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# Extreme parties and populism: an analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries

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**ABSTRACT**

Parties are adapting to the new digital environment in many ways; however, the precise relations between populist communication and social media are still hardly considered. This study compares populist communication strategies on Twitter and Facebook employed by a broad spectrum of left-wing, center, and right-wing political actors in six Western democracies. We conduct a semi-automated content analysis of politicians' social media statements ($N = 1400$) and find that populism manifests itself in a fragmented form and is mostly used by political actors at the extremes of the political spectrum (both right-wing and left-wing), by opposition parties, and on Facebook.

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Over the past two decades, populist actors around the globe have made headlines. Mudde (2004) even argues that populism has become 'mainstream in the politics of Western democracies' (p. 542). We are also living in digital times. Online media and social network platforms offer politicians new communication channels. In the emerging hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), political actors familiar with online and offline platforms gain a crucial advantage in party politics (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

These new communication possibilities also affect populism. An excellent example is the case of the Spanish political movement Podemos that has challenged old media logic by intensively and successfully using digital media (Casero-Ripolles, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016). Social media offer political actors another channel to promote themselves and actively, personally, and directly communicate with their electorate and provide politicians with unmediated and inexpensive access to voters (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Social media as a channel fits the populist message by being non-hierarchical (Bartlett, 2014) and providing populist actors with the opportunity to circumvent traditional news channels (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017).

Although scholars have intensively investigated the relationship between political populism and the mass media, as well as political actors on social media, the combination of populist communication and social media has rarely been investigated. Most of the extant research consists of case studies of single countries, predefined populist actors, or elections (Bartlett, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2015; Groshek & Engelbert, 2013; van Kessel &

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Castelein, 2016). One exception is a qualitative study by Engesser, Ernst, Esser, and Büchel (2017) that investigates how politicians use social media for populist purposes.

This study embraces a broader perspective by comparing populist communication strategies of a broad spectrum of left-wing, center, and right-wing political actors on two social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook) in six Western democracies (CH, DE, UK, US, IT, and FR). This study investigates to what extend political actors use populist communication strategies on social media and which channel they prefer for populist communication. By identifying key aspects of populist political communication and investigating how populist communication strategies are used by various political actors on social media, we follow a *communication-centered approach* (Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017). We will show that populist communication strategies are mostly used by political actors at the edges of the political spectrum (right-wing and left-wing) and by opposition parties. In terms of social media platforms, Facebook achieves higher populism values than Twitter.

## Defining populism and populist communication strategies

At the end of the twentieth century, populism was attributed with 'constitutional ambiguity' (Taguieff, 1997, p. 11) and described as a 'notoriously vague term' (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Accordingly, most definitions of populism suffered from 'inherent incompleteness' (Taggart, 2004, p. 275).

Nowadays, scientists widely agree upon the conceptualization of populism as a *thin* (and less elaborate) ideology (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004) and as a 'set of ideas' (Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Taggart, 2000). Other authors have conceived of populism as a communication style (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011; Canovan, 1999; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), a political strategy (Weyland, 2001), or an instrument for mobilization (Jansen, 2011). We define populism as a *thin ideology* that, considers – from a Manichean point of view – society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the good people' versus 'the bad elite' and which postulates the ultimate und unrestricted sovereignty of the people (Wirth et al., 2016).

Due to its ideological thinness, populism can be enriched with *thicker* and more substantive ideologies (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004) like nationalism, liberalism, or socialism. Depending on the supplemented ideologies, the notion of the people and the elite can vary. While right-wing populism tends to define the people as nation and is more likely to attack elites such as the current government or mass media, left-wing populism conceives the people as class and may denounce economic and religious elites (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Kriesi, 2014).

Populism maintains a complex relationship with democracy; scholars have described it both as a threat and a corrective (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Populism presents, independent from the perspective, a serious challenge to contemporary democracies, as it rejects crucial aspects of democracies like 'checks and balances' (Kriesi, 2014). Kriesi (2014) therefore argues that the populist vision of democracy is illiberal. However, populism challenges democracies from within the democratic system (Abts & Rummens, 2007), which clearly separates it from anti-system and extremist movements (Mudde, 2004).

