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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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CHAPTER 2

Appeals to the people: A content analysis of references to the people in traditional media, social media and the parliament

Abstract

Political representation lies at the heart of representative democracy. In order to signal their connection to the people they are representing, politicians often speak on the people's behalf. This study focuses on how politicians refer to the people and how this varies across three main platforms of communication available to them: news media, social media and the parliament. Through an in-depth content analysis of news articles, politicians' social media posts and parliamentary speeches and debates (N=1668), we examine how Dutch politicians address the people in terms of 'advocacy' for the people and 'opposition' to other actors; which politicians most commonly refer to the people; which communication platforms are predominantly used for this, and whether the examined references to the people vary across time. We find that references to the people did not differ between election and non-election years. Yet, party variables and communication platform both play important roles: references to the people manifest themselves more frequently within social media and in the communication of politicians from parties on the left as well as those scoring higher on the populism scale. We also find that there is little variation in advocative references to the people, while communication that includes oppositional references to the people is more prominent among populist actors and those positioned on the political left.

Introduction

Political representation is an inherent feature of democracy. While politicians act independently, they are trusted to do so in a way that is best for the people they represent. In order to demonstrate their responsiveness to the electorate, politicians often reference the people. They use appeals to the people as a communicative construction of trust and closeness to their constituents (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). Some argue that those references are deliberately vague (Taggart, 2004), acting as empty signifiers of an ambiguous mass so that everyone can feel addressed (Laclau, 2005; Mény & Surel, 2002).

Often, people-centric communication is equated to populist communication because references to the people are argued to be the minimal defining element of populism (de Vreese et al., 2018). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) define 'thin' populism as a political communication style that merely refers to the people (while 'thick' populism adds the element of exclusivity and anti-elitism). References to the people are commonly associated with populism, where the mere mentions of the people can be considered fragmented populism (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). We use these theories as a starting point in our conceptualization of the relationship between appeals to the people and populism. Nevertheless, this is not a communication strategy reserved for populist actors. Studies of populist communication styles also include politicians' references to the people across the political spectrum (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Roodujin, 2014). Chapter one has shown that because politicians from all parties use references to the people and public opinion - a key component of populist communication - in their communication strategies, 'normal' political communication might appear populist. These references are originally rooted in theories of public opinion and representation where this communicative strategy is used for its effectiveness in winning over voters and shaping audiences' perceptions: it serves as a crucial tool for persuasion. This has shown to be an especially powerful tactic in election times because it prompts support from a wide part of the population (Bos et al., 2013). Therefore, it is worthwhile to further explore how manifestations of people-centric communication, such as references to the people, are utilized by politicians.

In order for politicians to be persuasive and voice their opinions to the people, these messages have to be mediated through available communication platforms. These platforms include the traditional media, social media, and

parliamentary speeches and debates (which are nowadays easily accessible for the ordinary voter online). Previous studies have looked at the way political communication is adapted to fit a media logic (Altheide, 2004; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2014), at the relationship between what politicians discuss in parliament and what is reported in the media (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014), and at the way social media restructured political power by providing the possibility of unmediated, direct and personalized communication between citizens and politicians (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Engesser, et al., 2017a; Golbeck et al., 2010; Kruikemeier, 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). While early studies focused on traditional media, and later ones on social media, the way in which references to the people take form in parliamentary debates and speeches has so far received little attention. There are also only very few studies that look at more than one platform (see Kang et al., 2018; Kruikemeier, Gattermann & Vliegenthart, 2017) or take into consideration the differences between election years and non-election years. We know from previous research that has looked into context-dependency of populist communication, that different platforms influence populist communication differently (Cranmer, 2011) and that populist communication is not restricted to populist parties (Cranmer, 2011; Ernst, Engesser, Esser, 2017). What we are contributing to the literature is to single out appeals to the people as a communicative strategy, rather than to look at it only within populist communication, and compare the use of this across media platforms. The aim of this paper is to provide novel insights into how politicians refer to the people, who refers most commonly to them, when those references vary, and which communication platforms are predominantly used for this.

Overall Research Question: How are politicians' references to the people reflected in the parliamentary setting, the news media and on social media?

We use the Dutch case as the context for this study. Because it is a multi-party system, it provides diversity in the make-up of politicians and allows for the comparison between a greater range of party-level variables than, for example, a two-party system would. Through a three-folded content analysis of Dutch parliamentary (i.e., parliamentary speeches and debates), traditional media (i.e., related political media coverage by five major national newspapers) and social media (i.e., politicians' Twitter and Facebook accounts) data, we investigate when and how political elites communicate about the people.

Theoretical Framework

Our starting point for this study is politicians' references to the people. Appeals to the people and speaking on their behalf originates in public opinion and political representation literature, as public opinion can be viewed as people's input on political processes (Abts & Rummens, 2007). These appeals also signal a responsiveness to the people and their input, communicating an allocation power that goes back to the constituents (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). This reflects the idea of collective correspondence in political representation, which assumes that the parliament as a whole represents the electorate (and their opinions and needs) as a whole (Dalton, 2013). Accordingly, references to the people are at the core of politicians' legitimacy and therewith are by no means a new phenomenon.

