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Twitter as a right-wing populist's playground:

The algorithmic populism of Dutch political party 'Forum voor Democratie' and leader Thierry Baudet during their political rise

Abstract

Dutch political party 'Forum voor Democratie' grew from a small party with two seats in the House of Representatives to becoming the largest party in the 2019 provincial elections. Since its creation in 2016, it has been accused of engaging in populist tactics, and has been labelled a far right party. This paper examines these claims by means of a qualitative Social Media – Critical Discourse Study of 250 tweets posted from March 2017 to March 2019 on the accounts of the party and its leader Thierry Baudet. Drawing on the concept of “algorithmic populism”, we show that prototypical right-wing populist tropes such as othering, heartland, leadership, and conspiracy theorizing are all visible patterns in the Twitter discourse of both Baudet and the party. We conclude by discussing how these tropes are articulated more provocatively in Baudet's personal account, and the general significance of the media-conscious style of far right politics articulated by the party.

Keywords: Populism; Far-right; Social Media Discourse Analysis; Algorithmic populism; 'Forum voor Democratie'; 'Thierry Baudet'

In 2017 a number of new political parties participated in that year's elections for the Dutch House of Representatives. Among them was 'Forum for Democracy [Forum voor Democratie,]' (FvD), a party that campaigned with the promise to 'break the cartel of the establishment'. By opposing the elite in favor of the people, FvD presented itself as an exemplary populist party. This campaign proved successful, as the party got voted into the House of Representatives. By the time of the 2019 provincial elections, the party had temporarily risen from a small party to the largest, even surpassing prime minister Mark Rutte's conservative-liberal 'People's Party for Freedom and Democracy [Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie]' (VVD). This significant growth suggests that the discourse articulated by the party and its leader Thierry Baudet resonated with many Dutch citizens, despite being represented by critics as extremist and racist. In the 2021 elections for the House of Representatives, FvD won 6 seats and became the 7th largest party. This was significantly lower than the earlier provincial elections, but still better than expected, because of a tumultuous pre-election period in which many party representatives left after evidence surfaced of anti-Semitic and racist text messages being exchanged among the party's youth wing (Markus, 2020).

This study examines the rhetoric used to mobilize FvD voters, especially the rhetoric of a leader who was being described in 2019 as the "Dutch far right's new figurehead" (Schaart, 2019). We focus specifically on how Baudet and FvD used Twitter during the period of its political rise. Informed by the notion of algorithmic populism (Maly 2018b), we examine the presence and use of particular populist tropes in both the party's official Twitter account and Baudet's personal account by means of a qualitative Social Media - Critical Discourse Study of 250 tweets posted from March 2017 to March 2019. The paper starts with an overview of the history of Dutch right-wing populism, followed by a literature review on populism and right-wing populist discourse. We then explain our choices regarding method, data collection and analysis. The empirical results are presented first for the party Twitter account and then for Baudet's own Twitter account. We conclude by

discussing how Baudet's account articulates a transgressive populist identity, and clarify how the concept of algorithmic populism enriches understanding of populist media strategies.

Dutch right-wing populism, Forum for Democracy, and the Baudet "brand"

Right-wing populism first gained national attention in Dutch politics in 2002, when the polls showed that Pim Fortuyn was set to win big in that year's parliamentary elections (Te Velde, 2010). Fortuyn was shot nine days before the election, but right-wing populist rhetoric became more socially accepted and less taboo afterwards (Te Velde, 2010). In February 2006 Geert Wilders and his 'Party for Freedom [Partij voor de Vrijheid]' (PVV) continued Fortuyn's work of mainstreaming far-right discourses (Mudde, 2019). Wilders remained the dominant personality of the Dutch far-right until Baudet's emergence as a public figure. The FvD was formally established as a think-tank in September 2016 after playing a prominent oppositional role in the April 2016 referendum on the "association agreement" between Ukraine and the European Union (EU). The party's political rise overlapped with a period where "Euro-sceptic" and "Euro-cynical" discourses became more salient features of Dutch politics.

The personality of Baudet has been central to the party's branding, his "flamboyant image" (Faber, 2018) drawing direct parallels with Fortuyn's transgressive style. The author of several books, and the holder of a PhD earned under the supervision of philosophers Paul Cliteur (since 2019, Senate leader for FvD) and Roger Scruton, Baudet is an unlikely figurehead of a party presenting itself as "anti-elite". Embodying an "aristocratic air" that saw him deliver his "maiden speech to Parliament in Latin", Faber (2018) suggests that Baudet has turned "his high class tastes and manners" into "a signature brand", combining an idealization of 19th century European culture with criticisms of political correctness, the EU, multiculturalism and immigration. As shown below, many of

these themes are prominent in FvD's Twitter discourse, especially in how Baudet uses his own personal account. During the 2021 election campaign, he communicated such hostility to the country's COVID-19 vaccination programme that Twitter appended a warning label to some of his tweets, similar to those applied to Donald Trump's account.

