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On behalf of the people?

Perceptions, usage and effects of references to the people in political communication

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INTRODUCTION

Communication between politicians and the people is a crucial part of the democratic process. Politicians need to know the will of the people in order to act as their representatives, and people need to know that their elected representatives are working on their behalf and with their interests in mind. In order for this to be case, there need to be open and transparent lines of communication between the two sides.

It is through the media that the greater part of this communication takes place. And it is through the media that the people encounter their (potential) representatives. The media are the main channel of interaction between politicians and the people, the central mechanism for facilitating communication. The importance of communication in the political context is its potential to contribute to not only informed citizenship but also to connect citizens more closely to the political process. Politicians, through the way they communicate with the people, can suggest and facilitate a feeling of connection: their connection to the people and the people's connection to politics. Hence, the opportunity to communicate in a more interactive and personal way is not restricted to citizens, but is crucial for politicians, as well (Kruikemeier, 2014). This feeling of connection may depend as much on the content, as the context of the communication taking place. In addition to *where* the communication is taking place, it is also *what* is being said and *how* it is being said that plays a role in this perceived connection. Here, references to the people take center stage.

This dissertation examines the communicative construction of 'the people', politicians' perceptions of and references to the people, and how these are reflected in the media. Furthermore, this dissertation links these theories and findings to potential democratic implications and tests the effects of communication strategies involving people-centrism.

The role of populism in political communication

When talking about the concept of the people in political communication, populism will almost inevitably be part of the discussion. Of populism, Taggart (2004) said that "when it appears, [it] does so with a spectacular quality" (p.270). The surge of populism – or populist rhetoric, at least – has transformed the political landscape over the past two decades. At a rally in May of 2016, Donald Trump proclaimed that "the only important thing is the unification of *the people* – because the others don't mean anything." On the other side of the political spectrum, and almost exactly 20 years earlier, Tony Blair, on the verge of a landslide election victory said: "We are back

as the people's party and that's why the people are coming back to us". Far removed from each other (in time but also in political ideology), these two examples illustrate the unshifting core of populism: a focus on the ordinary people. The communicative construction of the people includes appeals to the people, talking about the people, putting the people and their opinions first, or symbolically talking about a 'we' and an 'us'. It constitutes the more or less undisputed core of populist communication.

Before we can start dissecting the role populist rhetoric has played, we have to first address what is meant by populism in the first place. Populism, in and of itself, is a highly contentious concept that does not take an overarching form but rather presents itself in different types that, in turn, overlap in theory and practice (Mudde, 2000). Historically, we can distinguish three successive waves of populism: agrarian populism, where peasants were considered the source of morality, opposing the urban elites and capitalism (Mudde, 2000); Latin American populism, marked by charismatic, nationalist leaders who claimed to govern as one of the people and on behalf of them, working for economic growth and moderate redistribution (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2000); and political populism (Mudde, 2000), which mobilizes against traditional politics which it accuses of ignoring the real wishes of the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2005). This goes to show that populism is by no means a new phenomenon. What is persistent in the history and theories of populism is that the people are a central tenet – and especially so in populist communication.

These main three waves of populism provide the rough contours of another central element of populism: opposed to the ordinary people is a common enemy. Tied to the central populist idea of a rift between the 'ordinary people' and the 'elite', is the notion that politics (as run by the political elite who is out of touch with the needs of the ordinary people) has escaped the control of the people and that this has to be restored (Kriesi, 2014). This is where people-centrism comes into play. Politicians can use references to the people to position themselves within that group and suggest themselves as the best, or only possible, representative of that group.

It is with a focus on the 'us', the people, and specifically references to those people, that this dissertation aims to answer the questions of (1) Who are the people on whose behalf politicians speak? (2) What form do these appeals take in (social) media?, and (3) How are these appeals interpreted by the citizens?

Why (references to) the people matter

References to the people are a political tool that, as with all other tools, serves a concrete purpose. This dissertation argues that this purpose is one that comes with great democratic implications. Politicians are known to make references to the people and public opinion as evidence to demonstrate their responsiveness to the people's demands (Dalton, 2013) and to back-up their claims that they represent the people's will (Pitkin, 1967). References to the people thus serve as an illustration of understanding and an acknowledgement of the responsibility to act in the best interests of the referenced people.

