


# Populist MPs on Facebook: Adoption and emotional reactions in Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden

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## Abstract

The argument goes that social media can reinforce the rise of populism as populists' emotionally charged language fits well with social media algorithms. However, whether this potential materializes in practice depends on (1) populists' actual social media adoption and (2) whether their messages actually elicit more (emotional) responses. This is a study of those two core elements of populist politicians' presence on Facebook. We examine 682 members of parliament (MPs) Facebook uptake in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Austria and the emoji responses to 10,355 of their posts. *First*, we argue that populist parties' centralized structure enforces discipline, which makes Facebook use by populist MPs other than the leader more problematic. Our study shows indeed that populist party leaders use Facebook prolifically to reach out to their community, but relatively few of populist parties' other MPs use Facebook. *Second*, we argue that Facebook posts of populist MPs activate feelings of indignation, triggering responses that are more emotional. Empirically this expectation is borne out. Compared to other parties, messages posted by populist actors receive more emojis than ordinary likes. In particular, “anger” and “haha” stand out. An exploration of the content of such messages shows that both are related: “haha” also reflects sarcastic ridiculing of political opponents, paving the way for anger.

[Correction added on 27 September 2022 after first online publication: H1b<sub>ideology</sub> has been corrected to H1b<sub>party structure</sub>]

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media provide political actors the freedom to articulate their ideology and spread their messages directly to citizens. This is said to benefit populists particularly (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017). Part of this logic is examined in studies showing that populists' communication more strongly includes emotionally loaded language (e.g., Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Wirz, 2018), which in turn leads to high engagement (Jost et al., 2020). The algorithms of social media, especially that of Facebook, heavily filter what content users see based on “calculated relevance,” such as reactions from other users (Bossetta, 2018, p. 487). Since 2017, the Facebook algorithm weighs emotional reactions more heavily than normal likes (Stewart, 2017). Hence, if populists' trigger more emotional reactions, the Facebook algorithm then further amplifies their message (i.e., the snowball effect of social media). To understand if and how populist parties do indeed benefit from social media, two core questions, both of which have remained largely unanswered, need to be addressed: (1) does the adoption of Facebook differ between populist and nonpopulist members of parliament (MPs)? This is the necessary condition for Facebook to have any impact. (2) Does the extent to which politicians' posts elicit emotional reactions differ between populist and nonpopulist MPs? This question digs deeper into the aforementioned potential snowball effect.

To advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of MP's use of and impact on social media, we focus on Facebook. Until recently, most studies have focused on Twitter, but this platform is used by relatively few ordinary citizens (e.g., Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). In contrast, Facebook can be described as the people's platform. As it is both widely used and facilitates direct communication with potential voters, it is a crucial arena in the study of parties who claim to be speaking directly to “the people.” Of the more recent studies that have looked at populism on Facebook, nearly all focus on the degree to which parties use populist rhetoric, that is, not the populist political actor per se (Ernst et al., 2017; Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; Muraoka et al., 2021; Zulianello et al., 2018). These studies are important for understanding populist communication on Facebook and to what extent parties, in general, adopt such style or rhetoric on social media, as well as its potential effect on follower engagement. They do not, however, tell us about how politicians belonging to populist parties use Facebook and the implications of their use. A recent exception does show differences in how populist MP's use Facebook compared to other parties as their posts activate anger among followers (Jacobs et al., 2020). In this study, we will investigate this link further by analyzing all forms of reactions and the inter-party variation in the use of Facebook.

Theoretically, we propose an analytical framework that combines the attributes and architecture of Facebook on the one hand with the key organizational and ideological characteristics of populist parties on the other. Regarding the organizational aspect, previous studies show that political candidates from populist

parties are *less* likely to make use of Twitter (Dolezal, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2018). However, this may be different for Facebook. Our framework adds that populists' ideological focus on the people aligns with Facebook being the “people's platform.” Consequently, populist MPs might be expected to be more prone to adopt Facebook than nonpopulist parliamentarians. Additionally, we theorize that the distinction between leaders and other MPs matters more for populist parties than nonpopulist parties. Regarding the architecture of Facebook, we argue that specifically, the algorithmic filtering of Facebook fits well with the emotional communicational style of populists. We thus expect their messages to garner more emotional responses than the messages of other MPs.

Empirically, we investigate Facebook adoption and emoji reactions to posts of all 682 Austrian, Dutch, and Swedish MPs. We collected data from politicians' Facebook pages over the course of 3 months (November 1, 2017, to February 1, 2018), covering all posts and responses in the form of likes and emoji reactions. This dataset allows us to analyze if populists are more prone to use Facebook pages, if they do so more actively compared to nonpopulists and whether populists' posts elicit more emotional reactions on public pages, as well as what type of emotional reactions they trigger.

Below, we first provide a brief summary of the literature to explain the core concepts and current knowledge gaps, after which we move on to theorize the connection between populism and Facebook activity more concretely. In the results section, we first address the relative presence of populist MPs and party leaders, and then the emoji responses to posts. The quantitative analyses are illustrated and explored further through looking at the content of some of the most engaging populist MP's posts.