Insights from populism literature

The election of Trump, the rise of Podemos in Spain, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and UKIP in Great Britain have all been cited as examples of how "populism" has become the defining political force of our time. As these heterogeneous examples suggest, populism does not take the form of a single political identity; rather it exists in both left- and right-wing forms. Mudde (2004) conceptualizes populism as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde, 2004), as it can animate different political projects. De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon (2018) argue that right-wing discourses are often euphemistically misidentified as populist, especially in contexts where terms like racist would be more appropriate.

Others focus on rethinking the concept of populism for a digital age (Bartlett 2014; Maly 2018a, 2018b). Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook give politicians the opportunity to disseminate messages publicly without depending on traditional media gatekeepers. Maly's (2018a; 2018b) concept of algorithmic populism is particularly suggestive. It takes its name from the proprietary algorithms used by social media companies to shape what content gets visibility within the online attention economy. The accumulation of social media followers, likes, and retweets not only help support the populist's claim that they represent the "voice" of "the people". They also help consolidate the appeal of a particular political "brand", whether in the form of a political party brand or an individual political persona (Savigny, 2008). Instead of focusing one-dimensionally on the rhetoric of individuated actors dubbed "populist", algorithmic populism reframes populism as a "digitally mediated *communicative relation* between different human and algorithmic actors"

(Maly, 2018a, p8). Populism is reconceptualized as something intersubjectively made in the social and technical interactions between different social media actors. The effectiveness of top-down populist messaging becomes dependent on “some kind of uptake, legitimation or recognition” (Maly, 2018a, p8) by social media users and a successful gaming of the algorithmic logic that drives online communication. Tweets with high interaction are more likely to become a Twitter Highlight, potentially opening up a political account to new audiences (Twitter, 2019). In addition, high social media interactions intrigue journalists, inspiring them to report on the content further.

Different scholars have discussed the importance of “the media” to right-wing populist parties (e.g. Jutel, 2017; Moffitt 2016), particularly in a commercialized media culture that amplifies the actions of transgressive political identities. For instance, Ekström, Patrona, & Thornborrow (2020: 497) found that:

the success of the populist radical right in western democracies has been highly dependent on increased media attention, and that by their integration into the political play of mainstream media, controversial politics have achieved not just greater impact but also legitimacy.

De Jonge (2019: 204) suggests that media attention is often instrumental in eliminating the stigma of extremism. In her book *The Politics of Fear: Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, Wodak (2021: 228) argues that the normalization of far-right discourses is inculcating a “*post-shame era*” rather than a “post-truth era”. Far right politicians deliberately break “conventional rules of politeness and respect” (Wodak, 2021: 91) through a combination of “nativist and exclusionary rhetoric, symbolic politics, digital demagogy, 'bad manners' and anti-politics (228)”. This politics is “performed” (Moffitt, 2016) as an authentic expression of views held by others in the society. The concept of algorithmic populism focuses attention on how such shameless discourses are articulated online. The digital media interactions between right-wing populists and their online followers become a strategic element in cultivating the impression that the former’s views are shared by others.

The right-wing populist playbook

Informed by the notion of algorithmic populism, this study examines populist political performance by focusing on the use of particular populist tropes on Twitter. Three populist tropes have regularly been discussed in the literature, which offer a kind of playbook for right-wing and far-right populists. These tropes are a common ideological feature of populist discourse, creating easy intertextual associations between one (con)text and another.

One trope is ‘Othering’. Mudde (2004) describes the concept as creating an opponent or an ‘Other’ that is not just someone with a different political ideology, but someone framed as evil, immoral or idiotic. While left-wing populists are more likely to attack economic elites, right-wing populists typically Other legacy media, other political parties, immigrants, and academics (Engesser et al., 2016; Mudde, 2004; Bos & van der Brug, 2010).

The Othering of immigrants is consistent with another trope employed by right-wing populists: the appeal to ‘heartland’. The notion of heartland focuses on the protection of the nation-state, its identity and culture from various political and cultural forces deemed to be threatening, such as different cultures, religions, and immigration (Gimenez & Schwarz, 2016; Taggart, 2000). In the right-wing populist imaginary, different elites are denounced for failing to adequately represent the Heartland’s interests. Heartland aligns with the ideology of nativism, in ways that blur notional divisions between extreme right and populist right discourses. Nativism suggests that a country belongs to those who are native to it (Young, 2017). This encourages the use of racist or discriminatory rhetoric to expose what are constructed as threats to the nation and its people.

A third populist trope is “the focus on charismatic leaders who defend the common people as an outsider to the establishment” (Kreis, 2017, p. 4). The charisma of the right-wing populist manifests as a “political style” (Moffitt, 2016) that embodies performative delight at transgressing politically acceptable codes. The “politically correct” conventions subscribed to by others are disparaged. The populist heroically broaches “taboo” topics that are deemed off-limits by the establishment. In online sub-cultures, this transgressive political style habitually

takes the form of vicious mockery of various Others, sometimes in discursive idioms that are performed as humorous (Nagle, 2017).

