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On the Ordinary People's Enemies: How Politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands Communicate Populist Boundaries via Twitter and the Effects on Party Preferences

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MICHAEL HAMELEERS

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS PROVIDE important discursive opportunity structures for politicians to get populist viewpoints across.[1] Research indicates that communicating the ideational core of populism—that is, cultivating the divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites—can have an important impact on citizens' cognitions,

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[1]Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchel, "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 8 (2017): 1109–1126; Nicole Ernst, Sven Engesser, Florian Büchel, Sina Blassnig, and Frank Esser, "Extreme Parties and Populism: An Analysis of Facebook and Twitter across Six Countries," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1347–1364; Michael Hameleers and Desirée Schmuck, "It's Us against Them: A Comparative Experiment on the Effects of Populist Messages Communicated via Social Media," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1425–1444; and Kristof Jacobs and Niels Spierings, "A Populist Paradise? Examining Populists' Twitter Adoption and Use, *Information, Communication & Society* 22 (2019): 1681-1696.

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attitudes, emotions, and behaviors.[2] Yet, we know markedly little about the ways in which politicians in different countries communicate in populist ways via social media. In addition, although it has been argued that populist ideas have become mainstream,[3] there is little comparative empirical evidence on the nature of populist references by mainstream versus populist actors in different countries.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is threefold. First, this article relies on an extensive qualitative content analysis of the Twitter feeds of Donald Trump, Theresa May, and Geert Wilders to assess how leading politicians in different countries express populist boundaries during periods of crisis and increasing polarization. These actors are compared for several reasons. Polarization and clashes between left-wing and right-wing issue positions have become increasingly more salient in all three countries, which may provide fertile soil for politicians to shape a credible divide between ordinary people and culpable elites. In terms of most-different cases, these three politicians are interesting to compare. Trump and Wilders are (prototypical) examples of radical right-wing leaders, whereas May is a nonpopulist mainstream politician. In this article, we assess the similarities and overlap between the social media discourses of these cases.

Second, this article conducts a comparative experiment to investigate whether the use of populist arguments is actually effective at activating people's populist party preferences. Third, zooming in on country comparisons and individual-level differences, this article aims to shed more light on the conditionality of populism's effects. Hence, the electorate is divided in its support of populist actors and viewpoints.[4] If anything, recent polarizing developments in the United States (the 2016 election), the United Kingdom (the Brexit referendum), and the

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[2]Linda Bos, Wouter van der Brug, and Claes H. de Vreese, "An Experimental Test of the Impact of Style and Rhetoric on the Perception of Right-Wing Populist and Mainstream Party Leaders," *Acta Politica* 48 (2013): 192–208; Michael Hameleers, Linda Bos, Nayla Fawzi, Carsten Reinemann, Ioannis Andreadis, Nicoleta Corbu, Christian Schemer, et al., "Start Spreading the News: A Comparative Experiment on the Effects of Populist Communication on Political Participation in 16 European Countries," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 23 (October 2018): 517–538; Jörg Matthes and Desirée Schmuck, "The Effects of Anti-Immigrant Right-Wing Populist Ads on Implicit and Explicit Attitudes: A Moderated Mediation Model," *Communication Research* 44 (June 2017): 556–581; Phillip Müller, Christian Schemer, Martin Wettstein, Anne Schulz, Dominique S. Wirz, Sven Engesser, and Werner Wirth, "The Polarizing Impact Of News Coverage On Populist Attitudes In The Public: Evidence From A Panel Study In Four European Democracies," *Journal of Communication* 6(2018): 968-992; and Dominique S. Wirz, "Persuasion through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1114–1138.
[3]Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542–564.
[4]Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes de Vreese, *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Netherlands (the refugee crisis) have further increased the divide between those supporting and those opposing populist ideas. But what psychological factors are crucial to understand people's acceptance or rejection of populist viewpoints? This article aims to advance the research on populism by mapping how different mainstream and populist politicians use direct communication, and the potential electoral gain that can be achieved by (strategically) cultivating the divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites.

In the following sections, we first review the literature leading to the research questions addressed in Study 1 (the qualitative content analysis) and the hypotheses for the effects of populist communication in Study 2. Next, the methods and results of Study 1 and Study 2 are presented. The article ends with an overall discussion of the findings of the two studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digital Populism: Cultivating a Divide between the People and the Elites

The central idea of populism is the construction of a divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites.[5] Populism demands the people's sovereignty, as their will should be central in politics.[6] Populist actors typically stress closeness to the in-group of the people and the imagined community of the heartland they belong to.[7]

Populism further stresses an antagonistic or Manichean outlook on society. This means that a moral and causal divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites can be identified in populist rhetoric: the elites are seen as responsible for causing the deprivation of the ordinary people on a cultural, political, and/or economic basis.[8] In this crisis, the elites are accused of not representing the people. In populist rhetoric, the elites are typically understood as the established political order—including the government and leading politicians (such as the prime minister). However, elites can also be distinguished on a nonpolitical level, such as corrupt organizations (for instance, the International

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[5]Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2019); Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).
[6]Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."
[7]Taggart, *Populism*.
[8]Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, eds., *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News."

Monetary Fund, large corporations, banks). Importantly, populist ideas reach voters by means of communication.[9]

As noted in recent empirical research on online populist communication[10], social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook play an important role in populist communication as they allow politicians to circumvent elitist communication channels and establish a direct relationship with the ordinary people.[11] In this article, we focus on Twitter as a social media platform. Twitter is known to offer an opportunity structure for politicians to directly express their rhetoric to the electorate through weak-tie networks.[12] Populist politicians are known to be early adopters of direct communication via social media.[13] Even though some research has indicated that populism is more prominent on Facebook than on Twitter,[14] the leading politicians included in this study primarily use Twitter to disseminate their rhetoric. For this reason, and considering that Twitter is an elitist media used by politicians to directly communicate their viewpoints to unknown members of the electorate, we assess whether and how Twitter offers an opportunity structure for the communication of populist discourse by different politicians.

Constructing a Collective Identity of the Ordinary People

The literature on populism has demonstrated that references to the people and their will are the most basic elements of populist communication.[15] Mainstream politicians may also refer to the people and their will in order to signal that they represent their electorate and understand their needs. Social media in particular allow politicians to express closeness to the people, using the same platform and language

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[9]Aalberg et al., *Populist Political Communication in Europe*; and Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart, and Bruce Horsfield, *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

[10]Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."

[11]Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."

[12]Sebastián Valenzuela, Teresa Correa and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, "Ties, Likes, and Tweets: Using Strong and Weak Ties to Explain Differences in Protest Participation Across Facebook and Twitter Use," *Political Communication* 35 (2018): 117-134.

[13]Ernst et al., "Extreme Parties and Populism"; Desirée Schmuck and Michael Hameleers, "Closer to the People: A Comparative Content Analysis of Populist Communication on Social Networking Sites in Pre- and Post-Election Periods," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 10 (2020): 1531–1548.

[14]Ernst et al., "Extreme Parties and Populism."

[15]Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, "Populism As Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study Of Political Parties' Discourse In Belgium," *European Journal Of Political Research* 46(2007): 319-345; Edina Strikovic, Toni G. L. A. van der Meer, Emma van der Goot, Linda Bos, and Rens Vliegenthart, "On Behalf of the People: The Use of Public Opinion and the Perception of 'the People' in Political Communication Strategies of Dutch MPs," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 25 (January 2020): 135–157.

as the vox populi.[16] Yet, to date, we know markedly little about the ways in which leading politicians across different regions and in different (power) positions use social media platforms to refer to and address the people, and what language they use to express the representation, identity, and will of the people's in-group. To explore the cultivation of the people's identity further, we raise the following research question: *How are leading politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands referring to the people—and to what extent and how are politicians' references to the people indicative of a populist communication tactic?* (RQ1).

