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**THE DIFFERENT STRATEGIES OF WILDERS’S PVV
AND BAUDET’S FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY**

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Two Faces of “Twitter Populism” in the Netherlands

The Different Strategies of Wilders’s PVV and Baudet’s Forum for Democracy

Peter Verweij

Twitter – the mini-blogging or messaging service on the internet - has fundamentally changed the process of communication. In professional communication networks, like for example journalism, Twitter is an important new source. Twitter brought fundamental change in professional political communication networks. The classical model of communication of **Berelson and Lazarsfeld**, known as ‘*two step flow of communication*,’ (the theory that the news and interpretation of the news follows a top-down model, in which “opinion leaders” are followed by the public) seems to have lost its predominance to new models of communication, such as Twitter. Direct communication to the audiences gained in importance. An important issue in the debate about the consequences of Twitter is the idea of equality in the process of communication. Because, at least in principle, the technology behind Twitter does not discriminate between users, whether they are politicians, journalists or ordinary citizens. This equality between users lowers the threshold to participate in the process of communication, and therefore it is argued that Twitter contributes to democracy. Referring to **Jürgen Habermas’s** classical study *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* about the changes in the *public sphere*, Twitter could enhance the process of democratic decision making and contribute to a more open public debate.

OPTIMISM

This technological optimism about Twitter emerged in the nineties of the past century when the Internet was still freely developing. However, in the light of recent developments, especially the rise of populism on Twitter, one can have serious doubts. In this paper we will analyze the tweets of two Dutch politicians: **Geert Wilders** (PVV, Party for Freedom) and **Thierry Baudet** (FvD, Forum for Democracy). Both parties are relatively new in the Dutch political landscape. Both rose because

of a growing resistance against the neo-liberalist political hegemony that replaced the Dutch traditional party system based on religion and the right-left divide.

POPULISM

In the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer, 150 members), Wilders with 20 seats and Baudet with 2 seats are not very prominent. When we look at the twitter connections of the members of the House, the 'friends-network' on Twitter between the members, the position of both is lagging behind. Their position in the network, measured by number of connections (in network terminology, the 'degree score') is not very high. The politician with the highest number of connections (218) ranks far above Wilders (79) and Baudet (68).

However, if we look outside the friends' network inside the House of Representatives, that is, when we look at the number of followers on Twitter, we see a different picture. Wilders has 814,253 followers and Baudet 207,290. These are high numbers, comparable to for example the Prime Minister Mark Rutte who has 1,007,141 followers. These high numbers are interesting in the process of direct communication. Both politicians address their audiences directly and try to put sensitive issues on the political agenda or legitimize their policies.

TWO FACES

Wilders and Baudet are both specimens of 'Twitter Populism', both rely heavily on their direct communication with the public. But there are important differences as well. If we analyze the content of the tweets of Wilders and Baudet we see the following.

The tweets of Baudet consisted of 16,000 unique words. The most important words (words with the highest frequency) were:

EU (European Union)	224
Boeren (Farmers)	170
Democratie (Democracy)	172
Immigratie (Immigration)	154
Stikstof (Nitrogen emissions)	89

Both Wilders and Baudet are right wing populist politicians. However, there are important differences. Wilders offers a nationalistic perspective, founded on his anti-Islam ideas, which seem to be politically attractive for the lower income classes. Baudet, on the other hand, argues against the EU and EU policies, like immigration, the European agricultural policy, and environment. This gives his nationalism a more intellectual flavor which is attractive for the higher educated classes. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that we have **two faces of Twitter populism** in the Dutch political landscape.

ALT-RIGHT

It seems that an alt-right movement is growing in the Low Countries. And when we look at the process of communication we can conclude that there is no two-step flow, but *direct* communication. Journalists, considered to be opinion leaders in the classical model, are mistrusted: they are lying and members of a left-wing church, according to the alt-right.

Nevertheless, the idea of opinion leaders has not completely disappeared. The tweets of both populists are re-tweeted. Re-tweeting means sending a tweet inside your own group of followers, which means amplifying the content of the tweet. One could argue that re-tweeting works as a kind of opinion leader and brings back the two-step flow.

Analyzing the **re-tweet count** for tweets by Wilders and Baudet shows the following. For Wilders: RTL (23, a commercial TV station), De Telegraaf (48, rightwing newspaper) and Geen Stijl (19, a right wing blog) are the most important opinion leaders on a total of 563 (unique re-retweeters). For Baudet: Syp Wynia (40, editor at Elsevier, rightwing weekly magazine) and right wing intellectuals, such as Rutger van Noort (90) and Joost Niemöller (80), important opinion leaders on a total of 1811 unique re-tweeters.

The **favorite count** (followers can mark a tweet as a favorite) is interesting too, because it shows which topics are liked or popular among the followers. For counts above 2000, we found for Baudet that topics like EU, energy and nitrogen emission were most popular. For Wilders we see the same picture; for counts above 5000, Islam and minorities are the leading topics.

THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA

The process of communication has become faster, easier, and wider, with a lower access threshold. Especially Twitter is showing this trend. On the other hand, opinion leaders keep an important position in the process. In a twitter network re-tweets and favorite counts are important to filter and amplify the message. But one should not underestimate the political effects of direct twitter communication. Twitter can easily open the door for populism, which could be used to legitimize political decisions. A twitter storm in large networks of Wilders and Baudet could put pressure on the democratic process of decision making in the House. American President Trump has shown how that works. In the Netherlands we had the fight over a referendum about an EU association agreement with Ukraine in which the populists were very active. But Twitter is not the only means of communication. When we analyze the twitter network between representatives and the media, we notice that TV (especially NOS-national broadcaster, and RTL, a commercial channel) is a medium of preference for all parties and their members in the House. There is also a large variety of national newspapers and magazines that have the attention of the twittering members of the House. If one only looks from the twitter perspective, the correcting effect of traditional media is underestimated.

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This analysis of the tweets of Wilders and Baudet is part of a larger research project highlighting the twitter network of the Dutch House of Representatives, the Dutch government, and the media. The data for this project were collected from December 2019 to February 2020. In the analysis I used R project for Statistical Computing (<https://www.r-project.org/>), Workbench (<https://workbenchdata.com/>), and Voyant (<https://voyant-tools.org/>).

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