humanité	16	-0.3	1	0.0	9	-0.5	5	1.0	7	-1.0	3	0.0	41
Nouvel Obs	8	0.7	1	1.0	9	1.0	3	1.0	4	0.3	2	1.0	27
Express	10	0.0			17	0.6	2	0.0	3	0.0	1	1.0	33

Tab. 4 Visibility and framing of primaries elections candidates within news media coverage in Italy

	Bersani		Puppato		Renzi		Tabacchi		Vendola		Tot
	528	0.6	76	0.4	510	0.4	70	0.0	199	-0.1	1383
Corriere	99	0.8	11	1.0	101	0.8	13	0.0	41	-1.0	265
Stampa	83	0.5	10	0.0	96	0.8	11	1.0	30	0.3	230
Repubblica	106	0.8	19	0.0	99	0.3	15	-0.3	48	0.3	287
Unità	168	0.9	29	1.0	144	0.0	24	0.0	52	0.5	417
Giornale	63	-1.0	7	-1.0	55	0.2	7	-1.0	27	-1.0	159
Espresso	3	1.0			6	1.0					9
Panorama	6	-0.6			9	-0.1			1	0.0	16

5. Parties in a negative light and conflicting candidates: The two faces of the personalization within primaries public debate

One of the most discussed topic in the public and scientific debate on primaries concerns personalization and, in particular, the risk that this kind of election could weaken the party in favour of a candidate invested by a direct legitimation.

The election campaign of candidates and the coverage that they received by the media system helps to define the balance of power between the selected candidate and party establishment. We could say that the public image of the party is the sum of the public representation that the media give to candidates together with the representation that is given to the rest of the party.

Table 5, showing the main features of the candidates' coverage and of the party/coalition's coverage in France and Italy, highlights some evidences about the personalization process. Three points should be underlined:

(a) In both countries, the articles concerning candidates are framed more positively than those concerning parties / coalitions;

(b) In the news items devoted to the candidates, the dimension of conflict is more relevant than in the news items devoted to the party/coalition;

(c) As regards visibility, the degree of personalization within the primaries' coverage differs in the two systems. It is very high in Italy (71.8%), where it is confirmed that candidates overshadow the party within the public debate. On the contrary, in France, the situation is more balanced: the articles devoted to the party/coalition are higher than those devoted to the candidates, albeit slightly (51.8% vs. 41.5%).

To better investigate these evidences and differences, it can be useful to analyse, in detail, which have been the main topics discussed in France and Italy, trying to identify contingent factors as well as structural factors.

The French election campaign has been marked by an external event that has greatly contributed to cast a negative light on the PS party: the so-called 'affaire Strauss-Kahn', namely the sex scandal involving the former director of the International Monetary Fund. The category 'Political scandal/corruption' consists mainly of articles related to this topic: 93/103. Although some aftermath of the scandal have involved Aubry for his previous political relations with DSK, is the Socialist Party to be more involved in a public debate not at all positive. This topic is the more significant for the party and the level of coverage tone is absolutely low (-0.9). A second factor that contributes to explaining the more negative coverage of the party/coalition compared to candidates is the relevance and the tone of the topic 'Debate on primaries'. Indeed, while in Italy the primaries are generally considered as positive by both politicians and journalists and their organization is no longer being debated, in France the 2011 primaries have been repeatedly criticized from both the right and the left field as well as by members of the political, media and academic system. More generally, the Socialist Party seems to have worked as a lightning rod for its candidates. When we look, for example, the topic on the economic and financial situation, we find that the candidates' proposals have a neutral tone, while articles related to the party are negatively covered (-0.8). This happened mainly because the proposals of candidates have been little discussed within the media, while the public debate on this point has focused more on the sustainability of the socialist project in the face of constraints imposed by the crisis and the EU (e.g. the introduction of the so called 'règle d'or').

As regards the image of candidates, the result is mainly due to the ‘horse race’ coverage of the competition. The great attention to surveys (both for primary and the presidential elections) as well as the emphasis on the election campaign events are structural features of the French media system. However, while during the presidential campaigns the media appear to be more autonomous in setting the agenda and in particular in focusing on some topics they consider relevant, in this case the media agenda was set by political events.

As previously mentioned, the Italian case, in contrast to the French one, shows a very high level of personalization within the public debate. In addition to a moderate interest in the ‘horse race’ dimension of the primaries (27.3%), Italian newspapers and magazines have focused on issues such ‘Endorsement’ (9.2%), ‘TV Debate’ (8.2%), ‘Definitions of political alliances’ (5.9%). creating a sort of self-referential information flow. All these topics have created a positively framed information flow, which, however, was also strongly self-referential: a significant part of the news on the primary had as target audience the political and journalistic systems, rather than the citizens-voters. In Italy there were no external events similar to the Strauss-Kahn case. The primary campaign has been rather developed around the opposition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics and politicians. Initially raised by Renzi, this issue has become central to the whole public debate and involved, actively or passively, all the candidates. The key word of the campaign has been the ‘renewal’. Renewal of the PD party, of the left and broader of politics. This topic has been relevant both for candidates and party/coalition. However, while in the first case the tone was neutral, in the second one coverage instead has been rather negative. This happened because candidates, by proposing the reorganization of the party and the change of its leadership, have caused discontent and hostility within the party.

