

Polarizing strategies in political statements on Twitter: anti-lockdown rhetoric in the UK

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many political parties and leaders adopted an anti-lockdown rhetoric that was aimed at gaining traction over the popular classes affected by public health restrictions. That was the case of Reform UK, the right-wing populist party formerly known as the Brexit Party in the United Kingdom whose leaders adopted a hardline stance against the coronavirus-related measures previously introduced by incumbent Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Reform Party founder Nigel Farage and deputy leaders Richard Tice and David Bull were among the main Reform UK representatives who expressed their concerns about the state of the economy and the loss of civil liberties following the introduction of COVID-centered measures. With this in mind, the present paper seeks to examine and compare the emotion-driven polarizing discourse patterns and strategies adopted by these leaders when discussing the implementation of such punitive regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, Benítez-Castro and Hidalgo-Tenorio's (2019) refined model of the Martin and White's (2005) AFFECT taxonomy was taken as the main theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of the emotion-driven strategies contained in these politicians' tweets. As regards the methodology set for the analysis, the emotion-centered discourse patterns and strategies used by Farage, Tice and Bull were tagged and compared with UAM Corpus Tool, a Systemic Functional Linguistics-based electronic tool specifically designed for the identification, tagging, and analysis of text corpora. The results of this paper indicate that an emotionally charged rhetoric assisted Reform Party representatives in fueling the increasing popular discontent towards public health measures limiting the spread of COVID-19. The polarizing statements made by these political leaders on Twitter voiced criticism of the incumbent forces' handling of the health crisis while trying to elicit an emotional response from an increasingly disappointed British audience.

References

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