Are some Communication Channels More Suited for Populism Than Others? A Comparison of Populist Communication in Facebook Posts and Party Press Releases in the German Election Campaign 2017

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the vote share of populist parties has been growing steadily in Western societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 9). Consequently, the success of populist parties has led to a situation where governing without them is becoming increasingly difficult. In the last decade, populist parties joined national governments in Italy, Austria, Hungary, Greece, and Poland. Scholars have speculated that social media could be a driver behind populism's success (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018, p. 427; Kriesi, 2014, p. 367). With 4.2 billion users worldwide (DataReportal, 2021), social media offers a great opportunity for political actors to reach out to potential voters, making social media a forceful political communication tool (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020). Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, the emerging social media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) is well compatible with populist communication. Social media allows populist parties to bypass journalistic gatekeepers (Krämer, 2017, p. 1303) and deliver the message directly to their supporters (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017, p. 1113). Consequently, we can observe an "elective affinity" between populism and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Parallel to the rise of social media, popular trust in the mass media has declined (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Kleis Nielsen, 2022, p. 15). It is foremost the group of populist voters who now prefers to get their news from social media (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, while there are numerous studies on the social media performance of populist actors (Bobba, 2019; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Zulianello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli, 2018) and on the attention that populist communication can generate online (Bracciale, Andretta, & Martella, 2021; Engesser et al., 2017; Klinger, Koc-Michalska, & Russmann, 2022; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), few studies have empirically analysed how prevalent populist communication is on social media compared to other communication channels. The following article, therefore, addresses this research question by analysing

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the prevalence of parties' populist communication in social media posts and press releases. The analysis uses a novel dataset covering political communication during the German election campaign of 2017 (n=1,216). The dataset includes manually coded social media posts and press releases of the German parties. The 2017 German Bundestag elections were significant because they were the first German legislative elections where a right-wing populist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and a left-wing populist party, Die Linke, won seats at the same time, which affected populist communication in Germany both quantitatively and qualitatively. Although research has linked the AfD's effective social media performance to its fast rise, the attention has been foremost on the user reaction that the party's social media activity provoked (Diehl, Lehberger, Müller, & Seibt, 2019; Hübscher, 2020; Serrano, Shahrezaye, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2019). Consequently, we know relatively little about the prevalence of populist content in the communication of the AfD and the other German parties. The article aims to close this research gap.

In what follows, the next (second) section discusses the key concepts of the ideational foundation of populism. Based on the ideational approach, populist parties in Germany are identified and examples of populist communication discussed. The literature review in section three focuses on the relationship between populism and the media, highlighting the growing importance of social media in political communication. The research gap and hypotheses for the empirical analysis are discussed in section four. The fifth section provides an overview of the dataset and method. The sixth section presents the analytical results. The last section discusses conclusions and implications for future research.

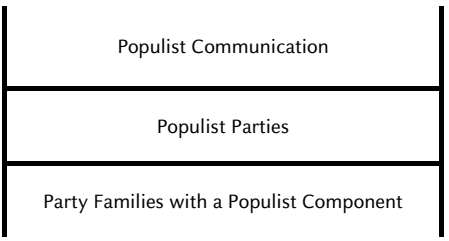
The Ideational Approach to Study Populism

This article focuses primarily on populist communication, understood as the discursive communication of populist ideas (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 425). The so-called ideational approach to populism, which has become widespread in textual analyses of populism, including social media analyses (Bobba, 2019; Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017), defines populism as a "unique set of ideas" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 3). Although contextual variations of definitions exist, ideational approaches agree that for populism, politics is a struggle between two fundamentally different moral camps: the "good people" and the "bad elite/establishment" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Populist communication uses a simplistic narrative in which ordinary people are described as virtuous, who have an identifiable "General Will", which should guide political decision-making. This subdimension is called people-centrism. According to populists, the people are oppressed by "the elite", a powerful minority that illegitimately controls the state. Thus, populism is

strongly anti-elitist, which constitutes the second subdimension of populism (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Besides populist communication, there are also other manifestations of populist ideas that can be analysed empirically. Building on the work of Sartori, Van Kessel (2014) conceptualises a ladder of abstraction of populist manifestations (see Figure 1). Populist communication[2] is at the top of the ladder, which can be a populist statement, a sentence or a paragraph in a text that refers to the core ideas of populism. Populist communication is considered to be present if communication elements of both subdimensions, people-centrism and anti-elitism, are combined. As others suggested (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), this may be called full populist communication to differentiate it from texts that only include individual subdimensions of populism. Populist communication is a "light" concept in the sense that it has low intension (few properties) and high extension (applicable to many cases). Further down the ladder is the concept of populist parties. Populist parties are parties that use populist communication coherently over time. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between a non-populist party, which may make references to populist ideas from time to time, and a populist party, which uses populist communication on multiple platforms (e.g., in manifestos, press releases, leader speeches) and coherently over time (e.g., subsequently in different campaigns). Finally, researchers may also be interested in analysing populist party families, such as the populist radical right.

