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# Citizens' engagement with popularization and with populist actors on Facebook: A study on 52 leaders in 18 Western democracies

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**Abstract**
By considering the Facebook activity of 52 party leaders during national election campaigns held in 18 Western democracies that went to the polls between 2013 and 2017, we study users' engagement with popularization and with populist leaders. Applying negative binomial hierarchical models on original data of party leaders' Facebook pages, we find that elements of popularization in leaders' posts are associated with an increase in users' acknowledgement (number of likes), decreases in redistribution (number of shares), while they do not affect discursive interactions (number of comments). Our research also shows that, irrespective of their content, messages published by populist leaders are more capable of increasing both acknowledgement and redistribution, while they do not generate more comments than those published by non-populists. Finally, we find that when populist leaders adopt popularization as a communicative style, they do not achieve any extra gain vis-a-vis non-populist actors.

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**Introduction**

Contemporary election campaigns are situated in a highly dense communication envi- ronment where newer and older media logics and practices are strictly intertwined, resulting in what Chadwick (2013) has defined a 'hybrid system'. However, hybridity should not be confounded with homogeneity: digital media, and more specifically social networking platforms, represent a particular environment for political campaigning.

Citizens encounter contents on social media produced by political actors, although they might be on these platforms for reasons other than politics (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Moreover, such political messages are frequently intertwined with non-political contents produced by users' friends and acquaintances, as well as by commercial brands and celebrities (Wright, 2012). While it is true that social media are high-choice environments (Prior, 2007), most of these choices are made when users establish connections (by 'liking' a page or 'friending' a user) with the other nodes in their network. However, during daily social media use, exposure to specific messages is frequently incidental and results from the actions of others who, by producing original messages and recirculating third-party contents, can affect the political experiences of their contacts (Anspach, 2017). The combination of a high selectivity of sources and incidental exposure to specific contents is thus a distinctive feature of social media, and it has important implications both for users' political knowledge and for political actors trying to maximize the reach of their messages. Because of these patterns, the best strategy for political actors is to produce contents that can both reinforce their bonds with supporters while at the same time stimulating them to recirculate such messages to reach other users who might be less interested in politics and, therefore, very unlikely to follow politicians.

In this regard, it should be noted that most social media offer multiple modes of engagement with contents. Specific types of content—because of the emotional or rational reactions they stimulate in their addressees—and specific types of actors—because of the special relationship they can establish with their supporters—could be more effective than others in generating different types of users' engagement. Nevertheless, empirical research in this direction is limited and the few exceptions consider exclusively one or few countries (e.g. Ernst et al., 2017; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014; Heiss et al., 2018; Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014), while comparative literature is almost missing. Consequently, albeit presenting interesting findings, the research design of existing works hinders generalization and the identification of cross-national patterns.

To fill this gap, we propose an exploratory analysis of the Facebook activity of 52 leaders in 18 Western democracies during national election campaigns. Our research shows that posts presenting elements of popularization stimulate users' engagement more than other contents in term of likes, while they negatively affect shares, and do not affect comments. Moreover, we find that populist leaders, irrespective of the specific content of their communication, are more successful than others to mobilize users regarding two out of
three types of engagement (i.e. likes and shares). Finally, we consider whether employing popularization as a communication style could be more or less rewarding, in term of users' engagement, for populist actors than for other leaders. Our analyses do not show significant differences in this sense.

The relevance of social media users' engagement around political contents for our understanding of political participation has been both theoretically postulated and empirically demonstrated. Several authors (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis, 2015) contended that forms of political action and expression on digital media can be considered as a distinct dimension of political participation, and others more specifically argued that even less demanding activities such as political clicking on 'social buttons' should be seen as legitimate political acts (Halupka, 2014). On the empirical side, researchers demonstrated that engagement in lower-threshold forms of

political engagement on social media increases the likelihood of being active in more demanding activities online (Vaccari et al., 2013) and offline (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2014).

**Theoretical background**

*Popularization of political communication and social media*

Authors have addressed the concept of personalization of political communication (Van Aelst et al., 2012) and its multiple emanations, including popularization (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2006). However, agreement is lacking when it comes to demarcating the gen- eral idea of popularization of politics. John Street (2015), in the ICA's International Encyclopedia of Political Communication, defines popularization as 'the attempt to engage large sections of a population with politics' (p. 1). Specifically, the author argues that 'it does so by making politics "popular" by using the styles and platforms associ- ated with popular culture' (Street, 2015: 1). Most importantly for our research, Street defines popularization as a *style* and conceptualizes it as a form of political perfor- mance. Therefore, popularization is not assumed as a historical process—such as a ris- ing communicative phenomena substantially absent in the past and progressively spreading nowadays—but as a communicative action having specific properties and characteristics. It is, hence, conceived as a set of rhetorical apparatuses at disposal of political actors to enhance the political efficacy of their messages.