More recently, this communication style has re-surfaced within populist communication, where the communicative construction of the people is "at the very core, the minimal defining element" (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 427). In the populist communication framework, the homogenous in-group of the people is seen as pure and ordinary (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). What helps set it apart from politicians merely addressing the wider electorate is that populist rhetoric also creates antagonism between the people and other groups. Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) distinction between a 'thin' and a 'thick' populism as a communication style is a helpful categorization, here. The thin conceptualization refers to a political communication style that merely refers to the people; the thick conceptualization adds content that is explicitly anti-elitist and exclusionary in nature (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Opposed to the pure and hardworking people are other out-groups such as the corrupt elites (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2004) whose privilege detaches them from the real people (Abts & Rummens, 2007). These elites include political ones, but also economic elites, corporations and the media (Canovan, 1999; Hameleers, 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Taggart, 2000; Zaccaria, 2018). The people are also commonly pitted against outsiders within their own strata of society, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities (Hameleers, 2018; Schmuck, Matthes, & Boomgaarden, 2016).

In further examining political representation, we loosely follow this 'thin' and 'thick' conceptualization logic to explore *how* politicians refer to the people in their communication: primarily, we examine what Jagers and Walgrave (2007) are calling 'thin' populism in its manifestation as

advocative references to the people; secondly, we also explore the 'thick' element by scrutinizing whether the people are put in opposition with the (political) elites or pitted against outsiders. We argue that appeals to the people in and of themselves are not restricted to the populist domain. Having a genuine understanding of their constituents' needs is essential to representative democracy, so that politicians across the political spectrum might strive to portray themselves as belonging to the people (Rooduijn et al., 2014; Strikovic, van der Meer, Bos & Vliegenthart, 2020; Zulianello et al., 2018). While we do not strictly adhere to the populist labels of the Jagers and Walgrave conceptualizations (2007), we do take on their rationale for distinguishing between the two gradations of references to the people and adapt it to a more general communication frame. Hence, we depart from the 'thin' and 'thick' conceptualizations of populism and examine two dimensions of the communicative element of references to the people: a 'pro-people' dimension of *advocative* references to the people and a dimension of *oppositional* references to the people that, in addition to being pro-people, pits the people against elites or other actors.

While other scholars examine solely the presence of references to the people in political communication (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014), we first and foremost look for *advocative* references to the people. When speaking on behalf of (and in their efforts to connect with) the people, it is favourable for politicians across the political spectrum to put the people in a positive light in order to win over the people's confidence - and ultimately votes. This is also the case for oppositional references to the people, where pitting the people against out-groups positions politicians on the side of the people. References to the people and attacks against elites are known to lead to more political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018), more political cynicism (Rooduijn et al., 2017) and affect vote intention (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007).

Because of the apparent strategic advantage of appeals to the people, these communication strategies are used by politicians across the political spectrum (chapter one). What is not yet examined in depth is how this is manifested in the communication practices of a variety of politicians. We therefore provide a more in-depth discussion on how politicians who reference the people do so, and in what ways they express their support for the people and opposition to other actors.

Research Question 1: How are advocative and oppositional references to the people manifested on media platforms?

Communication platforms

Media are an important factor that drives the success of political parties (Esser et al., 2016b; Krämer, 2014). There is evidence that politicians across all parties feel the pressure to cater to the media's needs (Mazzoleni, 2014; Strikovic et al., 2020). While traditional media have served as the connector between politicians and the people for decades (Esser et al., 2016b), social media restructured political power by providing the possibility of unmediated, direct and personalized communication between citizens and politicians (Engesser et al., 2017a). Traditional newspapers are also heavily edited, while this is not the case with social media. Even fewer restrictions exist in the institutional realm of the parliament in which uncensored debate takes place and politicians have virtually no boundaries (be it gatekeepers or word limits) to the messages they send, except for the formal parliamentary rules and regulations. Communication within the confines of the parliament is internal in nature, but parliamentary debates and speeches are often broadcasted (online) and covered in the media. Parliamentary debates are also affected by the media and in turn affect the media (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2007). For example, politicians know that a strong statement in a parliamentary debate could gain traction outside of the institutional realm.

It follows that, even though parliamentary speeches are not often streamed or watched in full, politicians are aware of the potential attention their parliamentary speech might receive from the media. This platform also allows for a comparison between messages that are explicitly intended for the public (newspapers and social media) and those that are, for the most part, internal in nature (albeit with the anticipation of possible public attention). These three communication platforms (traditional media, social media and the parliamentary setting) provide varying degrees of formality and access to the people, making them an interesting comparison to study.

Research on cross-platform differences suggest that communication within these platforms and the evaluation of this communication indeed differs. Newhagen and Nass (1989), for example, found that respondents evaluate the credibility of messages on different platforms according to different criteria specific to those platforms. Message content is also shown to be affected by platform differences. Cranmer (2011) finds that populist

communication varies with the level of publicity of a platform, showing that populist communication tends to be more prominent on public platforms. We build upon studies like these to investigate the differences in the communication across the platforms of traditional media, social media, and parliamentary speeches and debates.

