COVID-19 in Italy: Performing Power and Emotions

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The article charts the notion of statehood emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the emotional repertoire and the themes addressed in the government's crisis communication. The conception and performance of statehood and power in Italy during the COVID-19 emergency rely on four interrelated nodal points: (1) the state's relationship to citizens, (2) the state's relationship to regions and local governments, (3) the state's relationship to politics and the Italian parliament, and (4) the state within international sphere. For each of those nodal points, we have analyzed relevant themes and rhetorical devices following a discourse-historical approach (DHA). Specific efforts have been made to identify the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication. In the interplay between the dramatic context of crisis and an enduring trend toward the personalization of the government's leadership, the source of legitimacy has shifted from traditional democratic procedures to the use of emotional capital. The analysis of the Italian government's communication reveals the features of the emotional capital used during the pandemic, like the ability to display empathy toward citizens' sufferings, the will to engage in dialog with social stakeholders, confidence in expertise, and the pride and determination to negotiate within the EU. The article concludes that the performance of the prime minister in expressing his emotional states has nurtured the conception of post-COVID statehood, consolidating his individual leadership and flawing the spaces of political conflict.

Keywords: leadership, emotions, performance, communication, populism

INTRODUCTION

Our democracies have been confronted with many challenges, some deriving from enduring trends of change and some arising from critical junctures in history. In the last 20 years, for instance, the process of democratization has undergone serious moments of crisis, such as during the Great Recession and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic; at the same time, a neoliberal hegemony has constrained the welfare state and pushed advanced democracies toward processes of depoliticization (Fawcett et al., 2017). The insurgence of far-right populist parties and the authoritarian backlash have further complicated the road toward democratization (see, for instance, Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Pappas, 2019; Crouch, 2020).

In those crucial years, some trends have consolidated. First, the dissolution of political parties as a means for organizing social demands, confronting collective interests, and recruiting government executives has led to a "partyless democracy" (Mair, 2000). Second, personalization of politics begins with the individualization of political power in the hands of a single individual and necessitates the search for a direct relationship between the leader and his electorate (Viviani, 2015). In such a novel

social relationship, two elements acquire more importance than they have borne in the past: the personality of the leader and the performative/communicative dimension of the process of consensus-building (De Blasio et al., 2012).

Particularly in critical times, the personality of the leader, his performance and discourse, can modify how the State is organized and perceived. As crises open the possibility for a restructuring of social and political institutions, the narrativity emerging from such crises is the foundation of structural transformations of the state (Hay, 1999; Jessop, 2016). During the pandemic, for instance, communicative acts have reacquired their capacity to shape the reality and ways of living: What the government has announced during these crucial months has constituted the "new normality" of the post-COVID era. Hence, performing statehood and power is not only a matter of communication and rhetoric but also of specific policy actions undertaken (i.e., policies and regulation).

This article studies the interplay between the performance and notion of statehood and the personalization of the leadership during the pandemic's first wave. We analyze the case of Giuseppe Conte's communication in Italy for two main reasons. First, Italy was the first Western country to be severely hit by the coronavirus and to declare a national emergency followed by a "hard lockdown." Therefore, studying the communication by the Italian government means looking at the first phases of the pandemic crisis, assuming that other countries might have been inspired by the best and the worst practices undertaken in Italy as an initial example. Second, the leadership of Giuseppe Conte presents a quasi-experimental case: When he took office, Conte had not had a political career or a clear ideological leaning, and during the COVID-19 crisis, he had come to lead a second Cabinet with a totally different majority than the first one. Although Conte's original mandate was to exercise a warranty role, and his main credit was that he came from outside the parliament, the management of the COVID-19 crisis has seen the consolidation of his political leadership.[1] The analysis of his communication is therefore oriented to estimate how emotions might have contributed to the construction of his credibility as a political leader.

In particular, the process of building and personalizing leadership during the COVID-19 crisis is scrutinized through the lens of the political sociology of emotions, a field of study that is receiving increasing attention for its ability to connect communication, political sociology, and psychology. Here, we argue that the emotional repertoire used by a leader forms part of his emotional capital and that such capital can be in turn exchanged for more traditional procedures of power legitimation. While we acknowledge that the role of emotions in democratic processes might be ambivalent, we want to underline that we need to assess such a role on a case-by-case basis, rather than simply dismiss it as harmful and alien. Emotions play an important part in extraordinary, critical contexts (which in turn occur more and more frequently) as well as in ordinary processes of political leadership-building (most of all when a political history for a figure or group is lacking). Although the concept of audience democracy (Manin, 2010; Sorice, 2014; Urbinati, 2014) is not new, we aim to clarify the role of emotions in the consolidation of those structural transformations of contemporary democracies in the post-COVID era.

PERFORMANCE OF LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONS

At the beginning of the 20th century, research in the psychology of crowds identified emotions in politics as precursors of unexpected, unpredictable, and perilous collective behaviors. The rise of Nazism and fascism and the Holocaust have contributed to the success of this negative evaluation of emotions in politics (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). Later, the affirmation of a rational, deliberative ideal of the public sphere has constituted a normative benchmark that has excluded emotions from politics (De Blasio and Selva, 2020a). Increasingly in recent years, we are witnessing a revival of the interest in studying emotions as a key feature of social change, with ambivalent judgments on the so-called emotionalization of the public sphere (see, for instance, Higgins, 2008; Saccà, 2015; Sorice, 2020b). For some, the increasing use of emotions in politics has been interpreted as a substitute for the loss of ideological roots, as a way to win power within the context of dissolving political parties, and as a result of the general downgrading of the possibility of rational deliberation in the public sphere. For others, emotions have maintained a positive allure because they are conceived to contrast with attitudes of technocratic élites, and for this reason, emotions are exploited most of all (but not exclusively) by populist actors pretending to be genuine and authentic (Wodak, 2021). The "right" or "efficient" use of emotions is still seen as a quality of a political leader's ability to build a relationship with her/his supporters.