Figure 1. The Ladder of Abstractions of Populist Manifestations.



Source: Adapted from Van Kessel, 2014.

Populist Communication and Populist Parties in Germany

When studying populism, Germany provides an interesting case. While Germany seemed long immune to right-wing populism (Berbuir, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2015), left-wing populism was comparatively successful after the German reunification. The post-communist and neo-populist Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS) entered the German Bundestag in 1990. Examples of the PDS's

[2] For reasons of coherence, I will use the term populist communication. In his original article, van Kessel uses the term "populist discourse", which I see as a synonym and not a different concept.

populist communication include references to the East Germans, often described as exploited by West German elites. As this discourse was used frequently and coherently over time, the classification of the PDS as a left-wing populist party is justified (Hartleb, 2004). In 2007, the PDS merged with the West-German WASG, a left-wing splinter party founded by disillusioned SPD members and union leaders, under the new name Die Linke (Hough & Keith, 2019, pp. 130–131). Die Linke continues the PDS's populist legacy. Nevertheless, researchers state that although the party fulfils the minimal criteria as a left-wing populist party, it is less populist than other European left-wing populist parties (Hough & Keith, 2019), which researchers have already observed for the PDS (March & Mudde, 2005). However, Die Linke is a quite heterogenous party, which is also reflected in the large variation of the populist communication of their sixteen state chapters (Thomeczek, 2023). Right-wing populism, in contrast, was not represented in the Bundestag until 2017, when the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the third strongest faction. Elements of populist communication were already present in the AfD's early tactical agenda; however, the party did not use populist rhetoric coherently at that time (Arzheimer, 2015; Berbuir et al., 2015; Franzmann, 2016; Lewandowsky, Giebler, & Wagner, 2016). In 2015, Frauke Petry, the leading figure of the national-conservative wing at that time, gained control over the party and re-orientated it towards its current course of nationalist populism (Franzmann, 2019). The party changed its rhetoric towards a more nationalist and anti-establishment discourse in the following years, strongly criticising Germany's immigration policies (Wurthmann, Marschall, Triga, & Manavopoulos, 2021). The post-2015 AfD provides many textbook examples of right-wing populist rhetoric. Regarding people-centrism, the AfD builds its discourse around the term *Volk*. In terms of anti-elitism, the party attacks the political establishment by using derogative terms such as "the political class" or "career politicians" (Olsen, 2018, p. 79). Several recently published datasets measuring party-level populism state that the AfD is among the most populist parties in Europe by now, while they classify Die Linke as moderately populist (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020; Norris, 2020; Thomeczek et al., 2021).

Literature Review: Does the Shift From Mass Media to Social Media Favour Populism?

In recent decades, political campaigning has changed drastically. After WWII, political communication became less direct and more mediated through mass media (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammel, & Semetko, 1999, p. 22). Three phases characterised this development leading up to the turn of the century. The first premodern phase was characterised by face-to-face communication and strong local party branches; the second phase was defined by the advent of mass media and mediated communication; and the third phase, which began in the early 1990s,

related to professionalisation and the advent of new mass communication technologies (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 599). Roemmele and Gibson (2020) argue that we are currently experiencing the fourth phase of political communication, characterised by the impact of social media. Social media fulfils an essential function in the Electronic Democracy, where electronic devices support vital functions of the political system (Kersting & Baldersheim, 2004). Those core functions are information, communication and transaction/participation (Kersting, 2012, p. 23). While social media contributes to all three functions, its information function is the most important.

Although mass media communication continues to be relevant (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 315), the advent of social media as a direct form of communication (Manucci, 2017, p. 478) revived the idea of unmediated communication that populists always emphasised. Therefore, populism research has suggested that the shift towards social media communication created a favourable communication environment for populists, which becomes apparent when the underlying media logics of social media and mass media are contrasted. Both logics differ in terms of distribution, usage, and production (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Regarding all three aspects, the social media logic is well-suited to populist ideas. First, in terms of distribution, social media fits with populists' demand for direct communication with the people (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). Research on the right-wing populist AfD highlights that there is a discrepancy between the critical evaluation of the party in newspaper articles and the more favourable online comments below them. This was already observed in the party's less radical early years (Schärdel, 2016). Although those comments may not represent the general public, they highlight that a potential audience prone to populism can be addressed directly via the Internet. Therefore, it is not surprising that many populists quickly adopted social media communication, having recognised it as an opportunity to create direct links with their supporters (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113; Kriesi, 2014, p. 367; Manucci, 2017, p. 475; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020, p. 1533). However, even on social media, intermediaries are not entirely absent. There are, for example, digital intermediaries, including algorithms, which are mostly invisible to users (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 317). However, as the algorithms favour polarising content (Barrett, Hendrix, & Sims, 2021), those social media intermediaries are rather an advantage than a disadvantage for populist communication. Second, through social media's logic of usage, populist communication reaches many people beyond the readership of traditional mass media outlets (Pew Research Center, 2018). This process is accelerated by the aspect of virality, as users pass on populist messages to other users with similar dispositions (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, pp. 1248–1249). In this sense, online communication could activate dormant populist attitudes (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, & Andreadis, 2018). As populist messages positively affect the number of likes (Bobba, 2019;

Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018), social media's logic of usage can connect populist demand and supply. Third, when it comes to the logic of production, populist parties can use social media to evade the evaluation of journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser et al., 2017, pp. 1110, 1113). Mass media follows the principle of journalistic curation. Here, content is processed through selective promotion based on normative or public-oriented rules (Thorson & Wells, 2016, pp. 314–315). Although no party can control political mass media communication because the outlet chooses how the message is framed (de Jonge, 2019), it is primarily populist parties who distrust journalistic gatekeepers (Krämer, 2017, p. 1303). Thus, populists can see social media communication as a means to circumvent mass media outlets, which they claim are controlled by political elites (Manucci, 2017, p. 475). On the demand side, this resonates well with the long-term trend of declining popular trust in media (Newman et al., 2022, p. 15). Another relevant aspect of social media's logic of production is text length. The comparatively short texts on social media rarely contain all elements of populism (Engesser et al., 2017). By combining messages selectively with populism elements, populists can strategically exploit the oversimplification and deliberate vagueness of its concepts. Although some have suggested that the commercialisation of the media has led to a favourable environment of "media populism" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 54), there is little empirical evidence that tabloid newspapers present populists in a more positive light (Akkerman, 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014). In many countries, the news coverage that populist actors get is more critical when compared to other parties (De Cleen & Van Aelst, 2016; de Jonge, 2019; Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2019, p. 183; Mudde, 2007, p. 251). In the case of the German AfD, Schärdel reports that the coverage became more critical as the party became more radical. After the party's radical nationalist-populist turn in 2015, the AfD was frequently described in newspapers as a "wolf in sheep's clothing", "inflammatory", or simply "populist" (Schärdel, 2017, pp. 94–95).

As mass media and social media logic are not mutually exclusive, hybrid forms exist (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, pp. 1251–1252). For example, several aspects of the mass media logic also influence the production of social media communication by political parties. The parties' social media managers are professionals who lead teams that are more similar to the staff of newspapers than to the average social media user. Similarly, party accounts will only publish highly selective content on social media based on party-specific criteria.

As there is an overall high compatibility of populist ideas with the social media logic, populist actors typically dedicate much attention to social media communication. In Austria, the right-wing populist FPÖ considered social media a crucial element of their campaign already in the early 2010s, years before the other parties discovered its potential (Klinger & Russmann, 2017, pp. 306, 309). Moreover, for populist actors, social media communication is not merely an election

campaign instrument but an integrative part of their communication strategy, whereas non-populist politicians are relatively inactive outside of elections (Ceccobelli, 2018, pp. 130, 135).

Research Gap and Hypotheses

Although populist communication is well-researched on various communication platforms, there is an overall lack of comparative research comparing populist communication across multiple platforms. Furthermore, comparing the results from different studies is often impossible as the research designs and definitions of populism differ. Among the few exceptions are two comparative studies from the US and Europe that suggest that populist communication is more frequently used in social media posts than in talk show statements (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; Ernst, Esser, et al., 2019). However, surprisingly, populist communication elements were most widespread in newspaper articles, although about half of the articles were also critical of populist actors (Ernst, Esser, et al., 2019, p. 183). One of the shortcomings of these studies is that the dependent variable is the usage of any populist communication element, without recognising which specific elements were used. Two studies on the 2016 US presidential campaign and the COVID pandemic communication of the Trump administration compared tweets and press releases (Lacatus, 2019; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021). During the 2016 campaign, candidates emphasised their key policies more often in their press releases compared to their tweets. In terms of populism, the results were more ambiguous. On the one hand, references to populist themes like establishment critique were more prevalent in their press releases. On the other hand, the most frequently used topics in tweets by Sanders and Trump were related to populism (Lacatus, 2019, supplementary material). During the COVID pandemic in 2020, Donald Trump used anti-elitist attacks against the mainstream media more frequently in his tweets than in his White House Press Briefings (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021). As in the other two studies discussed above, a shortcoming of these studies is that they do not focus on the combined usage of populist communication elements but rather specific subdimensions.

Under the assumption that populist communication can be used strategically (Dai & Kustov, 2022; Franzmann, 2016; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021), I expect that the choice of the communication channel will affect the usage of populist communication elements. In the following analysis, I will focus on full populist communication as the combination of both core elements, people-centrism and anti-elitism, on two communication channels: Facebook posts and press releases. Those two channels represent social media and mass media communication. While analysing the two communication channels will shed light on the prevalence of populist communication within a certain channel, a comparison allows to tackle the

question which channel is more dominated by populist communication. Based on the overall compatibility of the social media logic with populist ideas, I assume that full populist communication is more likely to be found in social media posts than in mass media communication.