In this regard, existing studies addressing the popularization of political communication can be grouped around three different strands that, by choosing different focuses, can be referred to as 'intimate', 'celebrity' and 'lifestyle' politics. Intimate politics focuses on how the private life of political actors is increasingly moving into the public sphere (Stanyer, 2013) with the aim of giving politicians an aura of *authenticity*. Celebrity politics builds on politicians' desire to achieve an aura of *extraordinariness* (Wheeler, 2013) by appearing with celebrities or gaining public endorsements from show-biz per- sonalities. Finally, lifestyle politics refers to a deliberate attempt by political actors to mix their public activity with the daily lives of common citizens (Mancini, 2011) with the purpose of creating a sense of *proximity*.

Despite the specific foci adopted, all these different theoretical proposals can be reconducted to the same broader phenomenon of popularization of politics, since they all mainly attempt to enlarge the segment of the population which engages with politics, as the abovementioned definition by Street (2015) underlines.

Social media can be described as communication environments facilitating the adoption of popularized styles of political communication (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Platforms for online social networking are designed to give users the opportunity to eas- ily share episodes from their private lives (Baym and boyd, 2012), they have become crucial components in the emotional connection between celebrities and their fans (Marwick and boyd, 2011), and they are environments where new practices related to popular culture naturally flourish (Jenkins et al., 2013). These patterns suggest that popu- larized contents have the potential to offer politicians the opportunity to capture the attention of broader segments of social media users' population, or even to affect vote intentions (Lee et al., 2018). It becomes thus important exploring through sound empiri- cal data whether these features of popularized content can boost different types of users' engagement provided by social media affordances.

Social media offer multiple opportunities for users to react to content they are exposed to. Larsson (2017) proposed a taxonomy that, while highlighting that each platform for social networking presents different and specific affordances, contends that most of these services allow essentially three types of communication modes. Users can simply *acknowledge* that a content has attracted their attention by employing one-click affordances such as reaction buttons on Facebook, they can *interact* in a more articulate way by writing a text comment and, finally, they

can *redistribute* it to their contacts by employing sharing affordances. Acknowledging and interacting are forms of engagement creating (or reinforcing) a connection with the sender of the original message, while through redistribution a user aims to recirculate a message received beyond its original audience. It might be argued that engagement does not necessarily imply agreement or support. This could be especially true for more interactive practices such as comments that allow to express a highly diverse spectrum of feedbacks including criticism, incivility (Rowe, 2015) and trolling (Phillips, 2015). Nevertheless, users' engagement around a content could be considered a good proxy of attention and interest in the specific content and in the activity of the sender.

As discussed earlier, popularized political communication is aimed at entertaining and touching citizens' feelings, consequently, if we take onboard the idea that users' engagement is mainly driven by emotions (boyd et al., 2010), we should expect that popularization results in higher levels of engagement on social media. By contrast, since popularization has the goal to simplify information (Gans, 2009) and to introduce in the political discourse non-political actors and contents (Street, 2015), users could consider popularized messages less informative than others. If we assume that engagement is driven by content informativeness (Suh et al., 2010), then popularization should depress engagement, especially among those highly sophisticated and interested users who are the primary audience of politicians on social media (Vaccari et al., 2013). Considering these conflicting expectations, we cannot thus derive a clear hypothesis on the effect of popularization on engagement around the activity of political leaders on social media. Moreover, different patterns might apply for different types of engagement (i.e. acknowledgement, redistribution, interaction). Consequently, with the intention of exploring a topic which is crucial to our understanding of the current dynamics of digital political campaigning, we formulate the following research question:

Do popularized contents published on social media by political leaders result in higher or lower levels of citizens' engagement? (RQ1)

*Populism and social media in Western democracies*

Popularization of political communication has been frequently associated and confused with another concept: populism. They are often presented, at least in journalistic narratives, as denoting quasi-synonymous phenomena. However, as Street (2015) warns, 'politics may be popularized without being populist because "populism" may be understood as a particular form or ideology' (p. 1). Scholars have not yet reached agreement on the theoretical borders separating and/or linking these two different concepts. The fact that over the last two decades populism has become one of the most contested concepts in literature (Engesser et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004) is of little help.

Stanyer et al. (2017) argued that two approaches can be employed to study populist political communication: the first one is actor-centred, while the second is communication-centred. An actor-centred approach considers political actors having—or not—a clear populist ideological 'core' and aims at identifying specific patterns of political communication proper of these subjects. Conversely, a communication-centred perspec- tive considers populism more simply as a style of communication strategically employ- ing elements proper of populist ideology to craft effective messages. A populist style can thus be occasionally employed by any political actors, irrespective of their actual ideological profile.

