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# On Behalf of the People: The Use of Public Opinion and the Perception of “the People” in Political Communication Strategies of Dutch MPs

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## Abstract

This study investigates the role of public opinion for members of parliaments (MPs) in a time in which communication about the will of “the People” is high on the political agenda. By means of face-to-face elite interviews with Dutch MPs, we explore who politicians perceive as “the People,” how they assess “the will of the People,” and how this translates into their communication strategies. We find that MPs distinguish between listening to individual opinion, to understand what topics are at the forefront of “the People’s” minds, and taking political action considering a more general public. MPs are divided in their acceptance of the term “the People”—some find it useful, while others voice concerns over its antipluralistic implications. We find evidence of populist communication strategies in the form of references to public opinion across the political spectrum. Political communication is used for political marketing and to connect to the electorate. We conclude that Dutch MPs are not becoming more populist across the political spectrum, but rather that there is a tendency toward personalization and authenticity in political communication, which makes “normal” political communication appear more populist.

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**Introduction**

Public opinion is crucial for elected officials. It informs them about the preferences of the electorate at large, and of specific constituencies. It facilitates them in executing their representative roles, and in making assessments on which policy positions work to their electoral advantage. That politicians consider public opinion of great importance is beyond debate: They frequently refer to public opinion as evidence to demonstrate their responsiveness to the people's demands (Dalton 2013) and to back-up their claims that they represent the people's will (Pitkin 1967).

The practical use of public opinion by politicians is uncontested: In terms of communication, and in a time in which "the will of the people" is high on the political agenda, references to public opinion often surface in the form of reference to "the People." The term "the People" can, however, be used to imply that there exists a uniform group of "people" who hold the same opinion, reflected in a generally held "public" opinion. This view of a homogeneous people within society without regard for diversity in the make-up of that society and opinions within it is commonly associated with populist rhetoric (Converse 1987; Esser et al. 2016; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). It is consequently also associated with a populist communication style (Hameleers et al. 2016). As literature has shown that populist messages can be persuasive and impact on voters' attitudes (Bos et al. 2013; Hameleers et al. 2016; Rooduijn et al. 2017), it is important to study communicative features of populism such as politicians' references to "the People" in a wider political context. This is because these communication strategies, originally found in populist rhetoric, can be used across the political spectrum and their effect reaches across boundaries of ideology or political alignment.

To communicate to "the People," speak on behalf of them and offer a sense of belonging to them, politicians have to have a certain perception of who these people are. This understanding of the people's will provides the basis for politicians' responsiveness and communication (strategies). Yet we know relatively little about the way "the People," who are at the heart of public opinion, are perceived by elected officials such as members of parliaments (MPs) themselves. Although it has sparked various interesting research approaches to communication from the angle of populism (see, for example, Aalberg et al. 2016; Bos et al. 2013; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Kriesi 2014; Mazzoleni 2003; Moffitt and Tormey 2014), the crucial aspect of "the People" in the wider political context remains underexplored. Previous studies examined the content and effect of MPs' political communication (see Rooduijn et al. 2014; Zulianello et al. 2018), but did not provide insight into the thoughts politicians themselves have about "the People" and how they facilitate them in their representative role. We approach MPs directly, investigating the processes through which they understand who "the People" are, how public opinion is assessed, and how they (the MPs) translate this information into communication strategies:

**Overarching Research Question:** How do MPs form their understanding of “the People” and assess the people’s will and opinions, and how does this translate into the communication efforts of those politicians?

We conduct in-depth interviews with Dutch MPs from a number of parties, focusing on questions about their daily routines, how they establish what issues are dominant in public debate, and how they use this information in their communication with the public.

## Theoretical Framework

Our starting point, and core motivation for the study, are politicians’ displays of knowledge about the public’s will and public opinion through their references to “the People.” Although this is originally rooted in the literature on public opinion and representation, the use of this term itself resurfaced within populist communication. We know from populist communication research that there are rising criticisms about referring to public opinion as something that represents the opinion of *one* people. Specifically, the communication strategy of identifying with “the People” and conceptualizing them as a uniform collective with similar interests and features (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000) can be especially relevant here. This, however, is not unique to populist communication: politicians across the political spectrum use this term to create trust, signal a connection to their constituents, and allocate some of the power back to them (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Pitkin 1967). We therefore do not restrict ourselves to populism theory, but rather adhere to a communication-centered approach, focusing on communication strategies and styles that may now be associated with references to “the People” in populism (Staney et al. 2018) but have foundations in public opinion and representation theory.

### *Public Opinion and Representation*

To be able to assess the implications of the use of public opinion, as manifested in terms of “the People,” we first set out to understand how those who communicate about them, namely the MPs, measure these concepts. Scholars mostly agree on the framework of public opinion that assumes that there is an aggregation of individuals who share sentiments and viewpoints that are mainly measured by polls and communicated through the media (Herbst 2001). Using public opinion as a benchmark for identifying what is important to the public, and referencing those issues in their communication, can be useful for MPs: They can achieve strategic advantages by supporting those matters that citizens identify as their own (Petrocik 1996). This conceptualization of public opinion thus contains three elements that are of central importance in this paper: assessment, understanding, and communication. These three elements will be addressed in the research questions below.

