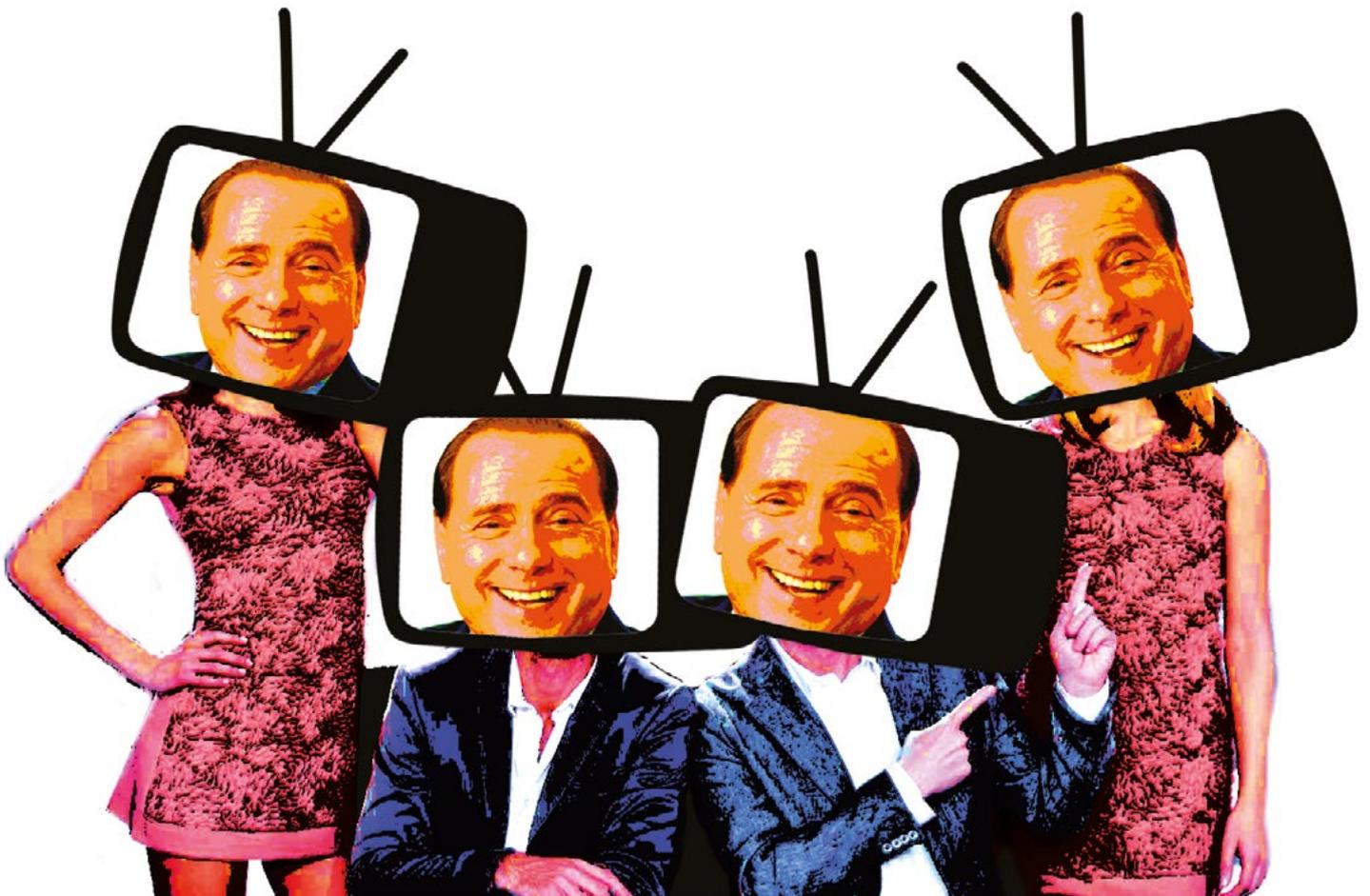


To what extent are the media to blame for the rise of populist political leaders? **Andrea Tesei** and colleagues explore the impact of the light entertainment served up by Silvio Berlusconi's commercial TV network, Mediaset, on his later electoral success.

