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Research Article

Shifting the blame. Populist politicians' use of Twitter as a tool of opposition

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Abstract

The advent of new social media has facilitated new means of political communication, through which politicians can address the electorate in an unmediated way. This article concentrates on political actors challenging the establishment, for whom new media platforms such as Twitter provide new tools to engage in a 'permanent campaign' against dominant mainstream parties. Such opposition is ostensibly articulated most strongly by populist parties, which can be seen as the ultimate challengers to the (political) 'elites'. By means of two often-identified cases of populism in the Netherlands (the radical right Freedom Party and left-wing Socialist Party), this study explores how populist party leaders use Twitter messages (tweets) to give form to their adversarial rhetoric in practice. Irrespective of the different ways in which the politicians utilised the medium, our study shows that Twitter can serve as a valuable source to study the oppositional discourse of populist parties, and (shifting) party strategies more generally.

Keywords

Twitter has grown out to be one of the most prominent microblogging and social networking services. For politicians, the medium provides a tool to engage in unmediated communication with a broad group of potential voters (Lassen and Brown 2011). In practice, Twitter is regularly used by politicians to voice their opinions, and tweets can be seen as typical vehicles for self-promotion (Golbeck et al. 2010). Even though a relatively small number of people 'follow' politicians on Twitter directly, tweets often lie at the basis of more widely consumed media coverage (see Larsson and Moe 2012; Jacobs and Spierings 2016).

While Twitter allows for a more general analysis of party positions and political ideologies, the focus of this article is narrower, as we are interested in the manner in which the medium is used as a means of political opposition. Several authors have noted the suitability of social media for so-called populist politicians, who are characterised by their appeal to the 'ordinary' people and hostility towards the (political) elites (Bartlett et al. 2011; Gerbaudo 2015). Yet research on how populist parties give shape to their anti-establishment rhetoric through Twitter remains sparse. In our study, we assess how leaders of two alleged populist parties at the ideological fringes of the Dutch political spectrum, Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) and Emile Roemer of the Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP), use Twitter to criticise their political opponents, and respond to changing political opportunities. Both these parties have habitually been associated with populism, not least due to their critical attitude towards the Dutch political elite. In our analysis we trace developments in the party leaders' 'adversarial tweets'; more specifically, we consider which actors they blamed over time, and which issues were at the centre of their adversarial tweets.

The following sections outline in more detail our theoretical starting points. Subsequently, a brief description of the Socialist Party and Freedom Party is provided. The article then moves on to present the research design and the results of this study. We find that the frequency in which the party leaders used Twitter has varied over time, but that the politicians' adversarial tweets reflected well their (electoral) strategies. They were selective in criticising particular opponents and shifted

their targets and 'blame topics' throughout time, largely depending on who was in government, and which issues dominated their political agendas. Tweets thus proved a suitable source to track the strategies of political actors, and the findings point to the relevance of studying new means of political communication (see e.g. Lassen and Brown 2011; Towner and Dulio 2012). Indeed, much more than party manifestos, tweets allow researchers to map short-term developments in party strategies in between elections. The results also show that political actors branded as 'populist' do not necessarily voice criticism just for the sake of protest against the entire political system, but that they can act in a calculating manner, just like other political actors do.

TWITTER AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Due to, inter alia, its low operating costs, interactive, unmediated and personal character, and 'virality potential', Twitter can be viewed as an important new political communication tool (see Vergeer and Hermans 2013; Jacobs and Spierings 2016). Compared with party manifestos, which primarily outline preferred policies and are only published prior to elections, tweets are also more suitable as means to react to current affairs and to criticise other politicians. This applies not least to politicians challenging the political establishment, for whom tweets provide the means to engage in a 'permanent campaign' against the political elites, and governing parties in particular (see Vergeer et al. 2013). Indeed, radical fringe parties have been observed to be among the most active users of online technology (Gibson and Ward 2012, p. 65), and also attract many 'followers' on social media relative to their mainstream competitors (Economist 2015). The format of tweets – which are limited to 140-characters – arguably offers more opportunities for politicians with a succinct and unambiguous message than for mainstream politicians whose positions are marked by more nuance and opacity.

Parties at the ideological fringes are often associated with 'populism', which can broadly be defined as an ideology or discourse which makes a Manichean distinction between the corrupt 'elites' and the virtuous 'people', and supports the idea of popular sovereignty (e.g. Taggart 2000; Mudde 2004; Laclau 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). It is debated whether populism is an element of certain politicians or parties only, or rather a strategic rhetorical devise or style which can in principle be applied by all political actors (to a certain degree) (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2013; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Van Kessel 2014). It may well be argued that for some parties populism is an essential element of their ideology – i.e. those parties which are marked by a consistent and frequent use of populist language – while for others populism is not more than a sporadic (strategic) devise to put distance between them and the parties they compete with. Be that as it may, in the Western European context populism tends to be associated primarily with parties of the radical left and radical right (e.g. Mudde 2007; March 2011). These parties have in common a criticism of the political establishment, but also of other 'elite' actors. Depending on the parties' broader ideological characteristics, these can be the corporate rich, bankers, but also the media or intelligentsia, whose (liberal) ideas, values and interests are at odds with those of the 'silent majority' (Canovan 1999, p. 3).

In their cross-national study, surveying Facebook fans of populist parties, Bartlett et al. (2011: 15, 30) observed that these parties are 'adept at using social media to amplify their message, recruit and organise', and that the Internet is 'deeply ingrained' in their strategy and identity (see also Mazzoleni 2015). Paulo Gerbaudo (2015: 68) similarly argued that for protest movements and parties 'social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook have become the means through which to address Internet users as the new prototypes of the 'common man' of populism: the ordinary hard-working citizens, victimised by an unfair political and economic establishment'. Through social media, an

otherwise diversified mass can be mobilised against economic and political elites. Indeed, the format of social media outlets such as Twitter allows politicians with an anti-establishment agenda to voice unambiguous criticism and identify the culprits of social problems. In other words, tweets can be used as vehicles for these politicians' 'injustice frames', through which they identify the victims of a given injustice ('the people') and focus blame or responsibility on established (political) authorities (Gamson 1992; Benford and Snow 2000: 615-6). While in the past politicians and social movements were tied to traditional media as a resource though which to construct their injustice frames (Gamson 1995), social media such as Twitter now allow them to voice their discontent without an intermediary channel (see Schulz 2014).

That said, not all studies have come to the conclusion that Twitter is the ultimate medium for populist parties. From their analysis of Twitter use among Dutch politicians at the time of the 2010 parliamentary election, Vergeer and Hermans (2013) conclude that candidates from less established and smaller parties did not use Twitter more extensively. They found that the (populist) PVV and SP were actually among the parties with the lowest 'adopter rates' (see also Vergeer et al. 2013). Jacobs and Spierings (2016) also studied the political use of social media in the Netherlands, and similarly observed that the PVV and SP – which they also identified as 'populist parties' – lagged behind in terms of the number of candidates represented on social media platforms and the professionalisation of their online activities. What is more, particularly the PVV refrained from making use of Twitter's more advanced interactive features, and 'seemed to consider Twitter merely as an alternative to sending out press releases' (Jacobs and Spierings 2016, p. 181).