H1: *Full populist rhetoric is less prevalent in mass media communication compared to social media communication.*

Due to the fragmented character of populist social media communication, I will also focus on the subdimension of anti-elitism (see Schwörer, 2021, pp. 3–6 for a similar approach). Anti-elitism can foster polarisation, one of the most problematic effects of social media platforms (Barrett et al., 2021), which helps to generate user attention. Furthermore, when criticising the elite, many populist parties explicitly include the mainstream media elite in their criticism (Krämer, 2014, 2017), something they may avoid when communicating with the mass media. This suggests incentives to focus anti-elitist communication strategies on social media.

H2: *Anti-elitist rhetoric is less prevalent in mass media communication compared to social media communication.*

Experimental research has shown that full populist and anti-elitist communication are the most effective populist communication elements for provoking user reactions (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019). Furthermore, they can activate populist attitudes (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). The two hypotheses are directed towards populist communication and apply to all parties. However, as it is much more likely that populist parties rely on full populist communication than non-populist parties, H1 has more relevance for the two populist parties, AfD and Die Linke. In contrast, H2 refers to anti-elitism, a specific subdimension of populism. While it is a well-suited indicator separating populist from non-populist parties (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011, p. 1278), anti-elitism is not restricted to populist parties and is also an ideational element of anti-establishment challenger parties (Rooduijn, 2019, pp. 367–368). Therefore, anti-elitist rhetoric is more likely to be found among oppositional parties in general compared to full populist communication. No specific effect is expected for the subdimension of people-centrism since this is also common among many mainstream parties (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; March, 2017) and the least provocative populist communication element.

Method and Dataset: Manual Content Analysis of Party Press Releases and Facebook Posts During the German Election Campaign 2017

A manual content analysis was used to identify populist communication. Numerous studies demonstrate the usefulness of manual content analysis to analyse populism across different text types like press releases, manifestos, social media posts, speeches, and similar textual units (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Franzmann, 2016;

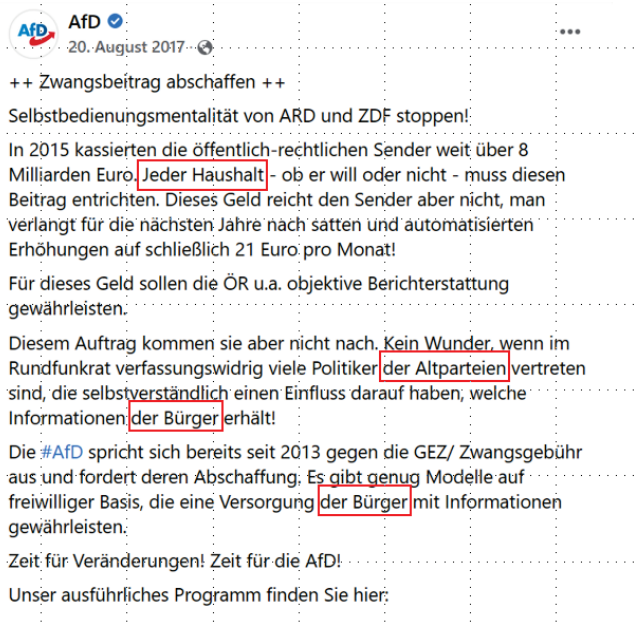
Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; March, 2017; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Thomeczek, 2023). Compared to automated methods, reliable manual content analysis can be considered the "gold standard" for the valid measurement of populism in texts, with the downside that it is labour-intensive and costly (Hawkins & Castanho Silva, 2018; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Coders were asked to identify the presence of people-centrism and anti-elitism using binary variables. People-centrism was defined as an appeal to the whole population, that is, a generalised and positive appeal to the majority of the population (e.g., "the people," "the Germans," "the taxpayers," or "our society"). This can also relate to pronouns such as "us" and "we", although it must be clear that they are related to the German population and not to the party or government. Anti-elitism was defined as a generalising critique of the establishment (e.g., the political, economic, or media establishment), including intermediary institutions such as the EU or NATO (de Raadt, Hollanders, & Krouwel, 2004, p. 3). The generalisation aspect is a necessary condition for anti-elitism (e.g., criticising all established parties instead of individual parties, Franzmann, 2016, p. 465; Schwörer, 2021, p. 3). Consequently, criticism towards individual politicians, parties, or the government was not identified as anti-elitism, as it is part of everyday party rhetoric (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011, p. 1275). Coder training was an iterative process based on intercoder reliability. Ten coders each for Facebook posts and press releases were trained in three rounds, discussing the discrepancies after every round. The most reliable coders coded more texts and are therefore overrepresented. The threshold for inclusion was *Gwet's AC1>0.65*.[3] Out of the 1,216 manually coded texts, 49 codings of the people-centrism variable fell below this threshold. These 49 coded texts were removed from the analysis.

