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Understanding the nature of a rising political phenomenon: Populism in times of crisis: a comparative discourse analysis on populist rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Understanding the nature of a rising political phenomenon

Populism in times of crisis: a comparative discourse analysis on populist rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Abstract

Over the last two decades, we have observed a surge in support for populist parties. As populism is known to thrive on crisis, the current COVID-19 pandemic provides an interesting case to study its nature. This thesis tests whether the three-folded paradox of populism observed in the U.S. by Rogers Brubaker (2020) holds for the Netherlands and Germany, by means of a comparative discourse analysis. This analysis covers the Twitter discourse of Dutch politicians Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet, and the German populist party, Alternative für Deutschland, during the first wave of COVID-19. This thesis thereby enters the conceptual debate on populism, arguing the observed discourse to not convey a consistent ideology, but instead to adhere to certain stylistic elements that could be qualified as characteristic of a populist political style. Moreover, the comparative analysis will shed light on whether the rise of populism can be classified as a global, perhaps ideological phenomenon, or whether national characteristics also play a role. Throughout this thesis, the role and importance of the contemporary media landscape with its various online channels for the mobilisation of contemporary populists are taken into consideration. As a surge in populist rhetoric could further uproot the established global political landscape, understanding this phenomenon is of high importance for the future of international relations.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the world has observed, and suffered from, a crisis of faith in democracy (Moffitt, 2016). Political polarization and a dissolving of the political centre can be observed in many countries worldwide (Ibid.). Over these decades, a surge in populist rhetoric has uprooted the established global political landscape (Lewis et al., 2019). A study of 31 European countries has shown support for populist parties to have more than tripled between 1998 and 2018, with one in four Europeans in these countries now voting populist (Lewis et al. 2018).

Populists often fabricate a sense of crisis to stress the threat that a protagonist “elite” is posing to the antagonistic “people” (Moffitt, 2016). Hence, as expected in times of crises, populism has had the opportunity to thrive under the global COVID-19 pandemic, further increasing the observable polarization trend. Examples of the larger trend are the victories of Brexit and Trump, the enormous increase in popularity of the populist right represented by politicians such as Norbert Hofer, Marine Le Pen, and Nicolás Maduro, and electoral breakthroughs, such as that of the German far-right anti-immigrant party Alternative für Deutschland (the first of its kind since the fall of the Nazi-regime) (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2016). The impact these politicians and their decisions have on international relations nowadays, and the future thereof (take Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement as a prime example), underline the importance of gaining further understanding of this trend. By performing a discourse analysis on Dutch and German populist politicians during the first wave of COVID-19, this thesis contributes to a more knowledgeable position with regards to how crises - in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic - allow for the populist narrative to be pushed. In order to do so, understanding the more general interaction between populism and crisis, and the way populists make use of the contemporary media, is of the utmost importance. Moreover, the international dimension of this study, namely the comparative analysis of populist discourse in the U.S., the Netherlands and Germany, will shed light on whether this rise can be classified as a global, perhaps ideological phenomenon, or whether national characteristics also play a role.

In the face of a worldwide pandemic, high levels of insecurity within society are combined with a large dependency on local, national, and transnational institutions. This provides fruitful ground for a populist narrative that contradicts mainstream politics. Adding to this, is the fact that disinformation is disrupting the public debate, leading to deteriorating levels of trust in the media, and with it, in the authorities and the country’s democratic

institutions. This can cause civil unrest and create space for alternative narratives, such as populist, or even conspirative narratives, to gain momentum. The COVID-19 pandemic offers an interesting case, allowing us to explore how populism behaves during an actual crisis.

In 2020, Rogers Brubaker published an article, titled *Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic*, on the behaviour of populism in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article states it to appear paradoxical in the following three respects: firstly, whereas normally, populism uses a (fabricated) sense of crisis to thrive on, during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream politics and media were accused of exaggerating or even inventing the crisis. Secondly, populism is generally hostile to expertise, yet during this crisis, society has been forced to look to medical experts for guidance. Hence, hostility towards expertise could cause populists to lose support. However, he explains this is only an apparent paradox, as especially its indispensable character has made experts vulnerable to successful populist attack. Lastly, whereas ordinarily, populism has a protectionist character, populists in the US have turned anti-protectionist during this crisis and have criticized measures, aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19, claiming them to be overprotective.

This thesis will explore how Dutch and German populists have behaved in this time of crisis. I thereby pose the following three questions. Firstly, whether the three-folded paradox, observed by Brubaker in the US, can also be observed in the discourse of Dutch and German populist politicians. Secondly, whether these observations tell us anything about populism as a concept: does it belong to the domain of ideology, or rather that of a political style? And lastly, by comparing the differences in national responses, I aim to establish whether we can identify a border-crossing conformity in these observations or whether national characteristics also play a role.

As an ideology demands consistency, I hypothesise that this comparative analysis of populist discourse will demonstrate populism to be a political style. A style which adheres to a certain discursive and stylistic repertoire, in which content adapts to situations and time, rather than following a substantive ideology. Moreover, the role and importance of the contemporary media landscape with its various online channels for the mobilisation of contemporary populists will be discussed. This is done to add to the literature trying to understand the recent rise of populism in Europe that is fostering political polarization, and further define the role of crisis and the contemporary media landscape herein.

To answer these questions, I have conducted a discourse analysis of all Twitter activity during the first wave of the pandemic by Dutch populist politicians Geert Wilders

(Partij voor de Vrijheid) and Thierry Baudet (Forum voor Democratie), who represent two parties currently in the Dutch opposition, on the one hand, compared to German populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), on the other. A comparative analysis will thereafter enable conclusions to be drawn on whether we can identify a border-crossing conformity in these observations or whether national characteristics also play a role.

Literature Review

Conceptual definitions of populism

Populism has been on the rise as citizens find themselves more and more disillusioned with mainstream politics (Moffitt, 2016). Politicians who speak up in defence of “the people” against “the elite”, arguably in the name of democracy, have been gaining ground over the past two decades (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). This trend did not go unnoticed by academia, referring to it as a “populist Zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004, p. 542), a “populist wave” (Krastev, 2007, p. 57) and a “populist revival” (Roberts, 2007, p. 3). However, when trying to gain an understanding of this trend, first, the question of what it is that constitutes populism needs to be addressed.

This thesis will be set within the wider academic debate on the concept of populism, addressing scholars Cas Mudde on the one hand, and Benjamin Moffitt and Rogers Brubaker on the other, as representatives of two main schools of thought. Namely, within the scholarly debate, no consensus exists on a conceptual definition of populism. Consensus is especially lacking on the question of whether populism belongs to the domain of ideology (Mudde, 2004; 2007), or whether it should be seen as a political style (Moffitt, 2016), or a discursive and stylistic repertoire (Brubaker, 2017). This literature review will address the four central approaches to populism before concentrating on two distinct theories of the latter two scholars. Firstly, that of Moffitt (2016), whose approach to populism this thesis will use as foundational understanding, in which he argues populism to be a theatrical, performative political style which can be found across the whole political spectrum, and secondly, Brubaker’s theory set out in *Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic*, which this thesis shall be testing, addressed under a separate header.

Within contemporary literature, meaning from 1990 onwards, four central approaches can be identified. That of populism as a 1. ideology, 2. strategy, 3. discourse, or 4. political logic. Most dominant in the body of literature on the concept of populism of the last decade, are theories arguing it to be an ideology. Building on the literature of Shils (1956), it was

Mudde's *Minimal Definition of Populism* (2007, p. 23) that made the concept of populism as a 'thin-centred' ideology gain ground in political science. He defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into a homogeneous and an antagonistic group, '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). His definition restricts populism to a set of ideas. It is called a thin-centred ideology, for Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue it to have common features that remain stable across space and time, but to mostly present itself in co-existence with other ideologies. According to Loew & Thorsten (2019), it is thereby implied that successful populism is in need of a host ideology. Others, such as Canovan (2002) and Lasch (1996) refute this and argue populism to have an intrinsic democratic nature, and with it, a strong and self-standing ideology. Hence, variations of Mudde's conceptual understanding of populism are widely cited (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 2002, Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Kaltwasser et al., 2013; Stanley, 2008; Taguieff, 1995;) but have also been heavily critiqued for not considering key components of populism, such as its styles of communication and leadership (De La Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019; Abromeit, 2017).

Those denouncing populism to be an ideology state that, rather than political ideologies such as realism or liberalism, populism relies much less on a set of principles or ideas rather than on a specific way of performing politics. Their arguments all refute the ideational or ideological approach and instead approach populism as either a discursive political logic (Laclau 1977, 1980; Stavrakakis, 2004), a style of discourse (Barros, 2005; Canovan, 1999; Knight, 1998; Ostinguy, 2009), or a political style (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016).