Political legacies of Italian entertainment television



People who watch entertainment TV are more likely to vote for populist politicians

dominated by a particular cultural model – from advertising to light entertainment shows – also influence viewers’ political attitudes.

Our research explores the political consequences of exposure to light entertainment TV by focusing on the rise to power and political success of Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, considered by many to be the closest international analogue to Donald Trump and a forerunner of the newly emerging populist stream of politicians.

We make use of the staggered introduction of Berlusconi’s commercial TV network, Mediaset, across Italian municipalities during the 1980s. This allows us to compare similar municipalities exposed to Mediaset channels before and after 1985, and analyse differences in voting outcomes over the following three decades.

Crucially, during the early period of expansion, when some areas were exposed to the network while others were not, Mediaset channels were entirely devoted to light entertainment programmes, such as quiz shows, football games and foreign TV series. Newscasts were only introduced in 1991, when access to the network was virtually ubiquitous. This feature within the Italian context therefore provides a unique opportunity to isolate the effect of exposure to entertainment TV.

Figure 1 reports the coverage of the Mediaset network across all

8,100 Italian municipalities in 1985, using data on the exact location and technical characteristics of Mediaset transmitters. These were inherited from a multitude of local TV stations that were progressively incorporated into the network in the early 1980s, more than a decade before Berlusconi decided to enter politics.

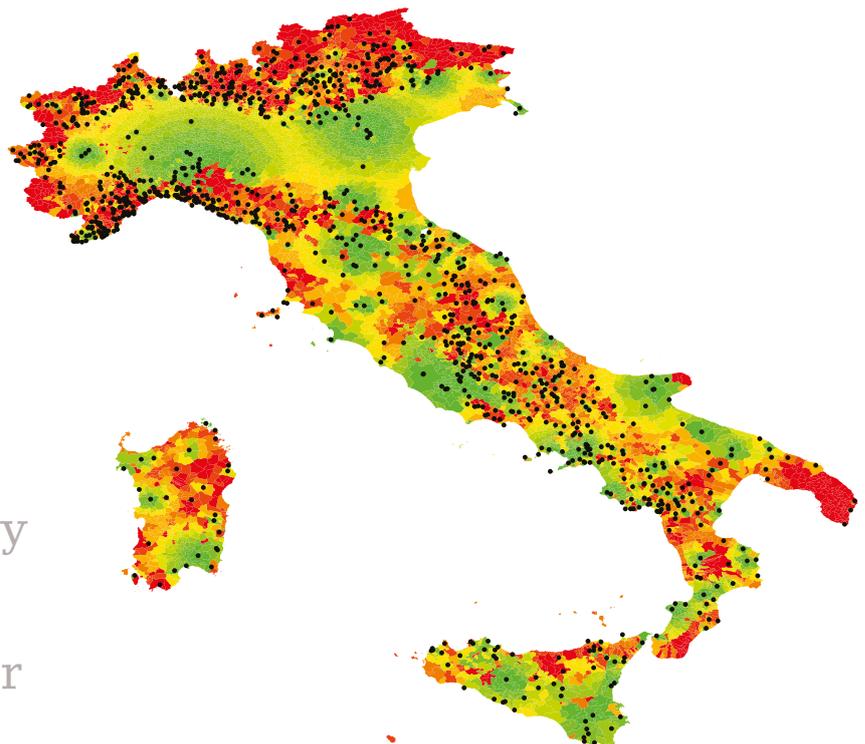
It is therefore unlikely that their location directly helped Berlusconi’s political ambitions. Nonetheless, it is possible that other local characteristics (such as proximity to large cities) could influence later electoral outcomes. To isolate the causal link between the media and future voting behaviour, we follow the analytical approach of other researchers in media economics (Olken, 2009; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014) and identify the effect from the residual variation in TV signal coverage due to idiosyncratic geographical factors, such as the ruggedness of the terrain, which would interfere with the broadcast signal.

