

Is Twitter a populist paradise?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*A prominent social media presence is typically seen as critical to the success of populist politicians. However, **Kristof Jacobs and Niels Spierings** find that in the key case of the Netherlands, populist politicians were slower to adopt Twitter and engage with fewer people on it, seemingly preferring instead to stick to their own echo chamber.*



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In a [cartoon](#) that appeared last year, Donald Trump throws a football (with the label ‘social media’ on it) over the heads of a group of reporters, directly into the hand of a ‘typical lay citizen’. The cartoon exemplifies how pundits often view the relationship between populism and social media: a natural fit, whereby populists use social media platforms to avoid or circumvent the traditional media and establish a direct relationship with ordinary citizens. This in turn is considered the foundation of their success – indeed, Trump himself has been vocal about his belief that [Twitter contributed significantly to his election victory](#).

It is tempting to focus only on high-profile cases, and label Twitter a populist paradise. Yet this conventional wisdom obscures the fact that we know surprisingly little about how populist politicians use social media. In a [new study](#), we address this lacuna and examined when populist politicians adopted Twitter and how they used it, and how this differs from other politicians.

What did we do?

We (1) examined populists’ Twitter adoption and (2) investigated whether they differ from other political actors in their posting, connecting and engagement behaviour on Twitter. Whereas most contemporary studies on social media and populism focus on the party

leadership, we examined the activities of all the (populist and non-populist) politicians in the Netherlands. The timeframe of our analysis of adoption and posting was relatively broad (2010–2016), which allowed us to examine changes over time. Our assessment of populists’ connecting and engagement behaviour was based on a three-month period at the end of that time frame (August to October 2016), as this tells us most about the current way in which populists (do not) use Twitter.

There are two main substantive reasons why we focused on the Netherlands. *Firstly*, the country is a Twitter frontrunner with very high internet-penetration rates among citizens as well as politicians. Hence, if there is any (lasting) pattern to be found, it should be visible here. *Secondly*, and this is especially important for a study of populism, the country houses a right-wing populist party (PVV) and a left-wing one (SP). This allows us to explore differences and similarities between the two types of populist parties.

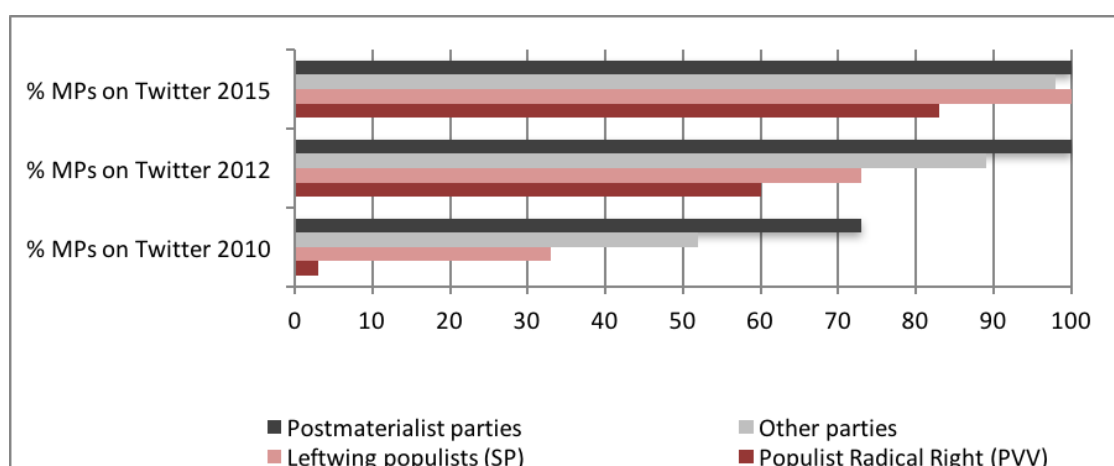
Populists on Twitter: main findings

Our main findings were threefold and highlight that the conventional wisdom obscures an important part of how populists use Twitter.

1. Populists were slower to adopt professional Twitter use

Most studies examine the social media use of politicians at one particular time-point. However, taking a longitudinal perspective, we were able to examine who adopts new technologies first and who follows. Given the potential advantage for populists to bypass traditional media using Twitter, one would expect them to be among the early adopters. Yet this was not the case (see Figure 1). On the contrary, we found that populists were actually *slower* to adopt Twitter.

