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# Augmenting polarization via social media? A comparative analysis of Trump’s and Wilders’ online populist communication and the electorate’s interpretations surrounding the elections

Michael Hameleers<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** Social network sites may have contributed to the global electoral success of populism in important ways. Drawing on the technological affordances of social media, politicians are enabled to directly communicate populist discourse via Twitter by constructing a pervasive societal divide between the “good” people and “corrupt” elites. Such Tweets may resonate with the reality constructions of receivers—who are also enabled to communicate populist discourse online. To understand the intersections of the supply- and demand-sides of populist discourse in the U.S. and Europe, this paper draws on extensive comparative qualitative content analyses of Trump’s and Wilders’ Tweets ( $N=2681$ ) and the electorates’ discourse on Facebook ( $N=657$ ). The results provide important insights into the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at play in populist discourse and the affordances of social media in shaping populist and polarized discourse among politicians and the electorate at election times.

**Keywords** Polarization · Populism · Social identity theory · Social media · Partisanship · Technological affordances

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, populism has received most attention in right-wing, European contexts (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007). With the election of Donald Trump to U.S. presidency in 2016, it has been argued that populism has also permeated U.S. politics (e.g., Judis 2016). Although the expression of populist divides

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between the “ordinary” people and the “corrupt” elites is salient in both Europe and the U.S., differences in the electoral system may give rise to the construction of different discourses. Partisanship, belonging to the people and opposing the elites may for example mean different things in a multiparty system such as the Netherlands compared to the U.S. Moreover, in the U.S., Trump entered the political stage as an outsider and became part of the establishment after the U.S. elections. Wilders, in contrast, attacks the elites as a (relative) outsider. In these different sociopolitical climates, this paper aims to investigate how Dutch and the U.S. populist discourse overlaps and differs.

Most research on populist communication explored the content or effects of populist ideas in mass media or political manifestos (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn et al. 2014). A recent body of research explored the role of politicians’ direct communication via social media (e.g., Bracciale and Martella 2017; Engesser et al. 2017a, b; Waisbord and Amado 2017; van Kessel and Castelein 2006). These studies, for example, demonstrated that populist politicians use social media to attribute blame to their opponents (van Kessel and Castelein 2006). Yet, research that assesses the overlap between the political realm and public opinion is scarce (see Stier et al. 2017 for an exception). Do the reality constructions communicated by politicians overlap with the public’s discourse, or are (populist) ideas challenged by the electorate? Integrating the perspectives of politicians and ordinary citizens, this paper provides in-depth insights into politicians’ populist self-communication and the electorate’s populist discourse surrounding the U.S. and Dutch elections. Taken together, this research explores the extent to which politicians’ online discourse overlaps or differs from citizens’ interpretations.

Against this backdrop, this paper presents the results of in-depth qualitative content analyses of Trump’s ( $N=1157$ ) and Wilders’ tweets ( $N=1524$ ) surrounding the 2016 U.S. and 2017 Dutch elections. In order to explore how their self-communication resonated with public opinion, this paper presents a second study in which the electorate’s populist discourse on Facebook is analyzed ( $N=657$ ). By comparing the European and the U.S. cases of polarization and populism, this paper aims to make a significant contribution to the recent literature that aims to understand how public opinion is constructed in a fragmented media environment characterized by politicians’ and citizens’ self-communications.

## A social identity perspective on populism and affective polarization

In populist discourse, the “ordinary” people are depicted as a good, superior unity (Taggart 2004). The elites, in contrast, are constructed as an “evil” and corrupt out-group that is unwilling and unable to represent the people’s general will (e.g., Canovan 1999; Taggart 2004). In right-wing populism, the anti-elitist stance can be extended with the exclusion of societal out-groups, most saliently “dangerous” others (i.e., the Islam) or “profiting” migrants (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007). These elements are part of host ideologies that can supplement the “thin ideology” of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The focus on radical right-wing leaders



in this study (Wilders and Trump) allows us to distinguish their populism from the host ideologies pertaining to their (radical) right-wing issue positions.

The central divide between “us” and “them” characterizing populism is also salient in affective polarization (e.g., Greene 1999). Applied to the U.S., affective polarization can be understood as a social identification process by which Democrats and Republicans perceive fellow partisans as more similar and positive and partisans of the opposed party as dissimilar and negative (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012). In a multiparty system such as the Netherlands, the divides between “us” and “them” are constructed differently. Affective polarization taps into the process by which the deprived “ordinary” citizens emotionally distance themselves from citizens that do not identify with this group, as illustrated by extant research on the connection between relative deprivation and populism (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hameleers et al. 2018). Although not all supporters of Wilders may oppose *all* citizens voting for other parties, polarized divides between issue-publics are constructed. Hence, “they” are seen as a group of citizens that is ignorant, supporting the culpable elites while being blind to see what is going on in society.

Similar to populism, affective polarization can be understood from a *social identity perspective*: positive qualities are ascribed to the in-group whereas negative qualities and blame are attributed to the out-group perceived of as a substantially different entity (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986). The divides shaped by populism can be connected to polarization as a political consequence on the demand-side. Hence, populist expressions may strengthen identification with the ordinary, deprived people among the part of the electorate with congruent prior attitudes. At the same time, people who disagree with populist interpretations distance themselves from this community of ordinary citizens. In other words, as a political consequence of the dissemination of populist ideas, the electorate can become divided in emotionally distinct camps of people that support versus oppose populist worldviews.

