



# Speaking their Mind: Populist Style and Antagonistic Messaging in the Tweets of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders

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**Abstract.** The authors in this study examined the function and public reception of critical tweeting in online campaigns of four nationalist populist politicians during major national election campaigns. Using a mix of qualitative coding and case study inductive methods, we analyzed the tweets of Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage, Donald Trump, and Geert Wilders before the 2014 Indian general elections, the 2016 UK Brexit referendum, the 2016 US presidential election, and the 2017 Dutch general election, respectively. Our data show that Trump is a consistent outlier in terms of using critical language on Twitter when compared to Wilders, Farage, and Modi, but that all four leaders show significant investment in various forms of antagonistic messaging including personal insults, sarcasm, and labeling, and that these are rewarded online by higher retweet rates. Building on the work of Murray Edelman and his notion of a political spectacle, we examined Twitter as a performative space for critical rhetoric within the frame of nationalist politics. We found that cultural and political differences among the four settings also impact how each politician employs these tactics. Our work proposes that studies of social media spaces need to bring normative questions into traditional notions of collaboration. As we show here, political actors may benefit from in-group coalescence around antagonistic messaging, which while serving as a call to arms for online collaboration for those ideologically aligned, may on a societal level lead to greater polarization.

**Keywords:** Twitter, Populism, Politics, Social media, Political spectacle, Political attack, Political communication

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, we have seen a number of populist political positions coming to the mainstream in various countries around the world, with the election of leaders such as Donald Trump and Narendra Modi, in addition to the strong showing of previously fringe political positions in various parts of the world. This trend has coincided with dramatic changes in the media environment that have extended the power of political messaging directly to candidates and parties themselves as social media have competed with, and in some cases surpassed, traditional media as a source of political news. For politicians, the framing and use of direct messaging on social

media are increasingly important because the material they generate reaches their electorate unfiltered, and frequently instantly.

In this study, we examined the use of direct social media messaging by four political leaders who have each been at the head of polarizing political campaigns. Narendra Modi and Donald Trump both won elections in parliamentary and presidential systems in India (2014) and the United States (2016), respectively, whereas Nigel Farage put his weight behind an eventual victorious referendum that was in favor of the United Kingdom (2016) leaving the European Union. Moreover, Dutch politician Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom; PVV) showed dramatic gains against a net loss of seats for the ruling coalition parties, ultimately securing second place overall in the Dutch general elections (2017).

Each of these four politicians took a nationalist position and was active on Twitter at the time of our study. In each case, the campaign in question was a major national vote that featured a diverse electorate, as opposed to party primaries or state campaigns that are relatively narrower in scope. While populist campaigns can be of various ideological persuasions, the choice of the four candidates was driven by their comparability both as nationalists and the personality-driven nature of their campaigns. We considered other campaigns including that of Bernie Sanders of the US; however, the Sanders campaign did not make it past the Democratic Party's primary elections.

We turn to the literature on populist politics to frame the ways in which the candidates and their opponents are depicted by the campaigns. We built on the work of Murray Edelman's notion of a political spectacle to interrogate ways in which social media become a performative space for political actors.

This work furthers an existing strand of research in computer-supported collaborative work on the role of individual actors in shaping opinions on specific issues in online environments. Political actors, in framing issues, or individual actors who stand for those issues in certain ways, are playing the role of "issue entrepreneurs" (Mascaro and Goggins 2011) on the internet, wherein they can drive the agenda in shaping what others in their networks think about key issues. This work extends Mascaro and Goggins' work from citizen "issue entrepreneurs" to influential political agents setting the agenda in democratic discourse.

A lens into the framing of oppositional discourses or actors by populist political actors is also useful to shape public discourse, and this extends existing work on encouraging constructive discussions online with respect to contentious issues (Yu 2017). In particular, our work raises questions of how a leader's framing of an issue or actor can give insight into the constraints of how followers may engage with the same issues. Understanding how social media messages are being crafted and how their content relates to their popularity will also provide insights into not only how ICTs are being adapted and used by online actors but also how CSCW can help support ongoing social movements (Saeed et al. 2009).

## 2. Related Work

There are three areas of work immediately relevant to the research presented here. First, and immediately relevant, is that of populism. All four leaders profiled here exhibit characteristics of populist politics in their campaign rhetoric. We consider the relevant research on populism to frame the respective leaders' Twitter output within the context of populist speech.

Second, we consider a body of work on the 'political spectacle'. We approach the act of public tweeting through a lens of political performativity, of which individual tweets and the impression left by their aggregation acts as a form of political spectacle. We argue that the notion of the political spectacle is valuable both to the populist politicians, as seen here, and across the board for studies of political performance online. Each of the leaders in this study uses social media as a means of direct outreach, each message aimed at making an impact directly on readers as well as the mainstream media. Therefore, we observe that social media is a form of self-representation in which each message and the themes, tone, or content therein are part of a larger persona-building exercise, whether intentional or not.

Finally, we look at existing work on political Twitter, which includes the instrumental use of social media by various other politicians to frame ways of comparing the approaches of the four politicians studied here.

### 2.1. Populism

There is little consensus on how populism is defined (Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Laclau 1977), and the wide range of so-called populist leaders over the last several decades have included figures on all ends of the political spectrum. Cas Mudde (2011) has argued that nativism, a rejection of the establishment, and some measure of centralization in an authoritarian figure are common signifiers of populist movements. A characteristic of populist movements has been some form of anti-pluralism that includes the creation of an imagined antagonist, often explicitly defined as separate from a 'legitimate' population. Such antagonists can be a 'non-authentic' group such as an ethnic or regional minority, subscribers to oppositional political ideologies, or outsiders, such as immigrants (Müller 2014). Those who stand with these excluded populations, such as existing political elites, are likewise delegitimized and othered in the political discourse (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).

Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that cultural factors defining citizenship and legitimacy are more salient for populist movements than institutional factors like ballot access laws, types of electoral systems, political finance regulations or economic uncertainty. While left-wing politicians have attempted frame legitimacy in terms of economic alienation, Engesser, Ernst, Esser, and Büchel (Engesser et al. 2017), studying populism in the context of Twitter, found that the right-wing populists were likely to exclude groups on cultural or social grounds.

There has been much work on populist movements in Europe and Latin America since the turn of the millennium, and recent history suggests that these trends are global and across social and economic ideological spectra (Moffitt 2016). Luke March (2017) asserted that contemporary mainstream populism is typically manifest in ‘demoticism’, or a creation of closeness to ordinary people. Studying British populism, March found that right-wing ideology is better suited to the structure of populism and that the ‘rooted ideology’ of a populist movement is more salient than its economic position. Gerbaudo (2017), referring to this as a ‘populist era’, asserted that the drivers of populism are emotional notions of ‘sovereignty’, a reason why the right, using social arguments, has been more successful than the left or proponents of globalism.

Globalism has been at the center of contemporary populist debates — both the integration of economic and institutional relationships across state borders, as well as the increased access to global media via the internet. In particular, populist political actors with various ideological leanings have attacked globalism as being fundamentally opposed to the national interest. Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese (Hameleers et al. 2016) highlighted the importance of discursive constructions in populist speech by showing that emotional language is used in blaming the institutions of a national government, whereas international institutions (for the purpose of the study, the European Union) are often blamed through the assignment of responsibility, rather than through the usage of emotions. They attribute this through an ‘us vs them’ lens, wherein the public has a relatively consistent view of a national government, while causal attributions of responsibility can more easily be ascribed to an ‘other’, thus absolving the ‘people’ of all responsibility. Such discursive constructions can be argued out and performed collaboratively in social media by supporters willing to be vocal, particularly given that public disagreement can be a major deterrent (Vraga et al. 2015). This leads to some voices, in particular those acting in collaboration for a single cause such as that of a politician, performing publicly, versus others stifling their views in the interest of managing their own online reputation (Marder et al. 2016).

