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Introduction

The year 2020 can be called memorable for a great part of the world population. Namely, because this is the year of the spread of COVID-19, also addressed as the Corona-virus, causing a global crisis. Besides the fact that the virus in the first months already led to more than a hundred thousand deaths worldwide, the long-term economic consequences of the crisis are still very uncertain. While countries all over the world are in lockdown simultaneously, the prospect of a new global economic crisis is not unthinkable.

During and after a global crisis, changes could be detected in the political landscape, especially in the national party systems. To illustrate, the global financial crisis of 2008 has destabilized party systems throughout the whole of Europe. This was mostly due to the emergence of new parties (Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). These so-called challenger parties generally blame the mainstream parties and national elite for the social and economic misery caused by the crisis (Lisi et al., 2019). This 'anti-elitism' is a typical trait of populist parties (Nai, 2018). Accordingly, Moffit (2015) argues that especially populists use the change in the traditional situation to present ideas of dramatic and extensive reform as a solution to the crisis, thereby challenging the established parties. Indeed, Rico et al (2017) found that far-reaching societal change has often been associated with the increase of support for populist parties. Given the assumption that populists benefit from crisis situations, it would be plausible that they then actively engage in spreading a sense of crisis among the population. This line of thought corresponds with the work of Homolar and Scholz (2019), who state that during a crisis populist politicians use a specific rhetoric which evokes images of costs, unfairness, and defeat. The purpose of this is to raise the sense of insecurity and threat among individuals, so that the populist narrator can transform this fear of the public into confidence in the populist political agenda as the successful route back to normalcy.

Looking at the way populists spread these fear-arousing messages, the internet seems to be an important medium since populists generally struggle to get their socially provocative messages across in the traditional media. The internet can overcome this problem of access by directly connecting politicians with their supporters (Schaub & Morisi, 2019). In particular, social media platforms offer an efficient and low-cost space where a high amount of one-sided statements can be made available to followers. In addition, populist supporters feel like they can speak their minds more freely here without having to worry about criticism (Ekman, 2015). Besides reaching their own followers, social media make it possible for populists to

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reach a so-called 'secondary audience'. These are non-followers who are exposed to the populist online content because it is being re-circulated, for example through a 'retweet' on Twitter, by the direct followers of the populist (Ernst et al., 2017).

Thus, there is the assumed populist advantage of spreading fear-arousing messages in an international crisis context, combined with the strategic use of social media. As a result, the main focus of this study will be on what the exact type of rhetoric, words, and methods are that populist politicians use to arouse fear among the population during an international crisis. Ultimately, this leads to the following research question:

'How do populist politicians use social media as a tool to spread fear among the population during an international crisis?'

It is important to study the rhetoric of populists and their means of communication in an international crisis situation, since these could have electoral consequences (Moffit & Tormey, 2014; Nai, 2018; Schaub & Morisi, 2019). As discussed, part of this populist rhetoric is based on arousing fear. Indeed, Obschonka et al. (2018) argue that psychological factors, such as fear, can influence voting behavior in major elections. The Trump and Brexit campaigns were very different in numerous ways, but what they had in common was the goal of fueling fears in the electorate. These fears then motivate a desire for protection, which makes individuals support leaders and policies that promise protection from the threats (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Thus, this shows how emotions can influence electoral behavior. Moreover, Homolar and Scholz (2019) found that individuals with little real life experience of what politicians frame as threats (e.g. terrorism, migration, or the breaking out of a pandemic), rely more on information coming from the media. Arguably, this could then lead to an enhanced effectiveness of the fear messages populists spread through social media, creating an even greater effect on the political behavior of the electorate. Keeping these potential electoral consequences in mind, populist communication regarding the COVID-19 crisis is an important topic to research.

There is also great scientific relevance in researching this particular subject. Because the world is currently experiencing the COVID-19 crisis, not a lot of research has been conducted on this event. This makes additional information and data valuable for the comprehension of this new global phenomenon and the different political responses to it. As discussed, one of

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these political responses is populism. The findings of this study will support or undermine earlier theories on populism in an international crisis context and in that manner contribute to a greater understanding of this topic. In addition, it is significant to look specifically at the assumed relationship between social media and populists, because social media is still a relatively new type of media and therefore not that widely covered in the literature (Ernst et al., 2019). Lastly, the results of this research aim to provide for more insight in the ongoing debate on how to define populism.

This thesis will develop by first explaining the concept of populism. Next, there will be elaborated on populism in relation to the emotion of fear in an international crisis context. Then, the internet as an important tool for populist communication will be discussed. The theory section is being followed by a Twitter content analysis of the tweets of six Dutch politicians. The research concludes by stating that populists as compared to non-populists, more often use a type of rhetoric that is based on arousing fear while addressing COVID-19. This happens through the use of typical words that enhance the sense of threat and crisis among the population. Furthermore, it becomes clear through the analysis of the tweets that populist politicians use different rhetorical methods to emphasize the threat that is caused by COVID-19. In short, these are the mentioning of doomsday scenarios, prioritizing the crisis, using war vocabulary, stating the number of deaths, and criticizing the government's crisis policy. In addition, the study finds that populist politicians, as compared to non-populist politicians, advocate more often ideas based on anti-elitism and people-centrism. Here, anti-elitism seemed to be a stronger indicator of populism than people-centrism. Since a tendency exists to interpret 'populism' in various different ways, the concept as it was used for this research will now be further explained.