It is thus a moot point whether populist parties are truly that Twitter-savvy. However, even if only used as top-down 'press release centres', populist politicians' Twitter profiles may well feed into the political debate, not least because tweets are picked up by the mass media. It is therefore important not only to study the nature of politicians' use of Twitter, for instance in terms of adopter rates among party candidates, but also to focus on the *contents* of their tweets. For one, bearing in mind that tweets provide suitable vehicles for succinct and unambiguous criticism of other political actors, it is worthwhile to investigate how populist parties (i.e. those parties for which populism is a more or less consistent element) utilise Twitter in their opposition to the (political) elites. Does their Twitter usage reflect well their anti-establishment strategies, and can the medium therefore be considered suitable to study the construction of populist actors' injustice frames? This article has an explorative character and focuses on tweets with an explicit adversarial character; those which target actors for ignoring or causing social problems. We start out from the assumption that populist parties can be seen as rational and calculating players in the political 'market place' (see Scammell 1999). On the basis of this, several expectations can be formulated.

First of all, populist parties are likely to direct their criticism towards traditionally dominant parties, which are often in government and can most convincingly be portrayed as members of the political elite. As they are typically political outsiders in opposition, populist parties can often freely target parties in government (see Walter and Van der Brug 2014). It is wrong to assume, however, that they have no ambition to enter government themselves; several European populist parties have in fact entered, or supported, governing coalitions in the past few decades (De Lange 2012; Albetazzi and McDonnell 2015). In order not to destroy their 'coalition potential', populist parties may limit their criticism of prospective partners, whilst directing their criticism towards parties with whom there is less scope for cooperation.

Related to this, we further expect that populist parties predominantly criticise parties with contrasting ideological positions. This relates to their presumed caution not to antagonise potential coalition partners with similar programmes, but also their need to construct a consistent ideological

narrative. In view of their nativist and authoritarian character, populist radical right parties are likely to criticise those parties that subscribe to 'progressive' values and have more favourable attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism (see Mudde 2007). On the other hand, considering their 'emphasis on egalitarianism and the espousal of collective economic and social rights' (March 2011, p. 118), left-wing populist parties are more likely to criticise parties that are supportive of *laissez faire* capitalism (in addition to economic elites outside of the political sphere, such as bankers, managers and large companies).[i]

It would also be conceivable to hypothesise that populist parties primarily express criticism of ideologically proximate parties, since these are their main electoral competitors (see Walter 2014). We expect, however, that populist parties are more likely to focus on their ideological nemeses, in order to construct an anti-establishment message, which is consistent with their wider ideological attributes. Indeed, we also expect that the adversarial tweets of populist parties primarily relate to issues, which are at the centre of their programmatic appeal, with left-wing populists primarily placing emphasis on the malicious socio-economic policies of their political opponents, and right-wing populists blaming their adversaries for their welcoming attitude towards immigrants and promotion of cultural decay. All in all, we expect that populist parties, at least when they are in opposition, primarily target dominant mainstream parties which often take part in government. In addition, we presume that populist parties will be less critical of ideologically proximate parties with whom they seek to cooperate in office, and that their criticism is mainly focused on the issues that are central to their own political programme.

CASE SELECTION

We focus our analysis on two parties in the Netherlands. The country offers an ideal testing ground, as two different types of populist parties have been identified in the contemporary Dutch party system: the left-wing SP and the radical right PVV (see e.g. Lucardie and Voerman 2012). This allows us to assess the adversarial rhetoric of two ideologically distinct populist parties, while controlling for general developments in the domestic political context. The PVV, furthermore, provides us with a case that has acted as a support partner for a minority government (the Rutte I Cabinet, October 2010 – April 2012). By focusing on the PVV, we are able to explore developments in the adversarial tweets of a populist party leader once this party departs from its (natural) role as full-fledged opposition party. Further, the Dutch technological context is also suitable for our analysis of politicians' tweets. In addition to the relatively large presence of Dutch political actors on social media, the country is characterised by a high proportion of social network users in comparison with other European countries (see Jacobs and Spierings 2016, p. 13-4). This implies that Dutch politicians have a real incentive to use Twitter as a means of political communication, as they are able to reach a relatively large audience.

As far as the background of the two selected parties is concerned, the SP entered the Dutch Parliament first in 1994 (having won 1.3 per cent of the vote). The party steadily expanded its support base until its electoral high point in 2006, when it won 16.6 per cent of the national vote. In the subsequent parliamentary elections of 2010 and 2012, the SP failed to repeat this achievement – it received 9.9 and 9.6 per cent of the vote, respectively – but the party remained a substantial force in the fragmented Dutch party system.

By the time of its parliamentary entrance, the SP had moved away from its Maoist roots and could better be described as a radical left-wing protest party, exemplified by its slogan: 'vote against, vote SP'. The party was also populist in its appeals to the 'common man' and its denunciation of the

political and economic elites (see Lucardie and Voerman 2012). Around the turn of the 21st century, the SP downplayed its anti-establishment image – in 2002 its slogan had remarkably changed to 'Vote *for*, vote SP' (see also Lange and Rooduijn 2011). Populist rhetoric could nevertheless still be found in the discourse of the party and its politicians (Lucardie and Voerman 2012, pp. 64-9), and the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent economic downturn seemed to fuel the SP's populism; the party, for instance, held the 'political and economic elites' responsible for the crisis at the time of the 2010 parliamentary election (SP 2010, p. 5). In the recent literature, the SP has thus regularly been identified as a populist party (e.g. Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013; Akkerman et al. 2014; Otjes and Louwerse 2015). It is nevertheless evident that over the years populism became a more irregular and sporadic element in the party's discourse (see Rooduijn 2014; Van Kessel 2015) – making the SP a prominent case in the debate about whether populism is a matter of degree or kind. The 'borderline character' of the SP has to be borne into mind when analysing the results. In terms of concrete policy positions, the SP's signature issues have always related to socio-economic themes. After the party dropped its more radical communist policies, the SP continued to denounce the supposed supremacy of the neo-liberal philosophy. The party has advocated higher minimum wages, and opposed welfare state reforms, restricting unemployment benefit requirements, and privatisation of health care provision. The SP has also been sceptical of European integration, and has taken issue with the EU's supposed neo-liberal character in particular.

The Freedom Party, in turn, has been the dominant populist radical right party in the Netherlands since its entrance into parliament in 2006, when it won 5.9 per cent of the vote in the national election. The party filled the gap on the populist right left vacant after the electoral demise of the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), which fell into organisational disarray soon after the assassination of its founder in May 2002. The PVV was founded and ever-since controlled by Geert Wilders, a former MP for the Liberal party (VVD). Wilders has appealed explicitly to the 'ordinary people', and his discourse has been marked by a strong hostility towards the political elite. In his 'declaration of independence', written after his departure from the Liberals, Wilders (2005, p. 1) for instance spoke of a 'range of interlinked crises flowing from the incompetence of the political elite in Brussels and [Dutch political capital] The Hague'. Wilders (2005, p. 2) declared that he intended 'to return this country to its citizens'. With this declaration Wilders set the tone for later statements in which populist rhetoric recurred frequently.