A large body of work has argued that the nature and delivery of the political message in populist movements are at least as important, if not more important than, the underlying ideology. Lievrouw (2003), in the context of oppositional new media, argued that some participants in the online sphere have sought to reject the mainstream and instead use the internet to effectively advance their own cultural ideologies. Similarly, populist movements have taken advantage of the internet in defying the ‘mainstream’ in which their ability to influence content may be relatively limited. Populism is fundamentally performative, making social media an important stage where the politician and follower alike have the space to enact their views. Politicians use social media for personalization — highlighting themselves over their party ideologies and presenting online both their public and private lives (Lilleker and Jackson 2010). Studies have suggested that online behavior and communications have indeed enabled the growth and spread of populist movements (Bartlett et al.

2011). A new breed of populist leaders have embraced social media and in particular present a mediatization of politics in that they reach the public directly instead of through the traditional option — a potentially skeptical mainstream media (Mazzoleni 2014).

An analysis of two case studies advances this view. Groshek and Engelbert (2013), in analyzing the American Tea Party movement and the Dutch PVV, found that both organizations use ‘double differentiation’ in their self-portrayal online and in the broader media landscape. Citing the work of Hutter (2011) and Kriesi (2011), Groshek and Engelbert asserted that this ‘double differentiation’ enables the leaders of populist movements to reject established political cultures while maintaining a distance from the beliefs of fringe elements within the movement, while still demonstrating leadership over the movement overall. Moreover, the methods through which they maintain their public image through their use of social media sees them move further from the prior norms. This kind of differentiation is enabled by social media, where a leader can propose a certain position in his or her direct discourse, and allow a more nebulous set of collaborators to promote their nod for the more extreme ideological positions on social media because these positions would be potentially indefensible in the mainstream media.

Exploring this further, Benjamin Moffitt (2016), theorizing the performance of populism online, proposed a structure in which the leader is the performer, the people are the audience, and the crisis and media are the stages on which populism plays out. Moffitt (2015) proposed that we see a spectacularization of crisis online as a necessary part of the political style, in which a populist leader builds the notion of a crisis and then centers his or her own contribution as both the exposé and rectifier of that crisis. The use of innuendo and reference have been important parts of populist social media communication because it proposes an ‘inside joke’ that is understood by ideological insiders, and this has been used widely historically in political communication on- and offline (Bartlett et al. 2011). The enactment of populism on social media has extended the personalization in self-representation to personalization in opposition, such as in the form of ad hominem attacks against opposition politicians (Gourgiotis 2016), as well as new means of allowing supporters to affiliate themselves with one another, and with the politicians. Terms that enable affiliation among followers may initially be manifested through some form of social steganography, in which the coded messages or specific terms are intended to be read and understood by one group but remain invisible to another (Boyd 2010), allowing denial of direct association where necessary.

## 2.2. The Political Spectacle

Political scientist Murray Edelman has proposed that a ‘political spectacle’ is created through the rhetorical techniques of a political figure. The characteristics imbued with the political figure’s primary audience help audience members to form their own interpretation of the political actor’s rhetoric, which is what truly creates the spectacle

(Edelman 1988). In this, the performance of the spectacle is in both the speech (or tweets in this case) as well as in the creation and embrace of an audience of like-minded, ‘legitimate’ people. Tweets by populists are endorsed by a population they claim to speak for in a range of ways that include replies, retweets, or public affirmations of support.

The speaker, in a political spectacle, frames a set of circumstances within a created, sometimes alternate, reality, through a process of ‘making worlds’ through rhetorical means to convince the audience of a particular point of view (Goodman 1978). An important instrumental technique in this endeavor is the creation of what is termed a ‘pseudo-event’ (Boorstin 2012), which is not necessarily an actual event but rather the specter of one. Thus, while an actual airstrike would not be a pseudo-event, the specter of one, through its repeated allusion in the public sphere, would make for one.

Such pseudo-events are engineered by certain actors with the intent of causing a reverberation amidst the general public, with the endgame that they become ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ unto themselves (Boorstin 2012). A politician repeatedly making a claim of expertise at something, or claiming a certain preferable political identity, such as identifying as being from humble origins, over time becomes truth to his or her audience.

The rise of pseudo-events has been attributed to the growth of mass media and broadcast news consumption. Twitter and social media offer the fraught possibility of creating pseudo-events and magnifying them (Parmelee and Bichard 2011), as has indeed been the case for the 2016 US elections with intense discussions on the role of social media networks such as Facebook, in perpetuating ‘alternative facts’. The political spectacle is furthered by the constant reinforcement of the pseudo-events in the collaborative action of the people who act the words of the leader by referring to their rivals in the pejorative attributed by the leader — for instance Rahul Baba for Rahul Gandhi of India, or Lyin’ Ted for Ted Cruz in the United States.

Edelman (1988) also proposed the idea of a ‘political enemy’, in which an opponent is framed as possessing an impure moral fiber and disputed integrity — qualities that are specifically directed at their person rather than the positions they embrace. The use of the political enemy is, therefore, an attempt to frame a political battle as a moral battle, where the political actor symbolizes righteousness and his or her opponent epitomizes the wrongs of society.

There are various discursive forms of creating an antagonistic spectacle on social media. The use of individualized, issue-agnostic criticism such as personal or group insults, as well as the use of language to rhetorical effects such as sarcasm or hyperbole, are forms of Edelman’s political spectacle. Such rhetorical techniques or turns of phrase are essentially performative, suggesting the leader’s wit (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011), but also presenting an inside joke for followers to affiliate with (Eisterhold et al. 2006). The ‘spectacle’ in messaging such as insult and irony also evokes a stronger reaction, making it more likely to garner reactions from followers online (Lagerwerf 2007).



### 2.3. Political Twitter

Social media offer a low-cost campaigning tool in which political agents can phrase their messaging precisely and hope to create an alternative form of reaching an audience, bypassing mainstream media channels. Collaboration is central to political Twitter because it requires either strategically pre-planned action or an active strategy at an affective moment in spreading a political actor's message online. As recent campaigns have employed a range of messaging and networking approaches, much research on social media has framed collaborative action from the perspective of citizen engagement.

CSCW researchers have evaluated the role of rhetoric online in order to decipher the linguistic tropes that are more indicative of leadership, as viewed on online platforms (Cassell et al. 2005). Similarly, we aim to examine whether negative styles in language have been able to promote the impact some public figures have online. An example of the affective use of social media in political speech is seen in a study conducted on the 2016 US elections. Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017), in their analysis of social media, used populism in the 2016 US election to argue that social media technologies helped create support for populist politicians, through both active and passive social media use. Collaborative action online is central to the populist strategy, particularly if it argues that the mainstream media are antagonistic to its message. For the populist, reaching out directly to the electorate and building momentum through the collaborative action of citizens retweeting messages strengthens the politician's normative claim to legitimacy.

Collaborative message spread online has its roots in a longer legacy of work on cooperation. Schmidt and Bannon (1992), assert that cooperation 'within the workplace' permits the completion of certain tasks that are otherwise impossible if handled by merely one individual. The leaders or party must rely on collaboration first at a layer of core supporters and campaign administrators, and thereon forth to the citizenry. While there are hierarchies embedded in these relationships, political campaigns operate on being able to mobilize cooperative efforts.

Boulus-Rødje and Bjørn (2015) built on the learnings from organizations or businesses in their application to various political settings, in this case specifically to hierarchy in the organization of elections. They discussed how the allocation of various tasks to different groups of workers contributes to collaboration in an efficient manner, and how 'lines of command' help to direct the procedure. Our goal is to extend this work by proposing ways in which the leader's output leads to collective action that enables the dissemination of the leader's messages. Examining the affective nature of the output helps theoretically ground the messaging in the broader literature on political communication and mediatization. Facilitating collaboration in the face of conflicting political ideology is a significant challenge that has been studied by CSCW researchers (Boulus-Rødje et al. 2015). Furthering this, we propose that these challenges may indeed be further intensified when political actors

communicate in a partisan fashion or delegitimize oppositional points of view by demonizing or belittling the actors who stand for those.