According to Brubaker (2017), populism should be seen as a discursive and stylistic repertoire, which does not have an inherent ideology. Similarly, Arter (2010) states "populism is confrontational, chameleonic, culture-bound and context-dependent" (p. 489). Moffitt (2016) argues, along these same lines, the contemporary concept should move from "seeing populism as a particular 'thing' or entity towards viewing it as a political style that is performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts". Contemporary populism, he argues, should be seen as a theatrical, performative political style in which one can identify a performer (the populist leader), an audience ("the people") and a stage (consisting of some crisis and the media). Moreover, he argues that the changing media landscape should be considered, and academia should seek to understand how new media

technologies, which touch upon all aspects of political life, are used as a tool to the advantage of the populist (Moffitt, 2016).

Populism & crisis

According to Taggart (2000), populism gets its momentum from a widespread perception of crisis, threat or - often the result of a crisis - a breakdown of trust between citizens and their representatives. According to Moffitt & Tormey (2014), a sense of crisis or threat, whether actually existing or created (take for example Geert Wilders framing a supposed Islamisation of the Netherlands as an imminent threat to the well-being of “the Dutch citizen” (Vossen, 2010)), generates a general distrust of the complex functioning of governance and policy solutions, allowing populists of opposition parties to offer alternative, swift and understandable solutions to complex problems. This also shows in the used narrative, characterized by what Canovan (1999) calls a tabloid-style. According to Ostinguy (2009), who has created two-dimensional axes of high-low and left-right politics useful for characterizing certain political strategies and placing them within the political spectrum, this style contains elements such as slang, swearing, political incorrectness and the use of colourful, popular language. Thinking of populism as a political style, with identifiable tactics such as a certain narration style, makes it understandable why this style may be found across the whole political spectrum, left to right (Ostinguy, 2009).

The considerable economic and social upheaval caused by the COVID-19 crisis, like other crises before, creates a context that is particularly conducive to a political style with a polarizing character: a narrative aimed at deepening social divisions (Manow, 2020). A crisis demanding measures with an economic impact to be taken, in most cases, hits the middle class hardest. As these measures are taken by the government, a narrative portraying the government as having only the elite’s interest at heart and which offers an alternative focused on the interest of the middle-class or “the people”, is likely to find an increase in support (Manow, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020).

Populism & the contemporary media landscape

Moffitt’s (2016) argument, that understanding the rise of populism as a style of politics cannot be done without generating an understanding of contemporary media politics, and the commercialisation hereof, is widely cited (Waisbord, 2003; Stanley, 2008; Brubaker, 2017, 2020). In the case of this thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated high levels of

distrust in the media, mainstream politics, and the authorities (Brubaker, 2020). In part, this is due to the enormous increase in circulating disinformation, popularly referred to by the term “fake news”. Throughout this thesis, the term *disinformation* will be used to denote “Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Bennet & Livingston (2018) tie the rapid spread of disinformation to the growing legitimacy problems that democracies are facing. Moreover, they associate it with the radical right’s efforts to mobilize support against centrist parties and democratic institutions by discrediting the mainstream press. They state that disinformation campaigns by populist leaders such as Donald Trump have “liberated large numbers of people from the constraints of evidence and reason and fuelled public discourses driven by anger, hate, prejudice and lies” (p. 125). The effects of disinformation are furthermore multiplied by the fact that the digital environment, especially that of social media, algorithmically improves the visibility of popular messages, actively increasing the reach of these messages to increase profit (Brubaker, 2020; Hopp et al., 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018). A study by Vosoughi et al. (2018) shows that tweets containing disinformation are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than tweets containing true information. Logically, this trend, combined with a profit fuelled algorithm actively enhancing the visibility of these stories, hugely amplifies the reach of disinformation. Furthermore, moderating such rapidly spreading information only tends to raise concerns about censorship, allowing populists to cast doubt on mainstream politics and media by accusing them of deciding what one should deem a legitimate view (Brubaker, 2020).

This thesis acknowledges the influential role of the contemporary media landscape and the rapid increase and spread of disinformation. Hence, to be able to draw conclusions on the behaviour of populism in times of crisis, the ways in which populists use disinformation and the digital environment to generate a narrative working to their advantage will have to be considered.

Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic - Brubaker

The article *Paradoxes of Populism during the Pandemic*, by Brubaker (2020), suggests that populists in the U.S. have demonstrated paradoxical behaviour during this crisis. He states it to appear paradoxical in three respects, each of which will be addressed below.

Crisis

“The rhetoric of “crisis” serves as a bid for attention, a marker of urgency, a claim that extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. Populists do not simply respond to pre-existing crises; they seek rather to cultivate, exacerbate, or even create a sense of crisis, casting the crisis as one that they alone have the power to resolve.” (Brubaker, 2020, p. 13)

This quote shows that Brubaker believes populists often contribute to, or even produce the crisis they claim to solve. However, during the COVID-19 crisis, he observes U.S. populists to accuse mainstream politics, the media and public health experts of exaggerating or even inventing the Corona crisis. Brubaker states that by performing what he calls a “non-crisis” regarding COVID-19, populists have capitalized on another crisis, namely the economic and political crisis resulting from the measures taken to prevent the disease from spreading. With regards to the economic crisis, emphasis is put on the inequality with which the economic impact affects the middle class or “the people” as opposed to the elite. Politically, protest against the emergency regulations has claimed them to infringe on fundamental rights. Hence, populists have staged an economic and political crisis caused by, and consequently overshadowing, the health crisis in order to further push a narrative contradicting that of the establishment. Brubaker recognizes this reaction to dominantly stem from populists in the opposition, though also adhered to by populists in power such as Donald Trump and the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. Other populist leaders in power, however, such as the Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, have created a narrative emphasizing the gravity of the Corona crisis, allowing them to expand their authoritarian power (Brubaker, 2020).

Expertise

Brubaker recognizes that it may seem paradoxical at first that populism, so hostile to expertise, has gained ground during a period in which expertise forms the basis for all political decisions. However, this paragraph explains why this is only an apparent paradox. Namely, especially its indispensable character has made experts vulnerable to successful populist attack.

With regard to expertise, Brubaker starts off by quoting Gil Eyal (2019), who states that politics increasingly calls upon science to prove the legitimacy of its policies, especially when said policies advantage some and disadvantage others, calling this trend the “politicization of science”. As populism is characterized by its anti-establishment rhetoric, when the establishment and its institutions call upon experts to support their policy decisions,

the obvious anti-establishment reaction would be to discredit these voices and call upon counter-expertise.

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the influence of virologists, epidemiologists and other medical experts has been unprecedented, affecting the entire world not only with regards to health but in all its spheres: social, economic, and political. Especially the fact that the world is heading towards an economic crisis makes a populist narrative, appealing to “the people” and discrediting expert voices to contradict the politicians who followed their guidance, a logical one. Brubaker recognizes several causes for the success hereof, such as the hyper-accessibility of an abundance of expertise or claimed expertise, which makes it easy to cast doubts on facts or data presented by experts to support policy decisions made by the establishment. As, logically, the hyper-accessibility of knowledge includes disinformation, this further distorts the debate and discredits expertise.

Protectionism

Lastly, Brubaker (2020) refers to the normally protectionist character of populism, claiming to protect “the people” from threats from the outside or from some “other”. Among these threats is that of globalization, a neoliberal economy and open borders, which are all portrayed as favourable to the elite and not “the people”. However, in the face of the pandemic, U.S. populists have turned anti-protectionist, claiming lockdown and social distancing measures to be overly protective. Brubaker recognizes that this paradox also only seems to be paradoxical. Namely, one could argue that a protectionist stance is taken towards liberties instead of safety. However, he deems protecting individual liberties with overprotective restrictions to be libertarian and hence, this does represent a paradox.

Concluding remarks on Brubaker

The argument Brubaker aims to support by presenting the paradoxes he observed in the U.S. is that unlike other political theories such as realism or liberalism, populism lacks a substantive ideology. I, however, dispute that we can draw such a conclusion based solely on the observations in one country. Consequently, this thesis will test whether the proposed paradox holds for the populist narrative used in the Netherlands and Germany. This thesis hypothesizes that this research will demonstrate populism to be a political style with a corresponding style of narrative, in which content will adapt to the needs of a great variety of situations, rather than following a substantive ideology. Seeing how not only U.S. populists,

but also populist politicians in the Netherlands and Germany, have adapted their discourse to fit the current crisis and uphold the opposition between “the people” and “the elite/the establishment” will underline this argument.