Shifting Blame to Elites

It has been argued that social identity framing is most effective if perceptions of in-group deprivation are attributed to a *credible* scapegoat.[17] In populism, the "corrupt" elites can be regarded as the most salient scapegoat.[18] However, "the elites" is a quite flexible concept that may entail many potential out-groups that are constructed in opposition to the people. This becomes even more relevant to consider in light of political developments in many countries where alleged populist leaders are in government themselves, which means that they are part of the establishment they are holding accountable. How can this position be reconciled with the (thin) ideology of populism?

In the European setting, we see that blame for the people's problems is attributed to political elites at the supranational level. In Greece and Italy, for example, the European Union is regarded as part of the corrupt, unresponsive elites that do not represent the majority of the ordinary people. In the setting of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the European Union is also seen as an important elitist outsider that deprives the people of their sovereignty, as well as cultural unity and economic prosperity.

In recent years, leading mainstream politicians have partially integrated populist blame-shifting rhetoric into their communication.[19] There is one important limitation for mainstream or established political actors to credibly shift blame. Being part of the establishment, they cannot shift blame to all politicians in government or to the established

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[16]Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."

[17]William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective identity and social movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283–305.

[18]Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

[19]Aalberg et al., *Populist Political Communication in Europe.*

political order in general. Hence, only a subsection of the national political elites can be credibly blamed for depriving the people. To provide an example, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has been accused of using populist language to express a binary divide between honest, hardworking Dutch people and the left-wing, unresponsive elites that only promote their own agenda and so-called left-wing hobbies. Inventing ideologically opposed elites seems to be a valuable strategy when a politician is in government—an example of populist blame-shifting tactics that may also apply to the rhetoric of Trump in the United States. Next to this, politicians may attribute blame to "corrupt" media elites for causing the people's problems and failing to represent their voice. The centrality of scapegoating to the mainstream media in populism lines up with the literature, which regards anti-media rhetoric and fake news accusations as relevant dimensions of populist discourse over the last several decades.[20]

Attributing blame to the elites is a key element of a populist communication strategy.[21] Yet, attribution of blame to political opponents also occurs in the communication of mainstream politicians, especially in partisan settings. In this article, we look at blame attribution across multiparty (the Netherlands) and bipartisan settings (the United States and the United Kingdom) and aim to inductively assess the ways in which elites are scapegoated: how are explicit populist references in which an antagonistic divide between "the people" and "the elites" constructed, and how do such discursive elements differ from partisan attributions of blame? Against this backdrop, we raise the following research question: *How are different political elites framed in opposition to the people by leading politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands?* (RQ2).

Extending theoretical approaches that have mostly defined anti-elitism in populism as the divide between the people and political elites,[22] we inductively assess which discursive strategies are used by leading politicians to blame nonpolitical elites, such as the media and

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[20]Nayla Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' How a Populist Worldview Shapes Recipients' Attitudes toward the Media," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 24 (April 2019): 146–164; and Anne Schulz, Werner Wirth, and Philipp Müller, "We Are the People and You Are Fake News: A Social Identity Approach to Populist Citizens' False Consensus and Hostile Media Perceptions," *Communication Research* 47 (March 2020): 201–226.

[21]Ethan C. Busby, Joshua R. Gubler, and Kirk A. Hawkins, "Framing and Blame Attribution in Populist Rhetoric," *Journal of Politics* 81 (April 2019): 616–630; and Michael Hameleers, Linda Bos, and Claes H. de Vreese, "'They Did It': The Effects of Emotionalized Blame Attribution in Populist Communication," *Communication Research* 44 (August 2017): 870–900.

[22]Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (March 1999): 2–16; and Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

corporations. Especially when politicians become part of the establishment, such as Trump in the United States, closeness to the people and anti-elitism may be expressed by scapegoating different nonpolitical elites for failing to represent the people. In this setting, we raise the following research question: *How are politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands cultivating a populist divide between the people and nonpolitical elites?* (RQ3).

The Effects of Populism: How Populism's Ideational Core May Activate Party Preferences

As explained by the ideational approach to populism, exposure to populist frames may activate or trigger dormant populist schemata among receivers,[23] indicating that exposure to populist ideas has effects on populist perceptions when they are received in a relevant context or favorable discursive opportunity structure. In other words, populist ideas can prime populist perceptions in settings where populist ideas are a relevant and credible interpretation of sociopolitical reality.[24]

The process through which people's vote intentions may be influenced by exposure to populist ideas can be explained from the theoretical angle of the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA)[25] and the activation of traits by making negative out-group depictions chronically accessible among receivers.[26] First of all, following the SIMCA model and the framework of social identity framing, messages that communicate a divide between "us and them" are most likely to result in engagement and behavioral changes when a threat to the in-group is made salient and when the elites can be held accountable for the people's problems.[27] Populism both communicates an identity threat (the people are not represented and deprived) and frames a scapegoat for these problems (the corrupt elites caused the people's crisis). The cultivation of in-group deprivation may prime collective action. Hence, members of the in-group (that is, the ordinary people) are triggered to restore their status by fighting against the collective sense of deprivation made salient in social

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[23]Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins, "Frame and Blame Attribution."
[24]Hawkins et al, *The Ideational Approach to Populism.*
[25]Martijn Van Zomeren, Tom Postmes, and Russell Spears, "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Three Socio-Psychological Perspectives," *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (July 2008): 504–535.
[26]Travis L. Dixon, "Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime," *Journal of Communication* 58 (March 2008): 106–125.
[27]Gamson, *Talking Politics.*

identity framing.[28] Second, different elements of populist anti-elitism may relate to credible scapegoats to hold accountable for the people's deprivation—which is regarded as a crucial element for the persuasiveness of social identity frames.[29] Hence, when populist messages offer cues to absolve the in-group of blame while assigning responsibility for the collectively experienced deprivation of the people, populist ideas can help to consolidate a positive and consistent self-image.

One influential form of political engagement or collective action that can be triggered by exposure to social identity frames is the intention to vote for a party that represents the people's will. The premises of the SIMCA postulate that people have the intention to restore the status of the deprived people when a threat to this in-group is made salient.[30]

Populist ideas make this threat salient by expressing the people's deprivation on a political, material, and/or symbolic level and by emphasizing that the elites are responsible for this threat. An important way to engage politically is to punish responsible parties at the ballot box and reward parties that promise to alleviate the people's problems. To avert the threat cultivated in populist rhetoric, people should be less likely to vote for political parties in the establishment (the cultivated scapegoat), whereas they should be mobilized to vote for those parties that claim to represent the people's will, while promising to restore the status of the in-group by punishing the elites (the sender of populist communication). Although it may not be expected that the mere exposure to populist ideas actually changes people's vote intentions, existing preferences may be activated by messages that cultivate populist social identities—which is in line with the ideational approach to populism.[31]

In line with negative stereotyping theory, exposure to messages that emphasize an out-group threat (i.e. anti-elitism) make stereotypical representations of this out-group highly accessible in the minds of receivers of social identity frames.[32] When people need to make political decisions, such as expressing their intentions to vote, these activated negative stereotypes are used to guide political decisions. The culpable elites should be punished, and the parties that represent a positive stereotypical image of the ordinary people should be rewarded. Against this backdrop, the following hypotheses can be formulated.

