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James M. Howley
University of South Florida

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Empowering Populist Politics: Social Media Use in the US and UK

by

James M. Howley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Brian Turnbull, Ph.D.
Alejandro Marquez, Ph.D.
Sara Green, Ph.D.
Nana Tuntiya, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Modern advancements in technology, in particular the rise in influence and popularity of social media platforms, have had a profound effect on the political landscape. The way in which political actors conduct their campaigns therefore requires significant analysis. Populist campaigns have particularly benefitted from the political influence of social media platforms. This research therefore looks at two significant political events from 2016, the Presidential Election campaign of Donald J. Trump in the United States and the 'Vote Leave' Brexit referendum campaign from the United Kingdom. Utilizing Manuel Castells' 'Network Society' (1990) as the theoretical framework for the research, this analysis examines the language used in a representative sample of tweets from across the two campaigns - focusing specifically on the official Twitter accounts of Nigel Farage (@Nigel_Farage) and Boris Johnson (@BorisJohnson), from the 'Vote Leave' Brexit campaign and from Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) from the 2016 Presidential Election campaign. In this thesis, a thematic codebook aids in analyzing the language used throughout the two campaigns on Twitter and leads to many differences and similarities. The results display how the two campaigns leverage the modern advancements in Castells' network society, particularly the powerful increase in influence of the internet through social media messaging. Whilst tying both campaign strategies to the process of 'othering' as displayed throughout the findings, I argue that the decentralized mode of communication and bypassing of traditional forms of media brought about by social media has given great power to populist political actors and had a profound impact upon modern democratic processes.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to examine how populist political actors have used technological advancements and the emergence of social media to gain access to power. This study will focus specifically on candidates in two prominent Western democracies—the United States and the United Kingdom, both of which are closely aligned in their democratic strategies. This research will use the theoretical approach of Manuel Castells’ ‘network society’ (1991), as organized primarily around an integrated system of electronic media shedding light on our reliance upon such tools as the internet. I ask;

How have populist leaders used social media to gain access to power in Western democracies (particularly the US and UK)?

This inquiry intends to look at two specific case studies, one from the UK and one from the US. This will focus on the language used in past social media posts on Twitter, around both the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign (UK) and the election of President Donald J. Trump (US). A comparative analysis of Tweets and the types of language used around both campaigns and the use of misinformation from significant political actors in both countries will naturally follow.

Taken together, the aforementioned question will allow the research to contribute not just to the impact of the ‘network society’, social media and other technological advancements, but also to how prominent political actors from within the United States and the United Kingdom have utilized the rise of social networking to augment power and influence.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The complexities of governance within Western democracies, particularly that of closely aligned democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, gives immediate rise to a commonly held distaste for powerful vested interests and a disassociation with any notion of dictatorship. Effective democratic systems require that our governments are made up of elected officials who are put there by democratic means and are at the service of the country.

In this, the United States and the United Kingdom are closely aligned in their commitment to championing democracy. Both the US and the UK score highly on the democracy indexes and are often regarded as exemplary democracies. Indeed, according to 2022 the democracy index released by Freedom House (2022), the UK scored 39/40 on political rights and 54/60 on civil liberties, with an overall democratic index of 93/100. Similarly, the United States scored 33/40 on political rights and 50/60 on civil liberties, with an overall democratic index of 83/100 (Freedom House, 2022), underlining both countries' relative commitment to democratic values and their place amongst the most respected democracies in the world.

Disaffection within the two aforementioned democracies and the political establishment on opposite sides of the Atlantic has never been in greater post-Civil War evidence than in the past decade, coupled with a rise in populism that is not lost on many political observers, Higley (2020) amongst them; "the rise of populist leaders to power leads to an erosion of elite trust, which makes distributive issues more acute and threatens the stability of democratic institutions," (p. 64). This has dovetailed with the seemingly irrepressible rise of social media as a dominant force in Western debate - and the links between the two are inescapable. With its

tremendous scope and reach, social media is a hugely powerful tool utilized by political actors to gain power, as attested by Nahon in *Where There Is Social Media There is Politics* (2015); “The politics of social media may have the power to affect the behaviors, preferences and value systems of individuals and groups according to the intentions of those wielding it,” (p. 14).

When examining this assertion against the backdrop of the political landscape, two key events which took place in the year 2016 punctuate the debate around the two nations’ recent politics. Firstly, the election of Donald J. Trump who rode the wave of the disenfranchised all the way to the highest office in the land, with social media providing a running commentary and indeed live platform for debate along the way. Perhaps most saliently illustrating the power and influence of the ‘network society’ in the 21st century, however, was the Brexit referendum campaign in which the UK voted to leave the European Union. The disenchantment with the perceived political class stemming from increasing inequality and the global financial crisis only added to the growing public anger and much of the populist uprising which followed.

Naturally, given these two seismic events on either side of the Atlantic, the reasons as to why significant constituencies would decide to take such drastic political decisions – and perhaps more importantly whom would these decisions benefit? While Trump may be deemed as ‘anti-establishment,’ the existing order of political actors within the ruling Conservative Party in British parliament were overwhelmingly in favor of Brexit. The ‘Brexiters,’ as they became known, were ruthless in their pursuit of independence from the European Union for both party-political and personal gain, regardless of the long-term consequences for the country (Beaumont, 2020). The rise of social media has brought with it a curious burden of the age, with advantages and disadvantages for the political arena as evidenced through uprisings such as the Arab Spring and the ability of populist leaders to gain power as evidenced by Brexit and election campaigns.

