



# Favoring ingroups, derogating from outgroups: how populist parties in Belgium polarize on social media

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## Abstract

In a context of increasing polarization, this study proposes to clarify the way populist parties cultivate vertical (people vs. elites) and horizontal (between different groups in society) opposition in their online communication. Relying on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and on the concept of claim of representation, this article investigates to what extent left-wing (LWPP) and right-wing (RWPP) populist parties in Belgium create antagonisms in their online communication. Expectations are threefold. First, ingroup appeal and outgroup derogation should be more present in social media messages of populist parties than in non-populist ones. Second, both LWPPs and RWPPs should oppose groups vertically as well as horizontally. Third, the nature of these groups should be conditional upon their respective ideology—namely, socialism on one side, and nativism on the other. To this end, the article analyzes 13 months of X posts by all 13 parliamentary parties and their presidents (N=12,303), during a routine period (January 2023–January 2024). Our findings first reveal that populist parties, and especially RWPPs, are more likely to resort to outgroup derogation compared to non-populist parties. Second, regarding the vertical antagonism, our analysis points out the intertwined effect of populism and incumbency. Third, the nature of group appeals greatly differs between LWPPs and RWPPs, in connection with their core ideology.

**Keywords** Elite discourse · Social identity theory · Ingroup favoritism · Outgroup derogation · Populism · Polarization · Social media · Quantitative content analysis

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## Introduction

Politics in the last decades has been marked by profound transformations that have raised concern for the quality of the democratic debate. First, across party systems in advanced democracies, populist parties, especially on the right-end side of the spectrum, have gained leverage, with some even entering or supporting national executives (Askim et al., 2022). Second and related to these changes, societies would have become more polarized: political and social groups would increasingly feel apart from each other, both ideologically and affectively (Gidron et al. 2023; Wagner, 2021). Third, the generalization of social media among elites and citizens would reinforce the strength of anti-establishment actors and encourage polarized opinions (Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; Yarchi et al. 2021). Social media would allow parties and politicians to attack or discredit their adversaries more *directly* and ‘permanently’ (Auter & Fine 2016; Marland et al., 2017), and to mobilize co-partisans in so-called ‘echo chambers.’

This article aims to investigate the extent to which populist parties in their online communication contribute to opposing political and social groups, by making specific ingroup appeal and outgroup derogation. Theoretically, the paper relies on two central concepts in Social Identity Theory (SIT): ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. Ingroup favoritism refers to a tendency to ascribe favorable characteristics to ingroup members, while outgroup derogation denotes a tendency to associate outgroup members with unfavorable traits (Tajfel & Turner 1986). We aim to analyze how populist parties create antagonisms by favoring some ingroups and derogating other outgroups, while comparing to non-populist parties. While research has already demonstrated a link between populism and SIT, and with ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation (Gerstlé & Nai 2019), these previous studies focused mostly on populism based in nativism—and much less on left-wing populism (Hamleers & Vliegenthart, 2019). These prior studies did not differentiate systematically between vertical (people versus elites) and horizontal opposition (between different groups in society). Our study allows comparing ingroup appeal and outgroup derogation, both on a vertical and on a horizontal dimension, in the online communication of both right-wing populist (RWPPs) and left-wing populist parties (LWPPs). We examine this question in the multiparty and federal context of Belgium, where both types of parties are relevant in the party system and compete via claiming to represent the ordinary people.

Our hypotheses are threefold. First, we expect both ingroup appeal and outgroup derogation to be more prevalent in social media messages of populist parties than of non-populist adversaries. Second, we consider both the vertical (people versus elites) and horizontal (between different social groups) opposition that populists may cultivate, and we anticipate that they will be more likely to refer to the vertical dimension in their online communication than non-populist parties. Third, regarding the horizontal opposition, we expect that the ideological orientation will reveal differences in the types of ingroups and outgroups mentioned, with economic groups being prevalent in LWPPs’ communication, whereas groups based on nativism being mostly used in RWPPs’ rhetoric.



At the empirical level, we conduct a quantitative content analysis of 13 months of elite discourse on 'X' in Belgium (January 1st 2023 until January 31st 2024). We observe a period outside of electoral campaigns, allowing to neutralize campaign effect and to account for other dynamics (e.g., government/opposition) during a 'routine' period. All parties holding at least one seat in the federal Chamber are included (13 parties). All these parties and their leader(s) are active on X, and we consider the full population of posts from both the official parties' and the party leaders' accounts ( $N=12,303$ ). This means that we study 29 accounts on X. Findings reveal that outgroup derogation in general is more likely in RWPPs' online communication than in non-populist parties' online communication. Findings also show that both LWPPs and RWPPs are more likely to favor ingroups and derogate from outgroups in connection with their core ideology, respectively, on the economic and on the nativist cleavages. Regarding the vertical antagonism opposing 'people' ingroup and 'political' outgroups, our analysis points out the intertwined effect of populism and incumbency.

## **Social identity theory, group appeals, and polarization**

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986) considers intergroup relation dynamics as socially constructed (Kruschinski et al. 2022; Masroor et al. 2019), and puts forward the centrality of social norms and attributes of social groups. Via processes of social categorization, individuals have a tendency to divide the world into groups one identifies with and considers belonging to (ingroups) and those from whom they distance themselves from and do not identify with (outgroups). Two key concepts relevant in this regard are ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation: while ingroup favoritism refers to a tendency to ascribe favorable characteristics to ingroup members, outgroup derogation denotes a tendency to associate outgroup members with unfavorable traits (Allport 1954; Rooduijn et al. 2021). Group identities shape interactions and can also be exploited by political actors (Bornschieer et al. 2021).