Here, we aim at understanding whether and how social media represent a communication environment offering effective opportunities for citizens' engagement to political actors that have

a clear-cut populist ideological background. We thus adopt an actor- centred approach considering the ability of populist leaders to engage social media users regardless of the presence of populist elements in all of their messages. Several elements suggest that this might be the case.
In the first place, authors (e.g. Barr, 2009; Van Der Brug and Mughan, 2007) have stressed that in populist ideology, a crucial role is played by the charismatic nature of the leadership: the connection between the leader and supporters become visceral and emotional, since the leader has to embody the anti-establishment ideals that glues the movement. Therefore, social media could represent an efficient arena where the bond between populist leaders and their 'people' could be established, maintained and enforced.
Second, Ernst et al. (2017: 1350) suggest that social media favour the production and spread of messages by populist actors. They identify four elements that can explain the success of populist leaders on social media: (a) opportunities for unmediated access by circumventing gatekeepers, (b) a close connection to the people, (c) high possibilities of personalization, and (d) the opportunity to target specific groups. Populist leaders could thus be better equipped than others to hack the attention economy of social media (Engesser et al., 2017). Indeed, the ideological background described earlier favours the development of a style of presence that allows them to efficiently perform in a context where communicative supplies abound, and attention becomes a scarce resource.
Finally, it should also be noted that most of the populist formations that have emerged in Western democracies, and especially in Europe, during the last decade can be defined as 'cyber-parties' (Margetts, 2001), that is, organizations establishing fluid relationships with their supporters, and with the Internet representing a driver for mobilization, organi- zation and internal deliberation. Some authors (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2014) have even utilized the term 'populism 2.0' to describe how digital media have become for the latest genera- tion of populist actors a symbolic cornerstone to promote their alleged close connection with 'the people' and to materialize the ideal of direct democracy, which are two compo- nents associated with populist ideology. Such digital nature of most contemporary popu- list parties has important effects on patterns of top-down political communication on social media: populist leaders seem to be the ones who better and more convincingly invest time and resources in the management of their social media presences and frequently include in their messages deliberate calls to digital action (Mosca et al., 2016). Populist leaders could be more capable than others of leveraging the specificities of social media as communication environments to both reinforce (or create) a bond with those they reach, asking help from users in recirculating their messages. Such claim, however, still needs to be empirically tested, especially through a cross-country dataset. Therefore, our second research question is,

Does populist leaders' social media activity result in higher levels of users' engagement than non-populist leaders' activity? (RQ2)

*Popularization, populism and engagement*

Despite not being synonyms, popularization of political communication and populism may be linked. As Mazzoleni (2008) indicates, most populist actors are extremely savvy in managing their public image and in developing messages that strongly resonate with the 'pop' logic of contemporary media: 'populist leaders (. . .) are all strong personalities that perfectly fit the news media's demand for the spectacular and emotional treatment of social reality, including political life' (p. 53). This means that populist leaders are masters at getting media attention and, possibly, broad public consensus.

Scholars have pinpointed several examples. The Italian tycoon Berlusconi is among the first populist leaders to be associated with a peculiar ability to master popularization (Mancini, 2011). Other cases, such as Farage in the United Kingdom (Block and Negrine, 2017) or Le Pen in France (Campus, 2017) have been presented as paradigmatic examples. However, the affinity between populism and popularization does not automatically lead to the implication that populism is always present where there is popularization. Non-populist actors who exploit popularization abound, as the communicative choices made by political leaders such as Obama (Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014) and Cameron (Langer, 2010) testify. Notwithstanding, some recent studies have considered core elements of popularization as indicators of populist communication (e.g. Block and Negrine, 2017; Bracciale and Martella, 2017). Against this potentially misleading backdrop, the need of designing empirical research clearly differentiating these two dissimilar political and communicative phenomena becomes ever more urgent.

Neverthless, the strong emotional component characterizing their relationship with their constituency (Wirz, 2018), together with the abovementioned ability to manage 'pop' communication (Mazzoleni, 2008) seem to suggest a relationship between popularized communication and populist leaders on social media. Indeed, both popularized contents and populist leadership aim at connecting with people's emotional sphere, by relying 'on gut feelings rather than on rational facts and deliberations' (Wirz, 2018: 1116). Social media logic, by favouring emotional reactions rather than rational argumentation, might thus represent the perfect communication environment where the emotional potential of populist leadership and the one of popularized messages develop a powerful and effective interaction.