Besides its populism, the PVV has primarily become known for his anti-immigration policies and outspoken criticism of Islam. In terms of socio-economic policies, the PVV's programme had a neo-liberal character from the outset, favouring *laissez-faire* policies such as tax cuts and deregulation. The party's policy positions became more eclectic in 2010, and Wilders' party now called for the preservation of various welfare entitlements (see Vossen 2011, p. 186). During the election campaign of 2012, Wilders focused more than ever on the theme of European integration. Wilders condemned unelected 'Eurocrats', and opposed financial aid to troubled Eurozone members, as well as labour immigration from Eastern Europe. The Freedom Party had always been Eurosceptic, but now went so far as to support a Dutch 'exit' from the European Union altogether.

After its breakthrough in 2006, the PVV won 15.5 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election of June 2010. The PVV subsequently provided parliamentary support for a governing minority coalition made up of the Christian Democrats (CDA) and the Liberals (VVD), in exchange for the implementation of some of its key policies. This Cabinet (Rutte I) fell in April 2012 when Wilders refused to sign up to newly drafted austerity measures, and withdrew his support. In the early election that followed in September 2012, the PVV suffered a substantial loss. The party received 10.1 per cent of the vote, yet remained the third largest party in parliament, at par with the SP.

DATA AND METHOD

As we are interested in the populist politicians' use of tweets as means to focus blame or responsibility on established (political) authorities, the study considers the tweets with an explicit adversarial character; those which target actors for ignoring or causing social problems. This is done through hand-coding Twitter messages ('tweets') of the PVV and SP party leaders: Geert Wilders (@geertwilderspvv) and Emile Roemer (@emileroemer).

As national party leaders can be seen as the most prominent representatives of political parties in the Netherlands, their personal tweets are considered good indicators of the general stance of the party. In case of the hierarchically organised SP and PVV, moreover, rank and file candidates have seemingly been discouraged to become Twitter-active in an effort to preserve party discipline and organisational unity (Jacobs and Spierings 2016). This applies in particular to the Freedom Party, which can be considered as the personal party of Geert Wilders (see De Lange and Art 2011). Except for the European Parliament fraction (@pvveuropa), the PVV does actually not have an official Twitter account, and a link on the party's website leads directly to the personal Twitter page of Geert Wilders. The SP does have its own account (@SPnl), but many tweets refer directly to the tweets of party leader Roemer. To secure equivalence across the units of observation, we chose to analyse the personal tweets of Roemer rather than the SP's party account messages.

The previously stated assumption that Twitter is a more suitable tool than party manifestos to express adversarial rhetoric is corroborated by the case of the SP. The 76-pages SP programme of 2012, for instance, was mainly filled with policy proposals and only included five critical comments about other parties or the incumbent government (SP 2012). The PVV manifestos included considerably more criticism of other actors (PVV 2010; 2012). In the 2012 document, we found that 52 of the 133 paragraphs (39 per cent) contained derogatory remarks, mainly targeted at domestic political- or EU actors. In this study we therefore also occasionally refer to the contents of PVV manifestos in order to compare these with the Twitter statements.

We gathered tweets in the period between the run up to the 2010 parliamentary election and the aftermath of the parliamentary election of September 2012. This particular period was selected, because it allowed us to track whether Wilders' rhetoric changed during and after the PVV's role as support partner. Four analytically meaningful periods can be distinguished within the period of study:

1. **20 February 2010 – 9 June 2010**: Period in between fall of Cabinet Balkenende IV (CDA-PvdA) and new parliamentary elections.

2. **10 June 2010 – 22 April 2012**: Period of formation and tenure Cabinet Rutte I (VVD-CDA minority coalition, with parliamentary support from the PVV).

3. **23 April 2012 – 12 September 2012**: Period in between fall of Rutte I and new parliamentary elections.

4. **13 September 2012 – 30 June 2013**: Period of formation and first seven months of tenure Cabinet Rutte II (VVD-PvdA).

Emile Roemer only started using Twitter on 12 January 2011, and his tweets were thus gathered since this date. Tweets were collected primarily from the front pages of both politicians' Twitter

accounts, but to retrieve older (unavailable) tweets, and to ensure the completeness of the data, we also used the search engine http://www.twimemachine.com. Only original tweets from Wilders and Roemer were selected (hence: no 're-tweets' in which users share a message from someone else). Tweets were also excluded if they included personal messages directed to another user (i.e. when the message started with '@'). It can be noted that these decisions were mainly relevant for SP leader Roemer, since Wilders' tweets were mostly original and directed at the public in general. Throughout the four periods, we collected 660 tweets from Wilders and 445 from Roemer.

All tweets were double coded by the two authors, based on mutual agreement. We approached the data inductively at first, in order to determine which tweets could be considered to contain criticism. In cases of doubt, we came to an agreement on how to code ambivalent tweets – these decisions are reflected in the text and footnotes of this article.[ii] In the end, we selected all the tweets that contained a negative statement about another actor or a critical remark about proposed or enacted policies. These were coded as 'adversarial tweets'. Across the four periods under consideration, Wilders published 272 such tweets (41.2 per cent of his total), and Roemer 164 (36.9 per cent of his total).

The next step was to assess *who* was criticised or blamed for bad decisions or certain problems in society, using the tweets as coding units. The categories we created for this were non-exclusive, as a single tweet could target multiple actors at once. A first category was created for adversarial remarks aimed explicitly at specific domestic politicians, parties and cabinets. This category was especially relevant to test our assumptions about which political actors and parties were likely to be the prime targets of the tweets.

Since populist parties do not only blame domestic political opponents, we also kept track of pejorative references to certain other actors. A second category was created for the European Union and related actors (Commissioners, MEPs etc.). Populists typically view the EU as an elitist project and criticise its complex and opaque decision-making procedures (Canovan 1999). Populist radical right parties, in addition, tend to see European integration as a 'foreign' threat to the sovereignty of their nation, while left-wing populists often portray the EU as a neo-liberal project that encourages a 'race to the bottom' in terms of welfare entitlements and working conditions (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2002).

Third, we coded pejorative references to 'economic elites' (e.g. bankers, managers, companies) and, fourth, negative references to the media, as these are often portrayed by populist parties as mouthpieces of the establishment. A final 'other/unspecified' category was created for critical remarks directed at other actors; Dutch political institutions in general (such as 'parliament', *Tweede Kamer*); unspecified 'politicians'; or for criticism of policies without an explicit reference to whom exactly was to blame.