Following this conceptualization, populism consists of three core concepts: the people, the elite, and popular sovereignty. However, when this thin ideology is communicated to the public, the populist actor himself becomes a crucial element. The populist actor claims to represent the people's will, acts as their only true representative, and maintains a close relationship with the people. In fact, the populist actor transports the three core dimensions of populism into the public agenda by using a set of populist communication strategies. Based on the three theoretical core dimensions of populism and the existing literature discussing populist communication strategies (Bos et al., 2011; Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), nine populist communication strategies have been developed and assigned to one of the three core dimensions of populism (Wirth et al., 2016):

The first dimension – people-centrism – consists of four strategies that advocate for the people. The populist actor can demonstrate his closeness to the people, stress their virtues, praise their achievements, or describe them as a monolithic group. The second dimension – anti-elitism – combines three populist communication strategies that are all conflictive toward the elites. Populist actors discredit or blame the elite in their communication and detach the elite from the people. The last dimension of populism – restoring sovereignty – comprises two strategies. On the one hand, the populist actor demands popular sovereignty by advocating for the people's sovereignty. On the other hand, the populist actor can also establish a negative and conflictive approach by denying the elite's sovereignty. These nine populist communication strategies refer to the content of communication and are used to express support for a specific ideology.[1] The relations between the core dimensions of populism are visualized in Figure 1.

## Social media as a platform for populism

Social media such as networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and microblogging services (e.g., Twitter) play a major role in the political communication strategies of contemporary parties (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Unlike legacy media, social media are built upon the logic of virality, which compels political actors to communicate primarily those messages that users like, comment on, promote, and share within their networks (Klinger, 2013). It is not enough for political actors to maintain a social media account; they also need to be

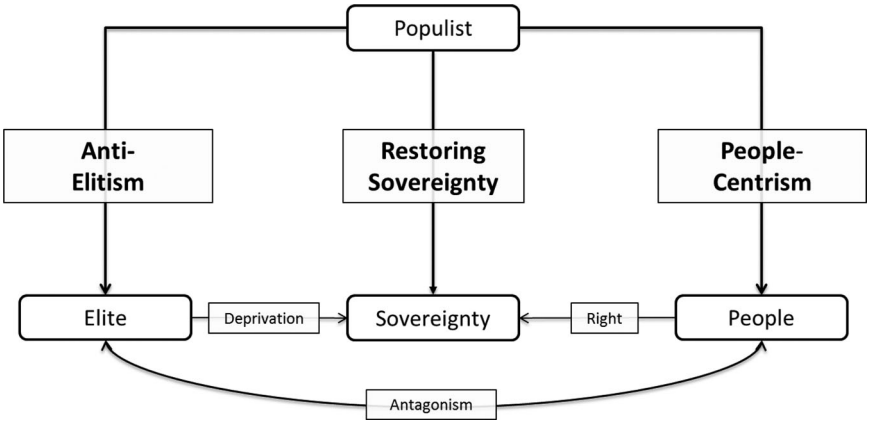


**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of thin populism.

connected to many others because high numbers of Facebook friends and Twitter followers signal popularity. While traditional 'mass media logic' is based on professional gatekeepers and a relatively passive audience, 'network media logic' evolves from interest-bound and like-minded peer networks (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Within these networks, politicians can communicate in two distinct ways (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015): By directly communicating to their followers and friends, politicians reach their 'primary audiences' (p. 1026). This direct communication relates to the model of a one-step flow of communication introduced by Bennett and Manheim (2006). If this direct communication is re-circulated by their followers, politicians extend their network's reach to a 'secondary audience' (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015, p. 1026). Since this indirect communication is mediated by choices of the primary audience and not controlled by the politician itself, it follows the logic of the two-step flow of communication hypothesis (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The potential of a secondary audience for political actors should not be underestimated, since followers of political actors are mainly active opinion leaders on Facebook (Karlsen, 2015) or people who have a high visibility on Twitter (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015).

A theoretical relation between populism and online communication was already established in the late 1990s by Bimber (1998), who explored the Internet's potential to 'restructure political power in a populist direction' (p. 137) and the possibility of an 'unmediated communication between citizens and the government' (p. 137). We argue that Bimber's argument is still valid and that the four following points underline the positive effect and opportunity structures for populist communication on social media.

First, populist actors require a 'direct, unmediated access to the people's grievances' (Kriesi, 2014, p. 363) because they are the self-perceived advocates and mouthpieces of the people. Via social media, this direct connection to the people and the political actor's followers is automatically given, due to the network characteristics. On social media, gatekeepers can neither select which messages are considered newsworthy, nor can journalists restrict and frame these messages (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Hence, unlike press releases, populist actors can spread their messages directly and unmediated by circumventing gatekeepers (Esser et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016).

Second, social media provide populist actors with the opportunity for a close connection to the people, a crucial element for populism to flourish (Kriesi, 2014; Taggart, 2000). Social media allow populist actors to connect with their voters at a human level and possibly create stronger ties due to the lower barriers of interaction. Jacobs and Spierings (2016) describe these advantages of social media as 'human-contact opportunity' (p. 23). Social media makes politicians – and populist actors in particular – more approachable, as social media can create a feeling of 'social presence' (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013), which results in a stronger and closer connection between populist actors and their followers.