Research Design & Methodology

Methodology

To answer my research questions, a critical discourse analysis will be carried out on all Twitter communication, selected and analysed according to criteria explained below. As this thesis does not aim to establish whether the analysed tweets consist of language or sentiment that can be classified as populist, no sentiment analysis or other form of quantitative analysis distinguishing populist from non-populist tweets will be carried out. Hence, besides quantifying the number of times certain keywords have been used, establishing how the three elements of analysis have featured in the selected tweets, and how this has differed between the U.S. (as observed by Brubaker), the Netherlands and Germany, will be based purely on qualitative methods and on the discretion of the researcher. During the process of reading and qualitatively analysing the selection of tweets, I have manually tallied the tweets, putting them into the three categories specified by Brubaker, and adding a fourth category (‘other’) for tweets not specifically belonging to any.

It is important to note that, although this thesis focuses solely on discourse as a unit of analysis, characteristics of the populist political style are not restricted to language. To gain a further understanding of populism as a style, one should consider its performative dimensions. As it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide this extra depth of analysis, to better generate an understanding hereof please refer to the works of Knight (1998) and de la Torre (2007).

Discourse analysis

To draw conclusions on the behaviour of various populists during the COVID-19 crisis, a critical discourse analysis will be conducted. Discourse is the linguistic practice that defines the construction of social identities, relationships and memberships to larger socially defining group identities (Angermuller, 2014). Untangling language through means of discourse analysis can illuminate these constructions (Carey, 1989). Moreover, the study of discourse in International Relations is used to demonstrate how politicians socially construct reality, using language to portray events in a manner working to their advantage, thereby for

example including some in their narrative and excluding others by using us/them language (Angermuller, 2014). Doing so can help uncover power structures or relationships of dominance, discrimination, and power (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). In the case of this thesis, a qualitative critical discourse analysis will help illuminate how the Corona crisis specifically, and crises generally, have been used in discourse to aid populism to gain momentum.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a specific type of discourse analysis that takes a poststructuralist approach to language. Namely, it believes reality is socially constructed and aims to illuminate how language is used to construct power relations (van Dijk, 1993). Van Dijk (1993) points out that CDA should not be seen as a distinct method, but rather as a critical state of mind to aid many qualitative methods of analysing discourses. Wodak (2009) adds that all discourses are historical and hence, it is a critical analysis of context that depicts its relevance. Al-Rahami & Rashid (2019) criticize CDA as a framework of analysis for its focus on deconstructing the world of dominance and its lack of eye for the use of language in the construction of new social realities, which it deems necessary for the understanding of the subjective rationality that is constructed by populists for what they refer to as “the people”. Hence, this thesis will take a poststructuralist approach to analyse discourse in order to not only deconstruct existing power relations but also understand the use of populist language in the construction of new political realities.

Criteria of analysis

This critical discourse analysis will establish how the three elements that Brubaker’s theory (2020) focuses on, have featured in the narrative of each of the politicians or parties. Namely:

1. **Crisis** - seeing whether they have capitalized on the Corona crisis or have claimed it to be overblown.
2. **Expertise** – evaluating the references made to the available expertise and the strategic use made hereof. *
3. **Protectionism** – seeing whether they have stuck to their usual protectionist narrative or, like in the U.S., have diverged from this political course and instead taken a protectionist stance not towards the safety, but towards the liberties of “the people”.

* As the corona crisis has sparked an enormous increase in the spread of disinformation, when looking at the stance the politicians have taken towards expertise, it will also be evaluated if, and if so, how the studied populists have spread disinformation or have referred to disinformation and/or conspiracy theories in relation to the Corona crisis.

Text selection

The Netherlands

All communication sent out on Twitter by Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands will be analysed. In the Netherlands, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) has registered the first wave of the pandemic to have been from the beginning of March till the end of June. For the sake of this thesis, all tweets between the 27th of February 2020 (the day of the first registered Dutch COVID-19 case) till the 30th of June will be included.

To further delimit the text selection, the following criteria have been defined:

1. Timeframe: 27/02/2020 00:00 o'clock – 30/06/2020 00:00 o'clock.
2. Only direct tweets, meaning retweets will be excluded.
3. Each tweet should contain at least one of the keywords listed in the appendix.

Germany

For Germany, all communication sent out on Twitter by the official AfD Twitter account during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany will be analysed. In Germany, the first COVID-19 case was registered on 27 January 2020. Consequently, the Robert Koch Institute has classified the first wave to have been from this date till mid-June.

To further delimit the text selection, the following criteria have been defined:

1. Timeframe: 27/01/2020 00:00 o'clock – 16/06/2020 00:00 o'clock.
2. Only direct tweets, meaning retweets will be excluded.
3. Each tweet should contain at least one of the keywords listed in the appendix.

As all analysed communication is in Dutch or German, translations will be given throughout this text. Moreover, one may notice that the Twitter communication by Wilders and Baudet will be analysed from their personal accounts, while the AfD's discourse will be analysed from the official account. The reason for this is that whereas Wilders and Baudet can be seen as the spearhead of the party - and with that also the embodiment of the political

message it conveys - the AfD has several leaders that represent ideologically and politically slightly differing factions of the party. Hence, analysing the account of only one of its leaders would not be representative of the overall discourse of the party. As the official Twitter account is sure to be representing the general stance of the party, using that account as a unit of analysis will allow for the most representative discourse analysis.

Assessing the political significance of Twitter

As this thesis in large analyses the political discourse taking place on Twitter, it is of high importance to first establish the political significance of the messages sent on this platform. This begs the question, to what degree politics has shifted from the public debate to online messages, and how tweets influence the political view and behaviour of its constituents and that of its opponents.

Many researchers have asserted that social media has started to affect elections and the way in which political discourse is conducted (Gulati & Williams, 2010; Chen & Smith, 2011; Gruzd & Roy, 2014; Hong & Kim, 2016). More specifically, several scholars argue Twitter to be a platform allowing for mobilization, which would, indeed, indicate Twitter to be of political significance (Hendricks & Denton, 2009; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2014; Nikolovska et al. 2020). Moreover, research has demonstrated Twitter to be a suitable platform for political communication for members of parliament (Larsson, 2015), politicians (Aharony, 2012) and political parties (Adi et al., 2014), but also for group advocacy (Konnolly, 2015) and modern activism, Gerbaudo (2012) stating it to be a platform that “facilitates and guides the physical *assembling* of a highly dispersed and individualised constituency” (p. 5) (Pérez Curiel, 2020).

Gerbaudo (2014) argues populism has become interactive and participatory and argues it to “strive to make use of the massive reach social media facilitate, as well as of their interactive features, such as liking, sharing, commenting, and re-tweeting, to construct a new form of mass politics fitting a society pervaded by the diffusion of social network sites [...]” (p. 68). Such interaction is, amongst others, facilitated by Twitter. Data from a study by Parmelee & Bichard (2012) underlines this, showing Twitter to be of major influence in political discourse, defining the relationship between political leaders and the public in crucial ways.

Furthermore, research shows the increasing concern of scholars with the negative impact of populist rhetoric articulated on the internet (Baum, 2011; Hong, 2013; Prior, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2016). Especially when focussing on social media, the potential for political polarization is large and increasingly gaining attention (Roy, 2011; Gruzd & Roy, 2014). One of the culprits for this is that the algorithm often tailors content to reflect and reinforce the user's opinions and beliefs. By tracking the user's behaviour and using this to filter the information shown to suit the user's interest, the algorithm fuels a confirmation bias and provides a so-called "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011) or "echo chamber" (Hong & Kim, 2016). Moreover, Hong & Kim (2016) found that politicians with ideologically extreme views have more Twitter followers.

The scholarly debate has noticed the importance of these trends with regard to the rise of populism, making way for a relatively new theoretical framework, referred to as algorithmic populism which, according to Maly (2018), moves from a one-dimensional focus when it comes to the rhetoric of populists, to seeing populism as a "digitally mediated *communicative relation* between humans and algorithmic actors" (Maly, 2018, cited in Van Raalte et al., 2021). Underlining the importance of these dimensions, Gruzd & Roy (2014) have found that people on Twitter predominantly cluster around shared political views, facilitated by algorithms ensuring that people interact more with fellow partisans than with their opponents. This is something that can strengthen the affiliation within political groupings, thereby reinforcing social and political polarization.

