International Journal of Communication 18(2024), 4726-4747 1932–8036/20240005

Building Voter Intimacy: Comparing Populist Communication Strategies in the Closing Stages of Elections in Taiwan and Germany

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Based on initial research into the stylistic roles in populist communication, both positive and negative emotions can shape voters' antagonistic perceptions of political elites. However, these arguments have received limited examination in 2 key aspects: (1) the influence of campaign timing as a contextual factor and (2) the exploration of nuances within distinct social contexts. This study conducts a cross-comparative analysis of Facebook content from 12 political parties during campaign periods in Taiwan and Germany. Our findings reveal 3 key insights: Despite fringe parties displaying a higher propensity for populism, the communication patterns of populist content during campaign periods are remarkably similar between fringe and mainstream parties. Second, while both negative and sociable communication styles are employed in populist messaging, parties significantly increase their use of sociable styles during the final stages of election campaigns. Third, when examining disparities in the populist communication strategies of parties in Taiwan and Germany, each with distinct political contexts, Taiwanese parties exhibit a greater tendency toward populism compared with their German counterparts.

Keywords: populist communication, campaign timing, communication style, cross-country comparison, German 2017 Bundestagswahl, Taiwan 2020 national election, Facebook

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Date submitted: 2023-03-20

[1] We appreciate that two anonymous reviewers suggested valuable comments. We also thank the fund from Taiwan's National Science and Technology Council (NSTC; nr. 110-2424-H-110-002-DR).

In the era of digital transformation, global political landscapes have undergone significant shifts, prompting scholars to delve into the intricate interplay between the rise of political populism and the proliferation of social media usage. Concurrently, political parties tend to use populist rhetoric as a campaign strategy to frame their political messages on their social networking sites (SNS; Bracciale & Martella, 2017). From the standpoint of political communication, scholars have been particularly intrigued by the "how" question (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018). Specifically, they seek to understand how political parties employ populist rhetoric to mobilize voters (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020) or reinforce populist identities among voters, along with their corresponding stereotypes of political elites (Hameleers et al., 2021). Notably, Schmuck and Hameleers (2020) have argued that populist communication serves not only as a campaign strategy to discredit political opponents but also as a means for parties to bridge the gap with voters and establish closer connections. Their arguments, to some extent, suggest that populist communication encompasses two contrasting emotional dimensions. On the one hand, it paints an optimistic picture of the future and ignites voters' imaginations (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020; Wirz, 2023). On the other hand, it amplifies the darker aspects of politics.

Despite a series of valuable studies in this field, we underscore three major research gaps that have received limited attention in existing research. First, while conventional wisdom suggests that smaller parties at the ideological fringes excel in using populist rhetoric during elections, we have relatively limited insights into how they adapt their populist communication strategies over different phases of electoral campaigns. Second, populism theories have predominantly been constructed based on Western democracies that face common social and political challenges. In contrast, fewer comparative studies have sought to generalize populism theories by juxtaposing countries with distinct social and political contexts. Notably, populism in Asia remains an underexplored area. Third, following the second gap, while populism displays its various facets in different social contexts, the influences of political systems (e.g., election systems and political regimes) on parties' populist communicative patterns have rarely been examined (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2017).

To address these research gaps, we seek to deepen Schmuck and Hamaleers's (2020) arguments by examining (1) the roles of stylistic devices (see also Schwörer, 2021) and (2) the contextual influence of campaign timing. Furthermore, we conducted a cross-country study encompassing one European case (Germany) and one Asian case (Taiwan). Both countries have been somewhat overlooked in the previous literature. Although there are certain similarities in political institutions and societal backgrounds, substantial differences exist between Taiwan and Germany. From the perspective of cross-country comparisons, this study aims to identify overarching communication patterns in both countries. In total, we examined 12 major parliamentary parties—seven in Germany and five in Taiwan. We analyzed these parties' Facebook content produced during campaign periods, specifically the 2017 *Bundestagwahl* (federal election) in Germany and the 2020 Legislative election in Taiwan.

Literature Review

Populist Communication on Social Networking Sites

Despite the multifaceted presence of populism in different social contexts, a Manichean viewpoint—emphasizing the central position of the people (people-centrism) and criticizing the established elites (anti-elitism; Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016)—is often regarded as the lowest common denominator (Rooduijn, 2014). Based on this thin-centered ideological assumption, recent research has further attempted to reinvestigate the role of communication in populism research, which has often been neglected in mainstream narratives in the field of political science. Although the people-against-the-elites notion has provided scholars of comparative politics with a framework for identifying "populist actors," this binary categorization hardly explains the general use of populist rhetoric in the party communication process (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005).

Our theoretical perspective centers on the communicative practices of political parties and is grounded in the approach proposed by de Vreese et al. (2018), which combines Mudde's (2004) ideological arguments with Hawkins's (2010) discursive-centered perspective on populism. In line with their explanations, we define a populist communication framework as a discursive expression that portrays a Manichean worldview, characterized by a combination of populist ideological elements (see also Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, & de Vreese, 2019). Importantly, this definitional operationalization not only considers what rhetorical characteristics are presented but also how they are conveyed.