According to SIT, the fragmentation of society into groups and the competition between these groups can help sustain a 'positive social identity' (Wojcieszak et al. 2022). Group identities are mainly used to provide individuals with a sense of belonging, by differentiating the group they identify with to other groups in society (Rathje et al. 2021), and individuals are naturally inclined to self-categorize into groups. This pushes political actors to resort to various discursive strategies to define the contours of these in- and outgroups (Masroor et al. 2019; Turner et al., 1979; Tajfel & Turner 1986).

Recently, SIT has been connected to the discussion on political polarization (Areal, 2022; Gidron et al. 2023; Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; Wagner, 2021). Ideological polarization relates to differences in political attitudes and issue positions of the adverse party (Dalton 1987), and affective polarization takes into account identity, its role in politics and 'how identity salience within groups can exacerbate outgroup animosity' (Kubin & von Sikorski 2021, p. 188). Affective polarization would be driven by growing inter-party group hostility. This resentment between opposite political groups (Iyengar et al. 2012; Yarchi et al. 2021) has been central in



the literature on ‘negative partisanship’ (Bankert et al. 2017). Especially in US-style majoritarian systems (Bankert et al. 2017), the growing disaffection between—often stereotyped—groups representing the out-party has fueled polarization over the past years (Ahler 2018).

## **Ingroups and outgroups in elites’ claims of representation on social media**

One of the goals of elite communication is to emphasize the differences between parties in order to shape voter behavior in one’s favor (Wojcieszak et al. 2021). To do so, political elites use both ingroup praise and outgroup derogation to differentiate one’s group from others (Wojcieszak et al. 2022). In fact, group appeals are central ingredients of political actors’ communication (Dolinsky 2022). These group appeals can be captured by the concept of ‘representative claims’: by categorizing individuals into groups that need representing, political actors actively contribute to crafting the image of these groups and to bring them into ‘political existence’ (De Mulder & Gevers, 2023; Saward 2006). Representative claims often pit the ingroup worthy of representation against the undeserving outgroup, which are sometimes explicitly excluded from the imagined community (Gevers et al. 2024; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schweber, 2016). Most commonly encountered in political communication is the use of the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative, or the binary opposition between a positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Gerbaudo et al. 2019). Both strategies can use references to moral values, or group membership to project others as burdensome or even dangerous to the rest of society (Masroor et al. 2019).

Social media platforms constitute perfect tools to disseminate these rhetorical strategies, allowing the disintermediation of communication between political elites and citizens (Petkevicius & Nai 2022, p. 279). Today, most political actors compete for voters’ attention on social media in a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), where they stimulate the ‘cognitive binary of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation’ to legitimize their political actions (Masroor et al. 2019). In doing so, they participate in so-called ‘echo chambers’ (Wojcieszak et al. 2021) to fueling sentiments of animosity toward political opponents (Iyengar et al. 2012; Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; Yarchi et al. 2021). Consequently, both ingroup appeal and outgroup derogation are likely to be frequent elements of elite communication online. As explained below, we expect this to be especially the case for populist parties.

## **Ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation in populist parties’ online communication: expectations**

Political parties are inclined to make claims of representation which will reflect social identities and specific conceptions of particular ingroups and outgroups in society. Our argument is that populism influences the way political actors articulate these interests, and construct ingroup and outgroup identities that are associated



with the party. The ideational definition of populism underlines four key elements: anti-elitism, people-centrism, the general will, and a conception of the people as a homogenous whole. As such, populism is considered a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004) that can be combined with other ‘host’ ideologies—nativism for RWPPs, socialism for LWPPs. Populism ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

Populist parties, via their online communication, have been shown to adopt a communication style reflecting this thin-centered ideology in which they tend to be rather vocal about both ingroups (e.g., the people) and outgroups (the elite) (Blassnig et al. 2019; Jagers & Walgrave 2007). A populist communication style, hence, can be viewed within the framework of SIT in which a reliance on the ‘we versus them’ frame is being noted with ingroups being praised and outgroups being derogated or having their negative attributes emphasized (Bornschier et al. 2021; Hameleers et al. 2018), whereas the technocratic style which non-populist parties rather use aims to uphold legitimacy and achieve consensus by emphasizing personal expertise (Bossetta 2017). Appealing to the people is at the heart of populist rhetoric. Populist messages tend to mobilize people and social groups by using a ‘populist identity framing,’ which implies the identification of an arguably deprived and threatened ingroup combined with a clear outgroup hostility (Bos et al. 2020; Mols 2012).

Therefore, we expect that populist party actors will be more likely to use ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation compared to non-populist party actors:

**H<sub>1</sub>** Both (a) left-wing populist (LWPPs) and (b) right-wing populist party actors (RWPPs) will be more likely than non-populist ones to favor ingroups in their online communication.

**H<sub>2</sub>** Both (a) left-wing populist (LWPPs) and (b) right-wing populist party actors (RWPPs) will be more likely than non-populist ones to derogate from outgroups in their online communication.

The literature on populism adds two key dimensions which are relevant to consider within SIT, claims of representation, ingroup favoritism, and outgroup derogation: horizontal versus vertical polarization (Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel 2017; Lupu 2015). Vertical polarization refers to instances where a non-elite ingroup (‘the people’) is opposed to an elite outgroup (‘the government’, ‘the institution’ etc.), whereas horizontal polarization characterizes instances where social groups, or even groups outside society (not related to any political or economic elite), are mentioned (Obradović et al. 2020). The classification of populism as a thin-centered ideology implies that populist actors—regardless of their ideological orientation—are more prone to highlighting the ‘moral superiority’ of the people, which are threatened by a disconnected and corrupt elite. This corresponds to vertical polarization. Hence, we expect that



**H<sub>3</sub>** Both (a) LWPPs and (b) RWPPs are more likely to favor ingroups referring to (the pure) people compared to non-populist party actors.

**H<sub>4</sub>** Both (a) LWPPs and (b) RWPPs are more likely to derogate from outgroups referring to political elites compared to non-populist party actors.

Regarding horizontal polarization, populist actors also resort to pitting the ‘ordinary people’ ingroup against other social groups, either to emphasize their moral superiority or to emphasize the threat that the outgroup represents to the ingroup (Bos et al. 2020)—populists can blame immigrants, minorities, or welfare recipients. Both horizontal and vertical oppositions can be described as aspects of the same underlying social identity mechanism (Hameleers 2018). The nature of ingroups and outgroups is likely to originate from their ideological orientation, which offers a basis for the groups they tend to represent and a view on which groups are considered ‘deserving’ (Gevers et al. 2024). LWPPs typically adopt a form of radical socialism or are inspired by a (neo-)Marxist tradition, while RWPPs are usually embedded within nativism. LWPPs typically mobilize on opposition against the dominant capitalist economic system (i.e., against deregulation, laissez-faire economy, austerity and small governments) in which the ‘workers’ or ‘working class’ are being exploited by rich people, and major economic actors (Marcos-Marne 2021; Perfeito da Silva, 2021). RWPPs tend to be grounded in nativism which refers to an ideology in which the interests and rights of natives are being prioritized over those of immigrants or newcomers (Newth, 2021). Often, nativism involves a strong belief in preserving cultural, social, and economic dominance of the native population. It can manifest itself as opposition to newcomers and advocacy for the protection of national identity and traditions based on a homogenous conception of the people as an ‘imagined community.’ Therefore, we expect that LWPPs will mostly make references to economic ingroups (i.e., the poor, workers, unemployed, trade unions) that they consider to be ‘deserving’ and which they claim to represent, while they are expected to consider some economic groups (i.e., multinationals, the rich, companies) as non-deserving outgroups. We expect RWPPs to mostly make appeals to ingroups that refer to a community-based ingroup inspired by some claimed homogeneity or a common core (e.g., the own people, their native community, nationality, a shared culture or heritage), and more likely to derogate from ethnic or religious minorities (that are perceived as not belonging to the native group) as outgroups. This leads us to expect that

**H<sub>5</sub>** LWPPs will be more likely to (a) favor ingroups and (b) derogate from outgroups based on an economic basis.

**H<sub>6</sub>** RWPPs will be more likely to make (a) favor ingroups and (b) derogate from outgroups based on nativism.

Overall, we expect different types of populist parties to be similar in the way they invoke vertical polarization (considering the people as the ingroup and



political elites as the outgroup), but different regarding horizontal polarization (Klinger et al. 2023).

## Data and method

### Case selection

We analyze ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation by political actors in Belgium, which is a federal country consisting of two large language communities, namely a Dutch- and a French-speaking community next to a smaller German-speaking community. It is a parliamentary democracy and a multiparty system, characterized by consensus-seeking and consociationalism (Deschouwer 2012). Thirteen political parties are currently represented in the Belgian federal parliament. These parties represent distinct ideological families and are structured along linguistic lines. They range from the radical left (PTB-PVDA<sup>1</sup>) to green (Ecolo, Groen), socialist (PS, Vooruit), Christian-democrat (LesEngagés, CD&V), liberal (MR, Open VLD), regionalist (DéFI, N-VA), and radical right (VB) parties (Delwit & van Haute 2021). The political system includes both left-wing and right-wing viable populist parties (Goovaerts et al. 2020), allowing for in-depth comparison. We provide a full list of the included parties, their abbreviations and affiliation along with their president(s)<sup>2</sup> in the Online Supplementary Files (Table A1). While polarization is typically lower in consensus democracies than in majoritarian systems (Bernaerts et al. 2023), Belgium has been described as ‘a deeply divided society’ where cross-cutting cleavages mutually reinforce each other (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps 2020; Deschouwer 2012). Belgium, hence, appears as a good case to study references to in- and outgroups in (populist) parties’ communication.

The media system in Belgium shares features with the Democratic corporatist model and has been described as hybrid, with advanced levels of professionalization, independent journalism, and a strong public broadcaster in a highly competitive and diversified media landscape (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Newman et al. 2022). Yet, in federal Belgium, this media landscape is organized along linguistic lines, resulting in separated media systems. Nowadays, political actors have fully embraced the social media, incorporating a digital strategy within their political communication toolkit (Lefevere et al. 2020; Peeters et al. 2023). Social media platforms are used on a daily basis by politicians to reach the electorate following a permanent campaign logic; still, we do see that generally speaking Flemish parties have been more ‘early adopters’ and tend to be more active than Francophone party actors (Kins et al., 2024; Lefevere et al. 2020).

<sup>1</sup> PTB-PVDA is the only national party that has a federal structure and has one party leader. All other parties are exclusively competing in either the Dutch- or French-speaking community (Delwit & van Haute 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Green parties have two co-presidents. For several parties (e.g., Vooruit, Open VLD), a leadership change occurred during our observation period. We always collected posts of these leaders only when they stood as party president.



We focus on political actors' communication on X (previously Twitter) in this specific media and political context. Keeping in mind that there are 'significant differences in the polarization patterns found on different social media platforms, we cannot speak about political polarization on social media as a unified phenomenon' (Yarchi et al. 2021, p. 113). X, notably, is an effective medium for expressing prevalent political attitudes and addressing public concerns (Masroor et al. 2019), but also where negativity is quite present (Antypas et al. 2023). The audience of X is not necessarily representative of the general population, yet trends emerging on the platform often spill over into mainstream media via intermedia agenda-setting processes (Wojcieszak et al. 2021).

## Sample

We have conducted a quantitative content analysis to assess all mentions of ingroups and outgroups during a non-election period spanning thirteen months (from January 1st 2023 until January 31st 2024). We collected and analyzed all posts sent out by official party and party leaders' accounts on X ( $N=12,303$  posts, on 29 accounts), i.e., the full population. All political actors had an active X account, with most posting on a regular basis—although Dutch-speaking actors are more active than their French-speaking counterparts (Close et al. 2023). Indeed, in our data, 8419 posts come from Dutch-speaking party actors (73.6%), while 3884 posts come from French-speaking ones (31.6%). Differences arise across parties: the radical right VB, regionalist N-VA and green party Groen post most often in Flanders; the liberal MR, regionalist DéFI and radical left PTB most often in Francophone Belgium. Posts have been defined as political claims following the procedure outlined by Giugni and Cinalli (2013). All posts have been collected ex-post via web scraping in R, and manually. This means that some deleted posts may not have been included. Still, a manual check suggests that deleted posts from party accounts in Belgium are exceptional and, therefore, unlikely to affect the validity of our results.

## Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis was a single post sent from an official party or party president's account during our observation period. Reposts with comments ('Cited posts') were analyzed, while simple reposts or reposts of other users without any comments were excluded. Reposts do not contain any original claim of a party actor. Posts were analyzed in their original language (i.e., Dutch or French) by coders that have advanced proficiency in both languages.

## Coding and intercoder reliability

The coding has been performed by two of the authors who have extensive prior experience with quantitative content analysis and coding based on a specifically developed coding scheme as part of the university's social media lab. All coders were trained to apply this codebook. About 5% of the sample has been double-coded.





Inter-coder reliability scores were satisfactory and range between 0.62 and 1.00 with an average of 0.81.

### Dependent variables (DV)

The dependent variable is whether a post refers to ingroups or outgroups, and references to specific types of ingroups and outgroups. To assess this, we took into account all available information of a post, that is the full text of the post, but also all links, articles, or pictures that were directly visible in the post via a preview (except for videos). We define ingroups as groups that political actors claim to identify with, and on whose behalf they claim to act. Conversely, outgroups are defined as groups that political actors dissociate themselves from, and consider as not belonging to, or simply not identify with (Bornschieer et al. 2021; Tajfel & Turner 1986). Such reference to an ingroup or an outgroup needed to be (a) explicit and (b) done within the framework of a claim of representation, in which a political actor makes a reference to a group which they either tend to represent or not. These claims could take the form of descriptive (i.e., claims to similar experiences or identity of a mentioned group), symbolic (i.e., identification, ascribing positive or negative elements, leveling support or criticism) or substantive claim (i.e., pertaining to policy, such as advocating for new legislation, calling for political action, decisions to the (dis)advantage of specific groups) (Gevers et al. 2024).

Consider the following post by the radical right party VB which includes (multiple) ingroups and outgroups: ‘The agricultural sector is rightly furious. The Flemish government must stop bickering and urgently sit down together to finally ensure legal certainty and a future for our Flemish farmers’ (Post on X, July 18, 2023). In this example, Flemish farmers and the agricultural sector are coded as (an economic) ingroup, while the Flemish government is coded as (a political) outgroup. The party advocates here for a policy (legal certainty) that will benefit the farmers and takes the side of this sector, while criticizing the Flemish government via denouncing its lack of action. Hence, the dependent variables are binary, referring to whether an elite actor mention an ingroup (0=no, 1=yes) or an outgroup (0=no, 1=yes). Some posts only contain an ingroup (34.3%), others only an outgroup (17.4%), while others contain no clear group at all or both types (4.6%).

Inspired by our theoretical framework, we distinguish three main categories of ingroups and outgroups (see Table A2 in Online supplementary file).<sup>3</sup> First, to capture the people versus elite opposition, we include general references to the people as an ingroup (i.e., ordinary citizens, taxpayers, the people, everyone); and political/ideological as outgroups (i.e., other political parties, institutions, ideologies, the government). Second, we capture the economic cleavage via references to economic ingroups (i.e., workers, the middle class, the unemployed); and outgroups

<sup>3</sup> These categories do not cover all the ingroup and outgroups that are present in political parties’ communication. Other publications by the authors examine for instance the presence of specific socio-demographic groups (e.g., ‘women’, ‘the young’ etc.) or groups associated with international affairs (e.g., ‘Ukrainians’, ‘people in Gaza’). For an overview, see Kins et al. (2024) and Close et al. (2024).



(i.e., sector federations, employers' organizations, companies or firms). Finally, we include nativist-based ingroup appeals, which correspond to appeals toward both community-level references on geographical, cultural or linguistic entities, such as Flanders, the Walloon community; and outgroup derogation based on nationality, such as refugees, religious minorities, immigrants, Muslims. This categorization draws on a claims analysis by Cinalli and Giugni (2013) which has been adapted to the Belgian context.

## Independent variables

The key independent variable is whether the party can be considered as populist. As stated in the theoretical framework, we rely on Mudde's (2004) definition as 'a thin-centered ideology.' This conceptualization regards populist parties as actors challenging the status quo that oppose the country's establishment. Following this definition, and in line with prior classifications, we define the PVDA-PTB as a left-wing populist party (LWPP), and VB as a right-wing populist party (RWPP) (Delwit & van Haute 2021; Goovaerts et al. 2020; van Haute & Pauwels 2016). All other parties (i.e., the green, socialist, liberal, Christian-democratic, and regionalist parties) have been classified as non-populist, although some are traditional and others can be seen as challenger parties (e.g., Greens), or some borderline populist (e.g., N-VA, the Flemish regionalist party—which has nevertheless become a major party of government) (Rooduijn et al., 2021).

Both populist parties are seen as outsider parties that are ostracized either formally via a cordon sanitaire or informally (Jacobs, 2022). Neither PTB-PVDA nor VB has ever been part of a regional or federal government, but they have reached historical thresholds at the 2019 election: 18 seats (11.9%) for VB and 12 seats (8.6%) for PTB-PVDA out of 150 seats in the Chamber. Together they control about 20% of the seats, making them significant electoral forces and competitors for mainstream parties. VB can be characterized by strict anti-immigration stances and viewpoints on assimilation; it is considered a nativist party with xenophobic positions (van Haute and Pauwels 2016). The party is also advocating for the split of the country—hence, highly likely to refer to community-based groups. PTB-PVDA self-identifies as a radical left party representing the working class: its party statutes still include references to its Maoist heritage (Delwit and Haute, 2016). PTB-PVDA is the only unitary party in Belgium and competes in the two party systems, but it clearly stands as the major populist party in the French-speaking community, while it is the VB that holds this status in the Flemish community. Recent research shows that both parties attract voters that tend to be angry about politics in addition to other key explanations for populist parties' support (Jacobs et al., 2024).

## Controls

A set of control variables have also been included, at the party level mostly. First, we include a variable pertaining to the incumbency status of the party. We have included a variable reflecting the incumbency status at the federal level (see



Table A3). Second, a dummy variable specifies whether the post was sent by the official party organization account (0) or the party president account (1)—as we know from previous analyses that party presidents are more prone to ‘attack’ on X (Close et al. 2023). Third, electoral strength takes into account the parties’ number of seats in the Federal Chamber of Representatives.<sup>4</sup> It indicates how well parties performed during the previous federal elections of May 26, 2019. Finally, we control for the language community (Francophone parties = 0, Dutch-speaking parties = 1). For PTB-PVDA party leader Raoul Hedebouw (i.e., leader of the only national party PTB-PVDA), this dummy is based on the language in which the post was sent in, as he only has one (bilingual) X account.

## Analysis and results

We first report descriptive analyses in order to illustrate the main patterns in ingroup and outgroup mentions by political actors, focusing on the comparisons between populist and non-populist parties. Second, we present multivariate analyses. We use multilevel logistic regression models to account for the nested structure of our data (X posts are nested within 29 political actors—namely accounts of political parties or presidents).<sup>5</sup> As we assume that there is dependency in the data—posts of a same actor sharing more similarities—we opt for multilevel analysis.

### Descriptive analysis

Table 1 summarizes general ingroup and outgroup mentions. Overall, political actors favor ingroups more often (i.e., 8013 posts or 65.1%) than they derogate from outgroups (5932 or 48.2%)—together, they do not add up to the full population, since some posts contain both types of groups or none. This is driven mainly by the RWPP: the VB is the only party derogating more often from outgroups than favoring ingroups. When comparing populist parties to other parties, both LWPP and RWPP derogate from outgroups (68.4%) more often than non-populist parties (37.1%); however, they do not make proportionally more ingroup appeals than other parties (i.e., the difference is very small). Indeed, liberal and socialist parties do make ingroup appeals to the same extent as the LWPPs (around 70%), and more often than the RWPP does (64%). Overall, accounts of party presidents differ from party accounts especially in terms of outgroup derogation, confirming party presidents’ tendency to use more negative campaigning. Differences across language communities are present: French-speaking actors make more ingroup appeals (68.38%), but less outgroup derogation (35.81%) than Dutch-speaking

<sup>4</sup> We also checked for multicollinearity issues by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with scores in the full model ranging between 1 and 2 for all variables, but rising substantially once we included the left–right score. Hence, we choose to drop the left–right score from our analysis.

<sup>5</sup> We also ran the analysis with simple logistic regression models (ordinary models, and models using robust standard errors), which yielded similar results, attesting to the robustness of our results.



**Table 1** References to ingroups and outgroups—general comparison

Actor	N ingroup mentions	% Ingroup mentions (%)	N outgroup mentions	% outgroup mentions
Political actor type				
Party president	2899	64.3	2262	50.1
Party	5114	65.5	3670	47.1
Level of populism				
Populist party	2905	66.5	2986	68.4
Non-populist party	5108	64.4	2946	37.1
Language community				
Dutch-speaking party	5357	63.6	4541	53.9
French-speaking party	2656	68.4	1391	35.8
Party family				
Christian-democrats	572	68.8	170	20.4
Greens	1356	67.5	791	39.4
Liberal	1423	71.9	645	32.6
LWPP	928	72.3	782	60.9
Regionalist	1454	54.2	1203	44.9
RWPP	1977	64.1	2204	71.4
Socialist	303	70.1	137	31.7
Incumbency status				
Federal gov. (majority)	3324	68.7	1635	33.8
Total/average	8013	65.1	5932	48.2

ones (respectively 63.63% and 53.94%)—which might be partly explained by the absence of the RWPP in the French-speaking community. Finally, incumbent parties derogate far less from outgroups than the average.

We also take a closer look at the types of ingroups and outgroups and compare between parties (Table 2). The ingroups that are most often referenced are community groups (15.6%), and economic groups (9.2%), while the most often referenced outgroups are political elite groups (31.8%). When comparing across parties, we note large disparities. Populist parties are way more likely to refer to political elite outgroups (44.1%) than non-populist parties (24.9%)—confirming H4—and this works for both LWPP (42.7%) and RWPP (44.8%). They are also more likely to refer to the people as their ingroup; but this works only for the RWPP. VB seems to refer more to the people as a homogeneous category than PTB-PVDA, suggesting a more populist rhetoric. Ingroups in the PTB-PVDA rhetoric are clearly more identified as socioeconomic groups (e.g., workers, the unemployed, low-income earners), and the party also targets much more economic outgroups (e.g., multinationals, the riche, billionaires) than other parties. Note that other parties that historically mobilize on the socioeconomic cleavage are also likely to refer to economic ingroups (and outgroups for the socialists, which compete with the radical left). Community-based ingroups are mostly prevalent among the communication of VB, and VB is more likely than other



**Table 2** References to specific types of ingroups and outgroups (general comparison)

Other variables	Ingroups			Outgroups		
	The people (%)	Economic (%)	Community (%)	Political (%)	Economic (%)	Ethnic (%)
<b>Political actor type</b>						
Party president	7.6	9.6	11.7	34.9	5.9	3.2
Party	8.2	9.0	17.9	29.9	3.9	6.4
<b>Level of populism</b>						
Populist	11.5	9.8	20.3	44.1	6.8	12.0
Non-populist	6.1	8.9	13.1	24.9	3.4	1.5
<b>Language community</b>						
Dutch-speaking	9	8.3	17.5	34.5	4.3	7.4
French-speaking	5.7	11.3	11.6	25.8	5.5	0.6
<b>Party family</b>						
Christian-democrats	5.4	12.9	10.8	14.4	1.0	0.2
Greens	6.3	8.9	7.7	27	4.1	0.0
Liberal	8.2	11.7	16.3	18.9	3.7	0.0
LWPP	4.6	17.0	5.9	42.7	15.5	1.7
Regionalist	4.9	4.7	15.8	32.3	2.5	3.0
RWPP	12.1	6.8	26.3	44.8	3.2	17.0
Socialist	4.9	14.8	10.4	17.8	9.7	0.2
<b>Incumbency status</b>						
Federal gov. (majority)	7.0	10.8	12.0	21	4.1	0.8
Average	8.0	9.2	15.6	31.8	4.6	5.2

parties to mention ethnic groups as outgroups. In fact, most other parties do not make any outgroup appeal of that kind.

### Multivariate analysis

Next, we adopt a multivariate approach, using a series of multilevel (mixed effect) logistic regressions in which we predict the likelihood of the presence of (specific types of) ingroups or outgroups in elite communication online. In Table 3,<sup>6</sup> Model 1

<sup>6</sup> We first ran empty models and estimated the Intra Class Correlation measure (ICC) for each of the dependent variable. ICC indicated that a significant part of the variation in terms of outgroup appeals was due to the Actor level (13.9%), whereas it was less the case for the variation in terms of ingroup appeals (5,0%). This confirms the necessity to do a multilevel analysis.



**Table 3** Predicting ingroup appeals and outgroup derogation in elite communication on X—Multilevel logistic regression

Dependent variable: ingroup appeal or outgroup derogation	Model 1		Model 2	
	Ingroup		Outgroup	
	B (SE)	<i>p</i>	B (SE)	<i>p</i>
Constant	0.81 (0.23)***	0.000	− 0.91 (0.24)***	0.000
Populism (ref.: non-populist party)				
LWPP	0.50 (0.27)	0.068	0.54 (0.29)	0.060
RWPP	0.29 (0.32)	0.365	0.80 (0.35)*	0.021
Party president	− 0.18 (0.15)	0.241	0.48 (0.16)**	0.003
Dutch-speaking party	− 0.31 (0.11)**	0.004	0.32 (0.10)**	0.002
Incumbent	0.41 (0.19)*	0.033	− 0.61 (0.20)**	0.003
Electoral strength	− 0.01 (0.01)	0.532	0.02 (0.01)	0.135
N	12303		12303	
Variance level 2	0.13 (0.46)		0.15 (0.49)	
Residual ICC	0.037		0.042	
BIC	15672.6		15590.6	
AIC	15613.2		15531.3	

Entries are logit coefficients (B) standard errors, *p* value, and odds ratios

Sign.: \* < 0.05; \*\* < 0.01; \*\*\* < 0.001

tests whether LWPPs and RWPPs are more likely to make ingroup appeals than non-populist actors (the reference category) (H1a and H1b), controlling for other party characteristics. Results show that the difference between populist and non-populist parties is not statistically significant, for both LWPPs and RWPPs. This rejects H1a and H1b. Hence, populist parties are not significantly more likely than non-populist actors to make ingroup appeals. Model 2 indicates that only RWPPs are significantly more likely than non-populist parties to derogate from outgroups, when we control for other party characteristics (H2b for RWPP is confirmed, and we reject H2a). Overall, these models suggest that (right-wing) populism better predicts the use of outgroup derogation than the use of ingroup favoritism. When looking at the control variables, we see that outgroup derogation is more likely in the online communication of party presidents, Dutch-speaking actors, and opposition parties, whereas incumbent parties are significantly more likely to favor ingroups than the opposition, and significantly less likely to derogate from outgroups.

In Tables 4 and 5, we test differences for specific ingroup (Table 4) and outgroup mentions<sup>7</sup> (Table 5). First, we find that LWPPs and RWPPs do mention significantly more ingroups referring to the people (H3a and H3b confirmed). However, we do not find that LWPPs and RWPPs do mention more outgroups related to political

<sup>7</sup> ICC measures again indicate greater variation in outgroup appeals than in ingroup appeals due to the Actor level.



**Table 4** Predicting specific ingroup mentions in elite communication on X (multilevel logistic regression)

DV: specific types of ingroup appeal	Ingroups					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	The people		Economic		Community	
	B (SE)	<i>p</i>	B (SE)	<i>p</i>	B (SE)	<i>p</i>
Constant	- 2.94 (0.22)***	0.000	- 2.59 (0.32)***	0.000	- 2.37 (0.23)***	0.000
Populism (reference: non-populist)						
LWPP	0.91 (0.24)***	0.000	0.91 (0.38)*	0.018	- 0.85 (0.29)**	0.003
RWPP	0.92 (0.27)**	0.001	- 0.28 (0.46)	0.538	0.69 (0.30)*	0.023
Party president	- 0.21 (0.14)	0.122	- 0.40 (0.21)	0.058	- 0.00 (0.15)	0.993
Dutch-speaking party	0.42 (0.13)**	0.002	- 0.41 (0.14)**	0.003	0.26 (0.15)	0.083
Incumbent	0.39 (0.18)*	0.032	0.47 (0.28)	0.091	- 0.12 (0.19)	0.509
Electoral strength	- 0.02 (0.01)	0.222	0.02 (0.02)	0.246	0.05 (0.01)***	0.000
N	12303		12303		12303	
Variance	0.058		0.221		0.101	
Residual ICC	0.017		0.063		0.030	
BIC	6769.6		7370.9		10210.6	
AIC	6710.3		7311.6		10151.3	

Entries are logit coefficients (B) standard errors, *p* value, and odds ratios

Sign.: \* < 0.05; \*\* < 0.01; \*\*\* < 0.001

elites (H4a and H4b are rejected). In fact, the effect is mostly captured by the incumbency variable, as government parties are way less likely to target political elites. Note that when we drop incumbency from the model, the effect of LWPP and RWPP is positive and significant. When controlling for other party variables, the communication of the PTB-PVDA (LWPPs) refers significantly more to (non-elite) economic ingroups, and significantly more toward (elite) economic outgroups than non-populist parties. H5 is hence confirmed: LWPPs are more likely to favor ingroups (H5a) and derogate from outgroups (H5b) based on an economic basis. In the same vein, we find that RWPPs are more likely to favor community-based ingroups (H6a) and more likely to derogate from outgroups (H6b) based on nativism compared to non-populist parties (H6 confirmed).

Regarding the control variables, party presidents' accounts are more likely than party accounts to mention political outgroups. Incumbent parties appear less likely to refer to political elites as outgroups, as mentioned above, but they are also more likely to make ingroup appeal to people—maybe as an effect of governing parties claiming to represent all citizens. Dutch-speaking actors seem to feed more vertical antagonism than French-speaking actors, as they are more likely to make ingroup appeals to the people and outgroup derogation toward political actors. This might be explained by the domination in electoral terms and on X of the RWPP VB and of the regionalist party N-VA. These parties are also the biggest in terms of electoral strength—and bigger parties have a higher likelihood to refer to community



**Table 5** Predicting specific outgroup mentions in elite communication on X (multilevel logistic regression)

	Outgroups					
	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Political		Economic		Ethnic	
	B (SE)	p	B (SE)	p	B (SE)	p
Constant	- 1.07 (0.26)***	0.000	- 4.87 (0.49)***	0.000	- 6.64 (1.19)***	0.000
Populism (reference: non-populist)						
LWPP	0.24 (0.31)	0.431	2.51 (0.49)**	0.000	0 (omitted)	0.016
RWPP	0.28 (0.37)	0.455	- 0.22 (0.58)	0.708	2.81 (1.17)*	0.531
Party president	0.48 (0.18)**	0.007	- 0.07 (0.28)	0.798	0.42 (0.67)	0.414
Dutch-speaking party	0.26 (0.11)*	0.013	- 0.13 (0.15)	0.369	0.65 (0.79)	0.380
Incumbent	- 0.96 (0.22)***	0.000	0.72 (0.38)	0.058	- 0.69 (0.78)	0.179
Electoral strength	- 0.00 (0.02)	0.792	0.08 (0.03)**	0.003	0.08 (0.06)	
N	12303		12303		11020	
Variance	0.171		0.360		1.498	
Residual ICC	0.049		0.099		0.313	
BIC	14635.6		4294.5		3962.1	
AIC	14576.2		4235.1		3910.9	

Entries are logit coefficients (B) standard errors, *p* value, and odds ratios

Sign.: \* < 0.05; \*\* < 0.01; \*\*\* < 0.001





ingroups. French-speaking actors seem to make more economic ingroup appeals—this is coherent with the fact that parties in this community do compete more on economic issues, whereas community and immigration issues are more prevalent in Flanders.

## Discussion

Inspired by theories on representation, SIT and sociopsychological notions on ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation (Dolinsky 2022; Tajfel & Turner 1986), we aimed to document how elite political actors apply these mechanisms in their online communication. Our point of departure was that processes of social categorization extend to political actors as they tend to divide the world into groups based on a shared feeling of identity and belonging, making a distinction between groups that they aim to represent and identify with (ingroups) and those that they tend to distance themselves from (outgroups) (Bornschier et al. 2021). We mainly focused on studying the role of populism in this regard via comparing populist and non-populist actors and their ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation in the Belgian context. This context allowed comparing both a strong left-wing and a strong right-wing populist party. We first expected that populism, defined as thin-centered ideology, would result in a greater tendency to use ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation compared to non-populist parties. Second, we expected populism to spark an opposition based on vertical antagonism, with the people as the main ingroup and the political elites as a key outgroup. Third, we expected differences between LWPPs and RWPPs in the types of social ingroup and outgroups they would refer to, based on their underlying ideology (either socialism or nativism). We think this approach offers interesting insight into how elite actors, in their online communication, create division in society, which groups they claim to represent and how they mobilize based on social identity and feelings of belonging (Werner & Giebler 2019). This is especially pertinent in a political landscape in which social media are increasingly used as a tool to level negativity toward political adversaries (Gerstlé & Nai 2019), and to facilitate positive self-portrayals as part of a permanent campaign (Larsson 2016).

Overall, our findings first suggest that populist parties do not make more ingroup appeals in general than non-populist actors, but that they derogate from outgroups more often than non-populist ones—although this seems to be the case especially for RWPPs. Regarding the vertical antagonism opposing ‘people’ ingroup and ‘political’ outgroups, our analysis points out the intertwined effect of populism and incumbency. Both populist parties and incumbent parties seem to ‘claim’ to represent ‘the people.’ Yet populist would tend to consider political elites as the ‘undeserving outgroup’—something that government parties do more rarely, but that opposition parties do in general, be they populist or not. While LWPPs and RWPPs tend to refer to the people as ingroups (more than non-populists), they do not refer more to political elites as outgroups once other party characteristics are taken into account. In fact, the majority versus opposition dichotomy appears best suited to capture the latter. This is an interesting finding, as it appears that although both parties are more likely



to appeal to the people, they do not differ so much from other opposition parties when it comes to rejection of the ‘ruling elite.’

Second, our analysis uncovers the importance of examining specific categories of in and outgroups, and of considering ideology when studying the communication of different populist actors. Both LWPPs and RWPPs tend to represent ingroups and derogate outgroups inspired by a distinct type of populism. Yet, RWPPs and LWPPs differ in the types of groups they refer to; hence, in the way they claim to represent some groups rather than others. VB uses more in and outgroup oppositions on the nativist cleavage, while PTB/PVDA clearly targets economic groups. LWPPs may have a specific conception of the elite, but mostly on an economic basis: indeed, LWPPs tend to identify both with economic ingroups (i.e., workers, lower income people), while they often refer to economic outgroups as well, which—as inspection of data shows—are mostly companies, employers, or ‘the rich.’ RWPPs, then, are more likely to make references to community-based ingroups. They clearly adopt nativism as their basis for (non-)identification with ingroups and outgroups, as they tend to consider ethnic and religious minorities and immigrants as key outgroups.

With this study, we have provided an exploration of the ramifications of exposure to populist discourse via exploring dynamics in ingroup favoritism, outgroup derogation, and division in society connected to vertical and horizontal polarization. This study should be replicated in other contexts, where LWPPs and RWPPs hold similar or dissimilar status in the party system as in the Belgian context. Crucially, future research should dig deeper into the extent to which political parties and leaders’ appeals or attacks toward groups vary depending on the communication channels (e.g., television, interviews in the press; or parliamentary interventions). This would allow exposing potential disparities based on the principles of (un)mediation that govern different channels. This would also provide more insights regarding the effect of specific channels (e.g., social media) on the degree of negativity or positivity of political communication. By applying our approach in a longitudinal perspective, we could in a next step assess the extent to which campaign periods activate, re-activate, or de-activate ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation in elite discourse, and the extent to which this varies across parties. Besides, by mobilizing other methodological approaches, such as experimental design, we could assess how these types of discourse truly affect citizens’ (affective) polarization and attitudes toward democracy. Finally, although we could not fully confirm our vertical antagonism hypothesis, investigating the tone and the content of the outgroup derogation toward the political elites could potentially reveal differences between populist and non-populist actors.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of



interest.

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