The emotional turn describes a very vibrant debate in the social sciences. Jan Slaby and colleagues, for instance, have talked about an "emotional reflexivity" to describe the tendency to study the social world through the lens of emotions and affects (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). Although social scientists have produced many perspectives on emotions,[2] here we rely on social constructivism and psychoanalysis (particularly Lacanian) to conceive emotions as elements that reveal the power structures of modern times as they are embodied in people's behaviors

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[1]Several opinion polls have estimated that the public trust in Giuseppe Conte has increased from 37% before the pandemic to 58% at the end of the first wave in late May 2020, with a peak of 71% in March; see for instance https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/05/20/sondaggi-fiducia-stabile-poco-sotto-al-60-per-conte-e-governo-la-maggioranza-promuove-lesecutivo-per-emergenza-e-decreto-rilancio/5807426/ and https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/12/30/news/sondaggi_nell_anno_delcovid_il_primato_e_di_conte_salvini_il_meno_amato-280507928/.

[2]The sociology of emotions has built different taxonomies of emotions (e.g., distinguishing between positive and negative, moral and individual, and primary and secondary) and provided definitions for all related concepts such as sentiments, feelings, moods, and, most of all, affects. For a comprehensive overview on those concepts, see TenHouten (2007) and Slaby and von Scheve (2019). This article follows a phenomenological and cultural approach to the emotional component of social and political life, meaning that "rather than asking 'what are emotions?,' I will ask 'what emotions do?'" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4).

(Clarke, 2003). The most important consequence of this approach is that while emotions might be universal, the ways to identify, describe, and enact them are mediated by specific social and cultural contexts. "Structures of feeling" have a historicity and emerge as a result of historical processes of domination and struggles for emancipation (Ahmed, 2014): They identify the meanings, practices, relationships, and discourses that ground human behaviors according to specific settings. Linking emotions to history means acknowledging that they also have a normative side and that emotions accumulate over the lifetime, contributing to the building of political subjectivities.

As new political subjects emerge from society, political parties and leaders also ride emotional hegemony with differing results: Some leaders appear to be more effective in exploiting (or exhibiting) a sentimental connection with the people (Sorice, 2014, 2019), while others show specific emotional repertoires that tend to be highly polarizing and divisive (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). While early studies in the sociology of emotions and psychology have focused on emotional intelligence and other personal characteristics of a leader, contemporary scholars tend to see emotionalization as a communication strategy: as a matter of performance rather than ontology. The theoretical grounds for this conception are the dramaturgical model sketched by Erving Goffman (1969): Power, as much as any other social relationship, is exercised through screenplays that are adapted to the settings of interaction. In this model, a certain degree of publicness is always present in every "stage" in which the agent/actor intervenes, as the boundaries of the stages are defined by the situations of social interaction. According to the studies on the charismatic performance, for instance, a leader's career should be assessed through the analysis of its appearances in the dramas it has written and played in (Joosse, 2017). Such studies have stressed the ephemerality of political leaders who perform a pseudo-charisma based on popularity and visibility in the media (Massidda, 2020; Viviani, 2020).

As leadership is performed through actions and communicative actions in particular (Moffitt, 2020), emotions are part of the screenplay. In this perspective, the distinction between charisma and pseudo-charisma is problematic: For instance, while recognizing that far-right leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini did not adhere to the Weberian concept of charisma, Eatwell (2006) warns that the social consequences of such a "manufactured charismatic bond" were equivalent. Identifying this factor is a way to normalize manipulation in communicative processes, acknowledging that any public performance or any social interaction relies on a certain degree of fictionality or artificiality (Sorice, 2020a). Other far-right leaders (e.g., Jean-Marie Le Pen and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and more recently Matteo Salvini and Donald Trump) sustained an emotional bond and the personification typical of the charismatic/plebiscitarian leadership ideal-type (Eatwell, 2018). We could also add that the bond between the leader (whether charismatic or pseudo-charismatic) and the people rests on a certain quota of emotions *mise-en-scene*, but it would be almost impossible to determine empirically if such emotions are truly *felt* by the leader or just pretended.

In this article, we try to use the peculiar angle of the sociology of emotions to study the discourses surrounding notions of statehood, authority, and power, as they have been deployed during the crucial times of COVID-19. This approach allows focusing on two different but interrelated aspects of contemporary democracies: First, emotions have frequently been used to maintain social order and power structures (Isin, 2004; Fortier, 2010; Di Gregorio and Merolli, 2016). We have already observed elsewhere that this is particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, as compliance to rules of containment has been solicited by the dramatic context and by the dramatization of such a context by governments (De Blasio and Selva, 2020b). Second, emotions are employed in a tactical dimension by leaders in their communication, as tools to consolidate a relationship with the public. This use is widely covered by literature on political communication and populism (De Blasio et al., 2012; De Blasio and Sorice, 2018); at the same time, there is nothing to support the claim that only populist leaders use emotionalization as a communication strategy or that only populist leaders are able to express empathy.

The possession or lack of "emotional capital" by political leaders is part of the research agenda of the sociology of emotions. Echoing Pierre Bourdieu, emotional capital can be defined as "an *embodied* form of cultural capital, understood as a trans-situational capacity to express, manage, and feel emotions in a manner that is 'in tune' with dominant emotion norms and cultures" (Heaney, 2019, p. 234, italics in the original); it is a form of capital in the sense that it can be converted to and exchanged with political capital. At the same time, the ability to use emotional capital and to transform it into political capital is highly differentiated among leaders. By approaching emotions in the analysis of discourses and performance of statehood, our aim is to highlight how emotional capital can be built recursively over time as a source of legitimacy in challenging times.

A TIMELINE OF COVID-19 AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE IN ITALY (MARCH–SEPTEMBER 2020)

Italy was the first Western country to be hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. The first native (i.e., non-touristic) cases were reported in the last 10 days of February 2020, but the outbreak has been registered during the first week of March (**Figure 1**). From January 31, the prime minister declared a state of emergency, suspended flights from and to China, and mobilized the Department of Civil Protection, the Ministry of Health, and the National Institute of Health to monitor the situation. On February 5, 2020, a Technical-Scientific Committee (abbreviated CTS) was created, an advisory board comprising experts and public executives providing evidence and models to support the government during the decision-making process for the whole period.[3]

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[3]See the composition of the Technical-Scientific Committee on the Ministry of Health website, retrieved from: http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioContenutiNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=5432&area=nuovoCoronavirus&menu=vuoto [Accessed January 9, 2021].