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[28]Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements."
[29]Gamson, *Talking Politics*.
[30]Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements."
[31]Hawkins et al, *The Ideational Approach to Populism*.
[32]Dixon, "Crime News and Racialized Beliefs."

Hypothesis 1a: Exposure to populist ideas expressed by politicians lead to *lower* intentions to vote for elitist parties than exposure to nonpopulist ideas.

Hypothesis 1b: Exposure to populist ideas expressed by politicians lead to *higher* intentions to vote for these politicians than exposure to nonpopulist ideas.

The Conditionality of Populism's Persuasiveness

Populist perceptions may exist as mental maps that are only triggered when a congruent populist message activates them.[33] In line with this, we expect that the effects of exposure to populist ideas on vote intentions are conditional upon people's existing perceptual screens. Theories of cognitive dissonance[34] and motivated reasoning[35] explain the underlying process predicting responses to populist communication. When people's prior perceptions are congruent with populist ideas, they have pre-existing schemata that can be triggered in such a way that they become more inclined to vote for parties that express these pre-existing schemata.

Here, it should be emphasized that we do not aim to make the tautological argument that populists are more likely to be affected by populist messages. Rather, we expect that some people are more vulnerable to persuasion by populist arguments because they perceive a threat cultivated in populist communication. In other words, when people perceive that they have lost out relatively more than other groups in society (higher relative deprivation), and when they distrust the establishment, they may be more likely to perceive the corrupt elites as a credible scapegoat for the problems they experience.

The literature on social identity framing has shown that framing an opposition between "us and them" is most likely to be persuasive when the in-group experiences a salient threat and when the out-group can be credibly held accountable for the in-group's problems.[36] Applied to populism, experiencing in-group deprivation and distrusting the elites should make elitist scapegoating more credible and personally relevant. For people who do actually trust the establishment, populist ideas expressed by

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[33]Hawkins et al, *The Ideational Approach to Populism*.
[34]Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson & Company, 1957).
[35]Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (July 2006): 755–769.
[36]Gamson, *Talking Politics*.

politicians should be less credible. In other words, the prediction that social identity frames are effective when they (1) express a sense of in-group deprivation and (2) shift blame to credible scapegoats[37] implies that populist messages are most effective among voters for whom this message is personally relevant. In line with research that has identified perceived relative deprivation[38] and political distrust/cynicism[39] as important antecedents of populist perceptions, we forward the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The effects of populist ideas expressed by politicians on vote intention are stronger for people at (a) higher levels of perceived deprivation and (b) political distrust and cynicism compared with people who do not perceive deprivation or political distrust and cynicism.

Populism across Contexts and Cases

The aim of this article is to explore how elements of populist rhetoric are expressed across settings, and how persuasive populist ideas are in most-different country settings. For this reason, a Western European country with a multiparty government (the Netherlands) and a prototypical and successful radical right-wing populist politician (Wilders)[40] was contrasted with two bipartisan political systems that both belong to the North Atlantic or liberal model: the United States and the United Kingdom.[41] Even though bipartisan cleavages are prominent in both the United States and the United Kingdom, they are considerably more pervasive in the United States. In addition, whereas the United States has been associated with the surge of radical right-wing elements since the 2016 elections, right-wing populism has been substantially less electorally successful in the United Kingdom at the time of data collection.

The comparative scope allows us to assess how influential politicians in all countries engage with populist elements on social media to different extents. The within-country case selection of politicians was based on maximum variety. In the United States, Trump was selected as a leader

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[37]Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements."
[38]Mark Elchardus and Bram Spruyt, "Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology," *Government and Opposition* 51(2016): 111–133.
[39]Bos, Van der Brug, and de Vreese, "An Experimental Test."
[40]Aalberg et al., *Populist Political Communication in Europe.*
[41]Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

that is part of the establishment, but still a likely case to express populist sentiments. In the Netherlands, in contrast, Geert Wilders of the right-wing populist Freedom Party is a most likely case of a right-wing populist leader who is not part of the establishment. The United Kingdom offers a contrasting or "negative" case to look at the mainstreaming of populist ideas in politics. Theresa May was part of the establishment and is not associated with populism in terms of the ideology she conveys. As it has already been argued that mainstream politicians have "flirted" with populist ideas as well,[42] it is relevant to more comprehensively assess how a polarizing crisis such as the Brexit referendum may offer a discursive opportunity structure for the establishment to voice populist sentiments. Together, these three cases offer insights into the responsiveness of populisms' cultivation of a binary societal divide in different discursive opportunity structures.

STUDY 1

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Political Communication on Twitter

As the core aim of this study is to investigate the discursive construction of populist elements—people-centrism, anti-elitism, and their antagonistic relationship—we rely on an inductive qualitative content analysis. Although numerous quantitative content analyses have looked at the salience and dominance of populist communication across media platforms,[43] markedly little research has relied on an inductive approach to assess the ways in which populism is constructed.[44] (Manual) quantitative approaches to some extent assume that populist communication can be reduced to a subset of fixed indicators. However, as populism occurs in fragmented[45] or chameleonic and flexible[46] ways, such approaches may overlook the nuances of populist elements. This may especially be relevant in the context of this study: we aim to assess how prototypical populists versus politicians who are not typically associated with populism use elements of populism in their rhetoric, and how these elements differ qualitatively across settings. Our aim is not to arrive at an overview of the (relative) dominance of populist communication on Twitter. Hence, this first study aims to inductively explore *how* politicians

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[42]Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."
[43]Roberta Bracciale and Antonio Martella, "Define the Populist Political Communication Style: The Case of Italian Political Leaders on Twitter," *Information*, *Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1310–1329; and Ernst et al., "Extreme Parties and Populism."
[44]However, see Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."
[45]Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."
[46]Aalberg et al., *Populist Political Communication in Europe*.

discursively use populist communication in their direct communication to the electorate. In the second study, these qualitative findings are used to inform an experimental design that tests the electoral consequences of politicians' populist discourse.

Sample

For this study, a purposive sample of leading politicians' Twitter activity surrounding important electoral events in all countries was analyzed. We thus strategically include "most likely" cases of populist expressions, as we are interested in mapping the nature of this discourse and not necessarily its salience or frequency. In the United States, Trump's Twitter activity in the three months prior to the 2016 presidential election and three months after the election was sampled (from 8 August 2016 to 8 February 2017). The tweets of Trump's official account were scraped using a Python script.

Based on the principles of cyclic-iterative data collection and analyses in the grounded theory approach,[47] the analysis was geared toward achieving theoretical saturation.[48] More specifically, the development of themes was constantly compared with the analysis of novel tweets—and the analysis of new tweets stopped when the addition of new themes did not reveal any additional insights into the development of themes and indicators. The sampling strategy ensured that an equal proportion of tweets was analyzed in every month of the sample frame. A total of 1,654 tweets were analyzed in the United States. To minimize selection biases, tweets were not read before the analysis but were randomly selected from an ordered list. Although later steps of the analysis were more selective (not all tweets in the sample contained relevant information to be coded for discursive elements related to populism), the overall sample frame was free of a selection bias.

In the United Kingdom, May only started to use Twitter in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. As a key electoral event, the Brexit referendum was chosen (23 June 2016). Here, the total sample frame entailed all relevant tweets from the official Twitter account of Theresa May, ranging from June 2016 to December 2018 ($N = 788$). Different from the U.S. case, the sample frame only includes the period when May was part of the establishment. However, the sample frame

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[47]Victoria Braun and Virginia Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: Sage, 2013).