Method and data selection

One recently developed method of discourse analysis aimed at analyzing the flexible and unsettled nature of social media is KhosraviNik's (2017) Social Media – Critical Discourse Studies approach, shortened to SM-CDS. It is partially based on a recontextualization of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (1992). CDA Research starts from the assumption that ways of representing the world are not neutral reflections of the world, but play an active role in constructing social reality (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). KhosraviNik (2017) describes SM-CDS as a “socially oriented, critical analysis of discourse” that is adapted for social media. Social media are perceived as enabling fluid forms of mass-communication combined with the interactive character of interpersonal communication. This discourse-in-action approach examines concrete actions and communications performed by people to achieve belongingness in specific social groups. KhosraviNik, Unger, and Wodak (2016) emphasize that within SM-CDS, the researcher should not be satisfied with a “mere description of genre, content and communication” (p.8), but should also illuminate the deeper ideological meanings of a particular discourse. This makes SM-CDS clearly suitable for an analysis of populist discourse and algorithmic populism.

Our analysis is also informed by different analytical tools that CDA scholars have developed for transcending a surface-level description of texts. Fairclough (2003) highlights the importance of the ideological presuppositions that animate particular word choices. As he puts it, “what is ‘said’ in a text is always said against the background of what is ‘unsaid’ – what is made explicit is always grounded in what is left implicit” (p. 17). Presuppositions sensitize us to the intertextual connotations of populist tropes. By intertextuality, Fairclough means that what is said in one particular text (including tweets) can implicitly recall other texts and contexts, in a way that serves specific ideological interests.

The 250 selected tweets were posted on the accounts of FvD (@fvdemocratie) and ‘Thierry Baudet’ (@thierrybaudet) between 1 March 2017 and 31 March 2019, when the party grew from being a small party in parliament to temporarily being one of the leading Dutch parties. We selected both accounts due to the personal character of social media, but also because of Baudet’s central place as the party’s main public face. Based on the concept of algorithmic populism (Maly 2018b), a further selection was made. Twitter’s algorithm selects top tweets for a specific time period, which it deems most relevant and impactful (Twitter, 2019). The exact reasons that make a tweet relevant are unknown because of the secretive nature of the algorithms, but it is at least partly based on likes, retweets, comments and views. As support grows, so presumably do Twitter followers, and thus online engagement is increased. Because of this, top tweets over a two-year period will primarily date back to the second year and bias the results. To limit this bias, the five top tweets of each month were selected. A total of 250 tweets divided over the two Twitter accounts were analyzed. These tweets have been selected manually in week 12 of 2020, using an incognito browser to limit influence from data tracking and cookies.

The tweets have been analyzed in the original language by a native speaker (i.e. the first author). Maly (2018b) suggests that to properly understand social media discourse, the researcher should consider how messages are received, both in terms of quantitative engagement with Tweets through objective measures like retweets and the co-production of similar discourses by different actors. The idea that the receipt of a message partly determines its meaning aligns with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model. Hall (1973) argued that a message is firstly encoded by the sender and later decoded by the recipient, implying that a message can have different meaning to different recipients. An example of ‘one message, multiple meanings’ is the dog-whistle metaphor. Racist discourses and/or conspiracy theories (Haney-López, 2015) are articulated in coded ways where some may ‘hear’ a particular underlying message while others may not. To critically assess the discourse of Baudet and FvD, we therefore need to be alert to both the explicit and implicit meanings of tweets and their intertextual potential. Specific

attention was paid to the ideological pedigree of particular concepts (such as “cultural Marxism”) mentioned in the tweets. We also considered how other Twitter users constructed meaning from messages in their replies. We mainly cite examples where the response was aligned with the strategic intention of the tweets, but also cite some tweets that critique Baudet and FvD. We anonymized the Twitter handles for the respondents, as they are not public figures and could not reasonably expect to be quoted in an academic study.

An empirical limitation of this study is the limited sample. A total of 250 tweets have been analyzed, 125 from each twitter feed. They offer a small fraction of the total amount of tweets by Baudet and FvD. Yet they were nonetheless given prominence by the Twitter algorithms, and therefore offered an appropriate sample for analyzing algorithmic populism.

Analysis

In this section the findings of the analysis are presented, first for the party’s account, and then for Baudet’s personal account. The third section focuses on the question of leadership and the relationship between the two accounts. The cited examples are translated versions of the original Dutch tweets.

‘Forum for Democracy’s’ discourse

The Twitter account @fvdemocratie actively employs Othering tropes. The tweets stigmatize various others by accusing them of madness, corruption, or other negative attributes. FvD Others competing political parties, but also legacy media and other established institutions. One institution is the Dutch electoral council, as illustrated in example one. The tweet, seemingly a simple one-liner, attests to what might be called a softer form of Othering, but nonetheless can be read as implying corruption or at the very least incompetence.