Ideally, public opinion can then be interpreted as people’s input on political decision making (Abts and Rummens 2007). However, the sources for knowledge about

public opinion are often criticized. The “one man, one vote” model—or “populist” conception—of public opinion polling ignores the more complex composition of society, which is based on the interaction of a diverse collective of groups and individuals (Blumer 1948; Converse 1987). In addition, public preferences are prone to fluctuation and ideally, in a perfect model of responsiveness and representation, policy changes should reflect these fluctuations (Hakhverdian 2010). The need for accurate assessments of public opinion thus becomes evident. Without taking sides in the delegate-trustee debate, political representation (Andeweg and Thomassen 2005) in essence requires that politicians are acting in a manner that is responsive to their constituents but doing so largely independently (Pitkin 1967). Direct discussion with the citizenry about each and every policy issue, however, is not generally a feasible way of governing. Hence, the construction of a popular identity out of a variety of democratic demands (and calling this popular identity “the People”) enables politicians to identify with the masses and act on their behalf.

Public opinion, here, can act as an assessment of the People’s consent. To communicate effectively and be able to relate to their constituents, MPs have to have knowledge about public opinion. This enables them to convincingly position themselves in relation to their constituents and identify with them. Given the amount of research available on the most important information sources for the public (see, for example Cohen 1963; Dalton 2013; McCombs and Shaw 1993), we know where the public goes to find out what is happening in the world. But what has been less examined is where MPs turn to in order to find out what is happening in the public consciousness:

**Research Question 1:** What are MPs’ most important information sources for their assessment of public opinion?

### *“The People”*

Although it is not entirely clear who “the People” are, it is apparent that for something so seemingly inclusive, the term appears to be deliberately exclusive in its segmentation of citizens (Abts and Rummens 2007; Converse 1987). Namely, when it comes to representation, the diversity of voices within an electorate means that any claim a politician makes on behalf of “the People” cannot include the whole community as this subject called “the People” does not exist (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Politicians are well aware of this: In their communication about public opinion, they can refer to the general people, but also to specific subgroups (e.g., party voters, people from a certain region, or ethnic background) they feel they represent.

Historically, the term “the People” is most commonly used to describe either (1) a nation, (2) the underdog, or (3) the everyman (Canovan 1984). Despite offering a sense of belonging, these terms are intrinsically exclusive.

It is particularly interesting to look at the understanding of the concept of “the People” from the perspective of MPs. In a time when populist communication and “the will of the People” is high on the political agenda, it is important to examine this political communication feature, namely references to “the People,” as a phenomenon that

is likely to be utilized by MPs across the political spectrum. Therefore, it becomes crucial to ask who, exactly, those politicians think “the People” they are referring to are:

**Research Question 2:** Who do politicians understand the term “the People” to include (or exclude)?

### *Public Opinion and Communication*

It is likely that, in their communication, politicians refer to “the People” to facilitate a sense of belonging to this group and to suggest that they have a genuine understanding of the group’s needs and values (Esser and Matthes 2013). These attempts to highlight a connection can have semantic symptoms, with politicians using colloquial language, for example, but politicians can also display a connection to “the People” by simply talking *about* them in a way that the people can identify with—the implicit motto here is “I listen to you because I talk about you” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 323).

The characteristics of political communication have frequently been analyzed on the level of communication output, that is, in party programs and manifestos. However, these studies can be supplemented by examining a missing link: the motivations and strategies of the communicators themselves. By going to the source of the communication, we are able to uncover to what degree references to public opinion and “the People” in political communication are utilized in communication by MPs across party lines, and to what degree it is present in their communication strategies, style, and motivations.

**Research Question 3:** How do politicians use the acquired knowledge of public opinion and construct the notion of “The People” in their communication strategies?

## **Method**

### *Sample*

Elite interviews and surveys were conducted with twenty-two Dutch MPs. The Dutch case presents an ideal context for this study. It is a multiparty system and therefore provides greater diversity in the political make-up of the MPs than, for example, a two-party system. At the time of the interviews, the House of Representatives comprised 150 MPs representing a total of thirteen parties. After the 2017 general election, the four parties that made up the governing coalition included the conservative-liberal VVD (thirty-three seats), the Christian-democratic CDA (nineteen seats), the social-liberal D66 (nineteen seats), and the Christian ChristenUnie (five seats). Other notable parties that held a substantial number of seats in parliament were the nationalist, right-wing PVV (twenty), the green party GroenLinks (fourteen), the socialist left-wing SP

(fourteen), the social-democratic labor party PvdA (nine), and the animal-rights focused Partij voor de Dieren (five). This context allows for an analysis across a variety of parties, investigating the invocation of “the People” in a way that is not limited to populism or the far-right.

The sample included politicians from seven of the thirteen parties represented in the Dutch parliament.<sup>1</sup> One party that is notably missing from the sample is the right-wing populist party PVV. We received no responses from PVV politicians directly, and phone access was limited. This party is most closely tied to populist ideals and should, following the populist mantra of being closest to the people, be most easily available to the people. However, it was not possible to contact MPs directly and the party’s contact person expressed no interest in asking any of the MPs to participate in the study. Other scholars of populism in the Netherlands experienced similar limitations in contacting the PVV (see, for example, Vossen 2016). At the time of the study, the FvD, a small, right-wing, populist party, held only two seats in parliament. Although we were successful in contacting them, neither of the MPs was available for interviews.

As outlined above, however, the analysis is not limited to one party or ideology. Besides, the study focuses on individual politicians and how they use certain political communication features, regardless of party affiliation.

All MPs were contacted directly in the initial round of recruitment via e-mails, outlining the project goals and procedures, which were sent in late April 2018. The second round of recruiting involved calling party offices directly to schedule appointments. Follow-up e-mails and reminders were sent after the phone round of recruitment. During the period of data collection, two participants pulled out of the project and participating MPs were also asked for recommendations for other possible contacts. This yielded a total sample of twenty-two participants representing seven parties.