In contrast to traditional media and the parliament, social media are reciprocal. Not only are politicians directly accessible to the people, but this also holds the other way around. Politicians acknowledge using this platform for feeling the pulse of the nation and as a source for feedback, suggestions and ideas from the citizens (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Strikovic et al., 2020). Consequently, a media platform that serves as a direct contact to the people is used by politicians to invoke the people directly. Social media posts may be limited in content but are virtually unlimited in reach. Citizens who are physically distant are made communicatively close. Here, a connection between citizens and politicians implies a mutual understanding and a feeling of truthful representation (Coleman, 2005). Communication through social media is also direct, without the gatekeeping processes of traditional media (e.g., Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001; Soroka, 2012). We therefore argue that, when addressing the people in the most direct way, politicians will use this communication platform in a strategic way and that advocative references to the people - either alone or combined with oppositional references to the people - therefore are more likely to appear on their social media than in parliament or traditional news media.

H1: People- centric communication, in terms of both (H1a) advocative and (H1b) oppositional references to the people, will be higher on social media than in traditional news media and parliamentary data.

Variations in actors and time

To broaden our understanding of communication strategies that include references to the people, we aim to provide additional details on *who* uses such communication styles and *when*. Even though it has been argued that there is no support for the claim that *populist* communication is being used by all politicians (Bos & Brants, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014), we have established that politicians across the ideological spectrum engage in *people-centric* communication (Ernst et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Strikovic et al., 2020). In other words, the more general communication frame of reference to the people that we adhere to in this paper might be more widely adopted across the political spectrum in an effort to demonstrate politicians'

closeness to citizens. Even though the effectiveness of these communication strategies may have prompted politicians from all parties to utilize them (Rooduijn et al., 2014; Zulianello et al., 2018), references to the people are still anchored in the tradition of populist communication, so that politicians from populist parties have more ownership of them. When asked to reflect on the use of the term 'the people' in political communication, politicians themselves are quick to steer the conversation towards populism, without being prompted to do so (chapter one). We therefore argue that it is still more likely to find this type of communication within populist parties than those that are not.

H2: The more populist a politician, the more likely (s)he is to engage in communication that refers to the people in terms of both (H2a) advocative and (H2b) oppositional references to the people.

However, there may also be certain aspects that are utilized differently by parties with varying political stances. We rely on a broader conceptualization of references to the people that is centered around advocacy. In a country-level study in Switzerland, it was shown that left-leaning parties are more likely to use advocative, pro-people references, while right-leaning parties have a greater reliance on anti-elite communication (Cranmer, 2011). It may be that due to the left's emphasis on the socio-economic divide between the people and other actors, politicians from parties aligned on the left invoke the people in a positive light more often.

As far as the political right, some argue that right-wing parties are critical of any type of elite: political, legal, media and cultural (Ernst et al., 2017). The parallel of exclusionary and inclusionary populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013) is a useful parallel, here: radical right-wing populism is exclusionary, with the populist radical right speaking for the common people, that is "everyone but the elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 165). However, this must be interpreted with caution as not all right-wing politicians are against the elite or immigrants, nor are they necessarily part of the populist radical right.

On the other hand, we also know that left-wing populist rhetoric originally ascribes to emancipatory ideals which distance them (and the people) from power structures created by corporations, globalization and unregulated financial markets, leading them to advocate for the people and reference them in a positive way. (Populist) politicians from the left are also likely to

oppose seemingly unaccountable elites. This fits neatly into the vertical/horizontal divide, with left-wing populists putting elites, such as the 'extreme' rich minority, CEOs of large corporations, or banks (Hameleers & Vliegthart, 2020), in opposition to deprived others in an economic context. Based on the above, we ask:

Research Question 2: How is people-centric communication containing a) advocative references to the people and b) oppositional references to other actors utilized differently by left-wing and right-wing politicians?

References to the people can be seen as a cue to public opinion (Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). If public opinion is the people's input on political decision making (Abts & Rummens, 2007), it can act as a measure of the people's will and consent. This is important to consider with regards to the effectiveness of these cues and what that means for those who listen to them. Gaining electoral support is especially important in the run-up to elections. Since mere references to the people can be used strategically to generate support from a wide part of the population (Bos et al., 2013), and these references stress the sovereignty of the popular will (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), we predict the following:

H3: Overall, the frequency of communication strategies aligned with people-centrism in terms of both (H3a) advocative and (H3b) oppositional references to the people is higher in election years than in non-election years.

