



**The 21st Century UK and US: Examining the underlying rhetoric that
characterises populist leaders' social media discourse**

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i. Abstract

This dissertation examines the underlying rhetoric that characterises 21st century UK and US populist leaders' social media discourse. Through a qualitative, critical, and theory-informed approach, the study analyses four populist figures (two from each country) – Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage of the UK, along with Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders of the US. The research employs a case study analysis, followed by an observed synthesis of populist rhetoric, to evaluate the underlying patterns and themes present within the leaders' rhetoric.

This dissertation's findings reveal two key, consistent underlying characteristics that shape these leaders' social media discourse: appeals to the people and anti-elitism. These characteristics are examined through various theoretical lenses, especially relying on Mudde and Kaltwasser's, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi's theory of populism as both an ideology and communication style, as well as Habermas' and Mouffe's public sphere theory. The dissertation's contextual evaluation of theory is supported by a manual selection of four tweets and four Instagram posts, one for each leader on each platform. This dissertation's research contributes to the broader understanding of the characteristics present within underlying populist rhetorics that are apparent in social media discourse.

ii. ACRONYMS

UK (United Kingdom)

US (United States)

PM (Prime Minister)

MP (Member of Parliament)

X (Twitter)

API (Application Programming Interface)

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement

It is undeniable that social media has dominated the 21st century's international political landscape. While most politicians still engage with traditional media, many have simultaneously ushered their campaigns to various social media platforms, including (but not limited to) Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and X. Platforms like these provide a more streamlined, direct way for political leaders to communicate with both their supporters and opposers. This communication is mutual: social media also offers politically inclined individuals the opportunity to effortlessly express their opinions, as well as reach out to (and potentially converse with) their elected officials. Researchers at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism have determined that the rise of social media has indeed impacted how individuals receive political information, stating that 'the audience for traditional news media is shrinking, while the popularity of social media as sources of political information is constantly growing' (Newman et. al, 2020). Given this shift in how audiences obtain information, it is crucial to understand the underlying rhetoric that characterises social media discourse.

Both right-wing and left-wing politicians employ social media to discuss issues that are of significance within their party. However, what appears to be a phenomenon within this wider debate has little to do with party affiliation. Rather, it can be understood that underlying rhetoric present within social media discourse depends on the 'type' of leader a politician is. Within this dissertation, two 'types' of leaders are identified: populist and mainstream.

It is first necessary to understand that populism manifests as both an ideology and a communication style, meaning that it can differ when put into practise. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 6) note that populism is a widely contested concept, but that the theoretical understanding can be defined as the following: 'a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.' Within this dissertation, Mudde and Kaltwasser's explanation of populism is identified as the standard theoretical definition of the ideology. Conversely, populism in a leader and in practise differs. While a populist leader will pinpoint their support for 'the ordinary' and their dislike of 'the elite', they can also be described by a particular set of rhetorics, such as described by Nai, Coma, and Maier (2019, p. 610): populist leaders '...rely on provocation and a more aggressive rhetoric, which sets them apart from other mainstream candidates.' A tangible definition of populism as a communication style and in practise is defined in this dissertation's literature review.

Like populist theory, there are a variety of conflicting understandings of mainstream parties (Brown et. al, 2023, p. 164). That said, Meguid's (2005, p. 348) definition of a mainstream party is largely acknowledged by scholars within this debate, and can therefore also be understood as a guideline for this dissertation's classification of the term: 'Mainstream parties are defined as the electorally dominant actors in the centre-left, centre, and centre-right blocs on the Left-Right political spectrum.' However, the rhetoric and characteristics that define a mainstream leader are not yet fully understood. Crulli and Albertazzi's (2024, p. 2) explanation provides clarity on what it means to be labelled as a mainstream individual, noting that 'to be called "mainstream", certain attitudes must be shared by a majority of the public, *and* there must be no significant differences in their endorsement across political groups.'

Mainstream theory is nowhere near as widely developed as populist theory. Though the mainstream debate is acknowledged as legitimate, due to its lack of theoretical depth, populist leaders' and their associated rhetoric can be understood as the focus point of this dissertation.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is to evaluate the underlying rhetoric that characterises populist leaders' discourse on social media in the 21st century UK and US. Despite the differences among the institutional structures of these two nations, they were chosen as this dissertation's setting of focus due to their shared history, common political values, and recent uprisings of populist leaders. This rise in populist leaders, as well as the increased usage of social media as a political source, highlights the theoretical and empirical significance of this dissertation's research. While studies have established the links among these increases, a gap in the scholarship persists: there are still limited reports discussing what underlying rhetoric characterises populist leaders' discourse on social media, especially ones situated in the context of the 21st century UK and US. Though this dissertation cannot fully bridge this gap, it intends to expand on previous information presented within the wider populist debate via frameworks of existing theories, with particular emphasis on populist theory as well as public sphere theory.

This dissertation's methodology is distinguished by its case study analysis of 21st century UK and US populist leaders. The studies are comprised of two UK populist leaders and two US populist leaders, with particular focus on the underlying rhetoric present within their social media discourse: for the UK, former PM Boris Johnson and current MP Nigel Farage, and for the US, President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders. The case study analysis is followed by comparisons of the four leaders' observed rhetoric, subsequently supported by a synthesis

and evaluation of patterns observed within the rhetoric, which aims to uncover the similar underlying themes present in populist social media discourse.