(1) *Mostly everything went wrong counting votes*

(@fvdemocratie, March 29, 2017)

Example one was a reaction to the results of the 2017 parliamentary elections and befits the Othering rhetoric frequently employed by FvD. The tweet never directly states election fraud. However, the reply in example 1A does, and represents the election council as an anthropomorphized, gendered entity:

(1A) *Meanwhile the @Kiesraad [election council] shrugs her shoulders, it's been facilitating @fraude [fraud] for "years"!!?? A blind horse would see it.*

(Anonymized, March 30, 2017)

Other replies explicitly suggest that the current election is susceptible to fraud:

(1B) *The votes need to go to the election council for a recount. Fraud or dismissing votes is very easy now.*

(Anonymized, March 29, 2017)

The impression that the establishment engages in unsavory actions is amplified by example two, which was tweeted on the same day and implicates municipalities.

(2) *Municipalities refuse to publish the results of polling stations. Unacceptable practices. #FvD wants this data published regardless. <http://s.vk.nl/t-a4480116/>*

(@fvdemocratie, March 29, 2017)

Fabricating election results is not only a criminal offense under the Dutch constitution, but also contravenes basic democratic norms. The article the tweet links to, published by legacy newspaper 'de Volkskrant', focuses on how the elections were organized, and how that invites conspiracy theories. Albertazzi (2007) identifies the use of conspiracy theories as a common rhetorical move by populists. Examples one and two feed into possible conspiracies by not only bringing attention to the situation, but also cueing the subliminal connotations of both tweets.

These messages are successfully decoded by followers as demonstrated by examples 2A and 2B, which are responses to the tweet presented in example 2.

(2A) *This is deception of the people, another example of how citizens are treated as trash*

(Anonymized, March 29, 2017)

(2B) *Everything to cover up possible fraud. That is democracy in the Netherlands.*

(Anonymized, March 30, 2017)

The idea that the establishment, including established parties, abuse their power is a common theme in FvDs' tweets. The focus is often on how established politicians use their current positions to enrich themselves, as presented in example three.

(3) *In June 2015, Jeroen Dijsselbloem (PvdA) [Partij van de Arbeid, i.e. the Dutch Labour Party] decided that NL [Netherlands] did not need to increase Dutch shares in Air-France-KLM. France did. A month later Dijsselbloem got reappointed as chairman of the Eurogroup with support from Paris. <https://s.parool.nl/t-a4086776/> #KLM*

(@fvdemocratie, May 8, 2018)

Example three stages a battle between a good 'us' and an evil 'them'. It links one event with another, seemingly unrelated event. The tweet suggests that Dijsselbloem¹ did France a favor, which had been returned by French support for his chairmanship of the Eurogroup. The tweet indicates that Dijsselbloem put his own interests first, reaffirming his 'side job' over the interests of his country. The tweet was met with different replies. Some express disgust with the employed business practice (3A), while others characterize Dijsselbloem and his party as evil or corrupt (3B):

¹ Former chairman of the Eurogroup and former PvdA-minister of Finance.

(3A) They should sue you for defamation!! Impossible to prove and tedious ranting!

(Anonymized, May 8, 2018)

(3B) PvdA and treason have been going hand-in-hand for decades

(Anonymized, May 8, 2018)

A notable critical response is example 3C, which censures the tweet's propaganda intent.

(3C) However unfounded the accusation, it inevitably quickly settles in the hearts and minds of the audience. Doubt strikes. It's a well-known strategy.

(Anonymized, May 8, 2018)

In the 125 analyzed tweets, multiple politicians were accused of only looking out for themselves. Another effect of the antagonism to a blanket "they" is the amplification of Eurocynism, as presented in examples 3D, 5 and 6.

(3D) They make disgusting decisions in politics. They are doing each other favors and we pay for it, while it costs more and more money. Leave the EU, get rid of the Euro.

(Anonymized, May 8, 2018)

These tweets illustrate a discourse where there is a clear good and a bad within Dutch politics, with FvD fighting for the values of the good. The morality of the "we" is juxtaposed with the wickedness of the "they", in the archetypal anti-elite fashion of populist discourse. Another group portrayed as evil by FvD are legacy media. Both government-funded and privately owned media are censured. Example four shows how FvD accuses newspaper 'de Volkskrant' of purposely influencing the elections by spreading false information.

(4) *The @volkskrant reported this morning that #FvD was in business with Cambridge Analytica. This is false information! CEO of Cambridge Analytica confirmed this to FD² yesterday. VK³ will rectify this only after the #GR2018⁴ elections.*

(@fvdemocratie, March 20, 2018)

Not only does the party imply that media are unreliable, it also suggests media are actively influencing or even corrupting election results. These attacks on the ‘unjust and unreliable media’ are not only an example of Othering, but also consistent with Schulz, Wirth, and Müller’s (2018) finding that populists are hostile to media. This antagonism is directed especially to media that are perceived as belonging to the out-group, who do not align with the desired in-group ideologies. Populists often identify the media as an Othered enemy that needs to be approached with distrust and caution (Schulz et al., 2018). The success of this tactic is visible in the replies, as most support the characterization of legacy media as producers of “fake news”. (4A). However, other replies note the hypocrisy of this when the party leader himself has been found to lie to reporters as seen in example 4B.

