Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press

Nicole Ernst¹, Frank Esser¹, Sina Blassnig¹, and Sven Engesser²

Abstract
The aim of this study is to explore favorable opportunity structures for populist communication of politicians in Western democracies. We analyze the content and style of 2,517 statements from 103 politicians from six countries (France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States) who differ in their party affiliation (populist versus nonpopulist) and hierarchical position (backbencher vs. frontbencher). To learn more about their media strategies and chances of success, we investigate four communication channels (Facebook, Twitter, talk shows, and news media) that systematically differ in their degree of journalistic intervention and examine fourteen often-raised topics that differ in their suitability for populist mobilization. Our content analysis shows the highest probability of populist communication comes from (1) members of populist parties and (2) backbenchers who address (3) mobilizable issues in (4) social media or newspaper articles. We conclude by explaining why populists have become so successful in getting their messages into newspapers.

Keywords
populist issues, populist actors, backbenchers, Facebook, Twitter

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The rapid diffusion of new communication technologies in a hybrid media system are reshaping political communication environments (Chadwick 2017). Politicians no longer rely on a single medium to communicate their messages; rather, they use a range of channels, including print media, television programs, and social media. This is particularly relevant in the field of populist communication, as studies have shown that the characteristics of communication channels have an influence on how much populism can be expected in them (e.g., Bos and Brants 2014; Cranmer 2011).

We aim with this study to determine to what extent the proportion of populist communication adjusts with regard to different communication channels, issues and attributes of a political speaker. We believe that this will tell us something about what media strategies populists use and what chances of success they have in each case. Empirical studies so far have identified political TV talk shows as the most favorable arena for disseminating populist messages (Bos and Brants 2014; Cranmer 2011). We strive to go beyond these studies and ask whether the talk show “bonus” still holds true in the age of social media. Furthermore, we would like to inquire which additional favorable factors can be identified. In addition to the type of channel, we would like to test whether type of issue and type of politician also play a role. Regarding channels, we will distinguish between those with high and those with low journalistic interference; regarding issues, we will distinguish between those with high and those with low populist affinity; regarding politicians, we will distinguish between (1) members of populist and nonpopulist parties and (2) leading and ordinary party officials.

To determine to what extent these differentiations have an influence on the extent and nature of mediated populist communication, we analyzed the content and style of statements of 103 politicians from six countries (France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States) while addressing fourteen issues in three types of media genres (print, television, and social networks). The theoretical framing of this study can be described as a combination of a communication-centered approach to populism (Sorensen 2017) with a discursive opportunity approach (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Our findings allow us to make predictions for a larger number of Western countries as to which politicians will most likely make populist statements on which topics and on which media channels. While most of our theoretical expectations were confirmed, one finding hit us unexpectedly. It concerns the favorable role of newspapers, and we will use the concluding section of this article to offer explanations.

Populist Communication

Although populism is a highly contested concept, a growing consensus describes populism in ideational terms and conceptualizes it as a set of ideas (Hawkins 2009; Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Based upon this, we conceive populism as a thin ideology that separates society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the good people” versus “the bad elite,” and postulates the unrestricted sovereignty of the people (Abts and Rummens 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2007; Wirth et al. 2016).
In addition to understanding populism as a thin ideology, scholars have conceptualized populism as a communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a political style (Moffitt 2016), or a political strategy (Weyland 2001). We follow Engesser et al.’s (2017) argument that these notions are not mutually exclusive and only represent different aspects of populism. Their conceptualization of a populist communication logic distinguishes between four main approaches. First, populist ideology conceives populism as a set of ideas and focuses on the content—the what—of populist communication. Second, populism as a style emphasizes populism as a mode of presentation and focuses on the form and how the content is presented. Third, populism as a political strategy conceives populism as a means to an end and is interested in the strategic motives and aims of populist communication. Fourth, research on populism can focus on actors by analyzing the messengers.

In our understanding, the ideology of populism cannot be communicated without stylistic elements. Core characteristics of populism empirically manifest themselves in both content and form, as the co-occurrence of ideological expression and communication style (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Krämer 2017; Kriesi 2018; Sorensen 2017). This means that we expect political actors to express their populist ideology in the content of their statements while using associated style elements to emphasize their overall points and themes further.

Populism consists of three basis dimensions as an ideology: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and restoring popular sovereignty (Wirth et al. 2016). Communicators will break down these core dimensions into more concrete “key messages” when conveying these concepts to the public. These messages are summarized in Table 1.

