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Participatory Populism: Online Discussion Forums on Mainstream News Sites During the 2014 European Parliament Election

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Abstract

Online media have transformed the political news landscapes, changing not only professional journalistic practices but also the way in which citizens participate in political communication. In the debate about the impact of the Internet on democratic practices, some scholars emphasize the potential of digital media platforms to establish a medium for deliberative and inclusive democratic participation, whereas others underline the development of fragmented ‘echo chambers’ driven by the interests of mainstream news organisations. We point to an alternative scenario in which online political communication develops in the direction of ‘participatory populism’, involving an unrepresentative group of users actively engaging in the delegitimization of democratic institutions. This engagement results in a collective voice that expresses high levels of negativity towards mainstream democratic politics. Through a study of user comments relating to the 2014 European Parliament election in Germany and the UK, we show how commenters express predominantly negative views towards not just the EU but also national government and mainstream opposition parties. We find, however, that the relationship between user comments and news platforms is highly contextualized. The nature of the relationship between comments and news platforms across countries thus warrants further investigation.

Keywords: user comments, European Parliament elections, populism, political participation, democracy, negativity, UK, Germany, Internet, social media

Introduction

The digital media revolution is dramatically reshaping the political news landscapes of Western societies. Digital-interactive media technologies are not only posing new challenges to the news industries and to professional journalism, they are also affecting the ways citizens take part in political communication. Such technologies thus indicate a broader transformation of the public sphere in terms of participation and have a number of implications for democracy. On the one hand, the online news room offers new opportunities for sharing journalistic products while at the same time allowing citizens to engage with news, to participate directly in debating political issues and to offer more diverse viewpoints. On the other hand, the online news room can be seen as an extension of the existing domain of mainstream media, in which only selected news and opinions are made available and consumed by like-minded audiences. This leads to increasingly fragmented ‘echo chambers’, in which unchecked information, rumours and prejudices are amplified and opinion is manipulated (see e.g. Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Michailidou, Trenz, & De Wilde, 2014).

This choice between deliberation and manipulation does not consider a third possibility, that the Internet, and in our case digital-interactive news sites, simultaneously facilitates active engagement with the news at the same time as resulting in the development of a homogenous mass public. In other words, the online newsroom would display a particular logic of activating individual citizens and aggregating audiences. By involving users *in* democracy and providing facilities for the expression of their individual voice, online news and commenting spaces also facilitate a collective representation of users who stand *for* democracy by expressing their support or discontent with government and political representatives. It is therefore not sufficient to consider instances of individual engagement with the news. There is a need to assess the collective expression of the voice of users, and, in particular, the way the user community appears to represent

the ‘people’ in the contestation of the legitimacy of democratic politics. We expect such collective expressions of the voice of the people to become particularly salient in electoral contestations, when ‘the people’ are called upon to assess the performance of their political representatives. In this article we ask to what extent online engagement with the news represents what we call a form of participatory populism, in which selected users engage collectively as a unified voice to express discontent with political representatives and institutions. We expect that engagement with online news contributes to the salience of populism by amplifying a collective voice of users that is characterised by a high level of negativity towards mainstream political representatives and institutions.

To assess this, we examine online engagement with news websites during the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election campaigns in Germany and the UK. The 2014 EP elections saw an unprecedented number of seats go to right-wing populist parties from across the EU. In the UK, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) came ‘first’, ahead of the two mainstream parties, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. In Germany, the then recently formed Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) entered the EP for the first time. Altogether, a significant minority of seats went to right-wing populist and far-right party groupings, including 9.32 per cent to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), 6.39 per cent and 5.2 per cent for the newly formed Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom respectively. The electoral success of right-wing populist parties in EP elections is usually explained with reference to the campaigning strategies of parties and their leaders or with reference to voters’ Eurosceptic attitudes and distrust of the EU (Arzheimer, 2015). Through our analysis of online commenting behaviour, we explore whether citizens’ own contributions to the debate, and, in particular, their selective engagement with news and expression of a collective voice can also be categorized as populist and thus as such contribute to understandings of how populism is diffused and made

salient. To approach the question of populism in online discussion forums, we first consider the ways in which the Internet may promote or challenge representative democracy. Secondly, we present our research design that draws on and juxtaposes systematic analysis of EP election news and user engagement and responses. Finally, we present original data that suggests that online engagement with news leads to the development of what we describe as participatory populism in which users express a high level of negativity towards mainstream institutions and actors.

