A populist paradise? Examining populists’ Twitter adoption and use

Kristof Jacobs & Niels Spierings

To cite this article: Kristof Jacobs & Niels Spierings (2019) A populist paradise? Examining populists’ Twitter adoption and use, Information, Communication & Society, 22:12, 1681-1696, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2018.1449883

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1449883

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 20 Mar 2018.

Article views: 3766

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 4 View citing articles
A populist paradise? Examining populists’ Twitter adoption and use

Kristof Jacobs\textsuperscript{a} and Niels Spierings\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}IMR, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands; \textsuperscript{b}RSCR, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
While populists are claimed to be masters of Twitter, we know surprisingly little about how they use the medium (if at all). This study examines (1) populists’ Twitter adoption and (2) also investigates whether they differ from other political actors in their posting, connecting, and engagement behaviour on Twitter. We use a series of regression analyses to examine populists’ Twitter adoption and use in the Netherlands (2010–2016). We find that populists are less likely to adopt Twitter and suggest this is due to the party structure of populist parties: they are typically highly centralized and are wary of internal dissent. However, when populists do have an account, they do not post less (or more) tweets. They are less likely to have reciprocal interactions though and are more selective in who they befriend. However, these friends are more likely to get retweeted, suggesting that populists actively contribute to creating echo chambers.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 November 2016
Accepted 2 March 2018

KEYWORDS
Twitter; populism; adoption; interaction; echo chamber

1. Introduction

Populism is on the rise (Rooduijn, 2015); some have even claimed we live in ‘a new populist era’ (partly) due to the increasing use of online media (Mudde, 2016, pp. 28–29). Indeed, online media allow populists to bypass journalists and spread their ‘raw message’ in an undiluted way among the people (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017, p. 110). Given this suitability of social media for populists (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016), one might expect there to be a fair number of studies examining how they use social media. Yet, the online communication of populists has in fact only rarely been systematically theorized or studied empirically.

Regarding online media adoption, most of the literature focuses on the so-called ‘equalization-normalization’ debate and whether new technologies such as Twitter level the playing field or rather reproduce existing inequalities (Dolezal, 2015; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Larsson & Moe, 2014; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). However, the empirical focus of these studies typically is on traditional, major parties and...
smaller contenders, mainly the postmaterialist parties. It remains to be seen whether the results found for these parties can be generalized to populist parties. Indeed, the only study including populism as a variable actually found populists are less likely to employ online campaigning (Dolezal, 2015).

A second lacuna in the field regards how populists use online media. While Kruikemeijer (2014) has shown that politicians need to use Twitter interactively in order to win votes, Jungherr (2016) suggests that online media including Twitter are mainly used as a unidirectional ‘broadcasting’ tool. Given their ideology, one would, however, expect populists to use Twitter to interact directly with ‘the people’. The main study on populism and Twitter interaction comes to a different conclusion: politicians from populist parties have fewer Twitter interactions (Tromble, 2016, p. 13). It is unclear to what extent this indicates a broader pattern and how populists use Twitter instead.

Following these empirical and theoretical lacunae, the main question we address in this study is as follows: How do politicians of populist parties use Twitter (if at all)? In the theoretical section we will further specify this question into two sub-questions: (1) Are politicians of populist parties more or less likely than other politicians to adopt Twitter? (2) Do politicians of populist parties differ from other politicians in their posting, connecting, and engagement behaviour on Twitter?

To answer these questions we analyse Twitter use in the Netherlands (2010–2016), a country that houses multiple populist parties (on the left and right) and is a social-media frontrunner: in 2010, Twitter was in its early-adoption phase in the Netherlands, by 2012 Twitter was already widespread, and by 2015/2016 nearly all Dutch MPs were on Twitter (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016).

In what follows, we discuss the concept of populism, outlining how it theoretically relates to Twitter’s key ‘attributes’ (Gulati & Williams, 2013, p. 579) and ‘logic’ (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1242). Empirically, we present a series of regression analyses on politicians’ Twitter data, using multilevel logistic regression models for candidates (2010, 2012) and MPs (also 2015/2016) to explain Twitter adoption and multilevel negative binomial models on the numbers of tweets. MPs’ befriending and retweeting behaviour as well as their @-mention connections are modelled using multilevel OLS regressions on 2016 data.

Our main finding is that politicians of populist parties are actually slower to adopt Twitter. We suggest this is not necessarily an artefact of their populist ideology, but rather of their highly centralized party structure; after all, Twitter can empower backbenchers and expose internal party conflicts. Additionally, politicians of populist parties who do use Twitter tend to use it somewhat differently from other politicians. They are less likely to actively follow other accounts, but more likely to retweet accounts they have connected with. Also, they respond to @-mentions less often. Altogether, politicians of populist radical right parties actually seem less interested in ‘the’ people and prefer instead to engage mostly by retweeting ‘their’ people.