## Direct populist communication via social network sites

A recent, yet growing body of research has explored the role of social media in providing a platform for the dissemination of populist sentiments (e.g., Bartlett et al. 2011; Engesser et al. 2017b; van Kessel and Castelein 2006). According to Engesser et al. (2017b), social media enable politicians to establish a direct linkage to the people, while circumventing gatekeeping journalists in traditional mass media. The resonance of their online communication with news values such as conflict, negativity and emotionalization secures the visibility of their ideas in traditional media (Engesser et al. 2017b). Establishing a direct link between politicians and the ordinary citizens is a central feature of populist communication (Canovan 1999). Populist actors claim to speak directly to the people on behalf of the people, while circumventing elitist institutions (e.g., Taggart 2004). Social media hereby supply populist politicians with an important tool to directly speak to the ordinary citizens they claim to represent, while circumventing the mass media accused of being part of the corrupt elites (Engesser et al. 2017b). Social networks’ sites do not only allow



politicians to express their partisan and populist boundary constructions, they also provide a central stage for ordinary citizens to *interact* and share their perspectives on various political issues (Bartlett et al. 2011). But how are *ordinary citizens* empowered as senders of populist communication?

### Affordances of the online context shaping populist discourse

The technological affordance perspective explains how communication via social media channels can give rise to different ways of communication compared to face-to-face interactions (Ellison and Boyd 2013). Interactivity and community formation are the most central features of social media that provide a context for online populist expressions. Four technological affordances in particular can be highlighted here: *asynchronicity, a pervasive and persistent awareness of communities, and perceived anonymity* (Ellison and Boyd 2013; Hampton 2016).

Asynchronicity refers to the process by which users can interact with each other without the necessity of a *direct* exchange of communication (Ellison and Boyd 2013). Social network sites hereby allow users to respond to each other's message wherever and whenever they desire. This means that citizens can interact with fellow citizens and politicians, irrespective of time and place (e.g., Klinger and Svensson 2014; Stier et al. 2017). This affordance thus empowers the "silenced majority" of ordinary citizens referred to in populism. Social media provide them with a virtual community to interact with other members of this in-group, as well as to respond to political actors they would not interact with in other settings.

The related affordance of a persistent and pervasive awareness of community links up to the centrality of comparisons of the self to others in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986). This affordance prescribes that users of social network sites can be constantly aware of the presence of other community members without investing time and effort to physically meet them (Hampton 2016). Hence, the populist in-group comes into being by providing them with a virtual space in which they can shape (des)identification. As a result of persistent and pervasive awareness, people can constantly and effortlessly exchange information with other community members, transcending the borders of space and time. Interaction with members of the ordinary people enables citizens to positively distinguish the in-group from the out-group, which makes the sense of in-group deprivation more salient, sparking the desire for mobilization online.

The absence of a physical receiver and direct response on social network sites creates a *perception* of safety and anonymity (Ellison and Boyd 2013). This can be compared to having a telephone conversation on the train. Although fellow travelers can follow the complete conversation, the person having the conversation does not experience the presence of other people being able to hear the conversation. Applied to populist discourse on the demand-side of citizens, this perception of anonymity may foster uncivil expressions as individuals may perceive that they are not accountable for communicating these sentiments (Suler 2004). The social network sites are perceived as online communities consisting of like-minded others who share similar worldviews.



They may be unknown, but people feel safe to communicate hostility toward others as they perceive that these sentiments are shared by other community members.

Most of the aforementioned affordances relate to the online expressions of ordinary citizens. For (populist) politicians, community formation and perceived anonymity may be less relevant. Specifically, politicians may communicate through online media as they can circumvent gatekeepers while securing media coverage (Waisbord and Amado 2017). Moreover, they can establish a direct bond to their followers (Engesser et al. 2017b), which may boost their electoral success. Citizens may rely more on social media to vent their dissent, and to construct communities with like-minded others without the risk of an immediate response.

Taken together, the affordances of social media give rise to a *network media logic* (e.g., Klinger and Svensson 2014). In terms of production, social media engage non-professional members of the audience to produce content. Social networks sites further allow for direct, interactive, horizontal, and personalized distributions. Unmediated by traditional journalistic news values, different actors are enabled to spread personalized messages to niche audiences of like-minded others (Klinger and Svensson 2014).

Different social network sites may provide people with different platforms for direct (self)-communication (e.g., Bossetta 2018). Facebook users are known to connect to people they are also interacting with in offline settings (e.g., Ellison and Boyd 2013). On Twitter, people also engage in conversations with people they do *not* already know. Facebook is more community centered. Here, the audience is empowered to co-construct meaning in response to each other (Klinger and Svensson 2014). Twitter, in contrast, does not offer such community structures. Importantly, Twitter allows for more anonymous communication than Facebook. Based on the less-visible community structure, room for interaction and more on-directional elitist media logic, Twitter may provide a more suitable platform for politicians compared to ordinary citizens. Facebook's community structure and reach among the general public may be the most salient context for the interaction and construction of partisan and populist discourse by the "ordinary people." Against this backdrop, Study 1 focuses on the direct communication of Trump and Wilders by raising the following research question: How are Trump and Wilders shaping populist and polarized discourse via their direct communication on Twitter surrounding the 2016 and 2017 general elections? (RQ1). Study 2 focuses on the expression of the electorates' discourse on Facebook by raising the following research question: How are Facebook users in the U.S. and the Netherlands constructing populist and partisan boundaries (RQ2)? An answer to these questions will help us to understand how the communication of populist actors resonate with the interpretation frames of ordinary citizens.