Recent international developments – from the results of the UK’s Brexit referendum to Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections – have raised concerns about the pervasiveness of the media and their contribution to the emergence of a post-factual political culture. But this concern only represents the latest development of a decades-long debate about the influence of media on politics.

Previous research on the subject has mainly focused on the effects of news content on voting. Among others, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) document the effect of Fox News on support for Republicans; while Enikolopov et al (2011) show the negative impact of the independent Russian channel NTV on support for Putin.

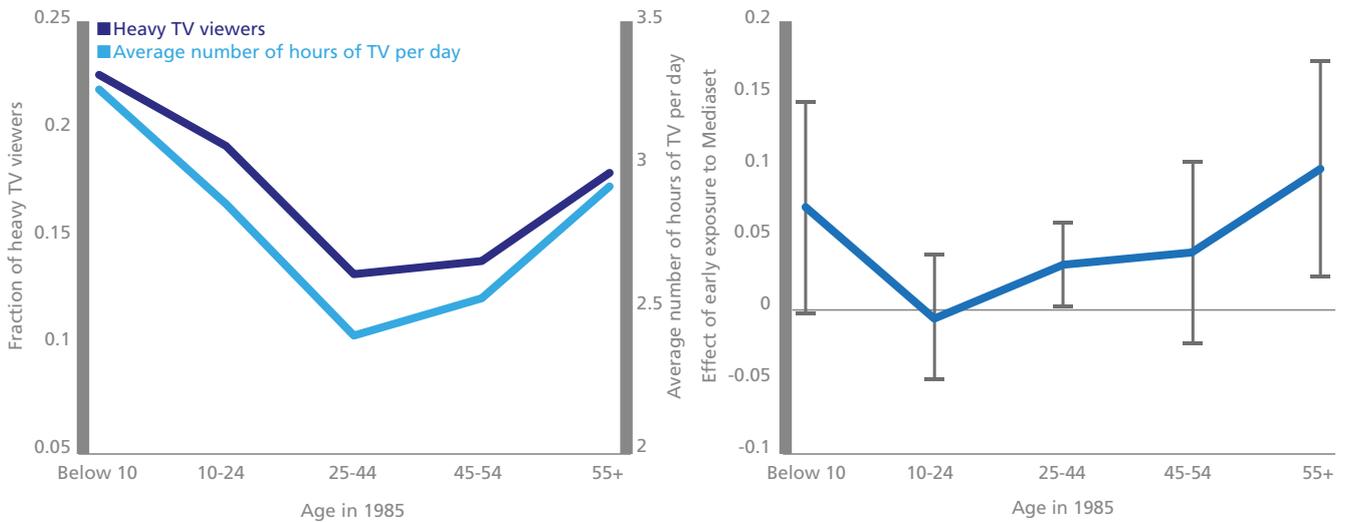
But news programmes now represent just a fraction of total TV airtime. It is plausible that other types of content

Figure 1:
Coverage of the Mediaset network across all 8,100 Italian municipalities in 1985



Italians who had early access to Mediaset’s TV content were more likely to vote for Silvio Berlusconi

Figure 2:
The political impact of entertainment TV among heavy viewers by age in 1985



We further restrict the analysis to variation in signal strength within electoral districts and local labour markets, which are narrow geographical areas composed on average of 20 and 12 municipalities, respectively. Our empirical exercise compares municipalities characterised by similar economic and political conditions but a different strength of Mediaset signal. Importantly, we show that within electoral districts and local labour markets, signal strength is uncorrelated with pre-existing political preferences for any party and with a large array of geographical and socioeconomic characteristics at the municipal level.