Figure 1. Twitter adoption over time



Why was this so? While we cannot look into the heads of the party leadership, there are some indications that (negative) incentives from the party matter. Semi-structured interviews with the left-wing populists’ campaign leader and social-media manager suggest that the populists’ tendency towards strong centralisation and dislike of dissent is

the explanation. In the words of the latter: '[W]e do not want (...) incidents where individual MPs all air their own individual opinions and start criticising each other on social media.' (Hijink, 2013).

The right-wing populist party generally refuses to talk to political scientists, but media interviews with former MPs of the party also suggest that Twitter use is tightly restricted as 'Wilders fears a loss of control stemming from conflicts.'

2. Non-responsive: Populists were @-mentioned the most, but reply the least

One would expect that populists would use Twitter to connect and engage with the people directly. After all, their ideology centres on being on the side of the 'good people' (not that of the 'evil elite'). This does not seem to be the case (see Table 1). While populist politicians do get @-mentioned more on Twitter, they are less likely to form reciprocal relations with these accounts. In another recently published study we found that even when accounting for this larger share of @-mentions, populists are significantly *less likely* to reciprocate @-mentions from lay citizens.

Admittedly, the more @-mentions one gets the more difficult it is to answer all of them. However, when we control for this factor, the findings are still clear: populists seem to respond less to @-mentions. In the Netherlands, this relationship is somewhat distorted because the highly prolific PVV party leader Geert Wilders (famously) does not respond to questions. Yet, even when we exclude him from the analysis, the relationship is still statistically significant and negative.

Table 1. Populists' @-mention relationships

	<i># unique accounts @-mentioning MP in research period</i>	<i>% of reciprocal relationships</i>
Populist Radical Right: PVV	701	3%
Leftwing populist: SP	141	7%
Others	81	9%
Postmaterialists	268	8%

Note: The numbers above are descriptives; the journal article also presents the results on differences after controlling for party position, age, etc. These analyses lead to the same conclusion. Postmaterialist parties are parties that prioritise goals such as sustainable development, privacy and the quality of life over materialist goals such as domestic security and economic issues. This category includes the progressive liberals (D66), the greens (GroenLinks), and the Party for the Animals.

3. Echo chambers: populists followed fewer people, but retweeted these accounts more

Populists also clearly differed from politicians of other parties in their following and retweeting behaviour. If populists genuinely use Twitter to connect with the people, one would expect them to follow more accounts. Yet once again, this was not the case. On the contrary, populists seemed more selective in who they follow (see Table 2). Compared to other parties they follow far fewer accounts. The populist radical right party leader, Geert Wilders, only follows one other account. (When we exclude him from the analysis, the relationship still holds.)

These 'selected few' are, however, more likely to get retweeted by the populist politicians, at least if we focus on the populist radical right MPs. This is in line with the logic of echo chambers, whereby populists spread the word of like-minded people.

Table 2. Populists' befriending and retweeting behaviour

	<i># unique accounts MPs have followed themselves</i>	<i>index friends among retweeted accounts^a</i>
Populist Radical Right: PVV	357	77
Leftwing populist: SP	555	12
Others	892	11
Postmaterialists	1051	12

Note: Above are descriptives; the journal article also presents the results about these differences after controlling for party position, age, etc. These analyses lead to the same conclusion.

^a *As the proportion of friends among retweeted accounts is highly dependent on the number of friends (in a positive way) and number of retweeted accounts (negatively) this figure present the number of retweeted friend accounts per friend per retweet, times ten thousand.*

Conclusion: no populist paradise

A lot of attention has been devoted to high-profile populists on social media, such as Donald Trump. Such cases have fuelled the conventional wisdom that social media and populism are a natural fit and that populists use such media to establish a direct relationship with the people (and avoid media).

Our analysis of all Dutch MPs suggests that a lot of the conventional wisdom needs to be amended. To begin with, Twitter and populism are no natural fit. Populist parties are leader-centred and wary of internal dissent, while social media such as Twitter can empower backbenchers and expose internal disagreements. It should thus not come as a surprise that populist politicians turned out to be slower in adopting Twitter.

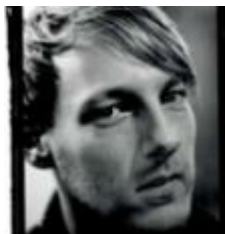
Their use was also different: they did not use Twitter to engage with ‘the people’ and largely seemed to ignore @-mentions. They were also far more selective in who they followed, but did use Twitter to retweet their friends relatively more often, which is in line with the logic of echo chambers. In that sense, it seems that populists are less interested in ‘the’ people, but mostly interested in ‘their’ people.

*This article represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on their article ‘[A populist paradise? Examining populists’ Twitter adoption and use](#)’ published in *Information, Communication & Society**

About the authors



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