

Angry Posts Mobilize: Emotional Communication and Online Mobilization in the Facebook Pages of Western European Right-Wing Populist Leaders

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Abstract

The rise of right-wing populists in Western Europe has often been linked to their ability to exploit social media affordances to fuel anger. While scholarship has already examined the emotional dimension of the populist right's online communication, with some researchers studying specifically the fuelling of anger among social media users, we still lack empirical proof of the mobilizational effectiveness of what we describe as “anger-triggering communication.” To explore this question, in this article, we develop a statistical and topic analysis of right-wing populists' Facebook pages in Italy, France, Spain, and Germany during the 2019 European Union (EU) election campaign. We find that (a) right-wing populists on Facebook have a significantly higher number of “Angry” Facebook reactions per post compared to their political adversaries; (b) there is a positive and significant effect of the number of Angry reactions on the number of times a post is shared; (c) Angry reactions and Shares are overrepresented in posts on immigration and security, but anger-fuelled mobilization is not limited to these topics. These findings contribute to the scholarship on social media, emotional communication, and populism, adding insights on the mobilizational effectiveness of negative campaigning. The article highlights that stoking public anger, especially around controversial issues such as immigration and security, is a rewarding tactic because it increases motivational strength, and contributes to triggering high-threshold interactions such as sharing, which, in turn, are key for achieving virality in the diffusion of political messages.

Keywords

social media, populism, emotions, anger, Facebook

Introduction

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the relationship between the rise of right-wing populist parties and candidates (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Traverso, 2019; Wodak et al., 2013) and the emergence of social media as a key arena for political communication (Bobba, 2019; Engesser et al., 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Jost et al., 2020). News media commentary and scholars have often argued that right-wing politicians, such as Matteo Salvini in Italy and Marine Le Pen in France, use social media as a conduit for the expression of anger and resentment (Krämer, 2017). Right-wing populists are known for aggressively targeting immigrants and minorities on social media—often sparking incendiary comments from their supporters (Ceron & d'Adda, 2016). However, to date, it remains unclear

to what extent this emotionally negative communication is effective in driving Internet users' mobilization.

In this article, we concentrate on four Western European right-wing populist leaders who are both politically prominent and popular on Facebook: Matteo Salvini, the leader of Lega in Italy; Marine Le Pen, the leader of Rassemblement National (formerly Front National) in France; Alice Weidel

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(former leader of AfD) in Germany; and Santiago Abascal (leader of Vox) in Spain. Besides being commonly described as part of the same right-wing populist political family (Mudde, 2007), these leaders share an aggressive style of communication, aimed at fuelling anger and outrage against immigrants and minorities (Kamenova & Pingaud, 2017).

Our aim is to explore whether these forms of negative campaigning are effective in mobilizing supporters, starting from forms of online political behavior such as sharing content on social media platforms. While some studies have started exploring the role of Angry reactions in right-wing populists' social media (Jost et al., 2020), in this article, we make a novel contribution to scholarship by assessing the mobilizational effect of what we describe as "anger-triggering communication." Building on the findings of recent studies on Facebook reactions¹ and user psychology (Giuntini et al., 2019; Krebs et al., 2017), we use Angry reactions as a proxy for users' anger in response to online content. We take the act of sharing online content, a high-threshold form of online behavior (Coursaris et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2019; Khobzi et al., 2019; Kim & Yang, 2017), as a proxy for users' online mobilization.

Within this framework, we explore an array of questions: To what extent does anger constitute an effective mobilization device for right-wing populists? Is there a relationship between the degree to which Internet users are angered by Facebook content and their likelihood to share content? And what are the topics that tend to engender the highest number of Angry reactions and Shares?

To explore these issues, we examine a total of 4,646 Facebook posts of right-wing populist leaders and their most notable non-populist center-left opponent for each country, for the period January–May 2019, which coincided with the European election campaign. We use statistical analysis to explore the relationship between Angry reactions and Shares and compare results between right-wing populist leaders and non-populist center-left politicians for each country. Furthermore, we perform a topic analysis of all the posts for each populist Facebook page, categorizing them by policy issue, to explore whether immigration and security—issues that right-wing populists tend to focus on—are more conducive to stoking anger and sharing behavior.

Our analysis provides empirical support for the mobilizational effectiveness of "anger-triggering" online content as a mobilizational device among right-wing populists and its ability to activate what we describe as "anger-fuelled mobilisation." By comparing the Facebook metrics of right-wing populist politicians and those of their most notable center-left adversaries, we find that (a) right-wing populists collect more Angry reactions per Facebook post compared to their opponents; (b) among right-wing populists' posts, Angry reactions are correlated with Shares; and (c) posts on immigration and security yield higher-than-average Angry reactions and Shares.

The article begins with a discussion of the scholarship on the nexus between social media, emotions, and online

mobilization on the populist right. After explaining our methods, we present descriptive and inferential statistics on Angry reactions, Shares, and their correlation. We continue analyzing the relationship between topics and Angry reactions and Shares. The discussion and conclusion section summarizes our contribution to knowledge and considers different possible explanations for our results and their implications for scholarship, before considering the limitations of our findings and paths for future research.