Although this may seem like a low response rate, the outcome was satisfactory for two reasons: First, the group of MPs was highly varied (see Table 1) in terms of members of the coalition and opposition, gender, age, topics of specialization, and time served in office. Second, recruiting politicians for interviews and participation in research in the context of the Netherlands is notoriously difficult, and published studies that have attempted the same thing yielded very similar sample sizes (see Celis et al. 2014).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected between May 14, 2018, and September 13, 2018. The interviews were semi-structured, including key questions and supplementary prompts to encourage participants to elaborate on answers if needed.<sup>2</sup> The interview protocol was organized around the research questions outlined above. On average, the meetings lasted forty-five minutes in total, including introductory remarks and a survey that preceded the open-ended questions. The interviews specific to this paper lasted approximately seventeen minutes and were held in Dutch.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Characteristics of the Respondents.

| Party                       | Participants |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| PvdA                        | 1            |
| D66                         | 1            |
| 50PLUS                      | 1            |
| CDA                         | 2            |
| SP                          | 5            |
| VVD                         | 6            |
| GroenLinks                  | 6            |
| Gender                      | Participants |
| Female                      | 8            |
| Male                        | 14           |
| Government/Opposition       | Participants |
| Government                  | 9            |
| Opposition                  | 13           |
| Age                         |              |
| $M = 47.28$                 |              |
| $SD = 10.1$                 |              |
| Time in Office <sup>a</sup> |              |
| $M = 2.5$                   |              |
| $SD = 1.45$                 |              |

a.A large share of parliament was replaced during the most recent Dutch national elections in March 2017.

### Data Analysis

The analysis was based on inductive and deductive approaches, structuring the data into categories, themes, and dimensions (Braun and Clarke 2013). Following the data structure of Dacin et al. (2010), the data were coded and illustrated according to the four-step process described below (see Figure 1).

The first step of analysis involved reading the transcripts and identifying preliminary trends in the answer sets. The order of the interview questions roughly reflects the main topics of the research questions. Different colors were assigned for each of these topics and passages of transcripts were coded according to what research questions they addressed. This organized the transcripts into components that correspond to each research question and identified which parts of each transcript provided the necessary data to investigate each research question. Subsequently, passages of the same color/topic were reviewed, and statements that were repeated across interviews were gathered in a file. These statements served as an overview of answers that were consistent