Therefore, an important theoretical framework for this research on how political actors attain power is Manuel Castells' 'network society' (1991), which refers to the technological paradigm that has been brought about by the information age. In this, Castells' 'network society' is one such characteristic and consequences of the information age, encompassing social media that has been widely utilized as a tool for social change, in particular by canny political actors who have used it to spread their message. The relationship between the network society and power is naturally of particular interest to this research, then. In first developing the theory, Castells fundamentally argues that the internet and mass communications not only enable new forms of counter-power against the established order which manifests itself in a 'network society,' but that this counter-power provides a platform for a way to resist the perceived injustice of the current system. This 'decentralized' form of media, and therefore message, is crucial to the populist campaigns we see today. Political actors no longer must go through traditional media gatekeepers anymore and can control the agenda themselves, as Trump and Vote Leave's successful campaigns displayed so powerfully. The information technology we see today, perfectly embodied by social media platforms such as Twitter, is much more interactive than the traditional forms of media from the past. The virtual dynamics of the social media age allows not just for the message to reach a much larger audience and 'go viral' but also for the constant rebuttal and reaffirming of certain information, which only serves to make campaigns such as Trump and Vote Leave more powerful. In this, the emerging processes and theories as outlined in Castells' network society has perhaps reached its full flowering today with the rise of social media. The potential cultural consequences of the information age were outlined by Castells in his 1991 book *The Informational City*; "we see the emergence of a similar pattern of

networking, flexibility, and ephemeral symbolic communication, in a culture organized primarily around an integrated system of electronic media, obviously including the Internet,” (p. 55).

The type of decentralized, and in many instances under-regulated social media which is perhaps best characterized by Twitter has led to the vast spread of information, not all of it accurate. It was the late American reality TV host and former mayor of Cincinnati Jerry Springer who remarked that; “the only universal truth in politics is the law on unintended consequences,” (Oxford Union, 2016). Thus, the relationship between social media and widespread mistrust of political actors and the political establishment was laid bare by the false promises of Brexit.

Post Truth Politics

This era of ‘post-truth’ politics, whereby a lack of trust in modern politicians has met with a tiring of the political establishment to aid the rise of populism, is examined through the lens of the Brexit campaign in intriguing detail by Marshall (2020), who reflects that;

Brexit is a key example of post-truth politics, and that two key factors ushered in this new form of politics into the UK: 1) technological changes associated with social media, which lead to a situation in which a significant portion of the population acquire their news online, while anybody can post anything online without checks on the accuracy of the claims; 2) a growing distrust in democratic institutions, political elites, expertise, and traditional media gatekeepers which leads, in turn, to a loss of trust in established expert knowledge, leaving the population willing to rely on information originating from questionable sources, (p. 26).

Populism, in a political sense, is perhaps best outlined by Muller (2019) who describes it as; “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified but ultimately fictional people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior,” (p. 4). It is clear to see, then, how populism is the vehicle of choice for anti-establishment campaigns such as that of Trump and Brexit as it fosters an us against them mentality, of anti-establishment sentiment, of giving a voice to the voiceless.

One of the key elements in all this was the spread of misinformation that was enabled by social media platforms such as Twitter and spoke favorably towards motivations for ‘Vote Leave’. This widescale spread of misinformation and disingenuous creation of accounts and content was brought under the microscope in a study conducted by Bastos (2021), who conducted a significant analysis regarding deleted tweets on the Brexit debate. The study found that, 3 years later, one-third of the almost 3 million tweets posted in the period are no longer available (932,815), with only 1,842,974 tweets remaining available to view, calling into question the motivation, sincerity and accountability of the messaging, with 20% of the accounts associated with the debate no longer even active on the social media platform.

Accountability when it comes to the information being put out on social networking sites by political actors is of key concern here, given the influence of such messaging on citizens in key voting campaigns. This was brought into sharp focus by Bastos (2021), who outlines in his reflective analysis on the issue of accountability around ‘deleted’ tweets that; “The disappearance of one-third of the discussion underpinning a key event in contemporary politics indicates that the fraction of deleted tweets may be a proxy for manipulation and disinformation. As much of the deleted content resulted from Twitter actively blocking accounts due to misinformation, thereby generating orphaned data, it is conceivable that the Brexit debate may

have been subjected to considerable volumes of low-quality information whose distribution often resorts to artificial manipulation and false amplification,” (p. 16).

The crucial role of social media in shaping political opinion and subsequent voting decisions was similarly underlined by Morosoli et. al (2022), who conducted a similar study of the spread of misinformation on such platforms as Twitter, conducted through an analysis of significant political actors’ posts in six prominent and respected Western democracies – the United Kingdom, the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany & France. In this, Morosoli and co-authors outline the increasing importance of political actors’ social media posts in influencing significant referenda, urging caution in how easily misinformation can spread in the online space; “social media play a crucial role in how individuals consume and share news with others. Spreading content on social media can, among other things, strengthen underrepresented opinions but it becomes problematic when people share false or misleading messages because they can reach large audiences,” (p. 4).

Prominent and successful populist leaders of the modern day – Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, for example, have recognized this and used the power of social media to connect with populations who have felt disaffected. They have utilized public sentiment to create the kind of moralistic imagination of politics as defined by Muller (2019) - of us against them. There is a salient clue here to the motivations behind allowing the spread of misinformation online, as one of the key reasons members of the public may ‘like’ or ‘share’ specific social media posts from certain political actors is simply because they agree with the message and hence convince themselves that sharing the information is a legitimate action (Penna, 2021).

Naturally, this opens up the discussion around the very nature of populist power and how it is allowed to prosper through the flourishing of the technological age. Consciously or

subconsciously, certainly on the part of the ‘regular’ citizen, this demands a two-way relationship. As human beings, we are invariably drawn to the opinions of those we agree with, and by sharing such opinions, or even advocating them, despite an underlying suspicion that the information may be inaccurate or propagandist, we are merely allowing populism to spread with no accountability.

Social Media in Mainstream Campaigns

The rise of social media in the past two decades has not gone unnoticed, then, by the political establishment who will utilize all means at their disposal in order to maintain a firm grip on power. This compulsion is described loosely by Walker (2019) as ‘political will’ - which speaks to; “the determination of an individual political actor to do and say anything that will produce a desired outcome in their favor,” (p. 516). Perhaps the first inclination of the importance of social media when it comes to the political arena came in the 2012 Presidential Election, breaking new ground in the online space.