Kou, Kow, Gui, and Cheng (Kou et al. 2017), through an analysis of public discourses on different social media sites, showed how such discourse is shaped by local socio-cultural political factors. Their work shows that social media don't naturally lead to collective social movements; we need to subsequently study the various elements that shape the nature of social media discourse, including that of important public figures. Mediatization theorists have argued that the need for politicians to control what counts as newsworthy creates an impetus for them to adapt to the nature of the media (Hjarvard 2013). This is true with respect to social media tools such as Twitter where politicians craft their messages so intermediaries can reinforce and channel them to help capture a larger audience (Wilson 2011). Thus, politicians who use a clear social media strategy are often able to become reputational entrepreneurs on their accord (Plotkowiak and Stanoevska-Slabeva 2013), unshackled from the constraints of traditional political structures and media reporting.

Former US President Barack Obama is widely seen as having pioneered the use of social media in politics, using Facebook and Twitter to directly reach out to his audience and the electorate (Bode and Dalrymple 2016; Tumasjan et al. 2010). Obama coupled his traditional door-to-door grassroots campaign with a social media campaign that became part of his branding, where a massive number of reciprocal follow-backs on Twitter to 'followers' presented a virtual equivalent of a handshake (Zavattaro 2010). In the years since Obama, a series of studies have brought to the fore the use and effect of these strategies, and an entire industry of experts advising politicians on how to manage their political output.

The rise of social media tools such as Twitter as a form of 'e-campaigning' has allowed politicians to skirt and evade traditional media outlets — meaning that the political actors themselves are the source of information rather than the traditional news media (Medina and Muñoz 2014; Schweitzer 2012). This has meant that politicians are left to their own resources to make something newsworthy — the tone, theme, delivery of messages can be factors that impact what becomes 'popular', whether through the viral spread that online citizen followers pick up on or through the mainstream media coverage of a politician's social media feed (Bode and Dalrymple 2016).

The asymmetrical nature of Twitter specifically, wherein an actor non-reciprocally follows someone (or an 'interest relationship'), prevails over actors being mutually connected (or a 'familiarity relationship'). In interest relationships, users rely upon a figure of interest for news and information, mediated through the 'social filter' of the user's networks (Jacovi et al. 2011). For a political campaign, reaching the citizenry through social filters is a means of public reinforcement but also a site for situated discourse where messages can be interacted with, and where the messengers themselves can individually or collaboratively perform their loyalty to a position. These spaces of social discourse are valuable spaces of feedback to the campaign because



politicians rarely try a single form of messaging but are constantly tweaking their message to see what creates news for consumption. In this asymmetrical communicative environment, it is not only the politician who speaks but the enactment of collaboration among people interacting with the leader's message that become the eventual voice.

Some politicians have had much better success with making the news outside of their policy offerings, often relying on sensationalist style (Kilgo et al. 2016) for political outreach. Work has also shown that Twitter styles of politicians are driven by citizen demands (Tromble 2018), wherein the direct utterances of the politician are one element of a larger 'carnivalistic' space of political discourse online that allows for otherwise problematic forms of ridicule (Park 2013), abuse (Udupa 2018), or even unconcealed debasement of oppositional voices (Ott 2017). This 'carnivalistic' space is similarly reflected in what Doris-Down, Versee, and Gilbert (Doris-Down et al. 2013) referred to as the online 'echo chambers', which are sub-universes of media consumption that can inhibit potential collaboration and cement polarized perspectives. The constant caricature of the political antagonists by politicians presents a personalization of attack that delegitimizes not only the oppositional ideological space but even the online citizens who subscribe to it.

Content analysis of tweets of politicians shows that the nature of messages ranges from formal mini press releases to more informal criticism that often uses humor or sarcasm (Parmelee and Bichard 2011). The short nature of the tweet helps promote an "impulsivity, simplicity, and incivility" (Ott 2017) that can pervade the platform at times, and is increasingly relevant to the Twitter activities of political actors such as Donald Trump. Twitter's use as a form of political antagonism by political actors has been well-documented.

Research suggests that aggressive campaigns focusing on negative or critical messaging may be more effective in building a political campaign online. Attacking another political actor in place of promoting one's own achievements may serve as a form of self-promotion — Ceron and d'Adda (2016) showed through a content analysis of Twitter use in the 2013 Italian election that negative campaigns are often far more effective. In the context of Dutch politics, content analysis of populist tweets show that Geert Wilders uses Twitter as an avenue for political opposition to ruling coalitions (Van Kessel and Castelein, Kessel et al. 2016), and as a medium to rally and communicate with his most ardent and extreme supporters (Blanquart and Cook 2013).

Online incivility is tied to the practice of 'politically incorrect' language. This has been common in populist movements around the world, where it has been justified in the name of freedom and liberty (Krämer 2017). The lack of political correctness is enacted as a spectacle, and in turn is embraced by supporters as indicative of plain-speaking honesty.

### 3. Overview of Selected Politicians

The four social-media-using politicians we selected for this study fit the definition of populist leaders and ran national campaigns, and are as follows: United Kingdom Independence Party Leader (UKIP) Nigel Farage, United States Republican presidential candidate (and current President of the United States) Donald J. Trump, Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian Peoples' Party; BJP) Leader (and current Prime Minister of India) Narendra Modi, and Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom; PVV) Leader Geert Wilders.

#### 3.1. Nigel Farage - United Kingdom

Nigel Farage is a former Conservative politician who has been a member of the far-right United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) since its founding in 1993. He has been an important member of the party ever since its foundation and his influence has grown over the last year because of his hand in campaigning for the EU Referendum, or the 'Brexit' movement. He emerged as one of the key Brexit leaders because a majority of widely known mainstream politicians on all sides of the political spectrum put their weight behind the 'Stay in EU' campaign. While Farage had lost every UK parliamentary election he had stood for as a UKIP candidate, he was ironically a member of the European Parliament. While the Brexit campaign marked an important moment in political anger in the UK, the subsequent general elections reversed fortunes for Farage significantly.

#### 3.2. Donald Trump - United States of America

Real Estate Mogul Donald Trump declared his intention to seek the Republican nomination for the presidency on 16 June 2015, sparking an unprecedented campaign that defied numerous expert predictions. Besides his reputation as a businessman, Trump had long been a figure in pop culture, having hosted the reality show 'The Apprentice' and making occasional appearances on the popular media — including on talk shows, films, news interviews, and professional wrestling. The 2016 presidential election, however, brought about Trump's transformation into a political figure, as he defeated 16 Republican primary challengers and eventually the general election frontrunner, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Social media were central to Trump's 'voice' online because he made the news through his tweets, often without interacting directly with journalists. His campaign engaged with relatively new, largely online media sources, and went into direct conflict with the much of traditional news media, which he attacked on social media by creating a series of pseudo-events in which he accused the media of creating 'fake news' (Enli 2017; Friedersdorf 2016).

### 3.3. Narendra Modi - India

Narendra Modi was a lifelong pracharak (proselytizer) of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), a far-right Hindu nationalist social group that has proposed a Hindu-values-based social and political structure for India. Since 2001, he has been on the political wing of the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), serving at the state level, first as the chief minister of Gujarat — a state in India — and subsequently as the prime minister of India since May 2014. Before his move to national politics, Modi was seen as a member of the far-right of the party, and in particular he was associated with the Hindu–Muslim riots of Gujarat in 2002. His alleged involvement led to him being banned from entering the United States. Since 2009, Modi has been active online, circumventing the mainstream media as part of an effort to rebrand his political image both domestically and globally. Modi is unique in this set in that unlike the other leaders who were elected by a citizenry that was largely online, Modi's social media impact reached a specific elite sub-section of the Indian electorate that was both online and using social media, with the mainstream media reverberation of his tweets being a secondary outcome.

### 3.4. Geert Wilders - Netherlands

Geert Wilders started his national political career in 1998 as an MP for the Liberal Party (VVD in Dutch, right-wing). In 2004, he left the Liberal Party to start the Party for Freedom (PVV). Wilders has been leading this party since its inception. The PVV (and Wilders with it) is known for its extreme right-wing positions, most notably against immigration, Islam, and the EU. Wilders' rhetoric is also characterized as extreme, culminating in a conviction in 2016 for a speech he made in which he promised to reduce the number of people in the Netherlands with a Moroccan background. Although the PVV has not led government yet, the party did support a minority government between 2010 and 2012 in the House of Representatives. This government's premature resignation and subsequent snap election were caused by the PVV's withdrawal of this support over austerity measures. As a result of the 2017 parliamentary elections, the PVV is the second-largest party in the House.