Methods

We conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles from five major Dutch newspapers that included a reference to the people and political parties. Articles were selected based on two criteria: 1) they included a direct quote from a current or former Dutch politician and 2) the quote included a reference to the people. This could mean that the politician speaking is directly addressing the people, talking about the people or identifying him/herself with the people. The articles were selected using a search string in LexisNexis that included all major Dutch political party names, names of prominent politicians that may be cited without their affiliate party, and various terms for the people, such as "ordinary people", "hardworking folk"

and “voters”⁵. Articles were gathered in March of 2019 and selected from the last four years (07 February 2014 – 03 March 2019). This yielded 494 relevant articles in five of the most widely read Dutch newspapers: *Algemeen Dagblad* (N=155 articles), *Trouw* (N=132 articles), *NRC Handelsblad* (N=82 articles), *De Telegraaf* (N=72 articles) and *de Volkskrant* (N=55 articles). Proceedings in the online parliamentary database were searched using similar keywords (e.g., “people”, “citizens”, “folk”) over a four-year period (14 January 2014 – 12 June 2019). This yielded over 3000 results. Every fourth result was downloaded and presented to the coders to determine whether it was suitable. This yielded seven parliamentary speeches, 68 questionings and 561 debates. For social media, relevant posts from Twitter (N=440 Tweets between 26 October 2017 and 21 April 2019) and Facebook (N=173 posts between 02 July 2016 and 31 January 2019) were collected from politicians’ social media pages. Coders manually searched all politicians’ social media pages and selected posts that included references to the people.

Two coders who were Dutch native-speakers conducted the coding. The unit of analysis and coding was a single quote from a politician or representative of a political party, characterized by quotation marks in news articles or up to one paragraph of uninterrupted speaking in parliamentary data. For social media, posts from politicians on Facebook and Twitter were coded if they contained direct references to the people. This included only original content posted by the politicians and excluded images, re-tweets, shared posts and quoted content that was not created by the owner of the social media profile. Intercoder reliability between the coders and the researcher was high for both dependent variables (Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient = 0.71 for the variable ‘Advocacy’; $\alpha = 0.81$ for ‘Opposition’).

Measures

Independent variables. Descriptive variables included the date of the item and the politician’s name or affiliated party. For our independent variables, left/right alignment and populism scale, we relied on the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al., 2017). In the survey, left/right positioning was measured on a 10-point scale (0=extreme left, 10=extreme right); populism was also coded on a 10-point scale, indicating whether politicians preferred elected office holders to make important decisions (0) or whether those decisions should be made by the people (10). We also created a dummy variable that indicated whether the specific statement was from the 2017 election year (1) or not (0).

5 For full search string, see Appendix F

Table 2.1: Parties' mean score for Left/Right alignment and populism according to the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey

Party	CDA	PvdA	VVD	D66	GL	SGP	SP	CU	PVV	PvdD	50+	DENK	FvD
Left/Right alignment	7	3.87	7.87	5.47	2.57	7.93	1.27	5	9.27	2.79	5.23	3.83	9.53
Populism	2.2	4.2	2.87	5.4	5.25	1.47	7.07	2.15	9.67	6.5	7.3	5.5	9.8

Dependent variables. We coded items for the presence of advocative references to the people (*advocacy*) by asking whether overall, the content of the statement is positive towards the people and coded neutral references as "0". We coded our second dependent variable (*opposition*) by asking whether any other actors are mentioned and, if so, whether the content is oppositional towards the actors i.e., whether the people are put in opposition to these actors.

The variable indicating opposition to the people was computed using two variables: 1) whether the people are put in opposition with other actors (immigrants, elites, corporations and politicians) and/or 2) whether negative sentiment is used towards those actors.

We will approach the results section as follows: First, we will look at some overall qualitative observations about the data. We will draw on politicians' quotes to illustrate how our dependent variables manifest themselves within our three communication platforms. We will then look at main effects across all communication forms, as well as differences between news media, parliamentary data, and social media.

To indicate the effect size, we will report odds ratios. This is particularly useful when describing relationships between binary variables. Odds ratios in a logistic regression indicate the ratio of the odds of the dependent variable being present as a result of variance in the independent variable. An odds ratio value greater than one ($OR > 1$) indicates an increased likelihood of the dependent variable being present, while the opposite is true for odds ratios less than one ($OR < 1$). Effect sizes in odds ratios are interpreted as probabilities of the dependent variable being present with the independent variable. If the dependent variable increases by one (1), the odds ratio indicates by how much the probability of the dependent variable being present increases.

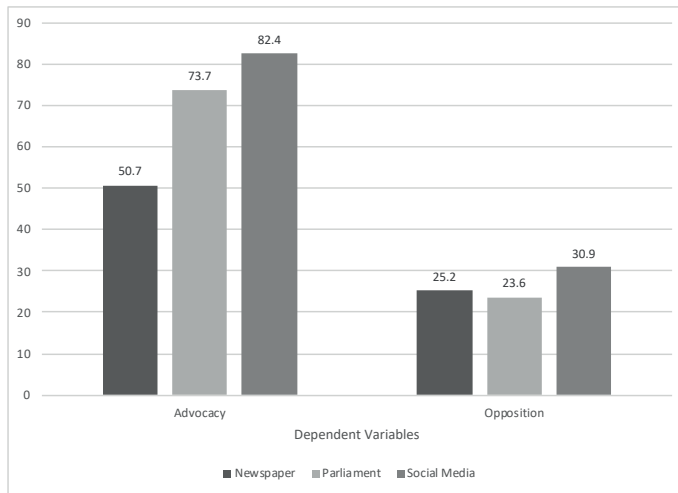
Findings

General observations

Figure 2.1 shows descriptive statistics for the various platforms of communication and the dependent variables examined in this study. It is important to note that these proportions are only for those items that were deemed relevant for the study. While most of the data did include references to the people, these references were not always explicitly positive. This means that out of those items that mention the people, people were referenced in an advocative manner and/or put in opposition with other actors as indicated in the chart below.