The styles of populist communication are also underpinned by three dimensions: negativity, emotionality, and sociability. For these newer findings on style, we refer to a study by Ernst et al. (2018). The authors had identified these three dimensions by means of a factor analysis after examining the frequency of seven more concrete “style elements” in statements made by politicians from several Western democracies. Table 2 shows both the style dimensions and the underlying style elements. Ernst et al. (2018) first identified and justified these seven populist style elements theoretically with a thorough review of the relevant research literature. In their subsequent empirical analysis, they demonstrated that the same politicians who used ideological key messages were also those who used the style elements listed in Table 2.

We build on the consensus emerging in the recent research literature that populist political communication should be regarded as a combination of the use of ideological key messages and accompanying style elements (see de Vreese et al. 2018; Kriesi 2018; Sorensen 2017). In accordance with the theoretical arguments put forward there, we define a statement as populist if it combines at least one ideological “key message” and one populist “style element.” The separate use of populist key messages or style elements is—in our admittedly very strict understanding—not sufficient to classify a statement as fully populist. However, as empirical studies have shown that populist communication often occurs in a fragmented form (Ernst et al. 2017; Esser et al. 2017), not all three ideological and all three style dimensions must be represented in one single
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Populist Key Message</th>
<th>Underlying Ideology</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-Elitism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrediting the elite</td>
<td>Elites are corrupt.</td>
<td>Elites are accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc. The elite are called names and denied morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blaming the elite</td>
<td>Elites are harmful.</td>
<td>Elites are described as a threat/burden, responsible for negative developments/situations, or as having committed mistakes or crimes. Elites are described as not being a source of enrichment or responsible for positive developments/situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detaching the elite from the people</td>
<td>Elites do not represent the people.</td>
<td>Elites are described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for the people, or not performing everyday actions.</td>
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<td>People-Centrism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stressing the people's virtues</td>
<td>The people are virtuous.</td>
<td>The people are bestowed with morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc. The people are exempt from being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Praising the people's achievements</td>
<td>The people are beneficial.</td>
<td>The people are described as being enriched or responsible for a positive development/situation. The people are described as not being a threat/burden, not being responsible for negative developments/situations, nor as having committed mistakes or crimes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stating a monolithic people</td>
<td>The people are homogenous.</td>
<td>People are described as sharing common feelings, desires, or opinions.</td>
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<td>Demonstrating closeness to the people</td>
<td>The populist represents the people.</td>
<td>The speaker describes himself as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people, or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.</td>
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<td>Restoring Sovereignty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demanding popular sovereignty</td>
<td>The people are the ultimate sovereign.</td>
<td>The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation. The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denying elite sovereignty</td>
<td>The elites deprive the people of their sovereignty.</td>
<td>The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to elites within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).</td>
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statement. We expect all dimensions of populist communication to be represented only in the long term of the continuous communication of a politician—not in every single speech act.
Favorable Opportunity Structures for the Dissemination of Populist Communication

The theory of discursive opportunity structures assumes that the actors involved in media discourse will choose the most favorable options for action and communication to achieve their goals. Actors include politicians and journalists; their goals include visibility, resonance, public support, and legitimacy (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). We focus on the perspective of politicians and first discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various media channels regarding their suitability for the dissemination of populist communication. In the next step, we discuss the relevance of more and less suitable thematic contexts; in a third step, we look at different groups of politicians with respect to their probability of using populist communication.

Populist Affinity of Certain Channels

For populists, politics is a direct and nonmediated expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2007). For this reason, they consider channels on which they can communicate in a direct and nonmediated way to be a favorable opportunity. This varies across channels. According to Paletz’ (2002) theory of media interventionism, Twitter and Facebook are regarded as channels without journalistic interference; rather, they focus on direct interaction, content distribution among users, and algorithmic connectivity. For Paletz, political talk shows are examples of medium journalistic interference, since communication control is shared between host and guest. The dialogical format offers politicians the opportunity to present themselves, but journalists determine the questions and setting. According to Paletz (2002), an example of heavy journalistic interference is a feature report in a newspaper about a politician, since control over the final product—including selection, presentation, framing, and evaluation—rests exclusively with the journalist.

Against this three-way classification of media interventionism, the oft-asserted preference of populist politicians for social media becomes understandable, but further aspects can be added. Many populists consider journalists and “established” mass media to be controlled by the ruling elite; in their view, mainstream political reporting misses the views and interests of “the people,” is corrupt and systematically denigrates those politicians who would stand up for the true “will of the people” (Fisher et al. 2018; Moffitt 2016). Three expectations can be derived from this (Krämer 2017): first, populists want to systematically circumvent the mainstream media; second, populists need a platform from which they can criticize the mainstream media as distorted and unfair; and third, they must offer an alternative medium to those citizens they have been able to alienate from the traditional media. This alternative medium are social networks. First, because social media can be used to create protected spaces in which one-sided, anecdotal evidence of populist convictions can be accumulated in large quantities and made accessible to followers. Second, an aggressive, uncivil tone can be cultivated in these spaces because like-minded people feel they can talk to their peers without having to worry about criticism or
social control. Third, the repeated selective exposure to this one-sided information promotes an in-group mentality that populists can use to mobilize their supporters and coordinate political actions (Krämer 2017).