1.3. Limitations

Scholars examining the wider populist debate have identified a variety of limitations present within their research. For one, populism's set of contested definitions can be understood as a minor limitation. To overcome this barrier, this dissertation strictly utilises two explanations of populism as a fixed term: Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) previously established theoretical understanding of the concept, as well as Canovan (1981) and Jaegers and Walgrave's (2007) definition of populism in practise and as a communication style, which is introduced within the literature review. Aside from this, one other limitation particularly presents itself as impacting this dissertation's overall research – the strength (or lack thereof) of a nation's governing institutions. Peters and Pierre (2019) have noted that a populist leader's ability to prosper depends on the structure of their respective nation's governing institutions. Hence, the differing structures of governing institutions poses a hinderance to the comparative analysis of populist leaders in different countries. On this matter, Weyland (2024, p. 4) notes the following: '... institutional weakness increases the chances for populist strength.' While both the UK and US have been widely labelled as developed democracies with concrete governing institutions, this limitation indicates that, to conduct an accurate analysis, the differences in these two nations' institutional structures, strengths, and weaknesses must be acknowledged. One of the most notable variations within UK and US governing institutions is that the UK operates under a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, whereas the US functions under a

constitutional federal republic. Hence, variations in these countries' governing institutions are acknowledged and accepted as a possible shortcoming within this dissertation's research.

2. Literature Review

Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) theoretical definition of populism posits that it is a 'thin-centred ideology', meaning that its focus is especially niche and cannot provide comprehensive answers to the questions that exist within the wider debate, that is without the backing of supplementary concrete ideologies. Thus, while this dissertation recognises the origin of populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', it aims to better understand populism in practise. This type of 'populism in practise' can be better understood as 'a communication style that is distinctly anti-elitist and claims to promote the will of the "ordinary" people.' (Canovan, 1981; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, Schaub and Morisi, 2019, p. 752). To make sense of populism in practise and as a communication style, this dissertation's case studies are comprised of a select group of four populist leaders, as outlined in this dissertation's aims & objectives. This literature review utilises these case studies as a framework for the evaluation of populist texts.

Johnson, Farage, Trump, and Sanders were chosen as an overall focus point for a couple of reasons. Firstly, there is an even distribution of leaders who possess considerably different political ideologies, which ensures that populist theory is discussed in the context of more than just one political leaning. Hence, this mitigates as much political party bias as possible within this dissertation's research. The second reason these four leaders were chosen is due to the wide range of literature that discusses their social media presence in relation to populist theory. While there is a selection of other leaders that could have been discussed, existing literature examining these four leaders within a populist context is particularly plentiful, thus permitting an especially meaningful and substantial evaluation within this dissertation. This literature review simply aims

to provide clarity on the previous literature that evaluates what underlying rhetoric characterises these four leaders' discourse on social media.

2.1. 21st Century UK and US Populist Leaders

UK Populist Leaders

a. Boris Johnson

Populist literature indicates former UK PM Boris Johnson, who held office from 2019-2022, as one of the UK's most notable populists. Johnson has been labelled as such for a plethora of reasons, but arguably his most notable claim to populist fame (during his time as PM, at least) is his 'hard Brexit' leave, solidifying the UK's departure from the EU on the 31st of January 2020 (Brusenbauch Meislová and Martill, 2024). The leave was largely characterised by Johnson's populist political strategy, particularly through his 'willingness to flaunt the rules and engage in offensive behaviour and rhetoric' (Collier, 2022, p. 536). While Johnson was able to achieve a hard Brexit via traditional media channels, which are classified by Fotopoulos (2023, p. 277) as 'TV, radio, and the printed press', much of his populist discourse was also a result of his social media activity, as Taraktaş, Esen, and Uskudarli (2022) argue.

Johnson's social media is framed by anti-elitist rhetoric and appeals to 'the people', thus exhibiting his populist tendencies. Taraktaş, Esen, and Uskudarli's (2022) research highlights this by analysing a collection of English tweets from X's API. They found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered Johnson's social media usage, and that his 'highest number of tweets' occurred in 2019, which was both pre-COVID and pre-Brexit. Evaluating the data collected in their study, Taraktaş, Esen, and Uskudarli (2022, p. 216) state the following: 'Johnson's pre-pandemic social media discourse

qualifies as a populist style; the most frequent words are 'country' and 'people' followed by opposition actors (Jeremy Corbyn) and Johnson's party.' Johnson utilised this anti-elitist rhetoric via his posts on X to successfully push one of the most significant items on his political agenda: a hard Brexit. Similarly, Čatipović (2023, p. 101) discusses Johnson's appeals to 'the people', noting how he utilised his Facebook page to achieve this: 'He distinguishes himself from the elite by using first-person plural and presenting himself as "one of the people". He does so by, for example, posting on his Facebook page: "if we Vote Leave, then all our votes will count for more in the future."' Johnson's continuous usage of terms such as 'we' and 'the people' indicate his promotion of 'the will of "the ordinary people"' (Canovan, 1981; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Schaub and Morisi, 2019, p. 752), a distinguishing factor of the populist communication style.

b. Nigel Farage

Within the wider populist debate and its associated literature, Nigel Farage is a familiar name. Farage was previously a member and leader of UKIP, which is said to have lost much of its status and power post-EU referendum (Evans and Mellon, 2019). Thus, Farage founded his own party of populists, the Brexit Party, in 2019 (Robaina, 2025). Farage's then-new party had just one item on the agenda: to advocate for a hard Brexit, like Johnson did. In early 2021, around a year after Brexit took effect, the party rebranded as 'Reform UK' (Heath et. al, 2024). Reform has quickly become a threat to the Conservatives; their participation in the 2024 UK elections led to 'the largest swing against a sitting government ever recorded, seeing the Conservative vote share plummet by twenty percentage points as they were swept out of office...' (Heath et. al, 2024, p. 91).