A concern that scholars, including Yardi & Boyd (2010), have raised with regards to Twitter, is whether the length of a tweet allows for meaningful political discussions. However, politicians often incorporate links to websites and articles, allowing them to share in more depth. Still, it is something to be critical of when taking Twitter as a prime source of analysis. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that Twitter is especially suitable for the short and simple messages that populists aim to convey, offering these messages a much wider reach by means of their virality. This claim is affirmed by Engesser et al. (2017) and Pérez Curiel (2020) who argue that populist politicians exploit this influence and reach out on Twitter to attack the elite, defend "the people" or simply to include and exclude in a very powerful manner.

Discourse analysis

1. The Netherlands

Forum voor Democratie

Introduction

Thierry Baudet, the founder of Forum for Democracy (FvD), was one of the initiators of the citizens' initiative, and referendum, against the treaty of the European Union with Ukraine. Leading up to this referendum, in February 2015, Baudet founded Forum for Democracy, which was to be a think tank that would discuss the regeneration of democracy in the Netherlands. Shortly thereafter, on the 25th of September 2016, FvD became a political party, partaking in the parliamentary elections of 2017. Baudet stated the refusal of the government to carry out the outcome of his referendum as the most important reason for his part-taking in the elections (FvD, "Statuten").

In its first parliamentary elections in 2017, FvD won two seats ("Tweede Kamerverkiezingen", 2017). In the 2021 parliamentary elections, FvD obtained 8 seats, thereby dropping to 8th place after having topped the charts in the provincial elections of 2019. Surprising, if not for the fact that the elections were preceded by a tumultuous period, during which two ideologically diverging wings developed within the party and many party representatives left after evidence surfaced of racist and anti-Semitic WhatsApp conversations among the party's youth wing (Botje & Cohen, 21 November 2020; FvD, "Statuten", 2021, van Raalte et al., 2021).

FvD has a strong focus on immigration, pleading for stricter immigration policies and an Australian immigration model. Moreover, the party not only criticizes EU influence but wants to withdraw from the European Union and the Eurozone. The party argues EU membership, membership to the Schengen Treaty, and the primacy of European Law over national law, should be presented to the population in a referendum. Binding referenda and other forms of direct democracy are at the core of the revisions of democracy that FvD pleads for. Moreover, the party wants to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreements and denies the existence of a climate crisis and subsequent need for climate laws. The rest of its party program is conservative-liberal (FvD, "Standpunten").

Brubaker applied

I. Quantification

For a quantification of the keywords, see the appendix.

Total amount of tweets = 81

Category	Number of tweets fitting category*
Crisis	27
Expertise	18
Protectionism	29
Other	28

*As some tweets suit multiple categories, the sum of the number of tweets fitting each category exceeds the total amount of tweets.

II. Qualitative analysis

Crisis

At the beginning of the crisis, Baudet stressed the severity of the Corona virus, focussing solely on its dangers for citizens' health and critiquing the government for not handling the pandemic with the severity it calls for:

"[...] France is going into lockdown, taking to the advice of experts. The Netherlands doesn't. Why? #FvD remains concerned about health risks in the Netherlands and pressure on the healthcare system. We advocate the approach chosen around us, including border controls!" (Baudet, 16 March 2020).

From April onwards, however, Baudet has taken a strongly critical stance toward the general severity of the pandemic. Previously stressing the danger of the virus, he has since time and again stated that it can be demonstrated that the virus is nothing more than a severe flu. Still, he uses the Corona crisis to stress the failure of the government, but also to draw attention to other crises: sometimes stressing the attention said crisis needs, but also denouncing certain crises as unworthy of attention. An example hereof:

"Unwise to push for the expensive and pointless #gassban right now. As I argued in a debate with Minister Hoekstra last week, it would be better to put all the "sustainability measures" on hold for now and instead provide maximum support for

healthcare and SMEs [Small and Medium-sized Enterprises]/freelancers. #FVD #Corona” (Baudet, 23 March 2020).

Two crises that he does stress are the financial crisis bound to result from the pandemic and the, in his regard, detrimental effects of EU influence on the Netherlands, its incompetence, and the need to refocus on the nation state:

“Column #FVD MEP @Rob_Roos: Corona crisis; EU appears incompetent and, therefore, wants more money and power #FVD <https://t.co/LPHkLIW4wm> via @fydemocratie” (Baudet, 14 March 2020).

“Now LIVE on YOUTUBE! How the #coronacrisis brings us back to the nation-state. Join me in a discussion about the three mega-projects of our time: the ongoing immigration, the European seizure of power and the climate plans. <https://youtu.be/4OA9crZ9G9k>” (Baudet, 27 March 2020)

In a comment on this video, FvD links to the moment one of the speakers explains the way in which it believes the European Union is trying to abuse the corona crisis to push its own agenda. A claim he also makes in the following tweet:

“Proponents of the European project are seizing the chance to use the #coronacrisis to sell the financially healthy Western Europe a southern European usury policy. This is unacceptable. #FVD calls on Minister Hoekstra (CDA) never to accept Eurobonds! <http://Fvd.nl/ja>” (Baudet, 7 April 2020).

In the tweet above, and again on the first of April (see tweets below), Baudet uses the Corona crisis to stress the dangers of an upcoming economic crisis, doing so to discredit the political course of the government, blame EU influence and promote “Nexit”.

“We can and must prevent a new recession due to #corona! Economy needs kickstart. Today I argued in favour of several concrete proposals, aimed at offering SMEs and freelancers the necessary financial security and an outlook on a return to normal” (Baudet, 1 April 2020a)

“And our motion for extra support for Dutch SMEs and freelancers was voted down. #FVD #nextit #corona” (Baudet, 1 April 2020b)

Expertise

Baudet shows ambivalence towards expertise and the media, planting seeds of doubts with regard to their legitimacy, something which can easily steer people away from evidence-driven arguments. In a tweet on the 22nd of April, Baudet links to an article titled “Do experts pay attention to society?” to support his plea for an exit strategy (a strategy to end the lockdown) (Baudet, 22 April 2020). Six days later, he tweets about a matter unrelated to the crisis, but states the cabinet to have purposefully spread lies and, thereafter, strategically leaked the true story during the Corona crisis:

“Our military is not to blame – the cabinet is. Namely, the cabinet has deliberately spread false information. The real story was strategically leaked during the Corona crisis. [...]” (Baudet, 28 April 2020).

On the 21st, 24th and 25th of May, Baudet claims a cure for COVID-19 has been found. He links to an article by Telegraaf, which reports Brazilian president Bolsonaro to have spoken out in favour of the use of hydroxychloroquine, the supposed cure, and U.S. President Trump to have personally stated to take it himself:

“Large trial with possible Corona drug in the United Kingdom now. Hydroxychloroquine. The remedy I posed Minister De Jonge a question about yesterday which he angrily dismissed as “quackery”.” (Baudet, 21 May 2020).

*“Brazil gives population hydroxychloroquine against Corona
<https://t.co/saR5vFBM8Z> via [@Telegraaf](#)”* (Baudet, 26 May).

Hydroxychloroquine had by that time not been proven effective in the treatment of COVID-19, which, if one reads the full article, this article also reports. By the 23rd of May, Radboud University published an article demonstrating the unlikelihood of being effective in the treatment of COVID-19 and the risks (Radboud UMC, 2020). By now it has been established it is ineffective and carries a high risk of negative side effects (IGJ, 2021).

Protectionism

From the start of the outbreak until the 23rd of March, Baudet argues in favour of a strict lockdown. He criticizes the House of Representatives for not implementing such measures and accuses them of leaning back and not taking the situation serious enough. Many tweets propagate this message, including the following:

“The #Coronavirus is now a pandemic, and the cabinet is doing too little. We MUST take more action now: Deny entry to people coming from places with high numbers of infection; Close schools and universities; Cancel events with 100+ attendees; In case of doubt: home-isolation #FVD” (Baudet, 12 March 2020)

On the 23rd of March, a so-called “intelligent lockdown” is implemented. In a tweet on this same date, Baudet states to support this measure.

“With this ‘intelligent lockdown’, the cabinet is finally taking the right step to contain the virus and protect the Dutch citizen. #FVD supports the new measures and calls on all Dutch citizens to stay at home as much as possible. Stay healthy.” (Baudet, 23 March 2020)

However, he does stress the need for closed borders:

“The Netherlands is in an “intelligent lockdown”, but our borders remain open. That must change. [...]” (Baudet, 28 March 2020).