## LITERATURE AND CONCEPTS: POPULISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

### Populism

Most scholars studying populism agree that populism can be defined as a set of ideas, whether expressed as a discourse or style (De Vreese et al, 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This populist set of ideas comprises the Manichean relationship between the “corrupt elite” and “the pure people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to populist parties, politics should be conducted in accordance with the general will of the people (“popular sovereignty”). These core elements of populism can be connected with other ideological standpoints, so-called host ideologies, such as nativism, socialism, and/or authoritarianism (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004). Most populist parties combine populism with a host ideology that is either radical left (e.g., the Greek Syriza or the Spanish Podemos) or radical right (e.g., the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Freedom party of Austria, or the Sweden Democrats [SD]).

Regarding the organizational characteristics of populist parties, charismatic strong leadership, and direct communication between the leader and “the people” are important traits. Although they do not represent the defining characteristics of populism, they certainly are more likely to go together with populist actors (Mudde, 2004, p. 545). Strong leadership and establishing direct communication links between the party leader and supporters of the party can thus be seen as general organizational traits of populist parties.

## Populists' use of social media

Despite the seemingly advantageous traits of social media for populist politicians that have been put forward in previous work, research on how populist MPs use social media is scarcer. Indeed, when studying the *uptake* of online campaign tools, only a few studies include populism as an independent variable (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Spierings & Jacobs, 2018). These studies suggest that populist actors are less prone to use social media. Moreover, the studies that look more closely at how politicians of populist parties use social media show they are less interactive (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Tromble, 2018). Most of this previous work is, as discussed in the introduction, focused on Twitter. Recent work addressing populism on Facebook almost exclusively adopt the communication perspective, which is why we lack knowledge about populist MP's behavior on Facebook, and the response to their communication has not been examined systematically. Extending the scope thus matters, as the architecture, and thereby the potential benefits, of using Facebook are completely different from the Twitter platform.

## Social media architecture

Communication on social media is mediated by the platform's digital architecture, as this shapes user behavior and “rewards” or “punishes” a certain type of communication style (Bossetta, 2018). On top of that, the users of social media platforms differ: Twitter is more of an “elite” medium, whereas Facebook has a far broader user base (Bossetta, 2018, p. 481). Due to these factors, politicians use Twitter and Facebook for different purposes depending on what audience they want to reach (Jacobs et al., 2020; Kreiss et al., 2018; Stier et al., 2018). On Twitter, the primary audience is perceived to be media and journalists, whereas Facebook reaches a broader and bigger segment of the population (Kreiss et al., 2018). On Facebook, politicians can reach out directly to more loyal, yet diversified, groups of supporters without journalistic interference. This communication is more under the radar and is likely to reach more potential voters directly than on Twitter. Moreover, Facebook's broadcast feed exhibits heavy algorithmic filtering based on calculated relevance (Bossetta, 2018, p. 487), and the algorithm rewards posts that generate more emotional reactions (rather than just likes) (Stewart, 2017). This, in turn,

generates views of the message by other users who are friends or followers of the commenters but not of the politician him/herself.

## THEORIZING POPULISTS AND COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the explanations for the success of populist parties that is often mentioned is the rise of social media, as they are said to allow for broad mobilization (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 104). It is difficult to test this claim directly, but one can investigate elements of the causal chain. For social media, in this case, Facebook, to have a mobilization effect, one major requisite is the mere adoption and use of social media. A second element that we can investigate is what responses populists' use of Facebook triggers. If their posts trigger more emotional reactions than those of their nonpopulist competitors, the messages will be rewarded by the algorithm and spread beyond the supporters of the party.

Building on insights about the architecture of Facebook and the populist ideology and party structure, we now first theorize how the adoption of the platform might differ between MPs from populist and nonpopulist political actors and then move on to the question regarding the emotional reactions they might elicit.

### Adoption

Recent work has identified several opportunity structures of social media that are compatible with populist ideology. Especially the direct access to an audience circumventing mainstream media, in combination with possibilities of personalized communication, has been argued to fit the populist ideology. Both the populist ideology's people-centrism and antielitism have been linked to these architectural aspects (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Spierings & Jacobs, 2018). Given their ideology, one can expect that populist parties use social media to avoid traditional editorial media (as these can alter, frame, or subvert the populists' raw message) and use the possibilities of engaging directly with "the people" (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018). While already having become influential in political systems, social media provide populists an added opportunity to maintain their position as strong antisystem challengers (Jungherr et al., 2019). Therefore, populists' do not only use social media to bypass traditional media, but they may also actively use them as platforms to maintain their oppositional role and publicly "shame" the media (Jacobs et al., 2020).

Turning our attention to party structure, we suggest that populist MPs use of social media might be comparatively modest due to the potential threat it poses to the leadership. As social media allows individual politicians to build a direct relationship with voters, this can be seen as a clear disadvantage for the top echelon of populist parties due to their high degree of centralization, empowering backbenchers to the detriment of leadership control (Spierings & Jacobs, 2018).

Populist parties concentrate power in the leadership and this power concentration requires party discipline. The struggle for coherence is, therefore, particularly persistent in these parties (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016, pp. 239–240), while the exposure of internal conflicts is likely to go viral on social media. The centralized nature of populist parties may thus induce them to curtail back-benching members of the party from speaking up on social media platforms or select and reward withholding back-benchers, as the leadership of these parties is rather intolerant of dissenting opinions (Taggart, 2000, pp. 100–103). In Sweden, for example, the populist radical right party is the only party that warns their members for the potential negative consequences of social media use and urges them to post carefully (Sandberg & Öhberg, 2017). It is, therefore, the highly centralized party structure, not the populist ideology as such, that indicates a relatively low uptake and activity on social media among MPs of populist parties (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018).