Populist literature indicates that Farage's supremacy is shaped by underlying themes of populism within his rhetoric, and that this rhetoric is especially apparent within his social media discourse (Breeze, 2020; Karamanidou and Sahin, 2021).

Farage's populism is rooted in fierce anti-EU sentiment, shaped by consistent references to 'the concepts of the elite, the people, and the general will' (Bull, Weinberg, and Coen, 2024, p. 198). An instance of this anti-EU positionality is shown in the following text, which was uploaded by Farage to X on the 25th of May 2016: 'People in Bolton sick of establishment scare tactics. They want to Leave EU & get their country back #BrexitBusTour' (Carrella, 2018, p. 37). By immediately identifying 'the people' and thereafter mentioning the pitfalls of 'the establishment', Farage associates himself with 'the people' and then positions 'the people' against 'the establishment'. He also boldly speaks on behalf of 'the people', claiming that they want 'their country back' by leaving the EU. This helps Farage further construct his groundless anti-immigration beliefs, but also his overall public populist image and underlying rhetoric. Moreover, another group of researchers also found that, after coding tweets gathered from X's API, 44.5% of Farage's uploads were considered 'antagonistic' (Gonawela et. al, 2018). This antagonism reflects Farage's continued criticisms of the elite and the establishment, hence highlighting his underlying rhetoric and populist qualities.

US Populist Leaders

c. Donald Trump

Researchers within the populist debate have identified Donald Trump as one of the US' most well-known populist leaders. He was president from 2017-2021, and was re-elected for a second term, which began in January 2025 (Waterhouse, 2017). Trump's

underlying rhetoric and social media discourse is especially populist-like: 'his populism manifested itself not only in the uncommon contours of his administration's foreign policy, but in his rhetorical attacks on the establishment' (Biegon and Hamdaoui, 2024). A businessman-turned-politician, Trump is particularly known for his avid usage of social media, with posts that are characterised by his underlying populist-style rhetoric. Due to his posts related to the infamous 6th of January US Capitol riots, Trump was temporarily banned from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in 2021 (Whitcomb, 2021; BBC, 2021). He responded to the bans by creating his own social media platform, 'TRUTH social that he said would "stand up to Big Tech" companies...' (Whitcomb, 2021). Trump's response distinguishes the 'Big Tech' companies as the 'elite', while himself and his supporters are considered 'the people' – this can be understood as an inherently populist response.

Utilising a populist framework, Zhang, Afzaal, and Liu (2020, p. 1277) conducted a case study of Trump's tweets throughout the 2016 US presidential election, finding that he frequently used militant language to describe his opposers. Some of these terms included 'rival', 'crooked & Hillary', 'Bernie Sanders', and 'Ted Cruz', among others. The study concluded that 'attacking rivals and the establishment were the most influential topic of Trump tweets' (Zhang, Afzaal, and Liu, 2020, p. 1277). Lee and Xu (2018, p. 207) previously identified this pattern as well. They note that within Trump's tweets, his 'issue agenda' displayed that, 'as a challenger, he mainly focused on criticizing the elites in power.' This research also compiled a list of Trump's 'most re-tweeted tweets', many of which are embedded in his underlying populist rhetoric. For instance, this viral Trump tweet posted on the 11th of October 2016 amassed 30,027 retweets: 'Wow, @CNN Town Hall questions were given to Crooked Hillary Clinton in advance of big debates against

Bernie Sanders. Hillary & CNN FRAUD!' (Lee and Xu, 2018, p. 209). Trump's consistent utilisation of accusatory and pejorative language towards both establishments and his opposers signposts his support for the 'people', as well as his dislike of the 'elite' – these are all instances of terminology that are rooted within his underlying rhetoric.

d. Bernie Sanders

Populist literature classifies Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders as one of the US' most prominent populist leaders. Prior to his election to the US Senate in 2006, Sanders served as Vermont's one and only congressman in the US House of Representatives (Sanders, 2018). Pre-congress, he was mayor of Burlington. Sanders ran for president in both 2016 and 2020, but he suspended both campaigns as he did not have enough delegates to win a party nomination (Detrow, 2020). A staunch politician known for his socialist views and lack of formal party association, Sanders thrives largely on grassroots donations from supporters – in 2020, ' Sanders held exactly zero big dollar fundraisers and rejected money from Wall Street executives and the fossil fuel industry' (Peters and Woolley, 2020). The senator is well-known for his criticisms of the ultra-wealthy and elite, as well as his mobilisation of the working-class people – these are what largely contribute to Sanders' underlying rhetoric.