Facebook, founded some 8 year earlier, was in its ascendancy, and Twitter was perhaps approaching the peak of its powers in this area, paving the way for future influence on political campaigning, as Dalton-Hoffman (2012) suggests; “Barack Obama and Mitt Romney both used social media to efficiently advertise their campaigns. The social media influenced vote in 2012 would create an entirely different campaign and create an entirely different internet,” (p. 7). This came to pass in 2012, with research conducted by Bor (2014) as relates to political messaging and social media showing that nearly 40% of all American adults used social network sites to engage in some form of civic or political activity such as expressing political opinions, encouraging others to act on issues and vote, and belonging to political groups (Bor, 2014).

Taken in its full light, the parallel rise of social media and the big brother society brought about by the digital revolution (Penna, 2021) is perhaps one of the most curious spectacles of the age. New ways of communicating and sharing ideas have given rise to a kind of all-seeing approach and consuming control that was not previously apparent. This revolution that birthed the internet and later social media has played a central role in proliferating new types of political action and expression, thus transforming the speed and ease of communication and information and giving those with a substantial platform (such as political actors) a greater ability to control the thoughts and opinion of their publics in a more immediate and consistent way (Keating & Melis, 2017).

The methods used by such political actors in the US and the UK in gaining and asserting the kind of power we allude to are both sophisticated and methodical, usually going into overdrive in crucial periods when they desire to take public opinion with them, such as election campaigns or at times of significant referendums (Chadwick et. al, 2022). They take matters into their own hands, no longer requiring the use of the established and rather using social media as a tool to speak directly to its citizens and often spread misinformation without fear of repeal or reproach. This is touched upon by Vergeer in his analysis of Twitter and political campaigning (2015); “These candidates and parties opted for a different campaign style, usually ignoring the traditional media, distancing themselves from the established parties and media, and creating a new following mostly consisting of people who lost faith in politics and no longer voted,” (p. 5).

The benefits, then, of social media usage from a public point of view when it comes to holding powerful, vested interests to account (the state apparatus and elected officials), is something which we must cast a cold eye upon. If, for example, the benefits of enhanced engagement are outweighed by the ability of the ruling state to assert even greater power over its

citizens, we must not be blinded by such a conjecture. In an analysis of modern politicians, social media and digital publics, Sobieraj et al. (2020) examines this dilemma; “These benefits, which have been demonstrated, must be weighed against the vast concentration of power in private, profit-making hands, as platforms craft their services not in the interest of the public good but in the accumulation of assets that feed their bottom line, especially engagement and information,” (p. 9). Social media influence naturally gives rise to thoughts of younger people pursuing and prolongating information in the online space – the ‘network society’ (Klinger & Svensson, 2014), but the underlying intentions of political actors who seek power is to influence vast swathes of the public on these platforms – from those savvy with social media to those less so.

Saliently, it is noted in the results of a survey study conducted by Keating & Melis (2017) on the influence of social media on political engagement by young Brits (22-29 year-olds) that; "social media may be providing a new outlet for some young adults; it is not re-engaging the young adults who have already lost interest in politics," (p. 19) – thus creating doubt around the extent to which political actors and state officials can use it as a tool of overwhelming influence to assert power on younger members of society who have already lost interest in politics. Conversely, the study suggests that those already involved or engaged in politics are simply using social media as the new arena within which to influence or be influenced.

With the increasing influence of technology, the debate has swirled around political actors, power and online engagement in the years since the birth of social media, with significant contributions to the relationship between the two. This proposed research intends to add to those contributions as well as fill salient gaps, both in the extent to which social media can be used as a tool of influence and more specifically in knowledge around comparisons between populist

leaders in the United Kingdom and the United States and how they have utilized social media in similar or different ways to achieve their political aims and attain power moving forwards.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This research examines how prominent political actors have used the emergence of social media to garner greater influence, achieve political goals and attain power. Particularly, the research will be upon two prominent Western democracies who score highly on the democratic indexes - the United States and the United Kingdom, with two specific areas of focus – the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign and 2016 Presidential Election of Donald J. Trump. This research will use the theoretical approach of Manuel Castells’ ‘network society’ (1991), as organized primarily around an integrated system of electronic media, examining our reliance upon such tools as social media and a singular research question is proposed. In this, this project seeks to answer the following research question;

- *How have populist leaders used social media to gain access to power in Western democracies (particularly the US and UK)?*

The research technique that has been applied here is qualitative. This is the natural research technique to choose because the research focuses upon the kind of language used from a contextual point of view. The platform under examination is Twitter, (now ‘X’ but still referred to as ‘Twitter’, and posts as ‘tweets’ for the purposes of this research), which was first founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and has grown into a huge social media machine of over 350 million users (Collins & DeWitt, 2023), going on to shape much of the public discourse around political engagement with a huge impact upon modern society.

The sample size examined for this research is a set of 300 ‘tweets’ - posts on the Twitter platform - (inclusive of exactly 150 tweets on the UK’s Brexit referendum campaign and 150

tweets on President Trump's 2016 election campaign), whereby utilizing Twitter's Streaming and REST APIs in order to programmatically collect data examining influential content put out on these two key areas. In order to guarantee a representative sample, the tweets with the greatest 'engagement' from this period were selected. Engagements refers to and is inclusive of retweets, replies, quotes, likes and views by all Twitter users. Data was then downloaded to a CSV file using Twitter REST APIs allowing for search optimization of relevant keywords and hashtags.

A sample of 300 tweets have been selected to accurately reflect a wide range of content from each side of the political debate on both issues – the twitter accounts these samples were taken from where the accounts of Nigel Farage ([@Nigel_Farage](#)) and Boris Johnson ([@BorisJohnson](#)), from the Vote Leave Brexit campaign and from Donald J. Trump ([@realDonaldTrump](#)) from the 2016 Presidential Election Campaign. The tweets were split evenly between the two campaigns. The 150 tweets selected on the Brexit debate sought to examine populist opinion, conjecture and debate on the leave side of the referenda, from prominent leaders Johnson and Farage - arguing against UK membership of the EU. Conversely, the 150 tweets seeking to examine the discourse around the election of President Trump also looked at a wide variety of content in support of his election as President of the United States and against that of his political opponents and the current establishment in Washington, taken from Trump's account himself.