However, while popularization of the message stimulates people's emotions by referring to realms that are not strictly political, populist leadership leverage on core ideological elements—that is, the idea of a society being intrinsically separated between an in-group (the pure people) and out-group (political or financial elites and ethnic or religious minorities)—to enforce the emotional connection between the people and the people's champion (the leader). Whether the combination of these two different emotional drivers could result in higher levels of engagement on social media has still to be empirically investigated. Consequently, our last research question is,

Is posting popularized messages on social media more rewarding in terms of engagement for populists than for non-populist leaders? (RQ3)

**Research design**

*Data*

To address our research questions, we conduct an analysis of party leaders' Facebook pages in multiple countries. Cross-country analyses addressing politicians' communicative styles on social media and citizens' engagement with these contents are rare, and those existing focus on one or no more than few cases (e.g. Ernst et al., 2017; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014; Heiss et al., 2018; Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Therefore, by considering several countries we aim to fill an important gap.

We analyse Facebook posts, since Facebook is the most popular social media in the Western world[1] and it is used globally by politicians in their communication efforts. Our dataset is composed of posts published by 52 political leaders during national election campaigns in 18 Western democratic countries that went to the polls between February 2013 and April 2017 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Case selection.

| Leader | Country | Election day | N posts | Coded posts | Leader | Country | Election day | N posts | Coded posts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shorten | Australia | 02/07/16 | 177 | 100 | Adams | Ireland | 26/02/16 | 88 | 88 |
| Turnbull | Australia | | 112 | 100 | Kenny | Ireland | | 41 | 41 |
| Xenophon | Australia | | 160 | 100 | Martin | Ireland | | 24 | 24 |
| Faymann | Austria | 29/09/13 | 70 | 70 | Berlusconi | Italy | 25/02/13 | 136 | 100 |
| Spindelegger | Austria | | 59 | 59 | Bersani | Italy | | 71 | 71 |
| Strache | Austria | | 766 | 100 | Grillo | Italy | | 1522 | 100 |
| Di Rupo | Belgium | 24/05/14 | 102 | 100 | Monti | Italy | | 208 | 100 |
| Michel | Belgium | | 167 | 100 | Rutte | Netherlands | 15/03/17 | 33 | 33 |
| Harper | Canada | 19/10/15 | 482 | 100 | Wilders | Netherlands | | 512 | 100 |
| Mulcair | Canada | | 547 | 100 | Cunliffe | New Zealand | 20/09/14 | 262 | 100 |
| Trudeau | Canada | | 430 | 100 | Key | New Zealand | | 169 | 100 |
| Dahl | Denmark | 18/06/15 | 149 | 100 | Peters | New Zealand | | 101 | 100 |
| Rasmussen | Denmark | | 117 | 100 | Jensen | Norway | 09/09/13 | 55 | 55 |
| Thorning-Schmidt | Denmark | | 55 | 55 | Solberg | Norway | | 97 | 97 |
| Rinne | Finland | 19/04/15 | 62 | 62 | Stoltenberg | Norway | | 100 | 100 |
| Sipila | Finland | | 60 | 60 | Iglesias | Spain | 26/06/16 | 216 | 100 |
| Stubb | Finland | | 113 | 100 | Rajoy | Spain | | 88 | 88 |
| Fillon | France | 23/04/17 | 360 | 100 | Sanchez | Spain | | 144 | 100 |
| Le Pen | France | | 346 | 100 | Akesson | Sweden | 18/09/14 | 53 | 53 |
| Macron | France | | 337 | 100 | Lofven | Sweden | | 59 | 59 |
| Melenchon | France | | 304 | 100 | Reinfeldt | Sweden | | 22 | 22 |
| Gysi | Germany | 22/09/13 | 185 | 100 | Cameron | UK | 07/05/15 | 206 | 100 |
| Merkel | Germany | | 139 | 100 | Farage | UK | | 182 | 100 |
| Steinbruck | Germany | | 121 | 100 | Miliband | UK | | 191 | 100 |
| Meimarakis | Greece | 20/09/15 | 80 | 80 | Clinton | US | 08/11/16 | 648 | 100 |
| Tsipras | Greece | | 92 | 92 | Trump | US | | 599 | 100 |

Note: The leader of the most voted Belgian party—Bart De Wever, New Flemish Alliance—never opened a Facebook page. Therefore, our choice moved to Charles Michel, leader of the party which came third in the 2014 Belgian election.

We focus on leaders' pages irrespective of the electoral system—that is, party-centred versus candidate-centred—characterizing each country included in our dataset. This choice is justified by the widespread personalization of political campaigning that, according to literature (McAllister, 2007), has increasingly characterized Western Democracies during last decades. Such phenomenon is highly noticeable in social media environments, where also due to these platforms' affordances, leaders' communication dominates campaigning efforts even in party-centred systems (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013).