His support lasted for about two weeks, as from the 7th of April, Baudet started openly criticizing the “mismanagement” of the House of Representatives. He argues in favour of an exit strategy and lays out plans for a “lock-in”. This, he describes, is a society in which only those belonging to the risk groups for severe COVID-19, due to advanced age or health conditions, would have to stay at home, to allow the rest of the population to move around freely. He explains this strategy in a short documentary, which he refers to in the following tweet:

“Today we have been in lockdown for exactly two weeks – and the first results are hopeful. In this MINIDOCU I outline the course of events so far, and the path we

need to take now: an intelligent lock-in and a controlled exit strategy:

<https://t.co/F6cVUu3qD4>” (Baudet, 6 April 2020).

Analysis

As demonstrated, Baudet used the Corona crisis to stress some and denounce other crises. In doing so, he always opposes the ruling government. At the beginning of the outbreak of the virus, Baudet criticizes the government for not recognizing the severity of the Corona crisis, demanding strict measures to be implemented and with that, taking a classic protectionist stance. When the cabinet implemented the lockdown that FvD had demanded, Baudet shifted his focus to the economic impact these measures will have and the way in which the lockdown restricts people’s freedoms.

Similarly, first, Baudet magnifies the crisis to gain support for his protectionist demands, but after shifting towards a more libertarian stance, he performs what Brubaker calls a “non-crisis”: diminishing the health crisis and instead, calling attention to other crises, stating that these trump the need for protectionist measures. Except, however, the closing of Dutch borders, something Baudet demands and does not retract after changing course in favour of an exit strategy.

With regards to expertise and the media, Baudet shows a tendency to discredit expert voices and strategically create distrust of the authorities and official statements. It is only after the researched period, however, that Baudet openly starts flirting with conspiracy theories.

Partij van de Vrijheid

Introduction

The Party of Freedom (PVV) was founded in 2006 by Geert Wilders, a member of the House of Representatives who had left the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) in September 2004, criticizing the party to have become too left-wing. When Wilders founded the PVV, he appointed himself chairman, leading candidate, and figurehead of the party. Odd, if not for the fact that he is the only member of the party, making the PVV the Netherlands’ only one-man party.

The focus of the PVV lies with immigration and Islam. From 2006 till now he has warned of “the Islamization of our country” which he states, “is an existential problem: the survival of a free Netherlands depends on the extent to which we manage to push back the

Islam.” (PVV, “Verkiezingsprogramma”, p.8). (Lucardie et al., 2006). Its current party program states “it is unforgivable that the political elite of Europe and the Netherlands have welcomed this horrible Islam with open arms” ([Party program PVV](#), p.7). Hence, the elite is blamed for having invited the threat to enter national borders.

The PVV combines an anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-Europe and anti-establishment/elite rhetoric with cultural conservatism, economic liberalism, and welfare chauvinism, taking a left-wing/social approach to healthcare, social services, and elderly care, though only benefitting Dutch citizens without a double passport or an immigration background. Lastly, the PVV fights against current climate policies and is often accused of denying climate change altogether (Hendrickx, 2021).

During its first elections in 2006, the PVV obtained 9 seats in the House of Representatives. During the 2010 elections, the PVV’s popularity significantly increased, and the party obtained 24 seats, therewith becoming the Netherlands’ third-biggest party, its popularity only increasing in the years after. However, in the most recent 2021 elections, the PVV dropped to 17 seats (Kiesraad, 2017; Kiesraad, 2021).

Brubaker applied

I. Quantification

For a quantification of the keywords, see the appendix.

Total amount of tweets = 217

Category	Number of tweets fitting category*
Crisis	73
Expertise	24
Protectionism	75
Other	67

*As some tweets suit multiple categories, the sum of the number of tweets fitting each category exceeds the total amount of tweets.

II. Qualitative analysis

Crisis

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Wilders has been stressing the severity of the virus and the need for strict measures. Moreover, he blames several policy decisions taken by the

cabinet to have worsened the crisis. These range from policies installed before the crisis, to those during. Firstly, the severity of the crisis is blamed on policy decisions taken before the crisis:

“Fact is, that this crisis would have been less severe if there had not been such cutbacks on healthcare these last years, hospitals had not been closed, healthcare workers had not been laid off en masse, and we had not spent billions on asylum seekers but invested in healthcare! #Corona” (Wilders, 30 March 2020).

Secondly, in the following tweet, decisions with regards to financial aid distribution by the European Union during the crisis, are used to promote an anti-Europe stance and with it, take a stance for “Nexit”:

“The EU gives Morocco Corona aid of 450 million euros (not a member of the EU, 534 Corona patients) and the Netherlands 25 million euros (EU member and 11,750 Corona patients). I say: NEXIT. #Corona #Nexit. (Wilders, 30 March 2020)

Moreover, by stressing the Corona crisis, Wilders portrays other crises as irrelevant:

“Stop these insane climate and nitrogen policies already! We are in the middle of a Corona and economic crisis! Now pump those billions into our economy and our care!” (Wilders, 20 April 2020).

This same tactic is used in the tweet below, this time to discredit the political parties who do support other causes than the corona crisis and the economic crisis resulting from it:

“From SP to VVD and from PvdA to CDA: during these times of crisis, all prefer to spend money on the EU, climate, Africa, and asylum seekers than on our economy and healthcare here in the Netherlands. Just so you know! [...]” (Wilders, 23 April 2020).

Wilders does, however, stress the severity of the Corona crisis and hence, does not perform a non-crisis as observed in the U.S.

Expertise

On the 26th of March, Wilders tweets the following:

“Unbelievable, we are being fooled by the @rivm about the Corona death rate, which turns out to be much higher.” (Wilders, 26 March 2020).

On the 29th of March, he tweets:

“And stop it @rivm with the technical talk about “flattening”, we’ve had by far the most #corona deaths in the past 24 hours since the start of the crisis! A total of 771 have already died. These are people with families, relatives, friends and acquaintances of flesh and blood!” (Wilders, 29 March 2020).

In both these tweets, Wilders questions the legitimacy of the RIVM (the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment). By using us/them language, he portrays the RIVM as an entity that is out to mislead “us”. Moreover, with the last sentence of the tweet above, it is implied that the RIVM doesn’t care about this “us”, something that can easily spread fear and cast doubt on the legitimacy of public health institutes. This could lead people to disregard experts and official statements, allowing for a populist alternative. The tweet below displays a similar tactic of casting doubt on governmental institutions and the way in which their expertise informs the decisions of the cabinet.

“Very wrong. There is no transparency and hence, no control – nevertheless, Rutte always follows the OMT [Operational Management Team] blindly. Not only science, but also the House of Representatives must be able to verify, check and, if necessary, correct the advice of the OMT and the decisions of cabinet. #Corona. (Wilders, 25 April 2020).

Like Baudet, Wilders also referred to hydroxychloroquine as a successful cure for COVID-19, without providing any sources supporting this claim.

“Quackery, minister @hugodejonge called it. Scandalous! GP Rob Elens from Limburg successfully used hydroxoychloroquine against Corona. Serious trials are

now underway in other countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. #COVID-19 #hydroxychloroquine #corona” (Wilders, 22 May 2020).

Protectionism

From the outbreak of COVID-19, Wilders has pleaded for strict measures and what he refers to as a “hard lockdown”, criticizing the government repeatedly for negligence and failure to implement needed restrictions. Hence, at the beginning of the crisis, Wilders takes an outspoken protectionist stance.

He pleads for a lockdown:

“[...] But please @MinPres Rutte, the Netherlands needs to go into the maximum possible #lockdown RIGHT NOW! #CoronaCrisis #coronavirusNetherlands #corona” (Wilders, 20 March 2020).

He wants to ban refugees:

“Why on earth are we still admitting asylum seekers? #closetheborders #Corona” (Wilders, 20 March 2020).

He demands the Dutch borders be closed:

“Immediately close the borders with Germany for passenger traffic @MinPres, it cannot be that the Dutch properly adhere to the rules and say #I’mstayinghome while half of Limburg is full of stubborn Germans! #closetheborders #coronanederland #coronavirus #CoronaCrisis” (Wilders, 10 April 2020).

Lastly, he wants schools and universities to be closed and events to be cancelled:

“In all of the Netherlands people should stay at home for the time being and go into social isolation – just like in Brabant. Universities and schools closed. Ban all events. Avoid groups. [...]” (Wilders, 12 March 2020).

In his demands for these measures, he specifically mentions the need for the elderly to be cared for and protected (Wilders, 23 March 2020).