The timeframe of posts was selected to be inclusive of the run up to both the Brexit referendum, which took place on June 23, 2016, and the 2016 United States Presidential Election which took place on November 8, 2016, as well as the subsequent aftermath of each. Hence, the data collection of tweets was condensed into a relevant 12-month period between January 1, 2016, and January 1, 2017, to adequately reflect the period of these events simultaneously.

A 'big data' approach was taken to the gathering the 300 tweet sample - selected specifically to reflect and represent the entire time period between 01/01/2016-01-01-2017 and relying on keyword and hashtag-based utilizing event-specific hashtags; #brexit, #voteleave, #voteremain and #euref in order to filter tweets specific to the Brexit referendum campaign and hashtags such as #makeamericagreatagain, #MAGA, #electtrump & #votetrump.

This research addresses the research question through the prism of two specific case studies - one from the United Kingdom and one from the United States as a representative sample from both democratic frameworks. Subsequent contextual analysis focuses on the specifics of language used in previous Twitter posts around the two key areas of focus - the 2016 'Brexit' referendum campaign (UK) and the 2016 election campaign of President Trump (US).

A comparative analysis of Tweets and the types of language used around both campaigns as well as the use of misinformation from significant political actors in both countries follows. The analysis utilizes the codebook thematic analysis method using *inductive coding*, chosen to reflect the fluid nature of the research undertaken. Unlike deductive coding, where the researcher starts off with a set of codes, inductive coding allows the researcher to be flexible and come up with the codes as they examine the dataset, allowing for new codes and categories to be added or for the current codes and categories to be edited and redefined as the analysis progresses and new insights or patterns emerge from the dataset.

Inductive coding is used for determining the prevalence of themes across the datasets, so the actual code itself was determined as the data is analyzed (known as the bottom-up approach). This 'thematic' approach is the most organic and coordinated method to analyze the kind of qualitative data being examined in this research as it is both systematic and rigorous and can identify the patterns of language, use of emotive and provocative dialogue and subsequent

relationships within the data, which maximizes the opportunity for meaningful and tangible results. As Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019) outline when speaking of the benefits of inductive coding; “researchers are not restricted by preconceived codes but understand codes as emerging inductively from scrutinizing meanings in the data,” (p. 26).

Codebook

A codebook is therefore put together to act as a guiding compass to decipher the differences, similarities, patterns of language, use of emotive and provocative dialogue and subsequent relationships within the dataset collected. The codebook selects dominant themes prominent in populist rhetoric based upon the themes and patterns emerging from the dataset, is consistent and is aligned with the goal of the research and research question offered.

The codebook (coding manual) acts as the methodological framework to examine the language and identify the themes and emotions within the cross-ideological campaigns for Brexit/Trump and use of populist dialogue therein and includes the dominant theme, the description, the keywords/phrases and relevant example(s) based upon the dataset.

Table 1: Coding Manual (Phase I)

Dominant Theme	Description	Keywords/Phrases	Example
Anti-establishment	Rhetoric in opposition to the current established political order. In case of Trump, anti-Washington. For Brexit, anti-Brussels	“Take back control,” “Drain the swamp,” Bureaucracy, Elitists, Crooked, Rigged, Brussels, Washington, Laws, Democracy, System	“As President, I WILL fix this rigged system and only answer to YOU, the American people!” - @Trump , Aug 12, 2016
Patriotism	Language asserting support/devotion for the UK/US and the cause of Brexit/Trump in aiding the nation moving forwards	“Make America great again,” We want our country back,” Sovereignty, Proud, Self-Governing, Independence, Citizens	“If you want your borders back, if you want your democracy back, if you want your country back then vote to Leave! #IndependenceDay ” - Farage , June 23, 2016

Table 1 (Continued)

Dominant Theme	Description	Keywords/Phrases	Example
Nativism / Anti-immigrant	Discourse around protecting nations own interests, demonizing immigrants, xenophobia	Borders, Build a Wall, Immigrants, Immigration, Illegal, Law, Uncontrolled, Overcrowded, Policy, Islam	“Gove quite right about housing pressures - they have unquestionably been increased by immigration! #VoteLeave” - Johnson , June 3, 2016
Mobilization	Appealing to the masses to rise up against the status quo, mobilizing their populist ideas	Fight back, Campaign, Movement, Together, Vote, Need You, Join, Chance, Crowd, Meeting	“In order to #DrainTheSwamp & create a new GOVERNMENT of, by, & for the PEOPLE, I need your VOTE! Go to https://t.co/HfihPERFgZ-LET'S #MAGA! ” - Trump , Oct 22, 2016
Use of Emotion	Using emotion to strengthen the case for political aims. Appealing to anger, fear, feeling that public is ignored/ lied to	Terror, Radical, Arrogance, Respect, Voice, Message, Chaos, Values, Stand up, Disgrace, Reject, Nightmare, Integrity	“How is it possible that the people of the great State of Colorado never got to vote in the Republican Primary? Great anger - totally unfair!” - Trump , April 10, 2016

Table 2: Coding Manual Phase II (Subthemes)

Dominant Theme	Subtheme(s)	Example
<i>Anti-establishment</i>	Electoral reform, conspiracy theories, movement, fake news media, against ‘elites’	“Well, we all did it, together! I hope the "MOVEMENT" fans will go to D.C. on Jan 20th for the swearing in. Let's set the all-time record!” - @Trump , Dec 16, 2016
<i>Patriotism</i>	Independence, wages, trade, economy, democracy, belief in country	“Morning folks. Polls are open until 10pm. Now is the time to believe in this country and #VoteLeave.” - Johnson , June 23, 2016
<i>Nativism / Anti-immigrant</i>	Law and order, safety of Americans/Brits	“CHAIN MIGRATION must end now! Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil. NOT ACCEPTABLE!” - Trump , Nov. 1, 2017
<i>Mobilization</i>	Appealing to the masses to rise up, against the status quo, mobilizing populist ideas	“This will prove to be a great time in the lives of ALL Americans. We will unite and we will win, win, win!” - Trump , Nov 12, 2016
<i>Use of Emotion</i>	Fear of terrorism, Lack of control, Anger about illegal immigrants, Worry about economic unfairness	“Steelworkers should vote for Brexit. Mad that we can't cut steel energy costs because of EU rules.” - Johnson , June 3, 2016

The NVivo system, which is readily available to all USF faculty and students free of charge and can be accessed via the Application Gateway, was used for the qualitative analyses. NVivo enables the user to “import and code textual data, edit the text; retrieve, review and recode coded data; search for combinations of words in the text or patterns in the coding,” (Bandera, 2006), and acted as a useful tool in the analytical methodology as the system lends itself succinctly to qualitative research of this nature, as it asks the researcher how node names should be determined, pre-setting is for social-media specific fields such as usernames/hashtags.