Many scholars have described populism as 'anti-democratic.' Cohen (2025, p. 1) explains that this is not necessarily the case, and that populism can be a vehicle to promote democratic 'transformative political practises'. He notes that Sanders is an example of promoting these practises, but that he still utilises populist discourse to do so. One instance of this discourse is Sanders' attacks on his rivals, Hillary Clinton, during the 2016 presidential elections. Clinton had sizable speaking fees, to which Sanders called

her out for during a televised debate, saying that 'these speeches to Goldman Sachs must be “Shakespearean” to deserve her extremely generous fees' (Caldwell, 2016; Cohen, 2025, p. 8). This style of discourse is also apparent on Sanders' social media; Moffitt (2022, p. 84) notes Sanders' emphasis on 'the people', stating that within many of his Instagram posts, 'there was a concerted effort to highlight racial diversity... with several slideshows depicting the diversity of his supporters and making an explicit argument about strength through difference.' By posting visuals (followed by relevant text) of his diverse base of individuals on social media, Sanders exhibits traits of populist-style communication: he strongly indicates his support of 'the people'. Penney (2017) also notes that Sanders' social media posts frequently touch on themes of anti-elitism, hence emphasising the underlying rhetoric that characterises his discourse on social media.

3. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

3.1. Populist theory

Mudde and Kaltwasser / Canovan; Jagers and Walgrave; Schaub and Morisi

Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) theoretical definition of populism, as well as Canovan (1981), Jagers and Walgrave (2007), and Schaub and Morisi's (2019, p. 752) practical understanding of populism provides a baseline framework for this dissertation's evaluation of populist leaders and their social media activities. Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) theoretical definition of populism is utilised due to its breadth and versatility: it is comprehensive enough to discuss populism in the context of both right-wing and left-wing leaders. It is also widely regarded by scholars of the populist debate as a standard theoretical definition of the concept,

hence validating its use as a framework within this dissertation. Alternatively, Canovan (1981), Jagers and Walgrave (2007), and Schaub and Morisi's (2019, p. 752) definition of populism is utilised due to its practicality. Its framing of populism as a communication style enables a coherent analysis of populism in practise, particularly in political leaders. This perspective also helps further this dissertation's evaluation of what underlying rhetoric characterises populist leaders' discourse on social media, as it clarifies that populism can also present itself as a communication style, whether it be via traditional or social media. However, since populism is a heavily contested concept, it is crucial to acknowledge how its various associated theories impact the research within this dissertation.

Jan-Werner Müller

Jan-Werner Müller's (2017, p. 2) commentary on populist theory presents yet another central argument of the wider debate, and one that is especially relevant to this dissertation. He begins by noting the broader implications of populist theory and scholarship: 'We simply do not have anything like a theory of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense.' Müller's observation implies that populist theory is especially nuanced, meaning that limitations within the debate are plentiful. Particularly, he posits that there is a lack of consistent criteria to determine what classifies a political leader as a populist. Müller's evaluation of this barrier puts this dissertation's limitations into perspective; it justifies the presence of various understandings of the ideologies among the wider populist debate, as well as within this dissertation's research. Within his analysis of populist theory, Müller (2017, p. 19-20) puts forward his own understanding of populism: 'Populism, I suggest, is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified...people against elites who are deemed

corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.' While Müller's understanding of populism is not considered to be the standard among populist theory, it is still necessary to acknowledge as his subsequent arguments build upon this definition.

Müller (2017, p. 20) argues that populist leaders, in part, can be identified by their 'anti pluralist' rhetoric, which leads them to 'claim that they, and only they, represent the people.' Müller posits that populist leaders' use of this rhetoric contributes to the invalidation of dissenting opinions, democratic values, and a nation's governing institutions. This claim reflects several themes present within this dissertation, including populists' attacks on their opponents and their appeals to 'the people.' Müller (2017, p. 3-4) additionally discusses the anti-pluralist reasoning put forward by Jürgen Habermas (1994), who contended that "'the people' can only appear in the plural. And it's a dangerous fantasy, because populists do not just thrive on conflict and encourage polarisation; they also treat their political opponents as "enemies of the people" and seek to exclude them altogether.' This assertion resonates with the populist communication styles analysed within this dissertation, in which underlying rhetoric is employed by populist leaders to make appeals to 'the people', but also to simultaneously establish political opposers as enemies with illegitimate opinions.

Ernesto Laclau

Laclau's (2005, p. 6-7) interpretation of populist theory is particularly unique. He is initially critical of Canovan's (1981) understanding of populism and argues the following: '...what Canovan is providing is not a typology, in the strong sense of the term, but, rather, a map of the linguistic dispersion that has governed the uses of the term "populism"'. Laclau (2005, p. 13) recognises Canovan for her framing of as populism as a political style that encompasses 'appeals to the people', but hypothesises that populist theory is rather shaped by a set of

discursive practises – the communicative measures via which political and social significance is emphasised and framed – noting that '...what matters is the determination of the discursive sequences through which a social force or movement carries out its overall political performance.' Laclau implies that populism is fundamentally rooted in discourse, challenging both Müller's moralistic and Canovan's typological understandings of populist theory. This theoretical distinction is especially relevant to this dissertation's evaluation of leaders' underlying rhetoric and social media discourse, as it exhibits the significance of assessing populist communication by content (as Müller and Canovan posit), as well as via discursive theory (as introduced by Laclau). Additionally, Laclau emphasises the term 'empty signifier', which he uses to describe a phrase that is inherently ambiguous (such as 'the people' or 'the elite'). This poses a particular relevance to ideological differences among populists, as both right-wing and left-wing leaders can apply these 'empty signifiers' in alignment with their social media discourse.