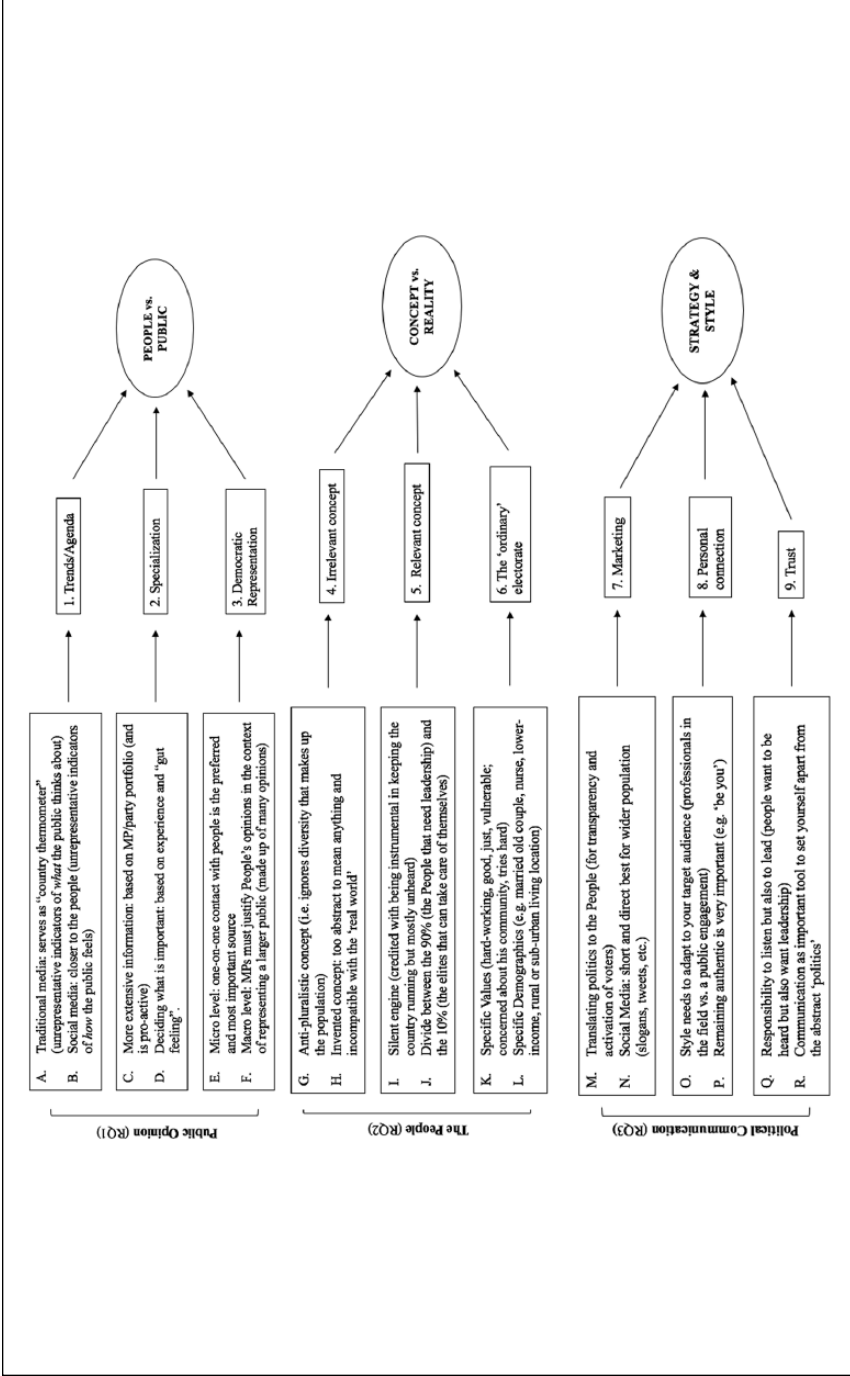


Figure I. Data structure.

across parties and MPs and represented the main premises for the answers to the research questions. By collecting these core statements across transcripts, we were able to identify initial patterns in the answers, which served as the basis for further analysis. This first step of the analysis resulted in 105 core statements made by the politicians.

In the second step, the analysis involved looking for overlap within the statements and collapsing the core statements into *first-order categories* (see Supplemental Table 2). This meant assigning codes to the statements that grouped them around the same topic. For example, many MPs stated that they read the daily newspapers on the train during their morning commute. Others stated that they rely on media reports they receive every morning. Still others preferred a quick glance at the headlines of various news websites with their morning coffee. These statements received the same code: “traditional media serve as a country thermometer.” The data structure that resulted from this second step presented the initially identified patterns in a more workable structure, as it condensed the core statements into eighteen first-order categories. Here, we took into consideration to what extent politicians with different types of background characteristics differed in systematic ways. We paid particular attention to the extent to which results differed for MPs from different political parties (and thus with different ideological backgrounds).

In the third step of coding, the eighteen first-order categories were grouped under *second-order themes* that linked groups of first-order categories under common umbrella-terms. Codes grouped into categories such as “social media is not representative” and “traditional media has own political agenda” were gathered together under the second-level theme of “Trends/Agenda,” for example. Not only were similarities of the codes considered but also instances where differences in the data seemed to prevail. Opposing themes, for example, emerged in the classification of “the People,” with codes falling into two dominant themes: the term “the People” as an irrelevant concept as well as the terms as a useful tool for political communication. This stage of coding involved revisiting the transcripts and considering the context and the tone of the statements. This resulted in nine second-order themes, which enabled us to make inferences about more general themes in the answers of the research questions, as we found common threads between the first-order codes.

In the final step of the analysis, the second-order themes were organized into *theoretical dimensions* guided by the theoretical framework of the paper. This was done to tie the answers of the research questions to broader theories on public opinion, the concept of the People and political communication. Three dimensions emerged here: “People versus Public,” “Concept versus Reality,” and “Strategy and Style.” An overview of the findings within this data structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

To illustrate our results, we will embed a small number of quotes in the findings section. In the interest of space, the number of quotes is limited. The selected quotes are chosen as representative of broader trends in the data that were discussed by several interviewees. In the analysis, general trends were observed by assigning codes to statements that were similar across politicians/interviews and then recording clusters of those codes. After identifying those general trends, we went back to the original

statements that were coded and selected those quotes that were most exemplary of the overall finding of that section. Additional quotes that illustrate the findings are provided in Supplemental Table 1.

## Findings

The MPs' responses about public opinion, the concept of the People, and political communication help form a new understanding of these concepts. Specifically, MPs state that they use traditional media to get a sense of *what* the public is concerned about but social media to discover how they *feel* about it. However, they are consistent in claiming that neither type of media is truly representative of public opinion. Should they require information more specific to their area of specialization, MPs generally turn to alternative sources that they consider more reliable. Our analysis also shows a discrepancy in acceptance of the term "the People": Although some MPs can identify with the term and find it a useful categorization of their electorate, others deem it irrelevant and a fabrication of populism. With regard to political communication, MPs tend to use public opinion and their perceptions of "the People" for two main reasons: as a tool to connect to their audience on a personal level and create trust, but also for marketing purposes, to help convince the People of their own policy standpoints and opinions.

### *Public Opinion: People versus Public*

*Trends/agenda: Assessing the state of public opinion.* Our analysis suggests that MPs distinguish between the opinion of the people as individuals, and the public at large. Traditional media, on one hand, serve as an indicator of what issues the public is concerned with at any point in time. They act as a "country thermometer," assessing the most critical issues of the day. In almost all cases, MPs give a version of the following example to illustrate how they come to know what the public is concerned about: "My day begins with reading the newspaper. Then you see what the big topics are."

Social media, on the other hand, provide a glimpse into how the public *feels* about those issues. Although politicians are quick to cite social media as an important direct link to citizens, they seldom fail to highlight the problem with social media as a representation of the public as a whole:

[On social media] are those who are complainers, the loudmouths, they find fault with everything. And this group is particularly good at rousing certain themes that the average citizen isn't engaged with at all. And then you get a strongly distorted picture.<sup>3</sup>

These findings are a first step to uncovering where MPs' understanding of "the People" and their will originates. It is rooted in information from traditional and social media. This provides essential insights into what forms the basis for MPs' communication strategies.