Finally, a charismatic leader is often regarded as a prominent feature of populism or at least a facilitating factor (Kriesi, 2014, p. 363; Mudde, 2004, p. 545). The very centralized nature of populist parties with dominant party leaders who make direct claims on behalf of “the people” leads to altogether different assumptions than for their general MPs. For populist leaders, the ideological and structural aspects are aligned. We can, therefore, expect that populist party leaders take control over social media communication and do so more than in other parties.

Summarizing, we can now formulate the following hypotheses:

**H1a<sub>ideology</sub>**: *Populist MPs adopt Facebook more than MPs of other parties.*

**H1b<sub>party structure</sub>**: *Populist MPs adopt Facebook less than MPs of other parties.*

**H1c<sub>ideology</sub>**: *Populist MPs are more active on Facebook than MPs of other parties.*

**H1d<sub>party structure</sub>**: *Populist MPs are less active on Facebook than MPs of other parties.*

**H2a**: *Populist party leaders adopt Facebook pages more than party leaders of other parties.*

**H2b**: *Populist party leaders are more active on Facebook than party leaders of other parties.*

While Hypotheses 2a and 2b are formulated based on the theory and will be explored in the empirical part of the paper, it should be noted that these tests should be considered preliminary as the number of populist party leaders is limited.

## Eliciting emotional reactions

Populist MPs are said to convey messages in a manner that is more direct and more strident, appealing to gut feelings rather than logical analysis. Populism defines itself in part by accepting this emotional, nonintellectual characterization, arguably as it helps to remain on the outside of mainstream politics or at least depict that it is

the case (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004). Starting from the observation that populists use more emotionally charged language, we raised two questions to further unravel the impact thereof; do their post also elicit more emotional reactions than nonpopulist MPs and if so, what type of reactions.

On Facebook, next to simply liking a post, users can react (emotionally) to posts, loving, laughing, showing surprise, crying, or getting angry. One reason we can expect populists' posts to receive more emotional reactions is because the populist communication style (Jost et al., 2020). Indeed, the emotionalized style of blaming the elite has been argued to explain populism's persuasiveness (Hameleers et al., 2017). A study by Ernst et al. (2019) has also shown that populist political actors are indeed more likely to use an emotional communication style on social media. Moreover, studies using experiments show that populist appeals elicit stronger emotions than nonpopulist appeals, that these emotions mediate the persuasiveness of the appeals, and that populist appeals are more persuasive when they are explicitly emotional (Hameleers et al., 2017; Wirz, 2018). More emotionally loaded posts and those containing populist style elements do indeed trigger more emotional responses on Facebook (Jost et al., 2020). It is, therefore, likely that posts from populist MPs evoke more emotional reactions as these actors are most likely to use a populist communication style (Waisbord & Amado, 2017; Zulianello et al., 2018). However, this link has not been tested directly.

A second reason why populist MPs' posts may trigger more emotional reactions is because such parties' electorate tends to be more susceptible to emotions, such as anger (Rico et al., 2020). In short, both the content of the posts and the characteristics of those following populist actors on Facebook lead us to expect a higher number of emotional reactions to populists' posts.<sup>1</sup> Facebook's architecture allows emotional responses with a simple click. One can like a post or select one of six more specific emotional reactions, so-called emojis: *like*, *love*, *haha*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry*. The "like" option is the standard setting and for a long time the only response option on Facebook, thus it will be considered the baseline or default response item. Only if people take more effort can they react to a message with a more distinct emoji. Considering all this, we translate the theoretical logic to the following hypothesis.

**H3:** *Reactions to populist MPs' posts include a higher proportion of a specific emotional reaction than the posts of nonpopulist MPs do.*

### **Which emotional reactions: anger, pride, and sarcasm**

It has not only been argued that populism primarily relies on an emotional appeal but that it particularly plays on a variety of emotions: anger, outrage, disgust, a sense of betrayal, and a sense of loyalty (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004). As discussed above, we know from recent empirical work that anger stands out

but beyond this, we link populism to at least two other emotional responses: pride or loyalty and sarcasm. Below we will discuss these assumptions further and how they might translate to Facebook's emoji function.

A fundamental theme in populist ideology and rhetoric is pitting the conflict between the out-groups (e.g., elites, foreigners) against the in-group (the people, whose well-being is threatened). Such conflictive messages referring to threats faced by the people and blaming the elite or other out-groups for bad situations elicit emotions of anger (Jost et al., 2020), while appeals demonstrating populist actors' or leaders' engagement for the people will elicit positive emotions of loyalty or pride (Engesser et al., 2017). Thus, the populist actors' statements to defend the "pure people's" virtues and interests against the out-groups are also argued to reflect emotions of pride that provide a sense of in-group identity and identification with the populist leader (Wirz, 2018).

Furthermore, the role of humor in attacks on the elites has been highlighted (MacMillan, 2017). Specifically, cynical irony has been linked to the populist leader (Milburn, 2019). Populists' use of such irony can be a way to make sincere statements of political belief while avoiding accusations of either hypocrisy or naivety (Milburn, 2019). Irony and cynicism play on both negativity and positivity. Apart from purely humorous traits, it can, therefore, be expected that ironic criticism or sarcasm also trigger negative emotions of anger, disgust, and contempt (Thompson et al., 2016).