Given that the high rate of cases situated in Lombardy and Veneto were isolated in two clusters, on February 23, 11 towns were placed under quarantine[4] (that area was declared a "red zone," a terminology further used to identify the gravity of the pandemic). In the meanwhile, several mayors and governors of regions undertook similar measures, such as the closure of bars and restaurants at night, the obligation to wear face masks in public offices, temporary school closures, and so on.[5] But the containment of the red zone was not timely enough to block the mushrooming of other cases in other parts of Italy.

During the first weeks, the situation was underestimated by some media pundits, industry associations (e.g. Confindustria), and political representatives (e.g., the mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, the Democratic Party's secretary Nicola Zingaretti, and the League leader Matteo Salvini).[6] The overall message was to try to carry on business as usual, dismissing the pandemic as a sort of "enhanced" seasonal flu. Carrying on with business as usual became unsustainable from the early days of March. That approach was punctuated by a sequence of law-decrees by the Cabinet and decrees by the prime minister (DPCM), an executive order that does not necessarily require a collegial agreement within the cabinet or a parliamentary control[7] (a timeline of all measures is sketched in **Table 1**).

Each of those provisions was accompanied with a press conference, a TV address to the nation, and sometimes also a Facebook live streaming that saw the Prime Minister as the main actor. Press conferences were held jointly with other minister, most of all the Minister of Finance, Roberto Gualtieri; the Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza; and the Minister of Education, Lucia Azzolina. At the same time, the Department of Civil Protection hosted a daily press briefing giving official statistics about case spreading, hospitalization, and deaths.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of this article, all communication by the Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte has been included in the analysis. As the head of the executive body, the prime minister has taken a leading role since the early days of the crisis. He has concentrated all communication and actions by the Cabinet by engaging in frequent press conferences, interviews, and addresses. We acknowledge that this approach to communication with the public is neither a neutral choice nor a necessary outcome[8]; hence, it stresses a peculiar aspect of the personalization of the government and of the performance of power during the COVID-19 crisis.

The corpus includes press interviews, press conferences, addresses, and TV interviews for the period between February 23 and September 3, 2020 (at the beginning of what has been called "the second wave of COVID-19"), for a total of 58 texts, as depicted in **Table 2**. All materials have been retrieved from the official website of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

The corpus has been analyzed following a discursive historical methodology (Meyer and Wodak, 2015; Charteris-Black, 2018). According to this approach, the political subgenres of communication (i.e., the types of content included in the corpus, distinguishing among press conferences, addresses to the nation, and social media contents) are to be considered in their totality, as different tools used for the same goals. The aim of a discourse–historical approach (DHA) is thus twofold: From the one side, it focuses on the themes addressed within discourses, and from the other side, it considers discourses as emerging from intertextuality, considering their coherence and cohesion as guarantees of their efficacy and recognizability over time (Reisigl and Wodak, 2015; Wodak, 2021). In such a vein, discursive strategies can be highlighted, such as nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, intensification, and mitigation.

The concept of nodal points is rooted in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory: With this term, the authors refer to the major ideas, words, or signs to which a meaning is assigned, which are frequently disputed, and which are occasionally reimagined over time. Hence, the concept opens to the definition of discourse in terms of a power struggle. In theory, nodal points can emerge from any discourse in different formats; in origins, nodal points could be

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[4]See the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/23/20A01228/sg [Accessed January 9, 2021].

[5]See the collection of news articles published during February 2020, retrieved from: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/22/news/coronavirus_in_italia_aggiornamento_ora_per_ora-249241616/ [Accessed January 9, 2021].

[6]See for instance "Dal coronavirus all'influenza stagionale: ecco i tassi di mortalità, numeri alla mano," Il Sole 24 Ore, February 13, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dal-coronavirus-all-influenza-stagionale-ecco-tassi-mortalita-numeri-mano-ACQQd2IB; "Coronavirus, la direttrice del laboratorio di analisi dell'ospedale Sacco: non è pandemia, mi sembra follia. Ma sbaglia i dati," La Stampa, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/02/23/news/coronavirus-la-direttrice-del-laboratorio-di-analisi-dell-ospedale-sacco-non-e-pandemia-mi-sembra-follia-1.38506371; "Coronavirus: nell'80-90% dei casi è come l'influenza, per gli altri rischio polmonite," Il Sole 24 Ore, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/coronavirus-nell-80-90percento-casi-e-come-l-influenza-gli-altri-rischio-polmonite-ACQ4pMLB?refresh_ce=1; "Coronavirus, il presidente dei biologi: "Non è più grave di un'influenza, il panico è peggiore della malattia"," Tgcom24, February 25, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/coronavirus-il-presidente-deibiologi-non-pi-grave-di-uninfluenza-il-panico-peggiore-della-malattia_15288332-202002a.shtml; "Coronavirus, parla il medico guarito dopo il contagio nella zona rossa: "È come un'influenza e ammalarsi non è facile," La Repubblica, February 26, 2020, retrieved from: https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/26/news/coronavirus_il_medico_guarito_niente_panico_-249646477/. On politicians' early perspectives, see "Sala ha detto che la campagna "Milano non si ferma" è stata un errore," Il Post, March 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilpost.it/2020/03/23/coronavirus-milano-non-si-ferma-sala/[All links accessed January 9, 2021].

[7]The opportunity and validity of the DPCM are disputed not only by parliamentarians (namely, from the opposition parties) but also by some law experts. Giuseppe Conte has repeatedly addressed the parliament to defend his choice to use the DPCM as he reputed them the most suitable tool for fast interventions and frequent updates.

[8]For instance, in the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson's communication has been judged as overcentralized, but vague and contradictory (Dagnall et al., 2020; Newton, 2020). Moreover, as the successor of Giuseppe Conte in managing the pandemic, Mario Draghi's communication has been marked by an opposite strategy of understatement, limiting his public appearances and leaving the floor to the ministries during several press briefings.

TABLE 1 | Timeline of the Italian government's measures.