*Specialization: Acquiring specific information.* In their discussions of both traditional and social media, however, MPs suggest that neither of those sources are a reliable indicator of public opinion. Mainly, this is because MPs agree that there is no such thing as just *one* public opinion. Instead, the MPs will attempt to seek out more reliable information on the issues they specialize in. An MP assigned to the area of education will, for example, conduct work visits to schools and boards of education, while someone in charge of healthcare will prioritize speaking to experts and employees in the medical field.

Within their own areas of specialization, many MPs claim to have developed a “gut feeling” for deciding what information is important and what can be ignored. Although each issue will have many aspects and diverging opinions on it, MPs often state that selecting what is truly important is frequently based on political judgment acquired over time. Some of the interviewed subjects relate this to the years of experience they have, crediting this experience for their sense of right and wrong.

My subject is [topic x] and I have worked in it my whole life. And in that time, I have developed diverse views and can relate the things that happen now fairly easily to the knowledge that I already have.

*Democratic representation: Individual opinions versus political representation of the larger public.* In our analysis, the source of public opinion most often cited as the primary one is on the micro level: direct contact with citizens themselves. One MP gives the example of talking to a person in line with him at the butcher’s, while another mentions speaking to parents in the schoolyard or on the sidelines at his children’s sports events. Here, they say, you get a feeling for how the public perceives politics and how it influences their lives. However, these responses come spontaneously from one group of MPs, while others only relate this information when prompted. Clearly, some politicians have to be primed to think about direct contact with people as an important source of public opinion, while for others it is obvious. This suggests a clear divide between those politicians who think of opinions on the level of “the People” and those who think in terms of the public, as distinguished in first-order category 1.

All MPs stress that they have to regard public opinion on the macro-level: in the context of the people they represent and the decisions they make on their behalf. In other words, the individual (and arguably most important) opinions and experiences of people must translate into policies for the public at large. In this decision-making process, however, public opinion seems to be largely secondary. Our analysis found that all of the interviewed MPs claim not to let the trends of public opinion identified through traditional and social media influence their own opinions. Rather, they say, it is the party agenda and their own viewpoints that largely dictate which way they will vote on a specific topic. Politicians state that they use their own expertise, opinions, experiences, and sets of skills to decide how best to act on behalf of the general public.

Therefore, as a politician, you are *listening* to the public but *acting* as a member of the party and according to what you believe is right:

I have my own opinions, as well. And my own ideas. I'm a person of the [party name] in my heart and soul. I became a party member at the age of 18, when I was first allowed to vote, so I'm biased, of course. I think that my opinion is what is best for the country. I believe in that, there is no other way.

In line with Converse's (1987) arguments on public opinion data not having much influence on what politicians think, few politicians show evidence of consulting such data to find out what they should be thinking about certain issues. This finding is also in line with Andeweg and Thomassen's (2005) distinction between elitist representation from above and a populist conception of responsiveness from the bottom, with MPs seemingly favoring the former.

There is, therefore, a balance to be struck between listening and acting—while all MPs stress that listening to the public is important, the analysis of the transcripts shows that what they are listening for are trends: the main issues about which the public is concerned. These trends seem to be very much an indicator of what issues to consider but do not go as far as swaying MPs' votes (or opinions) one way or another.

### *The People: Concept versus Reality*

The issue of representation undoubtedly leaves us with the question: Who are “the People” that the MPs are representing? When asked about the concept of the People, the MPs almost unanimously replied with a variant of the term “everyone.” This is consistent with not only the linguistic use of the term to describe a nation and all people native to that nation (Canovan 1984) but also reflects the notion that this term is used in populist communication to create a deliberately ambiguous but comprehensive constituency (Canovan 1984; Taggart 2004). It is also in line with the idea of collective correspondence in political representation, which assumes that the parliament as a whole substantively represents the electorate as a whole (Dalton 2013). It is only when MPs begin to elaborate on the idea of “everyone” that a clear divide arises between those who see “the People” as a relatable concept and those who find this concept largely irrelevant.

*Irrelevant concept: “The People” as an unhelpful term.* Many MPs' first reactions to the term of “the People” were ones of suspicion. This group of MPs looks at the concept in terms of exclusion and disregard for diversity. They argue that it ignores diversity in the population relating to background, opinion, demographics, and needs. This, they fear, can lead to feelings of exclusion. The MPs interviewed that hold this position also frequently connect the term “the People” with negative aspects of populism and strictly distance themselves from this ideology. The concept of the People is thereby shown to be an identifier of the negative consequences of populism.

These MPs generally disdain any usage of the term, claiming it to be an invented concept that is too abstract to mean anything in the real world. Not only do they argue that the term itself is a fabrication of populist politics but they also extended

this argument to public opinion, claiming that such a thing cannot be said to exist considering the amount of differing opinions which are self-evidently held by members of the public:

In politics, we often formulate what the public opinion is. And I think that that is populism. I think that we pretend to speak on behalf of the people, you know, and the People, here, are invented: who they are, but especially who they are not. So, I believe that that is wrong in the current system. In politics, we invent what public opinion is and then we search for sources for it. I think we are also a bit guilty of that.

**Relevant concept:** “*The People*” as a helpful term. Other MPs welcome the term and elaborate on how they can identify with “the People” as a concept that includes everyone who needs taking care of. Some put this in terms of the “silent engine”: an inclusive term used to describe the hard-working core of the population that is instrumental in keeping the country running but remains mostly unheard. The notion of the “silent engine” also assigns the group virtue and echoes the principle of “the People” as the underdog and the sovereign backbone of the country (Canovan 1984), in contrast to the members of an undefined elite or upper class:

We have the term of the “silent engine.” Those are the people who don’t necessarily send out five tweets a day but who are just teachers, policemen, nurses, or . . . well, keep society going.