Populist rhetoric as anti-elitist and people-centrist
In the last decades, a rise of populism can be detected in Europe (Jones, 2017). The exact conceptualization of populism is highly contested (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). This is partly because populist ideas typically lack policy and ideologic specificity (Hawkins, 2009). Therefore, populism is considered a 'thin ideology', since it could be combined with other ideologies such as nationalism, communism, and ecologism (Lisi et al., 2019). This means that there exist populists both on the left-side and right-side of the political spectrum, but most of the populist parties lean to the political right (Schaub & Morisi, 2019). Right-wing populism is characterized by often demanding the exclusion of part of the population

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(Krämer, 2017), whereas left-wing populist focus on the socio-economic, claiming that the political elite ignore the interests of the common man and only look after big business corporations (Otjes, & Louwerse, 2015).

However, what is true for all sorts of populist actors is that they advocate for anti-elitism and people-centrism (Nai, 2018). In other words, populist ideas are often based on a distinction between the 'good people' and the 'evil elite', combined with a radical understanding of democracy (Hawkins, 2009). The definition which is often used in the literature reads that populism is: 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

Political parties are the main actors of representation in liberal democratic systems. Here, the populist anti-elite ideas often translate into anti-party sentiments. Accordingly, populist politicians advocate that these political parties corrupt the relation between supporters and leaders and that the interest of the people is subordinate to the party. However, most populists do not oppose the party system completely, rather they are against the established parties. The populist party then often claims to be a new kind of party, hence populists are more reformist than revolutionary (Mudde, 2004). According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), the anti-elite focus of populists can indeed be on political elites (government, parties), but also on other types of elites, such as the state (civil service, administration), the media (journalists, media tycoons), economic powers (trade unions, multinationals) or intellectuals (professors, universities).

Defining what populists exactly mean with 'the people' on the other hand, is generally a bit more difficult. Some argue that the concept is merely a rhetorical tool, thus not referring to a real group of people. Others have argued that 'the people' is more a product of the imagination of populists, comparable to 'the nation' of nationalists. Still, 'the people' is a vague and problematic term and has been used differently from one populist politician to another (Mudde, 2004). Typical synonyms recognized to be used by populist actors to address 'the people' are 'the voters', 'the citizens', 'the taxpayers', 'the consumers', 'the residents' and, 'the population' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

This research will focus on a comparison between populists and non-populists. Therefore, it relies on the definition of populism as anti-elitist and people-centrist, so that it comprises all different sorts of populism. This then leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Populist politicians, as compared to non-populist politicians, advocate more often ideas based on anti-elitism and people-centrism.

Populism and fear during international crises

Another way to look at populism is not as a type of ideology, but instead as a political communication style. This means to consider populism primarily as an act of speech (Block & Negrine, 2017). Populist style and populist ideology are not mutually reliant, thus an individual can advocate populist ideas without using a populist political style (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). This in turn also means that the populist communication style can be used by political actors which are not politicians per se, such as journalists or movement leaders (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). What makes the political communication style populist, is that it stresses the importance of the political will and the sovereignty of the people. In this way the populist claim to know what the public really wants, rather than being alienated from the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The definition that follows is that populist political communication style is 'a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322).

The way in which populists communicate their ideas is generally not considered as very 'appropriate' in the political realm. This is because there are populists who swear, use slang words, and are overly 'colorful'. The goal of this is to contrast the often technocratic language of established politicians. Other mentioned aspects of populist political style are playfulness and directness. For example, the Dutch Thierry Baudet who wore a military bomb vest during the parliamentary debate, because he wanted to make the statement that the Minister of Defense had failed in providing the military with sufficient and appropriate materials (Isitman, 2017). Accordingly, Nai (2018) argues that the populist communication style is based on offensive language, aggressiveness, provocations, and negative emotionality (Nai, 2018). Especially this emphasis on emotion is often discussed in the literature. Rico et al. (2017) argue that anger and fear are the two emotions most frequently connected to the rise of populism. Fear is related to assessments of uncertainty and low efficacy, in other words fear is the consequence of a highly uncertain threat where an individual does not have a clear idea of

how this threat could be prevented. Since COVID-19 can be perceived as an uncertain threat, with until the present day no vaccination or effective medicine, the focus of this study will be on fear rather than anger.