## 4. Methods

We used a mixed-methods approach — including an iterative qualitative coding of tweets that were then quantitatively analyzed, followed by an inductive case-study discussion of the tweets in an individual context (Choy 2014; Eisenhardt 1989). Our reason for using a mixed-methods approach is the difficulty of comparing political communication across contexts. Thus, while we examine each of the four chosen politicians from the lens of populist speech, we do not claim replicability; rather, we present this as an important case study of four key politicians in significant moments in history. Our objective is to study tweets, not in isolation, but rather where they are

part of a larger narrative that includes the existing socio-political climate as well as the more immediate conversational context (Palen and Anderson 2016).

We used the Twitter API to mine tweets for the four politicians. Along with the tweets, we also parsed the number of retweets and favorites as a proxy to assess the relative popularity of tweets. A team of four coders — each well-versed in the contemporary politics of the US, India, the UK, and the Netherlands — then coded the tweets. We see the sample described in Table 1.

#### 4.1. Thematic Categories

Tweets are documents in which human context is needed to fully understand the behaviors of the writer and audience of the Twitter account. This context is not sufficiently captured by reducing the tweet to individual numbers or even collocations of words (Polkinghorne 1995; Riff et al. 2014). A range of common topics including identities, perceptions, and beliefs cannot be understood by merely parsing the text of a message without the accompanying contextual information (Choy 2014). Research has proposed that the differences in context from one setting to another make it difficult to generalize across sites (Amaratunga et al. 2002). While quantitative approaches are good in capturing valence, or the general attitudinal tone that can be negative or positive (Walton and Rice 2013), political tweets use idiomatic phrases and innuendo that risk losing nuance without granular coding.

A large body of work from multiple disciplines and methodological approaches has studied social media spaces to identify ideological leanings (Sparks 2010). However, our goal here is to go beyond ideology to study whether the commonly debated issues about populist speech online by politicians — that it is sensationalistic (Kilgo et al. 2016), antagonistic (Ott 2017), carnivalistic (Park 2013), or abusive (Udupa 2018) — hold up to an empirical test.

Deep dives into similar-size message feeds have covered elements of this in the past — Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers (Golbeck et al. 2010) studied 6000 posts from politicians to find that politicians do not use social media for new insights into

Table 1. Collected data

Handle	Time Period	Event	No of Tweets
@geertwilderspvv	14 November 2016–15 March 2017	2017 Dutch General Election	1729
@narendramodi	12 January 2014–16 May 2014	2014 Indian General Elections	1442
@Nigel_Farage	18 February 2016–27 June 2016	2016 Brexit Referendum	762
@realDonaldTrump	8 July 2016–9 November 2016	2016 US Presidential Election	1499

government or the legislative process, but rather to report on their own achievements, while Hemphill, Shapiro, and Otterbacher (Hemphill et al. 2012) coded 1042 tweets from Chicago politicians to find that Twitter was used for social conversations rather than political work. We found that the coding schemes used by these studies, while relevant for their settings, did not capture issues related to political campaign speech that we were interested in. Moreover, our work looks at political speech in a very specific context of populism.

Our initial interest was to look only at the frequency of antagonistic tweeting in a politician's social media campaign. Our initial classification thus began with seeking negative tweeting, which we coded as 'Confrontations'. Thereafter, we decided to capture the nuance within the antagonistic tweeting, particularly the use of figures of speech, and personal attacks instead of political attacks. To capture these, we looked for rhetorical figures of speech such as hyperbole and oxymorons, which we coded as 'Wordplay'. This extended the initial coding scheme and allowed for more descriptive information on the nature of negative tweets.

In the first iteration of coding, two primary coders independently annotated 100 tweets each of Trump and Farage. A third researcher assessed the coding and worked with the coders to establish ground truth with respect to the definitions of each code. To calculate the intercoder agreement for this multi-label coding, we used a weighted Cohen's kappa where each permutation of coding was represented by a single binary vector and the weights corresponded to the agreement measures between two vectors. The weighted kappa allowed us to incorporate partial agreements into our assessment of intercoder reliability (Cohen 1968) by assigning less weight to partial agreements.

After the first round of coding 100 tweets, the entire research team met as a group to determine the fit and appropriateness of the thematic codes by discussing them in the context of specifically selected tweets. We subsequently expanded our coding scheme for a more granular understanding of negative tweeting, creating the codes 'Confrontation', 'Sarcasm', 'Wordplay', and 'Labeling'. The new codes 'Sarcasm' and 'Labeling' were independent of 'Wordplay' and allowed us to code tweets that used sarcasm or labeling but did not fall under wordplay. Each of these notions was grounded in the theory of spectacle because the confrontations, sarcasm, etc., are publicly played out and intended for consumption by the politicians' direct audience and mainstream media alike.

The second round of coding of 200 tweets resulted in an average weighted Cohen's kappa of 0.66. Subsequently, the 'Confrontation' code was recoded into a primary node 'Criticism', and two secondary nodes were created — 'Personal Insult' and 'Group Insult'; these were earlier under a common primary node of 'Insult'. This was done to more accurately capture the intent of the tweet texts. The re-coding of 'Confrontation' into 'Criticism' did not result in any loss of information about the nature of interactions because almost all confrontations in the electoral context were criticisms of policies, individuals, or the system, but 'Criticism' covered uncoded

antagonistic tweeting that was not confrontation. Separating out insults allowed us a more nuanced understanding of specific tweets. All mislabeled tweets were recoded under their new headings. Our final coding scheme after coding the first 300 tweets consisted of four primary nodes and two secondary nodes, which were defined as ‘Criticism’, ‘Labeling’, ‘Wordplay’, ‘Sarcasm’, ‘Personal Insult’, and ‘Group Insult’. Table 2 below describes the sampled sets.

#### 4.1.1. *Criticism*

Criticism was defined as the expression of disapproval of an individual, group, or system. An example tweet from Nigel Farage:

‘Now appears EU won't allow Mr. Osborne to scrap tampon tax. Humiliating that UK has to seek permission from EU’ – @Nigel\_Farage, 26 May 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, 2016f)

Insults were nested within criticisms. Each insult was thus also a criticism, but a tweet was considered an insult only if it directly targeted an individual or group beyond the scope of a policy or professional position.

#### 4.1.2. *Labeling*

Labeling was defined as ‘the attachment of a descriptive adjective or slur to individual or group’, such as the use of ‘crooked’ for Hillary Clinton by Donald Trump or ‘pathetic’ for David Cameron by Nigel Farage. These are typically a particular quality the political actor might make his or her opponent out to have. An example tweet from Geert Wilders:

‘The only Islamofascists here are the Turkish dictator @RT\_Erdogan and yourself @MevlutCavusoglu <https://t.co/jKP7BrnRom>’ – @geertwilderspvv 11 March 2017 (@geertwilderspvv, 2017c)

Table 2. Follower counts and number of tweets

	No of Followers - Beginning of the Sample	No. of Followers on/near Election Day	No. of Tweets in Set
@geertwilderspvv	723,855 (14 November 2016)	807,383 (15 March 2017)	1729
@narendramodi	3,146,620 (12 January 2014)	3,878,777 (15 May 2014)	1442
@Nigel_Farage	257,036 (29 January 2016)	349,002 (24 June 2016)	762
@realDonaldTrump	9,548,962 (8 July 2016)	12,979,657 (8 November 2016)	1499



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The term Islamofascist is itself a label; in this case, it is being specifically applied to Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Mevlut Cavusoglu.

### 4.1.3. *Wordplay*

Wordplay was defined as ‘the use of figurative language, alliteration, idiom, puns, and statement constructions where the construction of the tweet is intended as performative’. An example tweet from Narendra Modi:

‘Samajwadi Party has become Samaj Virodhi Party! Electricity, law & order situation is poor & women are unsafe in Uttar Pradesh’ – @narendramodi, 02 February 2014 (@narendramodi, [2014b](#))

In this tweet, Modi uses a wordplay on ‘Samajwadi’, which means ‘of the people/society’ and rhymes it with ‘samaj virodhi’, which means ‘against the people/society’.

