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# Populism as a communication phenomenon: A cross-sectional and longitudinal comparison of political campaigning on Facebook

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 The paper provides an empirical verification of the concept of populism as communication phenomenon. It moves away from the actor-centered approach, where parties are perceived as populist or non-populist according to their ideological positioning. The populism as communication approach assumes that any party may present populist content when communicating with the voters. In the analysis, we employ the data from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom during three different periods: EU elections 2014 (second-order), national parliamentary elections 2017 (first-order), and a non-electoral period from January 2018. The paper is based on the 3,564 posts produced by political parties on Facebook during six weeks.
- 2 The article first contains a comprehensive discussion of the theories and proposes the hypotheses, it is followed by the method description of the data and results are presented. The last part is dedicated to the discussion of the results.

## Populism as communication

- 3 Populism is everywhere: it is evident in the news, in public discourses, and in political communication research. Over the past 30 years, the support for populist radical right-wing parties rose to a historic high (Tartar, 2017). Populism has become a ubiquitous research topic – not only due to the upsurge of right-wing and left-wing populist leaders, parties, and movements but also because populism is a mesmerizing phenomenon. It is notoriously vague (Canovan, 1999), “*immaîtrisable, incontrôlable et inutilisable*” (Pranchère, 2020), promiscuous (Oliver and Rahn, 2016), chameleonic (Taggart, 2000), and an opaque *zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004) at the conceptual level, and therefore poses an irresistible challenge to social scientists.
- 4 Recently, Claes H. de Vreese and his co-authors (2018, p. 3) evoked the notion of “a new generation of populism researchers”. In this section, we argue that an understanding of populism as communication (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018) indeed enables researchers to bridge the current debates on whether or not populism is an ideology, a discourse, a mobilization strategy, an organizational type, or a political logic (Laclau, 2005; Moffit and Tormey, 2014; Zulianello *et al.*, 2018).
- 5 In line with C. H. de Vreese and his co-authors (2018), we view populism as a communication phenomenon that includes typical elements of content (*i.e.* people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups) and of style (*i.e.* evoking fear, oversimplification, and style of language). Accordingly, “the emphasis is on populist messages as independent ‘phenomenon-as-such’ and no longer on a particular party family or type of politician” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). We see populism not only as actors’ attributes, but mostly as actors’ actions. We do not view populism in terms of an either/or, populist/non-populist dichotomy, but as a phenomenon that varies in degree. As a consequence, the proposed paper does not concentrate on populism as an ideology or actor-centred approach (Mudde, 2004), on its ideational character (Mazzoleni, 2008; Pauwels, 2011; Hawkins *et al.*, 2012), its critique as “thin ideology can [...] become so thin as to lose its conceptual validity and utility” (Moffit and Tormey, 2014, p. 383) or on the populism “*d’en-bas*” (Ivaldi, 2018).
- 6 Populism, within the context of this paper, refers to three core elements of the content of communication: the people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups.
  - *People*: essentially, populism appeals to the people – not for the sake of the people as such, but in opposition to the values and ideas of elites and certain minority groups who do not belong to “the people”. As an element of populism, *the people* is a rhetorical construct that is instrumental and that can be exploited, and its meaning is not the same as the citizens or the population of a territory. As a united, homogenous group of ordinary people, the silent majority (Oliver and Rahn, 2016), the notion of the people is a fiction. In this view, the people are united, solidary, guided by common sense, endowed with the same interests, values and opinions, and can be invoked into many forms such as the nation, peasants, voters or the proletariat (Rooduijn, 2014). In populism, the people are in a default state of crisis, threatened by others from the outside, which is why populism has been associated with a Manichaeian perspective and a dualist world view of Us vs. Them.
  - *Anti-elitism*: similar to *the people*, the elite refers to a homogenous group with its identity based on antagonism directed at the people (Engesser *et al.*, 2017a). Elites are found in the political, economic and legal systems, in the media, and in supranational institutions. The

core idea behind anti-elitism is the attribution of blame. When conjuring up a people in crisis, elites are blamed as either unable or unwilling to represent the people's will and to respect the people's sovereignty. Populism's opposition to complexity is connected to anti-elitism: "complexity is a self-serving racket perpetuated by professional politicians" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6) suggesting that policy should be guided by the people's common sense that is actually pure and simple. The degree of antagonism also varies: populism always presents itself as distinct from elites but, rather than blaming or shaming elites, it may oppose other groups in society as well (Moffit and Tormey, 2014).

- *Out-groups*: some scholars contend that the exclusion of out-groups is not a key feature and element of populism as such, but only one of radical right-wing populism. We argue, along with C. H. de Vreese and his co-authors (2018), that the exclusion of out-groups is not a defining element of *all* variants of populism, but is one that features both on the right and the left of the populist spectrum. The exclusion of others constitutes the horizontal dimension of populism's inherently antagonistic character. Elites are those in power and, therefore, the enemy from above; out-groups – being groups that populists stigmatize as a threat or a burden to the people (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) – are the enemy from within society. Once more, the out-group is a construction of "a blameless in-group opposed to a culprit out-group" (Hameleers *et al.*, 2018, p. 872). In this sense, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) differentiates between exclusionary and inclusionary populism. While the former is often rooted in notions of nativism and right-wing ideologies that oppose immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals or welfare recipients, the latter focuses on radical left-wing positions and constructs a homogenous group out of those affected by alleged unjust socio-economic policies and austerity measures. Similarly, Michael Hameleers and Rens Vliegthart (2020) differentiate left- and right-wing exclusion. In our operationalization, we do not make this differentiation of who is excluded but focus on the question of whether any groups are excluded (see in the codebook in Appendix B: V8\_OSTRACISM).

7 Based on the contributions of Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave (2007) and C. H. de Vreese and his co-authors (2018), we apply a typology of populism that differentiates between four levels of populism as a communication phenomenon and that to varying degrees can be empirically identified in political messages.

- Full populism: people + elite + out-group
- Anti-elitist populism: people + elite
- Exclusionary populism: people + out-group
- Empty populism: people

8 In this typology, the invocation of *the people* is at the core of populism and produces different types of populism depending on whether or not it is linked to the elite and out-group elements. Full populism combines all three elements. Anti-elitism or the exclusion of out-groups individually do not constitute populism; both only do so in combination with the people element. Similarly, the mere invocation of the people without reference to anti-elitism or out-groups is deemed to be empty populism, the thin, "empty-shell, initial definition" of populism (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 323).

9 Although, regarding *content*, people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups form three "pillars of populist discourse" (Bobba, 2019, p. 12), we must also consider how populism manifests in the *style* of messages, that is how actors present ideas and information. As previously argued, populism is not about the attributes of a political actor, but about the actions of an actor. Populism is performed; it is what is said and

how it is said (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). Also, performing populism is not limited to the political right or left, since “politicians can slip in and out of the populist style” (Moffit and Tormey, 2014, p. 393). The performative style of populism has been described as direct, emotional (Canovan, 1999), simple (avoiding complexity) and blunt. The populist transgresses the limits of presumed political correctness: “like a ‘drunken guest’ [...] with ‘bad manners’ [...], the populist disrupts the normal dinner table, much to the discomfort, even alarm, of the usual patrons” (Oliver and Rahn, 2016, p. 191). Populism is emotional and evokes emotions by purposefully breaching the taboos of mainstream politics and political culture, by employing calculated provocations (Pauwels, 2011), and by taking on a narrative of underdogs (Mazzoleni, 2008), of self-victimization, or other symbolic themes. These emotions emphasize fear and anger (Hameleers *et al.*, 2017).