Homolar and Scholz (2019) indeed found that a situation where there is a relatively high amount of threat or danger is during an international crisis. Crisis narratives can remove the feeling of stability human beings normally have, and instead spark fear and insecurity among the population (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Populists make use of such an occasion and only try to enhance the anxiety even more by communicating fear-arousing messages. This is because far-reaching societal change, for example during an international crisis, has often been associated with the increase of support for populist parties (Rico et al., 2017). Moffit and Tormey (2014) also argue that populists thrive under the perception of breakdown, crisis or threat. One of the reasons for this is that a crisis or social transformation provides for a 'break' in traditional hegemonic discourses, thereby opening a space for political challengers to emerge. These populist politicians then use their charismatic authority to present ideas of dramatic and extensive reform as a solution to the crisis (Moffitt, 2015). They favor swift and short-term action rather than 'slow politics' of deliberation and negotiation. In crisis situations, populists want to act immediately and decisively. Obstacles that get in the way of addressing the crisis have to be supplanted, ignored or removed (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

Accordingly, Homolar and Scholz (2019) argue that the populist narrator transforms the fear, caused by the possible threat or societal change, into confidence in the populist political agenda as the successful route back to normalcy. To illustrate, the election campaign of Donald Trump did this by creating a 'Crisis America'. In his speeches, Trump often highlighted that the Unites States was in decline, thereby arguing he had the solution to 'make America great again'. To address the imaginary crisis state of America, Donald Trump often used fear-arousing words like: 'violence', 'crime', 'poverty', and 'terrorism' (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). As stated earlier, this emphasis on threat and danger is a typical marker of populist speak.

Transferring this to an international crisis context, the same was true for the global financial crisis of 2008, which gave rise to right-wing populist parties throughout Europe (Hartleb, 2012). Pirro and Van Kessel (2017) argue that European far-right populist parties typically frame the European Union as a threat to the sovereignty of the individual states. In addition,

these far-right populists hold the idea that opening the borders brings the cultural homogeneity of nations into danger, and therefore one of the solutions to this problem is closing the borders. Looking at the specific rhetoric these far-right populists used, it is again fear-arousing and focused on the supposed threats and dangers that come with European integration.

As the cases of Trump and the global financial crisis show, populist politicians use a specific political rhetoric which evokes images of costs, unfairness, and defeat. This could then raise the sense of insecurity and threat among individuals. Next, the populist narrator transforms the fear, caused by the possible threat or societal change, into confidence in the populist political agenda as the successful route back to normalcy (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). In other words, the assumed populist strategy in a global crisis situation consists of two steps: first, arousing fear among the population and second, offering a solution for the problem that causes the fear. The purpose of this study is to focus on the first step and assess whether it is true that populist politicians, more often than non-populist politicians, use fear-arousing language in order to enhance the feeling of threat and insecurity among individuals. The current COVID-19 crisis is a real-world event that suits the discussed theory on populist behavior in a global crisis context well. Therefore, the second hypothesis will be:

H2: Populist politicians, more often than non-populist politicians, use a type of rhetoric that is based on arousing fear while addressing COVID-19.

Populism and the internet

Looking at the discussed literature, populists seem to benefit from framing a crisis in a fear enhancing way. Whether this happens successfully is for a great deal dependent on the media. This is because the media play a central role in making the public aware that there is a crisis in the first place. Furthermore, the media is needed to fuel a continuing sense of crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Traditionally, this process only happened through the mass media however, Ernst et al. (2019) argue that today the political communication environment is being reshaped by the rapid spread of new online communication technologies on the internet. For the already established mainstream political actors, the internet is in many cases just another communication channel. But, for populists the internet has been a game changer (Schaub & Morisi, 2019). This is because populists generally struggle to get their socially provocative

messages across in the traditional media. The internet is then a place that directly connects politicians with their supporters (Schaub & Morisi, 2019).

More specifically, populist politicians rely heavily on social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter. These are considered communication channels without journalistic inference, meaning that the focus is on content distribution among users, direct interaction, and algorithmic connectivity (Ernst et al., 2019). Thus, social media are an efficient and low-cost way to directly reach 'the people'. This is why the use of social media is especially advantageous for newly found populist parties, since these often have limited access to the main political arena and are generally excluded from coverage in the traditional media (Schaub & Morisi, 2019). Another reason why populists prefer social media is because they claim that the established mass media are controlled by the ruling elite (Ernst et al., 2019). Consequently, these populist politicians need an alternative platform, which circumvents the traditional media and offers a space to criticize them. Social media offer the perfect solution, because this is where a high number of one-sided statements can be made available to a lot of people. In addition, like-minded citizens feel like they can speak in a more aggressive and uncivil tone without worrying about criticism, for example the expressing of racist attitudes and xenophobic viewpoints towards Muslims (Ekman, 2015). Lastly, social media are particularly useful for populist politicians, because these populists tend to propagate information derived from unreliable and questionable sources which would therefore not be covered in most traditional media. During the 2016 American presidential election, a lot of the online content which favored Donald Trump proved later to be factually wrong (Schaub & Morisi, 2019).

So, social media are a means for populist politicians to directly communicate with their own followers, in other words their 'primary audience'. Ernst et al. (2017) argue that the distinctive feature of social media is that also a 'secondary audience' can be easily reached. This happens when the online content of the populist politician is being re-circulated, for example through a 'retweet' on Twitter, by the primary followers. The potential of such a secondary audience for populists should not be overlooked, since the primary audience mostly consists of active opinion leaders with a high visibility (Ernst et al., 2017).

Altogether, the discussed literature shows multiple reasons why populists' success can be partly attributed to their use of social media and the internet. It is highly plausible that also in

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the Netherlands during the COVID-19 crisis, populists politicians use social media as an important tool to spread their messages. Hence, the focus of this research will be on social media rather than on other types of media.