Drawing from a substantial body of literature on populism, this populist communication framework encompasses several sub-frameworks, including an emphasis on people-centric messaging, the restoration of popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and exclusion (Aalberg et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019).

Scrutinizing relationships between populist communication and online communication, researchers have mostly indicated that the rise of populism benefits from several intrinsic characteristics of SNS. On the one hand, conflictual content produced professionally by political parties or campaign experts fits a popular culture (i.e., sensational and dramatic communication) in digital media (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014). Related arguments are particularly consistent with mediatization theories, arguing that political actors' patterns can be highly influenced by various features of media logic (e.g., news value, professionalization; Hjarvard, 2008; Esser & Strömbäck , 2014). On the other hand, while these messages fit SNS algorithms, populist messages are circulated widely because they easily attract social media users (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). With the prevalence of populist communication on social media, scholars (e.g., Engesser, Ernst et al., 2017) have further observed a process of *fragmentation* of populist communication depending on parties' purposes. Engesser, Ernst et al. (2017) have argued that social media offers more room for political parties to strategically adopt a few rhetorical elements of populist communication and maintain ambiguous positions to win the trust of voters as much as possible (see also Bracciale & Martella, 2017).

While a large body of research based on European social contexts has described potential relationships between populist communication and social media, we emphasize that a cross-country

comparative framework paralleling distinct national contexts (e.g., European-Asian comparison) has been less employed in current studies. Given that populist communication presents malleable facets in different social contexts, we aim to compare common and discrepant communicative patterns of populist communication by examining three sets of theories in populism studies, including party types, roles of political communication styles, and campaign timing.

Party Types

Political communication scholars have explained how social media communication is conducive to the rise of populists (e.g., Bobba, 2019; Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Moreover, scholarly debates (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019) have shown that newly emerging parties at the edge of the political spectrum are more likely to use populist rhetoric on their SNS than mainstream parties, which hold moderate ideological positions. However, fewer comprehensive studies have compared similarities and differences between different types of political parties. Identifying differences between populist and non-populist parties is a widely used approach in the European context. Yet, this is a new approach when we shift our focus from Europe to other continents. Since we conceive of populism as a communication framework, the binary party categorization may seem contradictory to the communication-oriented approach.

Definitions of fringe parties are programmatic and positional (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016). On the one hand, researchers generally agree that parties positioned on the fringes of the ideological spectrum exhibit radical positions on certain issues (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Meguid, 2005). On the other hand, fringe parties are antiestablishment, meaning that they claim to reform the established political system (Sartori, 1976). Socially, the simplified communication of fringe parties arouses public resentment against the establishment by manipulating attention to social problems neglected by the government. This simplified and antagonistic communication can also influence public conversations and the quality of public debates (Kriesi, 2014; Marien, Goovaerts, & Elstub, 2020; Sengul, 2019). Politically, fringe parties' antiestablished tendencies can be driven by a stricter political opportunity structure (POS; Akkerman et al., 2016; Meguid, 2005; van Spanje, 2018). For instance, most European fringe parties are regarded as unwelcomed partners for mainstream parties, even though their ballots increase in elections. These stringent features of POS push fringe parties to become more radical and populist. Based on these findings, we further argue that this stricter institutional environment can generally explain higher populist tendencies of fringe parties. Our first hypothesis (H1) is as follows:

H1: Fringe parties use populist frameworks more frequently than mainstream ones do.

Stylistic Roles in Populist Communication

Based on previous studies that define populism as a political communication style (cf. Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016; Norris & Ingelhart, 2019), political communication scholars (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2018; Schwörer, 2021) have further investigated associations of communication styles and populist frameworks. We highlight that political communication styles are a heterogeneous ensemble of communicative tones that purposedly construct specific affective bonds (e.g., Lin,

d'Haenens, & Liao, 2020). Focusing on social media communication, the use of specific political styles in populist communication is not only shared by radical right and left politicians (Lin et al., 2020) but also shared by other political counterparts across the ideological spectrum (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). In addition, stylistic devices—conveying specific emotions—trigger social media users' engagement more effectively than rhetorical expressions (Hameleers, Schmuck, Bos, & Ecklebe, 2021; Martella & Bracciale, 2022).

Ernst et al. (2019) used factor analysis to identify three major stylistic dimensions (i.e., *negativity, emotionality,* and *sociability*) among seven individual political styles that are widely proposed in the current literature of populist communication. Negative styles aim to (1) attribute negative characteristics to certain people ("negativism") and (2) describe particular situations as crises ("crisis rhetoric"). Emotional styles aim to (1) share positive and negative emotions ("emotional tone"), (2) use assertive tones to portray a world in black-and-white ("absolutism"), and (3) emphasize national superiority ("patriotism"). Sociable styles aim to (1) use simple and colloquial language to reach people ("colloquialism") and (2) recount details about personal lives ("intimization").