Third, social media enhance the potential of personalization by linking to an individual visualization of the private and personal life of the populist actor and by offering a look behind the scenes (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Here, populist actors have a higher degree of freedom to shape their messages and focus on personalized messages by writing about their personal lives, their feelings and emotions, their competencies, and professional activities (Golbeck et al., 2010).

Finally, unlike any other media channel, social media offer the opportunity to connect with specific groups, 'like-minded others', or 'kindred souls' (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 24). This

target-group opportunity is especially fruitful for populist actors, as they can use harsh language to attack a common enemy within their network (Engesser et al., 2017).

Taken together, the opportunities for direct and unmediated access by circumventing gatekeepers, the close connection to the people, high personalization possibilities, and the target-group opportunity render social media an especially convenient instrument for populist messages.

## Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to investigate to what extent political actors use populist communication strategies on social media and which channel they prefer for populist communication. To pursue these questions, three main hypotheses are formulated.

Numerous studies, especially those with a focus on Western democracies, have considered radical right-wing parties or actors as populist. However, our definition of populism as a *thin* ideology and the chameleonic nature of populism (Taggart, 2000) imply that populism can be combined with various ideologies and should not be exclusively restricted to right-wing parties. European examples such as the Spanish movement Podemos (Casero-Ripolles et al., 2016) show that left-wing political actors successfully use populism in their communication. Especially in the context of social media, Engesser et al. (2017) demonstrate that populist communication via social media is not restricted to alleged right-wing populist actors.

Other studies were interested in whether parties to the ends of the political spectrum are more inclined to employ populist communication strategies than parties of the center are. The available studies that are comparative in nature are so far limited to content analyses of party manifestos (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Steenbergen & Weber, 2015), press releases (Bernhard, 2016), or interviews with MPs (Landerer, 2014); none examined social media. They indicate, however, that radical parties are more prone than moderate parties to challenge the current establishment, attack the elite, and glorify the people in their political communication. In order to ascertain whether previous findings can also be applied to the social media sector, we will test the following hypothesis:

> H1: Political actors on the left and right fringes of the party spectrum use more populist communication strategies than moderate or centrist parties.

Furthermore, we argue that having a public political office or being in opposition to the government influences the amount of populism in communication on social media. Mény and Surel (2002) argue that 'populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government' and 'remain predominantly in opposition' (p. 18). In line with this argument, Heinisch (2003) notes that when right-wing populist parties enter government, their unique strengths turn into disadvantages. Even where governments include a right-wing populist party, or are supported by them (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016), discrediting and blaming the alleged elites remains a core feature of populist actors. We also expect social media to be a favorite tool of the political opposition. As van Kessel and Castelein (2016) show, populist parties mainly target incumbent mainstream parties and politicians via Twitter. Hence, the second hypothesis to be tested is:

> H2: Opposition parties use a greater amount of populist communication strategies than governing parties.

Following Cranmer (2011), our third argument states that specific characteristics of a communication channel influence the degree of populist communication. Research on general political communication on social media usually does not differentiate between the various social media platforms. Empirical studies either investigate Twitter or Facebook in isolation, or summarize the two in one category, sometimes combined with further platforms such as YouTube. The results are then discussed as aggregated social media effects, with no distinction made between platform types. However, each social media platform has its own unique architecture, culture, and norms (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). The platforms also differ in terms of technical infrastructure, terminology, and appearance (Larsson, 2015). Moreover, users are fully aware of these differences and engage with the platforms differently (Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014). Especially when investigating populism, we argue that it is crucial to analyze whether the two most common and intensively used social media platforms, Facebook, and Twitter, differ in the degree of populist communication.

We expect that the use of populist communication strategies is higher for Facebook for the following four reasons. First, Facebook in general has more reciprocal message exchanges, which brings the users closer together and may enhance the quality of interpersonal communication (Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014) and foster social capital (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014).

Second, Facebook and Twitter are different in their levels of proximity, as only Twitter allows users to remain anonymous (Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014). Friending or liking someone on Facebook requires greater commitment than simply following a Twitter account. Therefore, the connection between Facebook users is generally more intensive, personal, and intimate. Populist actors benefit from this closer connection as it helps them to demonstrate their proximity to the people and potential voters.

Third, Twitter is often described as primarily used for consuming and distributing professionally relevant information (Hermida, 2010). The average Twitter user is younger, better educated, more urban and higher in socio-economic status than the average population. Facebook, on the other hand, is more popular and socially mixed (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Twitter is moreover widely used by journalist as a reporting (Vis, 2013) and research tool (Swasy, 2016). Due to Twitter's stronger professional and purpose orientation, political actors may consider it less suitable for spreading blunt and emotional appeals than Facebook.