These assumptions of a high affinity between populists and social media have not been put to a hard test yet. Populism research to date still assumes that talk shows offer populists the most favorable conditions for spreading their messages. Bos and Brants (2014: 717) found in a long-term analysis spanning twenty years that the populism share was higher in political talk shows than in any other Dutch media genres they examined; they described talk shows as “the most outspoken populist genre.” Cranmer (2011) compared different communication settings in Switzerland and concluded, too, that talk shows offer the most effective platform for employing populist communication. However, we find reason to review these findings, as they are based on older studies (without social media) that have not varied the other channels considered systematically (regarding their degrees of journalistic intervention) and only offer case study observations (without comparison of countries).

A core characteristic of populists is their paradoxical relationship to the traditional mass media. Although they criticize the mainstream news on one hand, they need it on the other hand to reach a larger audience and to increase their legitimacy (Haller and Holt 2018). However, the readiness of journalists to offer politicians a favorable platform for conveying their views differs significantly from one media system to another. Some journalistic cultures are friendlier toward politicians than are others (Esser 2008). Politicians must employ clever news management strategies to achieve favorable media treatment in more interventionist journalistic cultures. The newsworthiness of populist actors (Mazzoleni 2008) and their norm-violating behavior (Haller 2015) may trigger journalists to open the news gates for them. However, many European and North American quality media are known to position themselves very critically toward populists in their lead commentaries (Esser et al. 2017).

Overall, our argument follows the theory of media interventionism, according to which it can be expected that the lower the degree of journalistic interference in a channel, the greater the potential for unfiltered, unrestricted populism. This assumption leads to the following expectation:

**Hypothesis 1:** The degree of populist communication by politicians is highest on social media, followed by political talk shows, and lowest in newspapers.

**Populist Affinity of Certain Issues**

A second condition favoring the spread of populist communication is the concentration on certain issues in the appeals of populist actors. As populism is conceived as a thin ideology that can be complemented with other host ideologies, it is not restricted to certain parties and can be used by both left-wing and right-wing political actors. We see this fact most clearly in the populist mobilization of the involved issues. Certain issues serve particularly well as vehicles for mobilizing a sort of latent populist possibility. Van Kessel (2015), Poier et al. (2017), Smith (2010) and Taggart (2017) agree
that it is five political issues in particular—immigration, regional identity, corruption and crime, integration, and economic hardship—that have a specifically high affinity to populist mobilization in Western democracies. Taggart’s (2017: 250) hermeneutic analysis found these issues to be “appropriated” and “politicized” most frequently by populist parties in Europe. Van Kessel (2015: 23) ran QCA analyses with thirty-one countries to show that “the breeding ground for populist parties is especially fertile where related issues are salient” in public discourse. Populists put these issues on their agenda and bring them into wider contention, pressurizing the media and other political actors to address these issues also.

According to Taggart (2017), the clearest and most commonly mentioned populist issue is immigration, particularly on the political right. Immigration addresses a strong focus on the protection of national culture, an emphasis on the people as homogenous entity, an opposition to multiculturalism, and hostility toward outsiders and ethnic minorities. Second, regional identity relates to subnational identity politics; it expresses a rejection of central state structures and the idealization of a regional “heartland” (Taggart 2017). Third, the issue corruption and crime relates to allegations of institutional corruption, the failure of established parties, and that law and order policies require tightening (Taggart 2017; Smith 2010). A fourth populist issue addresses European/transnational integration, which summarizes populist tendencies to perceive supranational authorities and legal orders as a threat to the sovereignty of the nation (e.g., Euroscepticism; Taggart 2017). Finally, economic hardship relates to high unemployment rates and growing economic inequality, and demands to protect the national economy from global competition (Van Kessel 2015). The resulting populist accusations against the elites often come from the political left.

While these five issues are not inherently populist themselves, they often become the subject of populist politicization. (Taggart 2017; Van Kessel 2015). Although several authors discussed the link between these issues and populists’ successes, the actual amount of populist communication within these issues has not been analyzed empirically or compared to issues with a low affinity to populism. We expect that due to the high affinity of these issues to populism, statements about them will contain more populist communication elements. Furthermore, because politicians are not restricted in their selection and promotion of issues when speaking on social media, the amount of populist communication related to the five issues above should be highest on Twitter and Facebook. Two hypotheses are tested following these arguments:

**Hypothesis 2a:** Issues with a high affinity to populist mobilization will contain more populist communication than topics with a comparatively lower mobilization potential.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Issues with a high affinity to populist mobilization will be especially more likely to contain populist communication when discussed on social media.
Populist Affinity of Certain Groups of Politicians

A third condition that is expected to affect the dissemination of populist communication is the characteristics of politicians. We will discuss two characteristics: affiliation to a populist party and position within the party hierarchy.