## Study 1: populist and partisan self-communication on Twitter

### Method

#### *Data collection and sample*

An extensive qualitative content analysis of Geert Wilders' and Donald Trump's Twitter account was conducted. These radical right-wing leaders are selected for different reasons. First, Wilders is an exemplar case of an electorally successful right-wing populist leader (Van Kessel and Castelein 2006). Although Trump has been associated with (radical) right-wing populism, the actual discourse of his communication remains understudied. The comparison of proto-typical right-wing populism in Europe with the relatively new case of radical right-wing discourse in the U.S. is relevant to assess similarities and differences. Moreover, as this study focuses on radical right-wing leaders, we can disentangle the populist elements of their discourse, and identify similarities and differences in host ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

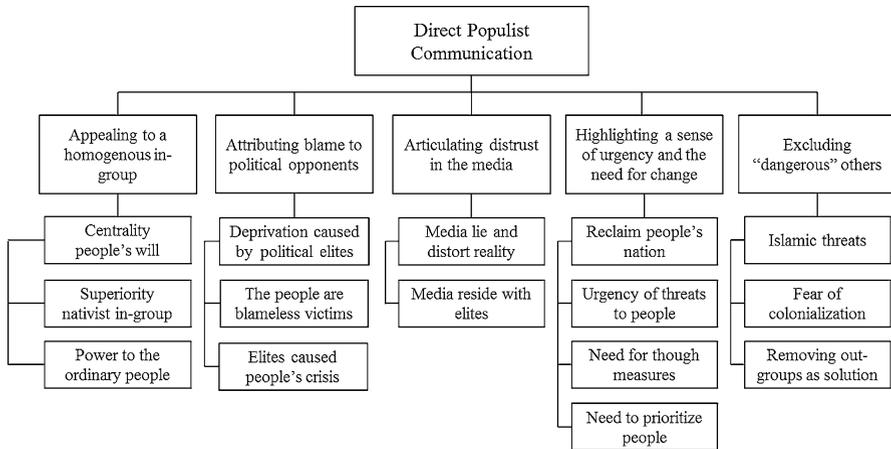
For the U.S. sample, a Python script was used to download all Tweets from Trump's original Twitter account published between September 8, 2016 and January 8, 2017. This timeframe was chosen for two reasons. First, it reflects an equal and extended period prior and after his election to U.S. presidency, which enables us to retrieve a maximum variety of shifting perspectives surrounding this main event. Second, in a back-and-forth movement between data collection and analysis, this sample was found to reflect a theoretical saturation of core themes. This means that when including more Tweets before and after the elections, the cyclic-iterative data analysis strategy did not reveal novel insights into the themes. This Twitter activity for 4 months yielded a total number of 1157 Tweets. All these tweets were included in the analyses.

An equal procedure was followed for the Dutch sample. Here, the key event was defined as the general elections in the Netherlands on March 15, 2017. Again, for a period of 2 months prior and 2 months after, this key event was sampled. In this period ranging from January 15, 2017 to May 15, 2017, all Tweets sent from Wilders' official Twitter account were downloaded, which yielded a total sample of 1524 Tweets. Different periods or topics do not reveal additional variety in the discourse of both politicians. However, the actual populist or radical right-wing discourse becomes less prominent in routine periods.

#### *Analyses*

The content analytic data were analyzed following the three subsequent coding phases of the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The software package Atlas.ti was used to assist coding. The first step of open coding was guided by sensitizing concepts related to the key research questions on partisan and populist boundary constructions. Specifically, the sensitizing concepts used were: in-group





**Fig. 1** Concept-indicator model of direct populist communication reflected in Trump's ( $N=1157$ ) and Wilders' Tweets ( $N=1524$ )

construction, out-group construction, out-group hostility, in-group favoritism, emotionalization, anti-elitism, exclusionism. These concepts all tapped into the construction of boundaries between “us” and “them.” Axial coding was used to reduce the open-ended codes to a more structured overview of partisan and populist divides. For this coding step, a matrix of core themes, their relationships, and indicators was developed. During focused coding, the variation on the axes was reinterpreted into the communication strategies reported in the results (see Fig. 1 for the concept-indicator model).

Peer debriefing was used to assess the reliability of the coding steps and the emerging themes. First, 10% of the Twitter and Facebook posts was independently coded by two researchers. Differences were discussed, and found to be relatively minor. Specifically, the differences between coders did not result in different core themes. Second, all open, focused, and axial codes were discussed with a second researcher to establish that the coding steps were logically deducible from the raw data.

## Results

### *Appealing to a homogenous in-group of the “true” people*

The first and most dominant communication strategy<sup>1</sup> salient in the direct communication of both Wilders and Trump is the strong emotional appeal to a homogenous

<sup>1</sup> The reference to “strategies” does not necessarily mean that all identified themes relate to intentional communication. Political actors may communicate their views for different reasons, and some messages may be more strategic than others.



in-group of the people (see Fig. 1). This in-group is constructed as an entity whose will should be the focal point of political decision-making, as illustrated by one of Trump's Tweets: "Every American will be treated equally, protected equally and honored equally." This also implies that the people as an in-group has one central will that can be represented by the politician: "I will be a president for ALL of our people." Similar in-group constructions were voiced by Wilders in the Netherlands: "Congratulations Britain, regaining national sovereignty! The Netherlands will follow in a few years. Power to the Dutch people."

Importantly, both politicians emphasized that "the people" should be in power and should decide on the future of their own country. As Trump described it: "This is a crossroads in the history of our civilization that will determine whether or not we the people reclaim control." In both the U.S. and the Netherlands, the politicians claimed to be part of the people's in-group, which is consolidated by the frequent use of "our country" or "we the people." These notions of in-group centrality also include a symbolic marker of identity, describing who is part of the homogenous in-group and who is or should be excluded. Such identity constructions can be illustrated by the following Tweet by Wilders: "Our money should no longer go to foreign people. It should be invested in our own people!" In a similar vein, Trump explicitly articulated a nativist perception of the people: "Nobody should be allowed to burn the American flag—if they do, there must be consequences—perhaps loss of citizenship or year in jail."