The point instead candidates have openly clashed are the rules and organization of the primaries. In particular Bersani and Renzi exchanged mutual accusations about the two-round electoral system (introduced for the first time in this election), the minimum age to vote (18 years old, it was 16 before), the system of pre-registration to vote. Not surprisingly, this topic along with ‘Political conflict’ recorded the most negative value for candidates: -0.9 and -1.0, respectively. In any case, as in France, in Italy is the party that acts as a lightning rod to the candidates and not vice versa. On average, the values of the party/coalition are lower than those of candidates, but in 61 cases out of 300, they record the level more negative as possible of coverage tone (-1.0). This happens on issues such as ‘Political conflicts’, ‘Political scandal/corruption’, ‘Antipolitics/antipartitism’ and reveals the credit of trust accorded to candidates, as well as the total distrust with which the media system normally covers the activities of political parties and politics (see Bobba and Seddone, 2014, 2015).

Table 5. Primary election coverage: candidates vs. party/coalition

	N	Conflict %	Tone
France			
Candidates	415 (47.5%)	21.0	0.0
Party/Coalition	453 (51.8%)	16.3	-0.4
Other	6 (0.7%)	33.3	-0.7
<i>N</i>	874		
Italy			
Candidates	834 (71.8%)	45.0	0.1
Party/Coalition	302 (26.0%)	36.4	-0.1
Other	25 (2.2%)	68.0	-0.6
<i>N</i>	1161		

Table 6. Primary elections campaign topics within French public debate: candidates vs. party/coalition¹¹

	Candidates			Party/Coalition			
	N	%	Coverage Tone	N	%	Coverage	Tone
Election campaign/Horse race	220	53.0	0.3	90	19.9		0.2
Political conflicts	50	12.0	-0.5	22	4.9		-0.7
Economic/Labour Market/Financial policies	40	9.6	0.0	38	8.4		-0.8
Definition of political alliances	27	6.5	0.0	19	4.2		0.3
Political scandal/corruption	25	6.0	-1.0	103	22.7		-0.9
TV Debate	22	5.3	0.1	36	7.9		-0.4
Other policies	17	4.1	0.2	9	2.0		0.5
Endorsement	4	1.0	-0.5				
Rules/organization	3	0.7	-1.0	31	6.8		-0.2
Debate on primaries	1	0.2	-1.0	79	17.4		-0.3
Turnout				17	3.8		0.3
Other	6	1.4	0.7	9	2.0		0.1
<i>N</i>	415			453			

¹¹ Note that in this table and in the subsequent data for the residual category ‘Other’ is not reported (6 cases in France and 25 in Italy).

Table 7. Primary elections campaign topics within Italian public debate: candidates vs. party/coalition

Italy	Candidates				Party/Coalition			
	N	%	Coverage	Tone	N	%	Coverage	Tone
Election campaign/Horse race	228	27.3		0.4	31	10.3		-0.1
Renewal of parties/politics	102	12.2		0.0	60	19.9		-0.4
Endorsement	77	9.2		0.8	1	0.3		0.0
Rules/organization	74	8.9		-0.9	44	14.6		-0.2
TV Debate	68	8.2		0.4	43	14.2		0.1
Economic/Labour Market/Financial policies	58	7.0		-0.4	14	4.6		-1.0
Definition of political alliances	49	5.9		0.5	17	5.6		-1.0
Turnout	37	4.4		0.9	44	14.6		0.7
Political conflicts	35	4.2		-1.0	13	4.3		-1.0
Political scandal/corruption	28	3.4		-0.7	9	3.0		-1.0
Antipolitics/antipartitism	26	3.1		-0.5	8	2.6		-1.0
Other policies	16	1.9		1.0	2	0.7		0.0
Debate on primaries	2	0.2		0.0	8	2.6		-0.5
Other	34	4.1		0.3	8	2.6		0.6
	<i>N</i> 834				<i>N</i> 302			

6. Scandals, private lives and the renewal of politics: the primaries according to popular media

The interest with which even the popular media have covered primaries in both countries certified that they have been a major event involving the whole of society. Although, from a quantitative perspective the coverage amount can not be compared with that of newspapers and news magazines, table 8 shows that primaries have been almost a constant presence even in the media tabloids and on satirical TV news. ‘Paris Match’ was the media more involved: articles on primaries were published in 8 out of 9 editions. The weekly gossip magazine ‘Chi’ – owned by the Berlusconi family – was instead the less concerned (3/9). The remaining media outlets have covered primaries in about 60% of cases.