Various studies have investigated the question of whether members of populist parties actually communicate in a more populist manner. Both individual country case studies (e.g., Bernhard 2017; Bobba and McDonnell 2016) and some multicountry comparisons (e.g., Bracciale and Martella 2017; Van Kessel 2015) have found supporting evidence for this. However, these studies lack a systematic comparison with members of nonpopulist parties. There are few single country (e.g., Bos and Brants 2014; Cramer 2011; Jagers and Walgrave 2007) and comparative international studies (e.g., Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Schmidt 2017) that uniformly have measured the proportion of populist communication among a wide variety of political actors. However, these studies again did not test systematically whether members of previously defined populist and nonpopulist parties differ significantly in their level of populist communication.

We want to investigate this question in a more differentiated manner. We want to test not only whether politicians commonly classified as populist actually communicate in a more populist way across several Western democracies but also whether they do so more strongly on social media (and talk shows) to avoid the mainstream media they despise for perceived distorting journalistic intervention and cozy links with the establishment (Fisher et al. 2018). In addition, we want to test whether this tendency of members from populist parties is particularly strong in the context of the five populism-related topics identified above. We expect the following:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Populist politicians use more populist communications than nonpopulist politicians do.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Populist politicians use especially more populist communication than nonpopulist politicians do on social media.

**Hypothesis 3c:** Populist politicians use especially more populist communication than nonpopulist politicians do when talking about issues with a high affinity to populist mobilization.

Another characteristic of politicians could promote their tendency to populist communication. Findings by Davis (2009: 209) indicate that those politicians that do not have the most elevated status (i.e., backbenchers) especially tend to see the exploitation of “populist news values” as an important strategy to overcome the media threshold, in particular on social media where they can communicate their messages directly to the public. Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016: 507) agree that “for backbenchers and newcomers, provocative statements are even more needed.” It is noteworthy that their underdog status gives them a certain degree of authenticity. Backbenchers can use the antiestablishment dimension of populist communication particularly effectivity by criticizing those in power for political failures and the supposed neglect of the...
concerns of the population—and in this way mark their own closeness to the people. Political frontbenchers and power-holders should sound much less convincing if they take a critical stand against the existing political establishment (Stewart 2018). On the party level, studies have shown that parties placed at the fringes of the political spectrum, or holding an opposition or challenger position, employ higher levels of populist communication than do mainstream and governing parties (Ernst et al. 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Schmidt 2017). Building on these findings, we examine the likelihood of populist communication at the individual level of politicians and argue that backbenchers or politicians not holding a key position in a party or government will use more populist communication.

Political outsiders often employ a digital campaign strategy to spread their messages and break into the mainstream media. Backbenchers are less disadvantaged on Facebook and Twitter: they are neither dependent on being invited to talk shows nor on passing journalists’ criteria of newsworthiness. Social media even can empower backbenchers: it offers a possibility to build their own power base of like-minded followers, and to establish a more direct and more interactive connection to the people than party leaders have (Jacobs and Spierings 2018; Spierings et al. 2018). Hence, we expect backbenchers to tap their full populist potential particularly via their social media communication. Finally, backbenchers often focus on political issues with high news values—and high mobilization potential—to gain the interest of a wide audience and attract journalist attention. These arguments lead to three final hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4a:** Backbenchers use more populist communication than politicians holding key positions do.

**Hypothesis 4b:** Backbenchers use especially more populist communication than politicians holding key positions do on social media.

**Hypothesis 4c:** Backbencher use especially more populist communication than politicians holding key positions do when talking about issues with a high affinity to populist mobilization.

**Methods**

We conducted a multinational content analysis to measure the prevalence of populist communication of 103 politicians’ statements on political talk shows, social media, and newspapers across six countries in 2015. In total, the study analyzed 2,517 statements by politicians from a broad spectrum of parties.

**Sample**

Populist communication is a transnational phenomenon (Aalberg et al. 2017; Moffitt 2016), and populist actors in many Western countries are on the rise. This study examines six news systems (United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany) to capture the phenomenon more broadly and go beyond case study observations. We followed an individual matching approach on the actor level across
several media channels to analyze the hypotheses. This sampling strategy required a
four-step procedure: We (1) identified relevant countries, (2) sampled political talk
shows and recorded all statements from the appearing politicians, (3) downloaded the
verified social media statements from the politicians, and (4) collected all statements
in newspapers from the same politicians during the period of investigation.