Case and data

The case of the Netherlands will be used to test whether the hypotheses are supported. The Netherlands was selected to study, because it is a consensus democracy with both right-wing and left-wing populist parties in parliament. This means that the results of this study have larger implications also for other West-European consensus democracies which have both right-wing and left-wing populist parties in their parliament, like Austria, Belgium, and Germany (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019).

As for the data, the main focus will be on the Twitter accounts of Dutch politicians. The social media platform Twitter was chosen, because this type of micro-blogging is increasingly being used by politicians (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). By the end of 2012, 87% of democracies had a leader who is active on Twitter, a platform with more than 500 million users worldwide (Graham et al., 2016). This then shows the relevance of Twitter for the online politician who is adjusting to a world where non-traditional communication forms become more important. Thus, the growing importance of Twitter for politicians combined with the fact that it is a relatively new phenomenon shows why research on this subject is desirable.

For the purposes of this research, three politicians of populist parties and three politicians of the three main governing parties were selected to compare. More precisely, the tweets of the politicians Geert Wilders, Thierry Baudet, Lilian Marijnissen, Klaas Dijkhof, Rob Jetten, and Pieter Heerma will be analyzed. These individuals were chosen because they all represent their party in the Dutch house of representatives. Geert Wilders is the leader of the PVV, which has some typical right-wing populist standpoints. For example, the need of Dutch citizens to stand up against the imaginary crisis of the Islamization of Europe. Geert Wilders framed this as a threat to liberal democracy which will cause the Dutch to lose their identity, freedom, democracy and rule of law (Moffitt, 2015). The other Dutch far-right populist party is the FVD, under the leadership of Thierry Baudet. He wished to attack the 'political cartel' with which he meant all the long established parties, because according to Baudet they were responsible for the existential crisis of the Netherlands caused by the double threat of immigrants and the EU (Van Holsteyn, 2018). Lilian Marijnissen is one of the few female

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party leaders in the Dutch political system. She leads the SP, which is a left-wing party with some clear populist traits such as critiquing the consensual political system (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019). The government consists of four parties and the party leaders of the three major ones are being used for this research. First, Klaas Dijkhof is the party leader of the VVD in the house of representatives. The VVD is the liberal-conservative party, which delivered the prime minister Mark Rutte for the third time in a row. The VVD is governing together with the religious center-right CDA led by Pieter Heerma, and the progressive-liberal D66 under the leadership of Rob Jetten (Van Holsteyn, 2018).

The analyzed time span will be from the 26th of February until the 22nd of March. This is because the 27th of February was the day that the first Dutch citizen was diagnosed with COVID-19. In the month that followed, the virus spread throughout the Netherlands. Multiple governmental measures, under the name of an 'intelligent lockdown' were taken on the 15th of March. The selected time period thus focuses on the moment the virus entered the Dutch borders, until weeks after the outbreak when severe national measures were implemented. Since the world is experiencing the crisis now, it is not possible to study the further development of the crisis and therefore the focus will be on the beginning stages.

Method of analysis

The selected time span from the 26th of February until the 22nd of March combined with the six mentioned politicians, led to a total of 351 tweets that have been analyzed for this research. These were all the tweets that the politicians posted, so not only COVID-19 related tweets. These 351 tweets have been analyzed by means of both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis on the basis of five categories. These categories were: 'people-centrism', 'anti-elitism', 'COVID-19-positive', 'COVID-19-negative', and 'COVID-19-neutral'. If a tweet referred to 'the people', it was coded as 'people-centrist'. A tweet was categorized as 'anti-elitist' if it was a critical message about 'the elite'. A tweet was coded as 'COVID-19-positive', when the author of the tweet either emphasized positive developments in response to COVID-19, or if some kind of appreciation for Dutch individuals in relation to COVID-19 was expressed. A tweet was labeled as 'COVID-19-negative' if fear-arousing words and rhetoric was used to address the virus. 'COVID-19-neutral' was the category for tweets that referred to COVID-19 in a neutral way, for instance by only stating certain numbers or facts. From the 351 tweets, 231 tweets fell within one or more of the aforementioned five categories. The remaining 120 tweets were coded as 'Other'. In some cases, the tweet met the

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criteria of multiple categories and was therefore coded as such. The following section will be used to elaborate more extensively on the categories and method of coding.

In order to test the first hypothesis, both people-centrism and anti-elitism were manually coded, partly based on the methods developed by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) and Jagers and Walgrave (2007). To measure people-centrism, the focus was on the following question: 'Does the author of the tweet refer to the people?' This could be literally 'the people', but also other terms with the same meaning such as: 'the voters', 'the citizens', 'the taxpayers', 'the consumers', 'the residents', and 'the population' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Furthermore, in the Dutch language it is common to also use the singular form of the abovementioned words to address the whole population, so this was also coded as people-centrist. The coding happened manually through a grounded method, so if additional synonyms were found during the coding process they were added to the list of people-centrist indicators.[1] This list then accounted for the quantitative part of the content analysis. However, the coder also considered the larger context of the tweet to establish whether it could be categorized as people-centrist. To illustrate, when the word 'the Netherlands' was used to describe that some event happened in the Netherlands, it was not coded as people-centrist. On the other hand, when 'the Netherlands' was used as a subject, so to say that the Netherlands wanted something for instance, then it was categorized as people-centrist. Another example concerns the word 'together' which was coded people-centrist when the intention behind it was to address the whole population, but when Rob Jetten (2020) tweeted he had 'a meeting together with his colleagues' this was logically not coded as such.