To gain support for his proposed measures, he portrays difficult governmental decisions to be overly complicated and, most of all, wrong, allowing himself to give swift and easy answers that resonate with his constituents. An example hereof is the following tweet:

“People don’t understand such a complex press conference held by four ministers at a time. Go outside, but not together, but children can play outside together? No more gatherings counting more than a hundred people but yes to school-exams? PVV wants clear, temporary #lockdown, no chaos!” (Wilders, 23 March 2020).

His demands for strict measures continued until the 16th of April, when he changes from a classic protectionist stance, to pleading for an exit strategy. Unlike Baudet, however, he emphasizes the need for masks to be included in such a strategy. This is likely because the government had long failed to supply sufficient facemasks and protective wear for those working in healthcare. Hence, pointing this out provides an easily demonstrable failure to discredit the ruling government. A large part of all tweets categorized as “other” refer to the failure to supply facemasks.

“The Netherlands yearns for an exit strategy. That is good for our economy and freedom. But it must be done responsibly. The use of masks should be included in the exit strategy! #corona #coronavirusNetherlands #COVID19 #coronadebat #Wilders #PVV” (Wilders, 16 April 2020).

On the 20th of May, it changed even further. Namely, from then on, Wilders starts openly criticizing the proposed “1,5-meter society” and criticizing the government for infringing on the citizen’s fundamental rights to freedom, as demonstrated in the tweet below:

“The one-and-a-half-meter-society as “the new normal” outdoors is a terrible concept. Unnecessary and moreover exaggerated! We must get rid of it immediately! #coronadebate #corona #corona measures #PVV #Wilders (Wilders, 20 May 2020).

Lastly, the following tweet demonstrates that Wilders has changed from a protectionist stance regarding the safety of the Dutch citizen to protecting their freedoms.

“Do we still live in a free country? [...] Freedom always comes first!” (Wilders, 20 June 2020).

Analysis

Throughout this research period, Wilders stresses the severity of the crisis, considering other crises, crises the PVV had already deemed overblown - such as the climate crisis -, to be irrelevant. Besides using the Corona crisis to dismiss issues not in line with its political agenda, emphasizing its severity serves his demand for classic protectionist measures. At some point, Wilders changes course in favour of protecting the liberties rather than the safety of the people. Unlike Baudet, however, he never claims COVID-19 to be a harmless virus. This could be explained by the fact that a large part of his constituents is older than those of Baudet. He does, however, argue against implementing what is referred to as the “1,5-meter society” and, from the 16th of April on, argues in favour of an exit-strategy. Still, unlike Baudet, he addresses the need for such a strategy to be safe for all and, with that, recognises that this does not allow for all restrictions to be lifted at once.

With regards to expertise, Wilders casts doubt on the trustworthiness of official statements. When the RIVM releases a statement that underlines Wilders’ arguments, he links to them for support. When a statement does not work to his advantage, he sows doubt by portraying the RIVM as an institution that does not have “our” (read: “the people”) best interests at heart. In general, Wilders tends to use us/them language to discredit expert voices that do not suit his interests.

2. Germany

Alternative für Deutschland

Introduction

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), established in 2013, is Germany’s first right-wing, Eurosceptic party that has succeeded to attract electoral support in local, national, and European elections (Grimm, 2015). The initial reason for its formation was its Euroscepticism, founded on its opposition to bailouts of indebted member states of the European Union, such as Greece. In the general elections of 2013, the AfD obtained 4.7

percent of the vote, thereby falling just short of the 5 percent electoral threshold (Clarke, 2017). By 2015, it had developed into a full-fledged anti-immigration party after rejecting chancellor Angela Merkel’s welcoming policy towards refugees. In the 2017 elections, having played into xenophobia, security, and cultural fears, the AfD rose significantly, obtaining 12.6 percent of the vote, therewith making the AfD the third biggest party and the largest opposition party, a remarkable victory for a far-right party in Germany (Clarke, 2017). The party wants to close EU borders and introduce various measures aimed at preventing migrants from entering or even leaving for Germany. Not unlike Wilders, the AfD speaks of an “Islamization” of Germany and portrays itself as the traditional, Christian party protecting Germany’s core values from this supposed threat (Chase & Goldenberg, 2019). Within the party, two ideologically diverging wings have developed, of which the far-right wing has been gaining ground since 2015 and has often been accused of being racist-nationalists and promoting anti-Semitism (Chase, 2017). Moreover, according to an investigation by Deutsche Welle, strategically used disinformation has been an integral part of the social media campaigns run by the AfD (Pfeifer, 24 August 2021).

In 2021, the AfD became the fifth-largest party with 10.3 percent of the vote (Voce & Clarke, 2021). At the time of the first wave of COVID-19, Tino Chrupalla and Jörg Meuthen co-chaired the party while Alice Weidel headed the fraction in the Bundestag.

Brubaker Applied

I. Quantification

For a quantification of the keywords, see the appendix.

Total amount of tweets = 43

Category	Number of tweets fitting category*
Crisis	23
Expertise	7
Protectionism	13
Other	5

*As some tweets suit multiple categories, the sum of the number of tweets fitting each category exceeds the total amount of tweets.

II. Qualitative analysis

Crisis

The AfD stresses the economic impact the restrictive measures will have, and uses the threat of an economic crisis to demand policy change:

“#AfD member of the Bundestag Marc Bernhard: “Against the backdrop of the #corona pandemic, with its feared consequential economic upheaval, a turnaround in environmental and transport policy must finally be realized. #Diesel #driving-bans must be lifted.” (AfD, 1 April 2020).

Moreover, it warns for the Corona crisis to have the power to cause not only an economic crisis, but also one of privacy:

“Edward #Snowden is known for the revelations that led to the #NSA affair in 2013. Now, he urgently warns: #Corona #surveillance will survive the #virus! Our stance: this may not happen!” (AfD, 3 April 2020).

Most notably, however, the Corona crisis is used to advance its narrative on Islam as an existential threat. The following tweets illustrate this:

“In an #asylum in #Suhl, massive #riots broke out after a confirmed #Corona case and the consequential #quarantine. Children used as shields, #police had to stop escape attempts while residents waved the IS flag.” (AfD, 18 March 2020).

“Freeloaders, rip-offs, endangerers – Islamist hate preacher swindles 18.000 euros in Corona-aid.” (AfD, 18 April 2020).

Lastly, it argues EU influence to have a detrimental effect on the crisis, claiming that the EU is “exploiting” the Corona crisis:

“The “Federal Minister of Finance must reject all attempts by the #EU to exploit the #Corona crisis to introduce aid #bonds! AfD federal spokesman Jörg #Meuthen: “The EU is shamelessly exploiting the #corona crisis... ”” (AfD, 8 April 2020).

Expertise

With several tweets, statements, and articles, the AfD questions the trustworthiness of governmental institutions and the expertise they draw from, and the traditional media. The following two tweets illustrate this:

“The #RKI [Robert Koch Institute] must inform Germans about the results of the #Corona-Sentinel-tests – clarification and transparency are at the order of the day” (AfD, 9 April 2020).

“#Coronaa-#Whistleblower: The scaremongering has technically been a “false alarm” and for that reason governmental #FakeNews. With every passing day that the measures remain in effect, damage increases.” (AfD, 11 May 2020).

The tweet above links to an article, published by the magazine of the party, titled “Government could be biggest producer of fake news”. A day later, a tweet links to an article titled “Over 80% of virologists & doctors are dissatisfied with the media” (AfD, 12 May 2020).

The following tweet, which is quite difficult to follow, is a response to a tweet by the Hamburger Morgenpost (@mopo) in which it reveals its next cover page to state that “the AfD is state-destroying” (Hamburger Morgenpost, 10 June 2020).

“Incidentally, the owner of @mopo, Artist von Harpe, works via @ZING_de, just like @jensspahn’s partner for @burda_news, which in turn works closely with @BillGates and which we have criticized for scaremongering in the wake of the #Coronacrisis. Pure facts, no VT [short for Verschwörungstheorien, meaning conspiracy theories]” (AfD, 10 June 2020)

With the above response, the AfD tries to discredit the legitimacy of the publication by revealing some of the ties the owner has, to what it deems dubious people and news outlets, such as Bill Gates and Burda News, explicitly stating this information to not be a conspiracy theory.

Protectionism

None of the tweets by the AfD - its first Corona-related tweet was posted on the 9th of March – specifically demand any measures to ensure protection against the virus, besides border controls and restricted entry:

“Corona checks: #Poland and #Czech Republic carry out #border controls – why Germany should follow their example – you can find out at <http://afdkompakt.de> #coronavirusdeutschland #CoronaVirusDE” (AfD, 9 March 2020).