- 10 To address these issues and to conceptualize populism as a communication phenomenon, we study both *populism in content* and *populism in style*. Both aspects vary in degree, as actors from across the political spectrum can employ populist content and style elements in their public communication. As James Stanyer and his co-authors point out:

It is important to reiterate that most studies are actor-centered and that we lack systematic empirical studies. Consequently, our knowledge is poor about how frequently both populist and non-populist mainstream political actors refer to the people, express anti-elitism, and exclude various out-groups in their communication. (2016, p. 361)

## Populism in election campaigns

- 11 Recent empirical studies have begun to address populism as a communication phenomenon, also considering that the proliferation of social media platforms allows access to populist communication with an additional type of data. Whereas previous research was limited to highly formalized genres like public speeches and party manifestoes, social media enable scholars to monitor the use and effects of political communication in a more granular fashion. Social media have become standard platforms for election campaigns, where parties and politicians broadcast their messages unfiltered by journalists or other gatekeepers. Social media posts are less formalized than party platforms, the way content is produced, distributed and used is very different from traditional mass media (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). In the fourth era of campaigning (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020), social media posts provide numerous and fertile material to study the use of populist messages and populist elements in party communication.
- 12 Not surprisingly, populism has become a popular research topic of political communication scholars interested in the impact of social media platforms. Although the data is proprietary and only partially accessible through APIs, it has nonetheless brought about an increase in quantitative empirical research designs (Ernst *et al.*, 2017; Stier *et al.*, 2017; Zulianello *et al.*, 2018; Bobba, 2019). This is all the more relevant as experiments show that populist elements have mobilizing and de-mobilizing effects on voters (Hameleers *et al.*, 2018).
- 13 Social media offer a communication environment that significantly differs from traditional mass media outlets. The affordances of social media platforms provide a

particularly fertile ground for populist communication, being mostly un-edited, enabling public communication outside of and circumventing journalistic outlets. On social media, political parties remain in control of their messages, they can tailor messages according to target groups or use micro-targeting tools for political advertisements (Kreiss, 2016). It is popularity and not news values or other professional criteria that determine the relevance and reach of a message. Indeed, there is empirical evidence that purported populist parties have profited from social media (Bobba, 2019), that they find new supporters among adolescents (Heiss and Matthes, 2017), that populist messages receive more comments online and “prompt citizens to use populist messages themselves in their comments” (Blassnig *et al.*, 2019, p. 629).

- 14 However, previous studies have shown that social media platforms are by no means a “populist paradise” since so-called populist parties often have a centralized structure and avoid internal dissent (Jacobs and Spierings, 2019). A study on Twitter use by populist presidents in Latin America found that the prevalent communication mode remains top-down (Waisbord and Amado, 2017), confirming that populist communication on social media tends towards *normalization/politics as usual* (Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2021). In their social media practices, populist actors are not always and necessarily more apt to respond and engage with the people (Spierings *et al.*, 2019).
- 15 While social media data call for comparative analyses, only few empirical studies have made comparisons across countries and even less so across time. Matthijs Rooduijn (2014) set an example by using data obtained from newspaper articles, comparing five countries where, over two decades (1988–2008), purported populist parties (at the time) had varying success. Nicole Ernst and her co-authors (2017) analyzed 1,400 Twitter and Facebook posts from 6 countries, published by 88 politicians from 29 political parties. They found that parties at the fringes of the political spectrum and opposition parties were more prone to populist communication. In another study on politician statements from six Western democracies, N. Ernst and her co-authors (2019) found that populist communication is associated with typical issues (such as immigration, crime and economic hardship), and that politicians from parties considered as populist indeed are more populist in their communication. They particularly stress the importance of studying the content *and* style of populist messages, claiming that “the ideology of populism cannot be communicated without stylistic elements” (p. 167). S. Engesser and his co-authors’ (2017a) comparative qualitative text analysis showed that “populism manifests itself in a fragmented form on social media” (p. 1109), justifying the need for a differentiated and comparative look at party messages on Facebook or Twitter. S. Engesser and his co-authors (2017b) provided a useful operationalization, based on emotionalization and negativity (p. 1282), to identify variations in content and style. Even though the thresholds they apply are debatable, Mattia Zulianello and his co-authors (2018) compared the Facebook communication of 83 political leaders from 6 Western and Latin American countries, showing that populism as communication can be empirically identified and that it varies extensively across parties and actors.
- 16 Based on the research presented above, our paper seeks to test the following hypotheses.
- 17 N. Ernst and her co-authors (2017) concluded that populist communication is mostly used by parties at the extremes of the political spectrum, both left and right. S. Engesser and his co-authors (2017a) showed that left parties tended towards attacking economic elites, whereas right-wingers attacked media elites and ostracized



out-groups. Based on this, we expect to find more populism in communication among right-wing parties.

- Hypothesis 1: *political ideology impacts on populism: right-wing parties have a higher populism in content and populism in style than left-wing parties.*
- 18 By using a comparison across countries, election types and over time – comparing EU elections 2014, national parliamentary elections 2017 and a non-electoral period 2018 in France, Germany and the United Kingdom – we also want to determine if and how populism in content and populism in style changed over time. Previously, researchers have shown that the presence of populism and populist elements have been increasing over time in party manifestoes and traditional media (Manucci and Weber, 2017; Hameleers and Vliegthart, 2020), and that populists have been increasingly successful in elections (Tartar, 2017). Based on this we assume that:
- Hypothesis 2: *populism in content and populism in style increase similarly over time on Facebook.*
- 19 While populism does not increase in a linear and simultaneous way, Luca Manucci and Edward Weber (2017) show increases of populism in party manifestoes and newspapers across four countries after 2010, including Germany and the UK. We seek to test whether
- Hypothesis 3: *populism in content and populism in style increase in time at the similar level in all three countries.*
- 20 Second-order elections are characterized by lower turn-outs, better prospects for small and new parties, worse prospects for government parties, a tendency towards protest voting, and perceptions that less is at stake (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Owing to these differences, campaigns and campaign strategies vary, and we expect to detect different levels of populism in communication. In the 2014 EU election campaigns, public interest in candidates and election as well as voter turnout were at record low levels (Treib, 2014). Based on this we expect more populist communication during national elections.
- Hypothesis 4: *populism in content and populism in style are more prevalent during first-order elections than during second-order elections and non-electoral periods.*
- 21 To our knowledge, the only study so far connecting populism to specific topics or policy fields is N. Ernst and her co-authors (2019), finding that there are indeed typical issues connected with populist communication. A possible reason for this research gap is that populism research either focused on right-wing or on left-wing parties, thus on ideologies rather than on policy fields. If we follow the notion of populism as communication, we can determine whether and to what extent populism is linked to and more prevalent in specific policy fields (e.g. migration policy). Thus our research question is: *Is there a link between populist communication and the topic of the post?*

## Methods and cases

- 22 In comparing party communication in election campaigns in France (FR), Germany (GER) and the United Kingdom (UK), we opted for cases based on different political and media systems (within Western democracies), in order to focus on only one feature (populism in communication) that political parties may or may not have in common. The three countries differ considerably with regard to their political systems, having centralized (FR) or more federal (GER, UK) forms of governance, presidential (FR) or

parliamentary (GER, UK) systems, and majoritarian (UK, FR) or more consociational (GER) decision-making. Their media systems cover all three types identified by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004): polarized-pluralist (FR), democratic-corporatist (GER), and liberal (UK). In their updated and empirically richer categorization of media systems, Michael Brüggemann and his co-authors (2014) classify both the UK and Germany as central types, “characterized by strong public broadcasting, strict ownership regulation, and low press subsidies” (p. 1056) and France as the southern type, combining “the highest degree of political parallelism with the least professional journalism and the least inclusive press market” (p. 1056-1057). None of the three countries had so-called populist parties in a government position.

- 23 Facebook has become a major source of information and news. In all three countries, approximately one-third of internet users received their news through social media (France 36%, Germany 31%, and the UK 39%), a large portion of which came from Facebook (Germany 24%, the UK 27%, no data for France) (Newman *et al.*, 2018, p. 10). Unlike Twitter, with its very short informational messages, posts on Facebook can be longer, more detailed, and do not force authors to be explicit and pointed. Since Facebook has become a standard platform for the campaign strategies of political actors (Klinger and Russmann, 2017), it is a prime source of official party communication. In the campaigns we analyze, all relevant political parties had Facebook profiles that they used for party communication.
- 24 A comparison of the three countries also produces longitudinal insight into different types of elections and election campaigns, and also provides a comparison with a randomly chosen non-electoral period. All the countries participated in the (second-order) 2014 European Parliament elections and held (first-order) national parliamentary elections in 2017. The data we use originate from the political parties’ official Facebook profiles and contain all posts published during the last two weeks of the electoral campaigns prior to the 2014 European Parliament and the 2017 national parliamentary elections, as well as during two weeks in January 2018 as a non-electoral period for comparison (data accessed *via* Sotrender). The data contain a total of 3,564 posts from 24 political parties in Germany, the UK and France (Table 1). The data represent all major parties present during all three periods, except La République En Marche, La France Insoumise and Debout La France which did not exist in 2014 and no data are available for them in respect of the 2014 EP election. (Please see Appendix A for party in the study, and Appendix C for detailed results.)