[48]Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

captures the outcome of the Brexit referendum (leave) and the aftermath: the negotiations with the European Union and the fierce societal debate surrounding the "hard versus soft Brexit" and the "deal or no deal" developments.

In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders was chosen as he represents the most likely case of a successful right-wing populist politician who is not part of the establishment.[49] He has been electorally successful for more than a decade. In the 2017 general elections, his Freedom Party was internationally regarded as having the greatest chance to become the largest party in government. In the end, Wilders's Freedom Party came in second. However, the 2017 elections provide an important case study, as Wilders's discourse changed when he moved from being part of the most popular party to the losing party in the aftermath of the elections. Here, the sample frame covers the period from 15 December 2016 to 15 June 2017. A total of 1,116 tweets were analyzed following the principles of theoretical saturation. Table A1 in the appendix includes an overview of the sample composition. The analyses were extended by looking at a random sample of tweets communicated by contrasting figures in the three countries: Hillary Clinton in the United States, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, and Mark Rutte in the Netherlands (50 tweets each from the same time frame as the main study).

Analysis

In all countries, a discourse analytic approach was combined with the stepwise coding procedure of the grounded theory approach.[50] The first coding step entailed the relatively unstructured identification of segments in the data that provided insights into the three research questions. More specifically, segments of tweets corresponding to (1) constructions of the people, (2) anti-elitism, or (3) the opposition between these two antagonistic groups were highlighted and labeled. This step resulted in a long list of relatively unique codes, which were structured during the step of focused coding. Here, similar codes were merged, and uniquely formulated codes were framed in more general terms. In the final step, the different themes were related to each other, and a hierarchical structure of higher-level themes and indicators of these themes was constructed.

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[49]Aalberg et al., *Populist Political Communication in Europe.*
[50]Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2006).

Data Quality Checks

The qualitative data analysis procedure was checked for credibility and transferability—measures for validity and reliability that can be applied to the nature of qualitative research.[51] First of all, the data-reduction process moving from unique open codes to focused codes and linkages has been documented—and field notes were made throughout the process. Second, the coding process and the outcomes were discussed with a second researcher. Both researchers agreed on the developed codes and themes. Specifically, the procedures of data reduction moving from open codes to final analyses and themes were reviewed by a peer, who agreed on the identification of in-group references and the discourse around the construction of an antagonistic construction between the people and the others. In addition, both researchers independently coded 50 posts in every country. The researchers used the same research questions and looked for (1) people references, (2) anti-elitism on the political level, and (3) the exclusion of nonpolitical elites in the political discourse. Comparing the resulting analyses, the different codes matched on the variety of meaning across all three elements—and the difference across countries in people references and anti-elitism. Third, the results from the Dutch sample were discussed with people who had actually voted for Wilders's Freedom Party. All six voters, who were recruited through the principal investigator's social network, recognized the themes as Wilders's discourse and identified with the "people" while being opposed to the elites.

RESULTS OF STUDY 1

Cultivating a Relatively Deprived In-Group: The Ordinary People and Their Will

In all countries, the leading politicians referred to the general political will of the people, who were said to be silenced by mainstream politicians who refused to listen to the "real" concerns of their electorate. The first similarity across contexts concerns the frequent references to the centrality of the ordinary people's will in political decision-making and the failed representation of this will in all politicians' direct communication.

In the United Kingdom, May emphasized that the majority of people who voted to leave the European Union should be represented by politicians. Even if this decision would be hard to implement, it was what "the people" wanted. In this setting, May presented herself as a strong

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[51]Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research.*

leader who was the only one who actually listened to the people: "The British people want this to be settled. They want a good deal that sets us on course for a brighter future." Although May made a strong appeal to the people and the majority's will, these references are not inherently populist. She did not express an appeal to "ordinary" people, and her understanding of the people was more inclusive than the politicians in the United States and the Netherlands. Different from May, Trump and Wilders expressed an exclusionary understanding of the people and their will, clearly emphasizing which segments of society belonged to "the people" and which should be excluded from this in-group (migrants and Muslims, for example).

In the United States, Trump forwarded himself as a strong leader capable of representing the will of the "true" American people, emphasizing that protecting U.S. citizens was his most important political mission: "As your President, I have no higher duty than to protect the lives of the American people." This promise of representation and protection was central in all politicians' discourses. Right after the election, Trump promised to restore the people's status—something they had lost under the previous administration, he argued: "We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth—and we will bring back our dreams!" This theme of restoring the people's status and ending their deprivation was mirrored in Wilders's communication. In Trump's language, the people were seen as a native imagined people who had been deprived of their freedom and wealth—and restoring this status was the most important mission in Trump's electoral promises.

These people references defined the in-group on the basis of nationality. Although Wilders in the Dutch case also emphasized the centrality of the nation-state, his understanding of the people referred to an even more specific segment of society. Specifically, Wilders referred to the "ordinary" people who were silenced in politics. He also explicitly used the first person to explicate that he was part of the people's in-group: "Our voice needs to be heard. The money of our hardworking ordinary Dutch people should not be invested in foreign countries—but only in our own country and people." Wilders cultivated a specific social identity of ordinary, native, and hardworking people who are distant from the elite sources of power. Despite being in politics, he emphasized to be part of the "ordinary" citizens he cultivated as an in-group.

The overlap in the discourse of the three leaders' references to the people is seen in the centrality of threats on a cultural and symbolic level and the failure of opposing politicians to represent the people's will.

The first main difference is the extent to which a specific populist in-group is constructed: only Wilders referred to an in-group of "ordinary" people. Trump, in contrast, referred to the "American people" or the "forgotten men and women of our country." In May's communication, references to an homogenous or monocultural people were absent: she did not make explicit populist references but rather voiced her closeness to the people's will—and the democratic principles of (failed) representation. Another main difference across leaders is the way in which the people are contrasted with the outside. Trump and Wilders voiced radical right-wing positions by constructing boundaries between native people and out-groups referred to as "dangerous Islamic terrorists"—thereby marking a strong boundary between the native populations and threats coming from outside.

Despite these differences, all leaders emphasized their capability to protect the people, and avert the threats they are facing. For May, this threat came from political opponents who failed to represent the people's collective will. For Wilders and Trump, this threat came from within the country (failing elites and political opponents) and from outside (Muslims and migrants should be excluded).

Together, in light of the first research question, the results indicate that the leading politicians all expressed the centrality of the people's will—presenting themselves as strong leaders who could pull "their" people out of the crisis. Yet, differences between the leading politicians are also salient. Wilders and Trump expressed a nativist and exclusionist understanding of the in-group, whereas May only referred to the need to represent the people's general will. She was thus more inclusionist when expressing membership to the people. References to "ordinary" people were only made by Wilders; Trump and May referred to the American and British people, respectively. In other words, only Wilders's references to the people were populist in the sense that a boundary between deprived ordinary citizens versus failing elites and dangerous others were cultivated. Trump did refer to a forgotten in-group of Americans who were not represented by the elites, but he refrained from labeling them "ordinary people." May did not make populist references, but followed the other leaders' discourse by presenting herself as a savior of the electorate, protecting them from the failures of political opponents.

Expressing the Divide between the "True" People and the "Dishonest" Elites

In all three countries, the leading politicians blamed their political opponents for failures. However, different elitist enemies were constructed

by the three leaders. In addition, whereas Wilders communicated an explicit right-wing populist ideology, populist elements were present in a more fragmented way in Trump's tweets. Confirming her established profile as part of the elites, May did not use explicit populist references, although blame attributions were central in her rhetoric.