Communication containing elements of populist rhetoric in the way it addresses the people has been ever present over the past two decades. The effectiveness of people-centrism in political campaigns has been proven not only by the frequently mentioned cases of the rise of the PVV in the Netherlands, the vote for Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US, but also by less obvious examples of David Cameron in the UK and Joe Biden in the US. From a political communication point of view, these examples also demonstrate an important shift: from a focus on the ideology of populism, to a focus on the communicative construction and elements of populist rhetoric (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann & Stanyer, 2018), unbound by political alignment. The presence of references to the people across the political spectrum is perhaps most clearly illustrated within one of the most polarized political contexts: "We, the American people, are the government. It's us!", Joe Biden remarked in a speech just a few months ago, while Donald Trump, in his inaugural speech, attacked the establishment for "protecting itself, not the people of this country" and vowed that "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer."

By identifying with the people and addressing them directly, populist communication is used to create trust by positioning the political leader within the people and thus giving some of the power back to the constituents (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). In a way, populist rhetoric claims that its rhetorician is the only true representative of the people because (s) he is *part* of the people. Here is how (and why): Populism's interpretation of the people and the common citizen is through empty signifiers such as 'real' and 'ordinary'. In political discourse, we sometimes also see romanticized, nostalgic, geographical placeholders for the people, such as 'the American heartland' or 'Middle England', symbolizing the mythical 'ordinariness' of the people (Taggart, 2004). The people can therefore be used as a *lingua franca*,

sufficiently flexible to be conveniently utilized in practically any sort of rhetoric and without any apparent consideration or caution (Canovan, 1984). This means references to the people can be both vague and yet seemingly inclusive, allowing politicians to convincingly make representative claims about the people, while avoiding specifics about who exactly those people are (and who they are not).

However, references to the people can also take a pluralist form, where everyone is part of the people. Politicians may not use vague identifiers that paint the people as a homogenous unit, but rather imply or specifically state that everyone, despite their differences and unique situations, is part of the whole of the people, including the politicians themselves (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Mackie & Queller, 2000). The effect is the same: the people feel heard and understood as part of a fabricated, politicized 'in-group' of which the politician is a part.

References to the people and representative claims

At the core of the populist idea there is a rift between the people and political power. Populist leaders often recognize this dilemma and attempt to offer a closer link between the citizens and the political decision-making process, which is supposed to be closely linked to the people's will (Kriesi, 2014). Politicians communicate this link by referencing the people in an inclusive manner and positioning themselves within the people. Here, public opinion can serve as a guiding framework for political communication, enabling the politicians to not only talk about what is important to the people, but also act as their direct spokesperson and representative. This contributes to the personalization of power, which is seen as the reaction of populist leaders to 'politics as usual' (Canovan, 1999).

If public opinion is used as a benchmark for identifying issues important to the public, then referencing those issues and that public in their communication can be a useful political strategy for politicians to identify themselves as the only true representative of that public: supporting matters that citizens identify as their own can give politicians' strategic advantages when it comes time for voters to pick a representative (Petrocik, 1996). But democratically speaking, this has far greater reach than just on the campaign trail. Through these references to the people and the implied political representation that comes with these references, there is a suggested allocation of power, in which the political decision-making shifts back from the politicians to the electorate (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). In

other words, if politicians speak about the people, they are communicating a responsiveness to those people that is assumed to be reflected in policy. It is through the use of references to (perceptions of) the people that politicians demonstrate their responsiveness to the people's demands (Dalton, 2013) and can thus back-up their claims that they indeed represent the people's will (Pitkin, 1967). This is used as proof of the bottom-up link between the voters and politicians, and the implications may reach far beyond mere effectiveness and the persuasive qualities of political communication into questions of political trust and political satisfaction.