For each country, we include, (a) incumbent heads of government and (b) candidates or leaders of parties that received more than 15% of the vote in the election round taken into consideration.[2] Moreover, relaxing the criteria illustrated earlier, we included (c) one incumbent and one challenger, and (d) at least one populist and one non-populist leader per country (which is crucial given our research questions). We specifically focus our analysis on the 60 days before each election round plus the election day.

Following these criteria, we collected 11,419 posts published by 52 leaders.[3] We manually coded[4] a random sample of 4509 posts using the following criteria: if a leader published 100 or fewer posts during the period under scrutiny, all his or her posts were analysed. Conversely, if a leader published more than 100 posts, a sample of 100 posts was considered.[5]

*Measures*

Our questions regard the levels of users' engagement with popularized contents on social media, with populist leaders' activities, and their combination. Therefore, we looked at the engagement options offered by Facebook and classified them according to the taxonomy proposed by Larsson (2017) introduced and discussed earlier. Following Larsson, we thus consider 'liking', as acknowledgement engagement, 'sharing', as redistribution engagement, and 'commenting' as interaction engagement.[6]

Given the structure of the dataset, which contains posts nested in politicians, we differentiate between independent variables measured at these two levels which are properties of the two units. At the post level, we consider whether the post presents elements of popularization based on the inclusive definition of the concept we have presented in our review of existing literature on the topic. We analysed and coded the selected posts as popularized messages if they present at least one of the following elements (the variable is dichotomous):

1. Direct reference to leaders' personality and/or her or his private biography;
2. Direct reference to members of leaders' family;
3. A presence of actors or expressive forms from the entertainment industry;
4. A reported appearance of leaders in non-political media formats;
5. A presence of popular practices and languages (slang, gestures, etc.);
6. A presence of elements relating to popular culture (traditional food, customs and traditions, popular festivals, etc.);
7. A reference to leaders' daily life as common citizens or interactions with citizens in informal situations.

Each element was searched for in both the textual and the visual component of each post. This means that pictures and videos were also analysed to identify the presence of one or more components of popularization.[7]

At the post level, we also control for two other variables that could affect patterns of user engagement with contents published by national political leaders: the first is related to the content, the second to posts' type. Regarding content, according to the literature (De Nooy and Kleinnijenhuis, 2013), social media are a milieu where negative campaigning—that is, messages aimed at attacking opponents—has found fertile ground. It is, therefore, likely that the rhetorical aim of a post—negative or comparative—could be a good predictor of the levels of user engagement with it. As for post type, we included in our models a variable categorizing posts, according to their formal nature, that is, whether they are photos, links, or videos, as opposed to statuses. In this way, we control for the fact that specific types of posts—for example, visual versus text messages—may predict modes of interaction with them.

At the leader level, we use a dichotomous indicator capturing populist leaders. We are aware that any possible classification of Western leaders as populist could raise objections, especially given the ongoing existing debate around the concept. However, we underline that all the leaders we included in our classification have been previously defined as populist in previous research (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2017; Denemark and Bowler, 2002; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Stanyer et al., 2017). In this study, we consider as populist the following leaders: Xenophon (Australia), Strache (Austria), Dahl (Denmark), Le Pen (France), Gysi (Germany), Tsipras (Greece), Adams (Ireland), Berlusconi (Italy), Grillo (Italy), Wilders (the Netherlands), Peters (New Zealand), Jensen (Norway), Iglesias (Spain), Akesson (Sweden), Farage (UK) and Trump (US).

At the leader level, we include several control variables: two dichotomous indicators measuring whether leaders occupy an incumbent position (e.g. prime ministers or presidents) and their ideology (liberal or progressive vs conservative). Moreover, we also include two demographic

characteristics: gender and age at the time of the election. These variables have been found to affect politicians' styles of social media campaigning (e.g. Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014; McGregor et al., 2017). Then, we control for the profile activity including the log of (logged) number of published posts over the period of observation for each leader. Finally, to control for the fact that engagement depends on the base of followers a leader has on Facebook, we include in the models the (logged) number of users who have liked their page.[8]

*Models*

To account for the data structure—in which posts are nested in leaders—we employ two- level hierarchical models (e.g. Gelman and Hill, 2006). As we consider that the units are not independent of each other, we partition the variance in the outcomes among the two levels of analysis and try to account for it using variables that are properties of posts and leaders. As we are not interested in the country level, we include country fixed-effects, with the advantage that we remove all cross-national variance from the intercepts. As the dependent variables are counts and their distribution is overdispersed, we use a negative binomial specification.

The variation in the levels of engagement will be predicted by both the post and leader level characteristics of interest—popularization of content and whether the leader is populist—while controlling for other factors and for the country fixed-effects. Next, we let the slope of popularization vary across leaders and try to predict this variation using the dummy variable capturing whether the leader is a populist.