(4A) *The government and all related media are the main spreader of fake news.*

Defund it all and create room for true news.

(Anonymized, March 20, 2018)

(4B) *So your chair @thierrybaudet lied about this when speaking to @FTM_nl⁵. Do I have that right?*

(Anonymized, March 20, 2018)

² Financieel dagblad, financial Dutch newspaper.

³ Volkskrant, legacy Dutch newspaper.

⁴ GemeenteRaad2018 -> Municipality elections of 2018.

⁵ Follow the money is an investigative journalism platform.

Example 4A shows a strong distrust towards both government and legacy media, implying (“related”) they are working together in a perfectly harmonious ideological alliance.

While immigrants are not actively Othered through the party’s official Twitter account, mass-immigration is constructed as a threat, as is the EU. This focus on protecting the nation, its identity and culture illustrate the relevance of the Heartland trope. For example, the following two tweets mainly focus on how the Netherlands is losing power and sovereignty to the EU:

(5) Minister of agriculture @Carolascouten lets down the Dutch Fishermen and refuses to make a case for #pulsefishing in Brussels. FvD-Leader @thierrybaudet confronts #Schouten with her weak performance during the question time in the House of Representatives.

(@fvdemocratie, February 12, 2019)

(6) Video! Thierry Baudet is back from the USA. He learned: “the only way to stop mass-immigration is leave the EU!”

(@fvdemocratie, May 30, 2017)

Both examples articulate what has been described as “Eurocynical” discourse and stress how the Netherlands continuously loses its sovereignty to the EU, while suffering under its rule. Eurocynicism is an extreme form of Euroscepticism, both of which are widely used populist frames (Krouwel & Abts, 2007). Additionally, example six illustrates FvDs’ desire to stop “mass-immigration”. The word choice, “mass-immigration”, instead of ‘immigration’, is a logical choice from a populist perspective. The adjective ‘mass’ dramatizes the scale of immigration and leaves less room for opposition. Contrary to Gimenez and Schwarz’s (2016) and Engesser et al.’s (2016) findings, the analyzed tweets show no concrete pattern where immigrants are presented as a direct threat to national identity and/or culture. However, other

groups identified by Engesser et al. (2016) as prototypical enemies of populists are Othered; legacy media and established governmental institutions, political parties and politicians. Additionally, FvD clearly represents the EU as a threat to the heartland.

Baudet's Twitter discourse

Like FvD's twitter account, Baudet actively employs the Othering tactic, but constructs a wider range of targets. His targets include: the EU (example seven), established parties and politicians (example eight), legacy media (example nine), academia (example ten), and immigrants (example eleven).

(7) Secret British state documents released: in 1971 governments knew the true intentions about the European project (meaning: a coup by Brussels) and were advised to lie about it against the locals.

(@thierrybaudet, September 29, 2018)

Example seven illustrates the Othering of the EU. This tweet accuses the EU of encouraging national political leaders to blatantly lie to their people and suggests the EU is part of a conspiracy theory. Albertazzi (2007) suggests this conspiratorial discourse is sometimes used to amplify distrust towards the EU and other transnational institutions by right-wing populists. Some replies indicate the success of this technique, as exemplified by 7A, while others see it as nothing more than a "paranoid" conspiracy (example 7B).

(7A) There must be something that can be done against this, this is ordinary deception and pure fraud by all EU leaders, particularly Merkel, Rutte, Macron, and Juncker. It should be illegal to keep this document in secret to ensure the European citizens don't remove this anti-social bunch from office.

(Anonymized, October 2, 2018)

(7B) *Paranoid weirdo. A few notes on sovereignty do not make a conspiracy.*

(Anonymized, October 1, 2018)

The idea that established politicians and parties routinely lie is affirmed in tweets such as example eight.

(8) *Another reminder to Liesbeth van Tongeren of GreenLeft [GroenLinks⁶]: this tweet is a lie. #fakenews #FvD supports the hearing and clearly communicated that with Parliament. GroenLinks needs to remove the tweet and stop demonizing #FvD and spreading lies about me.*

(@thierrybaudet, January 30, 2018)

Example eight implies that a member of Parliament, along with her political party ‘GreenLeft’, is spreading lies about Baudet and FvD. This not only encourages a negative view of ‘GreenLeft’, it also seeks to discredit the party and its politicians, making them an unreliable information source. ‘GreenLeft’ is not the only party othered by Baudet. Kreis (2017) suggests that populist use of the term “fake news” turns legacy media into a scapegoat, taking all accountability away from the party and placing it exclusively onto the media, who are accused of ‘misrepresenting’ the populist party and politician.

Another victim of Baudet’s Othering is the Dutch Public Broadcaster [Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO)] as illustrated in example 9.

(9) *The NPO abandons all semblance of objectivity with the ‘intimate documentary’ about Jesse Klaver. Break the mediacartel, support #fvd <http://ad.nl/politiek/npo-ruimt-uur-in-voor-intieme-docu-over-jesse->*

⁶ The Green party of The Netherlands.