Date	Type of measure	Relevant measures
February 23, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Conferring the cabinet with special powers (i.e., limitation of personal freedom)
February 23, 2020	DPCM	Establishing a red zone in some towns of Lombardy and Veneto
February 24, 2020	Decree by the Minister of Finance	Suspending tax duties and mortgages for residents in the red zone
February 25, 2020	DPCM	Limiting recreational activities and restricting access to some public services
February 28, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Providing economic support for families, workers, and companies
March 1, 2020	DPCM	Extending the scope of the red zone to some other towns in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, and Marche
March 4, 2020	DPCM	Closing schools and universities until March 15
March 8, 2020		Extending the scope of the red zone to all Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna
March 9, 2020	DPCM	Declaring a national red zone until April 3
March 9, 2020	*Start of lockdown*	
March 11, 2020	DPCM	Disposing the closure of all commercial activities except food groceries and drugstores on all national territory
March 20, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Prohibiting recreational and sport activities outdoors
March 22, 2020	DPCM	Disposing the closure of all industries except food processing and strategic sectors
March 22, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of the Interior	Prohibiting traveling between towns in the same region
March 25, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Conferring the cabinet with special powers further limiting personal liberties
March 28, 2020	*Highest number of daily deaths: 971*	
April 1, 2020	DPCM	Prolonging the duration of the lockdown to April 13
April 10, 2020	DPCM	Reopening some commercial activities
April 26, 2020	DPCM	Starting "Phase 2" from May 4
May 4, 2020	*End of lockdown*	
May 15, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Extending national emergency and special powers from May 18 to July 31. Regions and towns can rule autonomously on personal movements. National boundaries reopen from the early days of June
May 16, 2020	DPCM	Executing the law-decree
June 3, 2020	*Reopening borders between regions*	
June 11, 2020	DPCM	Reopening some commercial and recreational activities (including theaters)
June 30, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Restricting activities
July 9, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Restricting access to outdoor public spaces
July 14, 2020	DPCM	Extending the duration of the rules until July 31
July 30, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Extending the national emergency and related special powers until October 15
September 3, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Restricting opening and access to schools and universities

Source: own elaboration from the Italian government's website.

TABLE 2 | Corpus under study.

Type of content	No. of documents
Press interviews	35
Press conferences	16
Addresses	6
TV interviews	1
Total	58

"floating" or "empty" signifiers indicating many meanings (they are polysemic) and referring to a broader "field of discursivity." Terms such as "the people," for instance, are frequently used by opposite factions with vastly different meanings. At the end of a power struggle, the dominant meaning is temporarily fixed, but the door is open for further resemantization. The notion of statehood, as we; as that of state power, is an excellent example of "floating signifier"; since its origins in the early modern age, it has changed its structure, functions, and relationships with the private sector and civil society many times and regularly requires further clarification (Jessop, 2016). Following this perspective, the meaning of discourses is always the result of a negotiation among multiple actors. In particular, the "idea of the State" results from the relationships between the government

and several actors (ibid.). Given the scope of the research topic, we have focused our analysis on four interrelated nodal points we have found to ground the study. The nodal points that sustain the conception and performance of statehood in Italy during the COVID-19 emergency emerge from a relational perspective that puts emphasis on the actors the state interacts with: (1) citizens, (2) regions and local governments, (3) politics and the parliament, and (4) the international sphere. For each of those nodal points, we have analyzed relevant themes and rhetorical devices.

Specific efforts have been made to identify the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication. The concept of emotional repertoire refers to the array of emotions that are recalled through words, tone of voice, gestures, scenography, and choreography, and constitute a sort of "glue" among individuals who feel they belong to a community (von Poser et al., 2019). Charting the emotional repertoire through a discourse–historical approach means analyzing the ways in which emotions contribute to the discursive strategies, in terms of valence (positive or negative) and intensity (dramatization or mitigation). The valence of emotions has been coded by looking at psychoevolutionary theories that distinguish between primary and secondary emotions (TenHouten, 2007). This distinction is an attempt to

TABLE 3 | Discourses of statehood in Conte's communication.

Statehood and citizens	Statehood and local governments	Statehood and politics	Statehood in the international sphere
Preparedness of the healthcare system	National unity	Avoiding politicization	Resilience of the country
↓	↓	↓	↓
Rhetorical devices: use of stats and figures, appeal to rationality, display of international endorsements Emotional repertoire: confidence, gratitude, pride, and tranquillity	Rhetorical devices: defining a national "red zone," exercising a superior authority leaving little room for regional governance Emotional repertoire: responsibility, and determination	Rhetorical devices: partisanship is opportunistic, the times require consensus Emotional repertoire: responsibility, determination, and anger	Rhetorical devices: emphasis on status as role model, first responses, strength of the health system, and economic stability Emotional repertoire: pride, solidarity, and unity
Economic support to families and companies	Coordination and dialog	Expertise and decision-making	Negotiations within the EU
↓	↓	↓	↓
Rhetorical devices: recalling institutional duties, highlighting the unprecedented conditions of the economic emergency, and emphasizing the concrete presence of the state Emotional repertoire: sacrifice, empathy, solidarity, and moral duty (Omitted) Enforcement of containment measures Rhetorical devices: appeal to individual responsibility Emotional repertoire: sacrifice, love, and solidarity	Emotional repertoire: solidarity and confidence	Emotional repertoire: determination and confidence	Emotional repertoire: pride, determination, and anger

classify and simplify the complexity of emotional statuses felt by humans and animals: Primary emotions include four pairs of oppositional emotions: acceptance and disgust, joy and sadness, anger and fear, and anticipation and surprise. Secondary emotions such as love, pride, curiosity, anxiety, embarrassment, and so on descend from pairs of positive and negative primary emotions. The validity of this typology resides in the possibility of atomizing feelings into more simple elements that can be categorized by researchers; at the same time, as with any attempt to simplify social processes, it suffers from strong limits of comprehension. Trying to overcome those limits, we have considered all emotions performed in the government's communication for their positive or negative valence; at the same time, we have also charted the intensity of emotions relying on the DHA opposition between dramatization and mitigation. The result will be a chart of the themes according to the emotional repertoire they rely upon.

To summarize our technique of analysis, for each theme identified in the texts, we have tracked how it is argued and linked to the other ones, reunited in a specific nodal point; we have also highlighted relevant rhetorical devices and the emotions mobilized to anchor each theme.

DISCOURSES OF STATEHOOD AND EMOTIONAL REPERTOIRE IN ITALY

The features of the four nodal points are synthetized in **Table 3**, accompanied by examples of rhetorical devices and the corresponding emotional repertoire.