3.2. Public sphere theory

In addition to populist theory, this dissertation heavily relies on themes present within the theory of the public sphere. The following evaluates three arguments present in the theoretical debate, followed by a discussion of their relevancy to this dissertation.

Jürgen Habermas

As previously implied, Habermas is a widely known scholar within the populist debate. That said, he is most well-known for his creation of the public sphere theory in 1962 (translated from German to English in 1989). He defines the public sphere as the following: '...a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens...A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation

in which private individuals assemble to form a public' (Habermas, 1962; Burger and Lawrence, 1989, p. 27). Habermas' theory is especially relevant to this dissertation's discussion of social media, which can be thought of as a modern-day, digital extension of the public sphere. By utilising social media platforms as a version of the public sphere, leaders can directly liaise with the public, avoiding the interjection of traditional media outlets. That said, Habermas' theory does differ when discussed in a 21st century context, as noted by Elizade and Herbet (2023). They explain that Habermas' romanticised idea of access and inclusivity within the public sphere is inaccurate, as his thesis largely focused on one social class of people: the bourgeois. Hence, applying this idea to social media in the 21st century, where individuals of most social classes are present, proves difficult. Elizade and Herbert (2023, p. 327) elaborate, saying that 'The bourgeois space for discussion, almost assimilated to the Greek agora, had no future in a mass society with politics for the masses.'

However there are still ways in which Habermas' theory can exist within the context of social media. Rather than identifying a singular public sphere in the 21st century, as Habermas suggests, a multiplicity of public spheres exist. Social media enables this: likeminded individuals of varying social classes can form their own, collective smaller discourse communities to discuss political issues of importance. This challenges not only Habermas' idea of a singular public sphere, but also his understanding of inclusivity, as public spheres within social media do not solely cater to one class (the bourgeois). When contemporary adaptations are acknowledged, Habermas' public sphere theory proves relevant to this dissertation's theoretical/conceptual framework. Situated in the context of 21st century social media, Habermas' theory helps to better understand how social media can function under multiple public spheres, through providing a 'public' space for 'private' individuals to speak with one another. It emphasises the idea of inclusive, open debate, meaning that populist leaders can utilise the space to their advantage, in

which they often promote their underlying rhetoric (such as their 'appeals to the people' and anti-elite sentiments).

Chantal Mouffe

Chantal Mouffe's (2002) explanation of public sphere theory challenges that of Habermas'. Like Elizade and Herbert, Mouffe argues that Habermas' idea of inclusivity is not only flawed and exclusive, but also overly optimistic. She is quick to link democracy to the public sphere, explaining that democracy flourishes when diverse, marginalised perspectives are present. To support this argument, Mouffe (2002, p. 58) establishes the model of 'agonistic pluralism', which she defines as 'one which acknowledges the role of power relations in society and the ever present possibility of antagonism.' She posits that conflicting, diverse views are inevitable within a democratic society, hence the public sphere naturally provides a space for antagonistic debate. As previously discussed within this dissertation, populist leaders tend to employ antagonistic discourse via their social media; the 44.5% of antagonistic tweets uploaded by Nigel Farage proves to be a relevant instance of this (Gonawela et. Al, 2018). Therefore, as suggested by Mouffe, social media constructs an ideal space for antagonistic discourse, allowing populist leaders to impose their underlying rhetoric.

Though Mouffe's work is largely accepted by scholars of public sphere theory, her argument does have its limitations. For one, Mouffe is particularly ambiguous when discussing the concept of 'the people' and does not provide a concrete definition of who precisely 'the people' are. Rather, she simply characterises 'the people' by both their pluralism and antagonism. This challenges Müller's fixed, essentialist understanding of 'the people', emphasising the gap within the theoretical debate of the public sphere. Moreover, Mouffe's argument is not particularly practical; she struggles to cite instances of how agonistic pluralism manifests itself

within public spheres of the 21st century. Thus, while Mouffe's work does shape parts of this dissertation's theory, these two limitations of her argument are acknowledged.

4. Methodology

As mentioned in this dissertation's aims and objectives, the main intention of this research is to better make sense of what underlying rhetoric characterises populist leaders' discourse on social media. To achieve this, both a qualitative and theoretical approach is adopted. Highlighted by works from scholars of both populist theory (Mudde and Kaltwasser; Canovan; Jagers and Walgrave; Schaub and Morisi; Müller; Laclau) and public sphere theory (Habermas; Mouffe), this dissertation's research design is shaped by a case study analysis. Four populist leaders (Johnson, Farage, Trump, and Sanders) are designated individual case studies; their overall observed underlying rhetoric is compared, evaluated, and synthesised. This synthesised rhetoric is subsequently evaluated, highlighting common patterns and themes that characterise the social media discourse of the four leaders. These methods of analysis were chosen as they allow for a contextualised, in-depth, and theory-informed evaluation of the relationship among political power, language, and social media.