First, we selected six countries spanning the three relevant models of Western
media system types: democratic-corporatist versus polarized-pluralist versus liberal
(Hallin and Mancini 2004). In addition, these countries provide sufficient variability
regarding political systems (parliamentary vs. presidential, representative vs. direct,
consensus vs. majoritarian systems), party characteristics (strong vs. weak populist
parties), and consumer preferences for various political information sources (Aalberg
et al. 2017; Newman et al. 2017). Our multinational comparative design serves as a
robustness check for the validity and generalizability of our findings and allows us to
draw conclusions for a wider scope of countries.

Second, we selected the two most influential political talk shows for each country
that air on a weekly basis and enjoy high viewing figures and market shares in their
segments (Table A in the online appendix). All shows focus primarily on politics, fol-
low a roundtable format, have a duration of approximately one hour and regularly
invite politicians as panel guests. We recorded four episodes of the twelve selected
shows during a three-month period of routine news (with no interfering elections)
from March through May 2015. We content-analyzed only statements made by politi-
cians and neglected all statements made by talk show hosts, nonpolitical guests or
audience members. This led to a selection of 110 political actors across the forty-eight
taped programs.

Third, we collected the verified Facebook posts and Twitter feeds of all identified
politicians during the same three-month period when the talk shows were recorded.
We considered only tweets and Facebook posts that included direct statements from
the respective politician and were more than eight characters long. Simple retweets
and tweets or Facebook posts including only pictures, links or videos were excluded
from the analysis. We drew a random sample of fifty Twitter and fifty Facebook state-
ments per politician.

Fourth, we collected direct and indirect statements of the 110 identified politicians
in the newspapers. We selected two leading upmarket daily newspapers (one left- and
one right-leaning), two dominant mass-market media newspapers (either paid or free)
and two important weekly news magazines for each country (see Table B in the online
appendix). We retrieved all stories that these newspapers had published, including
statements from these politicians within the wider debates of migration and labor mar-
ket by using a verified search string for Lexis Nexis and Factiva. The sample period
for the press was extended to twelve months (March 2014 to May 2015) to ensure a
sufficient number of statements by the individual politicians in the sample.

Out of the initial sample, we kept only those statements that included a veritable
statement by a politician and expressed either a political position, an elaboration on a
political issue, an evaluation, or an attribution from a target actor \( N = 2,549 \). We
further excluded politicians with less than five statements in total. This led to a final
sample of $N = 990$ talk show statements, $N = 363$ tweets, $N = 708$ Facebook posts, and $N = 456$ newspaper statements by 103 politicians.

**Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis is a single statement made by a politician—who is considered a speaker—about a target actor or a political issue. A target actor is the object of a politician’s characterization or evaluation and may include politicians, members of the elite or the people. A political issue refers to the thematic context or policy substance of the statement.

**Operationalization**

**Populist Communication**

The nine populist key messages and seven populist communication styles were coded based on a comprehensive codebook (see Table 1 and Table 2 for details on the categories). For each category, we recorded whether the variable was present in a statement. A message or style was considered present if at least one of the related categories was coded. For the dependent variable—populist communication, which we theoretically defined as the co-occurrence of populist content and style—we constructed a dummy variable, which was present if at least one of the nine populist key messages and one of seven populist communication styles cooccurred in the same statement.

**Issues**

Each statement made on social media, talk shows or in newspapers was coded for its connection to one of the following fourteen issue specifications: Economy, welfare, budget, freedom and rights, Europe, education, immigration, army, security, ecology, institutional reforms, infrastructure, elections, and events. Each of these fourteen issues has a variety of subissues that were also coded ($n = 133$). The fourteen issues were divided into two groups—issues with a high affinity to populist mobilization and issues with a low affinity to populism—by following specifications by Taggart (2017), Van Kessel (2015), Smith (2010) and Poier et al. (2017). The dummy for populism-affine issues included forty-seven subissues related to immigration, regionalism, corruption and crime, integration, and economic hardship.

**Politicians**

Each of the 103 politicians was categorized for populist versus nonpopulist and backbencher versus holding a key position. In terms of identifying populist actors, we rely on previous categorizations made by Van Kessel (2015), Mudde (2007), Rooduijn et al. (2014) as well as the respective country chapters in Aalberg et al. (2017). The populist politicians appearing in the talk shows programs we taped came from the
Swiss People’s Party (SVP), the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), the German Leftist Party (Die Linke), the Italian Northern League (LN), the Five Star Movement (M5S), Forward Italy (FI), or the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP). In total, eighteen populist politicians were identified.