2. Theoretical framework

Decisions about the use of new technologies ‘depend not only on the characteristics of the adopter, but also on attributes of the (...) technology’ (Gulati & Williams, 2013, p. 579). Hence, we examine what populism is (Section 2.1), and need insight into Twitter’s
attributes and logic (Section 2.2). From there, we connect both to understand Twitter’s adoption and use by populist parties’ politicians (Sections 2.3 and 2.4).

2.1. Populism

Following the ‘actor-centred approach’ of populism (Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017, p. 354), we need to define what makes a party populist. While some debate over populism’s exact meaning continues, ‘[s]cholars increasingly agree on a conceptualization of populism as a set of ideas concerning the antagonistic relationship between two homogenous constructs: the (Good) people and the (Evil) elite’ (Rooduijn, 2014, p. 727), whereby populism is a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004). As a thin-centred ideology, populism needs another ideology to attach itself to. Most populist parties are either radical left, such as Syriza and Podemos, or radical right, such as the Front National, Geert Wilders’ PVV, and perhaps even Donald Trump. The former combines their populism with a democratic socialist ideology, while the latter combines it with a nativist and authoritarian ideology (cf. Mudde, 2016).

In the view of populists, politics should be an expression of the will of the people, the volonté générale, (without specifying what this precisely entails) (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). As such, it has an ‘empty heart’ and ‘the right course becomes that chosen by the right leader’. Consequently, populism is often associated with ‘charismatic leadership’ and with being organized in a very centralized way as many of them are ‘extremely intolerant of dissent’ (Taggart, 2000, pp. 100–103). In their comparative study, Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2016, p. 227) confirm this idea for populist radical right parties, which ‘tend to concentrate power in the leadership to an extent greater than in other parties’. At the same time, such power concentration ‘goes hand in hand with a persistent struggle for coherence’ and ‘harsh enforcement of party discipline’, triggering internal dissent (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016, pp. 239–240).

In sum, populists align themselves directly with the people (people-centrism) and oppose themselves to traditional elites (anti-elitism). Their leader is the central actor and embodies the people (leadership), and the party headquarters tightly controls the party (centralized party organization).

2.2. Twitter

Before discussing what these characteristics of populism mean for Twitter adoption and use, we have to examine Twitter’s most relevant attributes and logic.

1. Twitter allows for unmediated communication (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1248), whereas in traditional media, journalists ignore or filter, edit and frame content. Twitter thus also facilitates politicians ‘hearing the voice of the people’ (Katz, Barris, & Jain, 2013, p. 13). Indeed, ‘lay person’ and ‘amateur’ content is at the heart of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1246).

2. Twitter is cheap and easy to use as it does not require specialist technical knowledge (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 21). This implies that it reduces the power of the party leadership, as even backbenchers with limited technical or financial means can use Twitter as their own press agency and build a personal power base.
3. Like other social media, Twitter is built on engagement (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Most importantly, this can be achieved by drawing someone into a conversation using @-mentions, by replying to somebody’s tweets, or by retweeting. Twitter thus ‘enable[s] direct interaction and dialogue between politicians and members of the public’ (Tromble, 2016, p. 1).

4. Twitter is characterized by speed and virality (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 22). Messages can go viral within minutes, potentially triggering spillover effects to traditional media. This can also be a negative whereby gaffes, spelling errors, or slips of the tongue go viral.

2.3. Twitter adoption and use

We now link these key attributes to our conceptualization of populism. In his review of the Twitter literature, Jungherr (2016, pp. 74–76) distinguishes between research regarding Twitter adoption and Twitter use. They clearly link to each other, but the reasons to adopt Twitter do not necessarily tell us what specific type of use one can expect from adoptees. We therefore first discuss the relationship between populism and Twitter adoption, then between populism and use.

2.3.1. Adoption

Adoption refers to whether politicians have a Twitter account. Recent empirical research on adoption typically uses the equalization–normalization perspective, suggesting that smaller, postmaterialist parties tend to adopt social media early on (equalization), but once these media become more widespread among the population ‘the larger parties increasingly [see] the added value’ and are ‘prepared to invest in it’ (normalization) (Gibson & McAllister, 2015, pp. 529; see also Larsson & Moe, 2014). However, few studies have mentioned, let alone systematically investigated, where populist political actors fit in this picture (cf. Dolezal, 2015; Tromble, 2016; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013).