4.1. Case Study Analysis

Case studies were chosen as the primary methods of analysis within this dissertation to better understand populism as a practice and political communication style, rather than a standalone theory. As established previously, the four case studies presented in this dissertation are Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage of the UK, and Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders of the US. Various reasons guided the selection of these four figures as a point of analysis. Notably,

these leaders possess opposing political ideologies. This allows for ideological bias mitigation but also tests the fundamentals of populist theory. Unlike other political theories, such as liberalism or conservatism, populism is not typically associated with a particular party. That said, it has typically been evaluated in the context of right-wing leaders of various parties. Despite belonging to three separate parties and exhibiting ideological variations, three of four of the case studies chosen (Johnson, Farage, and Trump) are all considered to be right-wing leaders. Though this similarity exists, these cases are still suitable for a comparative analysis because of the leaders' varying party associations, ideologies, positions of power, and countries. Consequently, Sanders was chosen to ensure ideological balance, as well as to challenge the norm of evaluating primarily right-wing populists. Additionally, these four leaders were chosen because of the wide range of populist literature discussing the characteristics of their underlying rhetoric, hence enabling a particularly comprehensive, complete analysis of their social media discourse. These leaders have also been especially active in public discourse, frequently communicating with both their peers and the public via social media. This clearly links the impact of the four populist leaders' social media discourse to Habermas' public sphere theory.

The case studies provided analyse sets of X and Instagram posts uploaded by the four populist leaders post-2016. These platforms were chosen as they have been around longer than competing social media applications, such as Snapchat and TikTok, thus more comprehensive datasets are available. The post-2016 timeframe was selected as it marks a moment of political transition in both the UK and US, prompted by the observed rise in populist sentiment and social media as source of political information. While post-2016 cannot represent the entirety of the 21st century, these reasons justify its usage as a starting point of this dissertation's analysis. The data was comprised through a manual selection of X and Instagram posts. Observed recurring words and phrases within the data are then compared, synthesised, and evaluated, guided by both populist

and public sphere theory.' By focusing on UK and US leaders with contrasting ideologies, a theory-informed analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how populist rhetoric functions across various national settings, thus enabling a consistent analysis.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. Case Studies

a. UK v. US

i. Boris Johnson

Johnson's underlying rhetoric largely aligns with Müller's ideas of exclusionary discourse and anti-pluralist rhetoric, along with Laclau's theory of 'empty signifiers', as well as Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi's conception of populism as a division among 'the people' and 'the elite'. On the 24th of January 2025, more than six months after Starmer was elected PM, Johnson posted the following on X: 'People I meet abroad now pity us Brits over the sheer ghastliness of Starmer's socialist sogfest of gloom.' By immediately identifying 'the people' and claiming to know their opinions, Johnson posits himself as the one and only representative of the people, hence playing into the anti-pluralist rhetoric of Müller. Additionally, Johnson's choice to criticise Starmer with negatively-connotated rhetoric, by using terms such as 'ghastliness', 'sogfest', and 'gloom' corresponds with Müller's theory of exclusionary discourse; through the usage of these loaded words and discourse, Johnson excludes not just his opponent, but also anyone that supports his opponent. Moreover, Johnson's rhetoric presents a variety of 'empty signifiers', like that of Laclau's theory. On the 9th of December 2019, Johnson posted a

slideshow of pictures of himself on Instagram, presumably speaking about Brexit at an industrial warehouse, surrounded by workers and an unidentified woman in a red coat. The caption of the post reads: '1,264 days ago, the British people voted to leave. Since then, Parliament – and the Labour Party – have let you down by refusing to get Brexit done. Only the Conservative party can now respect the will of the people and deliver what they voted for. Back me to get Brexit done.'

Johnson's utilisation of empty signifiers – such as 'the British people' and 'the will of the people' – indicates his simplification of a particularly complex issue (Brexit). By oversimplifying the issue through using ambiguous terminology (empty signifiers), Johnson rallies the support of the people via this rhetoric. Furthermore, the images within this Instagram post also represent Johnson's division of 'the people' and 'the elite'; he is surrounded by warehouse workers, hence furthering his claim that he is also one of 'the people', and therefore a suitable representative of them. This largely relates to themes of 'the people' and 'the elite' that populists employ, as discussed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi.

ii. Nigel Farage

Farage's underlying rhetoric is especially polarising, characterised by confrontational and antagonistic rhetoric, hence Mouffe's understanding of antagonism and Müller's anti-pluralist theory prove to be particularly relevant. On the 22nd of April 2025, Farage uploaded the following to X: 'Today I campaigned in Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Warwickshire & Worcestershire. The other parties are nowhere to be seen in this election campaign.' Making the

untrue and bold claim about every one of his opposing parties' lacks of success, Farage delegitimises any and all dissenting voices and opinions. Guided by Mouffe's theory, this is a display of populist antagonism within the public sphere (social media), as Farage's rhetoric has framed conflict not as a competition among his legitimate opponents, but as a competition between 'the people' and 'the elite'. Farage's Instagram is defined by similar rhetoric. On the 5th of November 2019, Farage uploaded a picture to his Instagram of himself with a pair of boxing gloves on. The caption reads the following: 'Great start to our nationwide tour. The gloves are off and we are going straight after Corbyn's Labour.' By suggesting that Labour's presence is a target, rather than an opposing political party, Farage does not accept the party's legitimacy, thus conforming to Müller's anti-pluralist rhetoric. Via his Instagram discourse, Farage suggests that he is the sole representative of the people, and that any dissenting voices are invalid. The boxing gloves that Farage wears in the picture can also be understood as promoting conflict and controversy, relating back to the antagonism utilised by populists within the public sphere, as suggested by Mouffe.