Figure 2.1: Percentage of items in news, parliamentary and social media data containing the relevant dependent variables

Note: Total sample of items that refer to the people: N=1668



Our first research question addressed how statements that are classified as 'advocacy' or 'opposition' are manifested on media platforms. In order to answer this question, we have selected some samples from our data to illustrate elements of these statements with. Advocative references to the people were classified by politicians using positive sentiment when speaking to or about the people. Politicians who refer to the people this way make statements that suggest the people are good in some way, suggesting that they work hard and have good intentions.

'The people are everyone who works hard, wants to work hard or ever has ever worked hard.' (Arno Rutte, VVD)

'The people are those that work really hard and are decent taxpayers.' (Peter Omtzigt, CDA)

'The people are the ordinary men and women.' (Geert Wilders, PVV)

Additionally, they might add that the people have been wronged in some way and that this has to be rectified (presumably through voting for them):

"The hardworking Dutch people are the victims of fraudulent parties." (Helma Nepperus, VVD)

"While entrepreneurs and employees in the Netherlands created a lot of prosperity in 2018, the vast majority of this went to investors and shareholders [...] not to the workers, the hardworking men and women in the workplace." (Mahir Alkaya, SP)

These two quotes also illustrate the pitting of other actors against the people: other politicians in the case of the former and economic elites in the latter. These are also good examples for indicators of 'opposition': both advocative and oppositional references to the people are present. At times, multiple actors are mentioned as enemies of the people:

"Where politicians and climate gurus think they can save the globe, millions of ordinary Dutch people do not even make it safely to the end of the month, financially." (Geert Wilders, PVV)

In many instances, those oppositional references specifically target politicians or other parties. This is the most frequently referenced actor that is pitted against the people (see Figure 2.2 below). Here, politicians specifically attack other parties and politicians, not only explicitly naming their wrongdoings but also singling out the party or politicians themselves:

"Rutte's empty promises have sparked cynicism. The hard-working Dutch people feel betrayed." (Pieter Heerma, CDA)

"If you thought that [the FVD] cares about the ordinary men and women: this infamous case of mass terminations in the Reagan era is what they view as the ideal [link to Reagan dismissing 11.000 striking workers]!" (Zihini Ozdil, GL)

"I really wonder if hardworking Dutch people find it acceptable that their tax money is spent in this way by GroenLinks" (Wybren van Haga, VVD)

While it seems that there is agreement on the people being pious, hard-working and well-deserving citizens that need protection from the ill-intent of other parties and politicians, we examined under what circumstances this communication varied.

Hypotheses and Research Question 2: To test our first two hypotheses, which argued that references to the people in terms of (H1a) advocacy and (H1b) opposition will be higher in social media than in traditional news media, we first looked at the percentages of communication that entailed advocative references to the people across all three communication platforms. Figure 2.1 shows that social media displays the highest percentage of positive references to the people: 82.4% of all people-centric communication referred to the people in an advocative way. We used chi-square tests to determine that the differences are statistically significant ($X^2(2, N=1223)=95.1, p<.01$). We can therefore confirm Hypothesis 1a.

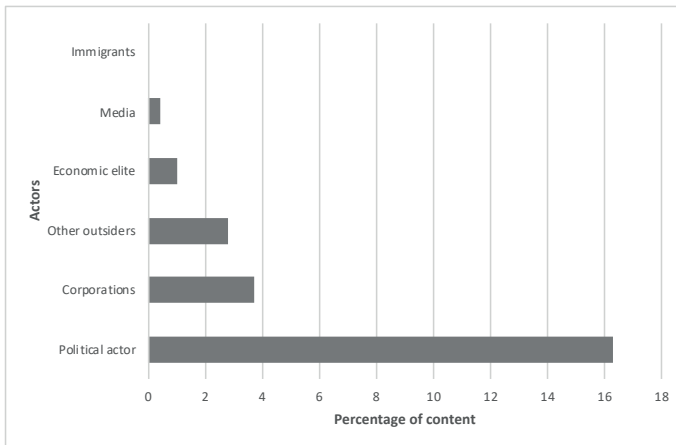
Figure 2.1 also shows that the ratio of communication pitting the people against other actors is slightly higher on social media (30.9%) than in the news (25.2%) or in parliamentary data (23.6%). These differences are statistically significant ($X^2(2, N=306) =15.8, p<.01$), providing sufficient support for Hypothesis 1b. When examined closer, the actors that are most commonly pitted against the people are other politicians (see Figure 2.2).

Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b posed that politicians who belong to populist parties are more likely to engage in communication that is indicative of both advocative and oppositional references to the people. To test these hypotheses, we ran logistic regressions with our independent variables for each of the examined dependent variables. Table 2.2 shows main effects of the independent variables for both dependent variables aggregated for all forms of communication. Content across all forms of communication taken together tends to have a higher probability of including advocative references to the

people if the politicians belong to a populist party. This confirms Hypothesis 2a, showing that the likelihood of politicians referencing the people in a positive way increases with the politician's party's score on the populism scale. This result is largely driven by the parliamentary data: when examined separately across the three communication platforms, these results only hold for communication items that stem from parliamentary data.

Moreover, higher scores of the populism scale also correlate with a higher probability that communication showed an opposition between the people and other actors. We can therefore confirm Hypothesis 2b.

Figure 2.2: Percentage of content pitting the people against other actors



These results hold for each of the separate communication platforms (see Table 2.4). The odds ratio for social media is especially high and differs significantly from those of the parliamentary and news data. The odds ratio here is $OR=1.93$, showing that as the populism score increases by one, the probability that the dependent variable (opposition) being present increases by 1.93 (or 93%). As odds of the dependent variable being present are expressed as a proportion of the odds that the dependent variable will not be present, the greater the numerical distance is from one (1), the greater the effect. For this particular result, the effect size is large, suggesting that the level of populism of the politicians' party has a far greater impact on the dependent variables within social media than in the news or parliament⁶.

⁶ When we tested the effect of coalition/opposition parties on the dependent variables, the effects were significant but disappeared when the populism variable was added.

Table 2.2: Main effects of election year, electoral success, populism, ideological positioning and communication platform

	Advocacy	Opposition
Election Year	.85 (.21)	.57 (.27)
Populism Score	1.14** (.03)	1.2** (.03)
Left/Right Positioning	.86** (.03)	.91** (.02)
Social Media	11.74** (.34)	1.24 (.21)
Newspaper	2.68** (.14)	.77 (.15)

Note 1: reported are odds ratios and standard error; *= $p < .05$, **= $p < .01$; N=1235.

Within news media and social media, no significant effect of parties’ populism scores on their communication in terms of advocacy was present. In light of the results shown in Figure 2.1, where both dependent variables were present mostly in social media, this indicates that while that is true for politicians across the board, the level of populism of the politicians’ party has a greater impact within the parliament.

Insignificant results within social media may be explained by the frequency of the use of advocative references to the people within this platform: social media may not be affected by variances in our independent variables because positive references to the people are simply the norm. Insignificant results within news media are more surprising. We expected that favourable communication intended for the people would significantly increase in election years, as politicians appear more frequently and prominently in the news. This might be explained by negative news biases, specifically during election times, because news consumers are more interested in and reactive to negative political news content rather than positive appeals (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). We can observe that in general, within traditional news, the independent variables have little impact, which may point to journalistic selection procedures that are at work, here.

Our second research question asked how people-centric communication containing a) advocative references to the people and b) oppositional references to other actors is utilized differently by left-wing and right-wing

Table 2.3: Main effects of IVs on positive references to the people across different communication forms (N=1223)

	Advocacy		
	News	Parliament	Social Media
Election Year	1.69 ^a (.29)	.42 ^{*b} (.34)	.79 (.98)
Populism Score	.99 ^a (.04)	1.25 ^{**b} (.04)	2.13 (.48)
Left/Right Positioning	.93 ^a (.04)	.82 ^{**b} (.04)	1.38 (.34)

Note: reported are odds ratios and standard error; *= $p < .05$, **= $p < .01$. Means with differing subscripts within rows differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level based on post-hoc coefficient comparison Chi-Squared tests.

Table 2.4: Main effects of IVs on data containing opposition between the people and other actors across different communication forms (N=463)

	Opposition		
	News	Parliament	Social Media
Election Year	.77 ^a (.34)	.36 ^{*a} (.54)	3.72 ^a (1.05)
Populism Score	1.16 ^{**a} (.05)	1.19 ^{*a} (.04)	1.93 ^{**b} (.17)
Left/Right Positioning	.95 ^a (.05)	.95 ^a (.03)	.66 ^{**b} (.11)