Finally, Facebook has an advantage in that messages are not limited to 140 characters, which gives political actors the opportunity to make their case more effectively and elaborately. The unlimited space, in combination with the longer lifespan of Facebook posts, is the fourth factor expected to lead to higher levels of populist communication on Facebook. Hence, the third hypothesis reads as follows:

H3: The extent of populist communication strategies is higher on Facebook than on Twitter.

## Method

We conducted a semi-automated content analysis (Wettstein, 2014b) of Facebook post and Tweets by 88 leading politicians from six countries during a three-month period in 2015 using the coding interface *Angrist* (Wettstein, 2014a). Twitter and Facebook were

chosen because they are currently the two most popular services, especially for political actors (Larsson, 2015).

## Sample

We selected six Western democracies (CH, DE, UK, US, IT, and FR) that are broadly similar in some but sufficiently different in other respects. The sample provides sufficient variability regarding parliamentary vs. presidential systems, representative vs. directional systems, consensus vs. majoritarian systems, strong vs. weak standing of populist parties (in parliament or public opinion), or higher vs. lower consumption of social media for political information purposes (Aalberg et al., 2017; Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017).

As populism is a transnational phenomenon that can be found across borders, we are not focusing on comparing single nations but on comparing political parties and social media platforms. By comparing the relationships between party types (H1, H2) or platform types (H3) and populist communication, the consideration of our six countries serves as a robustness check to determine whether these relationships hold in different contexts. If we are able to confirm the relationships between our independent and dependent variables in this multitude of countries, it would raise the confidence in the validity and generalizability of our findings substantially.

For each country, we selected five parties: on the one hand, the four largest parties in parliament across the left-right spectrum; on the other hand, the most influential party commonly described as populist in the scientific literature. Table 1 provides an overview of the 29 selected parties.

Within each party, politicians were selected according to two criteria: on the one hand, according to the highest hierarchical position in the country or party (head of government

**Table 1.** Sample of political parties including ideological stance score (CHES).

| | Political stance | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Left | Moderate left | Center | Moderate right | Right |
| CH | Green Party of Switzerland | Social Democratic Party of Switzerland[b] | Christian Democratic People's Party[b] | FDP. The Liberals[b] | Swiss People's Party[a,b] |
| | 1.9 | 2.1 | 5.5 | 6.9 | 8.3 |
| DE | Alliance'90/The Greens | Social Democratic Party of Germany[b] | Union Party[b] | Free Democratic Party | Alternative for Germany[a] |
| | 3.6 | 3.8 | 5.9 | 6.5 | 8.9 |
| FR | Europe Ecology – The Greens | Socialist Party[b] | The Democratic Movement | The Republicans | National Front[a] |
| | 3.1 | 3.8 | 5.9 | 7.7 | 9.6 |
| IT | Federation of the Greens | Democratic Party[b] | Civic Choice[b] | Forza Italia[a] | |
| | 1.3 | 3.6 | 5.4 | 6.7 | |
| | | Five Star Movement[a] | | | |
| | | 4.7 | | | |
| UK | Green Party | Labour Party | Liberal Democrats | Conservative Party[b] | UK Independence Party[a] |
| | 1.9 | 3.6 | 4.9 | 7.0 | 9.1 |
| USA | Green Party | Democratic Party[b] | | Republican Party | Tea Party Movement[a] |

Note: [a] = party widely described as populist in the literature; M5S was prioritized over Lega Nord, due to its stronger social media affinity and because another right-wing populist party, Berlusconi's Forza Italia, was already part of the sample; [b] = governing party.

and/or party leader) in 2015; on the other hand, according to the highest social media resonance (most followers on Twitter) in January 2015. With regard to the first criterion, we accounted for the fact that party leaders can serve different functions in different political systems; with regard to the second criterion, only the number of Twitter followers was consulted to ensure equivalence across countries.[2] Based on this selection procedure, the verified Facebook and Twitter profiles of 110 politicians were included in the sample (for details, see Table 4 in the Online Appendix). Party leaders or head of government without a social media account could not be considered.

The social media material was downloaded using the tool *Facepager* (Keyling & Jünger, 2013) during a three-month period from September until November 2015. We selected a political routine-time period to ensure we captured debates on a variety of political issues. A partial exception was Switzerland where parliamentary elections were held in October; however, due to the Swiss direct democratic system, elections are considered less relevant than the numerous referenda and initiatives about the 'really important' issues (no public vote took place during sampling period). Included in the analysis are only Tweets and Facebook posts that include actual statements of a politician and are longer than eight characters. Simple retweets as well as Tweets or Facebook posts including only pictures, links, or videos were excluded from the analysis. This procedure provided a large universe of Facebook posts ($N = 10{,}069$) and Tweets ($N = 28{,}761$) from which we drew a randomized sample of not more than 50 Tweets and 50 Facebook posts per politician (if possible). This yielded an initial sample of 4698 items.