iii. Donald Trump

Trump's underlying rhetoric is distinguished by his exclusionary discourse, consistent 'appeals to the people', and denunciation of 'the elite.' These rhetorics closely align with Laclau's 'empty signifiers' theory, as well as Müller's anti-pluralist theory and Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi's division of 'the people' and 'the elite.' On the 16th of October 2024, just a few weeks before the presidential election, Trump posted the

following to X: 'Kamala's support is collapsing with Black voters. Inflation is hell. Worse, their cities are being used as illegal alien dumping grounds. If Kamala gets 4 more years, the Black Community loses its political power forever because their neighbourhoods will all be majority migrant.' A variety of empty signifiers can be observed in this tweet – 'Black Community', 'illegal alien dumping grounds', and 'political power'. These are representative of emotionally-charged phrases that do not have one fixed definition and can be interpreted differently by individuals. Laclau posits that the utilisation of empty signifiers can form collective identities, thus enabling a range of people to relate and make their own meaning of the phrases. Via these empty signifiers, Trump puts his underlying rhetoric into action through his appeals to various groups of people. Likewise, Trump's Instagram displays aspects of his underlying rhetoric. On the 2nd of July 2020, he posted a photo of him in front of the American flag, with text written over the photo that says, 'June Jobs Report / 4.8 MILLION JOBS ADDED! / President Donald J. Trump.' The caption underneath the photo reads, 'JOBS, JOBS, JOBS! #MAGA.' While this post does not necessarily propose a direct attack on an opponent, it reiterates Trump's claim that he is the correct choice to protect the people's best economic interests, therefore still invalidating his opponents. Müller argues that this invalidation is especially apparent among populist leaders. Moreover, this post emphasises his 'appeals to the people' and denunciation of 'the elite.' By promising to defend the economic interests of the people via this discourse, Trump employs an appeal to 'the people', while subsequently implying that 'the elite' cannot achieve this. Additionally, the hashtag Trump utilised, which is an acronym for his well-known campaign slogan

– 'Make America Great Again' – deploys a call for action, allowing for collective identity against 'the elite.' As a result of his 'appeals to the people' and denunciation of the elite, Trump's social media discourse closely corresponds to 'the people' versus 'the elite' argument made by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi.

iv. Bernie Sanders

Sanders' underlying rhetoric can be identified by his inclusive language, 'appeals to the people', and anti-elite sentiments. This discourse correlates to theory proposed by Habermas, as well as theory discussed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi. On the 10th of November 2016, Sanders published the following to X: 'If Donald Trump takes people's anger and turns it against Muslims, Hispanics, African Americans and women, we will be his worst nightmare.' Habermas argues that the public sphere can be characterised by inclusivity and rationality, which Sanders promotes by addressing the sad realities that a variety marginalised groups of individuals face. He infers that he is ready to stand up for these groups of individuals, to better promote inclusive, representative discourse within the public sphere, hence corresponding to the inclusivity encouraged by Habermas' theory. Furthermore, Sanders also utilises his Instagram page to further his underlying rhetoric, particularly through his 'appeals to the people' and anti-elite sentiments. On the 7th of January 2025, Sanders posted an image of an artwork showcasing individuals of various religious faiths, with text over the picture that reads 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' He repeats this phrase in the caption below,

followed by text that states 'The "Golden Rule," and what virtually every major religion teaches: not lying, not cheating, not stealing – but treating people as you would like to be treated.' This connects to the populist theories shaped by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi, which proposes that populists' underlying rhetoric is often characterised by moral appeals to 'the people'. Sanders elevates the morality of 'the people' through his reference to shared philosophical teachings, therefore employing a moral 'appeal to the people', while implying that those who do not relate to these teachings belong to 'the elite'.

b. Overall Comparisons & Synthesis of Populist Rhetoric

Having analysed the four case studies individually, this section now aims to uncover the similar and varying themes of the populist leaders' underlying rhetoric that ultimately characterises their social media discourse. Of the four tweets and four Instagram posts evaluated, two distinct patterns of populist rhetoric can be identified: 'appeals to the people' and 'anti-elitism'.

i. Appeals to the people

Johnson, Trump, and Sanders all had some mention of the wider public in their tweets. Johnson (2019) and Sanders (2016, 2025) both explicitly write 'people', whereas Trump (2024) discusses 'voters.' To distinguish 'the people' without stating it outright, as Trump does, Johnson writes 'us Brits'; Sanders writes 'we.' This can be understood as a strategy to create a collective identity, as mentioning 'the people' – whether implied

or explicitly – constructs an empty signifier, meaning that 'the people' does not have a fixed definition (as proposed by Laclau). Thus, individuals can construct their own view of 'the people', and therefore feel justified in their support of a leader that also promotes 'the people'. This formation of a collective identity, via appealing to 'the people' by using precise rhetoric on social media, can be understood as a pattern of underlying rhetoric among populists' social media discourse. It was additionally observed that Johnson, Farage, and Trump's rhetoric was informed by language promoting the rallying and mobilisation of the people. The final sentence of Johnson's Instagram caption encouraged a call for action (Brexit). Farage's statement and image declared that 'we' are fighting his opponent, Corbyn. Trump framed his commanding campaign slogan as a hashtag, '#MAGA'. Similarly, the emphasis these three leaders put on taking collective action (under their guidance) positions the leader as the sole, moral representative of the people. This observed outcome largely corresponds with Müller's theory of populists claiming to be the lone, moral voice of the people. Thus, via implicit and explicit mentions of 'the people', as well as the utilisation of rallying and mobilisation rhetoric, this analysis observes that – in the 21st century UK and US – populist leaders' underlying rhetoric can initially be characterised via their 'appeals to the people'.