We expect that the stronger emotionally loaded language of populists translates as follows: positive messages will evoke a sense of loyalty or pride and negative messages (including irony and sarcasm) will evoke anger or gloating. Turning to Facebook's design, it allows different emotions to be displayed, as said: *like*, *love*, *haha*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry*. Positive emotions, like pride or loyalty, are primarily tied to the party leader that presents him- or herself as being an embodiment of the people and by promising to take action to face the current threats. This might not be directly represented as an emoji on Facebook, but it translates well and steers people to expressions of "love" as a reaction. Recent work renders support to this assumption as messages that contain positive depictions of "ordinary citizens" has been shown to evoke a higher number of "love" reactions (Jost et al., 2020). Therefore, we can particularly expect "love" to stand out in the positive sense, reflecting pride, loyalty, or support for the party leader. Negative elicited emotions are more easily translated in selecting the anger emoji, both supportive and dismissive of the message. Finally, considering sarcasm, we expect that populist MPs elicit more *haha* emojis, which are most likely to be supportive to the MPs post. Altogether, we thus formulate three expectations.

**H4:** *Facebook page post of MPs belonging to populist parties receive relatively more angry emoji's compared to posts of nonpopulist MPs.*



**H5:** Facebook page post of MPs belonging to populist parties receive relatively more haha emoji's compared to posts of nonpopulist MPs.

**H6:** Facebook page post of MPs belonging to populist parties receive relatively more love emoji's compared to posts of nonpopulist MPs.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Case selection: Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden

We selected three cases with similar political systems that had populist parties in parliament: Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Regarding the comparative nature, all three cases are middle-sized European countries with proportional representation and similar electoral systems, and they all have prominent populist parties. Moreover, there were no nationwide election campaigns taking place, which has been shown to matter considerably for social media use (e.g., Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Given these substantive parameters, many countries drop out,<sup>2</sup> but Finland could have been selected too. Our access to and knowledge of the Finnish data and context did not allow us to include this case reliably. Although this is an issue that should be put to the test, findings that are stable across our three countries can thus be expected to be visible in other countries with similar political systems.

Zooming out, the three included cases could, however, be considered rather diverse within the set parameters. For instance, we include the first country in which the populist radical right came to power (Austria), the case that was long considered the exception having no populist party (Sweden), and the in-between but rather visible Dutch case. Beyond the varying experiences with populist parties, different media systems are also important to consider. Of the three countries, the media system in Sweden is probably the most restrictive to populists, whereas the Netherlands is the most liberal and open in this regard (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2020). It is likely that both restrictiveness of mainstream media and access to political power, influence how these parties behave online.

### Facebook data

We collected information on all MPs from the three countries, as well as whether they had a Facebook account or a Facebook page. We then collected all posts and emoji reactions per post from the MPs with an active Facebook page. Facebook's pages provide an open public network structure allowing users to like or follow a page to get updates and react to posts. Moreover, contrary to a standard Facebook profile, a page gives the politician tools to monitor and track responses in addition to being able to select more functions including verification of account and statistical measures to follow responses and users.

Data were collected for the time period ranging from November 1, 2017, until February 1, 2018. This period was chosen because no electoral campaigns

were held at that time in any of the three countries. For all MPs with a page, we collected their Facebook handle (i.e., account) and per handle we automatically collected data on the activity of the Page via Netvizz. The maximum number of posts the application can process is 999 per page (Rieder, 2013), but this number was never reached in that period, indicating that we collected all relevant Facebook posts, totaling 10,355.

## Dependent variables and models

Regarding adoption, we focus on whether the MPs have a simple Facebook profile or not and whether they have a more professional Facebook page or not. As these two dependent variables are dichotomous, we use logit regression models. As part of the question whether populist MPs use Facebook to the same degree, we also include the number of posts as a separate dependent variable for those MPs with a Facebook page. The number of posts is distributed approximately normally, so we can use the easiest to interpret type of regression model: OLS. Different levels of uptake across countries are controlled for by including fixed effect dummies.

Regarding the elicited emotions, we zoom in on the emotional reactions to posts measured as the relative number of emoji's expressed as either "like," "angry," "love," "haha," "wow," or "sad" emoji. In other words, we took the number of a specific emoji reaction and divided that by the total number of reactions on a post (we added 1 to the total reactions to keep posts without any reactions, see Table 1). As the proportion of a certain type of emoji reaction might also be a function of the attention a post has gotten overall, we control these models for the total number of reactions to a post.

The emoji data are analyzed with multilevel linear regression models, which capture the nested structure of the data and thus the interprofile variability. In these analyses, the individual posts are the units of analysis and we estimated multilevel models with posts as the lowest level and identifying the MPs as the second level, with random intercepts at the MP level. This allowed us to account for reactions to posts being nested in the individual profiles. Finally, variations between countries are accounted for by including countries as a separate level. With only three observations, we can obviously not include country-level explanatory factors but including a random intercept at the country level does filter out country-level differences—this approach is equivalent to added fixed effect dummies in two-level models.