Online discussion forums as ‘participatory populism’

Commenting about political news ‘below the line’ offers citizens the chance to engage directly with specific news items, sharing their opinion with journalists and other readers. Commenting has been characterized as a form of low engagement with politics through mainstream media channels. In contrast to more active forms of participatory journalism (Domingo et al., 2008), readers on newspaper sites mainly engage in discussing existing news and thus contribute to public opinion formation based on information provided by professional journalists. In this way, online news readers can contribute to news distribution and reception in selective ways, highlighting particular issues that are considered relevant for the online community. Such an engagement with news could be seen as a contribution to a more plural and participatory public sphere. While mainstream news coverage constrains the likely responses of citizens, comments forums have been found to foster qualities of deliberative democracy, promoting a greater diversity of opinion in the public sphere (Baden & Springer, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2011). They open up opportunities for individuals to engage with journalists in a critical way, enriching news content with additional information and opinion and thus becoming a ‘normalized’ part of journalistic routines (Chen & Pain, 2017; Ruiz et al., 2011). In so doing, citizens participate in shaping the agenda and attention cycles of democratic politics by generating clicks that have an impact on news rankings. Comments sections can

therefore become ‘participatory spaces’ (Reich, 2011) in which users enter into conversation with others for the purpose of public opinion formation and political mobilisation (Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, & Trenz, 2017). From this perspective, the civic-participatory online sphere unfolds through an argumentative style of user debates with a recognition of the contested nature of democratic politics and a mixture of support and opposition in the assessment of political representatives.

At the same time, online participatory news formats and, in particular, the evolving forms of user commenting online, have become the object of harsh normative critique. Online discussion forums are often marginal and suffer from publicity deficits: Online media can engage selected citizens, but these debates often remain confined to closed forums among non-representative users, are detached from formal, decision-making contexts and will therefore only have minimal impact on political outcomes (Givskov & Trenz, 2014). Rather than developing into spaces for deliberation and public opinion formation, the democratic process becomes increasingly fragmented and polarized online through the development of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where more radical opinions find expression (see e.g. Colleoni et al., 2014; Flaxman et al., 2016). Furthermore, online user forums often operate under the conditions set by media companies with commercial interests and their autonomy is put at risk by politically manipulative interventions. For example, Krumsvik finds that user engagement is increasingly being viewed as a method for distribution and data-gathering rather than deliberation and co-production (2018). This draws the attention to a form of populism *by* the media, i.e. an anti-elitist line of certain, media outlets, particularly tabloids and their appeals to the people, which stirs extremism of opinion, for example in debates about immigration (Bastos, 2016; Moffit, 2018). Populism by the media can operate independently of political party agendas but would be primarily driven by the commercial interests and ideological agendas of the newspapers and Internet platforms.

While accepting that users can be manipulated by news organisations and commercial interests, interactive news outlets can also become an arena for populist contestations in selectively amplifying the messages of populist actors (what Moffitt calls populism *through* the media) and in this sense challenge representative democracy. Online discussion forums would therefore turn into platforms for populist mobilisation. This selective amplification of populist messages through the media cannot, however, be understood without considering the active role played by online users who engage in online populist practices (Krämer, 2017). We discuss an alternative scenario in which users' engagement with news is combined with an extremism of opinion that finds expression in fragmented user communities. We call this practice a case of 'online participatory populism'. While populism is usually approached from the perspective of political actors and parties, the Internet opens up the opportunity for 'populist non-elite actors' to participate in populist communication (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017, p. 1284; Krämer, 2017, p. 1294). Such users are not necessarily extremists engaging in 'hate speech' but understand themselves as 'good democrats'. Participatory populism is, however, different from critical debate to the extent that online discussion forums rarely allow for an engagement with the arguments of political opponents but rather result in a categorical rejection of political elites and an overall negativity towards political representatives. According to available user data, online commenters on mainstream news sites are predominantly male and represent the ethnic majority (see Gardiner et al., 2016; Pierson, 2015; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Intense user-driven debates can aggregate a populist voice in a way that challenges the performance of established political parties and of democratic (representative) politics as a whole. Online spaces thus create the possibility for 'an emerging anti-establishment digital mass politics' (Gerbaudo, 2014, p. 67), which results in users constructing a common populist identity as 'the people' that pits them against mainstream politics (Krämer, 2017, p. 1302). Based on an account of populism as a 'discursive and stylistic repertoire' that is

characterized by the claim to speak in the name of the ‘pure people’ against the elites and the political establishment (Brubaker 2017), populism is not only an element of ‘framing’ political messages by some prominent leaders, but also of ‘performance’ that actively engages members of the audience in connecting to each other through the media (Moffitt, 2016). Online participatory populism in this sense attributes a more active role for users in populist communication than simply amplifying the populist messages through the media.

Online comments can, in other words, be translated into claims for populist representation that fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of representative democratic politics. We thus draw on definitions of populism primarily as anti-elite or anti-establishment sentiment (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1285; Mudde, 2004). In the context of EP elections, this would be characterised by high levels of negativity towards the EU and mainstream national actors. While a certain level of negativity is healthy and indeed necessary in a democratic public sphere to the extent that political actors are scrutinized and held to account, in a participatory populist context online spaces would become highly homogenous and bring the legitimacy of democratic politics into question, amplifying anti-representative and, in this case, anti-EU sentiment. Such online populist spaces would thrive in commenting forums provided by tabloid newspapers combining the effects of populism *by* and *through* the media. Yet, we would also expect to find them in online commenting forums provided by quality newspapers, pointing at a possible uncoupling of populism *through* the media from the tonality of the news coverage. Furthermore, in contexts where a liberal media system combines with a majoritarian voting system, there would be higher degrees of polarization in partisan discourse which would be reflected in greater polarization in user debates (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In democratic corporatist systems combined with proportional electoral systems the political debate tends to be less polarized, translating into more plural and diverse user

comments. The next section will place the role of online populist spaces in the context of EP election campaigns.