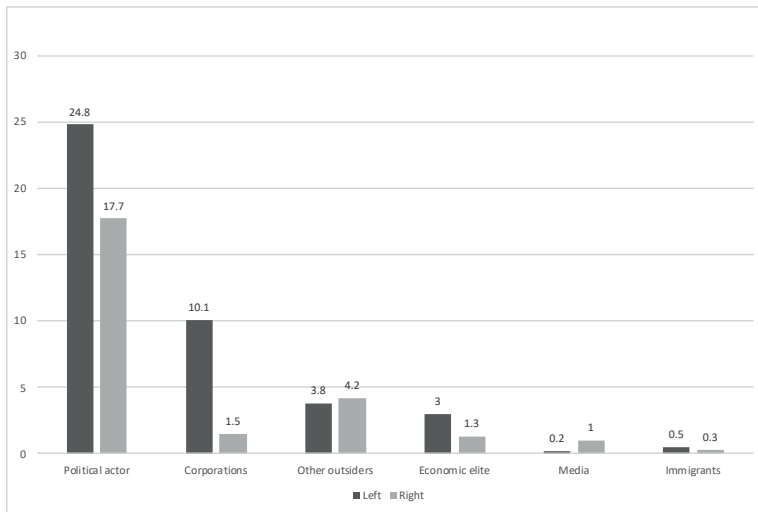
Note: reported are odds ratios and standard error; *= $p < .05$, **= $p < .01$. Means with differing subscripts within rows differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level based on post-hoc coefficient comparison Chi-Squared tests.

politicians. Our data provide sufficient support to answer this question: Table 2.2 shows that content from politicians aligned on the left tends to have a higher probability of using advocative references to the people and oppositional references to the people including other actors than politicians on the right. When we examined communication platforms separately, these results for advocacy stayed significant within parliamentary communication, while opposition was only significant on social media (see Tables 2.3 and 2.4).

Moreover, when referencing other (elite) actors, politicians on the left most often invoke politicians. While politicians from the right also favour this actor over the others, politicians on the left overall invoke them more often (see Figure 2.3). Other notable differences lie within references to corporations and the economic elite, which are also invoked more frequently by left-wing politicians than right-wing politicians.

This fittingly illustrates the horizontal/vertical divide in which left-wing politicians distance themselves and the people from the economic and powerful elite from the top (Hameleers & Vliegthart, 2020) while right-wing politicians reference threats from within society, such as immigrants and asylum seekers (Hameleers, 2018; Schmuck et al., 2016).

Figure 2.3: Percentage of content from left wing/ right wing sources pitting the people against other actors



In Hypothesis 3a, we examined variances in time (i.e., election year vs. non-election year), arguing that the frequency of communication strategies aligned with advocative references to the people is higher in election years than in non-election years. Results of the logistic regression show that there is no significant difference in positive references to the people between election years and non-election years. Hence, there is no support for our hypothesis. In Hypothesis 3b, we also expected that in election years, campaigning turns negative, i.e., that politicians focus more on the opposition's perceived failings rather than their own accomplishments or policy plans. However, there is also no support for this hypothesis within our data. In fact, when tested for the different communication platforms separately, Table 2.3 and Table 2.4 show that the opposite is the case for parliamentary data, where advocative and oppositional references to the people significantly decrease in election years.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide insights into how politicians utilize three communication platforms (traditional media, social media and the parliamentary setting) to address the people and how their references to the people vary across these three platforms. In order to do so, we categorized references to the people into advocative references and oppositional references to the people, and examined what variances in actor, platform and time had an effect on these references.

Qualitative data in our study demonstrates that advocative references to the people often come in the form of attributions of virtuousness, loyalty and a good work ethic. Echoing populist perceptions of the people (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2004), politicians portray the people as hardworking, meaning well and oftentimes falling victim to other actors. In this way they signal their advocacy and closeness to them, as if to say: "I listen to you because I talk about you" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 323). The data also show that actors by far most often put in opposition with the people are other political actors. This aids the politicians in two ways: Firstly, it separates them from the pack of politicians by communicating that they are different from the rest and connected to the people in a way that other politicians are somehow not. Secondly, it signals a responsiveness to a seemingly perceived threat to the people, offering not only political representation through responsiveness, but also a solution to this perceived threat.

We also found evidence for hypotheses (H1a and H1b) about communication platforms, confirming that communication strategies that include advocative and oppositional references to the people are indeed most likely to be displayed on social media. This may not be surprising, given that there are no gatekeeping restrictions on social media, the direct reach of this platform to the people, the accessibility of this platform to politicians and the lack of formal boundaries that this platform offers. This also has implications for representation of, and closeness to, the people. The reciprocal nature of social media suggests a mutuality of this connection: direct communication between the people and politicians is (in principle) possible, accessible, and has a positive impact on the public's political involvement and vote allocation (Kruikemeier, 2014; Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart & de Vreese, 2013). Politicians who appear accessible and in touch with the people are less likely to be perceived as disconnected than seemingly detached representatives (Coleman, 2005).