## Explanatory variable: Populist party family

The MPs are classified based on the party they represent in parliament and the parties are classified as populist in accordance with the common definition of

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std.	Min–Max
<b>Adoption</b>			
FB page (active)	0.42	0.495	0.1
FB profile	0.82	0.388	0.1
Number of posts	36.0	39.2	0–217
<b>Reactions</b>			
Anger	8.25	69.7	0–3645
Anger/(total reactions + 1) × 100	2.4	8.9	
Love	10.26	52.0	0–1585
Love/(total reactions + 1) × 100	2.8	5.2	
Haha	2.70	19.9	0–661
Haha/(total reactions + 1) × 100	0.9	3.9	
Wow	1.15	6.8	0–202
Wow/(total reactions + 1) × 100	0.6	2.8	
Sad	3.46	31.6	0–1625
Sad/(total reactions + 1) × 100	1.1	5.1	
Likes	49.54	205.0	0–4109
Like/(total reactions + 1) × 100	80.6	23.6	
<b>Independent variables</b>			
Age	48	11.2	24–96
Seniority (days in parliament)	2333	1988	6–9347
Female	0.4	0.49	
Populist MPs	0.20	0.40	
Postmaterialist	0.10	0.31	
Other MPs	0.7	0.46	

these parties in the literature (e.g., Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Rooduijn, 2014, 2018). In the Netherlands; the Party for Freedom (PVV), Forum for Democracy (FvD), and the Socialist Party (SP) are considered to be populist; in Austria, The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is considered to be populist; and in Sweden, we consider the SD to be populist.

## Control variables

The existing literature on adoption has shown that in many respects politicians of so-called “postmaterialist” parties differ from those of the mainstream and smaller nonpopulist parties, often being more prone to use social media and do so professionally (e.g., Spierings & Jacobs, 2018). Including the postmaterialists in the reference group might then lead to bias our results in favor of the hypotheses. Therefore, we distinguish between MPs of postmaterialist parties and all other nonpopulist parties. Following the common definition in the literature (Bolin, 2016), GroenLinks (GL), the Party for the Animals (PvdD), and Democrats 66 (D66) are considered to be postmaterialist in the Netherlands, List PILZ in Austria,<sup>3</sup> and the Green party (MP) in Sweden. Additionally, each model is controlled for the seniority of politicians (measured as days in parliament), as well as age and sex (see e.g., Xenos et al., 2017). Table 1, presents the descriptive statistics on our dependent and independent variables.

## RESULTS

There is quite some diversity in the adoption of open Facebook pages (ranging from 40% in Sweden to 65% in the Netherlands). Table 2 presents the adoption results and clearly shows that populist MPs use Facebook pages and profiles less than other MPs. The differences are statistically significant and most strongly for Facebook pages in particular. While there are differences in uptake between the countries (see fixed-effects in Table 2), additional models show that the core negative relationship between belonging to a populist party and Facebook uptake only differ slightly between the countries. In all three cases, representing a populist party shows a significant negative effect (see Appendix Table A1).

Model 3 in Table 2 additionally shows that if MPs of populist parties do have Facebook pages, they are more active on the other hand. They have a higher number of posts than other MPs, even controlling for gender, age, seniority, and country. The mean number of posts for MPs belonging to a populist party was 109 compared to 32 for postmaterialist party representatives and 74 for other party representatives. In sum, populist MPs use Facebook pages to a lesser extent but when they do use them, they are significantly more active. Based on these findings, H1b (on party structure) is supported on the level of adoption, while H1c (on ideology) is supported with regards to activity. These results can indicate that populist MPs are overall dissimilar to other MPs and do post more but given the lower uptake it can also indicate a selection effect whereby among populist parties only the most professional or those who hold leading positions within the party have a Facebook page. Of other parties, the less professional or well-known MPs are active with a Facebook page too.

**TABLE 2** Uptake of Facebook pages, profiles (logistic regression) and number of posts (OLS)

	<b>Model 1 FB Page B coefficient</b>	<b>Model 2 FB Profile B coefficient</b>	<b>Model 3 Number of posts B coefficient</b>
Populists	-1.209***	-0.763**	18.215**
Postmaterialist	-0.055	-0.339	-11.962
Female MPs	0.003	0.100	-0.615
Age	-0.030***	-0.018	0.216
Seniority	-0.009	-0.072***	-0.195
Austria	0.855***	-2.542***	13.239*
Netherlands	1.089***	-1.757***	-2.259
Intercept	1.249*	4.446***	22.394*
Model statistics			
(Nagelkerke's) <sup>a</sup> $R^2$	0.144	0.268	0.092
Increase in (Nagelkerke's) $R^2$ after including party families <sup>b</sup>	0.060	0.017	0.036
<i>N</i>	682	682	342 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>For Models 1 and 2, Nagelkerke's  $R^2$  is reported as these are logistic regression model; Model 3 is an OLS model, thus the standard  $R^2$  is reported.

<sup>b</sup>All MPs with a Facebook page.