**Table 1. Number of postings for each country in time**

	2014	2017	2018
Germany	421	546	215
United Kingdom	586	686	273
France	253	337	247

- 25 We do recognize that often party leaders can be more relevant politically, reach a larger audience than their parties and can impact the likeability of messages. However, we focus only on the party profiles, for reasons of comparability and to avoid the intervention of personality traits, political status, celebrity status or biographical

aspects. S. Engesser and his co-authors' study (2017a) on political leaders found that populism manifests in a fragmented form on Facebook, and our study seeks to focus on the party side of this finding.

- 26 All posts were manually coded by three intensively trained coders (German and French native speakers, fluent in English). Inter-coder reliability of Krippendorff was  $\alpha=.762^1$ . A self-reliability test was run for each coder within a few weeks after the first coding, with the mean for the coders being Krippendorff  $\alpha=.904$ . (The dependent and independent variables and the detailed codebook are available as Appendix D.)

## Results

- 27 Of the 3,564 party posts on Facebook, 376 contained only populism in content, 317 contained only populism in style, and 213 simultaneously contained both forms of populism. In total, we identified populism in 906 posts, implying that populism is not a marginal phenomenon but that it is present in about one fourth of all posts created by parties during the six weeks under consideration.

Table 2. Regression analysis for Populism in Content (PiC) and Populism in Style (PiS)

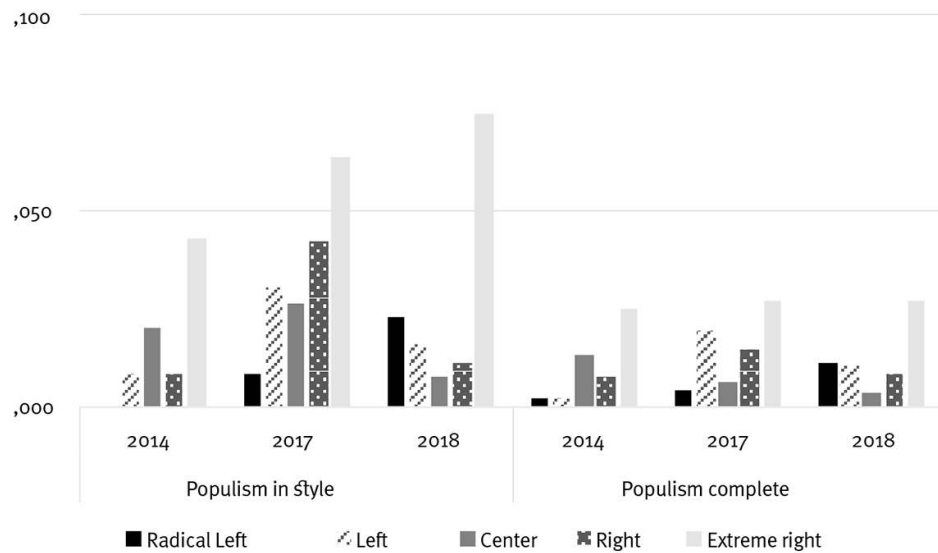
	PiC Empty		PiC Excluding		PiC Anti-elitism		PiS	
	IRR		IRR		IRR		IRR	
Time (year 2014 ref.)								
2017	1.170		1.251		1.079		1.702	**
2018	.806		1.015		.874		1.434	
Country (France ref.)								
Germany	5.956	***	5.260	***	5.834	***	12.013	***
United Kingdom	15.844	***	7.753	***	11.981	***	10.003	***
Party Size (Major Parliamentary ref.)								
Minor Parliamentary	.676		1.084		.823		.753	
Fringe	.322		1.024		.509		.813	
Governmental	.585		.551	**	.510	*	1.144	
Party Ideological Family (Center, Regional and Green ref.)								
Radical Left	1.411		.770		2.715	*	1.447	
Radical Right	3.094	**	2.706	*	3.604	***	3.250	**
Right	1.910		2.938	**	2.307		1.432	
Left	1.190		1.824		1.331		.888	
Constant	.016	***	.020	***	.020	***	.011	***
(1/df) Deviance	.4184		.5177		.4962		.4700	
(1/df) Pearson	1.1809		1.2098		1.1216		.9584	

Log pseudolikelihood	-1355.6		-1713.9		-1647.2		-1628.1	
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Note: GLM Negative binomial, IRR (Incidence Rate Ratios). Data was clustered by party\*year. \*\*\*p<.001 \*\*p<.01 \*p<.05.

- 28 Table 2 presents the regression analysis<sup>2</sup> on each form of populism discussed above. Notably, the analysis suggests that there is little variance over time in populism as communication. The exception is populism in style that was used almost twice as much during the 2017 national elections as in the 2014 EU elections. This suggests that populism in style may be used as a campaign strategy to mobilize voters in first-order elections. The variance between countries is also significant as political parties in both the UK and in Germany are more likely to employ populist communication in content and in style than parties in France. During all three periods there was a much lower level of populism in communication within all parties in analysis prevalent in France than in the UK and Germany.
- 29 As expected and repeatedly shown in the literature, radical right-wing parties extensively employ populist communication in all its dimensions. They strongly advocate anti-elite messages and spearhead the use of populism in style. However, while radical right-wing parties are prone to use any kind of populism, they are joined by some traditional, moderate right-wing parties (the UMP in France and the Conservatives in the UK), who also use exclusionary populism. Both the radical left and radical right show a preference for strong anti-elite communication. (Appendix C provides a table comparing the results and number of posts on the party level.)
- 30 ANOVA<sup>3</sup> analysis comparing populist communication according to party political ideology suggests a variation across the party spectrum regarding both populism in style [F(4, 3559)=41.45 p=.000] and full populism (in content) [F(4, 3559)=37.05 p=.000]. The *post-hoc* tests indicate strong dissimilarity not only for radical right-wing parties but also for all other parties. This confirms the previous results. We found a longitudinal variation for populism in style [F(2, 3561)=7.96 p=.000] (the *post-hoc* test indicates a stronger difference between 2014 and 2017), but not for full populism. The results (see Figure 1) suggest that across the political spectrum, no party type is free from populist statements. The temporal development of populism in style and full populism by the radical parties is particularly notable. Since 2014, radical parties – especially radical right-wing parties – have become more populist in their communication style, whether there was an election campaign or not. In fact, their style was most populist during the non-electoral period of 2018.

Figure 1. Relative mean for full populism and populism in style by party's ideology



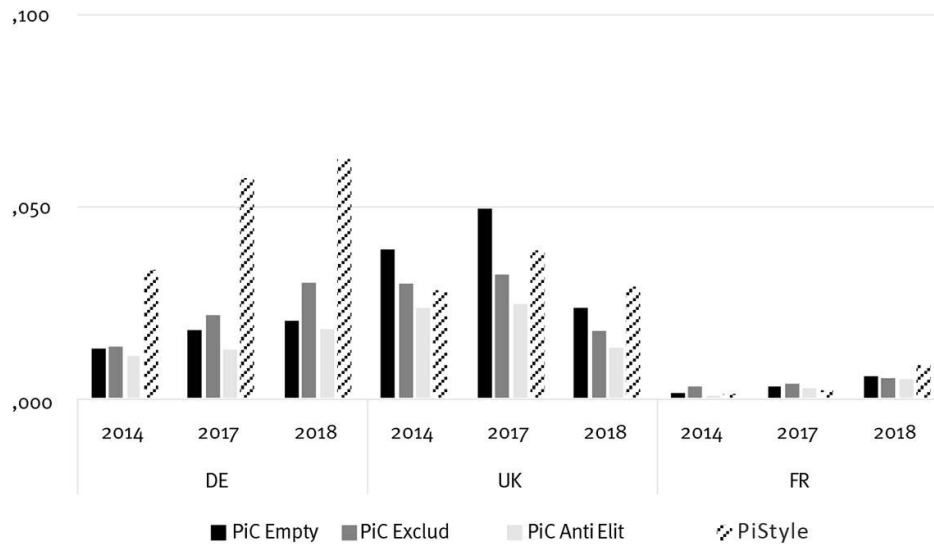
- 31 Moreover, it is clear that radical right-wing parties pursue full populism: content that does not merely refer to a vague “people”, but content that at the same time is anti-elitist and exclusionary of out-groups. Take this post by the British National Party as an example for full populism:

LIKE & SHARE The terminally liberal political class were slammed last night for their Immigration “disaster” by a member of the BBC Question Time audience. Except for the fact that an individual with different opinions to the far-left BBC was even allowed to take a seat in the carefully staged audience, there’s nothing unusual about this event, oh... except that this man was ASIAN!!! [...] “Now you realize that immigration has destroyed the country”, he told a disapproving panel. “Immigration has messed up the country [...] the whole of the North of England is full of my community!” he lamented. “This is not England anymore!” Britain must start expelling people from the country and turning people away he said, echoing BNP policy almost word for word. [...] When it takes an immigrant to tell the political class what’s what, you know they’re beyond the pale. Count yourself among the growing ranks of British people saying “enough is enough” and taking a stand. [...]<sup>4</sup>

- 32 This pattern remains stable over time and is independent of election campaigns. This differs from the moderate left-wing and right-wing parties who also mobilize support by using populist messages, but more so in national, first-order elections, only to relax their emphasis on populism outside the election periods. Based on these results, we confirm Hypothesis 1. Indirectly, this finding also validates Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris’ notion that cultural values matter (2016).
- 33 Regarding longitudinal and cross-sectional variance, Figure 1 represents the prevalence of populism in the perspectives of both content and style. As in the regression analysis, the country differences are clearly visible. French parties are reluctant to use populism in content and populism in style, a trait most likely due to the difference between parties seen as populist (*i.e.* the Front National and France Insoumise) and all other parties. The descriptive data suggests that the former extensively uses populism in communication, whereas the latter seldom uses it. In contrast, all parties in the UK and Germany extensively use populist communication in

their posts. Populism in style strongly increases over time in Germany, while empty populism or the mere invocation of the people dominates in the UK election campaigns, but clearly decreases during the non-electoral period. In France all forms of populism are at a much lower level than in the UK and Germany, but increased during the non-electoral period.

Figure 2. Relative mean for populism in content and populism in style by year



Note: to facilitate inter-index comparison, the mean score was averaged (by number of elements in each index).

- 34 Over time, exclusionary populism strongly increases in Germany and slightly increases in France, but not in the UK where it decreases during non-electoral periods. This confirms Hypothesis 2 for Germany and France, but not for the UK where the levels of both populism in content and populism in style clearly peaked during first-order election campaigns (with empty populism dominating in 2014 and 2017 and populism in style in 2018). We reject Hypothesis 3, because it only holds true for France and Germany. Hypothesis 4 is confirmed for the UK, but not for Germany and France where all forms of populism increase over time, albeit on a higher level in Germany than in France.
- 35 With regard to our research question, the most prominent policy fields that parties posted about were economic and social policy, but they were not particularly populist. Rather, we found that the perennial (“usual suspect”) topics were the most populist, with posts on migration and security policy containing more than half of all the populist elements.

Table 3. Policy fields and populism

	Populism	Full populism	PiS	N
Migration policy	.60	.48	.47	172
Security policy	.50	.32	.37	119
Social policy	.40	.28	.20	259

Economic policy	.36	.23	.20	394
Health policy	.32	.22	.14	152
Foreign policy	.31	.18	.19	156
Education policy	.20	.08	.14	122
Environmental policy	.12	.07	.07	82
Brexit (for UK)	.44	.35	.19	121

Populism indicates if any kind of populism (populism in content PiC or populism in style PiS) was evident in the posting. Numbers indicate the ratio of the posting containing populist element to those which do not contain such element.

- 36 While not surprising, it is striking that about half the posts by political parties on migration policy contain full populism. These posts invoked the “people”, and they contained anti-elitist notions as well as messages about the exclusion of out-groups, with the same number using a populist style. About one third of the posts on respectively security and social policy exhibited full populism. Education policy and environmental policy were the fields least related to full populism, although not completely free from populism either. Other categories that we controlled (e.g. technology, transportation, and media) did not contain any populist communication. Although only valid for the UK, posts about Brexit confirmed intuition and contained high levels of populism. Based on these findings, we conclude that populism in content and populism in style are more prevalent in specific policy fields. While populism is prevalent in messages of *all* the political parties across the political spectrum, it is evident that typical right-wing policy fields dominate the populist posts.

## Discussion and conclusion

- 37 Our results underline that it makes sense to study populism as a communication phenomenon (rather than only as an actor type approach) that includes typical elements of content and elements of style. Populist elements were evident in the messages of all parties across the ideological spectrum, and confirm that over time a populist style is increasing particularly in the messages of radical parties on the left and right. But moderate and center parties are not always “non-populists”, as they tend to use a populist style during first-order election campaigns, but less so during second-order campaigns and in non-electoral periods. As was expected, radical right-wing parties employ all types of populism (full, anti-elite, and excluding out-groups) on a constant level over time. Regarding the three countries included in our study, all forms of populism are increasing in Germany. In the UK, populist communication peaked during the 2017 national election, particularly empty populism, but not as much in 2014 and 2018. In France, all forms of populism are also increasing, but at a lower rate. Considering that the radical-right Front National (currently RN) under Marine Le Pen, the very low level of populist messages in France is somewhat counter-intuitive. Closer scrutiny of the data reveals that En Marche, while occasionally referring to the people (empty populism), is the only case where no evidence of ostracism, the exclusion of out-groups, and the evoking of fear was found in their posts. This is remarkable in comparison to all the other parties. However, other French parties are also very



reluctant to use populist communication. A possible explanation lies in the long tradition of legal constraints that prevent negative campaigning in France. Also, Front National is very centered on Marine Le Pen, a lot of communication in general and populist in particular is emitted by the party leader, not by the party and thus not captured here.

- 38 Studying populism as a communication phenomenon allows for a differentiated view: Yes, populism is increasing and has been scoring at the ballot boxes. But in many cases, it consists only of empty references of “the people” by moderate parties in specific settings. This is hardly threatening the integrity of democratic elections. The more problematic elements, such as the exclusion of specific groups from society, xenophobia, homophobia, attacks on elites, institutions and intermediary actors of various kind, can be obscured by a global focus on populism. In many cases, referring to “the people” is a cloak to mantle illiberal, anti-democratic or authoritarian notions as a presumable “popular” agenda.
- 39 An interesting finding is that populist style increased much stronger than populist content. This underlines the importance to see populism not only as an ideology or a political strategy, but as a particular form to communicate – employed by parties across all political spectrum. We can also interpret this as a sign for the brutalization of political language and public discourse.
- 40 Populism is also not limited to the perennial topics of migration and security, as we noted populist style elements in posts on environmental issues and on education, foreign and health policies. Environmental policy, in particular, could play an increasing role in the future since radical right-wing parties have recently turned to opposing the notion of a climate crisis and attack climate activists.
- 41 To better understand how populism forms part of campaign strategies and how it mobilizes or demobilizes support, researchers need to look beyond parties nominated as “populist”. Improved comparative research designs (beyond the particularities of individual parties) and quantitative, data-based studies on more campaigns and over more extended periods, can be attained by redirecting populism research from actor-centered approaches towards content-centered approaches. The notable difference between the findings in respect of first-order and second-order elections and non-electoral periods suggests that, depending on the political situation, the prevalence and intensity of populism as communication varies.
- 42 Our study faces several limitations. We only included one case of a specific time-period. Undoubtedly it would be valuable to reproduce this study with the 2019 EU election and the next round of national parliamentary elections. Also, including party leaders, which may differ in their communication style from parties. We only used data from three countries, which are similar (Western democracies) but also distinct (electoral system). For example, in the case of France, parliamentary elections take place right after presidential elections, which impact campaign content and dynamics, and could produce different results as in the separate campaigning in the UK or Germany. We only coded Facebook posts made by the parties, excluding comments of users and parties in response (although the parties were not very responsive and rarely contributed to the comment section). The inclusion of comments would show whether or not users similarly populist as parties. Another way forward is a comparison across platforms, including Twitter and Instagram. Unfortunately, due to all restrictions on data from social media platforms, independent research is only “peeking through the



keyhole” at the moment and only grasping in part what is happening on social media platforms during political campaigns. Also, little is known on how affordances of the platform can influence the popularity of certain posts (e.g. are post with populist content somehow differently promoted by the algorithms). This situation poses a threat to democracy, especially since social media platforms have become a major source of news and information, also considering that populist messages across the political spectrum, time and location, undeniably form part of this environment.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix A