Of this initial sample, we processed only those Tweets and posts that included a veritable statement by a politician which contained either a position or an elaboration on a political issue or an evaluation or an attribution of a target actor ($N = 1440$). We discarded the rest; we further excluded politicians with less than five statements in total. This led to a final sample of $N = 845$ Facebook posts and $N = 555$ Tweets sent out by 88 politicians. For testing the first two hypotheses, the data are aggregated on the level of politicians; for analyzing the third hypothesis, the data are calculated on the statement level without any aggregation.

## Units of analysis

The unit of analysis is a single statement made by a politician's respective social media account (speaker) on a target actor or an issue. A social media statement can contain one or several of these statements by one speaker. Speaker, target actor, and issue are defined as follows:

*Speaker*: A politician's respective social media account is considered a speaker. Because retweets are excluded from the analysis, only statements that are written by the politicians have been included.

*Target actor*: An actor characterized or evaluated by a speaker's statement counts as target actor, such as other politicians, organizations, elites, the people. The speaker himself can also be a target actor when he utters a statement about himself.

*Issue*: An issue is a subject area addressed by a speaker's statement, such as an election, immigration, or security.

Strategies that advocate for the people (people-centrism) or attack elites (anti-elitism) are measured at the level of the speaker's statements about target actors. The

strategies that protect sovereignty (restoring sovereignty) are coded as statements on issues.

A team of intensively trained student coders reached acceptable levels of reliability. The average Brennan and Prediger's kappa across all strategies is .83 (see Online Appendix, Table 6).[3] All coders had to pass an initial reliability test (137 statements) before being admitted to the coder pool. Additionally, a concealed reliability test (382 statements) was conducted during regular coding sessions.

## Operationalization

### Populist communication strategies

The nine populist communication strategies are operationalized using a broad set of categories (for details see Online Appendix, Table 3). These variables can be regarded as formative measures, which means that a strategy is not required to be internally consistent in order to be reliable or valid (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, & Roth, 2008). For each category, we code whether a given social media statement is present or not. A strategy is considered present if at least one of its respective categories is identified in a statement. The dependent variable – populism index – is present if at least one of the nine populist communication strategies is present. Original examples of populist statements are reported in Table 5 in the Online Appendix.

### Party categories

The 88 politicians belonging to 29 different parties are first placed on a left and right spectrum using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2014). The parties are assigned to categories based on their score on the overall ideological stance (see Table 1). We had to assign the four US-American parties ourselves because the CHES data only include European countries. Additionally, we calculate an indicator of party extremism by centering the original CHES score. For each party score, we subtract the theoretical center of the scale (minus 5) and square each result to obtain a measure of party extremism. High levels on the scale identify parties – both left- and right-wing – at the extreme of the political spectrum; low levels characterize parties based at the center of the spectrum.[4] Next to party ideology, a dummy for parties that were not in the government during the three-month time period (opposition party) and a dummy for Facebook is calculated.

## Findings

### Sample description

Overall, the results reveal that roughly every tenth statement on Twitter and Facebook (10.6%) contains at least one populist communication strategy (Figure 2). Anti-elitist sentiments are slightly more prominent (6.4%) than strategies on the people-centrism dimension (4.3%), whereas strategies that protect popular sovereignty are almost absent (0.1%). A closer look at the strategies level reveals that blaming (4%) and discrediting elites (3.5%), describing a monolithic people (2.8%), and demonstrating closeness to the people (1.6%) are the most frequent strategies.

### Hypotheses

To test the three hypotheses, we conduct analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) using the populism index as the dependent variable. The independent variables vary respectively (extreme vs. centrist party, opposition vs. government party, Facebook vs. Twitter) for each analysis. For the first two hypotheses, conducted at the level of political actors, a dummy controlling for national elections in Switzerland is included. For the third hypothesis, the length of all Twitter and Facebook statements is included as a control variable in the analysis.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that political actors placed on the left and right fringes of the party spectrum use more populist communication strategies than moderate or centrist parties do. This hypothesis is supported ($F(4, 83) = 2.88$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .123$).[5] Figure 3 plots the mean values of the different parties on the left-right scale for the populism index (for a detailed overview, see Table 7 in the Online Appendix). As predicted, politicians belonging to right parties used populist communication strategies most frequently ($M = .14$, $SD = .08$), followed by moderate right ($M = .11$, $SD = .10$) and left parties ($M = .10$, $SD = .08$). Moderate left ($M = .07$, $SD = .08$) and center parties ($M = .05$, $SD = .11$) use almost no populist communication strategies in their social media communication. The use of populist communication is therefore stronger for politicians belonging to parties at the extremes of the political spectrum. Moreover, the analysis shows that all right-wing parties score higher on the populism index than left-wing parties.