### 4.1.4. *Sarcasm*

Sarcasm was defined as ‘an implicit, ambiguous statement in which the literal meaning is not the intended meaning of the speaker’. These included ironic statements or mockery. An example tweet from Nigel Farage:

‘Given President Obama admires EU so much, surprised he hasn’t argued for open borders with Mexico or for foreign courts to run US affairs...’ – @Nigel\_Farage, 22 April 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, [2016b](#))

### 4.1.5. *Personal Insult*

A personal insult was defined as ‘an attack specifically on an individual’s character rather than a policy or position they espouse’. An example tweet from Donald Trump:

‘The highly neurotic Debbie Wasserman Schultz is angry that, after stealing and cheating her way to a Crooked Hillary victory, she’s out!’ – @realDonaldTrump, 24 July 2016 (@realDonaldTrump, [2016d](#))

In this category the insult must be aimed at an individual person; various forms of name-calling were also classified as personal insults, though these could also be categorized as labeling. In the personal insult in Trump’s tweet, for instance, Debbie Wasserman Schultz is called out and affronted personally through an action ‘cheating her way’ but is also labeled as ‘neurotic’. There are, however, personal insults that only refer to an action or an aspect that qualifies as an insult without being a label.

#### 4.1.6. *Group Insult*

A group insult was defined as ‘an attack on the character or integrity of an entity or a group of people, rather than a particular policy that the entity might support or embody’. An example tweet from Geert Wilders:

‘They hate and kill us. And nobody protects us. Our leaders betray us. We need a political revolution. And defend our people. #BerlinAttack’ – @geertwilderspvv, 19 December 2016 (@geertwilderspvv, 2016b)

Group insults have the frequent quality of attributing a specific characteristic or action to an entire group of people, irrespective of the clear definition of the group. In this example from Wilders, for instance, exactly who fits into ‘they’ is unclear.

The complete set of tweets for all four politicians<sup>1</sup> was coded using the final coding scheme, and the respective Cohen’s weighted kappa for each individual politician was: Trump = 0.74, Modi = 0.75, Farage = 0.72, and Wilders = 0.53.

The low intercoder agreement with the Wilders dataset was a result of one of the Dutch coders not being trained in qualitative coding. The two Dutch speakers in the research team were not physically co-located for the initial coding with the earlier data sets (Modi, Farage, Trump — in that order), in which the rest of the team participated. This was an impediment to setting a baseline for a common understanding of coding. Furthermore, the interpretations of idiom and innuendo in Dutch presented greater challenges than in English, causing lower inter-coder agreement. To mitigate this, we resolved disagreements on codes with low inter-coder agreement during group discussions and generated a final consolidated file that was then used for this study.

## 5. Findings

We summarize our findings in Table 3 and Table 4. Table 3 compares the proportions of tweets coded as a certain category using a z-score test. We see that Trump (=48.1%) and Farage (=44.5%) have a significantly higher proportion of antagonistic tweets than Modi (=29.6%) and Wilders (=25.5%). Table 4 uses an independent samples *t*-test to compare the means of retweets and favorites for tweets coded as a thematic category with those that were not. For each comparison, we conducted a Levene’s test for equality of variances and adjusted the degrees of freedom using the Welch–Satterthwaite method if the group variances were unequal. We also calculated Cohen’s *d* to assess the corresponding effect sizes. We found that three of the four politicians show significantly different retweets and/or favorites for confrontational tweets — essentially negativity is rewarded for these politicians. While mean retweets and favorites are higher for Trump ( $p < 0.01$ ) and Wilders ( $p < 0.01$ ), Farage

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<sup>1</sup> For the complete data set of the reconciled tweets, please see this link: <https://andregonawela.github.io/>

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Table 3. Proportions of tweets by categories compared across politicians

	Handle			
	@geertwilderspvv	@narendramodi	@Nigel_Farage	@realDonaldTrump
Overall Negative Tweeting	25.5% <sub>a</sub>	29.7% <sub>a</sub>	44.5% <sub>b</sub>	48.1% <sub>b</sub>
Criticism	18.7% <sub>a</sub>	25.4% <sub>b</sub>	42.3% <sub>c</sub>	47.2% <sub>c</sub>
Personal Insult	5.5% <sub>a</sub>	3.5% <sub>b</sub>	3.9% <sub>a,b</sub>	20.9% <sub>c</sub>
Group Insult	7.5% <sub>a</sub>	10.1% <sub>b</sub>	5.4% <sub>a</sub>	8.3% <sub>a,b</sub>
Labeling	7.2% <sub>a</sub>	0.9% <sub>b</sub>	6.4% <sub>a</sub>	19.0% <sub>c</sub>
Wordplay	7.2% <sub>a</sub>	11.9% <sub>b</sub>	9.7% <sub>a,b</sub>	7.6% <sub>a</sub>
Sarcasm	3.8% <sub>a</sub>	3.2% <sub>a</sub>	2.4% <sub>a</sub>	3.3% <sub>a</sub>

The subscripts represent a z-score test comparing proportions of categories for each politician. Values in the same row not sharing the same subscript are significantly different at  $p < .05$  in the two-sided test of equality for column proportions. Tests assume equal variances

has higher retweets ( $p < 0.01$ ). Modi is the exception, where his confrontational tweets have fewer mean favorites ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### 5.1. Criticism

Donald Trump and Nigel Farage's use of criticism was significantly higher than their two counterparts with their proportion of tweets — Farage at 42.3% and Trump at 47.2% — accounting for nearly half their tweets over the four-month period. However, Trump displayed a statistically significant difference in mean retweets ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1497) = -4.42$ ) and favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1497) = -2.713$ ) for tweets exhibiting criticism. The Cohen's effect size for retweets ( $d = 0.28$ ) was between small and moderate, while it was small for favorites ( $d = 0.18$ ). For Wilders, the mean retweets ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(415.72) = -4.98$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.49$ ) and favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(407.44) = -4.095$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.40$ ) showed a statistically significant difference, with the Cohen's effect size between small and moderate. For Farage, the mean retweets and favorites for this category were not statistically significantly different. On the other hand, retweets and favorites for Narendra Modi's tweets were less than for tweets that did not exhibit criticism, with favorites displaying a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1192.634) = 2.922$ ). However, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = 0.18$ ) suggests a small practical significance.

We observed the characteristics of criticism in this tweet by Donald Trump:

'Looking at Air Force One @ MIA. Why is he campaigning instead of creating jobs & fixing Obamacare? Get back to work for the American people!' – @realDonaldTrump, 3 November 2016 (@realDonaldTrump, 2016b)

Table 4. Independent samples *t*-tests comparing means of retweets and favorites between tweets coded as a certain category (=1) and those that are not (=0) for all politicians

Labels	@geertwilderspvv	@narendramodi	@Nigel_Farage	@realDonaldTrump
Code	0	1	0	1
Count	1288	441	423	778
RT	367.529***	599.121***	471.89***	9721.95***
Favorite	596.946***	930.147***	768.21	27,386.25***
Count	1405	324	440	791
RT	385.531***	601.725***	507.56	9743.65***
Favorite	633.833***	899.157***	828.27	27,352.45***
Count	1604	125	713	1214
RT	421.703	481.752	552.26	10,695.84**
Favorite	680.274	725.624	787.23	28,324.86**
Count	1604	125	688	1385
RT	397.500***	792.320***	541.33**	10,954.86
Favorite	634.609***	1311.600***	766.87	29,029.36
Count	1664	65	744	1450
RT	418.572***	617.338***	562.54	10,953.83**
Favorite	671.868	982.677	795.97	28,838.38**
Count	1634	95	732	1185
RT	423.064	477.295	556.57	706.37
Favorite	682.026	709.821	788.40	10,568.02***
Count	1600	129	721	28,426.83***
RT	398.134***	772.217***	562.83	1374
Favorite	641.367***	1206.791***	801.76	10,823.98***
Count				14,140.17***
RT				28,426.29***
Favorite				37,042.76***

Levene's test of equality of variances was used to assess if variances were equal. For unequal variances, we calculated the *t*-statistic using an adjustment to the degrees of freedom using the Welch-Satterthwaite method

Means that are significantly different represented by: \*\*\* -  $p < 0.01$ , \*\* -  $p < 0.05$ , \* -  $p < 0.1$

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We see that Donald Trump derides Barack Obama for campaigning instead of governing, essentially characterizing him as a ‘do-nothing’ politician. Likewise, we observe criticism in another tweet criticizing Barack Obama, this time by Nigel Farage:

‘Last time we followed foreign policy advice from a US President was when we went to war in Iraq. We should be wary’. – Nigel\_Farage, 22 April 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, 2016e)

Comparing Obama to George W. Bush, Farage aims to delegitimize American leadership in response to Obama’s support of Remain. Of the four thematic categories highlighted in the findings, the criticism theme is the most generic, covering a range of antagonistic tweeting. It is perceivable thus that critical tweeting would have high occurrence across political accounts, irrespective of populist tendencies. More important, all four politicians studied are opposition figures, thus they have existing states to criticize.