Online commenting in the context of EP election campaigns

The influence of the Internet on democratic elections has mainly been discussed from an institutional perspective in terms of strategies of mainstream and populist political parties and actors to reach out and mobilise their voters through top-down political campaigning (Ansted & Chatwick, 2011; Bracciale & Martella, 2017). The Internet also plays a prominent role for established representative institutions like the EP to consult voters more regularly in decision-making or online hearings (Haßler, 2015; Tarta, 2014). While the merits of such inclusive forms of online communications seem uncontested, there is yet another aspect of online electoral campaigning that increasingly escapes the control of established parties. Elections also increasingly trigger debates initiated by citizens online. It is here that alternative agendas can be promoted and democratic legitimacy be contested in more radical ways. Online users are, in this sense, campaigners who communicate their choices and preferences in the ballot by calling their leaders to account, punish or reward them and give praise and attribute blame. User commenting on mainstream news sites thus connects the institutional aspects of campaigning and grassroots mobilisation in interesting ways, first, because of its immediate linkage to political discourse as covered by journalism, secondly, because of its responsive nature to the inputs provided by political actors and journalists, and thirdly, because news comments posted on mainstream media news sites create in themselves a form of publicity that is of relevance for broader public opinion and will-formation processes (Michailidou & Trenz, 2015).

Online user commenting in the context of EP elections adds in this sense an additional layer of campaigning that is made up of voters' spontaneous reactions to their candidates in the news. Apart from expressing support of or opposition to political parties and their candidates, online

news readers can, however, also question the democratic legitimacy of the EU in principled terms. In doing so they often create publicity for hostile attitudes towards the EU (generally referred to as Euroscepticism) or stoke a distrust of elites, of government and democratic institutions in general. In the context of EP elections, populism primarily takes the form of right-wing populism that delegitimizes the EU as a polity – a form of Euroscepticism that can be described as polity contestation (De Wilde & Trenz, 2012). EU politics in particular have come under attack by (right-wing) populist parties who call for an immediate expression of the popular voice and are often in favour of participatory and acclamatory features of direct democracy. EP elections then offer these parties an opportunity to promote a principled opposition against the EU. At the same time, Eurosceptic and right-wing populist parties in Europe – particularly those in the UK and Germany – have been described as *Männerparteien* (men’s parties), to the extent that there is a ‘gender gap’ in support for such parties and that they promote traditional gender roles or indeed gender equality in their opposition to Islam (Mudde, 2007; Spierings, Zaslove, Mügge, & de Lange, 2015). Such positions of Eurosceptic and populist parties resonate well within online publics and their tendency to stage the voice of the people outside and beyond the arena of representative politics. The risks of online user commenting to undermine the legitimacy of the EU and its democratic representatives during elections are related to the the effects of fragmentation, polarisation and commercialisation.

Studies of the UK’s referendum on EU membership as well as recent general election have shown that social media networks have been dominated by supporters of far-right or nationalist movements. For example, Usherwood and Wright find that UKIP was particularly successful on social media in building up its support base, meaning that the Leave campaign had a much larger presence on Twitter during the EU referendum (Usherwood & Wright, 2017). It has also been found that calls for political mobilization on Twitter during the 2015 UK general election were primarily driven by a small number of supporters of nationalist parties such as UKIP and the

SNP (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). In the context of election campaigns, the development of communities between citizens described by Lewis et al. (2014) is therefore likely to transform into highly exclusionary nationalist communities of users.

Taken together, the negative effects of fragmentation and polarisation are likely to be amplified during election campaigns, disrupting the new opportunities for audience discussion and feedback through commenting. However, such studies miss an important element of selective user engagement with news content that aggregates a collective voice of the people and that therefore does not remain marginal but contributes in important ways to opinion formation in an electoral context. In the following, we will approach this performance of online publics from the angle of ‘participatory populism’.

Research design

To answer the question of whether there is a ‘participatory-populist’ style of user engagement with EP election news, we explore how online readers of EP election news respond to the news in the form of user comments. To empirically approach the performance of online publics, we analyse comments underneath articles about the EP elections in Germany and the UK from a three-week period spanning the elections of 22nd of May to the 25th June 2014. Germany and the UK constitute interesting comparative case studies given their divergences at the level of mainstream discourse. There has traditionally been a strong pro-European consensus amongst German political elites and the media, who have considered the country to be the ‘*Musterknabe*’ (model boy) of European integration (Lees, 2002). This transforms into a positivity bias in the context of EU polity debates in mainstream newspapers (Galpin & Trenz, 2018). Nevertheless, the then newly formed Alternative for Germany (AfD) won seven seats in the 2014 election. While the party could, at the time, be

categorised as a ‘soft Eurosceptic’ party (Arzheimer, 2015) and has in fact taken a shift to the far right of the political spectrum since 2015, their opposition to Germany’s membership of the Euro translates into a form of polity contestation. As the only anti-Euro party positioning themselves in opposition to the mainstream party consensus on the EU, support for the AfD is likely to stem in part from a more general disillusionment with political elites. Given the concerns that online discussion is driven by the ideological and commercial interests of the news organisations, Germany therefore offers the opportunity to examine how far the pro-European consensus of German media is replicated in the comments.