Politicians and people are inextricably linked in the scheme of political communication and representation. In addressing the people directly, and suggesting identification with them, references to the people elicit trust by allocating some power back to the constituents and treating them as equal to their representatives, taking their views into account and acting on their behalf, rather than deciding for them (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). The construction of a popular identity out of a variety of democratic demands (and calling this the popular identity of the people) enables politicians to identify with the masses and act on the behalf of the many. And communicating a responsiveness to the people and their preferences is an important driver of democratic satisfaction. One study shows, for example, that people's evaluation of democracy is based on their feelings of being fairly represented rather than on their evaluations of politicians' accountability (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). From a communication perspective, this is an important starting point for research. While there are studies that investigate the need for politicians to be responsive to the people (see Page & Sapiro, 1983; Hakhverdian, 2010), there are few that examine how this responsiveness is communicated and whether different ways of communicating it facilitate different perceptions of it. Appeals to the people (and speaking on their behalf) originate in public opinion and political representation literature, which argues that public opinion can be viewed as people's input on political processes (Abts & Rummens, 2007). This reflects the idea of collective correspondence in political representation, which assumes that the parliament as a whole represents the (opinions and needs of the) electorate as a whole (Dalton, 2013). Accordingly, references to the people are at the core of politicians' legitimacy and a key element in making claims of representation. What is novel in the approach taken by this dissertation is the empirical link between references to the people as a

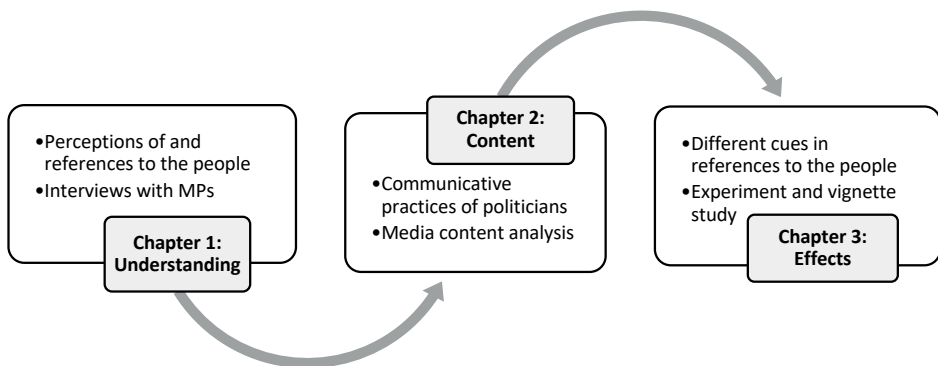
communication strategy and the idea of representation (1) as it is understood by politicians themselves in a wider political context, (2) how it is manifested in (social) media, and (3) how it is perceived on the side of the receiver.

Outline of the dissertation

The outlined above leads to three research questions that form the framework of this dissertation. The chapters of the dissertation were written as individual articles and can be read as stand-alone papers. In all three of its chapters, the dissertation addresses the topic of references to the people in political communication, each with a unique focus on one of three main elements highlighted in Figure 1.1.

The dissertation begins at the source of the communication, developing an understanding of the term 'the people', and moves through elements of content and effects in a way that allows the chapters to build on each other. The first element addressed in the dissertation is politicians' perceptions of the term 'the people'. As the dissertation relies on the assumption that references to the people are, to a considerable degree, strategic acts, it makes sense to start with those employing that strategy. Hence, the first chapter reaches an understanding of how references to the people are perceived and used by politicians.

Figure 1.1: Outline of the dissertation



The dissertation then proceeds to examine the communication output of politicians and takes a closer look at the content of those communications, assessing in what way the people are referenced across three communication platforms. This reveals how politicians' perceptions of and references to the people are manifested in their communication to the people, i.e., the

information they direct to people, hoping to influence their opinions and evaluations. Lastly, the dissertation moves to investigate how those on the receiving end of the communication (i.e., the people) are affected by those forms of references. This last chapter looks closely at the ties between different ways of referencing the people, as established in the previous chapters, and examines how people are affected by them. Because people-centric communication has been shown to be persuasive, it is important to examine the way in which different forms of references to the people affect perceptions of representation – a factor closely related to democratic satisfaction. Below, the rationale for, and content of, each chapter is addressed in more detail:

Chapter 1. The first study of the dissertation focuses on politicians' understanding of and perspectives on the use of references to the people. It asks *how politicians in general obtain their perceptions of 'the people' and the people's will and opinions, and how this translates into the communications efforts of those politicians.* While past studies have focused on the content and effect of MPs' political communication (see Rooduijn, De Lange & Van der Brug, 2014; Zulianello, Albertini & Ceccobelli, 2018), the understanding that politicians themselves have about the people (and how it affects their representative role) remains largely unexplored. This first chapter investigates the processes through which they understand who the people are, how the people's needs are assessed, and how they (the MPs) translate this information into their communication strategies. By going to the source of political communication – the communicators themselves – this study does not assume a unanimous understanding and usage of the term 'the people' but rather investigates how politicians from a diverse sample of parties think about, understand and use this term in their communication with the public.

Chapter 2. In order for politicians to communicate with the public (and make references to them), they rely on communication platforms. The second study of the dissertation focuses on how the perceptions about the people (chapter one) translate into the communicative practices of politicians, i.e., how politicians communicate about the people or other actors. Research on communication content is not new. Studies have examined how political communication is adapted to fit a media logic (Altheide, 2004; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2014), looked at the relationship between communication content in parliament and the media (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014), and at the effects of unmediated, direct and

personalized communication between citizens and politicians in social media (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Kruikeimeier, 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, little attention has been paid to the way in which references to the people occur when politicians are speaking in parliament or across more than one platform (see Kang, Fowler, Franz, & Ridout, 2018; Kruikeimeier, Gattermann & Vliegenthart, 2017). Therefore, the second study contributes to research on *how politicians across the ideological spectrum reference the people in the parliamentary setting, in news media and on social media*. This serves as a look into the practical use of references to the people and of the differences in usage across various communication platforms.

Chapter 3. The third study of the dissertation provides insights into the conditionality of the effects of different types of references to the people. We know from previous research that populist communication strategies can affect people's political attitudes (e.g., Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2016; Rooduijn, van der Brug, de Lange & Parlevliet, 2017). Focusing on the relationship between references to the people and feelings of representation, this chapter adds to the literature by examining how different types of (advocative and oppositional) references to the people, as used by politicians across ideological boundaries, affect people's perceptions of being represented. Here, theories of representation are combined with those of people-centrism in communication in order to test the effect of different cues in references to the people on citizens' perceptions of representation. Specifically, the chapter examines the effectiveness of certain ways of referencing the people (as observed in chapter two) and the effectiveness of those cues in eliciting feelings of being represented. It therefore asks *how different types of references to the people, as used by politicians across ideological boundaries, affect people's perceptions of being represented*. In addition to examining various cues in references to the people, the study also investigates the role party-preferences play in this relationship.

In a concluding chapter, I elaborate on the wider theoretical and political implications of the three studies.

Research design

Context of the Dissertation. All data used for the analyses in this dissertation were collected between 2017 and 2021 in the Netherlands. The multi-party system of the Netherlands provides diverse sources for comprehending politicians' understanding of the people, as well as for a nuanced look at party-preferences. At the time of the dissertation, the Dutch parliament was made up of 13 parties, including an established right-wing populist party (PVV) that was the third largest party, with 19 seats in parliament. A new right-wing populist party (FvD) also celebrated electoral success in that time, often near the top of opinion polls and eventually claiming two seats in parliament, while the left-wing populist party (SP) retained a considerable presence with 14 seats. As this dissertation specifically looks at populist communication across the ideological spectrum, the merits of the Dutch political scene are that, in addition to having key players in the populist arena, it provides an array of new and established parties that range from Christian and conservative to liberal and social-democratic. The Dutch political context is also one where populism has thrived over the past decades. Populist parties, specifically right-wing populist parties, have ridden the wave created by the electoral success of List Pim Fortuyn in 2002, resulting in right-wing populist policies retaining a central spot in the country's political arena. Given the dissertation's premise that (elements of) populist rhetoric is not confined to populist parties, this history of populism, combined with the context of a multi-party system, allows for elaborate comparisons across the political system. The media landscape in the Netherlands also provides an ideal context for this research, as newspapers are still widely read and politicians are largely active on social media.