Besides keeping track of the targets of the adversarial tweets, we also considered for which reasons actors were blamed. Several broad categories were identified after a first inductive assessment of the data. Again, these categories are non-exclusive, as a single critical tweet could relate to more than one of these themes:

- Social, economic and financial issues (e.g. welfare state, health care, economy, budget)

- Immigration and culture (e.g. immigration, multiculturalism, national identity)

- Law and order (e.g. crime and safety, sentences for criminals)

- European integration (e.g. threats to national sovereignty, contributions to EU budget)

- Democracy (e.g. elite responsiveness, citizen representation and influence)

- Counter-criticism (e.g. countering criticism of other actors)

- Other or idiosyncratic issues

FINDINGS

General observations

We start with some general observations concerning the Twitter use of Wilders and Roemer. Figure 1 shows how many times the politicians tweeted in each quarter between January 2010 and July 2013, excluding tweets addressed to another user and retweets. Generally speaking, Wilders has used Twitter increasingly over time, irrespective of a few dips in 2010 (Q3) and 2012 (Q4). Particularly after the fall of the PVV-supported minority coalition in April 2012, the number of Wilders' tweets surged. Roemer's Twitter behaviour was somewhat more erratic; there is a remarkable dip in the third quarter of 2012, which happens to be the period in which (the campaign for) the parliamentary election of 2012 took place.
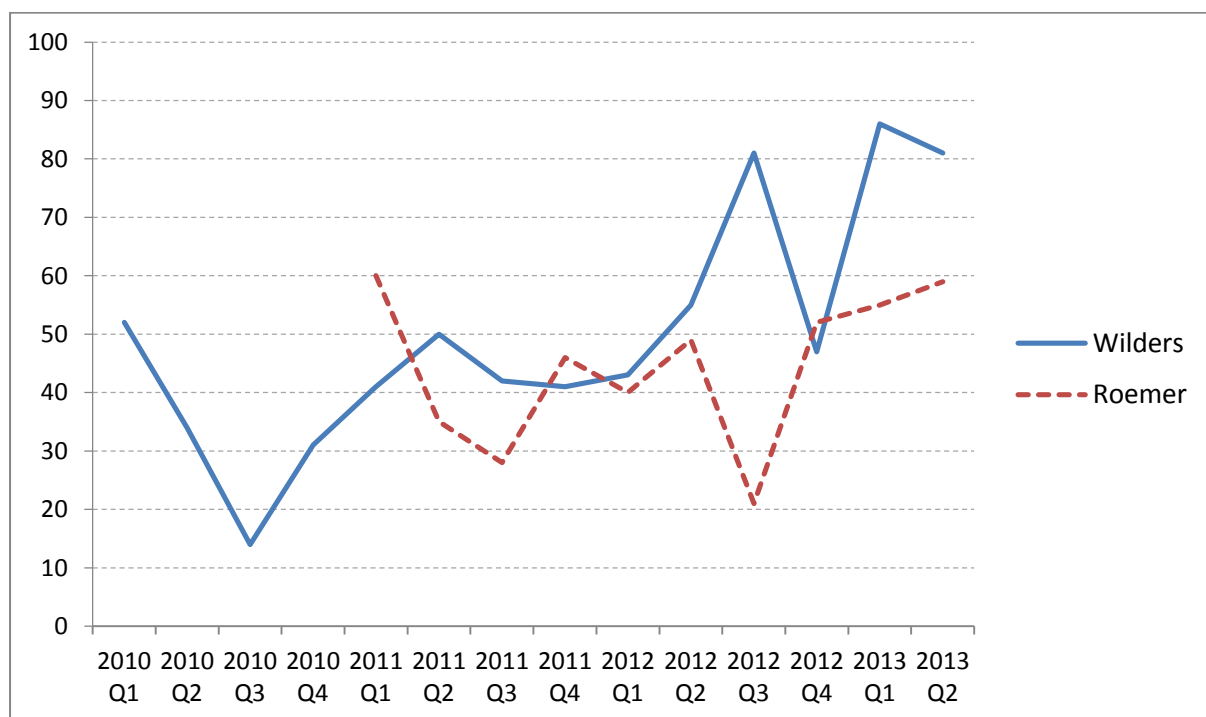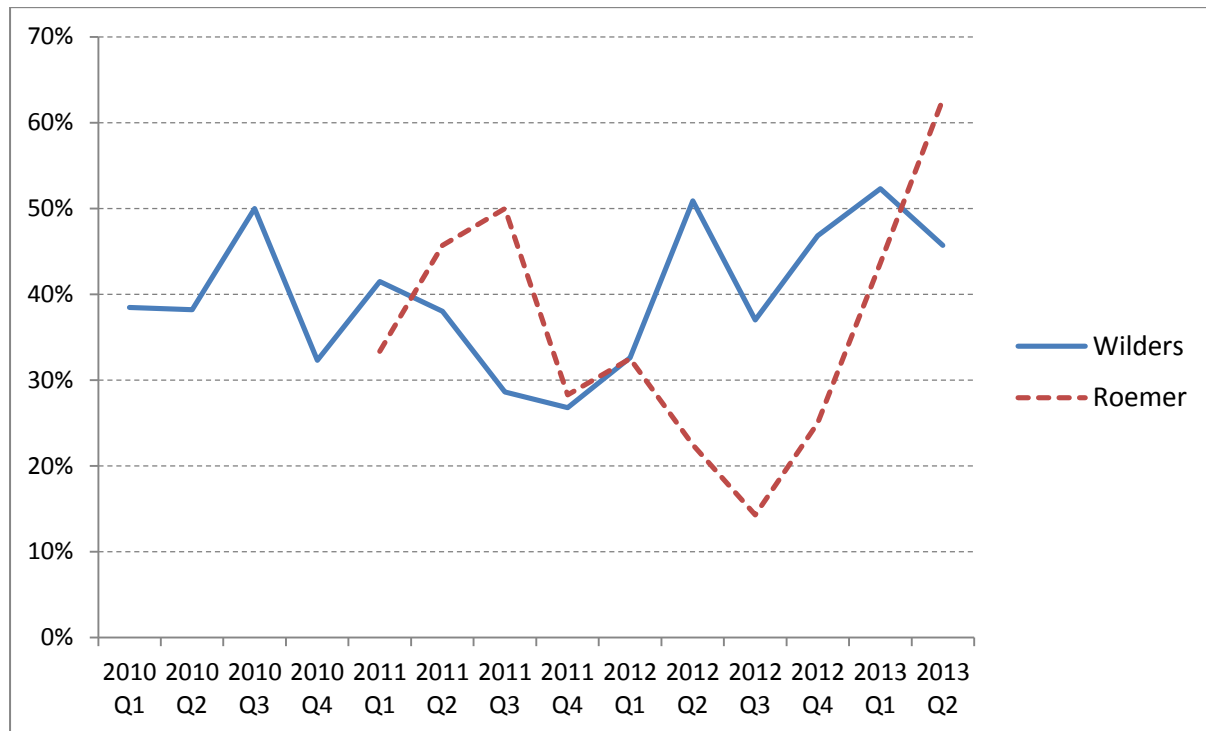
Figure 1. Number of tweets per quarter

Figure 2 shows the percentage of adversarial tweets; those that contained criticism of a certain actor, or an explicit pejorative reference to government policy. One notable observation is that Geert Wilders did not only use Twitter more frequently after the fall of the Rutte I minority

government, but also that his tweets became more adversarial. Roemer's tweets, on the other hand, contained much less criticism in the run up to the September 2012 election than before. Roemer's (relatively few) tweets during the campaign had a rather optimistic character, for instance reporting about the SP leader's local visits. His adversarial tweets soared after the instalment of the new coalition government in November.