The UK, however, has long been considered the EU’s ‘awkward partner’ (George, 1994) with traditionally high levels of Euroscepticism. In 2014, UKIP was a growing challenge to the mainstream parties and in 2013 David Cameron had promised to hold a referendum on EU membership should the Conservatives win a majority in the 2015 general election. The UK’s liberal media system has a long history of Euroscepticism, exercising ‘destructive dissent’ in their reporting of European integration (Daddow, 2012), particularly as a result of newspaper ownership becoming concentrated in a small number of billionaire proprietors who have ideological and financial reasons for opposing the EU. At the same time, UKIP supporters have been found to be most likely to have distrust in all political parties and the political establishment more generally, to express opposition to immigration, and to have higher levels of Euroscepticism (Ford, Goodwin, & Cutts, 2012). While a two-country case study cannot easily be generalized the EU-28, the choice of countries represents two cases with highly divergent media systems particularly in relation to their ideological positioning in relation to the EU. The country comparison allows us therefore to relate the nature of user comments to the particular national media landscape.

We collect articles and user comments from six of the most visited online news outlets with user commenting sections in the two countries via the European Media Monitor and the

available online archives. This includes *welt.de*, *spiegel.de* and *bild.de* for Germany and *guardian.co.uk*, *telegraph.co.uk* and *dailymail.co.uk* for the UK. Such a cross-section of news sites allows us to compare commenting practices with a critical view on whether traditional distinctions between conservative and left-leaning news sites as well as quality news outlets and tabloids apply or get increasingly blurred in the commenting sections of online news sites. The selection also allows us to compare comments in response to articles in traditionally pro-European German news sites, which have a broadly positive and left-leaning position on the EU (Eilders, 2002; Galpin & Trenz, 2018), and those in response to UK articles, which tend to be either overtly hostile to European integration such as in the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, or, in the case of *The Guardian*, those that are generally ambivalent or sometimes positive about the EU (Leruth, Kutiyski, Krouwel, & Startin, 2017). While readers of *The Telegraph* have been found to be supporters of either the Conservative Party or UKIP and are more likely to be negative about the EU, readers of both *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* generally express negative opinions about the EU (Leruth et al., 2017). This study was part of a wider study of media negativity in online news that also included coding of articles and quotes by actors in the articles (see AUTHOR, 2018). As part of this study, we coded a random stratified sample by newspaper of 50% of the articles collected in order to deal with the larger volume of articles in online news, which amounted to 335 articles. An integrated codebook was developed for both article and user comment coding through SPSS. Alongside the articles which were randomly selected, we coded the first 20 comments (listed in chronological order from oldest to newest in order to capture immediate reaction to news) under every third article. Altogether, 2091 user comments corresponding to 111 articles were coded by a team of four coders. The distribution by news outlet is outlined in Table 1 below. As the number comments for *bild.de* was particularly low, this should be considered in interpreting the data. While this is a

relatively small-scale study, we hope it can contribute to further research into the relationship between online news platforms and user comments.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In this article, we follow conceptions of populism as ‘anti-elite’ or ‘anti-establishment’ rhetoric by focusing on how negativity towards mainstream institutions and actors finds expression in the comments. We coded articles and user comments for tonality a scale from negative (-1), neutral/ambivalent (0) to positive (1) (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011). A set of indicators for negative and positive tone (such as failure, crisis, frustration, etc. vs. success, achievement, enthusiasm) was used to support the coders’ choices. Following Lengauer et al., we code for overall non-directional negativity, as well as negativity directed towards different types of domestic actors: government parties and representatives (defined as the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the case of the UK, and Christian Democrats (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) in the case of Germany); mainstream opposition parties (Labour and Greens in the UK, Greens, FDP, Left Party in Germany); and domestic populist/Eurosceptic opposition (UKIP and other small far-right parties in the UK, AfD in Germany). This allows us to identify the ideological positioning of articles and users and the extent of left-right contestation. In each case, the first mentioned actor in each category is coded in order to identify the primary focus of the comment. While this may exclude from the findings some actors mentioned, it allows for the widest possible analysis of different types of actors featuring in user commentary. With regards to negativity towards the EU, we follow Easton’s concept of specific and diffuse support (1965) by coding for tonality directed ‘specifically’ towards the EU’s institutions or representatives or towards a diffuse notion of ‘Europe’, ‘the EU’ or ‘Brussels’. This allows us to differentiate between general negativity and negativity most likely to provoke diffuse anger or distrust in the EU specifically.