There are strong traces of populism here in that MPs stress the divide between the people and the elite. It is the supposed 90 percent—the hard-working, common folk—for whom the MPs who like this concept of “the People” want to fight. Although the politicians in this camp agree that the other 10 percent—the elite—cannot be ignored, they make clear that those people have enough money to take care of themselves. MPs in this camp cleave closely to the very definition of populism, giving an account of society that is separated into the ordinary people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004). However, these MPs do not seem to be antipluralist because the homogeneity of the people is based on fundamental needs, rather than other characteristics:

Yes, certainly. I think that we can relate to [the concept of The People], because what we stand for is good education, good care, those basic principles in which a large part of society has an interest . . . That is 90% of the people irrespective of their specific problems. So, the 90% of “the People” stands in contrast to the 10%, which we call the “capital”—people with capital, with money. When you make that contrast, then you can certainly speak of “the People.”

The responses here showed the biggest and most clear-cut party divide, with most members of the SP agreeing that the term of “the People” is quite useful, whereas the other parties were either split in their opinions or against the use of this concept. This is particularly interesting in terms of the self-ascribed populist characteristics of the SP.

*The “ordinary” electorate: Characterizations of “the People.”* When describing “the People” in terms of their specific electorate, most MPs use a variant of “hard-working” to describe their constituents, echoing the populist “ordinary” label frequently attached to “the People.” The analysis showed that these value-based descriptors were grouped together to paint a picture of good, honest, hard-working people who did not seem to demand very much.

In addition to characterizing “the People” based on their values, MPs also use specific qualities to describe them. These, again, are geared toward the “heartland” residents, the 90 percent: low- to middle-income, elderly and young, students, and those either currently working or looking for jobs. In one case, an MP followed up his list of specifications with “just the normal, Dutch citizen.” In some cases, MPs even offer specific locations for those people:

The People are the family who lives in “Trilgras [xx], Alphen aan de Rijn” [random example of a suburban Dutch address]. That is the situation in which most Dutch people are in.

Again, there are patterns of references to the unheard and unseen population that needed someone to stand up for them: Politicians painted pictures of suburban or rural bliss, of people leading lives that were unpretentious in every way.

Despite their initial resistance to pin down who the “ordinary people” are, most MPs have a very specific image of them in mind. The overarching idea of the People is represented through selected cases that share features across values, demographics, and locations, painting a picture of the People through exemplification (Zillmann 1999). As examples of ordinary citizens, MPs often mention nurses, teachers, and policemen, while academics, doctors, lawyers, or other professions requiring higher education are rarely mentioned. The only notable exception is GroenLinks, as MPs from this party admitted that they probably have a different conceptualization of “the People” because they associate this term with young, educated, middle-class families residing in cities. By their own admittance, they suspect that they are in the minority with regard to this conceptualization.

### *Political Communication: Strategy and Style*

*Marketing: Targeting the public.* The first goal of political communication is claimed to be bringing politics to the people (and vice versa) in both an activating capacity and for reasons of transparency. This is important not only because politicians want citizens to be in touch with politics but also because politicians want to be re-elected. Many MPs admit that parliament can make politicians feel overly important and create an environment that is completely removed from the real world, in which citizens are concerned with other things than politics. Hence, MPs stress that it is important to not only translate politics for the citizens but also remind them that politics is ongoing and that they, the People, play an active part in it:

People have no idea what you do. I've been doing this for over a year, and they still don't. Nobody knows what I do and it's important that they do know, for two reasons: 1) you want to be re-elected and 2) you also want people to know where to find you if they have concerns about something.

As far as communication strategies go, social media play a key role. As much as social media were criticized for their inaccuracy in representing “the People” and public opinion, they were much lauded for their ability to reach a wide audience. Politicians now communicate directly with the public via social media and they no longer need the party apparatus to get their message to their constituents (Kriesi 2014). There seems to be an agreement that everything has to be short, direct, quick, and sharable. Again, we see the patterns suggesting not just the importance of the connection to the audience but also a marketing angle, with MPs trying to incorporate ways of making their messages more marketable to the general audience. Social media, here, are utilized to reach “the People” directly and simultaneously act as tool for self-promotion (Golbeck et al. 2010):

I just call it a little bit of marketing. You have to use a little bit of marketing in politics. Is that a bad thing? No, it carries a good and honest interest, namely that we have good ideas about how we can make things better for Dutch citizens, so I think we should also present them as marketable. Sometimes that is in the form of a slogan and a promise behind it.

*Personal connection: Connecting to the public through personalized communication.* When discussing communicating with the People, MPs talk of adapting to their target audience. A distinction is made between addressing professionals in the field and addressing the community in general. The analysis shows that if presented with an audience of professionals, politicians tend to adapt a mode of lecturing, using industry jargon and a presentation style of communicating. When speaking to a crowd of citizens, they use everyday language:

I think you should use different communication styles for different audiences. When I stand in front of a room full of doctors in training, well, then I speak differently than if I have to say something to *Hart van Nederland* [commercial news program]. It is important to be aware of which audience you have in front of you and that you try to find a connection in your style and communication with that target group—without compromising the content. That's what makes you a good politician.