Table 1. Party characteristics

Party name	Country	Party size	Political ideology family	Party position	Overall ideological stances	Ideological stances on economic issues	Stances on democratic freedoms and rights	Sallience of anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric	Sallience of reducing political corruption	Position on immigration policy
CDU	GER	Major Parliamentary	Center	Government	5.74	5.99	5.90	1.18	2.12	5.68
SPD	GER	Major Parliamentary	Left	Government	3.82	3.47	3.91	1.81	2.50	3.86
FDP	GER	Minor Parliamentary	Center	Opposition	6.55	8.13	3.59	2.29	2.80	5.02
GRÜNE	GER	Minor Parliamentary	Other	Opposition	3.28	3.38	1.78	2.31	3.60	2.17
LINKE	GER	Minor Parliamentary	Radical Left	Opposition	1.33	1.16	4.53	5.86	3.25	3.59
CSU	GER	Minor Parliamentary	Center	Government	7.30	6.10	7.69	2.81	1.60	7.63
NPD	GER	Fringe Party	Radical Right	Opposition	10	5.33	9.82	9.11	3.00	9
AfD	GER	Minor Parliament	Radical Right	Opposition	9.06	7.93	9.08	8.73	4.42	9.31
PCF	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Radical Left	Opposition	1.51	0.96	3.51	6.57	5.05	2.90
PS	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Left	Government	3.63	3.59	2.68	3.43	4.35	4.15
UMP	FR	Major Parliamentary	Right	Opposition	7.70	7.64	7.28	4.00	3.28	8.10
FN	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Radical Right	Opposition	9.66	5.40	8.78	9.62	7.45	9.83
MODEM	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Center	Government	5.72	6.46	4.88	4.18	5.31	6.14
LREM	FR	Major Parliamentary	Center	Government	5.47	6.85	2.45	4.70	5.95	6.05
LFI	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Radical Left	Opposition	1	0.60	2.30	9.45	7.50	2.35
DLF	FR	Minor Parliamentary	Right	Opposition	8.58	6.78	8.45	9.22	6.17	9.55
CONS	UK	Major Parliamentary	Right	Government	7.32	7.86	6.57	2.97	3.01	8
LAB	UK	Major Parliamentary	Left	Opposition	3.11	2.96	3.14	4.83	3.45	5.21
LibDem	UK	Minor Parliamentary	Center	Opposition	4.68	4.79	2.06	3.24	3.71	3.32
SNP	UK	Minor Parliamentary	Other	Opposition	3.18	3.45	3.49	6.28	3.83	2.98
PLAID	UK	Minor Parliamentary	Other	Opposition	3.25	3.26	3.44	5.46	3.58	2.90
GREEN	UK	Minor Parliamentary	Other	Opposition	1.93	2.14	0.92	7.03	4.84	1.79
UKIP	UK	Fringe Party	Radical Right	Opposition	8.88	7.68	9.26	9.37	5.21	9.68
BNP	UK	Fringe Party	Radical Right	Opposition	9.93	5.85	9.53	-	-	10

Note: data originates from CHES 2010 (for BNP), CHES 2017 (LREM, LFI, DLF), and mean of 2014 and 2017 CHES for other parties. For Party Size the highest position is taken into account (e.g. the FN in France was a Fringe Party in 2014, but is Minor Parliamentary in 2017); Overall ideological stances and Economic stances (0 Ext. Left to 10 Ext. Right); Stances on democratic freedoms and rights (0 Libertarian to 10 Traditional).

### Appendix B. Codebook

#### What we code?

Our data consists of 3,564 Facebook postings that 24 political parties published in their timeline within two weeks days prior to election days in 2014 (EU parliament), 2017 (national parliament elections) and two random weeks in 2018 (non-election period) in France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

## How we code – some general rules

- Explicitly: we are coding explicit expressions only – whatever the postings say, we take it literally. We do not make assumptions about implicit meanings, hidden context, what is meant “between the lines”.
- Individually: we code each posting individually. If there is no explicit reference to a previous posting, each posting stands for itself. We code each posting as if it was the only posting in the timeline.
- Unit of analysis: we treat each posting as a unit. If a posting contains various sentences that conflict with each other (e.g. one sentence with a positive tone, one sentence with a negative tone), we code “emotions, but hard to distinguish if negative or positive”. We do *not* code positive and negative in this case – because our unit of analysis is the entire posting, not each sentence.
- Thoroughly: we read each posting before we code. Then we read it again and code. Then we read it a third time and check if we coded correctly. In case we do not understand the posting, in case it contains illegible text (e.g. only emoticons or nonsensical letters) we color-mark the line and continue with the next postings.
- Binary: we code 0 if a variable does not apply and 1 if a variable applies. In cases we cannot decide, we code 99. We code 99 only in exceptional cases – 99 is *not* a regular code. All 99 will have to be recoded in the end, so we use it very sparingly. Binary coding also means that we only decide if something is there or not – we do *not* code gradually, measuring the degree to which something applies or not. It is possible for some categories that all codes will be 0.

## LIST OF VARIABLES

### Variable 1\_TONE

We measure the overall tonality of the posting. Tonality refers to *content*, *i.e.* positive (success, achievement) or negative (crisis, failure) content elements. If there is no specifically positive or negative content, we code neutral. If a posting’s tonality is ambivalent, contains positive and negative content or is hard to assess for other reasons, we code “emotions, but hard to distinguish if pos or neg”.

Please mind that generally the majority of posts are written in a neutral tone.

- V1\_1TONE: neutral.
- V1\_2TONE: positive (e.g.: “Scotland’s hospital A&E performance has been the best in the UK for 24 months”; “SNP is largest party in Clackmannanshire Council”).
- V1\_3TONE: negative (e.g.: “Only the SNP will stand up for Scotland, including our fishing industry. The Tories will sell them out”).
- V1\_4TONE: emotions, but hard to distinguish if pos or neg.

### Variable 2\_EMOTION

We measure the overall emotionality of the posting. Emotionality relates not to the content, but to the way in which a posting is presented: it is presenting and/or evoking positive (*i.e.* happiness, pride, satisfaction) or negative emotions (*i.e.* anger, fear, anxiety, stress, hate), feelings about a party, candidate or event?

- V2\_1EMO: neutral.

- V2\_2EMO: positive (e.g.: “Thank you to all our volunteers who have been campaigning to secure strong and stable leadership”).
- V2\_3EMO: negative (e.g.: “On June 9th, this man could be Prime Minister. We can’t let that happen”; “Tories think they can do what they like to Scotland and get away with it. Don’t let them”).
- V2\_4EMO: emotions, but hard to distinguish if pos or neg (e.g.: “We are the victims of our own success and now we pick ourselves up and go on to further success in the future”).

### Variable 3\_STYLE

This variable relates to the *language* of the posting. Populists typically use a direct, non-formal and non-institutional style of language, the language of “the ordinary man”, the “man on the street”. Because informal language is also a typical element of social media postings, coding this variable is a little tricky. Parties and politicians usually tone down their elite language, trying to make short, catchy statements on social media. We code informal style *only* if the posting is exceptionally informal, colloquial in style, using street or youth slang, vulgar expressions, emoticons or abbreviations (ROLF, LOL).

We also code if the posting contains xenophobic language. Xenophobia is usually distinguished by opposition to foreign culture, it expresses a “deep-rooted fear towards foreigners” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and “fear of the unfamiliar” (*Webster’s*).