Based on our earlier discussion of populism and Twitter’s key attributes, Twitter clearly offers some advantages to populists, as it is a cheap and easy-to-use tool allowing unmediated communication that can quickly reach many people. Populist parties are often outsiders with more limited funding and are restricted in their offline opportunities (cf. Strandberg, 2008). Twitter offers them a cheap and easy-to-use alternative that allows them to send out their message directly to the people. This fits populists’ people-centred ideology (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013, p. 407). Twitter is also advantageous given populists’ anti-elite messages, which might otherwise be changed by ‘media elites’ (cf. Gibson & McAllister, 2015, p. 231; Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1245). Journalists can alter their messages, leave out certain aspects and add their own negative evaluations. The ‘logic of social media gives the populists more freedom’ (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1123). Furthermore, Twitter’s speed and virality can force the media to report quickly about populists’ posts, without the possibility to change the ‘raw, unaltered message’ substantially, as these posts are publicly visible. Based on the ideology of populists, one can thus expect politicians of populist parties to adopt Twitter early on.

Simultaneously, populist parties’ centralization offers incentives not to adopt Twitter. Twitter allows individual politicians to build an unmediated relationship and potentially reach out to a large group of followers due to the platform’s potential for virality.
Therefore, it poses a threat to centralized parties as it can empower backbenchers. Furthermore, tweets exposing internal conflicts can go viral easily (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013, p. 407). Given populist parties’ focus on their leader and wariness of internal dissent, they can be expected to discourage using Twitter.

In short, politicians of populist parties have ideological characteristics that may motivate them to adopt Twitter, but party structure-related factors do the opposite. Given these contradicting expectations, our first research question (RQ1) is: Are politicians of populist parties more or less likely than other politicians to adopt Twitter?

2.3.2. Use: connecting, posting, and engaging

Once politicians of populist parties decide to adopt Twitter, how will they use it? Each of Twitter’s attributes discussed in Section 2.2 can be linked to a specific type of Twitter use and is related to the characteristics of populism (Section 2.1).

2.3.2.1. Unmediated. The direct reach out to people enables politicians of populist parties to bypass traditional media (elites), which are often hostile to them (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1110; Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016, p. 596). Moreover, as Bos and Brants (2014, p. 706) have noted, populists’ anti-elitism is typically linked to a communication style that is ‘straightforward’. To show their ‘hostility to the established order and [their] identification with the common folk they use every day, simple language’, which contrasts them to ‘the elitist complex language of representative politics’. This communication style fits well with Twitter, the medium par excellence for short and straightforward one-liners (Engesser et al., 2017).

For this reason, politicians of populist parties can consequently be expected to tweet more often than politicians of non-populist parties. At the same time, these politicians are especially under increased scrutiny by e.g., journalists on Twitter to expose within-party conflict. Moreover, tweeting a lot can draw attention away from the party leader. The unmediated aspect of Twitter could thus endanger populism’s party centralization and leader focus. Therefore especially backbencher politicians of populist parties have incentives to refrain from tweeting. Hence, ideological and party structure-related factors yield contradictory expectations of populists’ use.

2.3.2.2. Cheap and easy to use. Given that populists are people-centred, one can expect that they want to use Twitter to connect with people, for instance by befriending them (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013, p. 407). However, because populist parties are also anti-establishment and have a radical, revolutionary message (cf. Mudde, 2016), they are also said to keep their distance from those who do not share populists’ opinions. Thus the ‘populist communication logic and online opportunities go hand in hand, because the Internet is presumed to frequently cultivate homophily, which is the “tendency of similar individuals to form ties with each other”’ (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1284). If so, populist political actors should be more selective in who they befriend, focusing especially on people who hold opinions similar to their own.

People-centrism and anti-elitism therefore yield contradicting expectations. Party structure seems less likely to have an impact here, because following many people hardly leads to greater media risk or individual popularity. Regarding befriending the ideological factors may be most influential.
### 2.3.2.3. Engagement.

Populism’s combination of being people-centred and anti-elitist creates incentives to use Twitter’s interactive features to demonstrate that the politician and party are ‘of the people’ (Tromble, 2016, p. 9). At the same time, the party leader often claims to embody the people and be their voice (Section 2.1). If citizens ‘want politicians who know (rather than “listen to”) the people’, populists do not need, nor have little incentive, to connect and interact with ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 558). Hence, populists’ ideology and party structure yield opposite expectations regarding engagement.

### 2.3.2.4. Virality.

Twitter’s retweet function can create a snowball effect. Social media facilitate the creation of echo chambers wherein messages that confirm one’s worldview can gain traction (Bartlett, 2014). This also fits the populist worldview: echo chambers allow messages from ‘real people’ (people-centrism) who are ignored by the ‘traditional media’ (anti-elitism) to be spread and heard. The virality potential is also in tune with the populist focus on the leader as echo chambers have the potential to centre on the populist party leader. At the same time, however, the centralized nature of the Populist Party may mean that its leadership is less tolerant of dissenting opinions. In order not to upset their leader, politicians from populist parties are likely to be more cautious as to which messages they retweet. Thus, while there are ideological and some party structure-related reasons (leadership) to expect politicians of populist parties to retweet more, there are also other party structure-related reasons (centralization) to expect they do not.