Statehood and Citizens

The first theme to emerge from the earliest communications is the degree of preparedness of the national healthcare system. Although Conte has shifted from far too confident declarations ("Italy is a safe country," February 25) to more nuanced claims, the efficacy of the healthcare system has remained a key issue for the whole period. Two basic arguments were proposed. The first was a message of pride, confidence, and gratitude toward medical workers "fighting the virus on the frontline"; the Italian health system was described as a symbol of excellence to be proud of. Second, as long as the pandemic was spreading, the responsibility of every citizen to avoid unnecessary medical treatments was stressed, while the government was committed to enhancing medical equipment and infrastructure. Widespread testing was not recommended, to avoid dramatization and overload. Social distance and personal hygiene also formed part of citizens' responsibility. During one of the last press conferences before the end of the first lockdown, on April 26, Conte summarized his relationship with citizens with a simple and direct message: "If you care about Italy, you keep social distance." The accent is on the first part of the sentence, where the emotional attachment to the country is to be proven. The most frequent discursive strategy is perspectivization: Particularly during the lockdown, Conte indulged in expressing his empathy toward citizens, workers, families, and children for the sacrifices they were doing. For instance, on May 16, he acknowledged he was receiving many letters from citizens suffering from economic difficulties and answers them: "I am aware that for some sectors reopening will not mean recovery." And on June 3, he claimed that numbers suggested "a renovated sense of confidence and enthusiasm,"

FIGURE 1 | COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths in Italy by day. Source: WHO dashboard.
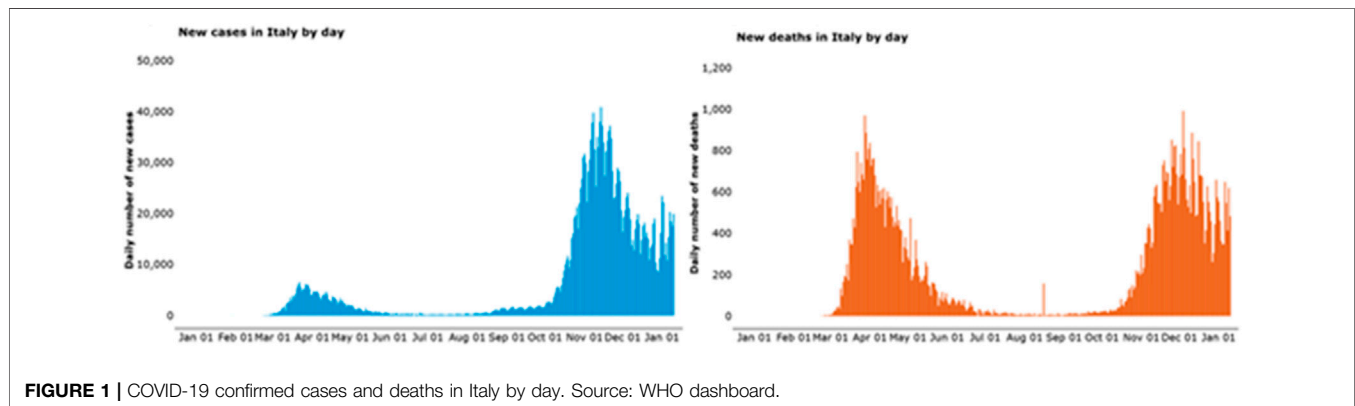
which is fully legitimate, as "we deserve smiles and joy, after weeks of hard sacrifices."

As the government asks citizens to be united in the effort to fight the pandemic (also using metaphors such as "we are all on the same ship") and stresses individual responsibility, it also highlights its role in supporting workers and companies economically. The emergency is depicted as both health-related and economic, and this latter aspect opens a space of dialog with the opposition. At the same time, "there is no differentiation of roles" (March 5), meaning that the government maintains a specific power to steer economic policies and to decide whether to ask productive sectors for sacrifices in the name of citizens' health. In his address on March 11, Conte frames the trade-off between health and the economy as a matter of personal conscience, assuming a fully personal responsibility. Again, on March 21, he repeats "the State is there, the State is here," addressing workers and companies that were suffering the consequences of the lockdown. Later on, Conte defines his government's economic relief package as "tremendous" (May 7). He frequently stresses his personal proximity to the private sector by using the locution "the Italy System" (for instance, on April 26 and June 3) to highlight the organicity and integration of the country. This locution is intended to emphasize that everything is well-functioning and project a real recovery (through infrastructure, funds, and economic reliefs), a message launched to two main addressees: domestic interest groups (i.e., Confindustria) and European partners. The newly elected President of Confindustria, Carlo Bonomi (formerly President of Assolombarda, the main industrial association of Lombardy), has repeatedly criticized the Italian government since taking the position. Solicited by a journalist, Conte replies to the last attack by inviting Confindustria to "bring forward-looking projects, not limited to just reducing taxes" (June 3), at the so-called General States of the Economy, a venue for allowing a dialog among all social forces, including Confindustria, other associations of enterprises, and trade unions (held on June 13–21). This remains the most explicit reply to Bonomi's criticisms. On the issue of safely reopening schools in September, Conte highlights that "this is not a challenge to Minister [of Education] Azzolina, to the President of the Council, to the government; it is a challenge we must win together, with school deans, officers, unions; we always want them to participate" (June 16).

The issue of enforcement of containment measures has arisen at different moments, but particularly in the earlier days of the lockdown and during the summer. Interestingly, the issue has been treated much more thoroughly by the media than by the government itself, in the form of a blaming and shaming campaign that stigmatized some behaviors (such as running outdoors or going to crowded streets, beaches, and nightclubs). The ability of the state to enforce the rules of containment is rarely put into question by the government, determining a sort of omission. The issue is not how to control citizens' compliance but to convince them that compliance to containment rules is an act of patriotism. For instance, the prime minister is frequently acknowledging how much patience and spirit of responsibility the citizens must have. Even in the most dramatic moment of the crisis, when the pictures of army trucks transferring COVID-19 coffins out of Bergamo inundated the newspapers (**Figure 2**), Conte stressed the need to follow containment rules at the individual level.