Moreover, due to the research's qualitative nature, the subsequent findings involve the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not simply reduced to numbers. We are examining the difference and similarities between the social media messaging utilized by two populist campaigns and the themes and subthemes therein as outlined in the codebook.

Ethics

Naturally, given the nature of social media platforms, and as much of the data being studied is already in the public sphere and made publicly accessible via Twitter's database, there exists few concerns here regarding ethics when gathering and studying the content of the data itself. If or where relevant, no identifying information for any non-prominent political actors will be made public. Through what we have learned in this research, this project does not meet the definition of research with human subjects and therefore the requirements that go with protecting those subjects are not under ethical consideration.

However, when using social media, ethical considerations are certainly not disregarded. Issues surrounding validity, reliability and authenticity of accounts of the platform require attention. Spam accounts, the spread of misinformation and being unsure as to who actually formulates and posts the tweets on the Twitter accounts of prominent political actors in the US

and the UK are all things to consider from an ethical standpoint, in particular because this content is usually managed by a social media team when it comes to high-profile elected officials.

This is a highly salient research topic as it aims to explore the influence of one of the great spectacles of the age – social media – and how it has been subsequently exploited by those with a powerful vested interest, all working to maintain state power. Given the vast scale of social media reach, these effects are widespread, and this research aims to fill the gap in the existing literature around how political actors in the US and the UK have used advancements in the network society to their advantage and to explore the dramatic effects of social media content therein.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Within these findings, I outline how the political movements of the 2016 Brexit Referendum campaign and the 2016 Presidential Election of Donald J. Trump carried out over Twitter bear striking similarities as well as key differences in their populist approaches to obtaining their desired outcome of power. Whilst this research is concerned with the language and approaches used by political actors in attaining their populist agendas and, ultimately, power, it is worth noting prior to exploring these findings that the broader public perception of supporters for Brexit and support for Trump was largely confined to three key areas; age, race, and trade.

The legendary British political commentator and interviewer Jeremy Paxman perhaps said it best on the key differences in outlook in a discussion with Adam Boulton of Sky News (November 2016) in response to Boulton's suggestion that "there are quite a few similarities between the mood for Trump and the mood for Brexit," when he remarked that "except that one's for free trade and one's for not." Boulton was then moved to respond that he was referring not to the detail of each campaign, but rather to the public response to them in that large portions of both the U.S and the U.K electorate had lost faith in the current political establishments.

In this, we dovetail nicely to the findings of this research. Through the use of salient themes and subthemes outlined in Codebook I and II of the method section – used to decipher the ways in which the Trump 2016 election campaign and the 2016 Brexit referendum used Twitter to spread its populist message and gain access to power, the research uncovers a number of striking differences and similarities between the two campaigns on opposites sides of the

Atlantic which perhaps speaks to the cultural similarities and differences the democracies share. The two campaigns share many similarities in the fact that they are appealing to a disaffected audience who has grown tired of the political establishment. In this, much of the underlying tone of the messaging appears similar. However, the way in which this message is imparted by Trump and Johnson/Farage has notable differences given the culture and society of the target audience in the US & UK. The way in which the electorate responded to the nuances of that messaging is invariably different, as recognized by successful political actors today.

Trump Dominates Overlap of Dominant Themes

For example, Trump's use of emotion is notably more aggressive and acts as a more direct call to action than that of Brexit campaigners Farage or Johnson, which speaks to a potential cultural difference between the two nations and their target audiences;

"Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism, I don't want congrats, I want toughness & vigilance. We must be smart!" ([@RealDonaldTrump](#), June 12, 2016).

This use of language speaks to an overlap of the *dominant themes* (using rhetoric directly associated with themes of emotion, anti-immigrant and mobilization) as outlined in Codebook Phase I which is more apparent in the analysis of Trump's tweets than that of Brexit. In the 150 tweets analyzed from Trump's Twitter page during the assessed period from Jan 1, 2016 - Jan 1, 2017, almost two thirds (96 of 150) featured an overlap of at least two of the 'dominant themes.'

Notably, Trump attempts to disparage the media and create an 'us against them mentality' both in order to embolden his current followers and gain new ones. In particular, he

often does this by claiming a large number of the prominent news organizations to be ‘fake news,’ and in cahoots with the current political establishment such as his opponent Hillary Clinton. This speaks to the overlap of dominant themes inclusive of **anti-establishment** and **mobilization**.

In a brief, five-day period between Oct. 10, 2016, and Oct. 15, 2016, he remarks on the dishonesty of the news media and how they are working against him (and with that, his supporters) to make sure he does not become President;

Wow, @CNN got caught fixing their "focus group" in order to make Crooked Hillary look better. Really pathetic and totally dishonest! (@[RealDonaldTrump](#), Oct. 10, 2016).

Trump goes a step further in his attempts to create an **anti-establishment** theme in his messaging by suggesting that the media is not just attempting to portray Hillary more favorably than himself but that they are even trying to rig the entire election;

This election is being rigged by the media pushing false and unsubstantiated charges, and outright lies, in order to elect Crooked Hillary! (@[RealDonaldTrump](#), Oct. 15, 2016).

This, naturally, leads to the kind of mobilization upon which populist movements thrive. The feeling of anger and powerlessness from the electorate and that the election may be ‘rigged’ by forces outside of their control is something Trump intelligently continues to tap into, even late into the election campaign perhaps sowing the seeds of an excuse should his campaign fail;

Very little pick-up by the dishonest media of incredible information provided by WikiLeaks. So dishonest! Rigged system! (@RealDonaldTrump, Oct. 12, 2016).