Finally, gender imbalance in user comments can be used an indicator for the propensity of online publics to adopt a ‘populist style’ of commenting. Research indicates that supporters of populist parties are disproportionately male (see e.g. Ford et al., 2012). We thus coded usernames for gender if users chose online handles that associated them with a particular gender through gender-specific first names or gendered titles (such as Mrs or Mr). Intercoder reliability tests were conducted on 40 comments using Krippendorff’s alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). As there is no official acceptability level, we accepted the score of .60 for the tone as a case of exploratory coding (De Swert, 2012), which has been common practice in a number of other studies (see e.g. van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). Results ranged from .62 to .92¹. Reliability was further enhanced through team coding, regular discussion and checking of problematic cases, as well as a final coding check by us.

Findings: a participatory-populist style in EP news commenting?

To answer our question of how users engage with news through comments, we explore the inclusiveness of comments sections as well as diversity in terms of overall evaluations of the EU, mainstream domestic parties and domestic populist parties through directed tone. With regards to inclusiveness, we find that, while gender does not always play a prominent role as an identification-marker for users (see Table 2), those users who do opt to identify with a gender are predominantly male. As Table 2 shows, a third of usernames in our sample reveal a gender which relates to 682 comments. There is nevertheless variation between outlets – almost half of all users on the *dailymail.co.uk* identify with a gender whereas less than a quarter do on *spiegel.de*. Heightened

¹ EU tone = 0.85, tone towards government = 0.62, tone towards domestic populist parties = 0.67, gender of username = 0.92. No reliability test was possible for the mainstream opposition parties due to the lower level of attention paid to these actors in the test sample. Nevertheless, the scores for all other forms of directed tone and our practice of team coding give us confidence in using this variable.

privacy concerns in Germany mean that users are generally less likely to use their own names than in British newspapers. While we cannot infer the gender of all users on the forum, analysis of the third of users who do identify with a gender is highly valuable given the difficulties in identifying users by gender through any other means.

[Insert Table 2 here]

When looking only at those users who chose a gendered username, the overwhelming majority are male (see Figure 1). We find no significant differences between news outlets or countries – on most platforms around eight out of ten users who identify a gender identify as male, although on *telegraph.co.uk* this number readers almost nine out of ten, and on the *dailymail.co.uk* it is slightly lower, perhaps an indication of the higher number of female readers of the newspaper. Although female users might choose to remain anonymous, perhaps in light of misogynistic abuse they are likely to receive online, this data would suggest a significant gender imbalance with approximately 80% of users being male. To the extent that women are participating online in discussions about the EP elections, we expect that they are engaged in political debates on alternative platforms.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

While gender imbalance is not in itself a sufficient indicator for a populist style of political communication, we cannot dismiss the possibility that there is an exclusive logic at work that turns online discussion forums into unsafe places for women to discuss controversial issues. Our finding falls broadly in line with those other studies which show that women are significantly under-represented in comments' sections, particularly underneath international politics articles (Pierson, 2015; Quinlan, Shephard, & Paterson, 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). This male dominance in online discussions is conducive to an abundance of adversarial and dismissive comments and

sometimes abusive language. For example, *The Guardian* found in a study of 70m comments on its website that female and ethnic minority journalists were more likely to experience comment abuse in the male-dominated world news sections (Gardiner et al., 2016). This would according to Moffitt (2016) meet one criterion for a populist style of communication.

Another key question is whether online publics tend towards uniformity in terms of ideological positioning or express a plurality of opinion comprised of supporters of both government and opposition parties. In line with our assumption of the specifics of participatory populism, comments towards mainstream political representatives are found to be highly negative. Citizens demonstrate a uniformity of opinion when making their voices heard online and use comment sections to express dissatisfaction with the EU as well as national politicians and political parties. Firstly, we find an overall negativity bias across all newspapers and countries in the case of tone towards the EU and its institutions and its actors (see Table 3). We do not find a statistically significant difference at the country or newspaper level – the vast majority (in the case of *dailymail.co.uk* even the totality) of readers who express a clear opinion about the EU through online commenting do it with the explicit intention to express negative views. The percentage of comments that finds something positive to say about the EU is around 5 % in all newspapers. This is particularly striking in the case of *guardian.co.uk* and of German news outlets, where there is a broad pro-European consensus and even a positivity bias towards European integration in the mainstream media.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Nevertheless, in an electoral context, commenting forums are used to express support and opposition with political candidates, their parties and manifestos (policies and politics), but also to assess the legitimacy of the political system as such (polity). Negative tone towards the EU does not necessarily indicate a broader lack of trust in the EU as a polity. We therefore differentiate between