- V3\_1STYLE: posting is written in a direct, non-formal and non-institutional style.
- V3\_2STYLE: posting contains language full of non-precision, allusions, puns and empty rhetoric, proverbs, stereotypes, clichés and other expression of “popular wisdom”.
- V3\_3STYLE: posting is breaking the rules of political correctness, being impolite to distinguish a party from other parties (e.g.: “Why should our taxpayers’ money be used to molly coddle the whims of the EU”).
- V3\_4STYLE: posting contains vulgar language (to reach “ordinary people”) (e.g.: “Theresa May arrogantly risked Brexit and blew it”).
- V3\_5STYLE: posting contains aggressive and provocative language (e.g.: “I simply cannot understand the mentality of the pathetic geeks behind this crime”).
- V3\_6STYLE: posting contains xenophobic language.
- V3\_7STYLE: posting contains ironic or cynical language.
- V3\_8STYLE: posting contains humourous, funny language (at least tries to be funny).

### Variable 5\_INTERACTIVITY

With this variable, we measure if a posting invites comments, activities and/or feedback.

- V5\_1INTER: encouraging discussion (with anyone) (e.g.: “Share to let everyone know”).
- V5\_2INTER: encouraging action (with anyone) (e.g.: “Go vote!”).
- V5\_3INTER: encouraging further engagement with the party (interaction with party, feedback, participation) (e.g.: “If you want to get involved with his campaign, get in touch!”).
- V5\_4INTER: contains questions that invite opinion statements (e.g.: “What do you think about our ideas?”).

## Variable 6\_PEOPLE

Populists typically refer to “the people” as a unitary actor, claim to be the one and true representative of “the people” and demand more power for “the people”. Other synonymous terms include the common man, the ordinary citizen, real people, the man on the street, etc.

- V6\_1PEOPLE: the speaker refers to the people as the theoretical origin of power in democracy.
- V6\_2PEOPLE: the speaker praises the achievements of the people, stresses virtues of the people.
- V6\_3PEOPLE: the speaker demands more power for the people and/or explicitly promotes the implementation of direct-democratic elements (e.g.: “*‘Die da oben’ bestimmen über ‘uns hier unten’! Dieses Gefühl der Ohnmacht vieler Bürger will die AfD aufheben. Einer der wichtigsten Punkte in unserem Wahlprogramm ist deshalb dieser: ‘Wir wollen dem Volk das Recht geben, den Abgeordneten auf die Finger zu schauen und vom Parlament beschlossene Gesetze zu ändern oder abzulehnen’*”).
- V6\_4PEOPLE: the speaker presents the party as the true and only representative of real people (e.g.: “There is only one leader who can provide strong and stable leadership for the UK through Brexit and beyond”; “Only UKIP MPs can be trusted to speak out firmly and courageously on behalf of hard-working British families”; “We want to build a Britain for the many, not the few”).
- V6\_5PEOPLE: the speaker presents other parties as NON-representatives of the people.
- V6\_6PEOPLE: the speaker presents party as defender of common-sense, the wisdom of the regular people in a crazy world and promises a return to common sense (e.g.: “*Deutschland ist vollkommen verrückt geworden*”).

## Variable 7\_ANTIELITISM

Populist communication always sides with “the people”, denies power to elites (elites have too much power) and blames elites (for whatever goes wrong). *Watch out:* it is important to distinguish anti-elitism from simple oppositional criticism of actors in power, such as pointing to mistakes of the government (e.g.: “The government did not do enough for better schools”). Anti-elitism is all-encompassing: all other political parties and their politicians are bad, corrupt, to be blamed for a glooming ruin and downfall of the country and society at large. The elite is imagined as a unitary actor, a clique that sticks together and is opposed to the people. An attack on another party is *not* antielitism, but normal part of election campaigns.

- V7\_1ATTAC: posting attacking political elites (politicians, the government, other parties, “Altparteien”, the political class, etc.) (e.g.: “Tim Farron and the Lib Dems will say anything to get elected. Their coalition of chaos would put the UK’s Brexit deal at risk”; “Right now, the coddled elite are laughing at us, but that will change”).
- V7\_2ATTAC: posting attacking economic elites (the banks, rich people, stock brokers, etc.) (e.g.: “Theresa May will protect workers’ pensions from irresponsible bosses who put them at risk”; “We don’t rely on the money of a handful of super-rich donors”).

- V7\_3ATTAC: posting attacking media elites (e.g. journalists, publishers, public service media).
- V7\_4ATTAC: posting attacking supranational elites (e.g. EU, UNO, World Bank, other powers).
- V7\_5ATTAC: posting attacking legal elites (e.g. courts, supreme courts, lawyers, judges, law professors).
- V7\_6ATTAC: posting attacking other institutions (e.g. science/experts, the military, schools, the church, NGOs).
- V7\_7ATTAC: posting attacks unspecified elites (e.g. the establishment, the state, officialdom, the regimen, high society).

### Variable 8\_OSTRACISM

Ostracism was a procedure under the Athenian democracy in which any citizen could be expelled from the city-state of Athens. Populism typically tends to identify groups as not belonging to society, marking them as outsiders. They claim that these groups are not part of “the people”, thus drawing red lines, excluding, and segregating certain groups, such as migrants, religious groups, voters of other parties. They may label certain groups as terrorists or “enemies of the state”.

*Watch out:* ostracism relates to people or groups that exist and live within society, and excludes them – not groups from outside. For example, if a posting claims that refugees are not part of society, it is only ostracism if it refers to refugees who are already in the country; if it refers to refugees in African camps and demands not to let more refugees in, it is *not* ostracism.

- V8\_10STR: posting states a monolithic people (“the people”, Us vs. Them).
- V8\_20STR: posting names groups that the party does not see as part of the society.
- V8\_30STR: posting accuses other parties of ostracism (e.g. as being fascists, populist, etc.).

### Variable 9\_SYMBOLS

Populism often refers to symbols, *i.e.* a shape or sign used to represent something such as an organization, for example a red cross or a Star of David. Symbols can be historical events, flags, national documents of importance, places, etc. Symbols are instrumentalised to lend legitimacy to the party, or to criticize another party. Symbols are signifiers, they are used to homogenise, to make followers of a party rally behind one flag, to lend identity and legitimacy to a political cause.

- V9\_1SYMBOLS : posting contains (historical) symbolism.

### Variable 10\_STORYtelling

Populist communication often contains alternative storytelling, recounting “unofficial” versions of reality, seemingly revealing secrets not known to the public (e.g. because “system media” hides it). This may include “alternative facts”, the real truth, links to conspiracy theories, etc. Populism also tends to present itself in the role of the “underdog”, the outsider, the David against Goliath. *In extremo*, populists present themselves as victims, repressed by political and or media elites.

- V10\_1STORY: posting recounts the “unofficial stories”, not known to general public, presents facts or data to dispute or rebut the positions of all other parties



or elites (e.g.: “Damit stellt sich die Umweltbilanz ganz anders dar, als von sämtlichen anderen Parteien propagiert”, “Und teilen Sie diesen Beitrag, denn über diese Fakten werden die Leitmedien wohl kaum berichten”, “Teilen: Das muss Deutschland wissen!”).

- V10\_2STORY: posting present party as underdog (e.g.: “Im Gegensatz zu anderen Parteien haben wir keine Großspender”).
- V10\_3STORY: posting presents party or party’s politicians as victims (e.g.: “Hexenjagd der Presse nimmt immer absurdere Züge an!”).

### Variable 11\_FEAR

Populist communication sometimes evokes fear and anxieties, claiming an imminent threat to society. These postings seek to alarm and mobilize people, evoking negative emotions or actions. Postings seek to warn, alert the public and may refer to dangers from outside (war, migrants), from far away (climate change apocalypse), certain policies (collapse of welfare or tax system) or be more general about the end of western civilization, local or national culture, the homeland, the cohesion of society, tradition, decency, etc.

- V11\_1FEAR: message appealing to emotion of fear to alarm or mobilize people on negative feeling or action (e.g.: “WATCH and SHARE: Whoever wins this election will have to keep our country safe. Our security and Jeremy Corbyn – TOO BIG A RISK”; “Jeremy Corbyn’s nonsensical and irresponsible ideas are a grave risk to Britain’s economic security and the finances of every UK family”; “You can’t take tea with terrorists who want to kill us”).