[klaver~a0cc8235/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socials_haring_web](https://www.klaver~a0cc8235/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socials_haring_web)

(@thierrybaudet, August 24, 2017)

The tweet references a documentary about ‘GreenLeft’ leader Jesse Klaver during the 2017 election campaign. The documentary got cancelled after it was widely criticized for potentially serving as party political propaganda that should not be broadcast by a government-funded network. Baudet frames the documentary as an example of how the “mediacartel” (Baudet himself conjoins the words) try to turn people against right-wing politics. Additionally, Baudet includes the statement ‘Break the Mediacartel, support #fvd’. The term media cartel is loaded with negative presuppositions and suggests a wider target than NPO. The word cartel stands out, for its intertextual association with drug cartels and organized crime. In addition, Baudet suggests that ‘the people’ should strive to – in the form of an imperative – *break the cartel* by supporting FvD.

Other targets of Baudet’s Othering are liberal and left-wing academics, and climate change scientists or teachers (example ten).

(10) *After the debate in #Groenlo yesterday, we received another hundred messages from students today who are weighed down by liberal indoctrination and prejudice at school. Shall we complain at the chairman of the high school council? Oh wait...*

(@thierrybaudet, June 16, 2018)

Example ten focuses on high school students complaining that their teachers are unreasonable about FvD compared to other parties. Baudet goes as far as to accuse teachers of ideological indoctrination. Additionally, Baudet implies that complaints to the national high school council would be fruitless as the chairman is Paul Rosenmöller, a former left-wing politician. Baudet accuses the teachers and high school council of indoctrinating future voters and disrupting the

democratic process. Once again, the replies show mixed reactions. Some of his followers agree with the claims of indoctrination (example 10A), reusing the loaded term cartel, while others question the integrity of Baudet's statement (example 10B).

(10A) *A great turnaround in the left-wing Rosenmüller-cartel-education-indoctrination. The more students dare to report, the better. We've all been there in high school, but now it's getting out of control.*

(Anonymous, June 16, 2018)

(10B) *Thierry hasn't received hundreds of letters. You know that, he knows that, I know that.*

(Anonymous, June 16, 2018)

Lastly, Baudet actively Others immigrants, as exemplified in tweet eleven.

(11) *"Turks take over Amsterdam and Rotterdam", writes VVD-paper surprised. Yeah, actions have consequences my friends. When you, like the VVD has done for the past Millenia open the borders, the composition of your population changes <https://telegraaf.nl/t/2213323/> via @telegraaf*

(@thierrybaudet, June 24, 2018)

Example eleven offers a clear example of Othering people of a different ethnicity. Baudet states that Turks are taking over Amsterdam and Rotterdam, implying these people are exclusively Turkish and cannot be both Turkish *and* a Amsterdammer or Rotterdammer at the same time. It also offers another example of Othering media, in this case newspaper 'de Telegraaf' by aligning it with a specific party, the conservative-liberal 'VVD'. The party is blamed for changing the composition of the population, something perceived as unwanted by Baudet and his followers.

The Othering of immigrants befits the pattern in Baudet's discourse where immigrants are presented as a threat to the Nation-State. He actively employs the heartland tactic in his tweets. He also appeals to the idea of nation, national identity, national culture and national sovereignty. Like the party's Twitter account, Baudet constructs the EU (example twelve) as a threat to national interests. He also shares strong opinions about the importance of national culture (example thirteen), in tandem with criticisms of Islam and immigrants (example fourteen).

An example of Baudet's negative opinion about the EU is example twelve, which constructs the EU as a threat to Dutch culture.

(12) Because the European Union is a cultural Marxist project that has the aim to destroy European civilization.

(@thierrybaudet, August 20, 2017)

Example twelve suggests that the EU is a project intended to destroy European civilization. "Cultural Marxism" is a conspiratorial concept often used by the alt-right to refer to the idea that left-wing Cultural Marxists use psychological manipulation to destroy the West/Western culture (Wilson, 2018). Lind, one of the proponents of the "Cultural Marxism" theory, links the concept to "multiculturalism, and Political Correctness" (para. 2, n.d.). Lind (n.d.) refers to the Frankfurt School, a group of Jewish scholars who fled Nazi-Germany, and positions them as building the foundation of a group that aims to destroy Western Civilization. Over time the identity of the Cultural Marxist was increasingly enlarged, to include "a coalition of blacks, students, feminist women and homosexuals" (para. 7, Lind, n.d.). Example twelve, similar to example seven, suggests that the EU is part of a much larger conspiracy. The claim is dismissed as "utter nonsense" in one tweet (12A). However, those who agree with Baudet, amplify his characterization of the EU as a failed institution (12B).

(12A) *That's utter nonsense, again. The wording is a mess as well.*

(Anonymous, August 20, 2017)

(12B) *Yes, indeed. Europe looks like a sinking ship, yet no one is brave enough to jump ship.*

(Anonymous, August 21, 2017)

The idea that Western cultures and particularly Dutch culture is under attack is further exemplified in the following tweet.