Considering the communication objectives of political parties, we contend that a populist framework can be conveyed through various communication styles during campaign periods. We recognize that these communication styles play a pivotal role in populist communication, as they carry specific emotions that amplify the emotional impact of populist messages (e.g., Wirz, 2023). In other words, communication styles are antecedents that increase parties' frequency of using populist frameworks. In particular, the use of negative campaigning styles (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Martella & Bracciale, 2022) has indicated that populist communication deepens the divisions between the virtuous people and the corrupt elites by emphasizing negative emotions among the people (e.g., anger toward the establishment, fear of deprivation). In addition, highlighting positive emotions (e.g., pride) can reinforce a sense of unity among the people (Lin, d'Haenens, & Liao, 2023; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020).

Using communication styles in populist communication on SNS is particularly crucial for political parties. For instance, in a cross-country comparison of Dutch and Austrian cases, Schmuck and Hameleers (2020) demonstrated that populist frameworks can be presented in both negative and positive ways. As they have argued, these communication styles serve as a means for leading party candidates to bridge the gap between themselves and the people. Their findings also indicate that populist communication employs different styles to establish emotional connections. Therefore, we anticipate that parties will, on the one hand, employ negative styles to discredit their political opponents and, on the other hand, use sociable styles to persuade voters that parties and voters share common ground. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Populist frameworks are conveyed using negative styles more frequently than non-populist frameworks in Facebook posts.

H2b: Populist frameworks are conveyed using sociable styles more frequently than non-populist frameworks in Facebook posts.

Campaign Timing

While populist frameworks are recognized as popular campaign strategies to increase the engagement of social media users, there is still a limited understanding of how political parties adapt their populist communication strategies throughout different campaign periods. Schmuck and Hameleers (2020) revealed that Dutch and Austrian party leaders tend to employ populist rhetoric on social media more frequently during campaigns than in the periods following elections. In addition, Lin et al.'s (2023) research scrutinizing populist communication strategies over the course of a campaign period indicated that both mainstream and fringe parties tend to intensify their use of populist frameworks, although the communicative patterns among these parties vary.

Drawing from these studies, it becomes apparent that campaign contexts can significantly influence parties' populist communication patterns. Parties often seek to shape specific images by employing populist communication frameworks. Therefore, we hypothesize that the timing of the campaign positively influences party inclination to use populist frameworks on social media during the final phases of elections, allowing them to mobilize their supporters promptly. We formulate the following hypothesis (H3a):

H3a: Populist frameworks are used more often as the election day approaches.

Expanding our focus on the contextual impact of campaigning, we delve deeper into whether campaign timing moderates the relationship between populist communication strategies employed by mainstream and fringe parties. It is noted that Taiwanese fringe parties maintained higher levels of populism throughout the 2020 national election despite a slight decrease in their populist tendencies just before the voting day (Liao, Lin, Liu, & Yang, 2020). In our study, we contend that campaign timing can positively enhance the use of populist frameworks by fringe parties. On the one hand, the resource constraints faced by fringe parties often necessitate heavy reliance on digital media as their primary communication channel to politically mobilize their supporters (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2015). On the other hand, given the limitations posed by the existing POS (e.g., Huang, 2017; Meguid, 2005; van Spanje, 2018), fringe parties tend to vehemently criticize the political elites within the establishment. In terms of the interaction effect of campaign timing, we formulate the following hypothesis (H3b):

H3b: Compared with mainstream parties, fringe parties use populist frameworks more often as the election day approaches.

Furthermore, we contend that the approach of an election creates contextual incentives that motivate political parties to employ populist frameworks combined with political communication styles on social media more frequently. Considering the prevailing preference for dramatic and sensational modes of communication in the digital era (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017), parties strategically elicit emotional responses from social media users through the strategic use of negative and sociable styles (e.g., Lin et al., 2023). On the one hand, political parties widely employ negative campaigning to discredit their political opponents, with the critique intensifying as the voting day approaches. On the other hand, parties must convey to voters that they genuinely understand the needs of ordinary people. In other words, we argue

that populist communication does not exclusively rely on negative communication styles but also incorporates positive ones (see also Wirz, 2023).

Concerning the interaction effect of campaign timing, we formulate two additional hypotheses as follows:

H3c: Populist frameworks are expressed more frequently using negative styles as the election day approaches.

H3d: Populist frameworks are expressed more frequently using sociable styles as the election day approaches.

Country Difference

Parties' populist communication patterns are context-based, such as institutional designs and societal environments in different countries (Aalberg et al., 2017). Theoretically, parties in parliamentary countries are encouraged to seek intraparty consensus and political cooperation to reduce political divisions among multiple parties (Lijphart, 1999). Meanwhile, parliamentary countries mostly adopt proportional representation systems that allow fringe parties to voice the electorate's opinion in parliament. Conversely, presidential countries that incorporate majoritarian electoral systems (e.g., the United States) not only narrow spaces of fringe parties in parliaments. Ideological conflicts might be intensified since the designs of political institutions do not encourage political compromises among parties. Since politicians are directly elected, they tend to adopt candidate-centered communication strategies (Linz, 1990), leading politicians to be more willing to employ populist rhetoric (e.g., Jensen & Bang, 2017). In contrast, Blassnig, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser, and Esser's (2018) comparative study indicated that politicians in parliamentary countries (e.g., Switzerland) reveal higher populist tendencies than those in presidential countries (e.g., the United States). However, looking at differences among parliamentary counties, Germany shows a much lower degree of populist communication compared with Switzerland.