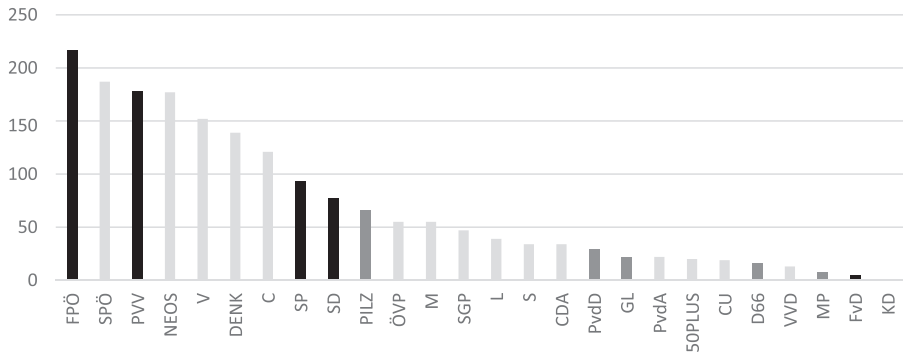
<sup>c</sup>We estimated the model without the party family dummies and subtracted the Nagelkerke's  $R^2$  from those models from the  $R^2$  reported above. A positive number indicates that the model with party family provide a better explanation.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Zooming in on the party leaders will shed more light on this issue and taking the result discussed below into account it would seem as though party structure weighs heavier than ideology when explaining populist MPs use of Facebook.

### Populist party leaders

All party leaders in parliament have active Facebook pages; hence, populist leaders do not clearly differ in that respect (see Figure 1). They seem, however, more active than party leaders from other parties, with party leaders from postmaterial parties being clearly much less active compared to the rest. The mean number of posts from the parliamentary leaders from populist parties ( $N = 5$ ) was 114 and the mean for postmaterial party leaders was only 28 ( $N = 5$ ).<sup>4</sup> For the rest of the party leaders ( $N = 16$ ) the mean was 70, which is



**FIGURE 1** Number of posts by parliamentary leader per party. Black is populist leaders, darker gray is postmaterialists and lighter gray represents other party.

lower than for populist party leaders. There seems to be a difference here, but we should be careful with these small subsamples, which are also too small for statistical testing.

To see if the proliferate posting by populist leaders is robust, we look at the variation *among* populist party leaders, for instance to see if the higher mean is not driven by only one leader. We do see considerable variation among party leaders from populist parties, but a clear pattern remains. In the Netherlands, Wilders (PVV) posted 178 times in the studied period (#4 most posts in our entire sample of MPs) and Marijnissen (SP) 93 times, whereas Baudet (FvD) only had five posts. The FPÖ deputy party leader Johann Gudenus (and leader of FPÖ's parliamentary group) in Austria had the highest number of posts in the period studied, with 217 posts.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the party leader from the SD posted 77 times. Overall, particularly leaders of populist parties seem to make active use of Facebook pages (except for Baudet in our sample) supporting Hypothesis 2b, but more studies are needed to delve deeper into these mechanisms, preferably with larger samples.

## Emotional reactions

Having more insight into MPs Facebook adoption, we now shift our attention to the second part of this study: the emotions evoked. Table 3 shows few significant relationships with emotional responses of the control variables, but postmaterialist MPs had significantly more love responses, and female MPs gain more “love” on Facebook but significantly less “haha.”

Table 3, more crucially, shows that populist MPs' communication garners more and stronger emotions: anger, love, haha, wow and sad were all positively correlated with populism. So not only did we find a much larger number of likes

TABLE 3 Emotional charge: Relative number of anger, love, haha, wow, sad, or likes reactions

	Model 1 anger <i>B</i> coefficient	Model 2 love <i>B</i> coefficient	Model 3 haha <i>B</i> coefficient	Model 4 wow <i>B</i> coefficient	Model 5 sad <i>B</i> coefficient	Model 6 likes <i>B</i> coefficient
Populists	3.963***	0.990*	0.928***	0.255*	0.088	-8.731***
Postmaterialist	0.490	1.626***	0.068	0.281	0.168	-0.775
Another party	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Female MPs	-0.690*	1.306***	-0.505***	-0.168*	0.067	-2.181
Age	-0.002	-0.026	-0.006	0.005	0.007	-0.096
Seniority	0.052	0.079*	0.008	0.009	-0.007	-0.198
Reactions (count)	0.000*	0.001***	0.000*	0.000	0.000	0.002***
Intercept	2.242**	2.779	1.854***	1.326***	1.600***	86.833***
Variance						
Country level	0.201	3.890	0.051	0.034	0.109	29.453
MP level	2.721***	4.506***	0.820***	0.163***	0.847***	153.788***
Models statistics						
BIC	73,920.99	60,469.81	57,201.91	50,788.58	62,860.08	92,613.68
BIC decrease party family <sup>a</sup>	76.57	15.43	16.39	2.97	-1.27	20.28

Note:  $N_{\text{post}} = 10,355$ ,  $N_{\text{MMP}} = 682$ ,  $N_{\text{country}} = 3$ .

<sup>a</sup>We estimated the model without the party family dummies and subtracted the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) reported above from the BIC of those models. A positive number indicates that the model with party family include present a better fit (considering that more variables have been included).

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

on the posts of populist MPs (on average 253 compared to 121 for postmaterialist politicians and 128 for other parties' MPs), but more of the people responding (in both absolute and relative terms) took the effort of not giving a default like, but actually selected a more specific emoji. In other words, despite people's general tendency to use the simple like, the stronger emotional reactions overpowered the more subtle like option for populists' posts quite clearly. With the exception of sadness all the coefficients are also statistically significant. Hypothesis 3 is thus supported by these results.

Furthermore Table 3 shows that there are considerable differences between which emotions are elicited. While populist actors evoke more emotional responses in all forms “anger” stands out, with a coefficient that is roughly four times as large as those of the other emojis. Following at a considerable distance are the “haha” and “love” emoji's, with “love” being less strongly significant, indicating greater variance. It thus seems that the posts from populist actors primarily evoke feelings of anger and humor or sarcasm (“haha”), as well as love, which we theorized on the grounds of pride or loyalty.