**Findings**

Table 2 reports estimates of the negative binomial hierarchical models predicting the number of likes, shares and comments each coded post received during the periods considered. To address RQ1, which asked whether popularization would boost or depress acknowledgement, redistribution and interaction engagement, we focus on post-level variables.

Model (1a) in Table 2 clearly shows that popularization has a positive and statistically significant association with the number of likes obtained by a post that is acknowledging engagement. As shown in Figure 1, posts presenting elements of popularization receive, on average, about 316 more likes compared to posts missing of such features (2103 vs 1787). This means a boost in levels of users' acknowledgement of about 18%. In contrast, in the model predicting the number of shares (1b), the coefficient for the variable accounting for popularization is negative and statistically significant. Popularization thus depresses redistribution practices: if we calculate the discrete changes, we find that an average post featuring popularization receives about 30 shares less than an average post lacking 'pop' elements (215 vs 245).[9] Therefore, popularization depresses redistribution engagement by about 14%. Eventually, Model (1c) shows that popularization of the message is not associated with interaction engagement (i.e. the number of comments).[10]

**Table 2.** Negative binomial hierarchical models predicting the numbers of likes, shares and comments for posts by 52 leaders.

| | Acknowledgement | | Redistribution | | Interaction | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (number of likes) | | (number of shares) | | (number of comments) | |
| | (1a) | (2a) | (1b) | (2b) | (1c) | (2c) |
| Intercept | 7.692*** | 7.706*** | 5.417*** | 5.323*** | 6.071*** | 6.082*** |
| | (0.200) | (0.181) | (0.233) | (0.240) | (0.293) | (0.285) |
| Popularization | 0.163*** | 0.161* | −0.130** | −0.159 | −0.061 | −0.081 |
| | (0.032) | (0.068) | (0.048) | (0.126) | (0.036) | (0.076) |
| Negative tone | −0.005 | 0.001 | 0.549*** | 0.554*** | 0.185*** | 0.178*** |
| | (0.045) | (0.044) | (0.068) | (0.067) | (0.052) | (0.052) |
| Comparative tone | 0.130** | 0.135** | 0.508*** | 0.526*** | 0.220*** | 0.215*** |
| | (0.043) | (0.043) | (0.065) | (0.064) | (0.049) | (0.049) |
| Post type (r.c. status): | | | | | | |
| Photo | −0.235*** | −0.241*** | 0.086 | 0.088 | −0.364*** | −0.359*** |
| | (0.042) | (0.042) | (0.066) | (0.065) | (0.049) | (0.050) |
| Link | −0.589*** | −0.599*** | −0.255*** | −0.282*** | −0.575*** | −0.574*** |
| | (0.050) | (0.050) | (0.077) | (0.076) | (0.057) | (0.057) |
| Video | −0.391*** | −0.393*** | 0.444*** | 0.418*** | −0.054 | −0.061 |
| | (0.049) | (0.049) | (0.075) | (0.074) | (0.057) | (0.058) |
| Populist | 0.316* | 0.355* | 0.546*** | 0.514** | 0.236 | 0.269 |
| | (0.126) | (0.150) | (0.145) | (0.174) | (0.185) | (0.203) |
| Incumbent | 0.001 | 0.004 | −0.142 | −0.135 | 0.093 | 0.094 |
| | (0.157) | (0.149) | (0.181) | (0.190) | (0.231) | (0.229) |
| Liberal/progressive ideology | −0.125 | −0.170 | −0.359** | −0.358** | 0.089 | −0.012 |
| | (0.103) | (0.097) | (0.119) | (0.124) | (0.152) | (0.158) |
| Female | 0.110 | 0.233 | −0.154 | −0.068 | −0.334 | −0.194 |
| | (0.182) | (0.169) | (0.209) | (0.220) | (0.268) | (0.270) |
| Age | 0.070 | 0.053 | 0.181* | 0.175* | −0.042 | −0.014 |
| | (0.068) | (0.064) | (0.079) | (0.083) | (0.100) | (0.101) |
| Number of posts (log) | −0.292*** | −0.379*** | −0.289** | −0.337** | −0.480*** | −0.521*** |
| | (0.085) | (0.082) | (0.097) | (0.107) | (0.124) | (0.126) |
| Number of fans (log) | 1.214*** | 1.288*** | 1.218*** | 1.266*** | 1.264*** | 1.310*** |
| | (0.116) | (0.107) | (0.132) | (0.147) | (0.170) | (0.169) |
| Control for number of fans | 0.100 | 0.077 | 0.048 | 0.139 | −0.411 | −0.347 |
| | (0.193) | (0.171) | (0.222) | (0.229) | (0.284) | (0.273) |
| Popularization × Populist | | −0.045 | | −0.021 | | −0.017 |
| | | (0.123) | | (0.227) | | (0.137) |
| Random-effects (variance) | | | | | | |
| Leader | 0.088 | 0.168 | 0.107 | 0.197 | 0.198 | 0.272 |
| Popularization | | 0.111 | | 0.429 | | 0.128 |
| BIC | 76236 | 76188 | 54001 | 54868 | 59982 | 59954 |
| N posts | 4489 | 4489 | 4278 | 4278 | 4489 | 4489 |

Note: *N* Leaders = 52. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include country fixed-effects. Continuous variables are standardized. BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.
*$p$ < .05; **$p$ <.01; ***$p$ < .001.

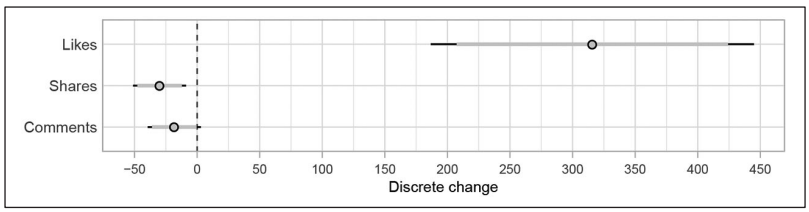


**Figure 1.** Discrete changes in the number of likes, shares and comments between popularized and non-popularized posts, with 90% (in grey) and 95% (in black) confidence intervals.

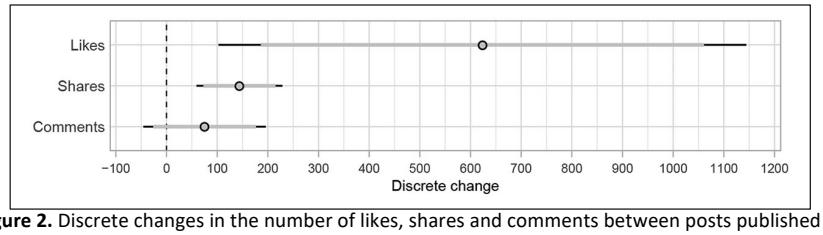


**Figure 2.** Discrete changes in the number of likes, shares and comments between posts published by populist and non-populist leaders, with 90% (in grey) and 95% (in black) confidence intervals.

Our second research question asked whether the social media activity of populist leaders, irrespective of the content of specific posts, is associated to higher engagement compared to non-populist actors. To address this question, we focus on the politician-level variables. As the estimates reported in Table 2 show—Models (1a), (1b) and (1c)—the answer to RQ2 is affirmative since coefficients capturing the associations between our variable clustering together populist leaders and two out of three dependent variables are positive and statistically significant. All else being equal, the levels of interaction, redistribution and interaction engagement with messages posted by populist leaders in our sample are higher than those with messages posted by other leaders. As reported in Figure 2, on average, posts published by populists receive about 623 likes more than posts published by non-populist actors (2298 vs 1675). Similarly, posts published by populists have about 147 more shares compared to posts published by non-populists (342 vs 198). Finally, populist politicians' posts do not receive more comments that their counterparts.
We now assess whether the effects of popularization are heterogenous across populist politicians as asked by RQ3. We do this by letting the coefficient for popularization vary across political leaders and try to predict this variation using the populist dummy variable. The models we use for this step of the analysis (2a, 2b and 2c in Table 2), therefore, include cross-level interactions. For all dependent variables, we see that the interactions between popularization and populist leaders are not significant. This suggests that populist leaders do not gain more than non-populists in terms of likes, shares and comments when they popularize their communication on Facebook.

**Discussion and conclusion**

If political leaders and their digital strategists were thinking that walking the walk of popularization on social media would be an indisputably successful option to obtain citizens' support, our research, by taking a comparative perspective on all Western democracies that went to the polls between 2013 and 2017, has revealed a much more nuanced reality. We have found that popularization only triggers acknowledgement practices (number of likes), while it has a negative effect on redistribution (number of shares) and plays no role on practices of discursive interaction (number of comments). This finding suggests that when it is effective, popularization is mainly useful to reinforce existing connections between leaders and their supporters. Nevertheless, the boost gained in the number of likes suggests that popularization can also hook less loyal supporters or even help in creating a bond with users incidentally exposed to the content, which is one of the crucial aims of political campaigning on social media. However, our research shows that popularization of messages fails to achieve the second, and possibly most important, goal for political leaders: leverage on social media users to unleash information cascades capable of taking their messages where they cannot arrive on their own legs: to the time-lines of their supporters' contacts.
These opposite trends concerning acknowledgement and redistribution practices related to users' preference for popularized contents indicate that social media should not be understood as a

realm where political discourses are strategically effective exclusively if they are sweetened with popularization. If popularized contents are not necessarily more capable of circulating on social media than 'uncompromising' political content, it means that leaders and their social media strategists can also use these digital platforms to place 'hard' contents related to their programmes or to explain their views on specific policies without combining any element of popularization. It also suggests that citizens pay attention to what political actors post on their Facebook accounts and they act accordingly. Citizens do not behave passively, reacting automatically to what a political representative they support publishes on social media. They like to express a form of appreciation for popularized contents to maintain a direct and emotional connection with them, but these are a kind of content they do not share more than other messages with their Facebook networks.