In light of the existing literature, the populist communication between semipresidential (e.g., Taiwan) and parliamentary (e.g., Germany) systems remains underexplored. As a case of a semipresidential regime, Taiwanese politics share partial characteristics of parliamentary countries (e.g., proportional representative systems) and presidential countries (e.g., the president is directly elected by voters). Considering the electoral system, although both countries adopt the single-district two-vote system[2] with 5% thresholds[3] in their national parliaments, some subtle institutional designs are

[2] In this electoral system, legislators are elected directly (voters vote for candidates) or indirectly (voters vote for parties). The candidates run election campaigns in certain districts. The entry of district legislators relies on whether or not they are able to obtain a relative majority vote (the first-past-the-post, FPTP system). Non-district legislators are nominated on party lists. Their entry into parliament depends on internal distributions of votes within parties (called the second vote).

[3] National parliaments in both countries adopt the 5% threshold to ensure that parliamentary parties obtain sufficient popularity.

different. While Germany has a system of mixed-member proportional representation (MMP), Taiwan has a mixed-member majoritarian system (MMM). While the former minimizes differences between larger and smaller parties, the latter does not.[4] These differences in the electoral systems of the two selected countries make it difficult for Taiwan's small parties to survive (Su, 2010). These higher electoral thresholds force them to communicate in a populist manner. In addition, given that presidential candidates lead the parties in national elections, the parties' campaign communication strategies are candidate -centered (Chuang, 2022).

In this study, we argue that institutional differences (electoral systems & styles of campaign communication) could distinguish different levels of populist communication in various countries. Hence, our final hypothesis (H4) is as follows:

H4: The degree of populist communication among Taiwanese parties is higher than the degree of populism in Germany.

Methodology

Case Comparison

This study focuses on party communication behaviors during national elections. Twelve parliamentary parties—five running in the Taiwanese 2020 Legislative election and seven running in the German 2017 *Bundestagswahl*—were selected as cases for analysis. These political parties were chosen because they all successfully obtained parliamentary seats in said elections.

Socially, both countries have experienced fragmentation of their party landscapes caused by great shifts in public opinion about important social crises in recent decades. With the rise of new parties and the decline of mainstream parties, party landscapes in Taiwan and Germany have become more fragile. For instance, Germany has witnessed the rise of the radical left party The Left Party (*Die Linke*) in 2009 and the radical right party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in 2017. Despite their ideological differences, both parties hold significant antiestablishment and anti-EU attitudes.

In the 2017 German election, AfD won parliamentary seats at the national level for the first time. Meanwhile, traditional parties—CDU, CSU, and SPD—lost several votes in the election. The rise of AfD is often attributed to its successful campaign manipulation of the European refugee crisis. At the end of 2014, the German far-right protest group Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) used Facebook to mobilize crowds to protest on the streets when the whole of Europe faced great pressure from the influx of refugees. At the beginning of 2015, the Pegida protest further spread to other German-

[4] In the German case, seat differences between larger and smaller parties in the German national parliament are minimized because the MMP compensates with extra seats for political parties upon their party votes. This system ensures that smaller parties are equally represented in parliament. In the case of Taiwan, the MMM does not allow for compensatory seats for parties, and the fixed parliamentary seats limit the representativeness of smaller parties.

speaking (Austria and Switzerland) and Scandinavian countries (Norway and Sweden), although with different outcomes (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016). While AfD's economic stance was conservative, and the party mainly appealed to anti-Euro policies before 2015, it turned its main focus to refugee problems (e.g., burden on social welfare, social chaos). The refugee crisis also dominated debates during the campaign period. The great defeat of the three coalition parties is seen as an expression of voters' distrust and punishment of Merkel's welcome policy (*Willkommenpolitik*).

In the case of Taiwan, with the rise of the NPP (New Power Party) in 2016, the TPP (Taiwan People's Party), and the TSP (Taiwan Statebuilding Party) in 2020, the Taiwanese political landscape—traditionally a two-party system dominated by KMT (Kuomintang) and DPP (Democratic Progress Party)—changed. Broadly, the realignment of political parties can be attributed to the increasing intensive conflicts between Taiwan and China. Political divisiveness in Taiwan during national elections mainly revolves around the China issue (Tan & Ho, 2017). Except for KMT, all mentioned political parties claim that Taiwan should keep a distance from China.

The rise of smaller political parties is partially attributed to their criticism of established parties.[5] The rise of NPP is also related to the Sunflower Movement protest in 2014 against an economic cooperation agreement between Taiwan and China. During this protest, protestors used technological platforms to spread information and mobilize more volunteers to join the protest (Liao, Wu, & Chen, 2020).[6] The Chinese threat became a crucial issue again in the 2018 local election. During the campaign period, the public was concerned about the information war launched by China. Furthermore, an increasing number of Taiwanese people distrusted China's one-country, two-systems proposal when China reneged on this policy about Hong Kong, which lost its freedom and democracy.