‘specific’ negativity towards individual EU actors or institutions, or ‘diffuse’ negativity towards a general or vague concept of ‘the EU’, ‘Brussels’ or ‘Europe’. We find a significant difference at the country level, $X^2(1, N = 449) = 37.36, p < .001, \phi = .288$, and at the newspaper level, $X^2(5, N = 449) = 53.72, p < .001, Cramer's V = .346$. On the UK news sites, comments evaluating the EU are primarily diffuse, with over two thirds of comments on *guardian.co.uk* and over four out of five comments on the *dailymail.co.uk* and *telegraph.co.uk* indicating are more fundamental contestation over the EU. In Germany the picture is more mixed – over half of comments on *welt.de* and over two thirds on *bild.de* are ‘specific’, whereas a majority of comments on *spiegel.de* are diffuse. On the one hand, this may be symptomatic of a generally higher level of knowledge about the EU in Germany than the UK (Hix, 2015), allowing users on German online discussion forums to engage in more precise debates about EU politics. On the other hand, German Euroscepticism and, in particular, the EU policies espoused by the AfD, has been described as a ‘soft’ form of Euroscepticism (Arzheimer, 2015) that advocates reform of institutions (particularly the Eurozone) rather than a more fundamental rejection of European integration altogether.

[Insert Table 4 here]

This broad negativity bias towards the EU does not, however, mean that users are more supportive of domestic actors. On the contrary, our results similarly show a uniformity of opinion that manifests itself in a strong negativity bias towards both representatives of national government and mainstream opposition parties (Table 3). On all news outlets, over 90% of comments evaluating governing actors and parties are negative, with no significant difference found between countries or newspapers. While we do not find a statistically significant difference between comments evaluating mainstream opposition parties at the country level, with the majority highly negative in both Germany and the UK, we do find a significant difference at the news outlet level,

$p=007$, Fisher's exact test, *Cramer's V* = .308. Here we can identify some minor differences between newspapers, in particular, between the left/liberal leaning and the conservative and tabloid newspapers. Over a quarter of comments on *spiegel.de* and *guardian.co.uk* were found to be positive towards mainstream opposition parties, indicating that on more left- or liberal leaning news sites there tends to be somewhat more diversity in opinion and support for mainstream actors. More than one in ten comments on *welt.de* were also positive towards mainstream opposition, setting commenters on the German conservative quality news website apart from their counterparts on *telegraph.co.uk*. Overall, however, our findings suggest that, when expressing dissatisfaction with political representatives or the EU, commenters are met with very few contradictory or opposing viewpoints and are thus likely have their opinions confirmed. Such comment sections will rather serve as a form of socialization into anti-representative and anti-elite online communities rather than a source of deliberation (Krämer, 2017, pp. 1303-1304).

The negativity bias evident in relation to mainstream parties and the EU is however less prominent when it comes to evaluations of the populist (Euro-sceptic) opposition. There is thus a clear propensity for adherents of minority populist and Euro-sceptic parties to speak out in online forums, while supporters of both government and mainstream opposition are absent or marginal. It is here that online publics are most distinct across the news landscape. We find no statistically significant difference between countries but a clear difference between news outlet, $\chi^2(5, N = 279) = 70.87, p < .001, Cramer's V = .504$. On three conservative newspaper platforms – *welt.de*, *telegraph.co.uk*, and *dailymail.co.uk* – a large majority of comments evaluating domestic populist opposition are positive, in the case of the two British sites, this amounts to three out of four comments and for the German site over two thirds. While we find a majority of negative comments regarding domestic populist parties on the three remaining news platforms, the proportion of positive comments towards populist parties still tends to exceed positive comments towards

mainstream opposition parties (with the exception of *guardian.co.uk*). Ideological differences between readers of different newspapers are thus primarily reflected in the assessment of the populist opposition parties, less so in evaluating the mainstream opposition but not at all in the assessment of national government and the EU. With regards to the assessment of the EU and government, online publics are highly homogeneous with little ideological contestation regardless of the newspaper. It is primarily expressions of support for populist-Eurosceptic actors that seem to provoke opposition by other users, even though those who oppose Eurosceptic-populist parties do not necessarily translate this into expressions of support for mainstream government or opposition parties.

Our findings demonstrate that online commenting primarily serves to express dissatisfaction with the EU and domestic political representatives, with users across most newspapers also demonstrating a high level of support for domestic populist parties. There is a clear anti-representative attitude of online users when it comes to the assessment of government and opposition but, while there is a high level of positivity towards populist-Eurosceptic actors, these voices are also the most contested (i.e. balanced by critical-negative statements). Yet, both positive and negative statements contribute to the high salience of populism/Euroscepticism in online news commenting forums. In the context of the 2014 EP elections, this has consequences for how the objectives of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, representing mainstream governmental and opposition parties, were debated. EP elections could present an opportunity for an online participatory public to engage directly with electoral campaigning, with users framing their contributions in terms of support for and opposition to specific political candidates and their programmes and thus align along ideological, left-right cleavages. They might instead result in a fragmented and incoherent articulation of user voices leaning towards extremism. Our findings rather point to a third option of an online populist public that collectively mobilizes as part of a more fundamental delegitimization

of political elites as well as a diffuse discussion about the legitimacy of the EU as a political system (polity). As such, users align along an identitarian pro- and anti-European rather than a left-right cleavage.