Anti-elitism was operationalized by asking the following question: 'Does the author of the tweet criticize the elite?' Thus, this question consists of two elements. Firstly, the tweet should refer to 'the elite' and secondly this should include a criticism. Therefore, the coding happened fully qualitatively because in order to assess whether the author of the tweet is being critical, the larger context of the tweet is needed. Important to note here is that 'the elite' mentioned in a tweet, should be referring to a group of elites generally speaking. For example, this means a critique of the whole political system instead of being critical only against one political party or politician. For the opposition, and especially populist parties, it is common to criticize the whole government. However, this was not coded anti-elitist,

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[1] The full list can be found in appendix A.

because it still does not refer to the entire Dutch political system. In addition to the political elite, a tweet was labelled as anti-elitist if it critiqued the media, the state, intellectuals or economic powers (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Here, the same rule applied that it was only coded anti-elitist in the case that it addressed a whole system and not merely one part of it. The final codebook and how much of it was established before and how much was added later can be found in appendix A.

The second hypothesis stated that populist politicians, more often than non-populist politicians, use a type of rhetoric that is based on arousing fear while addressing COVID-19. In order to test this hypothesis, the tweets were qualitatively examined through the use of three different categories. The first category focused on a positive association with COVID-19. This meant that the tone of the tweet was positive, which was shown in two different ways. Either the author of the tweet emphasized positive developments in response to COVID-19, such as enhanced solidarity among the population or the favorable effect the virus has on climate change. The other possibility for a positive coding of the tweet was if it expressed some kind of appreciation for Dutch individuals in relation to COVID-19, like the people who work in the healthcare or supermarkets. The second category highlighted negative messages addressing the virus, for instance tweets that emphasized possible catastrophic outcomes or 'doomsday scenarios'. This category thus accounted for fear-arousing rhetoric as discussed in the theoretical framework, often recognized by typical words used such as 'alarm', 'concern', 'disturb', 'trouble', and 'worry'. The last category was for neutral tweets, which for example only stated certain numbers or facts about the virus. Here it was also important that the coder interpreted the larger context of the tweet, because continually stating certain facts about the virus, for instance how many people have died from it or were infected, could also work in a fear-arousing way. All the coding happened through a grounded method, so if additional interesting categories or patterns emerged from the data, they were added to the codebook. The final codebook and how much of it was established before and how much was added later can be found in appendix B.

From the 351 tweets, 231 tweets fell within one or more of the five categories: 'people-centrism', 'anti-elitism', 'COVID-19-positive', 'COVID-19-negative', and 'COVID-19-neutral'. The remaining 120 tweets were coded as 'Other'. In some cases, the tweet met the criteria of multiple categories and was therefore coded as such. For instance, on the 22nd of March Rob Jetten (2020) tweeted: 'Democracy is being abolished in Hungary. Horrible and

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unacceptable! The Netherlands are leading by example and should continue this. Even in times of extremely tough political choices there is democratic control. Representation of the people. Even in times of crisis.'[2] First of all, this tweet is people-centrist as it refers to the people by stressing the importance of the representation of people and democratic control. Secondly, the tweet was coded 'COVID-19-negative' because words like 'extremely tough' really emphasize the gravity of the situation. Another example that shows how the coding happened concerns the tweet of Pieter Heerma (2020): 'We can be proud of our country where immediately such a great willingness is shown to solve this problem together. A country where we take responsibility, not only for ourselves but also for others. #coronavirus' The most important word that indicates people-centrism in this tweet is 'together'. This is because the word 'together' insinuates that there is one Dutch entity who can do something 'together'. Furthermore, the tweet was coded 'COVID-19-positive' since it states how the Corona-crisis brings to light the willingness of Dutch people to work together and that this is something to be proud of.

Results

Looking at the first hypothesis, it predicted that populists politicians, as compared to non-populist politicians, advocate more often ideas based on anti-elitism and people-centrism. Table 1 shows that this is true, because in between the timespan of the 26th of February until the 22nd of March, populist politicians tweeted more than twice as much people-centrist messages as non-populist politicians looking at the absolute number of tweets. When it comes to anti-elitism, eleven tweets of populist politicians were coded anti-elitist as compared to zero tweets from the non-populist politicians.