During the pre-election period, Trump's most salient enemy was the "corrupt" Democratic government. Trump, for example, blamed Barack Obama and his government for failing policies: "Obamacare is a disaster—as I've been saying from the beginning. Time to repeal & replace! #ObamacareFail." Different from the other politicians, Trump's blame-shifting tactics changed during the run-up to the elections. In this period, his direct political opponent, Hillary Clinton, was regarded as the most salient enemy: "We must not let #CrookedHillary take her CRIMINAL SCHEME into the Oval Office." Finally, in the post-election period, the corrupt media elites that allegedly deceived the American people were the most salient scapegoat: "Somebody with aptitude and conviction should buy the FAKE NEWS and failing @nytimes and either run it correctly or let it fold with dignity!" Trump mostly attributed blame to ideologically different media outlets: "@CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!"

Similar to Trump, May shifted blame for the people's failed representation to her political opponents. However, different from Trump's discourse, these blame attributions were less hostile and did not explicitly frame political opponents as corrupt. In the two-party system of the United Kingdom, the elites of the other party were regarded as a credible scapegoat: "Jeremy Corbyn is playing party politics: opposing a deal he hasn't read and promising a deal he can't negotiate. Whatever he might do, I will act in the national interest." Although May scapegoated political actors for the people's problems, these references are not explicitly populist: the elites are not necessarily regarded as corrupt, although they are blamed for depriving national citizens. In other words, different from the other leaders' discourse, here blame attributions more closely reflect partisan cleavages than a populist discourse.

Wilders expressed the strongest antiestablishment populist discourse. Wilders actively blamed *all* national political elites for not listening to the people. Compared with the other politicians in bipartisan political systems, his blame attributions were less specifically targeted at opposing parties and aimed at all political elites: "The political elites totally disregard the will of the people!" Wilders frequently used a hostile tone to directly blame the Dutch prime minster for posing a threat to the

well-being of the Dutch people: "The man without a spine—Rutte [the Dutch prime minister] does not hesitate and betrays us."

In terms of overlaps and discrepancies, only Wilders's discourse lines up with the ideational core of populism: he explicitly juxtaposed the ordinary people with the failing political elites. Trump used some populist elements, but a discursive shift is evident when he became part of the establishment after the 2016 elections: the mainstream media become the most salient elitist scapegoat. This overlaps with Wilders's discourse: both leaders blamed opposing media sources for not representing the people's voice and for spreading disinformation and lies across the electorate. Wilders, for example, referred to a "politics of denial" and a media system that resembled North Korean censorship. Trump blamed the media for being biased against his views: "The dishonest media does not report that any money spent on building the Great Wall (for sake of speed), will be paid back by Mexico later!" Both leaders thus expressed a hostile media bias, which reflected a strategy used to delegitimize sources and interpretations that attacked the leaders' own political positions. The strongest discursive discrepancy was found between Trump and Wilders, on the one hand, and May, on the other hand: Trump and Wilders voiced populist blame attributions of the media and political elites, whereas May's responsibility attributions were not populist. More specifically, Wilders and Trump framed the opposition as "corrupt," "failing," and "self-interested." May, in contrast, less explicitly pointed to the failed representation of her opponents and only applied these accusations in the case of the polarized Brexit referendum.

Together, all political leaders attributed blame to "the elites" in such a way that it resonated with their perceptual screens. Answering the second and third research questions, when the context required politicians to shift blame to nonpolitical elites (that is, when May and Trump were part of the establishment), they attributed blame to elites in the media, the opposing party, or a higher-level political order (such as the European Union). In that sense, they used elements of populism without expressing a fuller ideational core. Although May only used isolated populist elements by pointing to failures of political opponents and the collective will of the people in the context of the Brexit referendum, populist elements were more explicitly used by Trump across contexts and issues. Different from Trump and May, Wilders's discourse reflects populist discourse on an ideological level rather than an adaptive strategy or discourse. Across contexts and topics, he attacked the political elites and expressed the binary divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites, and excluded allegedly dangerous immigrants and Muslims from the native people's in-group.

Additional Analyses: Contrasting the Leaders to Different Cases
For reasons of triangulation, and to further assess the extent to which the previous results reflect leader effects or partisan cleavages, one contrasting case was analyzed in each country. Specifically, we contrasted Trump's discourse with that of his political opponent at the time of data collection (Hillary Clinton), compared Wilders's discourse to the prime minister's communication via Twitter (Mark Rutte), and compared May's discourse with that of her political opponent at the time of data collection (Jeremy Corbyn). What discrepancies and similarities can be seen when comparing and contrasting the three political leaders with their opponents?

First of all, in the United States, the overlap between Trump's and Clinton's messages concerns the expression of hostile partisan blame attributions. Clinton accused Trump of being unfit to lead the nation— and for failing to adequately represent the people. However, she did not explicitly accuse the elites of being corrupt, and did not express anti-media sentiments or fake news accusations. In addition, her understanding of the American people was inclusive, whereas Trump excluded foreign elements from the in-group of the people.

These findings are mirrored in the Dutch context, although the prime minister's tone was less hostile than Clinton's accusations. In the Dutch case, the prime minister's blame attributions were mainly targeted at the left wing (the opposing political camp). In addition, the prime minister frequently voiced negative sentiments toward Wilders for failing to come up with feasible solutions. Although the prime minster also referred to the Dutch citizens as a unity, he did not explicitly refer to them as an in-group of ordinary, deprived citizens. Finally, in the United Kingdom, it can be noted that Corbyn's discourse mirrored May's references to the majority of citizens and their prosperity: "Labour will deliver a Brexit for the many not the few." Likewise, his blame attributions had a similar hostile tone targeted at May: "The Prime Minister's Brexit negotiating strategy has been a disaster. From day one, @Theresa_May has looked incapable of delivering a good deal for Britain."

To conclude, the additional analyses of contrasting cases reveal that the discourse of Trump and Wilders is unique and substantially different from their political opponents—although they share their emphasis on the people's centrality. May and Corbyn, in contrast, voiced very similar bipartisan discourse in which they both claimed to represent the will of the majority, while they blamed each other for failing to solve the crisis threatening the nation.

STUDY 2

The Effects of Politicians' Online Populism on Party Preferences

Based on the inductive insights into the specific rhetoric that leading politicians used to construct the people and the elites, a comparative experiment was conducted in which politicians' communication of a divide between the people and the elites was manipulated. The central question of the second study is how effective politicians in different settings are when they cultivate a populist divide between the people and the elites: are politicians who are part of the establishment (May, Trump) able to activate vote intentions by relying on populist cues, or are such communication tactics only effective for (right-wing) populists (Wilders)?

Method. This study reports the results of an experiment with one independent variable (cultivating a populist social identity by leading politicians: yes/no) contrasted with a neutral control group. The source of the message differed between countries: participants were presented with a tweet from Trump in the United States, May in the United Kingdom, and Wilders in the Netherlands. These sources always had the same function: they endorsed (retweeted) a news message in which populist or nonpopulist claims were made. The control condition was constant across the three countries. Group sizes were similar: 190 in the control, 189 in the no-populism condition, and 190 in the populism condition. The topic of the tweets was varied as a within-subjects factor. More specifically, participants were always exposed to two messages: one about increasing crime rates and one about decreasing welfare. The topical variation aimed to include variety in ideological leanings and issue ownership on different societal issues (also based on Study 1).