The results for the elicited emotional reactions are in line with our expectations (Hypotheses 4–6), but the prominence of “love” was not as strongly linked to populist messages as anger or laughter. As the latter can be related to both humor and sarcasm this result is explored deeper below by zooming in on the posts receiving most “haha” responses.

### Exploring populist postings receiving more laughter

Wilders' two posts with the most “haha” responses are not simply humorous. While he makes a humorous comment about an MP from his own party in one, he writes sarcastically about a political opponent and immigrants in the other (341 and 302 haha's, respectively). Laughter is thus also evoked against other politicians and outsiders by making clear how ridiculous some situations are and by stressing that other parties do not take this seriously. In a way it could even be said that this humor paves the way for anger.

In Sweden, the post with the most “haha” reactions was also the one with the angriest ones, again suggesting the interrelatedness of the two emotions. The party leader of the SD invited the other party leaders to talk about healthcare, being described as an “acute crisis,” but the other parties declined this invitation and two did not reply. The picture in the post contains these answers (Figure 2). The anger can be interpreted as a critique of the other parties not being serious about fixing problems relating to healthcare due their refusal to deal with the SD, a cordon sanitaire practice was at the time being upheld (see e.g., Strömbäck & Jungar, 2016). “Haha” seems a bit more out of place here but could be interpreted as a mockery of the other parties' responses and portraying the others almost behaving as children. Åkesson explicitly cites their e-mails with quotes like “We thank you for your invitation” and “We do not intend to work with Jimmie Åkesson.”





**FIGURE 2** Two posts from Geert Wilders Facebook page. Text says “Fleur sticks out her tongue!” and “Eight Eritreans in a drunken state. Probably on the way to the New Year's drink of D'66 Amsterdam at the invitation of Alexander Penthouse,” with the headline of the news article reading “Police takes drunken migrant from truck at highway truck stop: ‘They consumed some of the beer being transported’” (Wilders, 23/01/2018 and 21/01/2018).

In Austria, the post with the most “haha” reactions contains a link to a news article with the headline: “For children abroad: Kern wants to cut family allowances.” In the post, Gudenus writes “Like this, mister Kern?” (Figure 3. The post to the left). We interpret this as Gudenus basically supporting the measure, while at the same time pointing to a perceived inconsistency in the position of SPÖ (Kern). As it is not formulated as a joke or pun but targeting the political opponent (Kern), it can be interpreted as a kind of gloating or malicious delight. Similarly, the post with the angriest reactions targets a Social Democratic politician seen at what is claimed to be a radical left demo. Gudenus writes “Where will you run into social democratic [SPÖ] politicians? At radical left demonstrations.” The post can be argued to elicit anger as a form of blaming the social democrats of betraying the people. At the same time, it received almost a third “haha” emoji's compared to the angry ones (911 vs. 289). It would thus seem as these two emotions partly go hand in hand and that the elicited emotions from these posts are rooted in related feelings (disappointment or perceived betrayal of conventional parties and the policies they represent Figure 4).

Additional analyses also show that the “haha” reaction correlates with anger in particular and does so more clearly among populist MPs. Among all included MPs, the relative number of “haha's” correlates positively and



*'Last week, Jimmy Åkesson invited the other party leaders together with the spokespersons for healthcare, to discuss the urgent situation of Swedish healthcare and what we together can do as soon as possible to change this negative development. Here are their answers:'*

*When Jimmie Åkesson invites the other party leaders to talk about the acute crisis in healthcare, they answer:*

*"The prime minister does not intend to participate.", "We decline your invitation.", "We collaborate and develop our policies with the Alliance so we decline your invitation.", "Thank you for the invitation. However, we decline to participate.", "We do not intend to carry out dialogue with Jimmy Åkesson.", "(MP and V did not even reply.)"*

**FIGURE 3** Post from the Sweden Democrats party leader. Posted by Jimmie Åkesson 12/12/2017.



**FIGURE 4** Two posts from the FPÖ deputy party leader. Text says "Like this, mister Kern?" and "Where will you run into social democratic [SPÖ] politicians? At radical left demonstrations." Posted 14/01/2018. FPÖ, Freedom Party of Austria.

significantly with only two other reaction types—anger and wow—and strongest with anger. However, when we distinguish between MPs from populist parties, we find a much stronger correlation of relative number of haha's and anger among populist than among postmaterialist or other MPs: 0.12 ( $p = 0.000$ ) versus, respectively, 0.02 ( $p = 0.604$ ) and 0.05 ( $p = 0.000$ ). The relatedness of two emotional responses could, therefore, represent a distinct aspect of populist MP's messages. However, this link needs to be further examined in future studies.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine to what extent populist MPs use Facebook and whether they elicit more emotional reactions, two core elements undergirding the claim that social media is especially beneficial to populist actors. Indeed, if populists' make broad use of Facebook and if their posts elicit more emotional reactions, the Facebook algorithm will reward these allowing their messages to snowball beyond the followers of the populist actor.

Given their leader-focused and tightly controlled party structure, one expectation was that populist MPs would be less likely to have a Facebook profile and page. This also turned out to be the case. However, if they did have an account, they were more likely to post more messages, in line with our competing hypotheses on populist ideology. This difference is at least partially driven by the populist leaders, as their pages were among the most active.