“Beatrix von Storch: “EU law gives Seehofer the opportunity to avert damage for the German people by closing the #borders for #asylum seekers. As #AfD we demand: The #Corona #border-closure must finally apply to asylum seekers as well.” (AfD, 7 April 2020).

This last tweet also provides another example of how the party uses the Corona crisis to draw attention to topics such as immigration.

By the end of April, the party, remaining in opposition to the House of Representatives, positions itself against the imposed lockdown and proclaims its support for anti-lockdown protests. It speaks out against mandatory masks, compulsory vaccinating and, more general, demands restrictions to be loosened or lifted:

“Free choice with regards to the wearing of masks in public spaces instead of state-prescribed mandatory masks. The AfD parliamentary group in Bavaria is calling for the restrictions on daily and economic life in our free state to be loosened quickly.” (AfD, 21 April 2020).

“For the #AfD, #civilrights are of the highest importance, even in times of #Corona. An obligation to use a #CoronaApp or to get a #vaccine is therefore neither directly, nor indirectly acceptable to us.” (AfD, 12 May 2020).

That the AfD takes a libertarian stance is very clearly underlined by this last tweet:

“#AfD parliamentary group #Brandenburg is bringing the restrictions due to #Corona to the constitutional court. The court must examine the proportionality of

#demonstration- and contact-bans and #mask requirements. AfD: “Few infections do not justify restrictions on fundamental rights.” (AfD, 25 May 2020).

Analysis

Throughout this research period, the AfD does not really stress the pandemic as a major crisis or threat. Instead, it focusses on its economic impact and draws attention to other issues on their political agenda, sometimes actively using the pandemic to advance a certain narrative. In the first two-and-a-half months, their position on the need for restrictive measures remains somewhat unclear from their Twitter feed. From the end of April, the AfD starts demanding restrictions to be lifted and takes a very clear, outspoken stance in favour of liberties over safety. Different than both Dutch politicians, however, is that the AfD does demand certain measures to be imposed or lifted, but, in its tweets, does not often attack the government directly for failing to do so. Lastly, the AfD questions the trustworthiness of governmental institutions and the expertise they draw from, and the traditional media, resorting to what could be considered a conspiracy theory with regards to ties between those in power at certain media outlets.

Comparative Analysis

The following three paragraphs will compare the executed discourse analyses on each of the three categories. These comparative analyses will then form the foundation for an overarching, concluding analysis, the general conclusion, and lastly, the discussion.

Crisis

Baudet, Wilders and the AfD all used the Corona crisis to push their political agenda by stressing certain crises, and denouncing others. With regards to the Corona crisis, the ruling government is continuously opposed and, besides by the AfD, openly criticized, even if this means shifting course. For Baudet, this is clearly the case: emphasizing the severity of the crisis and demanding a lockdown, until the government implements a lockdown, then turning the complete opposite direction, not only claiming measures to be disproportionate but also claiming the whole Corona crisis to be overblown. In other words, performing what Brubaker calls a “non-crisis” with regards to the pandemic. With Wilders we observe a similar shift with regards to his policy demands, however, Wilders never claimed the virus to

be harmless or the crisis to be overblown, just measures to be disproportionate. The AfD did not clearly state its position with regards to the severity of the Corona crisis on Twitter, nor did it contradict the ruling government as strongly as Wilders and Baudet did. All parties, however, from a certain point on, downplayed the severity of the health crisis and, instead, called attention to other crises, stating these crises to triumph the need for COVID-19 related protectionist measures. With regards to the other crises they do stress, all three Twitter feeds share similar elements: demanding a focus on the economic impact of the pandemic and emphasizing the need to protect the middle-class, advancing a narrative of Islam as an existential threat to serve their demand for the closing of borders for asylum-seekers, pushing its anti-EU agenda, and dismissing the need for action with regards to the climate crisis by portraying it irrelevant in comparison to the health and/or economic crisis.

To summarize, all three discourse analyses have shown a rhetoric of staging one crisis and downplaying the other, whereas its content, though sharing certain elements, has varied with time, in order to benefit its constituency.

Expertise

As observed by Brubaker in the U.S. (2020), as well as in the Netherlands and Germany, the indispensable character of expertise during the Corona crisis has made experts vulnerable to successful populist attack. All three populists/parties discredit expert voices, strategically using this to create distrust of the policies the experts inform, and with that, of the authorities choosing to implement these policies. Besides expertise, all three sustain the narrative that the traditional media is not to be trusted. Various strategies are used to do so, such as exposing “dubious” power structures at certain media outlets, or the use of us/them language to portray the media as an elitist force out to “get us”. Some tweets from the AfD even show a narrative leaning towards conspiracy theories with regards to the media. Moreover, the AfD has actively accused the government of spreading fake news. Wilders and Baudet have refrained from doing so during the research period.

Protectionism

In the U.S., Brubaker observes Donald Trump to have taken a libertarian approach - a protectionist stance towards the liberty of the people – since the beginning of the crisis. In the discourse of the observed accounts, however, a shift takes place. Wilders and Baudet both demand protectionist measures at the outbreak of the crisis, only to change course and

demand these measures to be lifted once implemented by the government. The AfD never takes an outspoken protectionist stance in its Twitter discourse. From the end of April onwards, the AfD strongly positioned itself against the imposed lockdown, and supported anti-lockdown protests. In summary, throughout different points during the first wave of the pandemic, all three parties claimed that the imposed safety measures infringed on fundamental rights, and stated that the protection of these rights trump the need for safety measures. Hence, taking a libertarian stance, similar to Brubaker's observations in the U.S. Despite this, all parties remained in favour of closed borders, especially for refugees, during the whole of the observed period.

Conclusions comparative analysis

First of all, these comparisons illuminate some similarities. We observe all three parties to adjust their political course, resulting in a continuous contradiction of the establishment. In doing so, the use of us/them language features prominently. With the use of us/them language, it becomes easy to claim the other – in this case the establishment, the elite or the media – not to have “our” best interest at heart. When this has been asserted, all three populists/parties were able to offer alternative, swift and understandable solutions to the complex problems their governments are facing. Adding to the success hereof, is that they have all cast doubt on the credibility or legitimacy of the expertise that has informed these decisions, the authorities that have implemented them, and the media that have publicised about them.

However, we also observe differences. For example, Wilders and Baudet have both shifted from a protectionist to a libertarian stance, yet, whereas Baudet has claimed the virus itself to be harmless, and consequently, the whole pandemic to be overblown, Wilders has assigned severity to the crisis and solely questioned the proportionality of the implemented measures, balancing a need for protection with the wish to limit infringements on rights to certain freedoms. Wilders' rank and file consists of elderly and middle-aged people with a higher concern for health and safety, whereas Baudet's target audience is younger, and research has demonstrated that 51 percent of his constituents believe the virus to be a biological weapon designed to oppress civilians worldwide (Bouma, 2021). We may see these as examples of how the populist parties adapt their rhetoric to oppose the authorities, appears to depend on a constituent base. This will likely have a reciprocal element as well, as their rhetoric in turn influences the ideas of the constituency.

Lastly, several stylistic elements are consistently present, no matter the taken political course, such as the directness and simplicity of the solutions it offers, the use of us/them language in their anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric, the use of easy and popular language, and its mobilising character.

Conclusion

The argument Brubaker aims to support by presenting the paradoxes he observed in the U.S., is that, unlike other political theories such as realism or liberalism, populism lacks a substantive ideology. More than anything, he claims, populism is defined by what it opposes, upholding an opposition between “the people” and “the elite” or “the establishment”.

This comparative discourse analysis has tested whether this theory holds for the populist discourse in the Netherlands and Germany. Having compared the differences in response to the same crisis, allows us to draw more substantial conclusions on whether the narrative of “the populist” is defined solely by this construction of opposition - substantively varying with time and space, using a similar rhetoric but adapting to oppose - or whether we can, in fact, identify some unity that is founded in ideology.

This thesis hypothesized the comparative study to demonstrate populism to be a political style with a corresponding style of narrative, in which content will adapt to the needs of a great variety of situations, rather than adhering to a substantive ideology. We have observed variations of the three paradoxes observed by Brubaker (2020) in the U.S., in the discourse of Baudet, Wilders and the AfD. All three paradoxes were identifiable to some degree, though not all straight from the beginning of the crisis, as seen in the U.S. Examples hereof, are the observed shift from the expected protectionism with regards to COVID-19, to the paradoxical libertarian approach, and similarly, from stressing the severity of the health crisis, to performing what Brubaker calls a “non-crisis” with regards to the pandemic. More generally, all three parties repeatedly adjusted their political course, resulting in a continuous contradictory stance against the establishment. Furthermore, all have cast doubt on, or discredited, experts and expertise, the authorities, and the traditional media, this serving their ability to successfully offer solutions contradicting those of the authorities.