The most salient country-level difference in people centrality references concerns the components of the people's unity. In the U.S., the "American" people was defined in more general and national terms, whereas Wilders referred to a more specific group of citizens who are worse-off than other groups. Hence, the ordinary people as a threatened homogenous in-group on an economic and cultural level was more explicitly expressed in the Netherlands.

### *Attributing blame to political opponents*

Both Trump and Wilders emphasized that the homogenous in-group of the people was threatened severely by the unresponsive elites. The construction of this divide entailed a specific populist strategy of blaming the elites for causing the people's crisis. This can for example be illustrated by one of Wilders' Tweets: "Weak EU-leaders are politically responsible for terror attacks as they deny Islam as a central cause and more." The national government was explicitly blamed for allowing one of the greatest national threats to root: "Muslim terrorists at our airport. All thanks to the open borders of the VVD [the governmental party]."

In the U.S., Trump frequently attributed blame to Obamacare for the deprivation of "true" American citizens: "We have to repeal and replace #Obamacare! Look at what is doing to our people." Next to this, he blamed his political opponents for posing severe threats to the people. Attribution blame to the political order for the problems experienced by the ordinary people forms a central component of the populist and partisan communication strategy used by both Trump and Wilders. By assigning blame to the political elites, these political leaders created a positive perception of a *blameless* homogenous people. By scapegoating political opponents, and by



distancing themselves from these enemies, they forwarded themselves as messiahs who empowered the people to reclaim the people's country.

In the U.S., affective polarization was constructed as a societal divide between “ignorant” and “lying” Democrats versus “honest” and “real” Republicans (and the other way around). In the Netherlands, Wilders shaped a societal divide by pointing to the distance of the hardworking, honest and pure people he represented versus the backward, lying and self-interested people that the elites represented. Corresponding with the different political settings of the U.S. and the multiparty setting of the Netherlands, Trump mainly attributed blame to the opposing party, whereas Wilders scapegoated “corrupt” elites in a more diversified way. In that sense, Wilders' attributions of blame are more flexible and chameleonic, providing a pervasive frame to blame different actors at different levels of governance (i.e., the EU versus the national government).

As Trump became part of the establishment in the post-election period, we do see that attributing blame to the political elites and opposing partisans was more salient in the preelection than the post-election period. Trump adjusted his blame shifting strategy by attributing responsibility for *past* failures and by assigning blame to non-political elites, most saliently the so-called “Fake News” media.

### *Articulating distrust in the media*

The most salient institution blamed for spreading lies, corruption, and a distorted reality was the media. This was highly salient in the direct communication of Trump: “Very little pick-up by the dishonest media of incredible information provided by WikiLeaks. So dishonest! Rigged system!” Such anti-media perceptions strongly related to a constructed conspiracy, in which the media were blamed for residing with the other political candidate. Such anti-media constructions did not only shift blame to journalists for being dishonest or incorrect, they also articulated a populist divide between the “innocent” American voter and the “evil” and “corrupt” media who reside with the culpable political elites. Trump also used the perceived corruption of the mainstream media to justify his own self-communication via Twitter: “If the press would cover me accurately honorably, I would have far less reason to “tweet.” Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!” In the U.S., Trump's anti-media discourse intensified after Trump was elected.

In the Dutch context, the anti-media interpretations of Wilders mainly focused around the bias of the media, accused of spreading inaccurate information and favoring established political parties: “A lot of media try to damage me and the PVV. They hate us. Don't believe them.” The most salient difference between both countries is the *justification* of politicians' direct communication (or the lack thereof). Trump explicitly connected the corruption of the media to the necessity of his own social media strategy, whereas Wilders' discourse lacked such justifications. Moreover, Wilders still cited stories of some “trusted” mainstream media outlets that supported his issue position, whereas Trump was more likely to identify “the media” as a scapegoat for the rise of fake news.

The anti-media divides were also extrapolated to the existence of opposing camps in society: those people that follow the “lying” channels are regarded as ignorant



and ill-informed, whereas those that take the effort to resort to alternative or supporting outlets are seen as possessing more accurate information. Hereby, the in-group is seen as more intelligent and critical as the out-group of opposing partisans.

### *Highlighting a sense of urgency and the need for change*

Trump emphasized that in order to solve the problems experienced by the people, change was needed *now*: “This world has serious problems. We need serious leaders now.” This need for change highlights the urgency to reclaim a “home” for the people’s in-group which is lost because of the elites’ failed representation and the out-group threats posed by foreign elements: “Thank you Alabama! From now on, it’s going to be #AmericaFirst. Our goal is to bring back that wonderful phrase.”

In the Netherlands, Wilders used war rhetoric to emphasize the severity of Islamic threats, and to legitimize his hostile out-group sentiments: “Nice, Berlin, Stockholm, Cairo. Islam has declared war on us. And it’s going to get much, much worse.” Since the “war” rationale highlights a sense of crisis, extreme measures were needed: “Our population is being replaced. We urgently need tough measures. We have to close our borders now! No more!”

### *Excluding “dangerous” others*

Societal out-groups were seen as a cause for the people’s malaise. The right-wing populist strategy of excluding certain elements of the population from the in-group was most saliently expressed in Wilders’ direct communication. People who identify with Islamic beliefs were seen as the greatest threat to the nativist in-group: “In a few decades the Dutch will become a minority in their own country. The total Islamization is only a matter of time.” The theme of colonialization ties in with sentiments of urgency and threat: “We are being colonized. Our population is being replaced by people with norms and values that are not ours.” As illustrated by this quote, the distinction between “us” and “them” is cultural-symbolically marked by referring to the distinction between national and foreign norms and values. Wilders foregrounded the exclusion of societal out-groups as the only solution: “These Imams should pack their bags and go to another Islamic country.”