Our results indicate that municipalities exposed to Mediaset earlier displayed higher support for Berlusconi's party,

Forza Italia, when he first ran for election in 1994, compared with municipalities exposed later on. This effect is sizeable – about one percentage point – and very precisely estimated. In terms of parliamentary representation, this effect implies that in the absence of entertainment TV, the centre-right would have lost 18 seats in 1994 (out of 463 in which the two main coalitions competed). The effect is also extremely long-lasting: the differential support for Berlusconi among early viewers persists over five elections, until 2008 – almost 25 years after municipalities were differentially exposed to Mediaset.

Strikingly, while the effect on Forza Italia vanishes in the 2013 elections, in that year municipalities that were exposed to

Mediaset earlier exhibit higher support for the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo. Grillo is a comedian turned politician who, in spite of clear ideological differences with Berlusconi, shares with him a charismatic media personality and a distinctively populist rhetoric. This result suggests that, rather than just favouring Berlusconi's party, exposure to entertainment TV made voters generally more supportive of populist movements and leaders.

To explore the mechanisms through which entertainment TV influenced later voting behaviour, we combine information on early Mediaset access with individual-level data on TV consumption, political and social attitudes, and cognitive abilities.

Figure 2 shows that the political impact of entertainment TV is especially

Figure 3:
Effects of Mediaset, education and civic engagement on voting behaviour

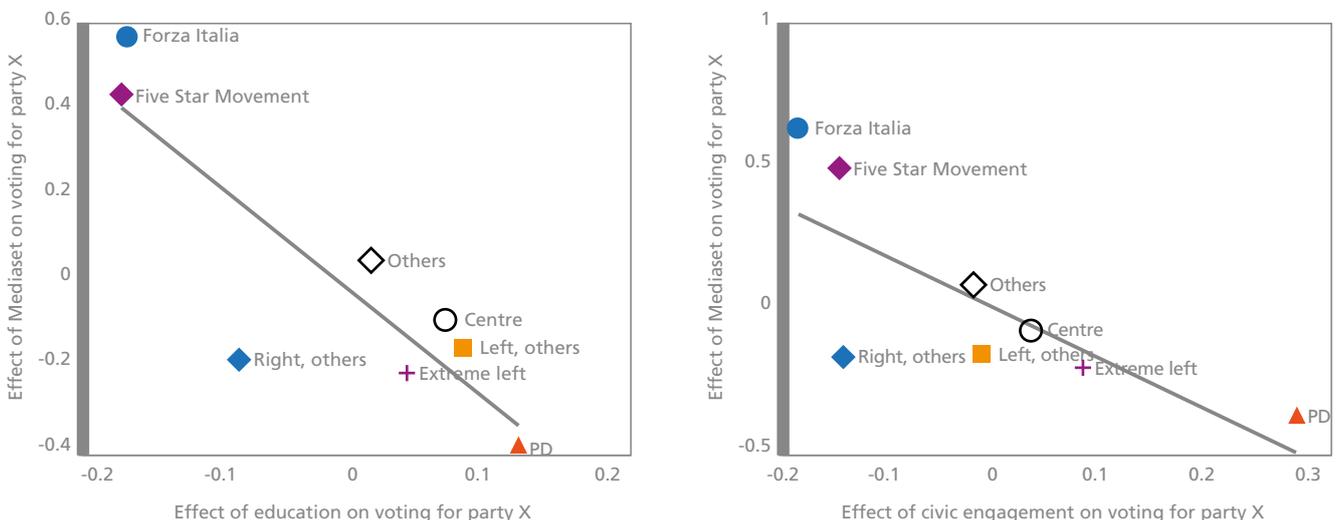
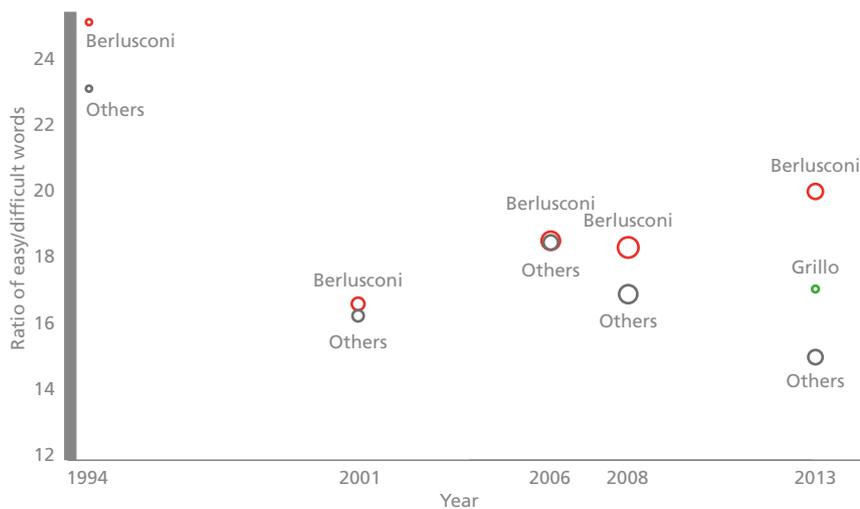