The Vote Leave campaign championed by Farage and Johnson stops short of accusing the media of being complicit in a ‘rigged system’ but does consistently spout anti-establishment narrative, usually around the bureaucracy of the EU and the UK being governed from Brussels;

EU are deluded. Peoples of Europe do not want to be governed by @JunckerEU and his unelected gang in Brussels. #VoteLeave. (@Nigel_Farage, Apr. 2, 2016).

Trump goes further by consistently combining **anti-establishment** sentiment with **patriotic** and **anti-immigrant** rhetoric around public safety and putting American first;

Hillary Clinton will use American tax dollars to provide amnesty for thousands of illegals. I will put #AmericaFirst! #BigLeagueTruth. (@RealDonaldTrump, Feb. 9, 2016).

This overlap of themes (which is consistently displayed throughout Trump’s campaign) speaks to the scattered approach he takes to his social media messaging which is an intentional tactic throughout his campaign – often focusing on more than one issue (overlap of themes) per tweet in order to maximize the impact of his message and speak to a wide audience. Each tweet is carefully devised not just to attack the current establishment in Washington but also appeal to the fear of Americans around immigration, law and order, safety and portray himself as the only candidate listening and fighting for them.

Difference in Use of Emotion

Conversely, Johnson and Farage from the Vote Leave Brexit campaign were much more nuanced in their use of emotion within their messaging on Twitter, attempting instead to give the implication of unfairness or a lack of concern for British citizens so as to stir up anti-EU sentiment throughout the campaign. A key element of this centers around British people being better off outside of the EU, on jobs, wages and the economy;

Bank of England has confirmed that wages are partly held down by uncontrolled immigration #VoteLeave #InOrOut. (@BorisJohnson, June 3, 2016).

In recognizing the issues which are important to ordinary British people, in particular in areas of the country which rely upon certain industries to provide jobs and with it economic security, the Vote Leave campaign often seeks to widen their appeal by suggesting that such industries are in terminal danger should the UK remain in a part of the European Union;

If we vote to Remain on June 23rd it is the end of the steel industry in this country. Simple as that. We must Leave EU. (@Nigel Farage, Apr. 12, 2016).

While not seeking to explicitly demonize immigrants as bad people in the way that Trump does far more often, Johnson and Farage merely make the case for British people having a higher standard of living without the free movement of people the European Union comes with, especially on key issues which matter to any regular Brit such as jobs, higher wages and trade;

Those of us on the Leave side were clear: Brexit must mean control of our borders & out of the single market. (@Nigel Farage, Sept. 23, 2016).

Trump also uses emotion intelligently but does so in a more concerted way especially around such topics as law and order, and immigration, which he often conflates;

Drugs are pouring into this country. If we have no border, we have no country. That's why ICE endorsed me. #Debate #BigLeagueTruth. (@RealDonaldTrump, June. 19, 2016).

Americans' fear of terrorist attacks, only heightened by the events of 9/11 and other such atrocities, is also played upon by Trump in an effort to stir greater **anti-immigrant** sentiment, often equating the influx of illegal immigrants, which he intends to stop should he be elected, to the potential for further attacks on Americans' safety which he claims is in evidence elsewhere;

ISIS has infiltrated countries all over Europe by posing as refugees, and @HillaryClinton will allow it to happen here, too! #BigLeagueTruth. (@RealDonaldTrump, April. 12, 2016).

Trump consistently uses **emotion** intelligently in an effort to set the agenda and focuses in particular on the areas of emotion outlined in the subthemes of Codebook II, around lack of control, warning the American people not to be influenced by what they see in the news media;

100% fabricated and made-up charges, pushed strongly by the media and the Clinton Campaign, may poison the minds of the American Voter. FIX! (@RealDonaldTrump, Oct. 4, 2016).

Patriotism & Trump's Conspiratorial Messaging

A constant theme throughout Trump's discourse is that of corruption, of a rigged system conspiring against both him and the American people. This is somewhat different to the anti-establishment rhetoric with which Johnson and Farage ran during their Vote Leave campaign. For example, for Johnson and Farage in particular, they do not assert a corrupt system but rather a loss of power for Britain in such things as establishing its own laws without EU approval, controlling its own borders without the free movement of people as agreed by EU member states and being able to negotiate free trade deals outside of the EU block which, to them, would benefit the UK economy. Taking back 'control,' and with it democracy is a key message for Farage;

If you want your borders back, if you want your democracy back, if you want your country back then vote to Leave! #IndependenceDay (@Nigel_Farage, June 23, 2016).

Similarly, Johnson is keen to hammer home the patriotic message of belief in the UK;

Morning folks. Polls are open until 10pm. Now is the time to believe in this country and #VoteLeave (@BorisJohnson, June 23, 2016).

In this, Johnson and Farage are far more overt in their use of the **patriotism** theme throughout their social media discourse than Trump is. Trump gives the implication of patriotism through anti-establishment and anti-immigrant sentiment, suggesting this is required to keep America as the great nation it has always been. However, despite his constant use of the hashtag #MAGA (Make America Great Again), his rhetoric is much more nativist (law and order, American safety and protecting jobs) in tone than patriotic (reference to independence, democracy, self-governance, national pride etc.) as thematically defined in Codebook I and II.

Instead, Trump is continuous in his conspiratorial message that outside forces are conspiring against him in order for him not to reach the White House;

Hillary Clinton should have been prosecuted and should be in jail. Instead, she is running for president in what looks like a rigged election. (@RealDonaldTrump May. 2, 2016).

For Johnson and Farage on the Vote Leave referendum, much of their conspiratorial tone came from an anti-establishment tone which formed the bedrock of their campaign, with Farage consistently attacking elected officials from the past who had backed Vote Remain and suggesting that they simply didn't care about the democratic will of the British people;

Blair, Major, Farron: the political elite who want to block Brexit. They should respect the referendum result! (@Nigel_Farage, Nov. 27, 2016).