In the U.S., Trump blamed Clinton for allowing the threat posed by ISIS to develop itself further: “ISIS has infiltrated countries all over Europe by posing as refugees, and @HillaryClinton will allow it to happen.” Trump argued that to fight ISIS, strong measures were needed. Hillary Clinton was seen as being incapable to do so: “Hillary is too weak to lead on border security—no solutions, no ideas, no credibility.”

In terms of country-level differences, Trump’s exclusion mainly revolved around protecting the nation from the outside, whereas Wilders’ construction of the outside focused more on the exclusion of foreign elements that were already among the in-group of the native people, for example immigrants from Eastern European or asylum seekers that already lived among the Dutch people. This connects to Trump’s references to the comparison of the future situation of the U.S. to the developments already taking place in Europe.



## Study 2: the audience's populist discourse expressed on Facebook

To understand how the populist communication of Trump and Wilders resonate with the perceptions of the electorate, the second study explores the populist perceptions of the “ordinary” people addressed by populist actors. Do they engage in a similar populist discourse, or do they challenge populist actors?

### Method

#### *Data collection and sample*

An extensive qualitative content analysis of Facebook communities in the U.S. and the Netherlands was conducted. In both countries, the sample frame covered exactly the same period as Study 1. In the U.S., three Facebook communities were selected: one that provided a forum for Republican citizens to share their political perceptions, one similar community on conservative distrust and patriotism, and one with a less-clear partisan bias. To ensure the confidentiality and the privacy of individual contributors, the names of the sampled community pages are not provided here.

The same procedure was applied to the Dutch case. Again, we sampled three community pages. For each community, ten posts were selected (three at the start period of the sample frame, four in the middle, and three at the end). This number was chosen to reflect maximum variation in terms of the period and topics discussed. For each post, if available, the first ten replies were selected. To assess saturation, additional posts at all periods were compared with the established themes. The total three-level sample in the U.S. contained 3 communities, 32 posts, and 334 replies ( $N=369$ ). In the Netherlands, the sample contained 3 communities, 31 posts, and 254 replies ( $N=288$ ).

Theoretical saturation was assessed in a cyclic-iterative process of data collection, analyses, and reanalyses (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Specifically, for all three communities in both countries, we continued to search for like-minded alternative pages. A reanalysis of the additional community pages revealed that the themes by and large confirmed the ones established in the three communities reported in this paper. The differences in themes across communities were discussed with other researchers until agreement was achieved. This means that the themes presented in the results section were established after constant comparison with new data from similar community pages.

#### *Analyses*

Similar to the first study, the contents of analytic data in both countries were analyzed following the three subsequent coding phases of the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The concept-indicator model is presented in Fig. 2.



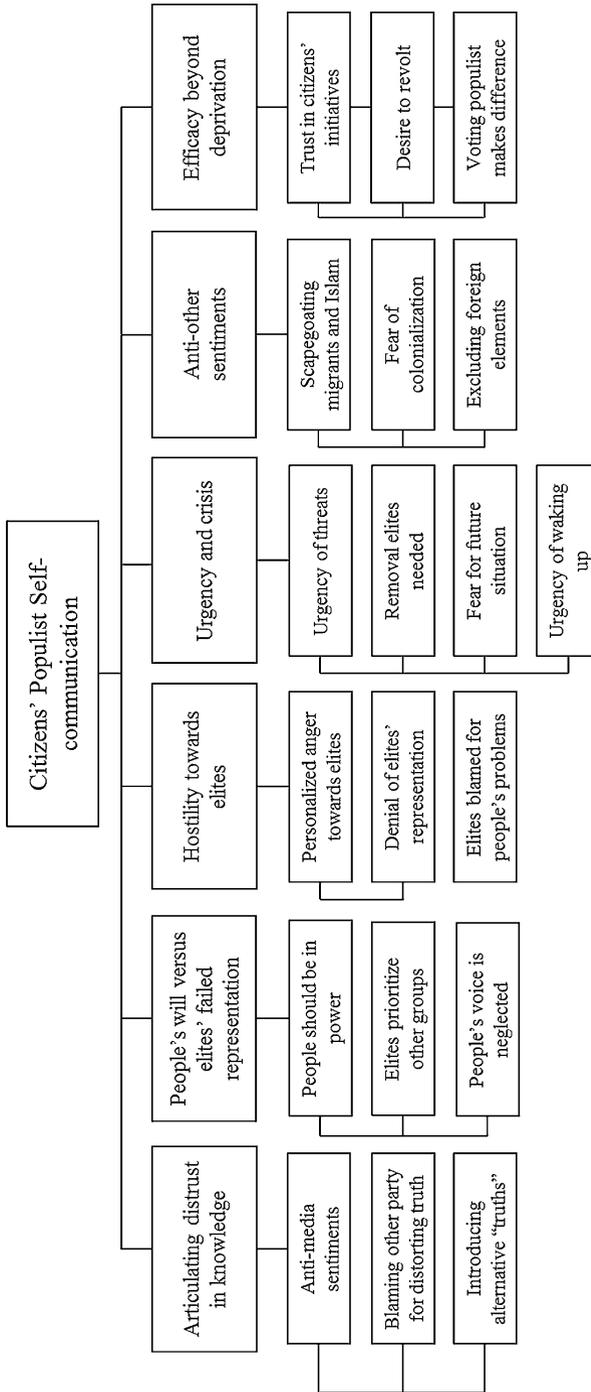


Fig. 2 Concept-indicator model of citizens' populist self-communications on Facebook in the U.S. (N = 369) and the Netherlands (N = 288)