Sample. An international polling agency recruited participants in the three countries during the same period (16–22 October 2018). Hard quotas were enforced to ensure a varied sample that approached national representativeness on gender (55.0 percent female), education (23.0 percent lower, 44.7 percent moderate, 32.3 percent higher) and age ($M = 45.02$, $SD = 12.44$). The sample composition captures a variety of political leanings and viewpoints (50/50 left/right leaning and distribution of previous voting behavior matches distribution in the population). The completion rate was 54.0 percent. This relatively low rate is mainly driven by the over-quota on education, and thus did not

correspond to high dropout rates. For this study, 569 participants were used for the final analyses (United States: $N = 193$; United Kingdom: $N = 195$; Netherlands: $N = 181$).

Independent Variable

Populism was manipulated by expressing the ideational core of populism in a news story on crime rates (Topic 1) or the health care situation (Topic 2). This news story was then endorsed by the three politicians via their own Twitter accounts (a type of communication that is in line with the actual means of politicians' communication). The topic was a within-subjects factor: all participants saw two tweets on different topics (increasing crime rates and health care issues).

To be clear, the policies depicted and the overall interpretations of the topic were identical in the populist and nonpopulist conditions. In the populist condition, however, the politicians in the three countries endorsed a news story on these issues by framing it in terms of a central divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites. More specifically, the corrupt elites were regarded as a cause of negative developments on the crime rate and health care situation. The elites were assigned blame for failing to represent the ordinary people and failing to acknowledge the real problems posing a threat to the ordinary people. This populist interpretation was absent in the non-populist condition. However, the main storyline, topic, and problem interpretations were identical. Again, crime rates and the health care situation were depicted as worsening, but the populist interpretation blaming the elites for the people's problems was not present. The articles were equal in length, layout, and argumentation.

Pre-testing ensured that the messages did not differ on perceived credibility or other factors not related to the independent variables. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to report all similarity checks, the populist and nonpopulist conditions did not differ, for example, in the interpretation of the crime rate as a threat to national citizens (populist: $M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.74$; nonpopulist: $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.75$). The two messages did not differ significantly in credibility ratings (populist: $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.85$; nonpopulist: $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.86$). There were no significant country differences in the ratings of the stimuli. Example stimuli are included in the appendix.

Dependent Variable

In the post-test questionnaire, participants completed a battery of items that included vote intentions, measured as the likelihood that

people would ever vote for a political party. Propensities to vote were measured on a 0–100 likelihood scale. Although this slightly deviated from traditional 0–10 propensity scores, it can be argued that people do not think of likelihood on an 11-point scale, but rather as a percentage of certainty (100 percent). We were particularly interested in propensities to vote for the political leaders who were communicating the populist messages (Trump, May, Wilders) and vote intentions for the elites assigned blame (the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, and the largest government party in the Netherlands).

Moderators

The perceptual screen or attitudinal filter of populism's persuasiveness was based on two attitudes measured prior to exposure: perceived deprivation[52] and political distrust/cynicism.[53] Measures of perceived deprivation included items such as "If we need anything from the government, other people are always advantaged" and "I do not get anything I actually deserve." The scale was measured with nine items on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.29$, Cronbach's alpha = .92). Political cynicism/distrust was measured with three items (for example, "Political parties are only interested in my vote, and not my opinion") ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.40$, Cronbach's alpha = .92).

Manipulation Checks

The manipulation of the ideational core of populism was successful in all three countries. For the topic of health care, people were significantly more likely to perceive the message as shifting blame to the elites in the populist condition ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.58$) compared with the nonpopulist condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.64$) or the control condition ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 336) = 14.56$, $p < .001$. The same pattern was found for the topic of increasing crime rates, $F(1, 336) = 23.50$, $p < .001$. Randomization checks were computed to confirm that the randomization to the different conditions succeeded—the composition of the experimental groups did not differ in terms of demographics, political preferences and issue attitudes toward health care or crime.

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[52]Elchardus and Spruyt, "Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism."
[53]Bos, Van der Brug, and de Vreese, "An Experimental Test."

RESULTS OF STUDY 2

Direct Effects of Populist Communication on Propensities to Vote

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated to test all hypotheses. Table 1 depicts the results for propensities to vote for the elites, and Table 2 reports the results for vote preferences for the political leader communicating populism. The results demonstrate that there is no significant direct effect of exposure to populist communication on intentions to vote for the elites (Table 1, Model II) or the communicators of the message (Table 2, Model II). Even if perceived deprivation and political cynicism are excluded from the models, the results are not significant. Against this backdrop, Hypothesis 1a and 1b are not supported by the data: populist messages do not unconditionally activate or deactivate vote intentions for leading politicians or opposing elites, respectively.

The Resonance of Perceptual Screens: Perceived Deprivation and Political Cynicism

In the next steps, the conditionality of populism's effects on party preferences for leading politicians was investigated (Table 2, Model III). First of all, the results point to a positive, significant interaction effect of exposure to populism and perceived relative deprivation on participants' propensity to vote for the leading politician ($B = 25.45$, $SE = 10.47$, $p < .001$). In support of Hypothesis 2a, this means that the effects of populist communication on vote intentions are stronger for participants who believe that they have lost out relatively more than other groups in society. There are no significant interaction effects of populism and deprivation on vote intentions for the elites attributed blame in the populist stimuli.

In the next step, we investigated whether higher levels of cynicism/political distrust condition the effects of populism on propensities to vote for the elites or the political leaders (Hypothesis 2a). The results do not support this expectation (see Table 1, Model III and Table 2, Model III). More specifically, the two-way interaction effects of populism and political cynicism/distrust on propensities to vote for the elites and the leaders as communicators of populism were not significant, indicating that the effects of populism are conditional on perceived deprivation (Hypothesis 2a) but not cynicism (Hypothesis 2b). The perceptual screens driving the electoral effects of politicians' direct populist communication consist of perceptions of relative deprivation.

TABLE 1
The Effects of Populist Communication by Leading Politicians on Voting for the Political Establishment

	Model I (n = 336)			Model II (n = 336)			Model III (n = 336)			Model IV (n = 336)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	35.71	4.19		34.38	4.29		34.69	4.49		33.08	5.32	
Deprivation	8.86	5.08	.12	7.92	5.11	.11	5.66	6.97	.08	5.64	7.01	.08
Political cynicism	1.91	5.06	.03	−.68	5.38	−.01	.64	7.12	.01	.53	7.15	.01
Trump (US)	.26	4.82	.01	.20	4.81	.01	.08	4.83	.01	1.01	6.86	.01
Wilders (Netherlands)	−19.37	4.96	−.24***	−19.37	4.95	−.24***	−19.24	4.98	−.24***	−15.27	6.84	−.19*
Populist communication				6.48	4.58	.09	5.74	7.03	.08	9.67	9.30	.13
Populism * deprivation							4.99	10.33	.06	4.16	10.41	.06
Populism * cynicism							−3.22	10.90	−.04	−3.08	10.93	−.04
Populism * Trump										−1.94	9.68	−.02
Populism * Wilders										−8.59	10.01	−.08
Adjusted R^2	.07			.07			.07			.07		
F	7.38***			6.32***			4.53***			3.60***		
F for change in R^2				2.00			.12			.41		

Notes: Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) regression weights. The reference category for Trump and Wilders is May (United Kingdom).
*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

TABLE 2
The Effects of Populist Communication by Leading Politicians on Vote Intentions for the Source of the (Populist) Message

	Model I (n = 336)			Model II (n = 336)			Model III (n = 336)			Model IV (n = 336)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	26.96	4.28		28.19	4.38		29.48	4.56		29.90	5.39	
Deprivation	−.80	5.19	−.01	.07	5.23	.01	−11.37	7.06	−.15	−11.11	7.11	−.14
Political cynicism	−3.11	5.18	−.04	−.72	5.50	−.01	7.14	7.22	.10	7.06	7.25	.09
Trump (US)	23.36	4.93	.29***	23.41	4.92	.29***	22.75	4.90	.28***	23.82	6.95	.30***
Wilders (Netherlands)	1.36	5.07	.02	1.36	5.06	.02	1.96	5.05	.02	−.55	6.93	−.01
Populist communication				−6.00	4.68	−.08	−8.37	7.13	−.11	−9.84	9.43	−.13
Populism * deprivation							25.45	10.47	.31**	25.91	10.55	.32**
Populism * cynicism							−19.02	11.04	−24	−18.94	11.08	−.24
Populism * Trump										−2.06	9.81	−.02
Populism * Wilders										5.56	10.15	.05
Adjusted R^2	.07			.07			.08			.08		
F	7.30***			6.18***			5.35***			4.21***		
F for change in R^2				1.64			3.07*			.31		

Notes: Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (β) regression weights. The reference category for Trump and Wilders is May (United Kingdom).