Data. The data-collection and analysis for this dissertation relies on a multi-method approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data for the first chapter were collected through qualitative interviews. Twenty-three members of the Dutch parliament, representing seven of the 13 parties in parliament at the time, were interviewed in person between May and September 2018. Based on these interviews, I draw conclusions about politicians' perceptions of the people and how they use this understanding in their communication strategies.

The data for chapter 2 consist of newspaper articles from five major Dutch newspapers (*Algemeen Dagblad*, *Trouw*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant*), parliamentary data, and social media posts (Twitter and Facebook) that explicitly reference the people in their content. Articles

(n=494), speeches (n=440) and social media posts (n=173) were coded by two coders to provide a comprehensive content analysis of how politicians use references to the people across these different platforms.

In order to assess what effects these different references to the people have on their (the people's) perception of being represented, an online survey-embedded experiment and vignette study were conducted. The data were collected by a research company (n=1043). I draw on this data to examine if (and how) populist and non-populist cues in references to the people affect citizens' evaluations of the communicating politicians as an adequate representative of the people.

Key contributions

The key contributions of this dissertation to the field of (populist) political communication that I wish to highlight are two-fold. Firstly, zooming in on the sender side, it approaches a key element of populist communication as independent from populist policy and populist parties and aims to expose how this communicative element – namely references to the people – is perceived and used by politicians across the board. Rather than taking for granted what is meant by 'the people', a widely agreed-upon marker and minimal defining element of populist communication, this dissertation constructs an understanding of this term from the viewpoint of all politicians who might use it and does not confine it to the populist arena. The first study, for example, finds that all politicians (regardless of their political alignment) agree that the term 'the people' includes everyone. However, they have differing opinions on how useful this categorization is. Some do not find the term useful and consider it exclusionary, as it disregards diversity in society and ignores differing opinions and needs within the group of 'the people'. Other politicians do find it a useful term, specifically when communicating their concern for the 'ordinary people', the majority of the citizens who are the 'silent engine' of the country and need politicians to make good decisions for them, unlike those who can take care of themselves (i.e., elites). This is confirmed by the communication output of politicians (chapter two), where politicians' references to the people include attributions of loyalty, virtuousness, and a dedication to hard work, and these loyal, virtuous and hard-working people are put in opposition with elite politicians who do not appreciate their needs. Whether they found it useful or not, all politicians stressed the importance of speaking to the people in a relatable way – in a way that positions the politicians within the people and communicates their belonging to the people. Overall, this is a key element in uncovering that

politicians (across the board) are using references to the people in a way that is not populist in nature but is rather intended to demonstrate their responsiveness to the people in a personalized and authentic way. This is also echoed in the finding that references to the people are most commonly utilized on social media (as opposed to other media platforms), where politicians have direct reach and access to the people (chapter 2). Moreover, this is the case for politicians across the board, with no differences in the use of references to the people between populist and non-populist politicians. Thus, instead of focusing on how populist politicians think about and use populist communication, the studies in this dissertation look at a core element of populist rhetoric and examine its use by politicians across the board, uncovering the way people-centric elements of communication are positioned within political communication as a whole.

Secondly, this dissertation tests what the above means on the side of the receiver. Rather than isolating populist communication and testing its effects on emotions, attitudes, cognitions and behaviors, as other studies have done, this dissertation juxtaposes populist and non-populist communication elements and examines how these affect a feeling close to the democratic core: people's evaluations of politicians as an adequate representative of their needs. The third chapter extends what previous studies on the effectiveness of populist communication have found and confirms that populist cues in references to the people, those found throughout the communication output of politicians in chapter two, are most effective in eliciting higher levels of perceived representation than cues that are pluralist in nature. This not only adds to the literature of the persuasiveness of populist (cues in) communication but emphasizes the strength of these communicative elements to sway even one of the most complex perceptions of political satisfaction. Combining the findings of more personalized communication that politicians describe in chapter one with the specific forms this personalized communication takes (as outlined in chapter two), this last chapter uncovers the effectiveness of these communication strategies and the potential impact they have on the core of perceptions of a functioning democracy.