This strikes a familiar chord. “The People” are “at the very core, the minimal defining element” of populist communication (de Vreese et al. 2018: 427), and therefore politicians strategically utilize different communication styles that facilitate a sense of belonging to the in-group (Esser and Matthes 2013), though the composition of this in-group seems to be fluid and adaptable to the politicians' varying target audiences.

Most MPs agree that speaking directly to the citizens is a much more intimate and reciprocal style of communication, so stepping down from the parliamentary pedestal



and being “authentic” is most useful. Despite most MPs referring to it, there is not much elaboration on this idea of being authentic, other than “just being you.” It is seen as the norm, the default setting we all fall back on as individuals. Similar to the definition of “the People,” it was just the ordinary, common way of communicating that was most posited as important:

In the beginning you think that people want to hear what your view is on this or that. But what people actually want to hear is: “Who are you?” and “How’s it going in The Hague?” Really human stories, and that is what I’ve learned. In the beginning I really prepared . . . “Oh god, what did we have on the agenda this week?” [laughs]. And now I am going as myself. And people really like that, I noticed.

These answers reflect the MPs’ efforts to communicate in a simple way, without appearing to be above the ordinary society that they represent. They reflect the notion of populist communication styles of simplistic discourse that are directed at the “gut and the feelings of people” (Mudde 2004: 204). This can occasionally take the form of “inappropriate” ways of acting in the political sphere “including slang, swearing and political incorrectness” (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 392). Traces of this are evident in some MPs’ responses:

The people that make up the core of the silent engine are not the ones we hear most about. So, you have to know who you are representing when you speak. The leader of [a conservative party] is always polite and straight. But our Prime Minister is much looser. He says things like “oh, piss off” and others say that’s wrong. But you have to appeal to a certain part of the population.

*Trust: Communication as a tool for creating trust within the electorate.* Given the MPs’ self-proclaimed respect for their audiences, their esteem for “the People” and the emphasis on connecting with them, the analysis sharply changed track when the discussion turned to the effect of public opinion on MPs’ communication strategies. All of the MPs allege that public opinion has little bearing on their opinions and viewpoints on political matters. MPs insist that although they have a responsibility to listen, perhaps more important is their responsibility to lead. According to the interviewees, sometimes this means taking unpopular viewpoints. Even if public opinion suggests that the people are against a certain policy, no MPs suggest that they would allow this to sway their vote:

I think that as a politician you need to be clear about which political movement you stand for. And this can mean that you sometimes have to take on the less popular standpoints. Or taking standpoints that do not conform with the mainstream in the political opinion. But you should primarily reason from your party’s ideology and party program, and that is the basis from which you should communicate. Even if it is not what dominates public opinion.

Sticking with these unpopular viewpoints and acting against “the People’s” will relies strongly on trust and mutual understanding between politicians and citizens. MPs were confident that people, in the end, want leadership. Given the overabundance of public opinions discussed above, politicians stress the need for the independence to act and trust that they are doing so in a way that is best for all the people. This lies at the heart of representative democracy:

In politics you have to show leadership. Especially in light of the differences in public opinion and values. You are here for that purpose and people expect that from you. You don’t need to return to the people all the time. You are given a certain mandate and you have to live up to it. The [political] elite has become a bad word, but I think it’s super important—that there is an elite that makes the decisions.

MPs acknowledge that earning trust is an important skill for the individual politician him/herself and that communication is an important tool for gaining and maintaining that trust. This communication includes, for example, reporting back to the communities they represent after important votes are cast. In terms of representation, it is important to set yourself apart from the political pack so that people know who you are and how you have acted on their behalf but also that you meant to do well by them. MPs stress the importance of returning to those people one-on-one and reporting back about your work, the decisions you have made, and the reasoning behind them:

I believe that, unless you’re a very famous politician who gets a lot of attention on social media, you have to go to the people directly and tell them what you do. Then the people make a connection and think “Hey, that’s [politician’s name] from the [party name]! He’s doing a good job!”

It is apparent that politicians aim to create a connection with the People by not only talking *about* them, but also by talking *to* them in a way they can identify with. The implicit motto then becomes “I listen to you because I talk about you” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 323), but also “I am part of you because I sound like you.”

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to contribute to research into public opinion and its occurrences in political communication by focusing on the concept of “the People.” By interviewing twenty-two Dutch MPs, we set out to uncover how politicians generate a perception of “the People,” their will and opinions, and how this perception is strategically used in political communication. We departed from the context of populist communication, distinguishing between public opinion as a theoretical foundation, representation as its democratic implication, and “the People” as its placeholder in communication. We argued that communication of behalf of “the People” is not confined to political ideology, and that especially those communication styles commonly associated with populist communication should be examined

across the political spectrum, as the effect of these communication strategies is not negligible.

In our first research question, we asked about politicians' most important sources of public opinion. MPs agreed that there is not one public opinion but rather a number of public opinions that are at variance with each other. MPs look to traditional media as a "country thermometer," echoing studies that showed the media reflected the political agenda and reflecting clear notions of agenda-setting theories (Helfer 2016; Walgrave 2008).

MPs acknowledge the media's grip on the public's consciousness, admitting that even though the headlines do not always reflect the most important issues in politics, they reflect what will be *perceived* by the public as most important. MPs also broach the topic of social media, saying they find it to be an important tool for connecting with people directly. However, they were quick to add that neither social nor traditional media are representative of public opinion(s) in general. This connects the distinction between "the People" and the public with ideas of responsiveness and representation. It creates a divide between the notions of acting on behalf of "the People" and deciding for them (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Pitkin 1967), with the latter seemingly dominating MPs' interpretation of their role as representatives.