In a second step, we coded the official political position of each politician during the sample period. We categorized politicians as holding a key position who were in office as the head of government (e.g., president, chancellor, or federal council), ministers of the current cabinet, or a party or vice-party leader. In total, twenty-eight politicians were categorized as holding key positions and seventy-five politicians were backbenchers.

A team of intensively trained student coders reached acceptable levels of reliability across all coding categories. The average Brennan and Prediger’s kappa across all populist messages, styles and political issues is .89 (see Table C in the online appendix for details).

Findings

Of the 2,517 statements we found across the four channels (Facebook, Twitter, TV talk shows, newspapers), roughly every seventh statement (15.3 percent) contains a populist key message, and roughly every third (37.2 percent) contains a populist style element. The proportion of statements in which politicians combine a key message with a style element is 9.3 percent. This figure gives us an idea of how widespread the use of populist communication is among Western politicians and how often we as media consumers are confronted with it on average (see Table D in the online appendix for further details).

We conducted analyses of variance using the co-occurrence of populist key messages and communication styles as the dependent variable to test our nine hypotheses. The independent variables (channel type, issue type, politician type) change depending on the hypothesis for the individual analyses. We ran Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests ($p < .01$) to analyze the differences further between groups.

Hypothesis 1: Type of Channel

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the amount of populist communication is highest on social media (both Twitter and Facebook), followed by talk shows, and lowest in newspapers. Although the channel type has a significant main effect, $(3,2513) = 10.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .012$, it is the newspapers of all places where we found the highest proportion of populist statements by politicians in the form of direct or indirect speech ($M = .15, SD = .35$). The politicians of all six countries appear to succeed surprisingly well in getting populist messages into the news columns of major newspapers. Populist politicians seem quite adept in overcoming the journalists’ filter and selection mechanisms.\(^5\) We found smaller shares of politicians’ populist communication on Facebook ($M = .11, SD = .32$), Twitter ($M = .07, SD = .26$) and talk shows ($M = .06, SD = .24$); the difference between newspapers and Twitter or talk shows is statistically highly significant (see Figure 1). Overall, H1 is disconfirmed.
If we look at the conditions in the six countries examined separately, we found (with regard to the media system typology of Hallin and Mancini 2004) for democratic-corporatist and polarized-pluralist media systems the same pattern as shown in Figure 1, but a slightly different picture for the liberal media systems. In the United States and United Kingdom, the share of populist statements by politicians is also highest in newspapers but is closely followed by the share in talk shows; only then follow Facebook and Twitter. It seems that talk shows in the United States and United Kingdom have a higher level of tolerance for populist discourses than in continental European countries.

**Hypotheses 2: Type of Issue**

Hypothesis 2a argued that issues claimed by populists to be “in their possession” are more frequently the subject of populist politicization than are other issues—and that this is particularly evident in social media communication (H2b). H2a is supported (F(1,2509) = 7.36, p < .01, η² = .003). Political statements on the five key topics of immigration, regionalism, corruption and crime, integration and economic hardship contain on average (M = .11, SD = .31) more populism than do statements on topics that we classified as nonpopulist (M = .08, SD = .28). All three types of Western media systems show the same pattern. In addition to the main effect, we also found a significant interaction effect between populist issue and channel type (F(3,2509) = 3.52, p < .01, η² = .004). Post-hoc tests revealed that politicians, in line with the expectation of H2b, communicate on Twitter and Facebook in a much more populist way on the five key topics than they do on the other channels (see Figure 2).

Where politicians are confronted with a higher degree of journalistic intervention in political talk shows and newspapers, they succeed significantly less often in actually communicating in a populist manner on topics classified as populist. Although we found in the previous step of the analysis that the proportion of populist communication...
is highest in newspapers, news journalists select populist statements regardless of
whether they write stories on a populist or nonpopulist topic.

**Hypotheses 3: Type of Party**

We suspected a difference between members of populist and nonpopulist parties in
their use of populist communication (H3a), especially in statements on social media
(H3b) and in statements on the five populist-related topics (H3c). The significant
main effect supports H3a ($F(1,2509) = 22.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .009$) and demonstrates
that members of populist parties use more populist key messages and style elements
($M = .14, SD = .29$) than do members of nonpopulist parties ($M = .08, SD = .26$).
Single country comparisons suggest that this effect is robust across all three media
system types.\(^6\)

Furthermore, we find indications of an interaction effect between type of party and
channel use ($F(3,2509) = 2.25, p = .08, \eta^2 = .003$). If we compare the different chan-
nel types using post hoc tests, we find that members of populist parties make intensive
use of one of the two social media channels for populist communication\(^7\) but that they
are also very successful at breaking into the coverage of the news media with their
messages and styles. This finding, graphically displayed in Figure 3, only can be read
as a partial and weak confirmation of H3b.