Regarding Twitter adoption, party structure and party ideology clearly pointed in opposite directions. The picture is less clear concerning Twitter use. Populist parties’ people-centred nature and their anti-elitism yield contradicting expectations regarding befriending. Moreover, the populist party structure seems at odds with interacting, but this is less clear regarding retweeting. Altogether this makes empirical research on the matter pivotal. We therefore advance the following research question (RQ2): *Do politicians of populist parties differ from other politicians in their posting, connecting, and engagement behaviour on Twitter?*

### 3. Data and methods


Our empirical focus is on Dutch politicians between 2010 and 2016. The Dutch case is particularly well-suited to address our research questions because of its diverse range of parties. Moreover, it is a Twitter frontrunner with very high internet-penetration rates (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 13). If there is any pattern to be found, it should thus be visible here.

Regarding elections, like most other European countries the Dutch electoral system requires parties to present a list of candidates. Election campaigns are generally run by the parties, who devote most of their staff and campaign finances to the few top candidates. It is possible to be elected despite a low list position by attracting enough personal votes, though relatively few candidates have been elected this way. In the 2010 and 2012 parliamentary elections (9 June 2010; 12 September 2012), a heterogeneous group of, respectively, 10 and 11 parties received at least 1 of the 150 seats. Up until the recent campaign, Twitter was the main political social-media communication tool for individual MPs (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 186).
3.2. Multilevel regression modelling

We use regression models with individual politicians as units of analysis to analyse the different types of Twitter adoption and use. All models are estimated in a multilevel setting with random intercepts, embedding individual politicians in parties (Allison, 1999, p. 130; Jones & Duncan, 1998). In the case of candidates competing in multiple campaigns, these measurements per politicians are also embedded in the individual. By pooling the years, the statistical power of our models is increased, and the total number of models remains manageable. Guidelines for the number of higher-level units vary for multilevel modelling, but the number of parties included here is certainly at the low end (see Paterson & Goldstein, 1991). This has several implications. First, given the low N at the party level, it is less likely that relationships turn out statistically significant. Following Allison (1999, p. 57), this implies that finding statistically significant relationships is a good indicator a relationship exists, but the absence of significance is not sufficient evidence for fully rejecting the existence of the relationship in the larger population. Second, exceptional party-level cases can have a disproportional influence on the size and direction of the slope coefficients. As highlighted by Nieuwenhuis, te Grotenhuis, and Pelzer (2012) the context-level units’ impact should therefore be assessed. To do so, we follow three steps (see appendices): (a) we run the additional tests to detect context-level influential cases for our results of the populism variable (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2012). If a case’s dfBeta is above the threshold \((2/\sqrt{n})\), it deserves further study. (b) We reran all models, consecutively leaving out one party at a time. This shows the actual impact of each of the individual parties (see also Van der Meer, Te Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2010). (c) We calculated single-level fixed-effect models with party dummies. First, this presents a more conventional way of testing differences between MPs of different parties. Although the N in some models is too low to make claims regarding significance, it does show whether the observed differences are in line with the main models. Second, this procedure lays bare whether our distinction between populist, postmaterialist (see below) and other parties does not veil other distinctions crucial for Twitter use (e.g., left–right ideology or party age [cf. Vergeer & Hermans, 2013]). When a main finding changes in any one of these additional analysis, this is explicitly mentioned in the results section.

As we realize that adoption and use patterns are likely to change over time (cf. Gibson & McAllister, 2015), we also control for differences between years by including a time variable that we interact with our explanatory focus (populism). We also ran the models separately per year to test the robustness of these results. This is discussed where applicable. To provide extra insight into the mechanisms underlying the patterns found in our models, we rely on additional empirical material derived from existing reports and in-depth interviews. This will be discussed in the text where relevant.

3.3. Dependent variables

To measure Twitter adoption (RQ1), we simply focus on whether politicians have a Twitter account. In the respective campaigns, we hand-checked this for each individual candidate of the parties that won at least one seat during the two most recent parliamentary elections. In models with MPs only, we also included the 150 MPs of November 2015.
Given the dichotomous nature of Twitter adoption, logistic regression models are used (Allison, 1999).

Regarding Twitter use, we begin by assessing the number of tweets each politician posted (‘posting’ in RQ2). For 2010, this includes all posts during the last 42 days before the elections; for 2012, the last month before the elections (31 days); and for the 2015 MPs we have a tweet count for an in-between election period of 77 days (18 August 2016–3 November 2016). To pool the models, we calculated the rounded weekly average number of tweets per candidate (truncated at 250 to avoid outliers distorting the general pattern and leading to false conclusions). Not surprisingly, this dependent variable is far from normally distributed. The non-parametric distribution and over-dispersion indicate that (three-level) negative binomial regression is the best-suited estimation technique (Hilbe, 2011).