Our second research question examined the concept of "the People" from politicians' perspectives. Elaborating on this concept, MPs agree that this includes "everyone," "all Dutch people," even "all the people of Europe." There is a clear resonance with Canovan's (1984) definitions of "the People," as well as the populist use of this term to create a deliberately ambiguous but comprehensive constituency (Canovan 1984; Taggart 2004). Populist notions also came to the fore in descriptions of the "90/10" divide, as described by some MPs. Excluding the 10 percent who make up the elite, some MPs see the rest of the citizens as the real people in need of representation and support. Others are quick to recognize populist themes in the question itself, distancing themselves from the concept and labeling it as antipluralist, in line with literature criticizing the limiting characterization of public opinion (Blumer 1948; Converse 1987).

The various descriptions of the People were bound by a common thread: Most interviewed MPs place themselves within the context of the people in the anecdotes and examples they give to illustrate their belonging to the people of their electorate. Whether or not they do this consciously is unclear, but when they talk about the family down the street, they imply that they are familiar with this street, perhaps that they even lived there; when they talk about the people in the countryside, they often mention that they were also born in the countryside; when they speak about that ordinary person standing in line with them at the butcher's, in the schoolyard, or at the kids sporting events, they are inevitably talking about *their* butcher, *their* children's school, and sports teams—that is, *their* communities, of which they are an active part. This is a key finding, not only because MPs' definitions of "the People" reflect how populist literature has described the concept so far, but also and most importantly because this is (no longer) only the case for those who identify with (right-wing) populist ideology.

In our third research question, we asked how politicians use the acquired knowledge about public opinion and conceptualization of “the People” in their communication strategies. MPs from the SP remember a time when “we were the populists,” referring to using simple language, identifying with “the People,” and “just explaining things the way they are,” while others reject adapting their communication styles to fit their understanding of “the People,” invoking negative consequences of populism. This is important to consider in light of the strict distinction we make between public opinion and populist communication features that are used to refer to public opinion: even though the term “populism” was not mentioned by the interviewer throughout the interview process, MPs volunteered opinions about this specific communication style when asked about the influence of public opinion on their communication strategies.

The data show the intricate connection between the importance of MPs’ assessment of public opinion and “the People,” and their invocation of this term in their communication to demonstrate their responsiveness to this group. It is only once they have a genuine understanding of the public’s needs and values that politicians use communication styles that suggest a sense of belonging to the public (Esser and Matthes 2013). By addressing the people directly, MPs thus elicit trust by allocating some of the power back to their constituents by seeing them as equals, rather than being above them (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Pitkin 1967). Although this is instrumental in bridging the divide between the leaders and those who are led, it also strikes a fine balance between utilizing those strategies to genuinely connect to the people and using them for purposes of persuasion. Overall, the data show that MPs are not becoming more populist across mainstream politics, but rather there are tendencies toward personalization and authenticity, which makes normal political communication appear more like populist political communication.

On a critical note, it could be argued that the sample of the study was not representative of the Dutch parliament. The sample size was relatively small, with twenty-two out of 150 MPs represented. Nevertheless, we had a large variation of MPs in our sample. We also found that after the first interview period, with twenty interviews transcribed and analyzed, there was maximum variation in the data, with no new information being added to the data set, even with more intensive prompts in the later interviews. In addition, the results relied solely on the responses of those MPs who volunteered for interviews, making any sort of generalizations about the findings difficult. However, the aim of this contribution is not to analyze public opinion within communication across the spectrum, but rather to redirect the thinking surrounding this concept and with regard to the concept of “the People” in the role of communication strategies beyond the populist framework.

Although we cannot make any conclusions about trends in political communication overall, there are some lessons to be learned that span beyond our sample. The consistency of the themes of personalization and authenticity throughout the sample suggests that this is not a product of the particular Dutch communication context but is likely to occur in other multiparty systems. We can also observe comparable communication strategies in terms of references to “the People” in other countries, regardless of the political structure, which makes it more likely that the communication patterns

identified in this study hold there. Therefore, we encourage further research into these trends beyond the scope of the Netherlands. We also call for further analyses of other performative elements of politics, as their importance has become more prominent (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). These include communication strategies such as political marketing, as the results show that MPs strategically use public opinion and appeals to “the People” for marketing purposes. Themes of agenda setting also ran throughout the analysis of sources of public opinion, with MPs targeting in their communication efforts those topics with which they think the People can identify. There are also traces of a different kind of mediatization here (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2013): MPs admit to adapting their communication styles to social media to reach their audiences quickly and allude to a sense of approachability.

We also call for research that explores whether our findings about what MPs claim to be the driving forces behind their communication practices translate into their actual communications. In other words, is the support MPs claim to have for the concerns of ordinary people reflected in parliamentary and media data? If MPs maintain that their political decision making is based primarily on party agenda and ideology, and they consider public opinion only as a secondary influence, it would be interesting to explore whether this is the case for both the opposition and coalition parties, or whether there is any kind of disparity there. For all these reasons, examining public opinion within political communication literature that is not tied to ideology points to important new directions for the exploration of the phenomenon of references to and identification with “the People” in political communication.


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### **Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### **Notes**

1. Parties represented PvdA, VVD, CDA, SP, GroenLinks, 50Plus, and D66.
2. For the full interview protocol, see supplemental material.
3. Because of the limited number of participants, we do not attribute the citations used to illustrate our findings, even by identifying party membership. This is done to preserve anonymity, as in some cases only one or two members of a party agreed to be interviewed.

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