## Results

### *Interpretation frame 1: articulating distrust in established knowledge and introducing alternative truths*

In the U.S., people articulated a clear sense of distrust in knowledge disseminated by established institutions. Partisan divides were mostly expressed by introducing alternative facts on the opposed party and its origins: “The Democrat party is still the party of discrimination. The Democrat party started and populated the Ku Klux Klan, murderers of blacks.” The Democrats were accused of denial and a *deliberate* distortion of historical facts: “The democrats have deliberately taken out major milestones of history from our education system. They don’t want people to know what they really stand for.” This presentation of an alternative truth also entailed the treatment recommendation that people should get their information from nonestablished alternative sources, as one community member in the U.S. argued: “Suggested reading: “Black Yellowdogs: The Most Dangerous Citizen Is Not Armed, But Uninformed” by Ben Kinchlow. Also read: The “Anti-Federalist papers” and the “Federalist papers. Caution!—Truth and facts can be frightening.”

In the Netherlands, distrust mostly revolved around the perception of false representation of ordinary people’s chances and power. Such misrepresentations of reality were frequently attributed to the mainstream media: “The media write that jobless people should take anything they can get. But how can you take anything if you are not even invited for an interview? Dutch people do not stand a chance.” The media were accused of lying, and the “real” truth was only known by the ordinary people: “It’s all lies in these newspapers. Our story is correct!” Other citizens not belonging to this in-group were accused of basing their decisions on lies and falsehoods.

This interpretation frame connects to affective polarization shaped by the audience. Society was divided in different camps, and people emotionally distinguished the hard-working and accurate in-group from a camp of profiting and lying others. The truth and truth-seeking were, however, referred to in different terms in the U.S. and the Netherlands. In the U.S., misinformation had a stronger partisan component, whereas the discourse around the truth in the Netherlands mainly revolved around the purity and honesty of the ordinary people versus the distorted reality spread by the media and other elitist actors.

### *Interpretation frame 2: the centrality of the people’s will and the elites’ failed representation*

Public opinion surrounding the elections in the U.S. and the Netherlands clearly reflected sentiments of the failed representation of the ordinary people’s will. In the U.S., citizens emphasized that the people *should* be able to decide on the candidate who best represents their needs: “It’s time for the Republican establishment



to get behind the candidate the people want. The Republican Party is the “We the People” party and the people are behind Donald Trump.” The people’s will was, however, perceived as being neglected by politicians, which resonated with severe perceptions of distrust: “These are the people Obama ignores. Barack Obama does not care about ordinary people! He only cares about terrorists and illegals!” As illustrated in this quote, the perceived failure of the elites to represent the people’s will resonated with the belief that the elites are self-interested and only respond to the needs of out-groups that do not belong to the people.

Similar perceptions of the people’s failed representation were voiced in the Netherlands. Here, the people felt let down by the elites, who were accused of not representing the people’s will and needs: “The people did not want to, but they just pushed through. Out of the European Union. Now!” Populist discourse was constructed by framing “the people” as a homogenous entity of hardworking citizens, whose efforts were not translated into well-deserved fruits of labor: “These disgusting traitors have all luxury, while we, the hardworking citizens that paid for it, do not have anything to eat and get kicked out of our homes.” In the Netherlands, the source of the people’s injustice and deprivation revolved around a perceived discrepancy in access to resources between the elites in their “ivory tower” and the deprived people on the streets. This sense of deprivation was less salient in the U.S. Here, the representation of the American people *in general* was at stake. This difference may be due to the nicheness of populist voters in the Netherlands compared to larger and more diverse group of Republican voters in the U.S.

### *Interpretation frame 3: emphasizing hostility toward elites*

Related to the elites’ failed representation, the electorate constructed the elites as the people’s enemy in *hostile* ways. In the U.S., hostile language was highly personalized, and mostly targeted at the former president Obama and his “failing” policies. Citizens for example described Obama as “traitor” “scumbag” “liar” “communist” “anti-Christ” “racist” or “Anti-American.” Some citizens actively denied him as part of the American people: “He is here illegally and therefore does not even come close to a president of this great nation. He is a traitor.” He was frequently accused of not protecting the safety of native Americans by residing with extremists: “Obama is more concerned with providing for illegals and Muslim extremists than he is for keeping America safe.”

Anti-elitist discourse in the Netherlands was less personalized, but equally hostile in tone: “These bunch of corrupt pigs who cannot fill their pockets enough and steal money from every country. The EU needs to go.” In the Dutch case, the electorate frequently lumped the elites together as a homogenous out-group of corrupt entities: “The cabinet is trying hard to help our country by destroying it with austerity measures.” Blame-shifting was central in people’s anti-elitist discourse. Specifically, the elites were accused of the problems experienced by the vulnerable native people: “Elderly people and chronically ill who are not able to work can be gassed if it’s up to this government. Pay taxes and die. This mess is created by our government.” The salient blame-shifting rationale entailed that elites in government were deemed



responsible for abandoning weaker groups in society to their fate by prioritizing their own interests.

*Interpretation frame 4: highlighting urgency in the midst of an extreme crisis*

The electorate's hostility toward the culpable elites was rooted in sentiments of a severe crisis that needed to be dealt with urgently. In the U.S., this crisis was cultivated by symbolically describing the country's situation as "disastrous" or "hell" or "alarming." In addition, the U.S. electorate articulated a strong sense of fear for the future situation of the country, stressing the urgency to avert the threat caused by the failing (previous) government: "This country will end in Hell under this Administration! Remove him at all cost. Wake up America."