An AfD post from 20 August 2017[4] (Figure 2) includes examples of both people-centrism and anti-elitism. In this post, the party is appealing to "every household" and "the citizens" (people-centrism), which are said to pay the public broadcast fee against their will. The public broadcast is accused of not sending neutral but biased news, as its board is filled with many politicians of the "old parties" (anti-elitism). The party tries to appeal to the population as a whole by claiming that everyone is affected by the broadcasting fees. It uses a pejorative term ("old parties") to criticise all (other) parties, without differentiating in their criticism.

[3] Gwet's AC1 coefficient was used instead of pure chance-corrected coefficients such as Krippendorff's Alpha as they produce paradoxical results for events with low trait prevalence (Gwet, 2014, pp. 82–88; 142–144).

[4] https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/posts/pfbid02394Y5jDMXNhJ1kMCZcWPBn6YUek8ggvJ1LubkLVmiyKRBh2gbbkE1m2xNtJ6JhTgl

Figure 2. Coding Example of an AfD Post.



I collected all Facebook posts and press releases sent out during the most critical campaign period, five weeks before the election. Facebook was selected for this analysis as it is the most used social media platform in Germany (DataReportal, 2021). Furthermore, it is the most suitable platform for comparison with press releases. In contrast to other social media platforms, Facebook posts are comparatively long and text-centred. All Facebook posts from the main party accounts were downloaded using the Graph API on 30 September 2017, before Facebook introduced API post limits (Ho, 2020). The textual elements of posted photos and the preview freeze-frame of videos were transcribed; the final dataset includes 883 posts.[5] In a second step, I collected press releases for the same period (n=333). In contrast to manifestos, press releases are more dynamic, expressing reactions toward recent developments and accusations while offering more flexibility in tonality and issues (Norris et al., 1999). All press releases from the main party and the legislative faction sent during the campaign were considered.[6] Before the analysis, headlines, dates, and signatures were removed from all press releases to make them comparable to Facebook posts.

[5] "Event" type posts and other posts without any textual content were removed before the analysis.

[6] While parties with seats (CDU/CSU, SPD, Grüne, Linke) focused on sending press releases through their legislative factions, those without factions (FDP, AfD) needed to send them out directly via the main party office. In addition, press releases by the CSU Landesgruppe were also included.

Although political actors may emphasise different topics on social media than in their press releases (Lacatus, 2019; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021), they used social media as an instrument through which they could communicate their key policies from the outset (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Some scholars have suggested that the social media content of political actors should be pre-filtered before the analysis to exclude politically irrelevant content (Ernst, Blassnig, et al., 2019, p. 7; Schwörer, 2021, p. 9). As my aim was to analyse the political communication of the campaign as a whole, I applied filtering as an additional analytical step.

Analysis

Table 1 summarises the parties' campaign activities during the 2017 German election campaign. Regarding press releases, Die Linke was the most active party (82), with more than two press releases per day, whereas the party with the fewest press releases was the FDP (39). The number of Facebook posts exceeded the number of press releases for all parties except Die Linke. Regarding post frequency, the AfD was the most active party, which sent around five posts per day.

Table 1. Political Party Communication on Facebook and Press Releases during the 2017 Election Campaign (5 Weeks).

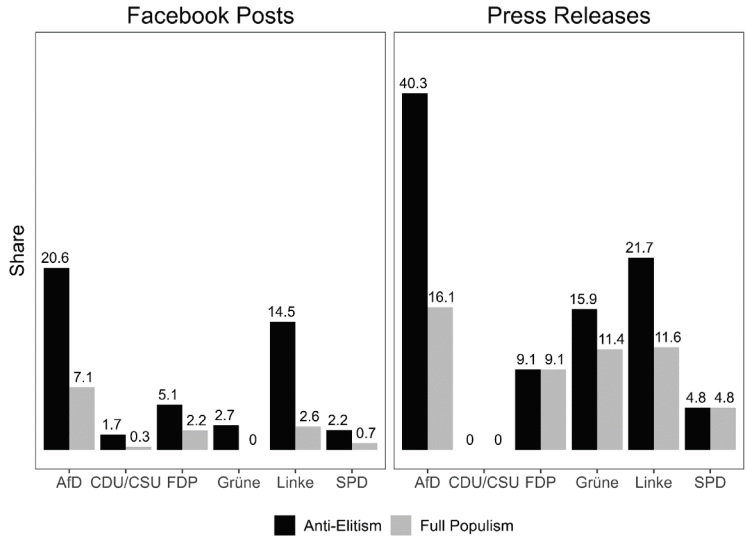
	Facebook Posts	Press Releases
Party	*N*	*N*
AfD	170	66
CDU/CSU	161 (CDU)/129 (CSU)	47
FDP	138	39
Grüne	73	51
Linke	76	82
SPD	136	48

Source: Own calculation.