Although in our sample are considered as analogous, it is worth remembering that there are important differences in the logic of the treatment of the news between tabloid media and satirical TV news. In particular, the first ones could also cover a candidate or party in a favourable way, while the second ones tend instead to highlight the more critical and negative aspects of a political actor or event, through irony and sarcasm.

Being covered by these media is therefore a double-edged sword. Though it is important for a party that does not want to reach only his constituents, but instead wants to increase the number of

citizens involved in its activities. In this perspective, the French campaign was internal, addressed to its own political field. The Italian campaign, however, was characterized by the contrast between Bersani, whose campaign target was the traditional constituency of the PD, and Renzi who sought the support of new voters, by explicitly turning his message also to the voters disappointed by Berlusconi. Within this type of coverage, the party is the great absent: in both countries, everything revolves around the main candidates.

The popularization of the primaries in France was structured around two topics, one completely negative and the other rather positive. As expected, the Strauss-Kahn scandal achieved wide visibility combined with a severely negative tone: 'Voici' covered only formally the primaries campaign, while actually it has devoted 5 out of 6 articles to the scandal and its political consequences. 'Paris Match' (3 articles) and 'Les Guignols de l'info' (8 TV stories) have been more balanced, but they also contributed to making this topic one of the most popular in the first month of the campaign. Hollande's campaign, his political career and his private life are the second relevant topic within popular media coverage. 'Paris Match' is the media outlet more interested in the socialist frontrunner to which it devotes six articles, interviewing both 'l'homme tranquille' and his companion¹². The preference of 'Paris Match' for Hollande is also proved by the fact that Aubry is covered only in one occasion, with negative tone, in connection with his alleged pact with Strauss-Kahn. 'Voici' has covered Hollande just one time, but in that occasion it launched his candidacy for the Elysée¹³. Finally, 'Guignols de l'info' has been more balanced, by paying almost the same attention to Hollande (8), Aubry (8) and Royal (5), as well as Strauss-Kahn (8). Also in this case, the link between Aubry and Strauss-Kahn was repeatedly underlined, while Hollande was ironically joked for his (excessive) tranquillity.

In Italy the popularization of the primary elections has focused around Renzi and his proposal of a radical renewal of parties and politics. With rare exceptions, these are the two topics that have most affected the popular Italian media. The tabloid media have mostly focused on the major candidates, mixing report on the election campaign and their private life. 'Oggi' and 'Chi' have covered Renzi six times (three of which on his private life¹⁴), while Bersani achieved only two articles on 'Oggi' and one on 'Chi' in which his wife was accused of refusing to pay a fine¹⁵. Even on 'Striscia la notizia', the satirical newscast owned by the Berlusconi family, Renzi was central

¹² 'François Hollande: l'homme tranquille', *Paris Match*, 15 September 2011; 'François Hollande: la victoire de l'homme tranquille', *Paris Match*, 20 October 2011; 'Entretien avec Valerie Trierweiler', *Paris Match*, 20 October 2011.

¹³ 'Hollande déjà Président', *Voici*, 1 October 2011.

¹⁴ 'Renzi: le 54 Cose che non sapete di me', *Oggi*, 24 October 2012; 'Non rottamerò le nonne!', *Oggi*, 28 November 2012; 'Io, mio padre e il nostro sogno: un'Italia nuova', *Chi*, 17 October 2012.

¹⁵ 'Daniela Bersani: La multa dello scandalo', *Chi*, 7 November 2012.

when compared to Bersani (25 vs. 8). In this case, however, is his proposal to be important. Although the image of the former mayor of Florence was usually negatively covered, the ‘renewal’ becomes a leitmotif within the coverage of the primaries. Within the newscast, the imitator of Renzi has stressed this idea of renewal in order to ask hard questions to the real old party officials, to the other candidates and political opponents. The personal characteristics of Renzi, young and dynamic, combined with a political idea, as that of the renewal, which winks to populism, shows the great interest was for him and his idea and only secondarily for the primary elections itself.

Table 8. Coverage of primary elections within popular media

	News Items	Primaries' coverage/ editions collected		News Items	Primaries' coverage/ editions collected
France			Italy		
Paris Match	17	8/9 (88.9%)	Oggi	13	6/9 (66.7%)
Voici	6	6/9 (66.7%)	Chi	4	3/9 (33.3%)
Guignols	31	24/40 (60.0%)	Striscia	40	6/9 (60.4%)

7. Conclusion

The comparison between the last primary elections held at the national level in Italy and France showed some general trends and features common in the two countries as well as some national peculiarities. The aim of this article was to verify whether and under which conditions the public debate will be favourable to the parties and candidates involved in the election campaign, or on the contrary in which cases will be unfavourable. We studied the election coverage looking at three main dimension of analysis the political parallelism, the personalization and the popularization of politics.