Data Set

This study selected Facebook posts produced by 12 major parties (seven for Germany and five for Taiwan) during campaign periods (see Table A in Supplementary Material, https://osf.io/jvn49/?view_only=0bae836a522d43eda03f8ba37cd5fba5). The main reason for Facebook selection is the small Twitter population in Taiwan, meaning that Twitter plays a minor role in Taiwan's elections. In contrast, the Facebook population in both selected countries is significantly higher (Newmann, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2018, 2020). Data spanning a one-year period in each country was collected by scraping Facebook post data using the Facebook API and by purchasing data from a

[5] TSP is an exception. This party strongly criticizes KMT and pro-China media and sees China as the biggest threat to Taiwan's democracy.

[6] The Sunflower Movement occurred in the spring of 2014. Crowds occupied the national parliament for almost a month out of dissatisfaction with the economic agreement with China signed by the KMT government. People were concerned that the Chinese government would impose an overbearing influence on Taiwanese society on different aspects related to daily life. During the protest period, technological platforms (PTT was the main communication tool) were successfully used for communication and mobilization.

technological company.[7] For Taiwan (election day January 11, 2020), Facebook posts from Taiwanese political parties published between January 1, 2019 and January 11, 2020 were collected. For Germany, Facebook posts from German parties published between September 1, 2016 and September 24, 2017 were collected. Excluding empty posts without texts, the Facebook posts of selected parties in both countries (N = 7,640) were analyzed.

Coding Procedure

Facebook posts are the units of analysis. All party posts from the two selected countries were coded individually because they were retrieved during different time frames. The first author of the study designed the codebook and led the coding of both national data sets. For each country's Facebook posts, we created training data sets in which parties' Facebook posts were randomly selected (n = 315 for Taiwan's data, n = 437 for Germany's). For each national data set, the first author of the study participated in the coding. In addition, we recruited two coders to code rhetorical and stylistic features of populist communication (one for Taiwan's data, one for Germany's). We spent a month training both of them on the theories of populist communication so that they could fully grasp and recognize the indicators. In terms of coder reliability, all indicators met satisfactory criteria (see Tables B & C in Supplementary Material).

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is populist frameworks that measure *degrees* of using various populist sub-frameworks in parties' Facebook posts. We included four types of populist frameworks: people-centrism, restoring popular sovereignty, antiestablishment, and exclusion (see Table D in the Supplementary Material; Ernst et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Despite the definitional inconsistency in the current populism research, covering these sub-frameworks allows us to comprehensively grasp multiple facets of populism in various social contexts. Nine rhetorical indicators of populist communication frameworks were coded as dummy variables and then combined with one composite dependent variable as a sum index (M = 1.15, SD = 1.25, min = 0, max = 7). These variables can be seen as formative measures (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, & Roth, 2008), meaning that they are not required to be internally consistent to be reliable (see also Ernst et al., 2017).

Independent Variables

For the definition of fringe parties (H1), we refer to the operationalization of Norris (2001), who considers radical ideological positions and a few parliamentary seats (less than 3%) as two prominent features. Given the differences in political landscapes in the two selected countries, extreme ideologies do not always refer to left-right ideology (e.g., the European context). Looking at the Taiwanese party landscape, the parties primarily differentiate themselves based on their positions about Cross-strait

[7] Facebook posts of parties in both countries were retrieved in different time frames. While Facebook posts of AfD and The Left Party were collected right after the 2017 national election, the rest of party Facebook posts were collected in 2021 when Meta closed its Facebook API to scholars. As an alternative, we purchased from QSearch, a Taiwan's technological company in 2020.

relations, which pertain to whether Taiwan should maintain close relationships with China or keep a cautious distance from its neighboring country with potential challenges (Tan & Ho, 2017). Based on Norris's criteria, two German parties (AfD & The Left Party) and three Taiwanese parties (NPP, TPP & TSP) are labeled fringe parties (amounts of Facebook posts: 43.1% for fringe parties and 56.8 for mainstream parties; see also Table E in Supplementary Material).

In reference to Ernst et al.'s (2019) categorizations and operationalization of communication styles (i.e., negative and sociable styles), we coded these indicators as dummy variables (see also Table F in Supplementary Material). Later, we combined both independent variables by adding up related indicators. The negative style consists of two stylistic elements: polarization and crisis rhetoric[8] (*M* = 0.37, SD = 0.66, *min* = 0, *max* = 2). The sociable style is composed of two stylistic elements: intimization and colloquialism[9] (*M* = 0.30, SD = 0.55, *min* = 0, *max* = 2).

To operationalize the campaign timing (H3), we referred to Hameleers and Vliegenthart's (2019) cross-time study, in which they examined levels of media populism over almost three decades. We operationalized weeks (*M* = 33.09, SD = 15.75, *min* = 1, *max* = 56) as units based on two rationales. First, we attempted to examine the nuanced effects of timing since parties are adjusting their communication strategies during the campaign periods. Second, our selection is data-driven because our data only records three different types of timing, including days, weeks, and months. Based on the aforementioned considerations, we argue that our operationalization can help us display nuanced differences in parties' populist communication.

Finally, as to H4, we set Germany as the reference to compare differences in populist communication between the two selected countries.