Figure 2. Percentage of adversarial tweets per quarter

If we divide the time according to the four periods identified, we observe similar results (see Table 1). In the run up to the election of June 2010 (P1), 42.9 per cent of Wilders' tweets contained criticism, while in the period of the formation and tenure of the Rutte I minority government (P2) the relative number of adversarial tweets was lower (34.5 per cent). After Wilders withdrew his support from the minority coalition, the percentage of adversarial tweets of the PVV leader soared (P3 and 4). In the last period, nearly half of Wilders' tweets contained accusatorial statements. The tweets of SP leader Roemer were also most critical during the latter period, and least adversarial in the run up to the 2012 election (P3).

Table 1. Share of adversarial tweets of Wilders and Roemer

		P1: PE 2010	P2: Rutte I	P3: PE 2012	P4: Rutte II	All
Wilders	Tweets N	42	275	117	226	660
	Advers.%	42.9%	34.5%	44.4%	47.3%	41.2%

		P1: PE 2010	P2: Rutte I	P3: PE 2012	P4: Rutte II	All
Roemer	Tweets N	-	231	44	170	445
	Advers.%	-	35.1%	20.5%	43.5%	36.9%

Type of Actors Criticised

The next step is to assess which type of actors were targeted in the adversarial tweets of Wilders and Roemer. Table 2 shows that most derogatory comments of Wilders were directed towards national-level political actors (politicians, parties, governments or party coalitions). Across the entire period of investigation, almost two-thirds of Wilders' adversarial tweets included an explicit reference to domestic political actors. It is further apparent that Wilders' criticism of EU actors ('Brussels', 'pocket-lining Eurocrats', European Commissioners etc.) mounted in the period between the fall of the Rutte I minority cabinet and the new election of September 2012 (P3). This finding is consistent with the observation that European integration became a more important theme for Wilders in this election campaign. Indeed, also the PVV manifesto of 2012 was filled with criticism of EU elites: 29 out of the 133 paragraphs (21.8 per cent) contained pejorative references to EU actors, compared with 12 out of 118 paragraphs (10.2 per cent) in the manifesto of 2010. In the period after the 2012 election (P4) we see a decline in criticism directed at the EU. However, an important caveat is that, during this period, Wilders still frequently blamed the Dutch government for its submissive attitude towards 'Brussels'. The EU issue thus remained a relatively salient theme for Wilders.

Other actor**s** were criticised only sporadically. Examples are certain media outlets, which received criticism after they had given the PVV bad publicity. In Period 2, Wilders targeted Queen Beatrix several times in relation to her visit to Islamic countries in the Middle East, and Dutch judges at the time when the PVV leader had to stand trial for inciting hatred against Muslims.[iii]

Table 2. Type of actors criticised in adversarial tweets of Wilders, in %

	P1 (N=18)	P2 (N=95)	P3 (N=52)	P4 (N=107)	All (N=272)
Political actors	72.2	57.9	61.5	68.2	63.6
European Union	5.6	11.6	38.5	14.0	17.3
Economic elites	0.0	5.3	1.9	5.6	4.4
Media	16.7	6.3	3.8	4.7	5.9
Other/unspecified	11.1	22.1	5.7	14.0	15.1

Notes: The categories are non-exclusive; a single tweet could relate to more than one actor category. The 'Political actors' category includes national level politicians, parties, governments or party coalitions. General unspecified references to 'politicians', 'parliament' or government policies were placed in the 'other/undefined' category.

Table 3. Type of actors criticised in adversarial tweets of Roemer, in %

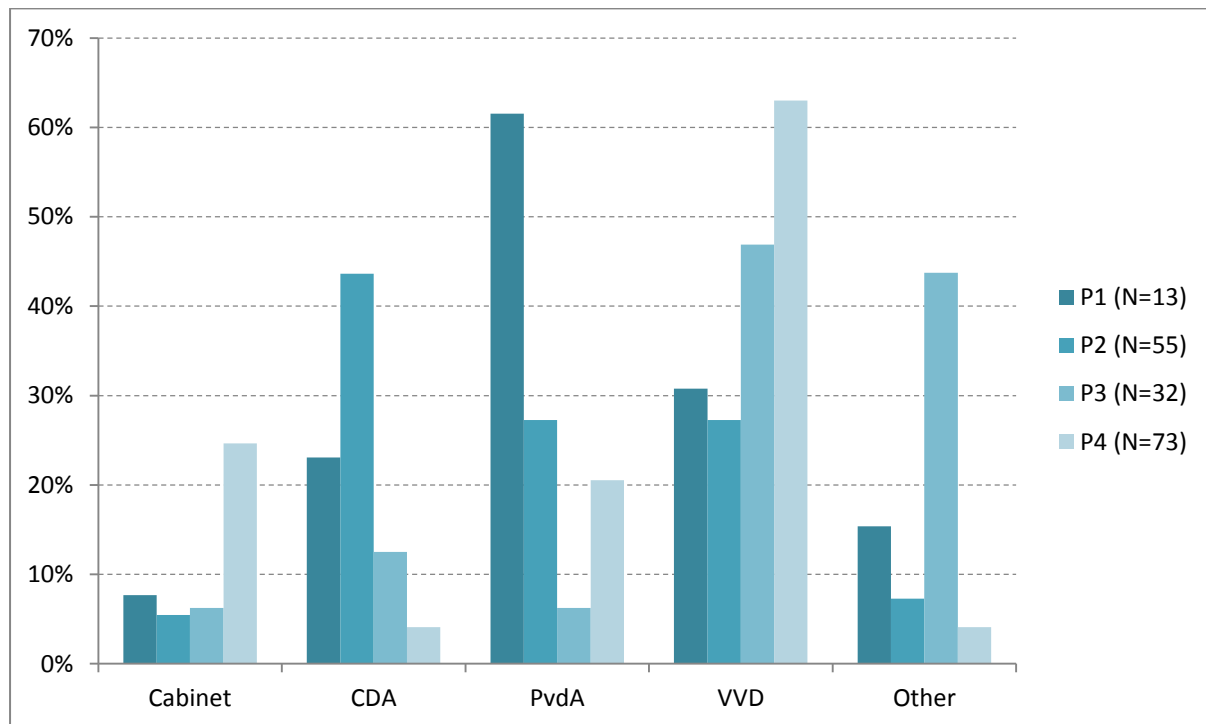|	P2 (N=81)	P3 (N=9)	P4 (N=74)	All (N=164)
Political actors	44.4	44.4	52.7	48.2
European Union	3.7	11.1	6.8	5.5
Economic elites	13.6	22.2	10.8	12.8
Media	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other/unspecified	39.5	22.0	35.2	36.6

The plurality of Roemer's adversarial tweets were also targeted at domestic political actors. Yet, compared with Wilders, the percentages in the 'other/undefined' category are much higher (see Table 3). An important reason for this is that Roemer had the tendency to criticise government policies – not least austerity measures – without explicitly naming and shaming individual politicians or the incumbent cabinet. Since these messages evidently, albeit more implicitly, expressed criticism of the government, they were nevertheless coded as adversarial tweets.