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

To further explain the persuasiveness of populist communication by political leaders, we looked at the role of prior levels of support for the three leading politicians. In the United States, we see a significant and positive two-way interaction effect between prior levels of support for Trump and the effects of populist communication ($B = 6.42$, $SE = 2.90$, $p = .28$). This means that participants who supported Trump as a political source were significantly more likely to vote for him when exposed to populist communication, whereas participants who supported him less were least likely to be affected by populist communication. In the Dutch case, this effect was nonsignificant ($B = −.44$, $SE = 2.34$, $p = .854$). Interestingly, in the United Kingdom, the effect was negative and significant ($B = −6.63$, $SE = 2.61$, $p = .12$). This indicates that the more people supported May as a political leader, the least likely they were persuaded by the populist cues she communicated via social

media. May is thus not a credible source for explicit populist attributions of blame.

Country Differences: Are Right-Wing Populists More Credible than the Establishment?

The comparative scope of this article allows us to assess how effective different politicians "flirt" with a populist style of communication: are politicians in the opposition (Wilders) more credible than those in the establishment (Trump, May), and are nonpopulists (May) also credible and persuasive when they use populist communication tactics? Compared with the reference country (United Kingdom), we see that Wilders in the Netherlands deactivates vote propensities for the elites, whereas Trump in the United States activates vote propensities for himself. Although they are not the result of a random allocation to conditions, these findings indicate that there seems to be a fit with a politician's relationship to the establishment and the priming of vote intentions. Yet, the results of the two-way interaction effects between countries and the presence of populist communication are not significant (Table 1, Model IV and Table 2, Model IV).

DISCUSSION

Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook have been regarded as important channels for politicians to directly speak to their electorate, which should particularly suit populist styles of communication that bypass the elites and directly establish a link with the ordinary people.[54] In the first study, we focused on the content of populist ideas communicated by Trump in the United States, May in the United Kingdom, and Wilders in the Netherlands. The findings indicate that the political actor typically associated with (right-wing) populism, Wilders, most explicitly communicates populist ideas by referring to an in-group of the ordinary people and the corrupt elites in the national government. However, and as an important next step in populism research, we find that the expression of populist ideas is contingent upon contextual-level discursive opportunity structures.

Being part of the establishment, May refers to the majority of the people and the centrality of the people's will when cultivating an in-group—which is used strategically to forward herself as a strong, capable leader of the British people. In May's discourse, the elites are "reinvented" based on

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[54]Bracciale and Martella, "Define the Populist Political Communication Style"; Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media"; and Hameleers and Schmuck, "It's Us against Them."

ideological cleavages and nonpolitical sources of the people's threat. In other words, to absolve her own "elitist" level of responsibility, she shifts blame to elites who are not part of the national government that she belongs to: the media, the opposing Labour Party, and the supranational European Union are regarded as elitist enemies that do not represent the people's will.

In the United States, the sample frame of Trump's direct communication allows for a direct comparison of pre- versus post-election populist blame shifting. Here, the national elites (the Democrats' and Obama's failing policies) are regarded as a credible scapegoat in the pre-election phase. Close to the election, his direct opponent, Hillary Clinton, and opposing media channels labeled "fake news media" become more salient in his rhetoric. Finally, after becoming part of the establishment, the media elites took center stage as the most salient threat to the American people. Together, these findings confirm the chameleonic nature or flexibility that has been associated with the "thin" core of populism.[55] Populist ideas expressed by mainstream and populist politicians are adjusted to the context, aiming to cultivate a credible social identity of the people versus the elites.

The first study also reveals that the discursive construction of the people and their enemies fits the different political settings. Hence, in the bipartisan settings of the United States and the United Kingdom, opposing politicians attack each other in hostile ways and shift blame to their opponent for failing to represent the people. Such hostile partisan attacks are absent in the multiparty system of the Netherlands—where the prototypical populist politician claims issue ownership on explicit scapegoating. These findings point to important contextual-level differences in negative political campaigning: Bi-partisan attacks are more salient in two-party systems characterized by high levels of polarization. As such references do not appeal to an in-group of "ordinary" people, they can be distinguished from the populist rhetoric that is omnipresent in multiparty systems.

In the next step, the effects of populist ideas expressed by the mainstream (May) or a right-wing populist politician in the opposition (Wilders) and an allegedly radical right-wing leader in government (Trump) were assessed in an experiment. The key findings indicate that populist expressions by all politicians do not directly activate vote intentions for these leaders or deactivate propensities to vote for the

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[55]Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

opposing elites. This finding can be explained in line with social identity theory, and the premises of collective action.[56] More specifically, the populist cultivation of a threat to the in-group of the ordinary people, and the attribution of blame to the corrupt elites, is not a credible or personally relevant storyline for all citizens. Although other studies have found a direct effect of exposure to populist communication on citizens' political attitudes, emotions, and behaviors,[57] and even propensities to vote for populist parties,[58] this study does not offer support for direct effects.

One potential explanation is that this study—in contrast with other experimental research—included explicit political source cues: the political actors were mentioned and shown directly in fabricated tweets that allegedly came from their own social media profiles. Across all three national settings, support for the political leaders was highly polarized, especially in the setting of the partisan debates on immigration (all countries) and the European Union (the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). This means that when people opposed the source cue, the populist message may have backfired. In addition, not all politicians may be equally credible for their followers when they "flirt" with populist ideas: Trump and Wilders may be credible, whereas May's populist discourse may not fit her profile. This is supported by the data. In the United States, Trump supporters were significantly more likely to vote for him when exposed to his populist messages (compared with people who supported him less). In the United Kingdom, however, May's populist rhetoric backfired: the more people supported this political leader, the weaker the effects of populist communication became. This finding implies that using populist ideas while being part of the established political order may backfire, as it can lower support from the electorate. In the Dutch case, there was no role of source support, which may be due to the mainstreaming of populist ideas in the Dutch context.

Our findings show that populist vote intentions are most likely to be activated among a group of citizens with congruent perceptual screens and support for a leader known to communicate populist messages

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[56]Gamson, *Talking Politics*; Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements; and Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action."
[57]Linda Bos, Christian Schemer, Nicoleta Corbu, Michael Hameleers, Ioannis Andreadis, Anne Schulz, Desirée Schmuck, Carsten Reinemann, and Nayla Fawzi, "The Effects of Populism as a Social Identity Frame on Persuasion and Mobilization: Evidence from a 15-Country Experiment," *European Journal of Political Research* 59 (February 2020): 3–24; and Wirz, "Persuasion through Emotion?"
[58]Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading The News."