We demonstrate this further by exploring the total level of anti-mainstream comments. Negativity towards politicians or parties is, of course, not automatically populist, indeed, it can be productive for representative democracy to the extent that politicians are openly criticised and held to account (Soroka, 2014). In the following, we demonstrate general patterns in user comments in their assessment of mainstream politics during EP elections. In order to judge overall negativity towards the ‘mainstream’ – that is, the EU, domestic government and mainstream opposition parties – we calculated a total score for comments that could serve as a proxy for a populist logic. To do this, we added together the scores from our negativity variables for different types of actors to create a total score for overall negativity towards mainstream actors. In this scale, positive evaluations of domestic populist parties are reversed to count as an indicator of negativity towards the mainstream. The score ranges from -4 (most negative towards the mainstream, i.e. negative towards government, EU, mainstream opposition and positive towards populist/Eurosceptic parties) to +4 (positive towards the mainstream and negative towards populist parties). We would consider a score ranging from 1 or 2 to -1 or -2 to be acceptable in a representative democracy, where criticism is an important part of accountability. In election campaigns, voters would take a critical view on their candidates but express not only their opposition but also support or at least a fair and neutral judgment (which is necessary for voting in the election). A score of -3 or -4 (or conversely of +3 and +4) would indicate the absence of such a balanced view of the system of political representation and, therefore, be considered more damaging. This would demonstrate either a level of negativity that results in a systematic rejection of the mainstream or an acclamatory voice in unconditional support of one candidate in the absence of political scrutiny.

Despite the broad mainstream and pro-EU consensus in the German press, we find evidence of anti-mainstream sentiment in the comments sections (see Figure 2). While we cannot test for statistical significance², no clear pattern between news outlets emerges, although comments on the conservative platform *welt.de* are most anti-mainstream amongst the German sites and the comments on UK news sites seem to broadly follow the patterns of the newspapers. *guardian.co.uk* comments are noticeably less anti-mainstream than those on the *telegraph.co.uk* and *dailymail.co.uk*, which have the highest anti-mainstream scores of all news platforms in our study.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The results suggest that populist sentiment in commenting is highly contextualized nationally and does not necessarily develop independently of news platforms. Commenters may be responding to the nature of particular national media landscapes: anti-mainstream opinions in German commenting forums might be interpreted as a backlash to the general pro-EU and mainstream consensus in the media where populist voices are denied a platform. Such opinions in the UK forums may be interpreted as replicating the overall negativity in the mainstream and particularly right-wing or populist press. Such interpretations do not deny the existence of differences between media outlets (as in the case of *guardian.co.uk* versus *dailymail.co.uk*) rather, such differences confirm and reinforce traditional distinctions between news platforms within countries. These possibilities would, however, need to be tested as part of further and larger-scale studies.

User commenting online: towards ‘participatory populism’?

² Statistical significance cannot be tested as our data does not meet the assumption of independence of cases for ANOVA, as commenters be influenced by comments made by other users in the forums. However, we offer some tentative conclusions can be drawn to serve as a basis for further studies.

In this article, we have examined the constitution of online publics in the context of EP election news in Germany and in the UK. While the two country studies cannot be generalized across the EU-28, they do allow for a fruitful exploratory analysis of comments sections in relation to populism that can provide a springboard for further studies. In response to the two models of inclusive-participatory versus fragmented-extremist styles of user engagement, we have introduced an alternative option of ‘participatory populism’ that considers user commenting practices as important for both activating citizens in election campaigns and aggregating audiences. We posit that online user commenting forums attract citizens who actively engage with political news but who, rather than contributing to the democratic legitimacy of policies and institutions, participate in a systematic delegitimization of the political system. The concept of participatory populism thus brings together individual expressions of discontent with representative politics and the collective expressions of the voice of users. At the same time, user commenters cannot simply be considered representative of the national electorates in the UK or Germany. Online commenting publics can neither be described as mini-publics who represent the population at large, nor as anticipatory publics that allow public opinion or electoral results to be measured in a reliable way. On the contrary, specific selective mechanisms apply to the constitution of online publics that attract particular categories of users: the overrepresentation of male users who are primarily motivated to express their discontent with representative politics. In line with these subversive logics, online commenting forums could be described as subaltern counter publics that challenge existing political and media power structures. User-commenters do not, however, amplify the voice of marginalised groups, and this form of bottom-up mobilisation through online engagement does not imply that more pluralist and tolerant views are expressed online.