Ideology demands some level of consistency. The only factors that remained consistent were the narration style, the construction of an opposition between “the people” and “the elite” or “the establishment”, and the strategic use of discrediting expertise and the

media. The fact that all three politicians/parties adapted the content of their rhetoric, opposing government, regardless of the political course taken, leaves little room for adherence to a consistent ideology. Moreover, I believe the stability of stylistic elements across space, time, and context, whilst its content has adapted to these factors, to be another demonstration of the ideologically empty character of populism.

Lastly, this thesis aimed to contribute to answering the question of whether the rise of populism can be classified as a uniform global phenomenon, or whether national characteristics also play a role. The analysed discourse has proven insufficient to draw significant conclusions on the role of national characteristics. What we do observe, is that the way they adapt their rhetoric in order to oppose the government, seems to depend on their constituency. This has been deduced from the fact that Wilders and Baudet, though both Dutch, have responded in a populist political style, but in content differing slightly in a manner befitting their constituency's needs, values, and goals. However, as constituencies differ per country, this leaves the possibility that the constituencies themselves are defined by national characteristics, and thus, indirectly influence national populist rhetoric. To truly be able to draw conclusions on the importance of national characteristics, an elaborate comparative analysis between a greater number of countries would be necessary.

In conclusion, by observing different variations of Brubaker's paradoxes of populism, rather than border-crossing conformity in the content of these observations, we found conformity in narration style and a construction of opposing and discrediting the establishment, the elite, and the media. This, and the fact that no coherent global or regional populist response to the pandemic can be discerned, underlines the plausibility of Brubaker's argument that populism does not belong to the domain of ideology, but rather to that of a political style.

Discussion

The observed discourse on Twitter during the first wave of the pandemic does not seem to convey a consistent ideology, yet does consistently adhere to certain stylistic elements that could be qualified as characteristic of a populist political style. However, this does not exclude the possibility that on a deeper level, an ideology could be identified that populists believe can be realised by consequently attacking the authorities, the expertise that informs their policies, and the media. Namely, successfully playing into emotions such as

fear and distrust, especially during times of crisis, may eventually allow for populists to come to power through the democratic process: take the election of Donald Trump as a prime example. Hence, it might be that the political style that we identify as populist, is used to further an underlying ideology. The fact that the narrative of this pandemic does not seem to be grounded in a consistent ideology, does not necessarily imply that this conclusion can be transferred to all political theatres in which populists operate.

An underlying ideology one could think of is nationalism. Populists in various countries, such as U.S. President Donald Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, share elements of a nationalist ideology. In the European Union, this can be observed in populists' shared stance against a further transfer of power to the EU and their opposition with regard to the inclusion of more states. Shared beyond EU borders is its xenophobic character, substantiated in the aversion to immigration, especially from Islamic countries. Hence, by systematically undermining trust in the established democratic institutions, populists may just create enough distrust in society to allow them to democratically come to power, after which, founded on nationalist ideology, they could begin to erode democratic principles. The examples mentioned above, tell us that this could indeed happen, and when it does, will have great impact on the future of international relations.

This argues for the need of a theory that investigates how a populist political style serves as a host for an underlying ideology. Perhaps (authoritarian) nationalism, perhaps an ideology not yet theoretically defined. Based on the theoretical framework we have today, the shortcomings of Brubaker's theory might be enhanced by combining his outline of the populist political style, with that of Cas Mudde's thin-centred ideology (2017), thereby giving voice to the critique of Loew & Thorsten (2019), who in their research already state that Mudde's thin-centred ideology implies that successful populism is in need of a host ideology.

Another point of discussion is the role of national characteristics in a phenomenon in which no global unity can be discerned. Previous research on political identity formation in former West and East Germany showed that support for the AfD in the 2017 elections came predominantly from former East Germany. West and East Germany used to be separate countries, the FRG and GDR respectively, with their own separate history shaping its current political context. This history is characterized by an intensive period of so-called "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" (ways of dealing with a violent past) in the FRG on the one hand, and denial of any responsibility for the atrocities committed as of the moment Hitler

came to power in 1933, in the GDR on the other (Tevonderen, 2018). Hence, though not becoming apparent from this discourse analysis, the fact that we observe a significant difference in support for the populist right in Germany between these two, formerly and thus historically different countries, may indicate that national characteristics do play a significant role after all. Further comparative research, in which the national and historical political context of the studied countries are taken into consideration, would be necessary to assert this claim.

To conclude, this last paragraph will address the relevance of this research for current developments in international relations. Democracy is under external pressure from authoritarian states, such as Russia and China. Political and economic unions, such as the EU, are strained from within by authoritarianism as seen in Poland and Hungary, and in a number of countries, internal democracy is increasingly under attack by populist parties. This research has served to deepen the understanding of a phenomenon that could increasingly become of influence. With a growing support for populist parties, electoral breakthroughs are bound to happen, inevitably leading to shifts in global power relations. For European countries, the prime example hereof brings us back to the nationalist character of most populist parties and their efforts to diminish EU influence, or their wish to leave the EU altogether. If anything, Brexit has shown us the influence such changes can have on international relations. Recent developments in France, one of the EU's founding countries, where the leader of the populist and anti-EU party *Ressement National*, Marine Le Pen, made it to the second round of the presidential elections, indicates that the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, may not necessarily be that unique. This implies that a further weakening of the EU, which forms one of the founding blocks for international relations as we know it today, can certainly not be excluded. The growing support for populist parties could well play a role in an international shift to a more scattered, less democratic, and increasingly nationalistic, or even authoritarian political landscape. This prospect underlines the importance of gaining a better understanding of this rising political phenomenon.

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zusammenarbeitet und die wir für ihre Panikmache im Zuge der [#Corona](#)-Krise kritisiert haben. Reine Fakten, keine VT. [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from

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[@hugodejonge](#)^[PDI] *het. Schandalig! De Limburgse huisarts Rob Elens gebruikte hydroxoychloroquine met succes tegen Corona. Ook in andere landen als de VS en het VK worden er nu serieuze proeven mee gedaan! #COVID-19 #Hydroxychloroquine #corona* [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1263871110174687233> accessed on 06 May 2022.

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Appendix

Baudet

Keywords	Times mentioned
Pandemie	3
Corona crisis, coronacrisis,	10
Corona, COVID-19, Covid, Covid-19, Covid19	82
Coronabeleid, Corona beleid, Corona maatregelen	2
Anderhalve meter, anderhalve meter samenleving	-
Avondklok	-
Lockdown	30
Mondkapjes, mondmasker, mondkapjesplicht,	8
Viroloog, virologen	-
Expert, experts, expertise	6
Vaccin, vaccins, vaccinatie, vaccinaties, vaccineren	1
Vaccinatieplicht	-
Vaccinatiebereidheid	-
Total amount of tweets during research period	444
Total amount of tweets during research period that include one of the keywords	81
Total mentions of keywords	142

Wilders

Keywords	Times mentioned
Pandemie	5
Corona crisis, coronacrisis	14
Corona, COVID-19, Covid, Covid-19, Covid19	254
Coronabeleid, Corona beleid, Corona maatregelen	8
Anderhalve meter, anderhalve meter samenleving	15
Avondklok	-
Lockdown	24
Mondkapjes, mondmasker, mondkapjesplicht	30
Viroloog, virologen	3
Expert, experts, expertise	-
Vaccin, vaccins, vaccinatie, vaccinaties, vaccineren	4
Vaccinatieplicht	-
Vaccinatiebereidheid	-
Total amount of tweets during research period	517
Total amount of tweets during research period that include one of the keywords	217
Total mentions of keywords	357

Keywords	Times mentioned
Pandemie	4
Corona-Krise, Corona Krise	3
Corona, COVID-19, Covid, Covid-19, Covid19	122
Corona-Politik, Corona-Maßnahmen, Beschränkungen	1
Eineinhalb Meter, eineinhalb Meter Gesellschaft	-
Ausgangssperre	-
Lockdown	3
Mundkappen, Mundschutz, Mundschutzpflicht	-
Virologe, Virologen, Virologin, Virologinnen	3
Experte, Experten, Expertin, Expertinnen, Sachverstand	1
Impfstoff, Impfstoffe, Impfung, Impfungen, impfen	4
Impfpflicht	-
Impfbereitschaft	-
Total amount of tweets during research period	350
Total amount of tweets during research period that include one of the keywords	43
Total mention of keywords	282