The Dutch electorate also articulated a strong sense of an urgent crisis threatening the nation. Because of the severe threat posed by the elites' self-interests, Dutch citizens believed their country has been polluted severely: "Our country has been ruined completely and they are not doing anything to resolve it." *Because* of the supposed continuing influx of foreign elements, people believed that their in-group will eventually be alienated and dominated by the threatening other.

*Interpretation frame 5: venting anti-other sentiments*

Blame for the threatening crisis was not only shifted to the elites, societal out-groups were also scapegoated. In the U.S., this right-wing interpretation mainly revolved around excluding Muslims in very hostile ways. People justified the exclusion on the perceived threat Islam poses on safety: "Islam is a cancer, an ideology of evil run by animals, not a religion, that must be eradicated before it spreads and kills the body, Their "God" is Satan." Some citizens referred to ISIS as a group of dangerous Muslims: "It is time for this nation to put a stop to ISIS. This includes destroying the training camps in our country and throughout the world." Other citizens negatively stereotyped *all* Muslims as an evil out-group: "Unfortunately, 7 years later, the liberals forgot about this horrible day. They elected a Muslim, who has set about destroying our once wonderful country."

Exclusionist sentiments in the Netherlands reached beyond articulating hostility toward the Islam. Just like the elites were frequently lumped together as one enemy, the boundary between "us" and "them" was constructed by excluding *all* foreign elements from the native in-group: "Go back to your own country. Lick the ass of the assholes that destroy our country." Beyond constructing dangerous others as a threat to the safety and prosperity of the people, the Dutch electorate expressed xenophobic sentiments: non-native people were dehumanized and perceived as a pollution to the nation's purity: "Their houses will need to be disinfected, but we will do this with pleasure."

*Interpretation frame 6: efficacy beyond deprivation*

Although both the U.S. and Dutch electorates articulated a strong sense of crisis and urgency, they did not always envision their people as a powerless in-group.



Indeed, let down by the failing elites and the dangers posed by “evil” societal outgroups, the U.S. citizens felt confident that they were able to protect themselves when needed: “Damn right I’m going to buy as many guns as I can afford to protect me and mine to hell with the government.” Moreover, uniting the people in (online) platforms was seen as a way to stop the corrupt government: “No we just need the right people to organize a united American People! Please help build the platform for our conservative Americans to wield their true power against the corrupt dictatorship.”

In the Netherlands, the electorate expressed a desire to *revolt* against the corrupt elites. People did thus not see themselves as powerless victims, but as empowered citizens who could protest to make their silences voices heard: “I assume that, for once, we will rise up for everything that is wrong in this country? I am in!” The targeted protests were frequently very detailed, including calls for protest with a specific aim, location, and time: “Then and there. I will be in The Hague then. Just like the old days, the activist strikes again. This time, I fight for safety on our streets, against poverty, and against failures in health care.” Beyond participating in protest, voting against the government and the European Union was seen as a way to make a change for the good: “We should not vote for pro-European parties. Next time, we should make the right decisions and send them back home.” Here, we can identify a crucial divergence between the discourse communicated by Wilders and Trump and their electorates: the politicians referred to the people as victimized and powerless, whereas the people actually perceived they had the agency to change the corrupt structure by forming a unity. In the U.S., the people’s solutions were individualistic, whereas Dutch public opinion points to a stronger sense of homogeneity of the ordinary people, who can form a unity to protest *together* to avert the threat they are facing.

Although populist and radical right-wing issue positions were shared, accepted, and reinforced in most comments, some people resisted the dominant populist frame in their responses to posts. Here, it may be useful to provide an indicator of the relative pro-attitudinal versus counter-attitudinal engagement. Specifically, only 9.9% of all content was challenged. In that sense, it can be concluded that the online communities are relatively one-sided, and mostly offer a space for likeminded citizens to communicate their populist discourse.

## Discussion

The 2016 U.S. elections sparked a fierce debate all over the globe. The election of Trump as the 45th president of the U.S. has for example been interpreted in the light of the surge of populism (e.g., Judis 2016). However, the U.S. elections should not be interpreted as a unique political phenomenon, as it resonates with wider political and societal mechanisms of affective polarization, political cynicism, populism, and right-wing exclusionism. Specifically, the construction of the central societal divide between the “good” people and the “evil” elites in Trump’s discourse resonates with the populist discourse that has been influential in Europe for multiple decades (e.g., Mudde 2004; Rooduijn et al. 2014). Yet, a comparative



and qualitative analysis of such discourse in Europe and the U.S. is lacking, whereas we would expect that differing electoral systems can result in different populist expressions. Against this backdrop, this paper aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of how partisan and populist divides were shaped at election times in the U.S. and the Netherlands, both reflected in the self-communication of politicians and the interpretations of the electorate.

Responding to a growing body of research claiming that politicians' self-communication via their own social media channels has become increasingly more influential (e.g., Engesser et al. 2017a, b), this study indicates that both politicians constructed populist discourse by emphasizing the Manichean opposition between the "good" people versus the "corrupt" elites. In the light of the premises of social identity theory, "the people" as an in-group thus corresponded to different conceptions of the self, depending on the social context of the boundary construction (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986). This links up to the "flexibility" of populist discourse and the multifaceted nature of the people concept in different constructions of populism (e.g., Mazzoleni et al. 2003). Important differences between the discourse of both politician's relate to their conceptions of "the people." In the Netherlands, Wilders addressed a "silenced majority" of hardworking citizens that were relatively deprived. In the U.S., Trump referred to a more general conception of the American people. This can be connected to differences between the Dutch and U.S. political sphere. Trump appeals to a more diversified electorate, whereas Wilders addresses a more specific audience of populist voters in a multiparty system. These contextual differences also relate to the conception of the elitist other scapegoated in populist discourse. As also demonstrated by van Kessel and Castelein (2006), Wilders assigns blame to different elites under different circumstances (the banks, the EU, the prime minister). Trump, however, became part of the establishment in the post-election period and had to adjust his blame-shifting strategy accordingly by assigning blame to the other party, the "Fake News Media," and the failures of the previous government.