### 5.2. Labeling

Donald Trump demonstrated by far the heaviest user of labeling, superseding his counterparts with 19% of his tweets containing the characteristic. On the other hand, labeling in Narendra Modi’s tweets was virtually nonexistent (=0.9%), while Farage and Wilders made relatively moderate use of it (=6.6% and 7.2%). Trump’s use of labeling corresponded to a small increase in retweets ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $t(1497) = -2.563$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 0.17$ ) and favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1497) = -2.422$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 0.16$ ). A key attribute of Trump’s labeling that we observed is seen through his use of nicknames to describe political opponents and unfavorable entities.

For example, Trump attacked both Hillary and Bill Clinton through the use of labels in the following tweet:

‘A country that Crooked Hillary says has funded ISIS also gave Wild Bill \$1 million for his birthday? SO CORRUPT!’ – @realDonaldTrump, 16 October 2016 (@realDonaldTrump, 2016a)

Trump labels Hillary Clinton as ‘crooked’ while Bill Clinton is labeled as ‘Wild Bill’ (as if he were a ‘wild’ frontiersman), to denigrate them. The adjective ‘crooked’, the innuendo of an ISIS connection, and the explicit use of capital letters implies that Hillary Clinton’s integrity is questionable and that she is part of a corrupt elite — effectively branding her as the ‘political enemy’.

We also see labeling used by Nigel Farage and Geert Wilders, but to a much lesser extent than it is by Trump. Like Trump, however, both used labeling to create an image of their opponents as politically repellant, in line with the political spectacle as espoused by Murray Edelman. For example, Wilders tweeted:

‘Vote the europhile Brussels-bender Rutte away on March 15! #NetherlandsOursAgain #VotePVV’ – @geertwilderspvv, 14 December 2016 (@geertwilderspvv, 2016c)

Wilders asserts that Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands, is a stooge of the European Union through the label ‘Europhile Brussels-bender’, which presents a pseudo-event of the EU trying to puppeteer the Dutch government, whereupon Rutte is as a political enemy of the legitimate electorate (the ‘real’ Dutch).

Similar to the Wilders tweet, Farage used labeling in a Eurosceptic fashion. Farage often presented a pseudo-event of EU failure and reinforced it by consistently presenting its detrimental effects as widely accepted reality. For example:

‘Failed Euro project has had a devastating impact on lives of citizens across Europe who have suffered at the hands of the EU nationalists’ – @Nigel\_Farage, 09 May 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, 2016a)

We see here also the creation of a pseudo-category of ‘EU nationalists’ presented as a political enemy, by imputing the anti-Brexit voters’ allegiance as primarily non-British, thus necessarily inimical to loyal citizenship.

### 5.3. Wordplay

Frequencies for wordplay are all relatively consistent among the four politicians, with Narendra Modi’s use of wordplay being proportionally highest (=11.9%) and significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ) from Donald Trump’s (=7.6%). A major form of wordplay consisted of Modi’s adaption of his political opponent’s names to conform with an antagonistic meaning that he would attribute to that individual or entity. Such rhetorical tricks are seen in this tweet attacking the Congress family:

‘Shahzada should tell us about R(ahul), S(onia), V(adra), P(riyanka) model. This RSVP model has looted India <http://t.co/nNOoPscdPV>’ – @narendramodi, 19 April 2014 (@narendramodi, 2014c)

Nigel Farage’s use of wordplay showed a statistically significantly higher retweet rate ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $t(760) = -2.37$ ), with the Cohen’s effect size ( $d = 0.29$ ) between small and moderate. Farage employed rhetorical sarcasm in calling to question the integrity of his opponents, and highlighting his own rectitude. For example, he tweeted:

‘Just returned government’s booklet of EU lies to Number 10 with @prwhittle & @DianeJamesMEP. Returning to sender!’ – @Nigel\_Farage, 15 April 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, 2016d)



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Geert Wilders experienced a statistically significant increase in both the frequencies of retweets ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(127.539) = -3.602$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.42$ ) and favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(126.789) = -3.922$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.47$ ) with respect to wordplay. The effect size for both was between small and moderate practical significance. Like Farage, Wilders used wordplay to question the honor and reliability of his political opponents, as seen in this tweet:

'Dictatorship66 #antidemocrats <https://t.co/FasA8wxcxT>' – @geertwilderspvv, 05 February 2017 (@geertwilderspvv, 2017b)

Wilders spins the name of the Dutch political Democrats 66 as 'Dictators 66', presenting an alternate reality of the party as fascist and undemocratic. This was the only category where Trump did not show a statistically significant increase in retweets and favorites.

### 5.4. Sarcasm

The frequencies of sarcasm were largely consistent in the data sets for all four politicians, averaging about 2–3% for each. However, Donald Trump stands out in terms of the increase in retweets and favorites that are observed in sarcastic tweets. On an average, tweets bearing sarcasm were 1.6 times more retweeted than those without ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $t(1497) = -2.448$ ). This is by far the largest percentage increase in retweets that we detected across all politicians for any category. The increase in favorites, while slightly smaller in magnitude, is also statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $t(1497) = -2.386$ ). Both retweets (Cohen's  $d = 0.36$ ) and favorites (Cohen's  $d = 0.35$ ) are between small and moderate effect size.

A noticeable trend we discerned in Trump's use of sarcasm was his implied (and blatant) accusations that his opponents were 'rigging' the election. This tweet typifies this trend:

'So terrible that Crooked didn't report she got the debate questions from Donna Brazile, if that were me it would have been front page news!' – realDonaldTrump, 01 November 2016 (@realDonaldTrump, 2016c)

While Trump far exceeded his counterparts in terms of raw following and therefore showed far higher mean retweets and favorites for sarcasm, the same is true for Geert Wilders with regard to the retweet counts, which had a low to moderate effect size ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1727) = -2.601$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ ). Qualitatively, Wilders' sarcasm frequently lacked innuendo and was directly hostile. For example:

'Can't those hate imams piss off together with Denk for the sake of Allah to some islamic country?' – @geertwilderspvv, 04 March 2017 (@geertwilderspvv, 2017a)

This tweet qualifies as sarcasm because the question is rhetorical — Wilders does not expect imams to move anywhere but rather is using that question to delegitimize Muslims. But we also see in the tweet the nature of direct outrage that would in a lot of political communication be considered out of bounds.

### 5.5. Personal Insult

Donald Trump is an extreme outlier in his use of the personal insult. Trump far exceeded the three other politicians in terms of the high ratio ( $p < 0.05$ ) that he exhibited in the occurrence of the personal insult in his tweets — Trump showed a 20.9% rate. Trump also showed a moderate increase in retweets ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $t(1496) = -3.205$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.28$ ) and a small increase in favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(1496) = -2.029$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.17$ ) for tweets containing the personal insult. We also found significant overlap of labeling and personal insults — for example, Trump referring to 'Crooked Hillary' qualified as both. Essentially, labeling is a feature of Trump's rhetorical technique of personal insult.