(13) *This is what we call #oikophobia. To undermine, stash, and neglect one's own culture. #FvD wants to stop this!*
<http://elsevier.nl/nederland/achtergrond/2017/04/geen-kerkdiensten-wel-koranlessen-in-rotterdamse-buurthuizen-495662/>

(@thierrybaudet, April 21, 2017)

Example thirteen suggests that a big threat to Dutch culture is oikophobia, a concept coined by Baudet's PhD supervisor Scruton, which Baudet (2013) defines as the fear of our own identity. This tweet offers a further example of Othering. It insinuates that Dutch culture is being undermined by allowing Islam in community centers, while "Western" religions are not allowed. By implying that Koran lectures are undermining Dutch culture, Baudet frames Islam as irreconcilable with Dutch culture. The notion that Dutch culture is being oppressed and neglected is mirrored by Baudet's attitude towards immigration and immigrants, as demonstrated by example fourteen.

(14) *Or the cartel politicians are incredibly stupid, or they are (secretly) advocates of the structural demographical transformation of Europe (and thus the end of our*

civilization). Anyway, mass-immigration continues. Last year 235.00! #FvD

(@thierrybaudet, October 19, 2018)

Example fourteen illustrates that Baudet sees immigration as a threat and problem. However, it moves beyond the idea that immigration simply involves people migrating to a new country. Baudet suggests that immigration leads to a demographical transformation and the end of European civilization. These concepts are often cited in the context of the ‘Great replacement’, a conspiracy theory based on the Nazi-idea of *Umwolkung*, which suggests the white race is slowly being replaced by other races. The concept stems from the French writer Renaud Camus who wrote the book ‘Le Grand Remplacement’ in 2011. Camus suggests that elites are trying to vanquish the white, European race by replacing them with other races. With this tweet Baudet gets a chance to Other his political rivals while standing up against migration, which seems to be appreciated by some followers as shown by examples 14A.

(14A) These puppets execute policies created by higher ranking globalists that aim to destroy our civilization with mass-immigration, to ensure we lose sense of our identity and national pride and they can therefore easily exercise power over us.

(Anonymous, October 19, 2018)

Additionally, 14A suggest that current Dutch politicians are mere puppets, manipulated by ‘higher ranking globalists’. The reinforces the impression of an alliance of forces that aim to destroy the Dutch Heartland, be it in the form of globalists, immigration, Islam, oikophobia or the EU.

The party and its leader

Within populist politics, it is common to find a charismatic leader who is inseparable from the party. In the Netherlands alone, we see the examples of Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders and now Thierry Baudet. Ten tweets in the analyzed FvD sample focused on the party’s strong,

charismatic leaders: Baudet and his deputy leader, Theo Hiddema, the other member elected to parliament in 2017.

Example fifteen, for instance, exemplifies the way leadership is often promoted by populists, in the form of the narrative of the strong leader fighting the establishment on behalf of the people (Kreis, 2017). It offers another example of Baudet taking on an establishment politician in the name of “the people”.

(15) #FvD leader @thierrybaudet confronts @jesseklaver during the #climatedebate about his childish vision on the economy, as if corporations won't calculate the cost of emission reduction to the consumer. Either way, the people will have to pay the bill.

(@fvdemocratie, February 5, 2019)

In this example, Baudet highlights the contradictory position of another politician, which he suggests will cost citizen-consumers money. Baudet is once again fighting a battle in the best interests of the people, when other politicians are not, which again exemplifies the Othering strategy. The strong leader not only confronts establishment figureheads, he is also willing to confront an entire institution, as suggested in example sixteen.

*(16) FvD-frontman @thierrybaudet confronts the House of Representatives about its own (useless) behaviour during the yearly conference of plans and expenses and wonders: “Who is actually in charge of the Netherlands?” Watch Baudet’s entire speech: https://youtube.com/watch?time_continue=89&v=YH2ASWos_cI #ABP18⁷
#ABP2018 #FvD*

(@fvdemocratie, September 9, 2018)

⁷ ABP is an abbreviation for ‘Algemene Beschouwingen Prinsjesdag’, the Dutch yearly conference of budget plans and expenses.

This example demonstrates how Baudet constructs the entire House of Representatives, and the mass of parties and politicians that have held seats for years, as antagonists. By questioning the ‘yearly conference of plans and expenses [Algemene Beschouwingen]’ and the efficacy of parliament, the party questions the way Dutch democracy has been shaped, suggesting a desire to topple the established order. By questioning who is in charge, Baudet implicitly suggests ‘the people’ are not, thereby casting doubt on the democratic integrity of the entire political system.

The comparable appeal of the party political brand and personal political brand is also evident in both accounts. As of March 2021, Baudet’s Twitter account has significantly more followers, 252,9000, compared to FvDs’ 88,500. This suggests that Baudet speaks to a larger Twitter audience than FvD and that the personality exceeds the profile of the party. Furthermore, when comparing both accounts, our analysis shows that Baudet’s personal account has more controversial content than FvDs’ twitter feed.