Regarding the 2015 MPs, we then further zoom in on different types of Twitter use: befriending (‘connecting’ in RQ2), retweeting, and @-mentioning reciprocity (‘engagement’ in RQ2). First, we registered the number of friends (followees) the MPs have (1 November 2016): in total 119,632 relationships between the 150 MPs and 50,749 unique accounts. Second, based on collected data on all retweeted accounts, we checked which of the MPs friends were actively retweeted by them over three months’ time (August 2016–October 2016). Retweeted friends accounted for 4,361 (59.5%) of the 7,331 MP-retweeted account dyads. Third, we collected the accounts that @-mention an MP over the same three-month period and, fourth, the proportion of these MP-@-mentioner relationships that are reciprocal (i.e., whether an @-mentioner was also @-mentioned by the MP in that same period). The second indicator above showed a fairly normal distribution; the other indicators showed a normal distribution after using a log transformation. For these four indicators, we can thus make use of linear regression models.

3.4. Explanatory variables

Our main interest is whether politicians who represent a populist party differ from other politicians. In pinpointing the Dutch populist parties we follow the literature (see e.g., Rooduijn, 2014): the PVV of Geert Wilders and the Socialist Party (SP). The SP might be the lesser-known of the two. From 1989 onwards, it adopted a more populist ideology and communication style, but it moderated its populist communication style in recent years. Below the surface, the populist ideology is still clearly present though (Lucardie & Voerman, 2012, p. 50–52, 66). Moreover, while the SP is less centralized than the PVV, the party’s leadership has been characterized as ‘authoritarian’ and centralized (Lucardie & Voerman, 2012, p. 50). We pool the politicians affiliated to the populist parties in our main analyses to ensure statistical power, but reran our analyses to see whether the slopes for the more populist PVV are stronger than for the borderline populist SP (see appendices). We discuss this in the results and conclusion.

PVV party leader Geert Wilders is known for his many tweets, disproportionally large following on Twitter, and for not following any other account (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). As a possible statistical outlier, he might bias our conclusions. Hence, we also reran the analyses without him. In some cases, this did lead to less strong relationships, but it hardly influenced the general direction and statistical significance of the coefficients.
We contrast the politicians of populist parties to two other types of parties, as the literature has shown rather different patterns for politicians of postmaterialist parties and those of other parties (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2015). In the literature, postmaterialism is mostly ‘operationally defined’ (Watts & Wandesforde-Smith, 1980, p. 346) by looking at prioritized values. Specifically, ‘[p]ostmaterialists give top priority to such goals as a sense of community and the non-material quality of life’ and postmaterialism is associated with ‘environmentalism, the women’s movement, unilateral disarmament [and] opposition to nuclear power’ (Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987, pp. 1296–1297). Indeed, starting from the 1960s politics started to polarize around this new materialism–postmaterialism dimension and parties that adhere an ideology centreing on the postmaterialist values started to pop up (Inglehart, 1985, pp. 488). Following the literature, we identify the progressive liberals (D66), the greens (GroenLinks), and the Party for the Animals as postmaterialist (see Jacobs, 2007; Lijphart, 1999). All politicians of other parties form the third group, the reference category in the regression models.

3.5. Control variables

Each model is controlled for the politicians’ position within the party and demographics. As leading politicians generally receive disproportional attention from citizens and media, we identify the parliamentary leaders as well as the five politicians per party who had the highest list position during the election. Moreover, we add list position in general. We also include the sex and ethnic-minority status of each candidate. In the MPs-only models, we include the politicians’ age provided by the parliamentary database. Finally, the engagement models include controls for the underlying Twitter metrics. For instance, it is much harder to reciprocate if there are many @-mentions, thus the reciprocal @-mentions model includes the times being @-mentioned.

4. Results

4.1. Adoption

Models 1 and 2 in Table 1 present the results for having a Twitter account (‘adoption’ in RQ1). Both among candidates and MPs we find that politicians of populist parties are less likely to have a Twitter account than politicians of ‘postmaterialist’ or ‘other’ parties (ceteris paribus). Distinguishing between PVV and SP shows that the negative effect is much stronger for the PVV. Moreover, the gap between the PVV politicians and the others closes with the increasing adoption among all parties over time (cf. the significant, positive coefficient for ‘Time’). This suggests that politicians of populist parties are indeed slower to adopt social media. In terms of logged odds, the positive interaction coefficient measuring the closing of the gap is not statistically significant, but this might be due to the relatively low N. The remaining gap in more recent years is fully due to (s)lower adoption among the PVV politicians, not their SP counterparts. The additional models (cf. Appendix 1) show that the patterns for the PVV are very robust and that the overall effect is indeed mainly driven by the PVV. However, they also indicate that the SP is indeed somewhat in-between: it has higher adoption likelihoods than the PVV but falls behind the other and postmaterialist parties in the beginning.
Regression analyses cannot provide definitive answers on what lies beneath these patterns, but there are some indications that (negative) incentives from the party may matter. Semi-structured interviews with the SP’s campaign leader and social-media manager suggest that the populists’ tendency towards strong centralization and dislike of dissent is at play. In the words of the latter: "We do not want ‘Labour Party’-like incidents where individual MPs all air their own individual opinions and start criticizing each other on social media. (Hijink, 2013)