When considering the percentages of people-centrist and anti-elitist tweets relative to the total amount of tweets, slightly different results are found. Populists still score higher than non-populists on anti-elitism. However, the number of people-centrist tweets in percentage of the total amount of tweets is even higher among the non-populists. This is because especially after the government implemented the severe measures in order to fight the COVID-19 virus, the number of non-populist people-centrist tweets increased noticeably. This can be explained logically since the government measures only have an effect if the whole population adheres to them. Unlike in other countries, the Dutch government decided to not impose a complete

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[2] All the tweets cited in this thesis were translated by the researcher who is a native Dutch speaker.

lockdown on the people. Instead, the Dutch citizens were expected to be responsible and follow the rules, for instance to keep a 1,5 meter distance from other individuals and to stay at home if possible. In short, the government trusted the people to work together and to help contain the virus. This was then shown through the use of words as 'together', 'everybody', 'all of us', 'all Dutch', 'the Netherlands', and 'as a country' in the Twitter content of non-populist politicians who were also members of the government parties. To illustrate, Rob Jetten (2020) tweeted two days after the government measures were implemented: '… We only make it through this crisis if we do it together. #Coronavirus'. The populist politicians on the other hand, also used people-centrist framing already before the 15th of March, the day the government measures against the virus were implemented. For example, Thierry Baudet (2020) said the following about the apologies of the Dutch king concerning the history in Indonesia on the 10th of March: 'Saying 'sorry' over and over again, always capitulating. As a descendant of proud Indian Dutch people, I am ashamed of the Dutch government that ignores our history and ignores the crimes committed against our population. #FVD' By stating 'our population', Baudet implies here that there is one Dutch population, one people. This shows how populist politicians also use people-centrist messages for purposes other than fighting COVID-19.

When it comes to anti-elitist ideas, zero were found among the tweets of non-populist politicians. They did in some cases criticize politicians of other parties or specific governmental policies. To illustrate, Rob Jetten (2020) mentioned the fact that the Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy was not very helpful in protecting the rights of store owners. Furthermore, Rob Jetten (2020) tweeted directly to Geert Wilders: 'Stop @geertwilderspvv! Stop politicizing the #corona crisis. Let the cabinet do its work in times of crisis …' However, for a tweet to be coded as anti-elitist it should criticize a whole elite system, so for example the whole political system or the whole media system. Thierry Baudet (2020) does this by often using words as 'partijkartel' and 'dikastocratie'.'Partijkartel' literally translates as party cartel and has a negative connotation, because Baudet uses it to claim that the established traditional parties are the main problem of the Netherlands. In addition, 'dikastocratie' is translated as kritarchy, which according to Baudet applies to the Netherlands. He argues that the Dutch trias politica is out of balance, because there is too much power with the judiciary. The following tweet of Lilian Marijnissen (2020) was also coded anti-elitist: 'It is good to see that the maddening uncertainty of people concerning their first needs is being removed. Now people have to survive. Then, we should quickly work

towards a fairer economy that works for everybody'. Here, Marijnissen implies that the whole economic system as it is now is not just. Therefore, this tweet was also categorized as anti-elitist.

To sum up, both people-centrist and anti-elitist ideas were found more frequently in the tweets of populist politicians as compared to non-populist politicians. However, looking at the percentages, non-populists scored higher on people-centrism than populists, which can be attributed to the appeal from the government to fight the virus together as a nation. On the other hand, zero anti-elitist messages were tweeted by the non-populists. Thus, non-populist politicians also used people-centrist ideas which was not the case for anti-elitist ideas. Therefore, anti-elitism is considered as a stronger indicator of populism than people-centrism. This is important information for the ongoing debate on how to define populism, because it suggests that people-centrism is contingent on the stage and type of crisis whereas anti-elitism seems to be a stable indicator of populism.

The second hypothesis stated that populists, more often than non-populist politicians, use a type of rhetoric that is based on arousing fear while addressing COVID-19. Fear-arousing messages concerning COVID-19 were coded as 'COVID-19-negative'. Table 1 shows that in the selected timespan, populist politicians tweeted one hundred three times a 'COVID-19-negative' message, whereas non-populist politicians did this only twelve times. In addition, looking at the percentages, the number of 'COVID-19-negative' tweets among populists was also well above that of non-populists with 35.2% as compared to 20.7%.

The following words were commonly used by populist politicians to create a sense of crisis or threat: 'urgency', 'emergency', 'life threatening', 'risk', 'death', 'fear', 'terrible', 'unrest', 'escalating', 'alarm', 'danger', 'victims', 'shocking', 'scared', 'frontline', 'survival', 'crisis' and 'threat'. Besides using these words, populist politicians used other methods to arouse fear with their messages. One way is by painting a picture of a possible doomsday scenario, in other words an extremely dangerous or serious situation that could lead to destruction or death. This type of rhetoric is often used by Geert Wilders (2020). He tweeted on the 16th of March: 'Contain the virus? Not really successful so far. Moreover, viruses cannot be controlled. Just look at all the countries around you @MinPres Rutte. Soon there will be no longer any IC beds available and we will experience Italian scenarios. Without a full lockdown, you will completely lose control! #corona' So by naming the worst possible