(Trump). This was confirmed in the experiment: populist messages were most effective among people with stronger levels of perceived relative deprivation. For this group of citizens, exposure to populist communication activates the propensity to vote for politicians communicating populist messages—which is in line with the resonance between populist perceptions and relative deprivation identified in previous research.[59] Together, these effects demonstrate that persuasion by populist communication is fragmented, and contingent upon support for the source and prior attitudes in line with populist blame attributions.

Contrary to the expectations, however, political distrust and cynicism did not condition the effects of populist messages on vote intentions. Although relative deprivation is part of the perceptual screen related to the people's in-group threat, political distrust may tap into distrust in the political system altogether. Hence, whereas deprivation may be strongly related to mobilization—activating people to restore the in-group threat[60]—political distrust and cynicism may be demobilizing. Politically cynical citizens may not just oppose the specific politician of the political establishment who is blamed in populist communication, they may also disapprove of the political system altogether. In addition, they are more likely to believe that their vote does not matter—which explains the finding that more cynical citizens are not affected in their intentions to vote. However, it could be noted that political cynicism plays a different role in populism's persuasiveness. As indicated by Matthijs Rooduijn and colleagues, populist messages may activate political cynicism, fostering distrust in the political establishment.[61]

As an important implication of this study, we are able to provide new insights into the effectiveness of populist ideas used by populist and mainstream actors in different countries. First of all, we did not find significant country-level differences in the effects of populist communication. This finding indicates that populist messages may boost support for leading politicians as long as they address a group of relatively deprived citizens. Yet, we do find some differences between countries: compared with May, Wilders's presence as a communicator deactivates elitist vote intentions, whereas Trump's presence activates vote intentions for the political leader. Thus, in light of a populist

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[59]Elchardus and Spruyt, "Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism."
[60]Gamson, *Talking Politics*.
[61]Matthijs Rooduijn, Wouter Van der Brug, Sarah L. De Lange and Jante Parlevliet, "Persuasive Populism? Estimating The Effect Of Populist Messages On Political Cynicism," *Politics And Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 136-145.

zeitgeist,[62] both mainstream and populist politicians may credibly flirt with the thin populist ideology to boost their electoral success, as long as they address segments of the electorate that feel deprived. However, only the presence of a populist leader helps people to move away from the "corrupt" elites.

Practically, our findings indicate that people who feel they have lost out relatively more than other segments of society may be most likely to be affected by populist communication. Populists can successfully mobilize support for their parties by targeting their message to these relatively deprived citizens. Potential responses to the challenge of populism may thus best be addressed to deprived citizens, explaining how the threat they experience may not be resolved by antiestablishment or exclusionist policies. In addition, interventions should be focused on decreasing and relativizing the threat people are experiencing, also showing how this threat is already addressed by the mainstream. Finally, it may help to point out that populist movements do not offer concrete solutions to deal with the deprivation people are facing. The best format to overcome resistance to such countermessages may be satirical content. As Boukes and Hameleers empirically demonstrate, satirist refutations that point out fallacies and the lack of concrete solutions offered in populist rhetoric may successfully decrease support for populist leaders and parties.[63]

LIMITATIONS

Despite offering important insights into the ways in which populist discourse is used by different politicians with what effects, this study has some limitations. First of all, the comparison of three countries is not complete. The different cases in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands are rooted in developments that do not relate to populism and anti-elite sentiments in similar ways. We simply contrasted a singly multiparty system (the Netherlands) with one extreme (the United States) and one less polarized bi-partisan system (the United Kingdom). Future research may conduct experiments in a larger set of countries with a more refined comparison of most-different or most-similar cases in light of the presence of populism in the political realm and public opinion. In addition, less prominent

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[62]Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

[63]Mark Boukes and Michael Hameleers, "Shattering Populists' Rhetoric with Satire at Election Times: The Effect of Humorously Holding Populists Accountable for Their Lack of Solutions," *Journal of Communication* 70 (August 2020): 574–597.

political figures may be used to further tease out leader effects from content effects.

Second, it could be argued that the topics used in the experiments are not equally credible in the three countries, which may harm the credibility of the populist cues. However, all stimuli were rated as equally credible in all countries. Finally, although the qualitative content analysis revealed the specific discursive elements and the nature of populist references as expressed by different politicians, we did not provide insights on the relative dominance of the different themes and indicators of populist discourse. Although it reaches beyond the scope of this article, we suggest future research to quantitatively assess the frequency of the populist elements identified in this study. Despite these limitations, this study is one of the first contributions that empirically investigates whether different mainstream and populist politicians associated with the use of people centric and anti-elitist sentiments may be electorally successful when using populist ideas—thereby providing a causal test of the electoral potential of the populist zeitgeist.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE COMPOSITION STUDY 1 AND EXAMPLE STIMULI

TABLE A1
Overview of Sample Composition for Study 1

Leader	United States	United Kingdom	Netherlands
Trump	1,654		
Clinton	50		
May		788	
Corbyn		50	
Wilders			1,116
Rutte			50

Note: Cell entries are total sample tweets, which were analyzed selectively in the next steps.

Theresa May ✓
@theresa_may

New healthcare reform report shows potential developments health care budgets: recent calculations show that budget cuts are needed

Published: September 20, 2018   3:11 PM
Last update: September 22, 2018 6:21 PM

By: THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Analysis new healthcare reform report: necessary budget cuts will be made in governmental health care spending. These measures will affect the budgets of different domains within health care. Citizens in the UK will soon start to see the implications of new healthcare reforms.

Based on this outcome, it can be concluded that different political and economic actors responsible for healthcare budgets will propose changes to spend tax money in a different way. These conclusions can be drawn from an unpublished report of the newly established committee that looks into the feasibility of new health care schemes, which should be launched within five years.

More specifically, the report concludes that the total budget cuts will amount up to three billion in 2023. The same calculations show that this will result from a redistribution of the available financial resources from tax income. This redistribution will follow exactly the same formulas as previous years.

These numbers thus demonstrate that the redistribution of resources intended for health care will be based on exactly the same proportions as in past years. There will be less money available, but this will affect each domain in exactly the same way.

Theresa May ✓
@theresa_may

New healthcare reform report shows how self-interested elites cause worsening healthcare – ordinary British people victimized by controversial policies

Published: September 20, 2018   3:11 PM
Last update: September 22, 2018 6:21 PM

By: THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Analysis new healthcare reform report: self-interested elites cause unnecessary budget cuts. As a consequence, the gap between the rich and poor widens – making healthcare accessible for the extreme rich only. Proposed new measures will affect ordinary British citizens most.

Based on this outcome, it can be concluded that ordinary British people will be deprived of their welfare benefits. Yet, other groups are disproportionally advantaged by the elites' controversial measures. These conclusions can be drawn from an unpublished report of a newly established committee that looks into the feasibility of new health care schemes.

More specifically, the new report concludes that the total budget cuts will amount up to three billion in 2023. The same calculations show that these worrisome measures would not have been necessary if the excessive salaries of managers and governmental institutions involved in health care would be reduced. The redistribution of available funds is unfair as the extreme-rich will be affected less by the cuts.

These numbers clearly demonstrate that ordinary British citizens will be worse off as a consequence of profiting elites. This is yet another situation that shows how ordinary citizens are disadvantaged by self-interested elites while other groups are allowed to profit.

Note. The image on the left-hand panel shows a nonpopulist message communicated by May, and the image on the right-hand panel shows a populist message communicated by May. Exactly the same messages were used in the other countries—with the exception of the endorsement via Twitter.