The PVV generally refuses to talk to scientists, but media interviews with former MPs of the party also suggest that Twitter use is tightly restricted as ‘Wilders fears a loss of control stemming from conflicts’ (Hoedeman & Meijer, 2012).

### 4.2. Use: posting tweets

When we turn our attention to the posting behaviour of the candidates and MPs, Model 3 and 4 in Table 1 provide the main analyses. Across the models, there is just limited evidence pointing into the direction that politicians of populist parties post more (or fewer) messages. Only for the average PVV candidate or MP, there are some indications that they post fewer messages (Appendix 1, Steps B and C), but even then rerunning the models per year shows that the effect among MPs (see Model 4) is solely driven by the PVV MPs tweeting less in 2012. This suggests, if anything, that during election campaigns,
candidates of other parties increase their number of posts substantially, while the candidates of the populist radical right party do not or do so to a lesser extent.

All in all, there are incentives for the politicians of the PVV to restrain their posting behaviour. Indeed, as mentioned in the theoretical section, given the high degree of centralization, MPs from populist parties may be more cautious in their tweeting behaviour in order not to upset their leader. This might explain the finding that politicians of the populist parties do not tweet more than others, but more research is needed to draw definitive conclusions.

4.3. Use: connecting and engaging

If anything, politicians of populist parties seem to use Twitter somewhat less than those of other parties, but do they also use the medium differently? Model 5 looks at the number of accounts MPs follow and whose messages they thus allow directly onto their Twitter-feed. As they befriend fewer people than MPs from other parties, MPs of populist parties appear to be more selective in the accounts they befriend. This relationship holds particularly strongly for the PVV, whose leader Geert Wilders famously follows no one (though the relationship even holds after excluding him from the analysis). However, it is also found for the SP (cf. Appendix 2, Step C). Additionally, Model 6 shows that MPs of populist parties do have a relatively stronger tendency to include befriended accounts’ posts in their retweets, even controlled for their lower number of friends and their general retweeting behaviour. This pattern is rather similar for MPs of the left-wing and right-wing populist party.

Table 2 Models 7 and 8 focus on Twitter interaction. MPs of populist (and postmaterialist) parties are @-mentioned by more people on Twitter, but these differences are not significant across populist parties (Model 7). The coefficient is driven by the PVV MPs: the party is clearly an influential case as without its MPs no difference between populists and the other parties is found (Appendix 2, Step A and B). Further analysis shows that it is mainly a few highly visible MPs who stand out. Geert Wilders has 4–20 times as many @-mentioner-MP relationships as any other major party leader. By himself, he covers 25% of all the @-mentioner-MP relationships of the 146 MPs on Twitter. But even among non-party leaders, PVV MPs are overrepresented in the top, ranking second, third, and ninth among the remaining MPs.

Given their radical signature, particularly in the case of the PVV, these @-mentions will include hostile engagement. While this is probably part of the story, there are reasons to expect that the disproportionately high number of @-mentions of the leading MPs of the PVV and (to a lesser extent) SP also comes from people supporting them (for an overview see Krämer, 2017, pp. 1305–1306). Asking for attention (@-mentioning), however, is not the same as getting it. Of our almost 92,277 MP-@-mentioner relationships, only 4.9% were reciprocal. This proportion differs considerably between MPs. First, with the exception of the political leaders, MPs who are @-mentioned more are also relatively in more reciprocal relations (Model 8). Taking this into account, MPs of populist parties are significantly less likely to have reciprocal relationships. Again, this effect is largely driven by the MPs of the PVV. One could note that Geert Wilders stands out. While he is indeed by far the most @-mentioned MP, he hardly ever @-mentions someone else in our data. As others have noted, he never replies to questions (Dietz, 2013). However, dropping him
from the analyses, the PVV MPs have significantly fewer reciprocal relationships, indicating a broader pattern: PVV MPs are less likely to use Twitter to have conversations.