Afterward, we zoomed in on the degree and type of emotions these messages triggered. Overall, posts from populist MPs elicited significantly larger shares of emotional reactions. Among these emotional reactions, anger stood out. It was much more likely to be elicited by populist MPs compared to their nonpopulist counterparts. Next to anger, “haha” and “love” reactions were also clearly more likely to occur, which were in line with our expectations. A closer exploration of the posts with the most “haha” reactions indicate that this reaction is often coupled with anger. The close relatedness of anger might follow from the reaction of being mad about the target of critical (or rather satirical) remarks or the followers of populist leaders might find a post funny at the expense of the subject of the post (e.g., political opponents). Both the intention of the reaction and the impact of posts garnering such reactions could represent an additional attribute of populists' presence on Facebook. However, we only explored this linkage for a few posts belonging to populist leaders in our study and future studies should examine this link further by analyzing the content of posts evoking such reactions among all MPs. Overall, a limitation of this study is that we do not conduct a systematic content analysis. Therefore, we do not know what weighs heaviest, the susceptibility of the followers of populist MPs or the

content of their posts. However, for the snowball effect to occur, this is of less importance.

From recent “communication-centered” studies of populism on Facebook, we know that a broad array of politicians can be said to communicate in populist ways and that different elements of populist rhetoric evoke different type of emoji reactions (Jost et al., 2020). To our knowledge, this is the first study that explicitly examined MP's belonging to populist parties and various reaction patterns on Facebook. In addition, we theorized on the distinction of these type of party organizations which is important if we want to understand how these parties make prolific use of Facebook and more specifically how Facebook functions as an efficient communication tool in the hands of the populist leader.

Facebook communities take part in actively shaping the populist discourse on social media (Hameleers, 2018). In line with this, our results imply that emotions have a significant influence in building ties between the populist politician and his or her followers on Facebook. As such, Facebook gives populists the opportunity to generate outrage directed toward perceived threats of immigrants, refugees, or the “corrupt” elite.

In terms of scope, our analyses covered three countries with similar political and media systems: Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. As for political systems, one can expect that populist leaders use Facebook even more in presidential systems that are leader oriented. Regarding media systems, Facebook can be expected to be used as an alternative to traditional media to an even larger extent in more polarized pluralist or liberal media systems. When populists are outsiders and have limited access to traditional media, Facebook can be an especially promising and powerful alternative communication channel. Countries with presidential systems and polarized pluralized and liberal media systems are thus important cases for future studies of populists' Facebook use.

In addition, future studies can also apply a perspective combining platform architecture with populist ideology and party structure to other types of communication. While our study suggests that populist MPs use some elements of Facebook differently than other politicians, it remains to be seen whether this holds for other features. For instance, are they more likely to use microtargeting and who do they target? Which types of posts do they send and does that content differ, for instance, by containing more disinformation? Nevertheless, if one wants to examine the message of parties who claim to be speaking directly to the people, one needs to examine their communication on what we have described as the “people's platform”: Facebook.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Note that we cannot distinguish between these two routes as we do not conduct a systematic content analysis. For the algorithmic dispersion of the post—the snowballing—this does not matter: it rewards posts based on emotional reactions, regardless of the reason why these reactions were placed (content or susceptibility of the user).
- <sup>2</sup> Other potential cases either had no populist party in parliament (e.g., Ireland, Portugal), a different electoral and party system (e.g., Belgium), elections were held soon or coalition negotiations still took place (e.g., Norway, Denmark—nationwide local elections took place in November 2017), or a combination thereof.
- <sup>3</sup> Some have suggested that PILZ is left-wing populists (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2018), while others emphasize PILZ as a spinoff from the Green party (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018). Peter Pilz, the party's founder was also founding member of and MP for the Green party, which made us consider the party as postmaterialist rather than populist.
- <sup>4</sup> The FPÖ was in government and so was the party leader, we therefore included the deputy party leader, Gudenus, as our focus is on MPs. If we instead calculate the mean replacing Gudenus with the party leader, Strache, the mean for populist party leaders is still highest at 95.
- <sup>5</sup> Noteworthy here is that the PILZ leader is the exception when it comes to the postmaterialist parties and it is exactly this case that is sometimes considered populist too. Considering it populist would actually further strengthen our conclusion.

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**How to cite this article:** Sandberg, L., Jacobs, K., & Spierings, N. (2022). Populist MPs on Facebook: Adoption and emotional reactions in Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12239>



## APPENDIX

See Table A1.

**TABLE A1** Uptake of Facebook pages and profiles in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Austria (logistic regression)

	NL (B)	SE (B)	AU (B)
Active page			
Populist	-2.547***	-1.135**	-0.727*
Postmaterialist	-0.786	0.045	0.122
Female	0.111	-0.164	-0.167
Seniority	0.092	0.004	-0.072*
Age	-0.057**	-0.034**	-0.020
Intercept	3.311***	0.928	1.826*
Profile			
Populist	-2.059***	-1.018**	-0.003
Postmaterialist	-0.962	0.32	-0.953
Female	0.297	-0.146	-0.444
Seniority	-0.107*	0.024	-0.058*
Age	-0.042	-0.034**	-0.009
Intercept	4.548***	5.841***	1.384

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .