

# Populism in German Politicians

How populist do German politicians tweet?

A text mining approach of twitter data

Project URL: [https://github.com/sebastiansauer/polits\\_tweet\\_mining](https://github.com/sebastiansauer/polits_tweet_mining)

Poster URL: <https://data-se.netlify.com/download/populism-tweets.pdf>

Report URL (German): [https://sebastiansauer.github.io/psy\\_pol/blog/populismus-tweets/](https://sebastiansauer.github.io/psy_pol/blog/populismus-tweets/)



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## Can populisms of politicians be estimated by analyzing speech data from Twitter?

With the re-surge of (right-wing) populism amongst countries on a global scale, the question of causes, and a deeper understanding of pathways, demands preoccupation. This study proposes to estimate individual populism levels of politicians (and, in consequence, of parties) by speech analyses of Twitter messages (tweets). Scholars are struggling to define populisms due to its varieties, but narratives of our „pure people“ and „threats from outside“ prevail. In addition, low-complexity and anti-pluralistic solutions to complex societal problems continue to provide wide-spread currency (Berbuir, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2015).

In the present work, populism is defined by referring to Poppers (pre-)theory of the open society, as antidote to the tribal society, or „horde“ (Popper, 1972). Advocates of the tribal-type society advocate for strong hierarchical leaders, strict rules, demand acceptance (as opposed to discussion) of „truths“, adopt narratives of „blood and soil“, or „we against them“, and cherish heroic traits and behavior. In sum, populist tendencies may be characterized as complexity-reducing, even anti-rational, and intra-group cohesive patterns. According to Popper, tribal societies have a totalitarian core, going back to Plato as its spiritus rector.

### Operationalization

Populism is operationalized by eight indicators in this study. Their median value give the total populism score per person.

#### Indicator

word shortness

ratio of negative/positive words

proportion of negative words

proportion of emotional words

negative emotion score

overall emotion score

proportion of CAPITAL letters

ratio of adjectives to adverbs

### Data and data aggregation

- 400k ( $4 \cdot 10^5$ ) tweets from German politicians
- 32k tweets from Donald Trump
- Yielding approx.  $6.3 \cdot 10^6$  words
- 200 politicians (mainly) from the list *German Politicians* (Deutsche Welle)
- 7 political parties included: AfD, CDU, CSU, FDP, Grüne, Linke, SPD, Trump/GOP
- Data were collected in August 2017
- R code and data freely accessible

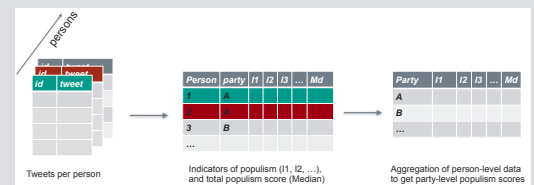


Figure 1. Eight Populism indicator scores (z-values) are computed from tweets data per person. Person-level data is further aggregated to party-level data.

## Results: AfD and Linke show highest score, overall\*

\*within German parties. However, Trump's score is by far the largest.

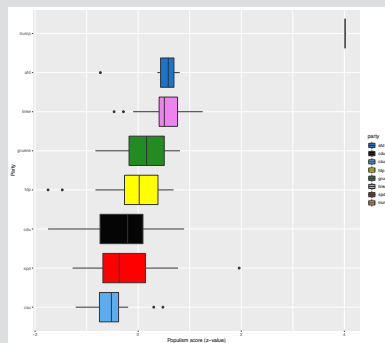


Figure 2. German party scores are led by AfD and The Linke

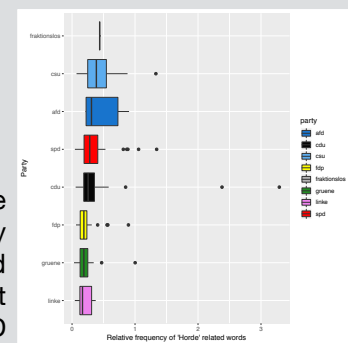


Figure 3. The relative frequency of 'horde' related words\* is highest for AfD

### Discussion

- Indicators were chosen with some degree of subjectivity
- More/different analyses warranted
- Statistical uncertainty not covered
- Was the sample representative for German politician chatter?
- Association with external criteria is still unknown
- Novel way to estimate populism that scales well

Figure 4. Populism indicator scores (z-values) for each party. Some parties show similar patterns such as CSU, CDU and SPD.