Mobilization Conflated Across Campaigns

Populist campaigns are largely successful on the back of mobilizing a large group of people to come in a specific direction, either for or against a certain idea or ideology. This was apparent in both the Trump/Vote Leave campaigns. However, what was noticeably different was

how the two campaigns attempted to mobilize the electorate. For Trump in his quest to reach the White House, he regularly conflates **mobilization** with **patriotism** and often with **anti-establishment** rhetoric, further displaying his campaigns tendency to overlap these dominant themes. He often implies that by joining his campaign, you will be making your voice heard, making America great again and making America safer;

Thank you Orlando, Florida! We are just six days away from delivering justice for every forgotten man, woman and child in this country! (@RealDonaldTrump Nov. 2, 2016).

Thank you ARIZONA! This is a MOVEMENT like nobody has ever seen before. Together, we are going to MAKE AMERICA SAFE... (@RealDonaldTrump Oct. 4, 2016).

It is a MOVEMENT - not a campaign. Leaving the past behind, changing our future. Together, we will MAKE AMERICA SAFE. (@RealDonaldTrump Aug. 21, 2016).

Trump makes notable mention to the fact that he sees his campaign as a ‘movement’ throughout his tweets. He adds **emotion** to the message by suggesting the urgency of supporting him, referring to it as the ‘last chance’ and always using exclamation points so that the audience can sense the excitement behind this mobilization;

Thank you, Michigan! This is a MOVEMENT that will never be seen again- it's our last chance to #DrainTheSwamp! (@RealDonaldTrump Nov. 6, 2016).

The **anti-establishment** theme is still evident with his hashtag #DrainTheSwamp, a reference to cleansing Washington DC of the establishment figures which have long ignored the ordinary

American people. However, what is also in evidence is the explicit reference to the ‘movement’ which has become the bedrock of his campaign. He often conflates this anti-establishment rhetoric with mobilization by consistently using the term ‘movement’ and the hashtag #DrainTheSwamp, particularly in evidence towards the end of the election campaign.

Specifically, for context, between Oct. 1, 2016, and Nov. 8, 2016, Trump made reference to the two in the same tweet 26 times, which further underlines how he conflates mobilization;

Just landed in Ohio. Thank you America - I am honored to win the final debate for our MOVEMENT. It is time to #DrainTheSwamp & #MAGA! @RealDonaldTrump, Oct. 20, 2016).

THANK YOU St. Augustine, Florida! Get out and VOTE! Join the MOVEMENT - and lets #DrainTheSwamp! Off to Tampa now! (@RealDonaldTrump, Oct. 24, 2016).

There is a key similarity here in Trump’s thematical messaging when it comes to mobilizing his campaign and how Farage and Johnson attempt to position themselves on Vote Leave. The two campaigns put **patriotism** at the heart of the message in encouraging their respective movements. They suggest that by supporting their respective causes, you are going to either #MAGA or you are going to liberate the UK from the economic and political shackles of the European Union. They do this in different ways, due to the nature of the two campaigns, which will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion, but the fundamental message that supporting their campaigns is good for the country and your duty as a citizen is in evidence.

For Vote Leave, this mobilization largely centers around the anti-establishment, underdog tone. They set up their campaign as fighting against the established order and consistently refer to the fact that they are ‘for the people’. Control is a key element of their message and dominates

the Vote Leave rhetoric – not just giving Britain back control of its democratic processes but also, and this is key in their efforts to mobilize the masses, giving back control to the British people against the establishment - particularly as the Prime Minister of the day, David Cameron, and many of his high-ranking cabinet officials, as well as Labour, were backing Vote Remain.

In this, a vote for leave was portrayed by Johnson and Farage as a vote against the established elite who supported Remain as well as the patriotic thing to do for the country;

Remain have thrown taxpayers money, civil service, Osborne's family friends, No10 and the kitchen sink at this. #VoteLeave have the people. (@BorisJohnson, Feb. 23, 2016).

For Vote Leave, the mobilization of the masses towards their campaign to exit the EU is the culmination of a long process of Euroscepticism. For Farage in particular, a long-time critic of the EU and advocate for the UK leaving the union, the ‘movement’ which is Vote Leave is not merely part of a singular election campaign in the way that Trump’s movement is, but rather of decades of work for which the British people are now coming round to;

Just met with Bernard Connolly, author of 'The Rotten Heart of Europe'. One of the early heroes of the movement. (@Nigel_Farage, Aug. 15, 2016).

Farage continues to conflate the dominant themes of mobilization and anti-establishment rhetoric by suggesting that the implications of populist campaigns such as Vote Leave will extend way beyond simply the EU referendum result and actually have a long-standing and profound impact on how political campaigns and movements are conducted going forward;

Era of top-down politics is ending. Mass membership, open, accessible political movements are the future. #VoteLeave (@Nigel_Farage, Apr. 6, 2016).

In a striking similarity to Trump, the Leave campaign often conflates mobilization with anti-establishment rhetoric. More than this, Farage and Johnson endeavor to use the very foundation of democracy as a key element of their campaign, often suggesting that the European Union is undemocratic and the only way that the UK can regain its democratic integrity, and with it its independence, is by the British people voting to leave the EU in the upcoming referendum;

Outside of EU we'd be a self-governing, democratic nation in charge of our own destiny. That's what it would look like, @David_Cameron (@Nigel_Farage, Feb. 8, 2016).

How many people can name their Euro MP? The EU is totally undemocratic #VoteLeave (@BorisJohnson, June 3, 2016).

If you want your borders back, if you want your democracy back, if you want your country back then vote to Leave! #IndependenceDay (@Nigel_Farage, June 23, 2016).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Throughout the findings of this research, many of the dominant themes and sub themes as outlined in the codebook share the kind of similarities we might expect between these two Western democracies, who have long insisted that they share a 'special relationship'. These cultural and societal differences are a key element in understanding the findings as outlined above. They give us a window not only into understanding why these themes are overarching for both campaigns, but how they are formulated in a different way through the use of language on social media, which has become an increasingly important tool for the success of political movements such as Vote Leave or the Trump presidential campaign, as Olmo & Diaz (2016) suggest; “Social networks, especially in Western politics, have become a basic concept of civic political communication and seems to be more influential every day. As a result, the political movement without social networks is difficult to imagine,” (p. 117).