Trump's use of personal insult was frequently blatant in phrasing, highlighting a populist style of plain speaking with no patience for political correctness. For example,

'Tried watching low-rated @Morning\_Joe this morning, unwatchable! @morningmika is off the wall, a neurotic and not very bright mess!' – @realDonaldTrump, 22 August 2016 (@realDonaldTrump, 2016e)

In contrast, Nigel Farage's personal insults were aimed at ideological delegitimization rather than Trump's style of personal attack such as emasculation (calling Republican primary opponent Marco Rubio small, for instance). Farage tweeted:

'It appears the crushing of Greek democracy and corporatist TTIP have won @jeremycorbyn over on the EU'. – @Nigel\_Farage 14 April 2016 (@Nigel\_Farage, 2016c)

Here, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's socialist leanings are called to question, suggesting he is either spineless or morally disingenuous.

### 5.6. Group Insult

Narendra Modi exhibited the highest proportion of the four politicians in his usage of group insults (statistically significantly different from both Farage and Wilders,  $p < 0.05$ ). It is important to note that a large segment of Modi's group insults are directed at the Congress Party and the UPA Alliance (of which Congress is a part). This was seen when Modi tweeted:

‘Our aim is “Apradh Mukh Rajneeti”. We need to end the atmosphere of criminalisation of politics, that was started & encouraged by Congress’ – @narendramodi, 14 April 2014 (@narendramodi, 2014a)

However, we did not observe any significant difference in retweets or favorites in tweets with group insults.

Geert Wilders, while having the lowest rate of group insult occurrence in his tweets, did have a statistically significant increase in retweets ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(134.65) = -4.264$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 0.47$ ) and favorites ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $t(134.455) = -4.357$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 0.48$ ) for such messaging; both categories had a low to moderate effect size when accounting for tweets with group insults as opposed to those that didn’t. One example is the following tweet:

‘#2017in3words No More Islam’ – @geertwilderspvv, 30 December 2016 (@geertwilderspvv, 2016a)

This tweet, attacking those who follow the Islamic faith, had garnered 3318 retweets and 5908 favorites at the time the sample was collected, which was highly comparable to other tweets by Wilders. Although this might not be sufficient to suggest that his following is inordinately stacked with followers who find this discourse acceptable, it does suggest that such tweets have significant purchase.

## 6. Discussion

Social media change the nature of political discourse in important ways. First, with the use of criticism itself, the findings are not necessarily unique. All four politicians were not members of ruling political parties, thus critical confrontation would be the expected approach of proposing a political alternative. The more interesting finding is in the extension of non-civil discourse that Twitter enables. The kinds of extreme rhetoric that would earlier be reduced to the fringes of private conversations, even in populist movements, can be mainstreamed through the public nature of social media. The support received online can also serve as a public affirmation of their validity as free speech. What was earlier excluded as politically incorrect can be affirmed as popular by nature of its resonance in some segments of populations.

While the leaders differ from one another in their individual styles, their core base online, and drivers for being online, we found comparable cross-cutting styles related to populist speech. First, an important part of the political spectacle is cutting down dissent. Twitter allows politicians to use terse messaging that is rewarded for impulsivity and simplicity, in what Brian Ott (2017) refers to as the ‘politics of debasement’. Indeed, as we found, not only do all four politicians indulge in personal and group insults of various forms, but indeed these have an overall higher resonance through retweets and favorites than general tweets. Here, the nature of social media affordances of being able to quickly disseminate messages and allow users to

publicly signal their politics as seen in their ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’, creating what has been referred to as ‘personal publics’ (Schmidt 2014).

Thus, tweets from a politician work not just as individual artifacts but are necessarily attached to the individuals who interact with them through online endorsements (or rejection). We see these endorsements in the form of retweets and favorites driven by collaborative networks, not solely by the leader, but necessarily by a shifting group of allies, as seen in the cooperative framework discussed by Schmidt and Bannon (1992). Studying the language and content of tweets gives us a sense of the top-down enactment of persona and message by the politician but embedded in this is also a hierarchical relationship (Boulus-Rødje and Bjørn 2015) in which the leader gives his or her followers what they want, often the spectacle, that galvanizes the online organization. The online space allows a swift escalation of the spectacle because the individual political observer is allowed to participate in the spectacle through its propagation. That tweeting such as insults, labeling, or word-play resonates more with the social media population suggests a symbiotic relationship between social media incivility by leaders and the resultant discourse online. It also reinforces research that the spectacle is driven by what a politician’s support base wants (Tromble 2018). After a certain amount of retweeting and favoriting of messages, unfiltered for veracity or civility by a mainstream media that can be held accountable, the spectacle created by a leader — that a certain rival is a liar or is crooked, eventually comes to be the moniker for that individual. This is further legitimated by being presented as the voice of an online citizenry as opposed to a politically correct or biased corporate media. Over time, the notion of Hillary Clinton as corrupt or Rahul Gandhi as infantile or stupid comes to dominate the collective imagination as being driven not by their political rivals, but by citizens speaking in distributed yet collaborated unison, rather than a centralized voice speaking for the powers that control it.

Short-form messaging allows for an instant flow of interactive responses that help legitimize what Boorstin and Edelman refer to as the pseudo-event, which is in turn made true by its reverberation through retweets and favorites. What we see consistently in the use of insult and labeling is a populist message presented with oversimplified conclusions that are intended to stick and delegitimize — either involving individuals when they are labeled, such as ‘Lyn’ Ted’, or groups such as the ‘EU Nationalists.’ For political campaign managers aware that these messages find purchase among followers (or even make the mainstream news), it makes sense to continue such messaging.

Second, the success of populist politicians in spreading their message online makes them newsworthy in the mainstream media. The decision to make a slur news is no longer in the hands of journalists and commentators. Twitter legitimates the scale of reach, as measured through the retweeting action of anonymous publics (or bots, as may be) to serve as a launchpad for a politician’s claims on the nature of things or individuals. Controversy is news, and over time the origins of ‘news’ matter less than the reverberating words themselves.

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Third, this research shows that wording of social media messages matters. The construction of populist messaging creates a political enemy but also forces the hand of the reader to react. The ‘take no prisoners’ social media style of both Wilders and Trump drives their more active social media supporters who engage through retweets or likes to publicly profess a more extreme form of political speech.

The differences between the phrasing and frequency of tweets help us understand the variances among the four politicians’ brand intent. In Narendra Modi’s case, the relatively muted use of criticism or personal insults compared with Farage and Trump must be seen in the light of the image management exercise of Modi’s online presence compared with the bare-knuckles outsider approach that Trump chose. Studies have suggested that Modi’s use of wordplay and sarcasm to attack opponents instead of angry language presents an alternative to his already earned stripes as a political strongman, rather than using the platform to enforce such an image (Pal et al. 2016).

On the other hand, for Trump and Farage the chest-thumping braggadocio of the political spectacle was a critical part of their online engagement as straight-talking, masculine alternatives to politically correct, coddling liberals. While Modi, speaking to Indian elites online, won points for his nativist turn of phrase at his opponent as a ‘Shahzada’, meaning ‘Muslim princeling’, which both othered Modi’s opponent from the Hindu mainstream and took aim at his nepotistic origins, Farage and Trump opted for the working-class directness of labeling their opponents ‘pathetic’ (for David Cameron) and ‘crooked’ (for Hillary Clinton).

Wilders, on the other hand, is somewhat of an outlier for his consistent verbal hostility towards immigrants as the main plank of his movement. His use of incivility in repeatedly using phrases such as ‘Stop Islam’ or asking Muslims to ‘piss off’ is nested within his populist call to defend free speech as an inherently Dutch trait. Muslims’ objection to such affront would therefore by default be a rejection of fundamental Dutch values. Social media allow for the creation of an alternate reality based on politicians’ ability to control the story by enhancing the logic they see fit. As we also see in our findings, when Wilders employed group insults (which were largely aimed at Muslims), those tweets were roughly twice as retweeted or favorited compared to his average tweet.