### Variable 12\_SIMPLICITY

Populist communication tends to over-simplify complex political issues. Coding this variable is tricky, because simplifying is also a typical element of communication on social media – and of election campaigns in general. Postings may suggest simple solutions to society’s key problems. The government or other parties are not getting anything done, while the real solution is so simple and commonsensical – as every man on the street knows. Postings promise to reform, to make life easier and simpler, for example by being able to do a tax declaration on a beer coaster in the future.

*Watch out:* if a simple solution is offered, but the posting contains a link promising more information and detail, we do not code it as over-simplified (e.g.: “We’ll stand up for the many, not the few. How? Read our 2017 manifesto to find out more. Agree with our pledges? Share it now”).

- V12\_SIMPL: oversimplifying issues or solutions (e.g.: “Theresa May will support working families by capping expensive and unfair energy prices”; “Whether you rent or buy, everyone needs the security of a place to call home – that’s why we will fix the broken housing market”).

### Variable 13\_TOPIC

This variable measures what the posting is about: policy issues, the personal life of a candidate, current events or the election campaign itself. It is possible to code “Other”, if the topic of a posting does not fit within these items. If this is the case, write *one word*

what the topic is. We code “Other” only very rarely, because all of these words have to be re-coded in the end.

- V13\_1TOPIC: message on *policy issues* that should be resolved (often local or episodic, individual) that should be resolved fast (e.g. taxes, public transportation, health care, migrant crisis, unemployment). >> Continue with V14.
- V13\_2TOPIC: message on *personal life* of a candidate or politician from other party.
- V13\_3TOPIC: message commenting on *current events*, which are not primarily political but on actuality (from sport, events, news).
- V13\_4TOPIC: message on *campaigning*, how campaign is managed and on performance during the campaign).
- V13\_5TOPIC: message is not related to politics or policy (e.g.: “Happy birthday, Barack Obama!”).
- V13\_6TOPIC: Other

### Variable 14\_POLICY FIELD

Only if V13\_1 was coded, *i.e.* if the posting is about a policy issue that should be resolved, we code the policy field it concerns.

- V14\_1POLICY: economic policy (prices, currency, unemployment, investment, taxes, financial regulation, banks, consumer debt, inflation, labour issues, fuel prices).
- V14\_2POLICY: social policy (welfare, housing, homelessness, poverty, pensions).
- V14\_3POLICY: health policy (health care, hospitals, fostering healthy behaviour, cost of health, insurance).
- V14\_4POLICY: migration policy (migrants, refugees, integration, border control, immigration).
- V14\_5POLICY: education policy (kindergarten, schools, university, science).
- V14\_6POLICY: foreign policy (diplomacy, war, relations with foreign leaders, international institutions [EU]).
- V14\_7POLICY: Brexit.
- V14\_8POLICY: environmental policy (climate, diesel scandal, nuclear power, air pollution, recycling, energy).
- V14\_9POLICY: security policy (crime, terrorism).
- V14\_10POLICY: transport policy (trains, public transportation, street tolls).
- V14\_11POLICY: technology policy (digitalization, glass fiber, internet regulation).
- V14\_12POLICY: media policy (public service media).
- V14\_13OTHER: if 1-12 do not apply, type the policy field in one word.

## Appendix C

Table 1. Populism in content and populism in style per party

Party name	Country	PIC Empty			PIC Excluding			PIC Anti-elitism			PIS			
		2014	2017	2018	2014	2017	2018	2014	2017	2018	2014	2017	2018	
CDU	GER	M	0	.007	0	0	.005	0	0	.003	0	.056	.038	0
		SD	(.000)	(.033)	(.000)	(.000)	(.027)	(.000)	(.000)	(.015)	(.000)	(.079)	(.082)	(.000)
SPD	GER	M	.004	.011	.006	.004	.017	.004	.002	.005	.003	.013	.061	.066
		SD	(.025)	(.023)	(.032)	(.021)	(.046)	(.078)	(.013)	(.024)	(.023)	(.043)	(.081)	(.073)
FDP	GER	M	0	.014	0	0	.009	0	.002	.007	0	.033	.030	.006
		SD	(.000)	(.042)	(.000)	(.000)	(.028)	(.000)	(.013)	(.022)	(.000)	(.071)	(.055)	(.033)
GRÜNE	GER	M	0	0	0	.005	.002	0	.004	0	0	.008	.052	0
		SD	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.022)	(.015)	(.000)	(.017)	(.000)	(.000)	(.037)	(.086)	(.000)
LINKE	GER	M	0	.008	.016	0	.008	.010	.003	.008	.029	0	.017	.048
		SD	(.000)	(.037)	(.073)	(.000)	(.027)	(.044)	(.016)	(.023)	(.051)	(.000)	(.051)	(.093)
CSU	GER	M	.012	.007	0	.007	.009	0	.008	.003	0	.030	.034	.008
		SD	(.044)	(.034)	(.000)	(.026)	(.029)	(.000)	(.024)	(.016)	(.000)	(.065)	(.068)	(.036)
NPD	GER	M	.029	.035	.011	.031	.063	.044	.024	.030	.014	.041	.122	.087
		SD	(.082)	(.093)	(.042)	(.070)	(.102)	(.074)	(.060)	(.058)	(.044)	(.086)	(.161)	(.108)
AfD	GER	M	.019	.035	.091	.016	.027	.027	.017	.027	.065	.057	.058	.107
		SD	(.054)	(.096)	(.132)	(.037)	(.064)	(.098)	(.040)	(.058)	(.077)	(.134)	(.105)	(.093)
PCF	FR	M	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.003	0	0	.011	
		SD	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.016)	(.000)	(.000)	(.056)
PS	FR	M	.001	0	0	.003	0	0	.001	0	0	.001	0	0
		SD	(.015)	(.000)	(.000)	(.021)	(.000)	(.000)	(.007)	(.000)	(.000)	(.015)	(.000)	(.000)
UMP	FR	M	0	.004	.011	0	.007	.013	0	.002	.005	0	.008	0
		SD	(.000)	(.023)	(.043)	(.000)	(.033)	(.052)	(.000)	(.012)	(.020)	(.000)	(.035)	(.000)
FN	FR	M	.003	0	0	.005	.004	.005	.001	.002	0	0	.002	.005
		SD	(.022)	(.000)	(.000)	(.029)	(.019)	(.028)	(.016)	(.012)	(.000)	(.000)	(.030)	(.030)
MODEM	FR	M	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.015	0	0	0	
		SD	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.034)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
LREM	FR	M	NP	.008	.005	NP	.005	.003	NP	.004	.003	NP	0	0
		SD	(.037)	(.019)	(.022)	(.022)	(.018)	(.017)	(.014)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	
LFI	FR	M	NP	.004	.015	NP	.002	.009	NP	.005	.013	NP	.004	.015
		SD	(.021)	(.065)	(.015)	(.030)	(.020)	(.036)	(.025)	(.057)	(.025)	(.057)	(.057)	
DLF	FR	M	NP	0	0	NP	.006	0	NP	0	.006	NP	.010	.026
		SD	(.000)	(.000)	(.025)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.021)	(.000)	(.021)	(.042)	(.063)	
CONS	UK	M	.052	.075	.027	.031	.045	.016	.024	.035	.012	.021	.082	.010
		SD	(.089)	(.084)	(.070)	(.054)	(.050)	(.042)	(.041)	(.039)	(.032)	(.056)	(.102)	(.040)
LAB	UK	M	.011	.070	.054	.007	.042	.032	.005	.033	.025	.019	.028	.029
		SD	(.042)	(.102)	(.089)	(.023)	(.061)	(.053)	(.020)	(.047)	(.041)	(.054)	(.066)	(.064)
LibDem	UK	M	.005	.036	.017	.003	.021	.010	.002	.016	.008	.015	.033	.025
		SD	(.029)	(.084)	(.075)	(.017)	(.050)	(.045)	(.013)	(.039)	(.034)	(.049)	(.077)	(.060)
SNP	UK	M	.039	.029	.005	.023	.018	.003	.015	.013	.002	.020	.020	.011
		SD	(.079)	(.069)	(.019)	(.060)	(.043)	(.008)	(.037)	(.039)	(.014)	(.057)	(.043)	(.043)
PLAID	UK	M	.076	.042	.021	.044	.027	.017	.034	.019	.013	.009	.027	.014
		SD	(.090)	(.073)	(.056)	(.045)	(.030)	(.041)	(.034)	(.020)	(.038)	(.062)	(.047)	
GREEN	UK	M	.023	.009	.020	.015	.007	.012	.020	.004	.009	.013	.018	.000
		SD	(.071)	(.038)	(.080)	(.048)	(.025)	(.040)	(.057)	(.017)	(.037)	(.045)	(.085)	(.000)
UKIP	UK	M	.042	.016	.022	.033	.009	.017	.031	.009	.013	.035	.012	.036
		SD	(.104)	(.080)	(.057)	(.083)	(.048)	(.039)	(.069)	(.048)	(.030)	(.095)	(.043)	(.086)
BNP	UK	M	.038	.041	.023	.043	.049	.030	.031	.035	.021	.071	.101	.089
		SD	(.087)	(.120)	(.058)	(.087)	(.127)	(.083)	(.060)	(.083)	(.051)	(.128)	(.170)	(.151)

