

Emotional actors: Social media debates between supporters and opponents of populist parties across Europe

In this paper, we will build on, enhance and refocus previous work (Author, forthcoming 2023) on the social media discourse of supporters for populist parties in the context of European elections. In a series of case studies, we identified what motivates people to vote for populist parties, what role national identities and values play in those motivations, and how the social media postings of populist parties are recontextualised in supporters' comments to serve as voting motivations. One finding was that far from only reflecting a politics of fear (Wodak, 2020) or anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), supporters' social media comments also encompass positive emotions such as pride, hope, enthusiasm and a sense of belonging. We also found that postings by populist parties attract both supporters and opponents, leading to debates and conflicts between the two groups.

In our new project, we turn to investigating the role of semiotic features, e.g. in political memes, to express the various emotions that emerge among the supporters of populist parties on different social media platforms as well as in digital debates between supporters and critics. In addition, we focus on how the affordances of social media platforms such as Reddit, TikTok and Wikipedia talk pages shape emotional discourse and whether certain emotions are specific to right-wing or left-wing discourse.

In presenting preliminary findings from different national contexts, including Hungary, Spain, Ireland and Denmark, we also discuss how to examine emotion, and reflect on its (legitimising) function, in political discourse (Reyes, 2011). Furthermore, we look at the specific challenges of working with social media data and consider the impact of analysing various languages, platforms and modalities while addressing the same research questions so as to arrive at coherent conclusions.

References

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