In our study, we find strong opposition to the EU institutions and candidates as well as highly negative views of domestic government and opposition parties regardless of country. These

findings may be interpreted in light of the diverse media landscapes in the two countries. In the German case, the ‘popular voice’ cannot be articulated through official media and representation channels and is therefore given authenticity through user comments. In the UK case, online discussion forums can generally be categorized as anti-EU and anti-mainstream, but our data suggests that the anti-mainstream voice finds expression particularly on the right-wing and tabloid news platforms, which themselves adopt a populist style. In both countries, we find commenters to be a predominantly male group of users, in line with our expectations on the basis of broader gender imbalances amongst supporters of populist parties. That many users do not publicly identify with a gender limits our data, but given the difficulties in identifying the gender of commenters by other means, this data is valuable in understanding the likely composition of comments sections. Our findings also confirm other studies that have found a significant under-representation of female comments in user forums.

Overall, the participatory populism in online user comments expresses a general discontent with representative democratic politics, including the performance of national government and opposition, but appears to develop in a contextualized manner depending on the news platform and country. Although some users do engage in a defense of mainstream opposition parties and condemnation of right-wing populists, particularly on the left/liberal platforms, the overall pattern is one of negativity. Online commenting forums therefore develop into a playground for testing out anti-mainstream positions and applying a populist style of discourse in the contestation of democratic legitimacy. As a result, online discussion forums in the context of EP elections involve not just the expression of ideological positions along a left-right scale, but also of identity politics that shifts the discussion from politics to polity contestation. This amplifies the Eurosceptic voice and fundamentally rejects the legitimacy of the EU’s system of political representation.

One limitation in our data is the focus on only one central variable of negativity towards mainstream institutions and actors as a measure of populism in user comments. This does not attempt to develop a more elaborate perspective on the complex relationship between populism and the media to be tested through a broader set of variables. Our study more narrowly explores the way in which negativity in comments transforms into broader anti-mainstream opinion on news platforms. This approach follows definitions of populism as anti-elite or anti-establishment sentiment (Mudde, 2004). Further studies could explore additional elements of populist participation which may include claims on behalf of ‘the pure people’, nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiment (Caiani & Kröll, 2017), or levels of incivility (Chen & Pain, 2017; Ruzza, 2009). It is also necessary to emphasise that negativity towards particular actors is not – on its own – a measure of populism, but can also reflect a healthy level of critique of political actors in the public sphere. We show, however, how user negativity transforms the comments sections into more homogenous expressions of public opinion towards elites.

A further limitation of our study is methodological. We present the descriptive results of a small-scale study of negativity in user comments sections. In addition, given the often ambiguous nature of online commenting, the results of our reliability tests fall within the lower range for acceptability. While these difficulties with reliability must be taken into consideration when interpreting the data and in designing further studies, we hope that our findings may nevertheless be used as a basis for further research. With our concept of ‘participatory populism’, we make a theoretical intervention in the literature concerning the Internet and its impact on democratic politics. Our operationalization of populism as negativity towards the mainstream and our development of an anti-mainstream index is meant as a proposal to be taken forward in bigger and larger-scale studies of populism on online comments.

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Table 1: Comments coded by news outlet

News website	No. of articles	Comments
spiegel.de	20	401
welt.de	27	428
bild.de	7	63
guardian.co.uk	27	538
telegraph.co.uk	15	297
dailymail.co.uk	15	299

Table 2: Percentage of gendered vs. non-gendered usernames

News website	Gendered username	Non-gendered username
spiegel.de, n=401	23.2	76.8
welt.de, n=428	33.4	66.6
bild.de, n=63	43.2	56.8
guardian.co.uk, n=538	27.7	72.3
telegraph.co.uk, n=297	37.4	62.6
dailymail.co.uk, n=299	46.2	53.8
Average	32.9	67.1

Table 3: Directed Comment Tone

Comment Tone		spiegel.de	welt.de	bild.de	guardian.co.uk	telegraph.co.uk	dailymail.co.uk
		%	%	%	%	%	%
EU	Negative	94.3%	97.3%	95.5%	91.2%	96.2%	100.0%
	Positive	5.7%	2.7%	4.5%	8.8%	3.8%	0.0%
	<i>n</i>	106	148	22	68	53	53
Government	Negative	95.9%	93.6%	100.0%	94.6%	97.3%	100.0%
	Positive	4.1%	6.4%	0.0%	5.4%	2.7%	0.0%
	<i>n</i>	97	94	8	111	75	91
Opposition	Negative	71.1%	87.5%	100.0%	75.0%	100.0%	96.9%
	Positive	28.9%	12.5%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	3.1%
	<i>n</i>	38	32	3	40	18	32
Populist Opposition	Negative	53.7%	35.2%	66.7%	86.2%	23.3%	22.9%
	Positive	46.3%	64.8%	33.3%	13.8%	76.7%	77.1%
	<i>n</i>	41	54	6	65	30	83

Table 4: Specific vs. Diffuse Comment Tone Towards the EU

Comment Tone EU	spiegel.de n=106	welt.de n=147	bild.de n=22	guardian. co.uk n=68	telegraph.co.uk n=53	dailymail.co.uk n=53	Total n=449
Specific	41.5	58.5	68.2	35.3	18.9	13.2	41.4
Diffuse	58.5	41.5	31.8	64.7	81.1	86.8	58.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0