We also hypothesized that politicians from populist parties scoring high on populism are more likely to utilize communication strategies that include advocative and oppositional references to the people (H2a and H2b) and examined the effect of politicians' left/right alignment on their use of these references (RQ2). Our key findings confirm that politicians' populism scores are the strongest driver of communication that includes these communication strategies. While we did not examine these communicative elements within a populist framework, these results raise the question of whether the findings indicate that it is not merely the case of politicians addressing the wider electorate that we are observing, but instead indicators of fragmented populism (Engesser, et al., 2017b). A closer look into the results provides a nuanced answer. Populism scores of the politicians' party was only a predictor for advocative references to the people in the parliamentary setting. This is in line with research that theorizes about the public nature of parliamentary speeches and deems its potential reach of a large audience a key contributing factor to the prevalence of populist communication within this arena (Cranmer, 2011). One could argue that because politicians know speeches will be disseminated by the media and are aimed at topics geared towards decision making (van der Valk, 2003; van Dijk, 2000), the stakes of parliamentary debates and speeches are rather high, so that politicians' incentives to use persuasive communication strategies, such as those rooted in populism, are rather high (Cranmer, 2011). In the Dutch context, parties also often share parliamentary speeches on social media directly,

getting around their dependency on journalists to disseminate parts of the speeches. This might mean that the social media platform (and its reach) is taken into account when writing these speeches.

Another way to explain that the difference in communication between populist and non-populist parties in parliamentary data could be that politicians use news and social media to communicate more strategically (i.e., utilize communication strategies that have persuasive effects, such as those rooted in populist communication), while speeches in the parliament and the references to the people within those speeches are likely to be driven by policy. Hence, politicians from populist parties would be more likely to use communication tied to the ideology of their party than those from non-populist parties. However, overall and consistently, populist politicians are more likely to engage in communication that pits people against other actors, keeping with the conceptualization of 'thick' populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and demonstrably distinguishing the populist actors from the others. This is in line with Engesser et al.'s findings, which illustrate that (on social media) populism appears in a fragmented form, often consisting of advocacy for the people and the opposition of one other actors (2017b).

In answer to our second research question, our results show that, contrary to what headlines of political coverage may suggest, it is not the extreme right-wing politicians, but rather those aligned on the left of the political spectrum that engage in communication that is more likely to use advocative and oppositional references to the people. Again, these results are not consistent across all communication platforms: just as with populism scores, advocative references to the people are only significantly higher for left-wing politicians within parliamentary data. When it comes to oppositional rhetoric, the same is the case for social media. This may be explained by the left's emphasis on the socio-economic divide between the people and other actors, meaning that attacks on the elite are preferred by left-wing politicians (Engesser et al., 2017b). Other politicians are also folded into this category of 'elites', being portrayed as out of touch with the people. This is compatible with the ideologies of the left-wing, as they signal a closeness to the people and distance themselves from the elite political pack.

Lastly, we theorized that election years would display more frequent use of communicative strategies aligned with both advocacy and opposition (H3a and H3b). Despite our expectations, we discovered that election years had no effect on either of those communication strategies. This might be explained

by the apparent ubiquity of references to the people and their opposition to others, so that even if it does increase in election years, this does not happen at a significant level. This is in line with studies that have shown that negative campaigning is highly dependent on communication platform (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010) and that negative campaigning overall has not increased (Walter, 2013).

On a critical note, we would like to reflect on some limitations to this study. A first limitation is that the analysed sample yielded a relatively small proportion of items where the dependent variable 'Opposition' was present. Political actors as out-groups were mentioned in around 16% of the coded items, while other actors were mentioned in less than 5%. This is important to consider, especially in light of the lack of results about references to other actors in detail. It would be beneficial to investigate these other actors more closely with a larger sample: sufficient data might lead to more precise conclusions about how and when immigrants, the economic elite, the media, and other outside actors are invoked in people-centric communication.

The lack of data about other actors leads to a second limitation. Our conceptualization of oppositional references to the people does not reflect any gradients of this variable. For the paper at hand, it sufficed for one actor to be present. If more extensive data were available, it may be interesting to analyse this variable on a scale, assessing whether the degree of oppositional communication varies with different actors, platforms or time. It may also be insightful to examine whether these variations have different effects on the population. As discussed above, it has been argued by many scholars that left-wing politicians are prone to attack the economic elite (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020), while right-wing politicians are more likely to attack the media and political elite (Ernst et al., 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013), as well as immigrants (Hameleers, 2018; Schmuck et al., 2016). Thus, we advise future research to look into more specific notions of "other actors" and develop different sub-hypotheses for these.

The sampling strategy is a third limitation and leaves room for further research. Firstly, only explicit, direct quotes were analysed. News websites often have embedded videoclips as supplementary footage. This is even more so the case for social media, where images, videos, re-tweets and shares are as much a part of communication as personal posts. Secondly, those quotes were specifically selected based on the strict criteria that they include references to the people. For the scope of this paper, as it

analyses the variances in references to the people, sampling only quotes with references to the people was legitimate. However, it may be insightful for future research to examine the overall prevalence of this communication strategy, i.e., to embed the analyses in the larger context of political communication. Along the same lines, actor and platform may overlap, in this sampling strategy. Future research could therefore track specific actors across platforms in order to disentangle whether effects are driven by the platform or whether they are actor specific.

The study sheds light on how politicians refer to the people, the variation in the presence of references to the people, which actors are put in opposition with the people and how different communication platforms are used for this. We suggest that future research focuses on the effectiveness of these messages. Studies should not only investigate this on the level of populist communication as a whole but look at its fragments individually and examine the effectiveness of different types of references to the people in political communication.