Hypothesis 3c must be rejected because we find no significant interaction between
affiliation to a certain party group and the way populism-related topics are addressed
($F(1,2513) = .53, ns$). Members of populist parties do not address issues with a high
affinity to populist mobilization per se in a more populist manner than do members of
other parties.

![Figure 2. Degree of populist communication in statements about political issues](image_url)

Note. Type of political issue: $F(1,2509) = 7.36, p < .01, \eta^2 = .003$ / Type of channel: $F(3,2509) = 10.18,
p < .001, \eta^2 = .012$ / Type of political issue*Type of channel: $F(3,2509) = 3.52, p < .05, \eta^2 = .004$.\(^6\)
Finally, we expected that backbenchers are more populist than politicians holding a leadership position (H4a), in particular when communicating via social media channels (H4b) and addressing populism-affine topics (H4c). We find a significant main effect that backbenchers ($M = .10, SD = .30$) are more populist in their communication than are high-ranking politicians ($M = .09, SD = .29/ F(1,2509) = 6.44, p < .01, \eta^2 = .003$). The differences between the two groups are small but in all probability would have been larger if we had considered “real” backbenchers; after all, our backbenchers were invited to talk shows, otherwise they would not have been included in the sample. Country comparisons further reveal that our backbenchers used significantly more populist communication in Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, and France. Frontbenchers used more populism in their statements in Switzerland and the United States. H3a thus finds only partial support. At a second view, this finding makes much sense because many populist politicians in Switzerland and the United States are in leadership positions of large parties with partial governmental responsibility.

The significant interaction of backbenchers and type of channel ($F(3,2509) = 3.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .004$) supports H4b. Post hoc tests reveal that backbenchers communicate in a much more populist way on Twitter and Facebook in comparison to those in the other two channels (see Figure 4). As expected, backbenchers particularly are keen to use social media and especially Twitter for their populist communication because there they can demonstrate particularly well their responsiveness to the alleged will of the people.

Hypothesis H4c is not supported because no significant interaction effect exists between the type of politician and their populist communication of certain issues.
Politicians in general use populist messages and styles much more often when they address populist issues; however, this is not more pronounced for backbenchers.

**Multivariate Analysis of Opportunity Structures**

To validate these findings further, we integrated all variables of the individual analyses of variance (ANOVAs) into a comprehensive binary logistic regression model (see Table 3) by using the dummy variable for populist communication as dependent variable and considering all channel, issue, party, and politician types as dummies for the independent variables. Additionally, we controlled for differences between the different types of media systems. The multivariate model confirms that populist communication is highly prevalent in newspapers and for members of populist parties. While the main effect for backbenchers is no longer significant, the interactions demonstrate that they use one preferred social media channel—Twitter—for their populist communication. The effects for populism-related issues stay robust when circulated on Facebook and the model overall reinforces the argument that social media channels in combination with other opportunity structures promote the spread of populism.

A final word on country differences: The previous ANOVAs had shown that politicians in all six countries find very similar opportunity structures for populist communication. The only notable country differences were (1) talk shows, where U.S. and U.K. politicians are allowed to express themselves more populist than in the other countries, and (2) frontbenchers, who communicate in an even more populist way than backbenchers in the United States and Switzerland. The main, overarching country difference is also reflected in the multivariate regression (Table 3): the share of popul-
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Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression of Populist Communication ($N = 2,517$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Populist Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal media system (vs. democratic corporatist)</td>
<td>0.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized media system (vs. democratic corporatist)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter (vs. talk show)</td>
<td>-1.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook (vs. talk show)</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers (vs. talk show)</td>
<td>0.83***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist issue</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist Issue × Twitter</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist Issue × Facebook</td>
<td>0.82**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist party</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist Party × Twitter</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist Party × Facebook</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist Party × Populist Issue</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbencher</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbencher × Twitter</td>
<td>1.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbencher × Facebook</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbencher × Populist Issue</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nagelkerke $R^2$ .07***

Note. Likelihood-Ratio-Test: $\chi^2(16) = 1,489.3, \ p < .001$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

list communication is higher in liberal Anglo-American media systems than in continental European ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study’s main contribution to the international political communication literature is that we link populism research with a discursive opportunity approach. With regard to favorable opportunities, we studied the role of different types of politicians, parties, issues, and communication channels. We find that members of populist parties rely more frequently on the combination of populism-related key messages and stylistic elements than do members of mainstream parties. This is the case in every tenth of their statements, and particularly often on social media and in news articles. Backbenchers can rely less on invitations to TV talk shows and make therefore greater use of social media channels and their contacts to press journalists. While frontbenchers rely more on Facebook, backbenchers use Twitter for populist communication.