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outcomes, Wilders tries to emphasize the gravity of the situation which could ultimately have a fear creating effect. Another way to enhance the sense of crisis is by making it a priority and by focusing on the urgency of it. Especially, Wilders (2020) and Baudet (2020) did this by requesting multiple parliamentary debates about the Corona virus. The urgent tone also was shown in their tweets with phrases as 'NOW AND IMMEDIATELY' in capital letters. The third populist politician, Lilian Marijnissen (2020), compared the COVID-19-crisis indirectly to a war situation. She did so by using words as 'frontline' in her vocabulary, for example in the following tweet: 'I wish strength to the patients and their family. Also to all the healthcare providers, from general practitioners to experts at the RIVM. They are in the frontline to protect our health. Our gratitude for their efforts is great! #coronavirus' Vocabulary like this is certainly not neutral and could lead to more fear among individuals. The fourth phenomenon that was more common under populists as compared to non-populists, was actively pointing out how many people have died as a consequence of the virus. To illustrate, on the 13th of March Geert Wilders (2020) tweeted: 'Only today 5 people died of #Corona. Horrible. Thoughts go out to the family. Also, 190 people were infected in 1 day. The total number of people infected with Corona in the Netherlands is now more than 800. Keeping schools open is criminal. There should be a parliamentary debate quickly! #closetheschools' Lastly, harshly criticizing the government policy regarding the virus could also decrease the trust of the population and instead create a feeling of fear. Thierry Baudet (2020) did this multiple times, for example by stating that 'The government has been WAY TOO LAX in its approach to the #Corona infections. Drastic measures are needed immediately to protect the Dutch against #Covid_19 and to ensure that we get the situation under control again. Judge for yourself!'

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Table 1. Results of the Twitter content analysis: the absolute numbers of coded tweets, with the percentage in relative to the total amount of tweets in parentheses.

	People-centrist	Anti-elitist	COVID-19-positive	COVID-19-negative	COVID-19-neutral	Other	Total tweets
Thierry Baudet	12 (11.3%)	7 (6.6%)	0 (0%)	30 (28.3%)	18 (17%)	46 (43.4%)	106
Geert Wilders	20 (14.3%)	2 (1.4%)	3 (2.1%)	61 (43.6%)	34 (24.3%)	39 (27.9%)	140
Lilian Marijnissen	10 (21.3%)	2 (4.3%)	5 (10.6%)	12 (25.5%)	6 (12.8%)	22 (46.8%)	47
Populists	*42 (14.3%)*	*11 (3.8%)*	*8 (2.7%)*	*103 (35.2%)*	*58 (19.8%)*	*107 (36.5%)*	*293*
Pieter Heerma	8 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	4 (33.3%)	3 (25%)	4 (33.3%)	2 (16.7%)	12
Rob Jetten	7 (17.9%)	0 (0%)	5 (12.8%)	9 (23.1%)	15 (38.5%)	9 (23.1%)	39
Klaas Dijkhoff	1 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	7
Non-populists	*16 (27.6%)*	*0 (0%)*	*11 (19%)*	*12 (20.7%)*	*23 (39.7%)*	*12 (20.7%)*	*58*

To summarize, the results of the Twitter content analysis support both the hypotheses. Based on the absolute number of tweets, populist politicians use more people-centrist and anti-elitist ideas than non-populist politicians. However, when taking in consideration the percentages, the situation becomes a bit more complex. This is because the politicians of the government parties often used people-centrist messages in order to convince the people to work together and to help contain the virus. Considering both the absolute numbers and percentages of tweets, populists tweeted more often messages that could create fear among individuals. The way in which populists enhance the sense of threat and crisis among the population is partly through the use of certain fear-arousing words like: 'escalating', 'urgency', and 'danger'. Furthermore, through the analysis of the tweets it became clear that populist politicians use multiple strategies to emphasize the threat that is caused by COVID-19. This was shown

through the mentioning of doomsday scenarios, prioritizing the crisis, using war vocabulary, stating the number of deaths, and criticizing the government policy regarding the crisis.

Conclusion

Using new information of the current COVID-19-crisis, this study aimed to give an insight in how populist politicians use social media as a tool to spread fear among the population. The Twitter content of six Dutch politicians has been analyzed, while making a comparison between populists and non-populists. The first part of the results showed that populists politicians, as compared to non-populist politicians, advocate more often ideas based on anti-elitism and people-centrism. However, anti-elitism seemed to be a stronger indicator of populism than people-centrism. This is valuable information that could contribute to a wider understanding on how to define populism, because up until today the exact conceptualization of populism is still highly contested (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). The findings of this study then suggest that people-centrism is contingent on the stage and type of crisis, whereas anti-elitism seems to be a more stable and reliable indicator of populism. Thus, according to this research populism is better defined and measured by the degree of anti-elitism as compared to people-centrism.

The second important finding that emerged from this research was that populists, as compared to non-populists, more often use a type of rhetoric that is based on arousing fear while addressing COVID-19. These findings are similar to the work of Homolar and Scholz (2019), who argue that crisis narratives can remove the feeling of stability human beings normally have, and instead spark fear and insecurity among the population. Populists make use of such an occasion and only try to enhance the anxiety even more by communicating fear-arousing messages. The case of COVID-19 and the corresponding narratives among Dutch politicians showed this as well. In addition, this research provided an extensive list of the typical words populists use to enhance the sense of threat and crisis. Furthermore, through the grounded analysis of the tweets it became clear that populist politicians use multiple strategies to emphasize the threat that is caused by COVID-19. This was shown through the mentioning of possible doomsday scenarios, prioritizing the crisis, using war vocabulary, stating the number of deaths and criticizing the government policy regarding the crisis. These findings are largely in line with the populist crisis performance model of Moffitt (2016). This model consists of six steps that are used by populist actors to elevate the level of crisis. These steps are not always necessarily performed in the same exact order. The first step is 'identify failure' which