As regards our hypotheses about political parallelism the two systems showed three different trends:

(1) The media closer to the right essentially confirmed the assumptions related to their orientation. They were quantitatively less interested in the primaries than the media close to the left and, above all, they frame in a negative way both the news about primaries and those on candidates (with the partial exception of ‘Il Giornale’ on Renzi).

(2) For the media close to the left the situation is less clear. In Italy ‘L’Unità’ and ‘Repubblica’ (though less intensely) recorded the highest values in terms of visibility and positive tone coverage of primaries. This finding is mainly explained by the extremely positive frame with which the Bersani’s campaign was covered. Compared with that of Renzi, Bersani’s frame was significantly

better: +0.9 and +0.5 respectively in his favour. The French situation is instead characterized by the different orientations shown by leftist media on primaries. 'L'Humanité' has scarcely focused on the primary election and, when it did, it has covered adversely both the campaign as well as the two main candidates, Aubry and Hollande. Libération and Le Monde have instead dedicated a significant amount of articles to the primaries, but they have framed them in an opposite way: 'Libération' has adversely depicted the debate (and Aubry), while 'Le Monde' has favourably treated the issue.

(3) In both countries, the media outlets less oriented ('Le Parisien', 'Il Corriere', 'La Stampa') have been characterized by an intermediate position compared to the two previous points. They showed a fairly significant coverage of the debate on primaries and an essentially neutral tone combined with a positive frame through which all four leading candidates were depicted.

Data on personalization of primaries' media coverage have shown a different situation in the two countries. In Italy, during the campaign, the hypothesis that candidates overshadow the party in the public debate seems to be confirmed. They achieve a positive coverage, which however is characterized by a high level of conflict and of self-reference. The media confrontation is entirely played between Bersani and Renzi, who are opposed on the renewal and the leadership of the PD and the coalition. The campaigns of candidates and their personal traits have achieved visibility to the detriment of the party and the coalition proposals, which have been virtually absent. The French case, unlike the Italian one, showed a low level of personalization that could suggest a greater centrality of the Socialist Party, its political agenda and its proposals within the public debate. Actually, this data is biased by two elements. On the one hand, the case Strauss-Kahn has caught the media attention for most of the month of September, moving the focus of public debate from candidates' campaigns to the political consequences of the return of the former director of the IMF in France. On the other hand, the primary elections itself were the subject of a broad debate, involving not only representatives of the Socialist Party, journalists and academics, but also some members of the UMP. These two factors have definitely slowed the personalization of coverage in France, but the increased visibility of the positions of the party and its representatives did not result in a greater focus on political proposals, which instead were marginal as in Italy.

The analysis of popular media showed that primaries have been almost a constant presence in the tabloid media and on satirical TV news of the two countries. In some way, it is true that the primaries were used – intentionally or not – to 'popularize the party', in the double sense of spreading its ideas and make it popular. This meant that popular media have identified two

candidates who best met the standards of their own newsworthiness: Hollande was soon crowned by the media especially thanks to the polls indicating him as the winner against Aubry and even against Sarkozy. The personal traits of Renzi, his youth and his proposal for the renewal of politics have been as well widely appreciated by the popular Italian media. In both cases, these media outlets seem to have accentuated the process of personalization and simplification of politics, not necessarily being able to get citizens more involved.

Although between the two countries there are important differences with respect to the institutional and political system as well as the media system, by their comparison some general evidence emerged.

First, the candidates who won the primaries were the most visible and most favourably covered by the media (as well as those favoured by polls). The election campaign, the television debates and media coverage have not altered the chances of winning of the candidates.

Second, The party has worked as a lightning rod for candidates. The candidates have not addressed the most controversial political issues in their campaign, leaving the hard task to the elite members. This has contributed to create a 'fresh and new' image of the candidates, compared to that 'old and stale' of the party.

Third, the primaries were not used to discuss political proposals, but to publicly legitimize the candidate selected. The visibility achieved by Bersani and Hollande - the latter even on popular media - has allowed the two leaders not only to increase their popularity, but also to re-define their public image, proving to have the features needed to lead a country.

Finally, the success of primaries between citizens (certified by the high turnout, as well as by the polls) combined with the positive media coverage of many media outlets in both countries, have shown that this kind of election can actually work as an asset to regain the trust of citizens in politics. Although much more simply, it was used as a strategic tool for mobilizing voters in the subsequent presidential or general election.

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