To what extent was the campaign communication by the German parties dominated by populist communication? Figure 3 summarises the results of the manual content analysis. Generally, populist communication was most widespread among the two populist parties, Die Linke and AfD, confirming the observation from other studies that populist communication is more likely to be found among radical parties (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). However, on social media, full populist communication was rare, even among populist parties. Only 7.1% of the AfD posts and 2.6% of Die Linke posts contained references to both subdimensions of populism, people-centrism and anti-elitism. This is followed by the FDP (2.2%), while full populist communication was not relevant for the other parties. In contrast, anti-elitism was used much more frequently on social media. Here, the two populist parties stood out, with references to anti-

elitism in 20.6% of the AfD's posts and 14.5% of Die Linke's posts. Among the non-populist parties, the FDP had the highest share (5.1%); however, this share was still much lower compared to the two populist parties. Overall, this can be seen as evidence of the "fragmented" character of populist communication on social media (Engesser et al., 2017), as populist parties included full populist communication only in a minority of their Facebook posts, while anti-elitism was more widespread.

Figure 3. Share of References to Populism in Facebook Posts and Press Releases.



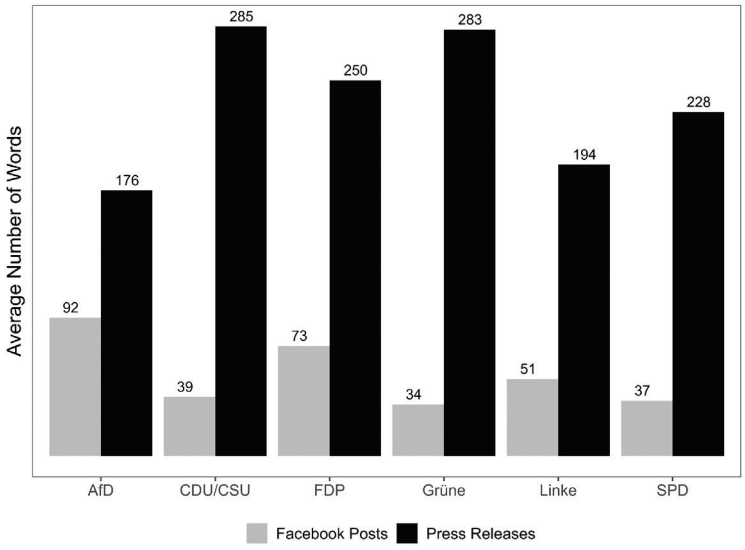
Looking at the differences between the two communication channels, it becomes evident that full populism and anti-elitism were more prevalent in press releases than in posts. Again, the two populist parties were at the top of the list. 16.1% of the AfD's and 11.6% of Die Linke's press releases included full populist communication. Surprisingly, the differences were small compared to non-populist parties. The Greens (11.4%) and FDP (9.1%) used full populist communication relatively often, and even the governing SPD included populist rhetoric in 4.8% of the press releases. Anti-elitism was even more widespread, included in 40.3% (AfD) and 21.7% (Linke) of the press releases, but also included in 15.9% of the Greens' press releases.

The results are surprising in two ways. First, full populist and anti-elitist communication was generally much more widespread in party press releases than in party posts, which was not expected. Second, in terms of full populist communication, the differences between the populist opposition (AfD and Die Linke) and the non-populist opposition (Greens and FDP) were relatively small. Thus, it seems that populist communication is generally associated with oppositional

party politics, confirming the findings of another recent study (Breyer, 2022). At least for the oppositional parties, anti-elitism and, to some extent, even full populist communication was seen as a promising strategy in their press releases. Parties may have hoped that a more radical language in their press releases would increase the likelihood of news coverage.

What could explain these unexpected findings? Figure 4 shows how the average press releases and posts differed in text lengths, measured as the number of words. On average, party press releases in the 2017 campaign were around two to eight times longer than Facebook posts. Thus, posts may be, on average, too short to include populist communication. However, it is also noteworthy that the AfD had, on average, the longest posts and the shortest press releases. This could be interpreted as evidence that the right-wing populist AfD took social media communication more seriously than the other parties. Another explanation is related to the specific content of the two communication channels. Although parties use both platforms to communicate their policies and positions, there is social media content for which no equivalent in press releases exists. This platform-specific content is typically non-political and includes, for example, "good weekend" wishes[7], general calls for electoral participation[8], and TV announcements.[9]

Figure 4. Average Length of Press Releases and Facebook Posts by Party.



7 https://www.facebook.com/CSU/posts/10155594351660688

8 https://www.facebook.com/FDP/photos/a.10150649308442250.418226.21289227249/10155733619892250/

9 https://www.facebook.com/B90DieGruenen/posts/10156561418028219

Since some authors argue that those texts should be pre-filtered (Ernst, Blassnig, et al., 2019, p. 7; Schwörer, 2021, p. 9), Figure A2 (Appendix) shows the results for the replicated the analysis without non-political texts. Although between 14.5% and 28.3% of the texts per party, which are almost exclusively Facebook posts, can be classified as non-political (see Table A2, Appendix), the overall conclusions are almost identical. However, Figure A3 shows that the filtering makes both text types more comparable in length.