Control Variables

Online user reactions can be regarded as an algorithmic mechanism by which Facebook users' attention is exposed to post popularity (e.g., posts with higher interactions; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Haim, Kümpel, & Brosius, 2018). In particular, with higher numbers of likes on Facebook posts, parties have higher incentives to employ populist frameworks in their Facebook communications (Lin et al., 2023). Hence, we controlled for the effects of online users' reactions to parties' Facebook posts in our models. We created online user engagement (*M* = 2804.9, SD = 4320.24)—an aggregation variable that sums up related indicators, including likes, comments, shares, and other emotional reactions.

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[8] Both variables reach satisfactory intercoder reliability scores: polarization (%-agreement = 84 and Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.69 for Taiwan's data; %-agreement = 92; Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.84 for German data), and crisis rhetoric (%-agreement = 92 and Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.85 for Taiwan's data; %-agreement = 95; Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.90 for German data).

[9] Both variables reach satisfactory intercoder reliability scores: imtimization (%-agreement = 93 and Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.86 for Taiwan's data; %-agreement = 98; Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.96 for German data), and colloquialism (%-agreement = 86 and Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.72 for Taiwan's data; %-agreement = 95; Brannen & Prediger's K = 0.91 for German data).

Method

We adopted a multilevel negative binomial regression analysis (Hilbe, 2011). First, our dependent variable might be over-dispersed because its mean value is smaller than its standard deviation. Second, the distribution of the dependent variable fits the Poisson assumption (see Figure 1). Furthermore, our Facebook data is nested (i.e., the lower level is the Facebook messages, and the higher level is the political parties). Hence, our models consider the potential influences that might be caused by differences between the parties in both selected countries. The analyses were mainly conducted with several R packages (package lme4, package lmerTest).

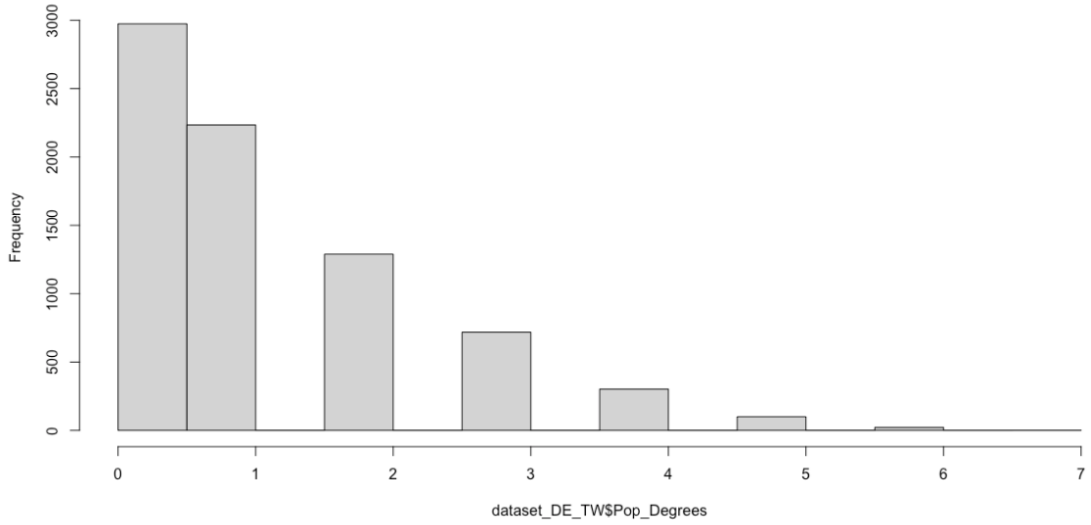

Figure 1. Distribution of the dependent variable.

Findings

In this section, we report descriptive statistics for the indicators related to populist frameworks (see Table 1). In total, around 61% of Facebook posts contained at least one populist rhetorical feature. With respect to the people-centric sub-framework (44%), "displaying closeness to the people" (22.7%) and "describing the people as homogeneous" (22.9%) are two equally used forms of populist rhetoric that are far more prominent than "praising the people's virtue" (0.7%) and "praising the people's achievements" (8.1%). With regard to the sub-frameworks of restoring popular sovereignty (29%), "demanding popular sovereignty" (16.2%) and "denying the elite's sovereignty" (16.5%) are equally prominent. With regard to the anti-elitist sub-framework (21%), describing hatred of political elites (20.3%) occurred far more often than attacking the media (2.2%). Compared with most populist communication sub-frameworks, exclusion (5.3%) was the least frequent.

Table 1. Percentages of Parties' Facebook Posts Containing Populist Frameworks.