Our resarch has also shown an advantage for populist leaders when it comes to mobilizing users around their social media messages, and this pattern is confirmed both for acknowledgement and redistribution. Populist leaders are more effective than others in inspiring emotional and strategic actions around their posts. This finding confirms the idea of a special communicative relationship between populist leaders and their supporters and shows that this *liaison* has found a preferential arena on digital platforms. Our findings show that this effort also pays off in terms of horizontal communication, with supporters and activists of populist parties apparently being more aware than others of the importance that redistribution practices and information cascades have within social media environments. Conversely, also in this case, we had a null finding related to users' discursive interactions. This suggests that commenting is a more nuanced practice compared to liking and sharing; for example, it requires the creation of original content by users and it is frequently characterized by interactions—and confrontations—between commenters. In order to investigate what boosts or depresses discursive practices around social media activity by political actors, we should thus consider other strategies and possibly analyse also the content of comments themselves.

Finally, we have found that popularization does not give any extra comparative boost to populist vis-a-vis other leaders in terms of acknowledgement, redistribution or discursive interaction engagement. Our findings thus do not support the idea of a perfect marriage between populism and popularization on social media, at least when it comes to users' engagement. Explaining the popularity of many populist leaders on social media with the presence of strong traits of popularization in their communication on these platforms may be an oversimplification. Other traits of populist leaders' approach to social media seem thus to be the ones that users like, share and comment most.

This study however is not without limitations. The visibility of specific content within and beyond the base of fans a page has is also the result of the Facebook algorithm promoting or hindering messages. This element is obviously important in affecting the performance of a post in terms of engagement, but we could not measure the reach of a post since these data are not publicly available. However, engagement itself is one of the most relevant parameters considered by the Facebook algorithm,[11] so our results should not be biased because of it. Another limitation is the use of paid opportunities offered by Facebook to promote leaders' social media activities. Unfortunately, we cannot control for this possibility either. Given the increasing diffusion of paid advertising on social media (e.g. Kreiss and McGregor, 2018), this element could be considered a structural element of political campaigning on Facebook.

In conclusion, our empirical study confirms one of its main theoretical premises: considering popularization of political communication as an indicator of populism does not help our understanding of what these two concepts denote, how they relate to each other and, most

importantly, whether and how they are singularly and jointly affecting contemporary political communication trends and dynamics.

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Authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to the article.

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**Notes**

1. Data retrieved from: https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview (accessed June 2018).
2. For parliamentary systems, we consider party results in the lower house; for presidential and semi-presidential systems, we consider the results for candidates running in presidential elections. In case of two-round elections, we consider the results for the first round to ensure homogeneity among elections
3. Netvizz was used to download the posts (Rieder, 2013).
4. The posts were analysed by two independent coders (intercoder reliability was checked using a random sample of 300 posts coded independently twice: Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.79). The posts selected are in multiple languages. English, Spanish, French and Italian posts were coded independently by the coders. For Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Greek, Norwegian and Swedish posts, Facebook automated translation services and Google Transalator were employed (support from mother tongue experts was requested when automated translations were unclear).
5. We used systematic random sampling to select the 100 posts for each leader. We selected every kth post such that $N/100$, where $N$ represents the number of posts a leader published.
6. It should be noted that 'event' posts have been removed in the analyses since they are very rare in our dataset (N=20) and including them would have forced us to add a very small category in the 'Post type' variable. We have also excluded third-party posts shared by leaders in the analyses predicting numbers of shares since if a user or a page shares a post created by a third-party, shares resulting from this action are not tracked by Netvizz. This decision explains the slightly different sample sizes for the analyses predicting shares compared to those predicting likes and comments (see Table 2).
7. Posts with popularized content are 24.3% of the total coded.
8. This information was retrieved, as of the day of the election, for 41 leaders. For the remaining 11, we have been able to include information less proximate to the election day. Therefore, we included a dummy variable to control for this heterogeneity in the precision of the data.
9. These are calculated holding the covariates at their means.
10. Given that controls are not relevant for our argument, we do not comment their coefficients.
11. https://techcrunch.com/2016/09/06/ultimate-guide-to-the-news-feed/

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