Discussion: On the far right Twitter politics of FvD and Baudet

The study shows that the common populist tropes of othering, heartland, leadership, and conspiracy theories are all visible elements in the Twitter discourse of both Baudet and FvD and their communicative interactions with other users. However, the way these tropes are articulated differs across the two main accounts.

Both accounts engage in Othering, in the sense of actively vilifying some other. The party account mainly focuses on public figures and the political establishment. But Baudet’s personal account also applies this to teachers, scientists, academics, and immigrants, reminiscent of the kind of far right discourses we see in different countries.

A similar pattern is evident in the use of the heartland trope. The party constructs the EU as a primary threat to the nation, but Baudet extends this threat to other targets: immigration, Islam, and oikophobia. One reason why Baudet and his party see the EU as a threat to the

heartland is because of the belief that the EU is part of a conspiracy to remove national sovereignty. The penchant for conspiracy theories takes a different form in the case of both accounts. The party account is more veiled and suggestive in its appeals to conspiracies (i.e. meaning works more at the level of implicit presuppositions), whereas Baudet openly affirms conspiracies about the ‘grand replacement’ and ‘Cultural Marxism’. Given the fascist and racist connotations of both the latter conspiracies, our analysis of Baudet’s Twitter account suggests that descriptions of FDV as a “far right party” are entirely justified, particularly if we subscribe to the definition of the far right advanced by Mudde (2019). Mudde does not treat the categories of the “far right” and “extreme right” as entirely synonymous. In his framework, the far right incorporates both extreme right parties that are overtly hostile to democracy *and* radical right or populist right parties, which affirm a principled commitment to democracy while also “mainstreaming” extreme right discourses in a more politically palatable form.

Our study shows that right-wing populist tropes are articulated more antagonistically in Baudet’s personal account. In February 2020, Baudet tweeted a message based on a false story, wherein he claimed personal friends travelling by train had been harassed by Moroccan passengers. Soon after the tweet, a different story was confirmed; the Moroccan ‘passengers’ were actual ticket inspectors, and Baudet’s friends had refused to show their tickets. The aftermath was met with indignation and social uproar, both on social and traditional media. Baudet (2020) stated that the tweet was emotionally motivated; sent too quickly and too firmly. The statement suggests Baudet uses his own account to communicate a more rapid and informal response to personal and public events, in contrast, we might surmise, to the professional communications staff running the official party account.

However, Kreis (2017) suggests that a populist’s Twitter account is not “erratic communication but should be interpreted as strategic” (p. 10). This suggests that the difference between the two accounts, particularly concerning how Baudet employs the different tropes

more luridly, is a strategic choice as well. The choice to present the party political account in a more subdued way potentially enhances the party's appeal to those who have the self-image of being more "moderate voters", even if our analysis also offered examples of users decoding the account's messages in extremist ways. In contrast, the importance of Baudet's personal account to the branding of FvD can be partly explained through the attention-seeking imperatives of algorithmic populism. Baudet's more controversial tweets are strategically effective in getting the attention of both acolytes and critics, in an algorithmic universe that can blur the distinction between positive and negative forms of online engagement. The political strategy is one that anticipates and gamifies the outraged reaction of Baudet's critics, to the conceivable delight of some of the party's supporters (much like the reaction of some of Donald Trump's supporters to Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" put-down). The unpredictability of the messaging on Baudet's personal account becomes a central part of the political appeal (and perhaps even his perceived authenticity), in contrast to the more restrained idioms of the party political account. In addition, Baudet's PhD background and high culture aesthetic conceivably gives an intellectual aura to some of his pronouncements, as if to affirm to his supporters the reasoned underpinnings of the provocations.

Let us end by clarifying the value of Maly's concept of algorithmic populism to understanding the relationship between far right populist discourse and different media spaces. The notion of algorithmic populism highlights how populists strategically garner attention on social media platforms like Twitter. However, in a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2019), a political party's social media strategy needs to be grasped as part of a general media-political strategy (Moffit, 2016), particularly in a national media culture like The Netherlands where journalists have normalized an "accommodative strategy" towards the coverage of far right parties (De Jonge, 2019). Baudet and FvD's use of Twitter offers a minor-scale illustration of a media-political strategy exemplified by Trump. In a commercialized media culture, the

actions of the transgressive online persona are rationalized as topics of general media interest, particularly when the immediate Twitter audience will presumably include many journalists themselves. The successful gaming of the algorithm is then amplified by traditional media coverage (Philips, 20184). Far right discourses are mainstreamed (Brown & Mondon, 2020) and “shamelessly normalized” (Wodak, 2021) in part because of a journalistic common sense that insists on the “importance of maintaining an open mind and covering *all* viewpoints” (De Jonge, 2019). The correlation between a political party’s media visibility and electoral success might ultimately be weak, and examining how Baudet’s and FvD’s tweets were covered by traditional media has not been part of our analysis. Nonetheless, given the party’s relatively surprising success in the 2021 Dutch election, we think our case study illustrates the significance of Twitter as a political playground for those who trade off their transgressive political persona.

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