5. Conclusion and discussion

While the contemporary rise in populism is said to be at least partly linked to the growing importance of online media (Mudde, 2016, p. 28), few social media studies have explicitly included populists in their analyses. Most exceptions have only featured populism as an aside (Dolezal, 2015; Tromble, 2016; Tromble, 2016; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013; but see: Engesser et al., 2017; Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). As a result, our theoretical and empirical knowledge of whether and how politicians of populist parties use Twitter is fairly limited. This study therefore advanced two sub-questions: (1) Are politicians of populist parties more or less likely than other politicians to adopt Twitter? (2) Do politicians of populist parties differ from other politicians in their posting, connecting, and engagement behaviour on Twitter?

Our first main empirical finding is that politicians of populist parties are slower to open a Twitter account, a finding that especially holds for populist radical right MPs. Connecting this finding to the literature on populism, this makes sense: populists have contradicting incentives. Their ideology pushes them to use social media, but their party structure pulls them back. There is no clear evidence, though, that when adopted politicians from populist parties tweet less. At the same time, they do use Twitter in different ways than other politicians. We found that, relatively speaking, populists are on average less likely

Table 2. Multilevel OLS regression models of Twitter behaviour (Dutch MPs, 2016).a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5 # friends (logged)</th>
<th>6 Proportion friends among RTed accounts</th>
<th>7 # of being @mentioned accounts (logged)</th>
<th>8 Proportion reciprocal relations with @-mentioners (logged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B coefficient</td>
<td>B coefficient</td>
<td>B coefficient</td>
<td>B coefficient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populists</td>
<td>−0.483*</td>
<td>0.078*</td>
<td>0.406</td>
<td>−0.455#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-materialists</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.651</td>
<td>−0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parties</td>
<td>Ref</td>
<td>Ref</td>
<td>Ref</td>
<td>Ref</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic-minority candidates</td>
<td>−0.179</td>
<td>−0.039</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>−0.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female candidates</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>−0.005</td>
<td>−0.423</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of birth</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>−0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political leaders</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>1.657**</td>
<td>−1.081**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 5 on lists</td>
<td>−0.369</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>−0.187</td>
<td>−0.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List position</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.004**</td>
<td>−0.036**</td>
<td>0.016*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># friends (logged)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.147***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># retweeted accounts (logged)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>−0.001***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># being @mentioned (logged)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.292***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.178***</td>
<td>0.184**</td>
<td>3.492***</td>
<td>0.806*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party level</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>0.810***</td>
<td>0.021***</td>
<td>2.200***</td>
<td>0.841***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>411.202</td>
<td>−56.734</td>
<td>548.907</td>
<td>403.713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N_p</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N_i</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aTwo-level models, with individuals embedded in parties, and random intercept at the party level.

*p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001 ###p < 0.10.
to reciprocate an interaction request. Similarly, they appear more selective in who they befriend, while at the same time their retweets contain relatively more befriended accounts.

These patterns were particularly strong for the MPs of the PVV and less so for the MPs of the left-wing populist SP. Indeed, one might wonder whether our findings are driven by the PVV. It is beyond doubt that that party is an extreme case in terms of the party structure. The whole party is organized around Geert Wilders and de facto he is the only member of the party. The interesting thing about the Netherlands is that it houses a second populist party, the SP. While this party is also very centralized (Lucardie & Voerman, 2012, p. 50), it is less so than the PVV. Comparing findings for the two parties gives us some hints of the impact of high party centralization. Overall, the SP-findings are similar to the PVV-findings, yet the latter are clearly more pronounced. Regarding Twitter adoption, we found that both are slower to adopt the platform, but the PVV was clearly the slowest. Both populist parties’ MPs connect with fewer people, though this pattern is more pronounced for the PVV. For retweeting, we find roughly the same results: both parties retweet less and primarily retweet befriended accounts. This suggests that party structure matters less in this case, but obviously our study cannot provide definitive answers here.

Regarding the theoretical implications of our study for the literature and specifically the equalization–normalization debate, our findings suggest that it is useful to look beyond party size. Party ideology is often overlooked in these studies, but as our study shows (radical right) populism should be a standard variable in the battery of explanations. Our findings also suggest that it is particularly worthwhile to look at party structure. Especially politicians of populist radical right parties are more likely to face contradicting incentives regarding Twitter use. Indeed, though most of the literature assumes that parties only have motivations to adopt Twitter, our results indicate there are also important reasons not to adopt Twitter. These reasons especially apply to populist political actors. Regarding the literature on Twitter use, our findings suggest that it is useful to examine not only interaction but also to look at connections (i.e., befriending behaviour) and engagement (e.g., forms of engagement such as retweeting) as well.