Since text length seems to be a driving factor for the usage of populist communication, as it requires a certain number of words to express populist ideas, other studies on populist rhetoric have suggested controlling for text length in multivariate analyses (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016). Therefore, I calculated logistic regression models that account for the number of words. Text length was measured using a categorical variable with four levels: below 50 words (reference category), 50-149 words, 150-249 words and above 250 words. Categorising texts this way ensured that both text types were represented in the categories (see Figure A1, Appendix). As Figure 3 suggests that the main difference was between the two governing parties (CDU/CSU, SPD), the non-populist opposition (Greens, FDP) and the populist opposition (Linke, AfD), these groups were included as an additional control variable (reference category: governing parties). The main independent variable is text type, indicating press releases compared to Facebook posts.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results. Robust Standard Errors in Parentheses.

	Dependent variable:			
	Anti-Elitism	Full Populism	Anti-Elitism	Full Populism
	All Texts		Non-Political Texts Excluded	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Source: Press Release (Reference: Facebook Post)	-0.480*	-0.028	-0.501*	-0.046
	(0.272)	(0.365)	(0.271)	(0.364)
Populist Opposition Parties (AfD/Linke, Reference: Governing Parties (CDU/CSU, SPD))	2.237***	1.944***	2.227***	1.916***
	(0.352)	(0.554)	(0.354)	(0.555)
Non-Populist Opposition Parties (Greens/FDP)	1.086***	1.334**	1.100***	1.324**
	(0.404)	(0.599)	(0.405)	(0.600)

Length: 50-149 Words (Reference: Below 50 Words)	1.377***	2.296***	1.056***	1.988**
	(0.328)	(0.779)	(0.332)	(0.781)
Length: 150-249 Words	2.401***	3.112***	2.051***	2.779***
	(0.377)	(0.810)	(0.379)	(0.811)
Length: Above 250 Words	2.431***	3.863***	2.074***	3.522***
	(0.428)	(0.817)	(0.429)	(0.817)
Observations	1,167	1,167	978	978
Log Likelihood	-290.787	-153.490	-283.700	-152.329
Akaike Inf. Crit.	595.574	320.980	581.401	318.657
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The results are summarised in Table 2. Models 1 and 2 include all texts, whereas models 3 and 4 are based on the dataset without non-political texts, although the overall conclusions are the same. Concerning full populist communication (models 2 and 4), no statistically significant difference is observed when controlling for text length. In the case of anti-elitism, the effect for press releases is statistically significant and negative. This means that when controlling for text length and party, press releases were less likely to include anti-elitist communication when compared to Facebook posts. This was initially expected and can be interpreted as evidence for H2.

Conclusion

Is social media more suitable for populist communication than other political communication channels? This article assessed how prevalent populist communication was in parties' Facebook posts and their press releases during the German election campaign in 2017. The results can be summarised in three ways. First, the right-wing populist AfD dedicated more attention to their social media campaign than the other parties. During the campaign, the AfD sent out more posts, which were, on average, up to three times longer compared to the other parties. In contrast, the left-wing populist party Die Linke did not stand out in terms of activity. Second, other than expected, parties did not use populist communication frequently on social media. This was also not the case for the two populist parties. As anti-elitist communication was much more prevalent in Facebook posts, this can be interpreted as evidence of the fragmented character of

populist online communication (Engesser et al., 2017). However, third, this was also related to the different text formats. The parties' press releases were, on average, around two to eight times longer than their Facebook posts, which partially explains the low prevalence of populist communication on the platform. Put differently, the average Facebook post was too short to include populist communication. This suggests that the comparability of press releases with length-limited Twitter content, which is widely studied in political communication studies (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Lacatus, 2019), is even more difficult. Furthermore, a substantial share of party communication on Facebook included non-political content for which no equivalent exists in press releases. Once text length is controlled for, the results show that anti-elitist communication was more likely to be found in party Facebook communication, as initially expected. This aligns well with the findings of other recent studies that have pointed out the relevance of negative aspects of populist political communication on social media (Bobba, 2019; Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Nevertheless, there are no significant differences in full populist communication when controlling for text length.

However, although controlling for text length matters, it is important to note that political Facebook communication differs from mass media communication through press releases. Parties have adapted well to the social media logic, which includes relatively short and sometimes even non-political texts. While there has been extensive research that populist content on social media generates more user attention (Bobba, 2019; Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Bracciale et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022), this study shows that populist communication may be more prevalent on other communication channels than social media. Even strongly populist parties like the AfD use social media to wish their followers a "peaceful advent season"[10] and do not spread populist communication in every post. Thus, the problem that social media has with populism is not that populist content dominates the platforms; instead, it is the way how populist content is processed. Put differently, while not even the majority of content by populist parties includes populist rhetoric, if it is used, populist content generates more user attention, as other studies have shown. This moves the research focus on social media algorithms favouring negative aspects of political discourse, such as polarisation (Barrett et al., 2021).

