

Title: Populists on social media: democracy for whom?

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This paper investigates the influence of democratization on how populist political actors communicate on social media. In particular, it focuses on representations of 'the people': how do populists' solutions to the boundary problem of liberal democratic theory (Dahl, 1989) differ across states of democratisation when represented in 'the people's media'? I compare two populist parties: the Danish People's Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. These cases contrast across states of democratisation and associated trust in political institutions and actors, yet both increasingly use social media very effectively. I present a pre-study of a qualitative 'ideographic' analysis of populist politicians' representations of 'the people' on Facebook and Twitter. These platforms are arguably suited to a populist communication style, yet allow for different communication strategies in populists' relationship with the people.

Inter-regional comparative studies of populism are all but non-existent, especially across states of democratization. Yet this study avoids the traps of Western-centric research on populism that too often entangles the concept with local political and cultural factors. It simultaneously places social media firmly on the populism research agenda. Populists' definition of 'the people' is constructed through both discourse and strategic media choice. In turn it constructs the populist identity and legitimizes a domesticated notion of democracy. In Western Europe populism is generally regarded as an exclusionary phenomenon. It exploits and deepens the current crisis of democracy with a less-than-liberal definition of 'the people', who are increasingly mobilized via social media. Yet populist representations of 'the people' can under certain conditions have an inclusionary effect on democratization. In newer democracies such as India, populists increasingly use social media for supposedly inclusionary outreach, despite digital divides. Populists' utilization of the medium's democratizing image in both contexts begs the question: democracy for whom?