Hypothesis 2 anticipates that opposition parties use a higher amount of populist communication strategies than governing parties do. This hypothesis is supported ($F(1, 85) = 8.58$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .092$).[6] As expected, overall populist communication via social media is higher for opposition parties ($M = .11$, $SD = .09$) than parties currently in government ($M = .05$, $SD = .07$).

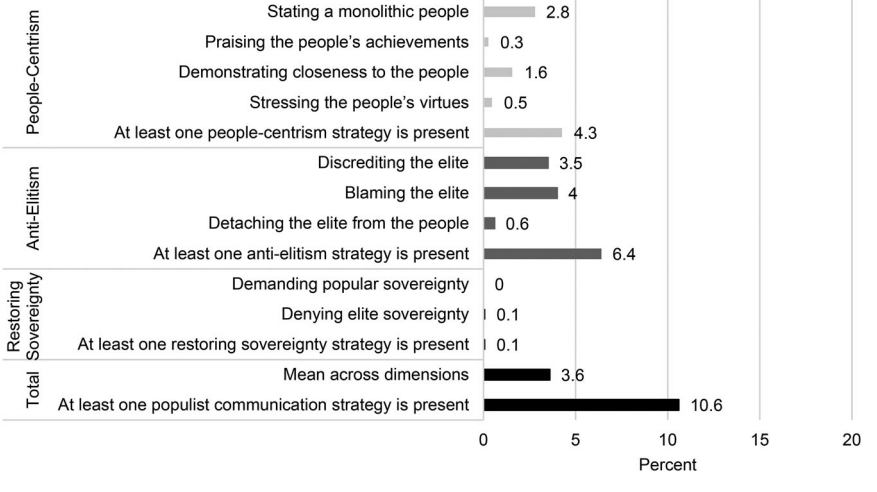


**Figure 2.** Share of all populist communication strategies ($N = 1400$).

Note: The figure depicts the proportion of the nine populist communication strategies, the three sub-dimensions and an overall amount in percent.

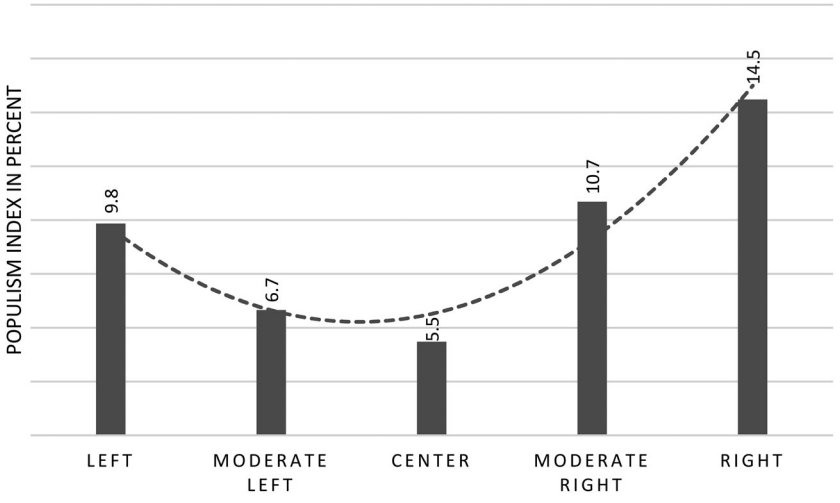


**Figure 3.** Use of populist communication strategies by parties on the left-right scale.

The third hypothesis predicts that the extent of populist communication strategies is higher on Facebook than on Twitter. The analysis reveals that indeed, overall populist communication is higher on Facebook ($M = .13$, $SD = .33$) than on Twitter ($M = .07$, $SD = .26$). Hence, the third hypothesis can be supported ($F(1, 1394) = 10.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .007$).[7]

For the purpose of multivariate validation, we test the effects of all three independent variables on populist communication in a single OLS regression model. The analysis includes party extremism and dummies for opposition parties and Facebook. As the USA is not included in the CHES, US parties were excluded from this analysis. The findings confirm that populist communication is higher for extreme ($\beta = .061$, $p < .05$) and opposition parties ($\beta = .093$, $p < .001$) as well as on Facebook ($\beta = .085$, $p < .001$).[8] On statement level the explained variance of the model is rather small ($R^2 = 0.021$). However, if the data are aggregated to higher levels, the explained variance increases to 12% at the level of politicians ($R^2 = 0.123$) and 31% at the level of parties ($R^2 = 0.312$). The regression analysis cross-validates the argument that populist communication is dependent on each of the included independent variables (see Table 2).

## Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study is to investigate which political actors use populist communication strategies on social media and which social media platform they prefer. We define populism as a thin ideology with three core dimensions of populism (people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring sovereignty) as a starting point to deduce nine populist communication strategies. We theorized that four characteristics make social media highly compatible with populist communication: A direct access to the audience without journalistic interference, a close connection to the people, an infinite potential for personalization, and the possibility to target specific groups.

**Table 2.** OLS regression of populist communication strategies ($N = 1205$).

| | Populist communication strategies | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *b* | *SE* | *β* | *Tolerance* | *VIF* |
| Constant | .019 | .020 | | | |
| Party extremism | .003 | .002 | .061* | .88 | 1.13 |
| Opposition party | .059 | .019 | .093*** | .89 | 1.11 |
| Facebook | .054 | .018 | .085*** | .98 | 1.02 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | | | | 0.019*** | |

Notes: OLS: ordinary least squares; SE: standard error.
***$p < .001$;**$p < .01$;*$p < .05$.

We find evidence that an extreme party position and opposition status favor an increased use of populist communication on social media. Political actors placed on the left and right fringes of the party spectrum (both right- and left-wing extreme parties) draw on populist strategies more often than centrist parties do. This result supports the first hypothesis. This pattern is consistent in Switzerland, Germany, USA, and the UK (with exception for the Green Party). In Southern Europe however, we identified a linear increase of populist communication from left to right-wing parties. We speculate that this is influenced by the disillusionment of Italian and French left-wing parties since the 1960s: However, future research should investigate this further. Consistent with previous results, right-wing parties use populism to a higher degree than left-wing parties; in our sample, the right-wing parties were usually those that are also labeled as populists. With regard to the discussion about populism as a 'thin' ideology that is enriched with specific 'thick' ideologies (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004), our findings indicate that in the analyzed Western democracies populism it is more often combined with elements of right-wing ideologies than left-wing ideas. However, our results also challenge a commonly held assumption – especially in the context of European Western democracies – that populism is *only* a right-wing phenomenon. Extreme parties located at the (far) left also use a great amount of populism in their social media communication.

Our study further demonstrates – on the solid base of a six-country sample – that opposition parties use higher amounts of populist communication strategies on social media than government parties. This finding corroborates our second hypothesis and fits earlier findings that populist communication is mainly used for attacking and discrediting the political elite by simultaneously advocating for the people. The third important result of the study is the necessary differentiation between the two social media platforms and the conclusion that both extreme and opposition parties rely in particular on Facebook for their populist communication strategies. Facebook's advantages include higher levels of proximity and reciprocity, unlimited space for messages, and its non-elite character. We can support our third hypothesis because Facebook seems to be the preferred channel for political actors to advocate for the people and blame or criticize elites. Switzerland is the only country that reports higher levels of populism on Twitter, which may be influenced by the occurrence of the national election. This Swiss finding also fits recent US experience where the 2016 presidential election campaign also favored an avid Twitter user. Future studies should investigate if Facebook is still the preferred communication channel for populism after 2017 and during election campaigns.

Taken together, these comparisons demonstrate that populist communication is indeed affine to social media. Extreme and opposition parties use these channels to communicate

directly with voters by bypassing the journalistic filters. They do so to get their messages out that might be less visible in legacy media. Furthermore, the fact that the amount of populism is higher on Facebook is a further indicator that Facebook lends itself to establishing a close connection to specific target groups and to personalized communication.

We further found that populism manifests itself in a fragmented form. The dimension of restoring sovereignty is almost absent, and the two existing core dimensions of populism hardly ever co-occur on social media. However, the finding that all analyzed statistical relations are robust across the dimensions of people-centrism and anti-elitism shows that these are both relevant dimensions that complement each other. Despite the fragmented empirical manifestation of populism, we argue that our strategy to identify three core dimensions of populism is a fruitful approach. Schulz et al. (2017) demonstrated that the three-dimension approach is essential for systemizing populist attitudes. Additionally, we were able to identify some statements that included both dimensions in one statement. Moreover, 20% of our investigated politicians combine at least two dimensions across all of their messages. This means that on the politicians' level, social media users are confronted with both dimensions.

Despite some exceptions, populism on social media is a fragmented phenomenon and the complete picture of the three core dimensions hardly ever occurs. This is in line with Engesser et al.'s (2017) results. They present three arguments: (1) politicians may reduce the complexity of the thin ideology to make it more comprehensive for their followers; (2) politicians may keep the populist ideology ambiguous and malleable to open the possibility that users can complement it with their own political attitudes; and (3) fragments of populism may travel more easily below the radar of political opponents and critical observers.

Additionally, the question of why the dimension of restoring sovereignty is practically absent must be addressed. The absence may be explained by the fact that demanding popular sovereignty for the people or denying sovereignty of elites may be something that is essential for the ideology of populism but not communicated via the personal and extremely direct channels of social media. Although populist actors are aware of this important dimension, they may consciously decide not to communicate this part of the ideology. Moreover, the idea of restoring sovereignty may be captured to some extent within the other two dimensions.

There are some limitations of this study that must be considered. One limitation is the rather low sample size in terms of selected countries, included parties, and platforms. Accordingly, the findings represent a specific sample of countries and parties and any generalizations must be drawn carefully. Because the party sample includes more far right-wing parties scoring high on the CHES score, it would be beneficial to include more far left parties in the sample such as the German 'The Left', the French 'Left Front', or the Italian 'Communist Refoundation Party' to further investigate the use of populist communication by fringe parties. However, in the six selected countries, far left wing parties have low vote shares on the national level and mostly non-influential actors in the national political process.[9] Nevertheless, it would be interesting to include them in the analysis to examine if the identified U-curve withstands and even further increases on the left side. Adding additional social media platforms such as YouTube or online media like political blogs would shed some more light on the question of which is the favorite online channel for populism.

A second limitation is the routine-time period without any elections. Populist communication might be different during election campaigns, and show a more complete picture of populism. Moreover, during the three-month period, migration was a highly debated issue. The discussion of the migration wave was fertile ground for populism, especially on the right-wing spectrum, which may explain the higher presence of populist communication compared to left wing parties during that time. Future studies should strive to sample both routine periods as well as election campaigns to compare populist communication across these different modes of operation.

Another limitation is that only populist communication strategies have been investigated and potential populist style elements such as dramatization, or black and white rhetoric have been neglected. By not only focusing on the content of a communicated populist ideology and taking the way this content is communicated into account, a more complete picture of the populist communication could be presented.

A final limitation is the fact that only written statements by politicians were analyzed. Including posted links, pictures, videos, or retweets might help to answer the question about the complete nature of populist communication on social media. Especially analyzing the messages of posted pictures and videos might prove fruitful.

To conclude, this study adds to the current research on populist communication in the media by systematically investigating how politicians use populist communication strategies in their day-to-day social media communication. Future research should follow a communication-centered approach and investigate the broad political spectrum, with a special emphasis on right- but also left-wing fringe parties. Moreover, it is crucial to differentiate between the various social media platforms. Moreover, the next logical step would be to investigate the use of populist communication in different media outlets by comparing communication on social media with traditional on- and offline news media, broadcast news, or political talk shows.

## Notes

1. Populist styles like emotional or colloquial language, simplification, or scandalization on the other hand refer to the way the content is presented.
2. Politicians with high social media resonance are identified through the following sources:
   CH: http://twittermonitor.somepolis.ch
   DE: http://www.bundestwitter.de/politiker and https://pluragraph.de/categories/politik
   FR: http://www.elus20.fr/classement-politique-twitter-facebook/#twitter and http://ymobactus.miaouw.net/labo-top-politiques.php
   IT: http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/italy/society/politics
   UK: https://thegeographist.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/uk-100-most-followed-british-politicians-on-twitter
   US: http://www.davemanuel.com/the-most-popular-us-politicians-by-twitter-followers-163 and http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/united-states/society/politics/
3. As the distribution of populist statements in the reliability test is skewed and most individual statements do not contain any populism, we use Brennan and Prediger's Kappa (Brennan & Prediger, 1981) as a measure of reliability. As Quarfoot and Levine (2016) have shown, this measure is more robust in assessing reliability of rare categories than Krippendorff's Alpha and Cohen's Kappa (p. 397).
4. The sample contains parties with higher right-wing scores compared to left-wing parties, which results in a slight positive skewness (.217) of party extremism.
5. We can report the same pattern for the single sub-dimensions: parties at the extremes of the political spectrum use more anti-elitist ($F(4, 83) = 3.74$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .154$) and people-centrist

statements ($F(4, 83) = .181$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .009$). Country comparison for the overall use of populism revealed the same U-curve for DE, CH, UK, and US. However, in southern Europe (FR and IT), the pattern is different as we report a linear increase form left to right-wing parties.

6. Opposition parties used more populism across all six democracies and both dimensions: anti-elitism ($F(1, 85) = 9.91$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .104$) and people-centrism ($F(1, 85) = .444$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .005$).
7. The degree of anti-elitism ($F(1, 1394) = 2.07$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .001$) and people-centrism ($F(1, 1394) = 8.85$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .006$) is higher on Facebook than on Twitter. Country comparison revealed that Switzerland is the only country where Twitter reported higher degrees of populism compared to Facebook ($F(1, 214) = 5.315$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .024$).
8. When the absolute value instead of squared scores of party extremism is included in the OLS regression, the effects for opposition parties ($\beta = .096$, $p < .001$) and Facebook ($\beta = .085$, $p < .001$) are identical. For party extremism, we can only report a trend ($\beta = .056$, $p = .065$).
9. With exception of the German "The Left" which is especially on the regional level more influential by being part of the regional governments compared with the other far left parties.

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