Populist subframes	Variable of populist rhetoric	Percentage (by populist frameworks)	Percentage (by rhetorical indicators)
People-centrism	Displaying closeness to the people	43.9% (*n* = 3,356)	22.7% (*n* = 1,736)
	Praising the people's virtue		0.7% (*n* = 59)
	Praising the people's achievements		8.1% (*n* = 626)
	Describing the people as homogeneous		22.9% (*n* = 1,753)
Restoring popular sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	28.4% (*n* = 2,172)	16.2% (*n* = 1,242)
	Denying elite's sovereignty		16.5% (*n* = 1,266)
Anti-elitism	Anti-elite	21.6% (*n* = 1,650)	20.3% (*n* = 1,551)
	Anti-media		2.2% (*n* = 170)
Exclusion	Exclusion	5.3% (*n* = 410)	5.3% (*n* = 410)

We ran multilevel negative binomial regression analyses (as shown in Table 2) to scrutinize our hypotheses. Firstly, Model 1 reveals that fringe parties are indeed more inclined to employ populist communication frameworks than mainstream parties (H1) (Incidence Rate Ratio [*IRR*] = 1.41, Standard Error [*SE*] = 0.13, $p < .001$). Concerning our hypotheses concerning stylistic devices and their association with the use of populist frameworks (H2a & H2b), both hypotheses find support (*IRR* = 1.31, *SE* = 0.01, $p < .001$ for negative communication styles; *IRR* = 1.17, *SE* = 0.01, $p < .001$ for sociable styles). These findings suggest that both stylistic devices can frame different images constructed by populist frameworks in parties' Facebook communication. Furthermore, our regression model underscores the significance of campaign timing (H3). As the election day approaches, there is a 4% increase in the likelihood of parties—spanning the ideological spectrum—employing populist frameworks on their Facebook profiles (*IRR* = 1.04, *SE* = 0.02, $p < .01$).

Subsequently, we examined the interaction effects of campaign timing in Model 2. Although we initially posited that fringe parties would adopt populist frameworks more frequently over the campaign period (H3b), our analysis did not support this hypothesis (*IRR* = 1.02, *SE* = 0.03, $p = .49$). In addition, taking the timing effect into account, we found an insignificant relationship between the negative style and the use of populist frameworks, leading to the rejection of H3c (*IRR* = 0.99, *SE* = 0.01, $p = .49$). Interestingly, our regression analysis revealed a positive interaction effect of campaign timing on the use of sociable styles in conjunction with populist frameworks (*IRR* = 1.05, *SE* = 0.02, $p < .001$). This underscores

the notion that the positive and informal aspects of populist communication may also increase the levels of parties' populist communication.

Finally, as we hypothesized that the differing political opportunity structures in various contexts would result in varying levels of populist communication, our analysis indicates that there is a 39% higher likelihood that Taiwanese parties employ populist frameworks more frequently than German parties (*IRR* = 1.39, *SE* = 0.13, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Multilevel Negative Binomial Regression Models Predicting Party Uses of Populist Frameworks.

	Use of populist frameworks	
	Model 1	**Model 2**
Predictors	IRR (SE)	IRR (SE)
(Intercept)	0.69 ***(0.04)	0.69 ***(0.04)
Fringe parties (vs. mainstream ones)	1.41 ***(0.13)	1.40 ***(0.13)
Negative style	1.31 ***(0.01)	1.31 ***(0.02)
Sociable style	1.17 ***(0.01)	1.14 ***(0.02)
Campaign timing	1.04 **(0.02)	1.04 *(0.02)
Taiwan (vs. Germany)	1.39 ***(0.13)	1.39 ***(0.13)
Campaign timing*Fringe parties		1.02(0.03)
Campaign timing*Negative style		0.99(0.01)
Campaign timing*Sociable style		1.05 ***(0.02)
Online user engagement	1.10 ***(0.01)	1.10 ***(0.01)
Observations/Groups	6499/12	6499/12
AIC	15905.432	15897.802
BIC	15966.45	15979.15
log-Likelihood	−7943.716	−7936.901

*$p < .05$;**$p < .01$;*** $p < .001$

Notes. All predictors in the regression models are standardized. IRR=Incidence rate ratio. While the values of IRR are larger than 1, the relationship between the variables is positive. Conversely, there is a negative relationship between variables if the values of the IRR are lesser than 1.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this study, we aimed to build on Schmuck and Hameleers's (2020) arguments asserting that populist frameworks serve as a campaign strategy for political parties to establish intimate relationships with voters in the digital communication environment. To expand on their claims, we specifically investigated the connections between populist frameworks and affective elements (i.e., negative and sociable styles) as well as contextual factors (i.e., campaign timing). In terms of the former, our findings underscore that populist communication frameworks are conveyed by employing negative and sociable communication styles, thus strengthening the theoretical links between populism and mediatization theories. About the latter, while campaign timing has a positive effect on the use of populist frameworks,

it primarily increases party use of populist frameworks in conjunction with sociable styles throughout the entire campaign period.

The study concludes with three key arguments. First, our findings enhance our comprehension of the relationship between populist communication and stylistic devices within the digital communication landscape. Our findings indicate that a negative communication style is still an important affective dimension of populist communication since it reveals statistical significance. It tells us that negative communication styles present negative images in parties' populist messages. In addition, we emphasize the importance of acknowledging the strengths of positive affect, as suggested by Ernst et al. (2019). In particular, with the increasing use of sociable style, parties' Facebook communication patterns become more populist. To some extent, it implies that sociable styles convey positive aspects, such as candidates' charisma and parties' future visions, offering voters a more optimistic view of politics.