It is further clear that Roemer criticised EU actors to a much lesser extent than Wilders. This suggests that the selection of targets depends very much on the (electoral) strategies of populist parties; unlike the PVV, the SP did not make European integration the central theme of its 2012 election campaign. SP leader Roemer did, on the other hand, devote more of his criticism to economic elites, such as bankers, money-grabbing managers, and high-income groups in general. This is not entirely surprising, as left-wing populist parties are more disposed to criticise the agents and presumed benefactors of capitalism. Despite his more pronounced welfare chauvinist appeal in 2012, Wilders remained a proponent of entrepreneurship, tax cuts and deregulation, and attacked economic elites only very sporadically.

The Domestic Political Targets

In order to assess which specific domestic political actors and parties were targeted, we dissected the 'political actors' category. As expected, within this category it is evident that most criticism of Roemer and Wilders was directed towards either the incumbent government as a whole, or at (politicians from) the three traditionally dominant parties: the Christian Democrats (CDA), Liberals (VVD) and Labour (PvdA).

Figure 3. Political actors criticised by Wilders, as percentage of the tweets explicitly directed at domestic political actors

As can be seen in Figure 3, Geert Wilders' pejorative references to incumbent cabinets were rather scarce in the first three periods. Regarding P1 and P3 – covering the months before the elections of 2010 and 2012, respectively – this does not come as a great surprise, as the governments were 'demissionary' and thus refrained from making politically sensitive decisions. More interesting is that Wilders was seemingly less critical of the PVV-supported Rutte I (VVD-CDA) Cabinet (P2) than of the Rutte II Cabinet, which was formed by the VVD and the PvdA (P4).

Matters are a bit more complex, however, if we consider the political affiliation of the individual politicians criticised. In the run-up to the 2010 election, PvdA leader Job Cohen was Wilders' favourite target. Cohen was portrayed as a multiculturalist soft touch on integration-related issues and problems with criminal Moroccan youths. In the PVV manifesto of 2010, too, the political left was the primary target. The terms 'left-wing elites' or 'clique' were used repeatedly, and four out of the five times a political actor or party was explicitly criticised, this was (a politican from) the PvdA.

In the subsequent period, however, CDA and VVD members received more criticism than the PvdA and its representatives. Wilders for instance attacked CDA and VVD politicians after they commented negatively on the PVV. In addition, the PVV leader occasionally criticised the actions of Immigration Minister Leers (CDA). Further, PM Rutte (VVD) and Finance Minister De Jager (CDA) were criticised several times in May and June 2011 for the decision to sign up to Eurozone bailout packages. Thus, even though Wilders made relatively few negative comments about the Rutte I government as a whole, he did occasionally criticise individual cabinet members for taking a 'soft' stance on the PVV's signature issues, which were not covered by the support agreement.
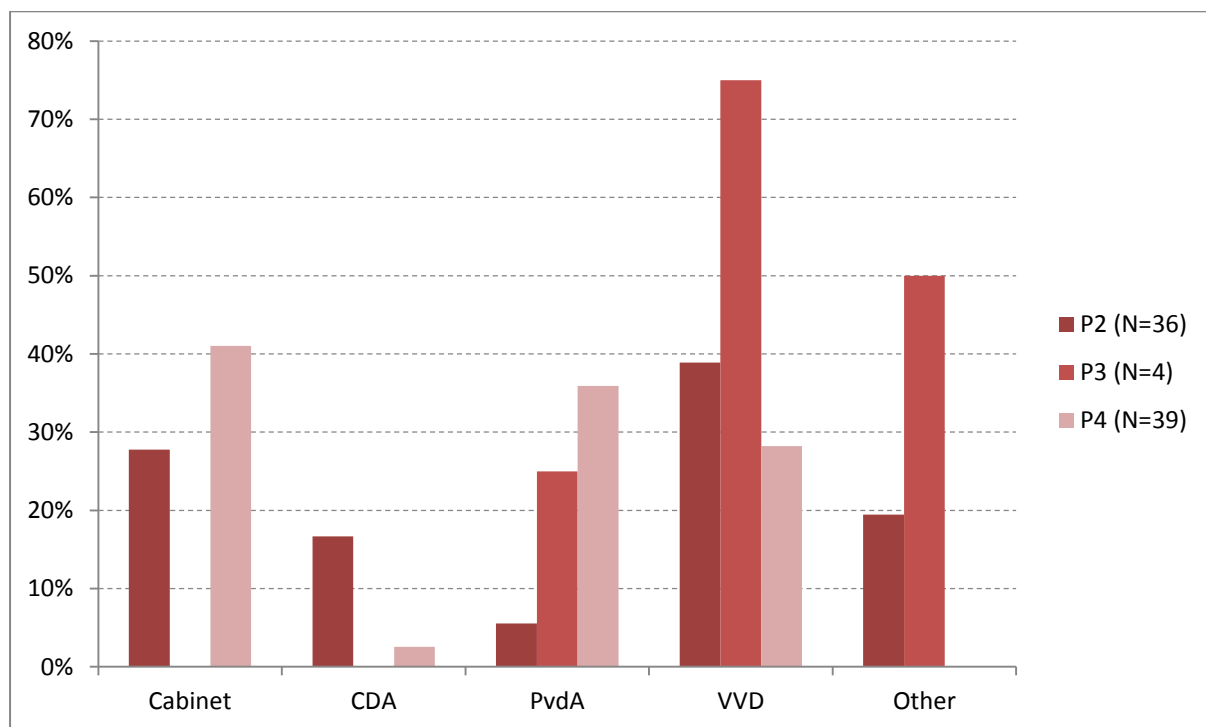
This finding is not completely in line with our expectation that the radical right PVV leader would criticise mainly political actors on the 'left' with whom there was little coalition potential. What is more, centre-right politicians, not least PM Rutte himself, actually became subject to most of

Wilders' negative judgements from Period 3 onwards. The PVV leader presumably anticipated that a renewed partnership with the VVD was unlikely after he withdrew his support from the Rutte I minority coalition.

In the third period we also see that Wilders directed a considerable amount of criticism towards the so-called 'Kunduz coalition', which is placed in the 'Other' category in Figure 3. This coalition of parties was formed after the break-up of Rutte I, when the CDA and VVD struck a deal on a new budget with three opposition parties, in order to comply with the EU's 3 per cent budget deficit rule.[iv] The centre-left PvdA remained outside of the Kunduz coalition and the party was also hardly targeted in Wilders' tweets in the run up to the early 2012 election. In the PVV manifesto of 2012 we also observe critical references to Kunduz in eight paragraphs, and only one to a PvdA politician (Cohen). The PVV still spoke derogatively of 'progressive elites' or 'politically-correct politicians' five times, but used the adjective 'left-wing' only once.