Statehood, Regions, and Local Governments

The main theme in this relationship is the avoidance of possible conflicts between the national government and the regional governors. The conflict is both administrative and political. The Italian Constitution's reform of Title V (back in 2001) has granted to regions the management of healthcare, and some regional governors exploit their positions to consolidate a political leadership that is also effective at the national level. The decision to enact a national lockdown has exacerbated conflict: Regions such as Sardinia and Calabria have been subjected to the same constraints as Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, despite very different levels of contagion (**Figure 3**).

The gaps among different regions have paved the way for contrasts between the central government and a number of governors, particularly from Southern Italy. Italy is suffering a historical fracture between the North and the South in terms of economic and social development; these previously existing difficulties have worsened the impact of the pandemic, and the Southern regions pressed for a more nuanced approach. The decision of the government was to avoid any possible fragmentation of the national territory, not only from a precautionary point of view but also from a political perspective. The leadership of regional governors has also been

FIGURE 2 | Italian army trucks taking coffins out of Bergamo, March 19. Source and credits: ANSA.

perceived as a possible threat to the national government's legitimacy because the Conte cabinet is sustained by a floating parliamentarian coalition made up currently of Five Stars Movement, the Democratic Party, and Italia Viva, but formerly constituted by the Five Stars Movement and the League (which lasted until September 2019).

In this scheme, the appeal to union and collaboration is not just a matter of rhetoric but a precise strategy of leadership consolidation. The government has highlighted the unity of the state beyond the specific competences of regions on health issues management. In communications, the emphasis is put on the appeal for responsibility and the determination to pursue an equitable environment: No matter the discrepancies in the spread of the virus across the different regions, all Italian citizens are called to stay at home in a move of national solidarity. It is important to notice that in the first wave, the northern regions (and in particular Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna) suffered most from the contagion, whereas in the south, the cases were relatively low. The decision to close down all the regions has been criticized by some governors of the southern regions and has no longer been pursued since the beginning of the second wave in September 2020. These polemics are not explicitly recalled by Giuseppe Conte in his speeches, which solely emphasize the appeal to national unity and responsibility of all.

Instead, governors and mayors are frequently called to act in coordination, collaboration, and dialog. Every action by the government is undertaken after intensive colloquia with governors (together or singly). On March 28, for instance, mayors were defined as "our first sentinels," motivating a transfer of funds from the central to the local governments, with the aim of distributing food supplies to families in need. From the end of lockdown, regions have been entitled to collect data about the contagion and forward it to the national authorities (May 16). Finally, from April 27 onward, the prime minister visited the towns in Lombardy where the virus had spread most, to display his emotional vicinity to local communities.

Statehood and Politics

As in any other state, the Italian government has made frequent appeals to the opposition to avoid unnecessary political conflicts during a terrible time for the country. On March 4, at the very

beginning of the emergency, Conte was already claiming that "the challenge of the COVID-19 has no political color." That phrase soon became a refrain on any occasion of political discordance. It is not by chance that when addressing this theme, the emotional repertoire mirrors that of the relationship between the government and the regions. As regional governors are actors in the political parties and run for electoral offices, their leadership in regions is frequently a springboard to acquire more power at the national level. The political conflict was further enhanced as soon as the European Union starts to reflect on a common financial strategy to address the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. Since April, the *casus belli* is the use of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)[9]: the Conte Cabinet has engaged in complex negotiations with its European partners to avoid using the ESM, in an attempt to take distance from austerity reforms.

At the same time, transparency and truth are described as "the first vaccines against conspiracies and polemics" (February 23). Conte repeatedly claims that his government is oriented to ensure the maximum degree of transparency of the policy-making process. Most times, Conte is refusing an explicit statement by the opposition. On the contrary, on April 10, Conte explicitly addressed Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, two leaders of the far-right, accusing them of "irresponsibly" spreading fake news regarding his willingness to adhere to the ESM. On that occasion, he affirmed that "this government does not work under cover of darkness. [This government] looks Italians in their face and speaks clearly." His gestures (pointing an accusing finger and looking into the camera) and tone of voice express anger and determination, while at the same time he depicts his competitors as false and irresponsible.

After the lockdown, the time for economic relief policies has come, bringing with it a reappraisal of political conflicts. The negotiations "with all stakeholders of the Italy System" are thus described as intense and difficult, as the Italian government must "overcome any resistance toward change, partisan reconstructions, reductive visions" with "courage, foresight, great determination" (June 3).

The relationship between politics and decision-making also calls into question the role of the experts. In this matter, the government emphasizes that the judgment and evidence provided by the CTS are informing all decisions. The expertise and capacity of the members of CTS are used as a shield for any possible attack on the legitimacy of the government's decisions, hence providing a sort of reassurance for citizens, who can feel that those in charge know what to do. From April, the government has also been supported by other technical expertise in matters of socioeconomic development and recovery; the task force led by the former manager Vittorio Colao was intended to guide the so-called Phase 2, in which containment measures were meant to gradually relax. The task force is described as crucial for the "organic program of recovery" launched on April 10. The task force is also joining religious representatives from the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), an entity that is accredited as a partner above

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[9]The European Stability Mechanism was created in 2012 to recover from the Great Recession: It consists of an intergovernmental framework of emergency loans among member states that have agreed on rigid parameters for public finances that often imply major reforms (such as the reform of welfare, pensions, the health system, and public sector). It has been one of the cornerstones of austerity programs.
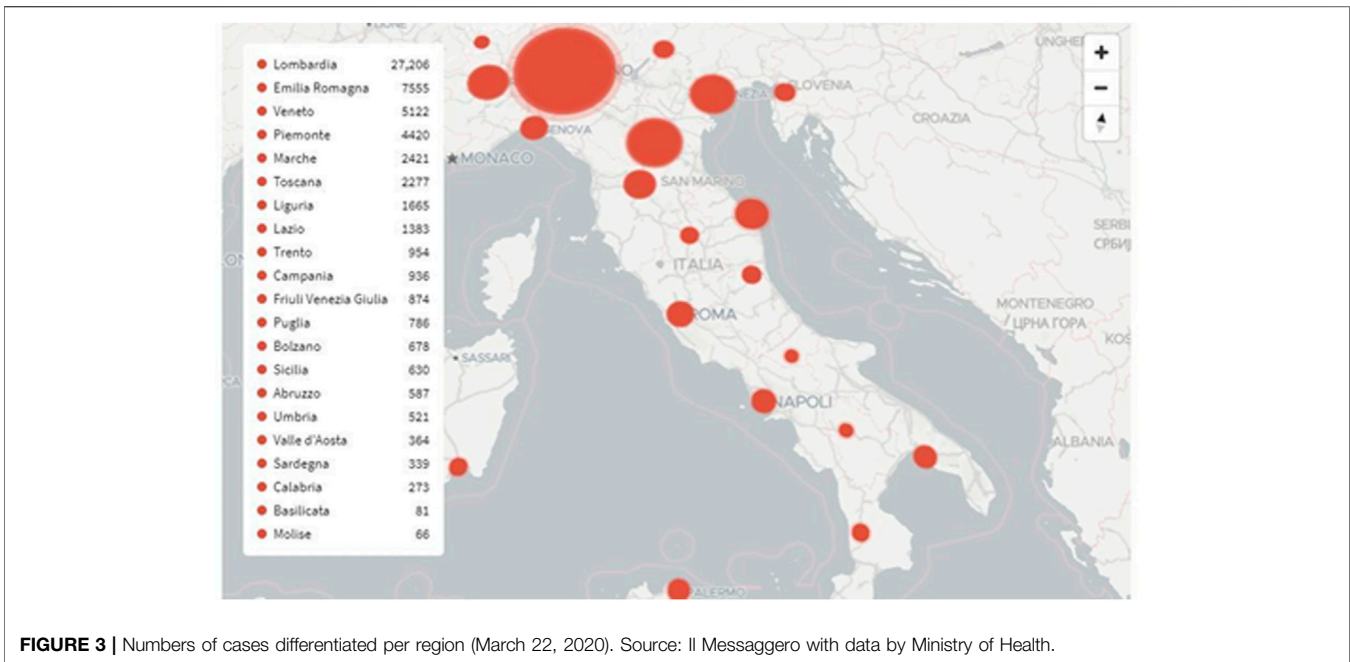
FIGURE 3 | Numbers of cases differentiated per region (March 22, 2020). Source: Il Messaggero with data by Ministry of Health.

others, given the importance of faith in citizens' lives (April 27). On May 7, the government signed a protocol with the CEI for reopening churches and celebrating Masses.

At the same time, on April 1, when asked about its role, Conte clarified that the CTS was formulating "only recommendations" (that can be followed or not, as opposed to binding decisions) but that "politics maintains its primacy," meaning that the decision-making is still led by the government. This point is particularly relevant considering that in Italy a "technical government" is associated with periods of economic crisis and austerity (as during the Mario Monti Cabinet in 2012). The prime minister is thus seeking a point of balance between the necessary reliance on technical expertise (given the delicate and complex matter of an unprecedented pandemic) and the performance of autonomy and power typical of a solid political leadership. It is also quite ironic considering that Conte in his political career as a law professor called to exercise a caregiver role for a fragile coalition government, back in June 2018.
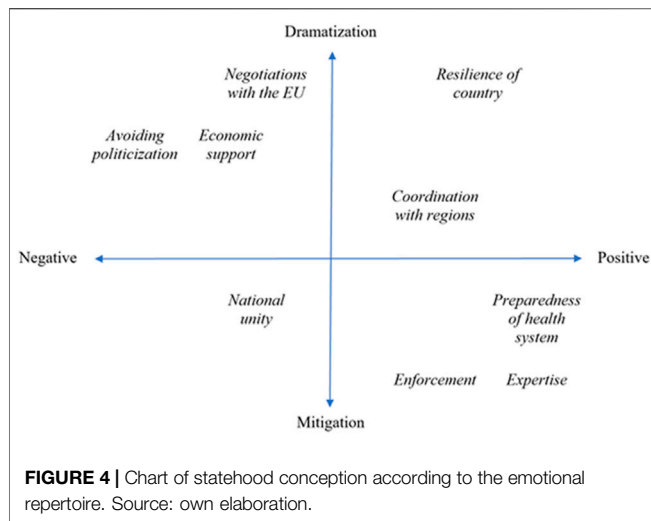
Statehood in the International Sphere

Conte indicates two main arenas in which Italy can play an international role: the European Union and the G7. In both cases, he first highlights how "the other countries" are praising Italy's resilience and capacity to respond to the emergency, both from a sanitary and an economic point of view. Italy is depicted not only as the first country to confront the pandemic, but also as the most effective and careful, adopting a principle of precaution leading to hard containment measures such as the lockdown. The prime minister encouraged the recovery after the lockdown by claiming that "the world is watching us, let's say it with a bit of pride, and admiring us, also because of our actions" (April 26). While announcing the full reopening of regional boundaries, on June 3, Conte highlighted that "Italy is among the first European countries able to afford a restart of social and economic activities". He always recognizes that "Italy being a model for other countries is a great collective merit" (August 9).

Also, both the EU and the G7 are referenced as allowing the most appropriate response to COVID-19, although implying an increase of public budget and debt. Accordingly, the pandemic is described as "a European match, to be played with a spirit of collaboration, a shared strategy of help and solidarity" (March 16), and "the most serious challenge since WWII" (April 10). The initial negotiations among European member states are judged as largely insufficient, as the prime minister is determined to ask to bypass the ESM and institute new common responses (e.g., Eurobond, common insurance framework, new credit lines with fewer conditions, and constraints on public spending). Since April, the Italian government has engaged in intense maneuvers to seek allies within the EU; Conte is one of the signatories of a letter of intent together with Emmanuel Macron and Pedro Sánchez, among others, to pursue a shift in the European financial policies. His position is made clear: "the response must be courageous, or it will not be a response at all" (April 10). In this respect, Conte speaks alternately of negotiations and battle. Each time, he highlights how his personal commitment is to represent the point of view of the Italian people (in his first day in office, he famously referred to himself as "the people's advocate"). He constantly operates a superimposition between the people and himself; for instance, in the aftermath of the first gains, he says that "the Italy System" has gained ground, convincing the European Union of its firmness and responsibility (April 26). He translates his engagement, promising that he would have not signed any agreement unless new tools were invented. His discourse about the role of Italy in the EU is paralleled by a vision of the EU both more united against the virus and able to compete at the global level.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Italian government's communication regarding the crisis has highlighted a multifaceted conception

FIGURE 4 | Chart of statehood conception according to the emotional repertoire. Source: own elaboration.

of statehood, confronted with multiple challenges and engaged in redefining its role. Besides the specific themes that each of those challenges posits, we have also focused on how an emotional repertoire was used to underpin and reinforce a particular conception of statehood during the first wave of COVID-19 in Italy. Elsewhere (De Blasio and Selva, 2020b), we have privileged a temporal evaluation of the emotional repertoire used by Conte, showing that it begins by focusing much more on care, anger, and pride and that it acquires more variance over time, leaving room for confidence, hope, spirit of sacrifice, and gratitude. Here we want to emphasize the general tone of his communication during the first wave, charting the whole spectrum of emotions that are mobilized to depict the "idea of the State." **Figure 4** provides a synthesized chart of the themes addressed by Giuseppe Conte in his discourse during the emergency; the themes are located alongside two continua between positive and negative emotions (horizontal axis), and dramatization and mitigation strategies (vertical axis).

The performance of the state in its relationship with citizens is marked by an ambivalent emotional repertoire: from the one side, the themes of the preparedness of the health system and of enforcement of containment measures are addressed with a mitigation strategy that aims to induce confidence and tranquillity; from the other side, the theme of economic support to workers and families is much more dramatized. In particular, Giuseppe Conte builds a relationship of empathy with citizens, acknowledging their sufferings, sacrifices, and difficulties. He is always center stage (although sometimes accompanied by other minister), explaining every action undertaken and how decisions have been made. This empathic relationship is the foundation for a notion of statehood able to guarantee concrete support, in terms of economic aid or public services (such as enhancing healthcare spending or the education system). The dramatization of the relationship of empathy is thus a strategy for legitimizing economic policies that will increase public spending. In such a rhetorical strategy, the overlap between the leader, the people, and the welfare state radically secures his decisions from political conflict: Whoever is criticizing the leader, or his policies, is not sensitive to Italians' sufferings. At the same time, Italians are embodied in many actors with whom Conte displays a practice of

dialog and collaboration, such as industrial associations, trade unions, interest groups, NGOs, religious entities, and so on.

The notion of statehood emerging from its relationship with regions and local governments is characterized by both positive and negative emotions. The political conflict with governors is mitigated by a strategy of national unity during the lockdown. While the policy of containment limits the powers of governors, the prime minister adopts an argumentation strategy which seeks to involve local governments (i.e., mayors) in monitoring and measuring the situation, in terms of contagion, health system response, and situations of extreme deprivation. This double articulation of domestic governance might appear rational and efficient, but it is also driven by the fact that the Five Stars Movement does not govern any region but has strong roots in several Italian towns.

The notion of statehood is also derived from the relationship that the leader performs with politics and decision-making at large. We have already discussed how a methodology of dialog and collaboration is emphasized in Conte's discourse. Members of opposition parties, such as regional governors and mayors, are part of this choreography, but they are not included in the category of stakeholders, whose involvement is much more underscored. Most notably, consultations and dialog with political representatives happen outside the parliament, either in more formal (i.e., consultations with the Cabinet) or informal ways (i.e., phone calls and similar). Another distinctive principle that he attributes to his methodology is transparency, defined as a means to avoid the risk of conspiracy theories. This point is particularly relevant when it comes to the involvement of experts in the decision-making. The theme is addressed through a mitigation strategy that involves positive emotions, such as confidence and trust.

Finally, the state must interact with international partners, among which the European Union plays a major role. This nodal point is addressed through the most intense dramatization strategy, involving both positive and negative emotions. On one hand, an international outlook is always described in terms of appreciation, solidarity, and unity, as a sign of the country's resilience in the face of an unprecedented crisis. On the other hand, the negotiations with the European partners are described as hard and intense, to be carried on with determination, pride, and foresight.

CONCLUSION

The crisis due to COVID-19 has established a dramatic context further stressing the trend toward a leader democracy in Italy. What this article seeks to explain, therefore, are the emotional characteristics of the current leadership. In other terms, the emotional repertoire shown by the prime minister during this turbulent time has constituted his main source of legitimacy for the limitations of personal liberties and for the reappraisal of economic policies. Such a repertoire has become part of his narrative and political strategy as much as his policies and decision-making criteria. In that sense, Conte has succeeded in consolidating emotional capital during the pandemic and constitutes an interesting case study for a political sociology of emotions.

This emotional capital is accompanied by a display of competence by Professor Giuseppe Conte. He has acted as a representative of the people ("the people's advocate," as he famously defined himself)

thanks to his competence, but he has portrayed himself as one of those people, performing compassion and acknowledging citizens' difficulties. Also the recognition that any success is collective and conquered through distributed efforts made by "the System Italy" has reinforced this narrative of unity and identification. At the same time, the main party that supports his leadership, the Five Stars Movement, has been created and nurtured by a sequence of populist leaders. His belonging to the Five Stars Movement and his reliance on the party's staff contribute to the shaping of his character as a leader. Despite the consensus he has built inside the Movement and by the general public, at the end of January 2021, Conte was forced to resign.[10] At the moment of writing, his future is still unclear, but he will probably continue to lead the Five Stars Movement.

As indicated earlier, the implications of this kind of leadership for notions of statehood and authority derive from the acceleration and dramatization due to the context of the crisis.

As time passes, we will witness how long a leadership built on emotional capital can last and how it will enrich or weaken democratic institutions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. These data can be found here: http://www.governo.it/.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both EB and DS have jointly discussed and drafted the present article (50% and 50%) and are fully accountable for its content.

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[10]On January 13, 2021, three cabinet members of Italia Viva (the movement led by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi) resigned. The government went to the Italian parliament to ask for a confidence vote: Although it won 156 votes in the Senate, it did not reach the absolute majority of 161. After having consulted the political forces to form an alternative cabinet (with the same alliance among the Five Stars Movement, Democratic Party, Free and Equals, and Italia Viva), the president of the Republic gave Mario Draghi the mandate to form a new government. At the time of writing, the Draghi government is supported by almost all political parties (with the exception of the far-right Brothers of Italy).

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