Second, while previous research has argued that fringe parties are skilled at employing populist rhetoric, we provide a dynamic perspective by scrutinizing changes in the use of populist communication frameworks during different election phases. In particular, as the voting day approaches, our study indicates that populist frameworks become a viable online campaign option for parties to define who their allies and adversaries are. This suggests that the contextual effects of campaigning may be applicable across diverse political contexts. However, the effects of campaign timing, as an interaction term, are limited, primarily increasing parties' use of populist frameworks through sociable styles. While our expectations about campaign timing are not fully supported, they align with Schmuck and Hameleers's (2020) argument that parties employ friendlier communication styles to connect with their supporters. In addition, there are no significant interaction effects of campaign timing on negative styles or on differences between mainstream and fringe parties.

Intriguingly, the adoption of negative communication styles does not affect the presence of populist references in the parties' posts even though we considered the potential effects of campaign timing. While the use of negative communication styles has been regarded as one of several useful campaign strategies, parties might avoid continuously framing their populist messages with negative styles. This does not contradict the existing research. Instead, we argue that parties strategically present messages on their Facebook profiles (e.g., building closer intimacy with their supporters).

Moreover, the absence of differences between mainstream and fringe parties in terms of their populist communication behaviors suggests that both types of parties can foster divisive perceptions, depicting a substantial gap between voters and political elites. This is also an interesting finding. Our interpretation is that fringe parties per se are more populist than mainstream parties. Nevertheless, as the voting day comes, mainstream parties tend to increase their use of populist frameworks.

Third, the institutional structures of political systems play a significant role. By comparing the two selected countries, we argue that levels of populist communication may be more limited in parliamentary democracies where political parties are inclined to seek political consensus and intraparty cooperation. Moreover, voices at the ideological fringes are safeguarded by institutional designs. Therefore, most smaller mainstream parties do not necessarily adopt populist rhetoric (e.g., FPD, Green

Party in Germany in our case).[10] Parties can find their supporters more easily because voter bases among different parties are generally fragile. In contrast, in Taiwan, both larger and smaller parties face a bipolarized voter base and aim to attract the attention of voters who may express varying degrees of preference on certain issues. This dynamic is exemplified by the positions on independence, where the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) primarily attracts the support of moderate voters, while radical constituencies may lean toward the New Power Party (NPP), the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), or even the Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSP). Consequently, despite higher levels of populist communication among fringe parties in Taiwan, mainstream parties also employ related communication strategies in their Facebook communications (Lin et al., 2023).

Methodologically, our study boasts two significant strengths. First, in contrast to most existing studies comparing populism among neighboring countries facing similar societal challenges in similar (e.g., European countries), we juxtaposed communicative similarities and differences in Taiwan and Germany at the party level. As a preliminary study, our study offers some interesting findings that highlight discrepancies between the two countries within different contexts. Second, from a communication-centric perspective, our analysis revealed that specific populist rhetoric is more prevalent in parties' Facebook communications, with the people-centric populist framework being particularly significant in our case. These findings not only support the arguments of Ernst et al. (2017), who contend that the presence of populist communication is fragmented and multifaceted but also suggest that people-centric rhetoric may be the most prominent populist communication framework in parties' Facebook communications.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although we have attempted to generalize parties' populist communication patterns, our analysis has several limitations, leaving some important questions to be addressed in future studies. First, we did not include minor political parties out of national parliaments in the analysis. Drawing on existing populism theories, it can be expected that minor parties also have higher incentives to adopt populist frameworks in their Facebook messages. Given the many challenges we faced (e.g., limited availability of data, time, and labor), only parliamentary parties were selected for this study. Meanwhile, we note that minor parties have not received much attention in previous research either. Communicative patterns of minor parties might be examined more comprehensively in future studies.

Second, while certain shared features of national media landscapes (e.g., wide uses of Facebook) give an impression of comparability, the role of specific POS (e.g., electoral systems, political regimes) should be further investigated in future studies. More specifically, our analysis implies that parties' communication patterns could be influenced by a deeper structural design. It also indicates that parties' populist communication patterns could be expressed in various ways (see also Engesser, Enrst et al., 2017).

[10] Based on our data, three smaller mainstream parties show relatively lower degrees of populist communication (mean values are between 0.43 and 0.64) compared with fringe parties, such as AfD (M = 1.65) and Die Linke (M = 0.97).

Therefore, this structural factor can help researchers explain differences when more national cases from different social and political backgrounds are included.

Third, given that the electoral timeline varies country by country, related arguments should be examined more in depth in future studies. Meanwhile, we might shift our focus to the communicative patterns of mainstream parties. It involves several topics. First, do mainstream parties per se employ populist rhetoric during campaign periods? Second, do mainstream parties change their uses of populist rhetoric as elections approach? These questions are currently being studied, but related research shows different viewpoints (see also Ernst et al., 2017; van Kessel & Castelein, 2016).

Indeed, the timing of campaigns is a significant factor, but it is also crucial to explore how agenda setting during elections can impact the levels of populist communication. Specifically, we should delve into how parties adapt their use of populist rhetoric in response to various issues, considering that multiple issues often dominate the campaign agenda during elections. These questions provide valuable avenues for future research and can shed further light on the nuanced dynamics of populist communication in the context of electoral campaigns.

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