We no longer can prove the talk show bonus claimed in the literature under today’s multichannel conditions. Populists now use more social media and have become more successful in getting their messages in the news columns of newspapers. This
observation is perhaps the most surprising finding of our study. How is it possible that the supposedly interventionist news media report so extensively on populism statements by politicians? We believe there are seven explanations for this.

First, populist politicians often have a so-called news value bonus because their messages are controversial, spectacular, and taboo-breaking—and thus meet the selection criteria of the media (Mazzoleni 2008). Second, their messages often take extreme positions on hotly debated issues for which populists claim ownership and problem-solving competence—and for which journalists feel obliged to open the news gates for reasons of balance (Esser et al. 2017). Third, journalists pay very close attention to what populist politicians say on other channels and incorporate this into their newspaper articles (Rogstad 2016). Fourth, populist politicians do not use social media only “to bypass” traditional news media but above all “to influence” the news media agenda with their posts and tweets—as Trump exemplified in the 2016 presidential election campaign (Chadwick 2017: 263). Fifth, we confirm the “paradox of populist communication,” according to which populists may publicly condemn the traditional media on one hand, but on the other hand regard any confirmation by them as the greatest possible triumph (Haller and Holt 2018). Sixth, the news media include many populist messages in their news articles to criticize and deconstruct them. In our sample, for example, 56 percent of the news articles offered populists a neutral platform, whereas 44 percent offered a critical discussion. In these latter articles, the majority of the criticism came from the journalists themselves, not from quoted sources. Many populist political statements in newspaper articles are thus embedded in a critical context, and we consider this a clear expression of the undiminished persistence of journalistic interventionism. However, many journalists have been frustrated to learn that populists follow the principle of “There is no such thing as bad publicity,” because populists like to use every instance of media criticism as proof that news journalists are part of the opposing elite and deserve to be scorned for it. Seventh, the higher proportion of populist politician quotes in the newspaper sample could be related to our methodology. As a result of our sampling strategy, there are more statements on the topics of migration and labor market (45 percent) in the newspaper sample than in talk shows (41 percent) or on Facebook (33 percent) or Twitter (21 percent), which theoretically could increase the populism share.

This brings us to the limitations of the study. Due to our specific sampling strategy, which takes its starting point in talk shows, our sample does not include politicians who generally avoid talk shows or were not invited on them during the period under study. This led to the under-representation of not only Front National members but also of populists and backbenchers as a whole in our sample. We call for future studies to replicate our findings with larger numbers of cases, considering more politicians from an even wider variety of parties, more media channels and more countries. The generalizations that can be drawn from our sample thus are limited somewhat. One final limitation is that we have only analyzed statements by politicians (direct and indirect quotes) in detail; how they were integrated in news stories was examined only roughly. Future studies should examine the contribution by journalists in much greater depth.

Nevertheless, we are convinced we have made a significant contribution to understanding the beneficial opportunity structures for populist communication under
multichannel conditions with this study. We can demonstrate that politicians indeed address populism-related issues in a more populist way than other issues. Populist politicians who raise these issues have been surprisingly successful in getting their messages into the news media. As many as half of these messages are transmitted uncritically. Populists turn to their own followers via social media. It may be that populists use Facebook and Twitter not only to bypass the news media but also to influence them. These findings broaden our understanding of the communication strategies of populist politicians.

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Notes

1. Italian Servizio Pubblico and Ballarò are an exception, with an airtime of approximately 170 minutes.
2. In the final analysis, only ten politicians had no Facebook or Twitter account.
3. We extended the study period to the whole year for politicians who had less than 100 tweets or Facebook posts during the three-month period.
4. The reason why only newspaper articles with a loose connection to migration and the labor market were available to us was that this study is part of larger research program.
5. To better understand politicians’ great chances of success in the news media, we examined the frequency of populist political statements in upmarket newspapers ($M = .13, SD = .33$), mass-market ($M = .13, SD = .34$) and weekly magazines ($M = .23, SD = .42$). It turns out that weekly magazines are the most receptive: almost one in four direct and indirect quotes by politicians are populist in nature. The high affinity of weekly newspapers for popularizing and populist communication had already been shown in earlier studies (Umbricht and Esser 2016; Wettstein et al. 2018).
6. We could not run these analyses for France and the United States because of too few members of populist parties in the sample.
7. We can only report a tendency for Twitter ($p = 0.10$)
8. The differences are no longer significant when tested in a single analysis of variance.
9. For Facebook we can only report a tendency ($p = 0.09$), but the preferred use of Twitter by backbenchers is well-known (Rogstad 2016).
Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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