In the next step, this paper explored the construction of partisan and populist discourse among the electorate. Extending literature that has argued that U.S. society is highly divided along partisan lines (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012), we found that citizens who expressed themselves on conservative Facebook communities also expressed hostile *populist* sentiments, mainly targeted at the elites and Islam. Next to this, U.S. citizens expressed positive sentiments toward fellow partisans and hostile sentiments toward partisans of the other party. Congruent with extant literature on affective polarization, the U.S. electorate symbolically marked the boundary between their preferred in-group and the disliked out-group by attributing negative qualities to the Democrats. Yet, affective polarization works differently in the Dutch multiparty system. Here, the divides are not constructed along partisan lines, but rather as experienced (des)identification with the deprived, unrepresented voters. Specifically, the group of voters that feels part of the native and hard-working ordinary people marks an emotional boundary between their in-group and parts of the electorate that allegedly accept the corruption of the elites, or profits from national resources without giving anything in return. The other pole of the electorate experiences a similar emotional distance to populist



voters. They are seen as misinformed, ignorant, and accused of the unjustified exclusion of parts of the population.

These findings indicate that the online context provided a stage for the construction of populist and partisan discourse at election times. By co-constructing membership to an imagined community of the blameless people with likeminded citizens on Facebook, citizens were enabled to constantly compare and reassure their positive self-concept to threatening others excluded from the in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). The technological affordances of asynchronous communication, pervasive community formation, and perceived anonymity provided a context for online disinhibition (e.g., Suler 2004). On social media, people are empowered to share uncivil sentiments and can experience belonging to a community of “ordinary citizens” that they may not know personally. Independent of space and time, the in-group of the ordinary people central to populism comes into being as a real community with real-life political consequences. Moreover, the online context fueled a sense of empowerment among citizens, who felt that they had the agency to change the power structures that opposed their will.

An important theoretical contribution of this study concerns the identification of political parallelisms between politicians’ self-communication and citizens’ online discourse—which provides a better understanding of the influence of social media on the electorate. The strong resonance of populist politicians’ self-communication with sentiments felt among their electorates may be an important factor explaining the success and popularity of populist movements throughout the globe. Traditional media frequently share the online communication of Trump and Wilders, meaning that these politicians exert control over their messages while still being covered by the elites they oppose. In contrast to the existing research on online populism, which mainly focused on either the supply-side or demand-side (e.g., Engesser et al. 2017b; van Kessel and Castelein 2006), this research demonstrates that the expression of online populism by political actors resonates with the perceptions of citizens, but also that citizens have more trust in their influence than claimed by populist actors. Moreover, the different electoral systems in the U.S. and the Netherlands shape different polarized divides in society. In the Netherlands, the divide between the ordinary people and the others is more central, whereas identification along partisan lines is more salient in the U.S.

The sense of urgency disseminated via Trump’s and Wilders’ accounts can promote political engagement. The electorate was mobilized to circumvent the threatening elites and to vote for the populist challenger in order to avert the in-group threat. Although populist actors may claim that “the people” are powerless and silenced in politics and society, citizens that communicated their sentiments online actually experienced the agency to change the political reality they lived in. This sense of empowerment was more individualistic in the U.S. and more collective in the Netherlands.

The focus on radical right-wing leaders enables us to disentangle populism’s thin-core ideology from its host ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Both politicians emphasized the populist divide between the people and the elites, and additionally emphasized the superiority of the native people while excluding immigrants and refugees. The discourses pertaining to populism and the host ideologies



can, however, be integrated by the centrality of blame-shifting rhetoric: the cultivation of the ordinary people as an honest in-group was connected to the identification of salient scapegoats on a vertical and horizontal level.

This study has some limitations. First and foremost, although the qualitative nature of the findings offers in-depth insights into how populist and partisan divides are constructed by politicians and citizens, they cannot be generalized to all politicians' self-communication or public opinion. The analyses zoomed in on two very specific radical right-wing politicians and a specific group of citizens. Still, in an era of increasingly fragmented media, selective exposure, congruency biases, and "filter bubbles," it is important to understand how specific issue publics reconstruct reality on the specific media platforms they select. Moreover, the distinction between core ideas of populism and right-wing host ideologies allows for a more nuanced comparison to other countries. Hence, the anti-elitist discourse may also apply to left-wing populism, whereas the nativist and authoritarian discourse may only be transferable to other cases of right-wing populism.

Another limitation concerns the focus on two specific social media: Facebook and Twitter. Citizens' communication on Twitter may have resulted in different findings compared to their use of Facebook. However, Twitter is mainly associated with politicians' self-communication (e.g., Engesser et al. 2017b), whereas Facebook is better suited to understand the electorate's discourse. Future research may investigate what role different platforms may play in shaping populist discourse. A related recommendation for future research is to provide more insights into the *salience* of polarized and populist discourse on various platforms. This qualitative research provides an important first step in understanding the themes of such discourse, but further research is needed in order to understand how dominant they are.

Despite these shortcomings, this study has provided important insights into how populist discourse is constructed surrounding the elections in the U.S. and the Netherlands. In the alleged global rise of populist sentiments, these findings indicate that social media may not only provide a platform for politicians to share their populist discontent, but ordinary citizens are also enabled to negotiate the boundary between "their" innocent people and the culpable others.

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