Note: M (Mean values of populism per all posts), SD (Standard Deviation), NP (Not Present)

Table 2. Number of posts per party during the 2 week-periods of analysis

Party name	Country	2014	2017	2018
CDU	GER	54	95	12
SPD	GER	90	60	27
FDP	GER	36	58	27
GRÜNE	GER	20	42	13
LINKE	GER	22	40	21
CSU	GER	28	68	21
NPD	GER	127	96	61
AfD	GER	44	86	33
PCF	FR	9	25	24
PS	FR	130	46	10
UMP	FR	46	44	15
FN	FR	59	78	61
MODEM	FR	9	5	6
LREM	FR	x	80	61
LFI	FR	x	43	57
DLF	FR	x	16	13
CONS	UK	32	51	50
LAB	UK	44	257	34
LibDem	UK	33	75	20
SNP	UK	144	80	62
PLAID	UK	110	44	24
GREEN	UK	65	75	17
UKIP	UK	52	43	23
BNP	UK	106	61	43

## Appendix D. Dependent and independent variables

### Dependent variables

Populism in communication is operationalized by using three distinct populism indexes for populism in content (PiC: PiC Empty, PiC Exclusionary, PiC Anti-elitist), following Claes H. de Vreese and his co-authors (2018); and by using one index for populism in style (PiS), following Roberta Bracciale and Antonio Martella (2017). There is less literature on populism in style than populism in content, and our operationalization also covers many variables that Werner Wirth and his co-authors (2019) suggest in their NCCR codebook on populism and in Martin Wettstein and his co-authors' (2019) analysis of populist styles, such as emotionalization, common sense as a source and colloquial language.

*Populism in style* contains six possible characteristics of the posting:

1. an appeal to emotion of fear;
2. the oversimplification of issues or solutions;
3. the use of non-precise language, with allusions, puns, and empty rhetoric, proverbs, stereotypes, clichés, and other expression of “popular wisdom”;
4. the breaking of the rules of political correctness;
5. the use of vulgar language;
6. the use of aggressive or provocative language (2014 M=.142 SD=.43, 2017 M=.216 SD=.52, 2018 M=.185 SD=.53; GER M=.289 SD=.60, UK M=.190 SD=.49, FR M=.021 SD=.15).

Concerning policy fields, we coded each posting according to covering any specific topic (in case of multiple topics, all topics were coded as present). Postings were coded according to twelve topics: economy, social issues, health, migration, education, foreign policy, Brexit (UK only), environment, security, transport, technology and media. In our sample, in 46% (1,661) of postings at least one of above topics were mentioned. Each posting was binary-coded for the presence or absence of the indexes' elements. This coding is non-exclusive as postings can contain more than one element within each index, for example a posting being anti-national, anti-government and anti-EU.

### Independent variable

To calculate variables indicating party characteristics, we use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). The data from CHES 2014 and 2017 (and 2010 for BNP) are combined (mean scores or a score from one year if a party is studied only in one wave [e.g. LREM only in CHES 2017]).

*Party family* is a dummy variable coded separately for Radical Left (3 parties), Radical Right (5 parties), Center (6 parties), Left Leaning (3 parties), Right Leaning (3 parties), and Other (6 parties, e.g. Greens or regional parties).

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## NOTES

1. Calculated according to syntax by Andrew F. Hayes, <http://www.afhayes.com>.
2. Statistical method allowing to search for relation between dependent variable and several explanatory variables.
3. ANOVA analysis allows to estimate the differences between the means.
4. British National Party, official Facebook account, 2 June 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/71523830069/posts/10155285526230070>.

## ABSTRACTS

In this paper, we adopt the notion of populism as a communication phenomenon that includes typical elements of content (*i.e.* people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups) and of style (*i.e.* evoking fear, oversimplification, and style of language). We thus move away from actor-centric approaches towards a content-centric approach of studying populism. Empirically, our study measures populism to varying degrees and forms in 3,564 Facebook posts of political parties in France, Germany and the United Kingdom during the 2014 EU election campaigns, the 2017 national parliamentary election campaigns, and a non-electoral period in 2018 in each country. The results show that populism is not a marginal phenomenon but that it is present in about one-fourth of all posts in some form; that there is variance between countries, party types, policy fields, and over time. While radical parties are very exclusionary towards out-groups on the right and very anti-elitist on the left and the right, this observation provides only a partial view of the multifaceted phenomenon of populism.

Dans cet article, nous envisageons la notion de populisme comme un phénomène de communication qui comprend des éléments typiques de contenu (le peuple, l'anti-élitisme et l'exclusion des *hors-groupes*) et de style (l'évocation de la peur, la simplification excessive et le registre de langue), nous éloignant ainsi des approches centrées sur les acteurs pour adopter une approche centrée sur les contenus. Empiriquement, notre étude mesure les différents degrés et les différentes formes de populisme à travers l'analyse de 3564 posts Facebook publiés sur les pages de partis politiques en France, en Allemagne et au Royaume-Uni pendant les campagnes des élections européennes de 2014, les campagnes des élections parlementaires nationales de 2017 et une période non électorale dans chaque pays en 2018. Les résultats montrent que le populisme n'est pas un phénomène marginal, mais qu'il est présent dans environ un quart des messages ; qu'il existe des distinctions dans le temps entre les pays, les types de partis, les domaines politiques. Si les partis radicaux sont très exclusifs à l'égard des groupes marginaux à droite et très anti-élitistes à gauche et à droite, cette observation ne donne qu'une vision partielle du phénomène multiforme du populisme.

En este artículo, contemplamos la noción de populismo como un fenómeno de comunicación que incluye elementos típicos de contenido (la población, el antielitismo y la exclusión de los grupos con los que no existe identificación) y de estilo (la evocación del miedo, la simplificación excesiva y el registro del lenguaje). De este modo, nos alejamos de los enfoques centrados en los agentes para adoptar un enfoque centrado en los contenidos. Empíricamente, nuestro estudio mide el populismo en diferentes grados y formas en 3564 publicaciones en Facebook de partidos políticos en Francia, Alemania y el Reino Unido durante las campañas electorales europeas de 2014, las campañas electorales a parlamentos nacionales de 2017 y un período no electoral en 2018 en cada país. Los resultados muestran que el populismo no es un fenómeno marginal, sino que está presente en alrededor de una cuarta parte de los mensajes y que hay distinción a lo largo del tiempo entre países, tipos de partidos y ámbitos políticos. Si los partidos radicales son muy exclusivistas frente a grupos marginales de derechas y muy antielitistas tanto en la izquierda como en la derecha, esta observación sólo ofrece una visión parcial del polifacético fenómeno del populismo.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** populisme, analyse quantitative du contenu, élections, Europe, médias sociaux

**Keywords:** populism, elections, Europe, social media, quantitative content analysis

**Palabras claves:** populismo, elecciones, Europa, redes sociales, análisis cuantitativo de contenido

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