Besides the individual characteristics of each politician, the political culture of each site also has effects on what we see online. Lijphart (2012) asserted that rigid and divided societies tend to have less cooperative democratic traditions than those in which many differences need to be bridged to come to an effective policy. Thus, Trump and Farage were clearly playing binary races where one side won and another lost, and Wilders and Modi were fighting elections where coalitions and partnerships could be a factor. Wilders, with his history of standing at the extreme right, had a position that had less access to political partnerships. Modi, on the other hand, operated in a political system in which coalitions were the norm — his own party had several regional partners who ran on relatively secular planks compared to him. To avoid their alienation, Modi needed to be a benevolent populist who would ironically

need to reach out beyond the traditional nativist conservative Hindu base to avoid seeming unpalatable to moderate Hindus and other communities (Pal et al. 2016).

Some statistics can be misleading. Geert Wilders exhibited the lowest frequency of negative tweets. Yet if we examine the content of those negative tweets, it tends to be far more extreme and direct than tweets from the other three politicians. Wilders' profile image on Twitter, for instance, says 'Stop Muslims.' His lower volume of critical tweets is partly a result of his focus on a few issues rather than being suggestive of a relatively benign leader. From a parliamentary perspective, Wilders has little to gain from decorum compared to Modi — in the fragmented Dutch political system, Wilders can still benefit from seats in the parliament without a majority.

Trump and Farage also benefitted from being able to communicate without being driven by the normative expectations of their allies in their respective binary races. Farage crafted himself as the key leader of one side of a referendum, while Trump openly touted himself as an outsider candidate to his own party. Both consequently benefitted electorally from their respective organizations (the Republican establishment, the entrenched anti-EU vote blocs), but they had the freedom to play a performative role online that was centered on presenting themselves as anti-establishment figures.

We found that Edelman's notion of the 'political enemy' was prevalent in the tweets of all four politicians, albeit emerging in different manners. However, this bares important consequences for the public reaction to the populist exercise. Donald Trump elicited higher retweet rates for tweets that were more personal and insulting. In effect, Trump was being rewarded from a populist perspective for rejecting decorum, and in doing so, presenting a contrast to his establishment opponent, thus automatically branding an enemy by their following of the accepted code of behavior. Wilders presented the pseudo-event of a Muslim takeover of Dutch society as a legitimate driver of popular concern.

Narendra Modi practiced the gentle touch of innuendo with the highest level of wordplay in his tweeting, among all four. In a context where the majority of social media users themselves are firmly part of the economic and social elite, Modi's Twitter output aimed to legitimize a populist movement by changing its off-street rhetoric. Unlike the other three politicians, Modi sits atop more than just an 'establishment' — his political party is cadre-based and has deep roots in a community. Modi did not have to enact a populist agenda online to reach that base — it already came to him naturally through the RSS's wide network. For him, social media is a place for reserved populism. Unlike Trump or Wilders, he benefits from exhibiting restraint because his ability to wield the stick has never been in doubt.

Despite the differences in terms of how the four politicians cast their opponents as the 'enemy', there are overarching similarities. All four use their Twitter rhetoric to call into question the legitimacy of their respective opponent's genuineness, but each also pitches their political battles as moral battles. Such arguments can be remarkably difficult to make and sustain in debate or long form. But devoid of having to substantiate or reason, the reverberation of a message becomes the measure of its



purchase. The higher the retweets, the truer was Hillary Clinton's crookedness or the anti-Brexit camp's treachery to Her Majesty's government.

Social media action does not exist in isolation. Each of the four politicians was aided by other forms of media outreach — both non-traditional, such as Farage's NHS Battle Bus, Modi's 3-D hologram trucks, or Trump's access to Breitbart news, as well as traditional, in that each of these figures is essentially a newsmaker. The mainstream media have no option but to cover them. More important, the contemporary media environment enables massive amounts of outreach purely through online news sources and a range of social network connections.

Forms of non-civil discourse that would be anathema for the politicians in a mainstream media setting are enabled by social media because the political actor cannot be forced to face up to being called out on it, as would be true for an incendiary speech on a television debate, which might be censored entirely. Moreover, politicians can delegate the work of incendiary speech to the 'comments' about their messaging, which is particularly helpful when they turn to innuendo in place of direct attack. The shelf life of the aggressive attack is thus not just the initial message, but both the conversation generated by one kind of messaging, as well as the history of that messaging in the speech of the author.

These online conversations and their roots are vital because they have the potential to stymie collaboration, but they might also lend insight into where the potential for conversation could be. While the nature of public discourse is indeed dependent on local context (Kou et al. 2017), we show that the nature of top-down public discourse across different political systems also has underlying similarities. Specifically, we assert that the political spectacle is an overarching theme that is implicitly visible across varying political systems in online political communication. Likewise, our study indicates that the political spectacle further propagates the online echo chamber through these conversations because it solidifies the consolidation of the politician's online network (Doris-Down et al. 2013). While the online echo chamber can prevent broader collaboration, the use of the spectacle in this context also crucially advances collaboration within the entrenched networks of a politician's supporters.

## 7. Conclusion

Several major politicians around the world, including some of those studied here, are increasingly in the news for how they use social media and what they say on it. In this study, we show that politicians' antagonistic tweeting includes the personalization of ideological attack and that such messaging has payoffs as measured through their higher purchase in the Twitter universe. Indeed, if the politicians are consistent in their style of antagonistic messaging, such behavior becomes part of their style, and they can then be seen as rational actors when they persist with that social media behavior, particularly when it has measurable payoffs. Their actions online are central to the future debates in CSCW because their success online depends both on the collaborative efforts of their respective political organizations, as well as on the buy-in for their

actions by the electorate. More important, these political actors' online style brings to question the normative basis of 'collaboration' because what we see here is collaborative action within groups that follow individual politicians, which arguably leads to greater polarization between their respective ideological blocks.

The political spectacle literature is a helpful theoretical lens to make sense of why politicians make certain choices in self-representation online, particularly when seen alongside literature on how people are encouraged to collaborate towards a common political end. The political spectacle lens used here can be useful in understanding the creation and sustenance of echo chambers from the validation of more extreme views that Twitter's inherent collaboration and creation of agglomerations of like-minded individuals can bring. CSCW researchers have long striven to combat this divisiveness online (Doris et al., Doris-Down et al. 2013). It is important to be cognizant of the politics of performative demonization and identity creation as we strive to design understanding and collaborative online discussion environments, and at a more general level, ICT tools (Saeed et al. 2009; Yu 2017). Our study thus at a basic level informs HCI and CSCW research by revealing the nature of discourse online, as viewed through the online behavior of key influencers.

However, our work is also motivated by highlighting important areas of potential future direction. We show that there is much need to further understand the reverse hierarchy — i.e. how public sentiment motivates critical messaging, and particularly that part of critical messaging that is uncivil. Likewise, our study suggests a need to delve deeper into the cooperative behavior as enacted within or across networks, e.g., is there a propensity towards a certain kind of speech or discourse that stimulates one set of people, but not another, even in the service of the same goal (i.e. electing a specific leader)?

We conclude that the four politicians were comparable on certain fronts — each of them spent significant shares of their communications in making critical comments and creating enemies. Such critical messaging serves to personalize political action and provide a form of political spectacle. However, the differences in the political systems, the nature of the issues driving candidature, and the timing of the elections are also important indicators of what drives the type and frequency of messaging.

Indeed, the current political climate in various countries around the world has briskly caught the attention of scholars working across the spectrum on sociotechnical issues. Key among these, both in the academy and in mainstream discourse, has been the issue of propaganda and 'fake news' (Hecht et al. 2017). Outside of the veracity of content itself, our work suggests both that politicians are savvy to the benefits of a spectacle, and that citizens online reinforce this by rewarding incendiary messaging. Finally, our work presents an approach to operationalizing and measuring political style on social media. Social media are now the cornerstone of any well-run political campaign, and understanding how these media are used will further our collective understanding of how political brands are built online, and how citizens, in turn, react to these. We hope also that this work provides a methodological tool for similar studies of political discourse online.

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### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge useful comments and contributions by Tanya Madhani, Vaishnav Kameswaran, Maximillian Alvarez, Shraddha Jain, and Verushka Patel during various iterations of this research.

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