ii. Anti-elitism

All four populist leaders analysed can be marked by their anti-elite sentiments. Their underlying rhetoric proves to align with Mouffe's understanding of antagonism present among populist discourse, especially as it relates to criticising and delegitimising their opponents, implying that they side with 'the elite' and are not suitable representatives of the people. Johnson's antagonism can be seen in his observed tweet from 2025, where he uses emotionally charged wording to describe the political status of his opponent, Starmer, to be that of a 'sogfest of gloom'. Farage's tweet (2025) claims that Reform's opposing parties are 'nowhere to be seen' in the UK election. Trump's tweet (2025) asserts that under the presidential leadership of his opponent, Harris, 'the Black community loses its political power forever'. Sanders' (2025) threatens Trump in his tweet, writing on behalf of his support base: 'we will be his worst nightmare.' This series of observed underlying rhetoric can be understood as pushing anti-elitist ideas through the deployment of antagonistic discourse. By utilising such intense, negative language, these four populist leaders were able to boost their own credibility and hinder their opponents', thus creating a division between 'the people' and 'the elite'. This division helped these leaders effectively frame themselves as representatives of 'the people', therefore implying that their opposers are a part of 'the elite.' Mouffe's theory of the public sphere, and that it provides a setting for antagonistic discourse, proves to be relevant: social media platforms can be understood as the public sphere, and the

four leaders' anti-elitist posts are representative of the antagonistic discourse. Additionally, the clearcut division that the observed populist leaders constructed between 'the people' and 'the elite' corresponds with Mudde and Kaltwasser, Canovan, Jagers and Walgrave, and Schaub and Morisi's theory of populism; they argue that populists' rhetoric inherently separates 'the people' from 'the elite.' Hence, through the utilisation of antagonistic discourse and the division of 'the people' and 'the elite' in the 21st century UK and US, populist leaders' social media discourse is characterised by underlying rhetoric which is not only defined by their appeals to the people, but also by their anti-elitism.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this dissertation was to determine the underlying rhetoric that characterises populist leaders' social media discourse within the 21st century UK and US. This was done by conducting a case study analysis of four populist leaders – for the UK, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage; for the US, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Their observed rhetoric was then evaluated, compared, and synthesised. The synthesis identified two patterns of underlying rhetoric that characterised 21st century UK and US populist leaders' social media discourse: appeals to the people and anti-elitism. Despite ideological and national variations, these two rhetorical patterns were consistently observed throughout the analysis.

The findings indicate that each of the four populist leaders observed utilised implicit and explicit language to signpost their support for 'the people.' By making use of terms that emphasise united identity, such as 'the people', 'voters', 'us Brits', and 'we', as well as through

their established calls for action (which promoted themes of rallying and mobilisation), the observed populist leaders were persistently able to appeal to the people, shaping a collective identity. These appeals can be related to Laclau's theory of 'empty signifiers': the leaders' use of vague, ambiguous terminology helped to foster this collective support and mutual identities. It is observed that these four populist leaders' appeals to 'the people' is one of the two pieces of underlying rhetoric that characterises their social media discourse.

Additionally, the research within this dissertation found that anti-elitist rhetoric largely characterised the four populist leaders' social media discourse. Within the observed X and Instagram posts, each of the four leaders situated their political opponents as being against 'the people', implying that they belong to 'the elite.' This was achieved through the usage of emotionally charged rhetoric, characterised by the leaders' promotion of themselves as suitable representatives of 'the people', and subsequently followed by the slashing of their opponents as unsuitable. This observed underlying rhetoric corresponds to Müller's anti-pluralism theory, in which populists claim that they are the exclusive moral representative of the people, while simultaneously invalidating opposing voices. It is observed that these four populist leaders' anti-elitism is the second of two pieces of underlying rhetoric that characterises their social media discourse.

While the research conducted within this dissertation was of value, limitations of the analysis remain. As the posts analysed were manually selected, certain nuances – such as the leaders' ideological variations – were not examined as comprehensively as they may have been with a coded dataset. Moreover, the differing structures of governing institutions were briefly acknowledged but did not widely appear as a point of focus throughout the dissertation.

This dissertation has demonstrated that – within the 21st century UK and US – the underlying rhetoric that characterises populist leaders' social media discourse can be identified

by their appeals to the people and anti-elitism. This shows how populist leaders do not just use social media as a tool for communication, but also as a tool for constructing collective identities, political legitimacy, and moral declarations. Future research could examine the audience's perspective and interpretations of this rhetoric, or how the rhetoric changes in other national contexts.

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