In assessing the findings, anti-establishment sentiment, for example, is prominent in both campaigns and a key theme in how it aligns both in the UK and the US as Vote Leave and Trump sought to further their political goals by cashing in on the disaffection borne out of frustration with the political elite. It can be argued that several factors contributed to this rising sentiment in the preceding years following up to the two 2016 campaigns, including socio-economic following the economic crisis, immigration, inequality and a lack of political accountability, all of which were in evidence across both societies. However, the two campaigns are noticeably different in how they use emotion as a tool to gain traction for their populist message. Trump, on the one hand, gives the impression of media control, almost to the point of

being conspiratorial, whereas for Vote Leave, much of their message is around patriotism and giving the UK the very best chance of success. In this, the Leave campaign almost acts as a call to duty.

Trump's election campaign produces much less pronounced patriotism, perhaps in part due to the differing nature of the two campaigns - the Vote Leave campaign being largely dominated by the fundamentals of law and governance around the independent nature of the UK from the European Union, free to make its own laws around trade and immigration, and the Trump campaign centering around returning America to the great nation it once was (evidenced through Trump's dominant slogan of 'Make America Great Again') through draining Washington of the establishment figures which have long ignored the American people. In this, the two campaigns share a fundamental similarity in that they are about the decentralization of decision making, about the taking back of power, but in different ways.

In interpreting the findings of this research, it is worth coming back to that highly salient point around the nature of the campaigns as well as the culture of their target audience. Although they share striking similarities, the two target audiences are culturally and socially different between the United Kingdom and the United States, and hence respond to messaging in a different way. For Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson from Vote Leave, their campaign had a natural enemy in the European Union and so they attacked the EU establishment in Brussels at every opportunity – appealing to the Eurosceptics as well as those who were perhaps undecided by portraying the UK as weaker within the EU on everything from jobs, trade and the economy to being able to control its own borders and establish its own laws without interference from Brussels. For Trump, however, he created the enemy as his campaign progressed, not just his direct opponent(s) in the presidential race such as Hillary Clinton but the 'fake news' media, the

establishment in Washington and all those conspiring against his efforts to reach the White House.

Perhaps more importantly, however, when assessing the differences of these two significant and consequential campaigns, the minutia of each campaign is fundamentally different. The Vote Leave campaign championed by Farage and Johnson was billed as a 'once in a lifetime' referendum on membership of what is a politically established union (EU), which impacted their messaging and allowed them to push that desperation onto their audience. In essence, if the British public did not vote to leave the European Union this time around, they may not get another chance. That is an extremely powerful tool to have on your side as it evokes fear of being trapped in a system which would perhaps be harming your country, and the populist tone of the campaign entered around that. For Trump, however, a presidential election campaign rolls around every 4 years as per the democratic system in the United States, giving the American people the right to elect whom they choose based on the preference/performance of incumbent. Trump realizes this, and instead focuses much of his campaign rhetoric upon anti-establishment sentiment - on “draining the swamp” in Washington, D.C whilst also appealing to the fears of the American people around jobs, safety and immigration.

This research is an important contribution to the current research around populist political campaigns and how they have come to evolve as the modes of communication and media have evolved with them. The results display how the two campaigns leverage the modern advancements in Castells' network society, particularly the powerful increase in influence of the internet through social media messaging, to exemplify their 'us against them' rhetoric – which is especially evident in their dialogue around immigration and anti-establishment sentiment. In this, the process of 'othering' is uncovered as a key component of both campaigns. Othering was first

developed by Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* (1995) and refers to the process of creating an artificial, 'us against them' division in relations between two groups of opposing ideologies. Said defines the theory as; "The construction of identity, whether Orient or Occident, France or Britain, involves establishing opposites and 'otherness' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from us," (p. 332). Both Vote Leave and the Trump election campaign use the process of othering to heighten divisions between the causes they seek to represent - for Vote Leave, this means Britain's best interests outside the EU, outside the free movement of people and the EU trade deals which are harming the UK economy and for Trump, against the 'fake news media' and the establishment in Washington as well as immigrants whom he consistently portrays as dangerous to America.

Whilst imparted in often different and sometimes similar ways, as displayed throughout this research, the decentralized mode of communication and bypassing of traditional forms of media has also given great power to populist political actors and had a profound impact upon the democratic processes of elections. How we 'do politics,' particularly in terms of campaigning, has been drastically changed due to the power of social media and how the message is imparted, although there is tremendous scope for future research to examine the nuances of how democratic institutions have been impacted by modern populist use of social media.

Future Research

As anticipated, the findings of this research indicate several limitations along the way and also avenues for future research moving forwards. Firstly, although hugely significant campaigns, examining just two campaigns from 2016 with a sample size of 150 tweets from each campaign, is perhaps not broad enough to generalize how populist campaigns have used social media to gain access to power throughout Western democracies. Next, given the time period

under examination, from January 1st, 2016 - January 1st, 2017, the findings do not reflect more modern thematic examples of social media impact upon populist campaigns and the link to power. As social media has become more and more popular, and with it, it can be argued, more and more influential, the political consequences of that on modern campaigns requires attention.

Perhaps most importantly, however, which became more and more apparent to me as I worked through this research and its subsequent findings, is that it does not speak to the perceptions of the target audience and how they themselves interpret, view and respond to the social media messaging within these campaigns. Moving forwards, my findings indicate several possible avenues for future research. Firstly, in an effort to better understand how these populist actors and campaigns actually achieve their goals of obtaining power through the use of social media, it would be necessary to approach the research from the lens of the target audience - the voter. Gaining a greater understanding for how they respond to certain themes of messaging and why they respond that way is crucial to understanding the impact of social media upon such campaigns. More than this, examining just who this target audience is would be of great use. A demographic analysis across different campaigns, and indeed different democracies, would help us gain more insight into just how powerful social media has become for populist political actors in the modern day and its dramatic effects on Western democratic institutions.

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