Only after the PvdA entered a coalition government with the Liberals, criticism of Labour politicians soared again. In Period 4, the government was frequently criticised for its austerity measures (e.g. concerning pensions and health care provision), proposed tax increases, and for slavishly following orders from 'Brussels' to fund the EU budget and support southern European countries. The VVD clearly remained Wilders' favourite target.[v] VVD Prime Minister Rutte was criticised personally on a regular basis, and on one occasion characterised as a 'walking ATM' for poorer EU countries (27-03-2013). In fact, even though negative references to Mark Rutte personally were all coded under the 'VVD' category, Wilders' criticism of 'Rutte' often seemed to denote a denunciation of the government as a whole. During this period we only observe a few negative references to the CDA, which lost heavily in the election of 2012 and ended up in opposition.

Figure 4. Political actors criticised by Roemer, as percentage of the tweets explicitly directed at domestic political actors

As discussed, SP leader Roemer did not explicitly direct his criticism to specific domestic political actors as frequently as Wilders. In the months before the parliamentary election of 2012 (P3) only four such tweets were aired – which is reason to approach the corresponding distributions in Figure 4 with caution. Compared with Wilders, Roemer criticised the Rutte I Cabinet more frequently (P2). In fact, Roemer also targeted the support partner PVV six times. In the fourth period, Roemer directed more criticism towards PvdA than VVD actors, and the Rutte II Cabinet was also criticised repeatedly as a whole.

It is further noteworthy that, unlike Wilders, the SP leader devoted several tweets reporting about his cooperation with other parties, including the Greens (GroenLinks) and the PvdA. The conciliatory tone of these tweets sits somewhat uneasily with the notion that the SP is a populist party, as the PvdA can certainly be considered to be an established party. The fact that Wilders' references to the established parties were hardly ever positive suggests that populism is a more consistent and central element of the PVV's ideology, than it is for the SP (see Lucardie and Voerman 2012). This observation is also in line with the previously mentioned caveat that the SP seriously moderated its anti-establishment discourse since the turn of the century. There is, in any case, little evidence for our expectation that left-wing populist parties mainly direct criticism towards right-wing politicians and parties. Emile Roemer primarily attacked whichever parties were in office: CDA, VVD (and PVV) in Period 2; PvdA and VVD in Period 4.

What were Actors Criticised for?

We finally assessed the substance of the adversarial tweets of Wilders and Roemer. Table 4 shows to which issues the criticism of PVV leader Wilders related in the four different periods. Although issues related to immigration and culture were initially quite prominent in Wilders's adversarial tweets, two different themes stand out overall: socio-economic and financial issues, and European integration. Particularly in the third and fourth period, Wilders's criticism often related to austerity measures (e.g. concerning pensions and health care provision), proposed tax increases, and the malign effects of EU membership. Wilders regularly connected the themes of austerity and Eurozone bailout packages to deliver welfare chauvinist messages, as is for instance evident in a tweet of 19 July 2012: 'Incomprehensible: cabinet grants billions to Southern European countries, but our own pensions are being cut'. Again, the increased attention towards the theme of European integration is in line with the programmatic developments of the PVV.

Table 4. Issues related to adversarial tweets of Wilders, in %

	P1 (N=18)	P2 (N=95)	P3 (N=52)	P4 (N=107)	All (N=272)
Social/economic/financial	16.7	30.5	51.9	55.1	43.4
Immigration and culture	33.3	23.2	7.7	19.6	19.5
Law and order	11.1	8.4	1.9	7.5	7.0
European integration	5.6	32.6	63.5	29.9	35.7
Democracy	0.0	9.5	1.9	1.9	4.4

	P1 (N=18)	P2 (N=95)	P3 (N=52)	P4 (N=107)	All (N=272)
Counter-criticism	22.2	25.3	9.6	0.9	12.5
Other/Idiosyncratic	44.4	14.7	5.8	17.8	16.2

Note: The categories are non-exclusive; a single tweet could relate to more than one issue category.

It must be noted that Wilders spent more attention in his tweets to immigration and culture than the percentages in Table 4 suggest – examples of specific issues being crime levels among Moroccans and the 'Islamisation' of neighbourhoods. However, the PVV leader did not always relate these issues explicitly to the failure of political actors, which is a reason why the themes of immigration and culture – and law and order for that matter – were not more prominent in Wilders's adversarial tweets. Furthermore, not all tweets could be related to specific substantive issues; particularly in the first and second period, for instance, Wilders regularly used tweets in a personal attack against politicians who had criticised the PVV.

Table 5. Issues related to adversarial tweets of Roemer, in %

	P2 (N=81)	P3 (N=9)	P4 (N=74)	All (N=164)
Social/economic/financial	70.4	88.9	86.5	78.7
Immigration and culture	2.5	0.0	1.4	1.8
Law and order	2.5	0.0	2.7	2.4
European integration	9.9	11.1	10.8	10.4
Democracy	4.9	0.0	0.0	2.4
Counter-criticism	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.6
Other/Idiosyncratic	19.8	11.1	9.5	14.6

Table 5 shows that social and financial issues clearly dominated the adversarial tweets of SP leader Roemer. In essence, Roemer's criticism of the Rutte I and Rutte II cabinets was very similar. The SP leader frequently condemned cuts in the education and health care sectors, and criticised austerity measures that were deemed to hamper economic growth and hit low-income groups. Socio-economic themes were thus more dominant in Roemer's adversarial tweets than in Wilders's, whereas the PVV leader focused more than Roemer on themes related to immigration and culture, law and order, and European integration. It is notable, however, that Wilders only truly began to criticise austerity measures after the breakup of the PVV-supported Rutte I government, whereas Roemer criticised the policies of both Rutte I and Rutte II. These results again suggest that Wilders has been selective in targeting opponents, and also that he has criticised different actors for different reasons across time.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Twitter has become a potentially potent new political communications tool, and several authors have noted the suitability of social media for populist politicians in particular (Bartlett et al. 2011; Gerbaudo 2015). Tweets – which are limited to 140-characters – are suitable means for populist politicians to express their unambiguous and succinct criticism of (political) elites, and to construct their 'injustice frames' (Gamson 1992). Although it is questionable whether populist parties always make full use of the more advanced (interactive) features of Twitter (Vergeer and Hermans 2013; Jacobs and Spierings 2016), the mere use of the medium as a top-down advertisement tool may boost the impact populist parties have on the political debate. In our explorative study we assessed how populist parties used Twitter as a means of political opposition. Did their Twitter usage reflect well the anti-establishment strategies of populist parties, and can the medium therefore be considered suitable to study the construction of populist injustice frames?

We aimed to answer these questions by studying the adversarial tweets of the party leaders of two (alleged) populist parties in the Netherlands: Geert Wilders of the radical right PVV and Emile Roemer of the left-wing SP. Our results indicated that populists tend to be selective in choosing their enemies, and that the targets of their criticism can change over time. This was clear in the Twitter behaviour of the radical right PVV leader Geert Wilders in particular. From the outset, Wilders' criticism – in tweets as well as in the 2010 election manifesto – focused more often on cultural issues than on the economy, blaming primarily politicians from the 'left'. Especially after his party withdrew its support from the centre-right VVD-CDA minority government, Wilders shifted his targets. The PVV leader now condemned the representatives of the EU elite, and also the 'Kunduz coalition' and the Rutte II government for giving in to the demands from 'Brussels' and passing 'a-social' austerity measures. Thus, even though Wilders remained a fierce opponent of progressive elites, immigration and Islam, the nature of his adversarial tweets changed throughout the years, both in terms of actors targeted and issues at stake.