Figure 4:
Accessibility of language used by Italian politicians on TV



pronounced for heavy viewers. In particular, the effect is much larger – close to 10 percentage points – for individuals exposed either as children (under 10) or at later ages (55 or older).

But the mechanisms through which these cohorts were influenced are different. Older viewers appear to have developed an attachment to the network due to its light entertainment content, becoming more exposed to pro-Berlusconi news after these were introduced on Mediaset in 1991.

For young viewers, the effect is more subtle and perhaps more interesting. We show that individuals first exposed to Mediaset as children display lower cognitive abilities when they are adults, as measured by standardised numeracy and literacy tests. This result is in line with psychological and medical research suggesting that by crowding out more intellectually stimulating activities such as reading, entertainment TV can be detrimental for children's cognitive development (for example, Schmidt and Vandewater, 2008).

In addition, consistent with the seminal work of Putnam (2000) on the decline of social capital in the United States, we show that individuals exposed to entertainment TV as children exhibit significantly lower levels of civic engagement, as measured by interest in politics and participation in voluntary associations.

In the final part of our study, we discuss why these changes were likely to benefit Forza Italia and, more generally,

parties that appeal to less sophisticated and less civic-minded voters.

Figure 3 shows that Forza Italia was well-positioned to benefit from the decline in cognitive skills and civic engagement induced by entertainment TV, as the party was disproportionately popular among less educated and less engaged voters. One reason for this may be that lower cognitive abilities make voters more vulnerable to the simple political messages that characterise the rhetoric of populist leaders.

Figure 4, which is based on analysis of a large corpus of televised interventions by Italian politicians, confirms that compared with other political leaders, Berlusconi uses language that is more accessible to ordinary people, and is therefore more likely to appeal to less sophisticated voters.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that even light-fare entertainment TV can influence political preferences and electoral behaviour, and that this effect is mediated by deeper cognitive and cultural transformations. Though specific to the Italian case, our analysis provides more general insights into how the cultural codes popularised by entertainment media can influence political preferences.

In particular, while popular discontent with the political establishment is likely to have deep socioeconomic roots, our findings suggest that by popularising certain linguistic codes and cultural models, entertainment TV may have contributed to creating a fertile ground for the success of populist leaders.

This article summarises 'The Political Legacy of Entertainment TV' by Ruben Durante, Paolo Pinotti and Andrea Tesei, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1475 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1475.pdf>).

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People who
are exposed to
entertainment
TV as children
are cognitively
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later life

Further reading

Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan (2007) 'The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122(3): 1187-1234.

Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya (2011) 'Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia', *American Economic Review* 101(7): 3253-85.

Benjamin Olken (2009) 'Do Television and Radio Destroy Social Capital? Evidence from Indonesian Villages', *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1(4): 1-33.

Robert Putnam (2000) *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster.

Marie Evans Schmidt and Elizabeth Vandewater (2008) 'Media and Attention, Cognition, and School Achievement', *Future Child* 18(1): 63-85.

David Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) 'Propaganda and Conflict: Theory and Evidence from the Rwandan Genocide', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4): 1947-94.