corresponds with the criticizing of government policy regarding the COVID-19-crisis, as was found through the Twitter content analysis. Moffitt (2016) also argues that an important aspect of the model of performing crisis is the temporal dimension. This is shown through the fact that populists state that their ideas should be executed within a short period of time otherwise horrible things will occur. This is in line with the findings that Dutch populist politicians used doomsday scenarios while addressing COVID-19. Furthermore, using war vocabulary concerning the COVID-19 crisis, is what Moffit (2016) names 'metaphorical framing'. The goal of this is to 'invoke a sense of shared trauma and concern, with a common threat bringing together 'victims' through a shared sense of vulnerability' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 124). The last two methods to spark a sense of crisis that were found through the Twitter content analysis were prioritizing the crisis and stating the number of deaths. These are not literally mentioned in the model of Moffitt (2016), however they could be a meaningful addition to the sixth step: 'continue to propagate crisis'. Here, the focus is on how populist actors use different methods to continue fueling the sense of crisis among the population.

Although this study provides some valuable findings, there are certain limitations to the research that need to be addressed. First of all, the fact that the COVID-19 crisis is an ongoing crisis, makes it difficult to measure the possible societal effects of the established fear-based crisis rhetoric of populist politicians. For example, whether this has an effect on the electorate and their political preference, can only be definitively concluded about when the crisis is over. Furthermore, the study that was conducted focused primarily on the emotion of fear. However, Rico et al. (2017) argue that anger also plays an important role in the mechanisms that account for populist support. Accordingly, they state that it is not sufficient to look at the emotion of fear only. Lastly, the analysis of the tweets was for a great part dependent on the interpretation of the coder, especially for the qualitative part. Therefore, it would be ideal to have multiple coders in order to increase the objectivity and to test intercoder reliability. Unfortunately, this was not the case for this research where only one individual analyzed the tweets. Still, this was done through a systematic method and as objective as possible. The aforementioned limitations of this study point to interesting directions for further research. This would mean to examine the societal implications of these established results over time, to include the emotion of anger into the equation, and to add multiple coders. Another suggestion for further research would be to conduct this particular study on a bigger scale in two possible ways. Either, by also including political parties in the analysis which are not populist nor a government party, since it is common for the government parties to not be

highly critical of government policies. Or, by taking this research across the borders of the Netherlands and analyze the Twitter content of non-Dutch politicians in order to determine whether comparable results can be established in different countries with different parliamentary systems.

Nevertheless, this case study of the Netherlands in a COVID-19 world, contributed to a wider understanding of how populist politicians use social media as a tool to spread fear among the population during an international crisis. In doing so, this research aimed to show that political language is often far from innocent. Awareness on this topic is important, especially in today's reality where a global crisis is easily politicized online through the strategic use of language and rhetoric.

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Appendix A: Codebook for the first hypothesis, people-centrism and anti-elitism

Below is the final version of the codebook, which includes both the categories that were determined upfront and also the information that emerged from a grounded coding method. To distinguish the part of the codebook that was established before from that which emerged from the data, the later added part has been underlined.

For a tweet to be coded as people-centrist it should refer to 'the people'

	Words that refer to 'the people'
People-centrism	The voter(s),
	the citizen(s),
	the taxpayer(s),
	the consumer(s),
	the resident(s),
	the Dutchman/Dutchmen,
	the Netherlands,
	the public,
	the population,
	everybody,
	all of us,
	all Dutch,
	as a country,
	together,
	society,
	each other

For a tweet to be coded as anti-elitist it should: 1) Refer to the elite and 2) Be critical

	1. Refers to 'the elite'	2. Is critical
Anti-elitism	The elite, the political system, the media, the state, the intellectuals, the economic powers, the established parties, <u>the established order</u>	Is critical on the whole system and not merely on one part or aspect of it.

Appendix B: Codebook for the second hypothesis, COVID-19-positive, COVID-19-negative, COVID-19-neutral

Below is the final version of the codebook, which includes both the categories that were determined upfront and also the information that emerged from a grounded coding method. To distinguish the part of the codebook that was established before from that which emerged from the data, the later added part has been <u>underlined.</u>

	Indicator
COVID-19-positive	1. Positive development
	<u>2. Appreciation for Dutch individuals</u>
COVID-19-negative	1. Use of fear-arousing words*
	<u>2. Mentioning of possible doomsday</u> <u>scenarios</u>
	<u>3. Prioritizing the crisis</u>
	<u>4. Using war vocabulary</u>
	<u>5. Stating the number of deaths</u>
	<u>6. Criticizing the government policy</u>
COVID-19-neutral	1. Stating facts
	2. Stating objective numbers

*These words were: 'urgency', 'emergency', 'life threatening', 'risk', 'death', 'fear', 'threat' 'terrible', 'unrest', 'escalating', 'alarm', 'danger', <u>'victims'</u>, <u>'shocking'</u>, <u>'scared'</u>, <u>'frontline'</u>, <u>'survival'</u>, <u>'crisis'</u>, <u>'horrible'</u>, <u>'extremely tough'</u>