The study provides analytical results on the relationship between populism and social media and contributes to the broader discussion of strategic aspects of populist communication (Dai & Kustov, 2022; Franzmann, 2016; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021). Parties make strategic decisions regarding populist rhetoric depending on the communication channel. Future studies would benefit from

[10] https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/photos/a.540406002656410/1302330993130570/

extending the analysis to more countries and elections. Additionally, including more communication channels with different audiences could facilitate the generalisability of the results. For social media, this concerns image-/video-based platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), which are currently understudied in terms of populist communication.

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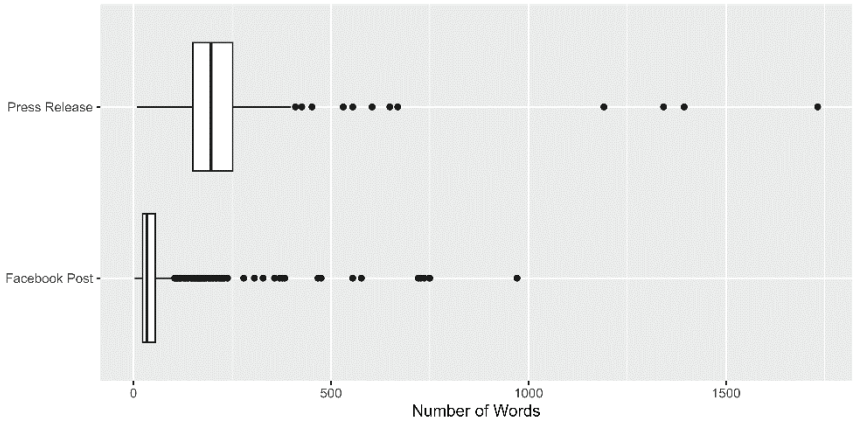
Appendix

Text Length

Figure A1. Boxplot of the Number of Words in Press Releases and Posts.



One data point represents one text. The thicker black vertical line represents the median, and the box around it marks the interquartile range.

Non-Political Texts

Non-political texts are defined as texts that lack any mention of issues, policies, positions, or (self-) evaluation of political actors (Ernst, Blassnig, et al., 2019, p. 7; Schwörer, 2021, p. 9).

Table A2. Non-Political Texts by Party and Text Type.

Party	Text	Number of Texts	Share all Posts/ Press Releases (percentage)
AfD	Posts	29	17.1
CDU/CSU	Posts	72	24.8
FDP	Posts	39	28.3
Grüne	Posts	15	20.5
Linke	Posts	11	14.5
SPD	Posts	21	15.4
AfD	Press Releases	0	0,0
CDU/CSU	Press Releases	0	0,0
FDP	Press Releases	0	0,0
Grüne	Press Releases	0	0,0
Linke	Press Releases	0	0,0
SPD	Press Releases	2	4.2

Source: Own calculation.

Figure A2. Share of References to Populism in Facebook Posts and Press Releases (Non-Political Texts excluded).

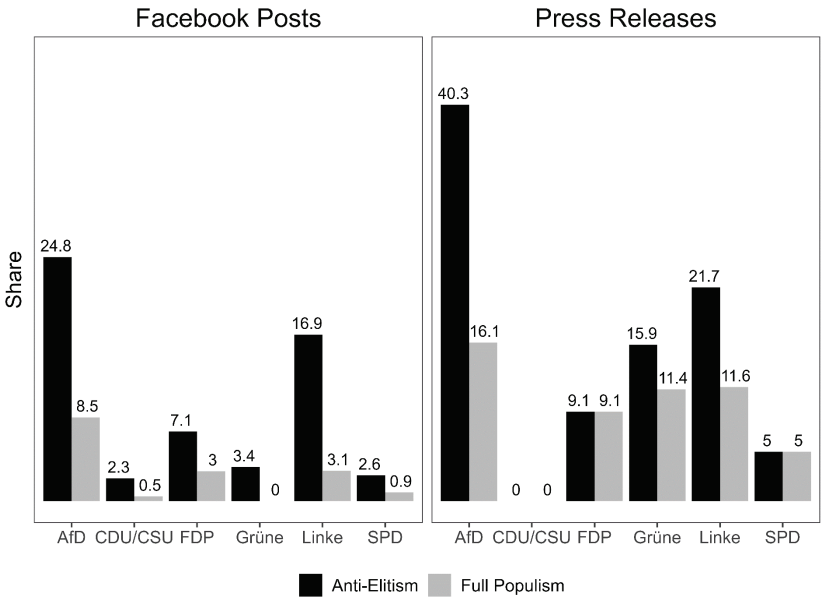


Figure A3. Average Length of Press Releases and Facebook Posts by Party (Non-Political Texts Excluded).