The Twitter behaviour of SP leader Roemer, on the other hand, was characterised by more continuity as far as the substance of his criticism was concerned. In both the Rutte I and Rutte II governing periods, Roemer criticised the enacted or proposed austerity measures and spending cuts, and mainly targeted the responsible parties in power. Unlike the PVV, the SP did not make European integration a central theme of its 2012 parliamentary election campaign – even though the party was clearly Eurosceptic – and this was reflected in SP leader Roemer's tweets. It was remarkable that the SP leader expressed little criticism through his tweets in the run up to the 2012 election. This may be a reflection of the party's office-seeking strategy, and aim to portray itself as a responsible coalition partner (see Lucardie and Voerman 2012). The 'moderate' course of the SP was also apparent in the party's manifesto of 2012, which contained few critical remarks of other political actors, certainly in comparison with the PVV document. Indeed, these findings corroborate the observation that the SP's populist rhetoric has become more episodic and muted after the turn of the 21st century (see also Rooduijn 2014).

In general, the results show that, quite unsurprisingly, populist parties mainly target incumbent mainstream parties and politicians in their adversarial tweets, even though their criticism may be more muted once they are in power themselves (see Walter 2014; Walter and Van der Brug 2014). Our findings further suggest that populist parties do not always target domestic opponents on the basis of their ideological proximity. Consistent with the socialist character of his party, SP leader Roemer criticised economic elites more often than Wilders, but also targeted the ideologically proximate PvdA when this party was in office. Wilders, in turn, shifted his focus from the PvdA to the

centre right VVD, and Prime Minister Rutte in particular. As a direct electoral competitor, the VVD had ostensibly become a more logical target after relations with the PVV had soured and a renewed cooperation appeared unlikely. Thus, concerning the domestic targets of populist parties' criticism, the two cases in the Netherlands suggest that the incumbency status of mainstream parties, as well as the potential for cooperation, play a larger role than ideological proximity as such.

The analysis has shown that developments in the politicians' adversarial tweets were in line with the wider ideological characteristics and developments of their parties. This suggests that Twitter messages can be a valuable source to assess the ideological course and strategies of political parties. As expected, tweets proved to be particularly useful in assessing whom politicians seek to blame and criticise. Even though PVV programmes did contain many derogatory remarks as well, we have seen that critical comments were much more frequent in Emile Roemer's tweets than in SP party manifestos. Furthermore, the fact that many politicians use Twitter on a day-to-day basis allows for an assessment of the discourse of political actors continuously over time and outside of election periods. Indeed, Twitter is a particularly useful source for the observation of short-term strategic shifts.

For populist parties in particular, tweets provide a good insight into their anti-establishment strategies and the targets of their criticism. Although further research focusing on other cases (beyond the Netherlands) is required to verify this, our analysis also suggests that 'genuine' populist parties are more likely to use Twitter as a means to construct injustice frames than parties with a less outspoken populist character. It is evident that the leader of the PVV used Twitter as a tool of political opposition quite consistently throughout time, while the leader of the SP, a party which toned down its populism substantially over the years, was found to air more 'positive' tweets. In terms of content, furthermore, Wilders' adversarial tweets had a personal character more often than Roemers', explicitly naming and shaming the political actors held responsible for societal problems or bad decisions. The differences between the two cases thus suggest that genuine populist actors use Twitter more consistently as a tool of opposition than politicians and parties who do not, or only sporadically, voice populist rhetoric. Again, comparative analyses focusing on more cases are required to explore this suggestion further. Relatedly, while it was not our aim to measure populism as such, Twitter also seems to provide a good source for measuring degrees of populism, or, if the concept is used as a means of dichotomous classification, to determine whether or not a party can be classified as a genuine populist party (see e.g. Rooduijn et al. 2014).

That said, not all politicians use Twitter for the same purpose or with a similar frequency (see Golbeck et al. 2010; Lassen and Brown 2011). Roemer, unlike Wilders, tweeted remarkably little in the run-up to the 2012 election, and did not appear to use the medium as an important tool in his campaign. This implies that Twitter can be seen as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, other sources to study party discourse and campaigning strategies. Indeed, while the medium can be seen as a potent new campaigning tool (see Towner and Dulio 2012), Twitter is unlikely to replace official party documents or traditional media as means of political communication. At the same time, the differences in Twitter usage, and developments in this over time, as such provide room for further research. Future studies may also focus on the actual impact of twitter messages on people's attitudes or voting behaviour (see Gibson and McAllister 2011; Spierings and Jacobs 2014).

Finally, our findings related to the tweets of Geert Wilders in particular tell us something about the general behaviour of populist parties. Assuming that developments in the adversarial tweets of Wilders were driven by strategic considerations, it is evident that the PVV leader responded to changing political opportunities, similar to any other vote- and office seeking politicians. The case thus suggests that populist parties behave like normal players in the electoral marketplace, and do

not voice criticism just for the sake of protest against the entire established political system. This also means that we have to qualify the notion that populists portray the two groups central to their discourse ('the people' and 'the elite') as homogeneous entities (see e.g. Mudde 2004). While in populist discourse 'the elite' often constitutes 'a broad and indeterminate amalgam of political, economic and cultural actors' (Mudde 2007, p. 65), it is not the case that the criticism of populist parties is unfocused or unrelated to political developments. Populist parties blame specific political actors and parties for their supposed failures concerning concrete policies. There is thus reason to be cautious about treating populist parties as extraordinary, or inherently dangerous, players in the domain of party competition, and to take seriously their claims and demands. [vi]

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[i] It is worthwhile to point out that the terms 'left' and 'right' essentially relate to different issue dimensions: we expect that populist radical right parties direct their criticism primarily towards left-wing mainstream parties due to their culturally liberal issue positions, whereas left-wing populist parties mainly target right-wing mainstream parties because of their position on socio-economic issues (e.g. their support for the free market).

[ii] The database is available upon request. No inter-coder reliability tests were run; the coding was a mutual exercise and we did not make use of a team of trained coders.

[iii] In the fourth period the relatively high percentage in the 'other/undefined' category is partly due to Wilders' references to his protest ('*teken verzet aan*') campaign against the government. Since several of these tweets did not mention the government explicitly, they have been coded under the 'other/undefined' category.

[iv] These three parties were the social liberals (Democrats 66), the greens (GreenLeft) and the Christian Union. Oddly enough, the agreement was soon dubbed the 'Kunduz Agreement', since the five parties that signed up to it were the same, which previously supported a 'police mission' to the Afghan province of Kunduz in 2011.

[v] In the fourth period Wilders occasionally blamed the VVD for making too many concessions to the PvdA, for instance regarding its position on the mortgage interest relief and illegal immigrants. In these cases, only the VVD was coded as the party being criticised, unless an explicit critical judgement is made about the PvdA as well.

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