How generalizable are our findings? In the methods section, we already discussed that the Dutch case has a typical ballot structure, though it has an extremely proportional system and is a Twitter frontrunner. In that sense, it is a most-likely case to find differences between populists and other parties and as a result, it is important for future studies to test our findings in other contexts. The exact extent to which populists differ from other parties will differ across countries, but the overall patterns found here are likely to occur elsewhere too. Indeed, our findings are in line with the existing, albeit rare and relatively scattered research on populist twitter use so far. Regarding Twitter adoption, Dolezal (2015, p. 113) also finds that Austrian populists are less likely to adopt Twitter. Regarding use, Stier, Posch, Bleier, and Strohmaier (2017, p. 1371) find that the German AfD attracts a lot of reactions, which is similar to our findings. Also similar to our results, Tromble (2016, p. 13) discovered that populists in the Netherlands, the UK and the US interact less, and Waisbord and Amado (2017, p. 1337) confirm this for Latin American populist presidents. Clearly, some pieces of the puzzle are still missing, but this overview suggests that our findings are no ‘one-off’. Our ideology versus party structure argument matters most in list-proportional electoral systems using flexible lists. Hence, similar results are likely in such a context, but future research should also examine whether populists behave differently in other systems.
Notes

1. Tromble (2016) finds that populists do have more reciprocal interactions with lay citizens, but this is relative to their interaction with elite accounts.

2. Stanyer et al. (2017) also discerned a communication-centred approach, which is especially useful when analysing political discourse, but which is less well-suited for this study on actors.

3. While mostly associated with populist radical right parties, Chavez, Morales, and Tsipras provide similar left-wing populist examples of this.

4. In line with Twitter’s own definition, we consider engagement broader than just interaction, which refers to @-mentioning only.

5. Whether or not a party’s electorate is on Twitter might matter, but by the time Twitter is used across social strata, these differences should be minimal though.

6. Tromble’s (2016) work support this claim. She found that politicians of populist parties hold fewer conversations than their non-populist counterparts.

7. Contrary to our discussion of adoption, party structure’s impact on Twitter use mainly works through the type of leadership, not party discipline.

8. The diagnosis procedure in this step to check whether there is a potential problem is less suitable for the negative binominal models. However, and crucially, in Step B, we still assess the impact of dropping individual cases on the results of our negative binomial models. These results allow us to test the actual effect of potential influential cases.

9. The conditional variance of the tweet counts on politicians being from a populist party or not was far larger than the conditional mean.

10. We explicitly highlight postmaterialism as the literature finds a strong effect there. We did not distinguish other ideologies because other research on the Netherlands has found this not to play a role (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013, p. 410) and because our number of parties is too limited to make extra distinctions in a meaningful way.

11. This is not available for all candidates. Age is thus absent from the candidate models. Our MP models indicate this does not influence the results on the populism variable. Moreover, some parties provide candidates’ age and analysing these data further supports this assumption. For instance, the 2010 PVV candidates are not older than those of the other parties: CU (42); D66 (43); GL (41); PVV (41); VVD (44).

12. For instance the coefficient for populism is mostly influenced by the PVV case (though the dfBeta is the still below threshold, cf. Step A). The coefficient drops considerably when the PVV MPs are excluded from the model (Step B). For Model 2, more dfBetas are above the threshold. This deserves further inspection, which is given in Step B. The check shows that the findings are once again primarily driven by the PVV case, dropping the other parties does not change the findings substantially.

13. Possible exceptions are the ultraorthodox Christian and the elderly party (SGP, 50Plus), Yet in the models controlled for age no such effect is found (see Appendix 1, Step C), suggesting this is a more a demographic than a party or ideological difference.

14. In line with this, PVV and SP show dfBetas above the threshold (Appendix 2, Step A). The result is, however, fairly stable in direction and size (Step B).

15. No potentially influential case is detected at the party-level (Step A) and SP and PVV are the two lowest scoring parties (Step B and C).

16. Consequently, the SP is an influential case at the party level (Appendix 2, Step A), and dropping it increases the difference between MPs of populist parties (i.e. the PVV) and other parties substantially (Step B). Moreover, the SP MPs are scoring lower than MPs of some parties, and higher than some of others (Step C).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Notes on contributors

Kristof Jacobs is Assistant Professor in Comparative Politics at Political Science Department of the IMR, Radboud University. His research focuses on the challenges to democracy (e.g., populism) and how political actors solve these (e.g., by using social media or implementing institutional reforms). He has published, among others, in the Journal of Information, Technology and Politics, Electoral Studies, Political Behavior and the European Journal of Political Research [email: k.jacobs@fm.ru.nl].

Niels Spierings is Assistant Professor in Sociology at the Department of Sociology and Radboud Social Cultural Research, Radboud University. His research interests include political inequalities; the social implications of technological developments, such as social media; the political parties-voters connection, and the rise of populism in European politics. On these issues he has published, among others, in the Electoral Studies, Patterns of Prejudice, Political Behavior, and West European Politics [email: n.spierings@maw.ru.nl].

References