Right-Wing Populism, Emotions, and Online Mobilization

The rise of right-wing populist parties and candidates has been a widely debated trend in recent years (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). Besides Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński in Eastern Europe, Western Europe has also been a fertile ground for the populist right, profiting from discontent generated by the 2010s economic crisis and the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, which made immigration a greater concern for European citizens (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). Figures such as Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and new parties such as Vox in Spain and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany have attracted strong backing and polarized public opinion, with social media constituting a crucial arena for their communications (Engesser et al., 2017).

While many definitions of populism and right-wing populism exist (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005), in this study, we follow Mudde's (2004, 2013) "ideational approach" to populism focusing on the recurrence of themes such as "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Furthermore, to define the populist right, we adopt Mudde's (2007) definition of "populist radical right," as a subset of the radical right, which conjoins xenophobic motives proper to the nationalist right with typical populist motives (p. 31). The parties here analyzed—Lega, Alternative für Deutschland, Vox, Rassemblement National/Front National—have been widely seen as belonging to this category. Particularly important to understand the logic of this Western European populist right is what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) identify as its "exclusionary" character (rather than inclusionary as in Latin American populism), premised on antagonizing "outgroup members," and in particular "aliens" such as "immigrants, refugees or Roma" (p. 160).

Social media have been very important in the growth of right-wing populists (Engesser et al., 2017). Right-wing populists enjoy high online popularity compared with other leaders (Bracciale et al., 2021; Ceccobelli et al., 2020; Stier et al., 2017). The European politician with the largest following on Facebook is Salvini, with 4.6 million likes as of January 2022, while Le Pen (1.5 million likes), Abascal (334K), and Weidel (227K) also have sizable followings. Scholarship

highlights that social media communication has served to foster a sense of identity constructed in opposition to out-group members (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Hameleers, 2019). Right-wing populists are well known for employing various negative campaigning tactics such as rhetorical debasement (Ott, 2017), mockery of political adversaries (Gross & Johnson, 2016), and the targeting of immigrants (Kamenova & Pingaud, 2017; Serrano et al., 2019). An example is Salvini's Facebook page, which often antagonizes immigrants and sea-rescuing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Berti, 2020). These forms of negative campaigning are strongly associated with negative emotional content and, in particular, anger (Jost et al., 2020), hence our term "anger-triggering online communication."

Emotions—normally understood as psychological states associated with affective processes such as love and hate (Scherer, 2005)—have attracted growing attention in research on social media and politics (Papacharissi, 2015; Vermeulen et al., 2018). The popularity of emoticons and emojis, from which Facebook reactions such as "Haha," "Lol," "Wow," "Love," "Angry" originate, demonstrates that emotional expression has become an integral part of online communication. Computational methodologies, such as "sentiment analysis" and "opinion mining," have been developed to explore emotional content on social media (Kaur et al., 2019). More recently, researchers have started using reactions as an index of users' emotional state in responding to social media content (Giuntini et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2020).

In this article, we are interested in exploring two processes: (a) the users' emotional response to right-wing populists' social media content; (b) their online mobilization in the form of further participation behavior on social media (such as sharing political content).

Regarding the first objective, it has been well documented how messages of all kinds—for example, an email, a film, or a speech by a politician—trigger emotional reactions in the audience (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). A useful framework to categorize the emotional reactions to media messages is offered by the distinction between "valence" and "arousal" (Russell, 1980). In this context, emotional arousal (or intensity) is the degree of emotional activation. Low-intensity emotions encompass boredom and calmness, while high-intensity emotions include—besides anger—excitement, joy, fear, and awe (Barrett & Russell, 1998). Emotional valence refers instead to the positive or negative polarity associated with emotions. Emotions with positive valence include compassion, pride, joy, and surprise, while emotions with negative valence comprise fear, anger, and hate. Within this "circumplex model of affect" (Barrett & Russell, 1998), anger is an emotion with high intensity and negative valence.

Facebook emotional reactions offer a useful proxy to measure the emotional response to social media content. Different studies have shown that Facebook reactions are predictive of the user's emotional state (Krebs et al., 2017; Raad et al., 2018)

and their attribution to social media content is consistent across Internet users (Giuntini et al., 2019). This is particularly the case for Angry reactions which are associated with a strong negative polarity (Giuntini et al., 2019).

Negative campaigning by right-wing populists is known to have a strong thematic focus. Particularly, in recent years, the likes of Salvini and Le Pen have insisted on the issue of immigration, exploiting the growing anti-immigrant sentiment seen in many European countries (Wirz et al., 2018), also thanks to long-standing negative framing of the issue on the news media (Lecheler et al., 2015) and the salience of the issue of immigration in the aftermath of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis (Ernst et al., 2019). This strategy has been particularly evident on social media where immigration has become the object of furious rhetoric (Heiss et al., 2019; Kamenova & Pingaud, 2017). Besides immigration, right-wing populists are concerned with a broader set of security-related issues, such as crime and terrorism (Nortio et al., 2021). In our research, we want to probe the extent to which anger-triggering communication is specific to these immigration and security contents or a more general effect.

Our second object of analysis is the mobilizational effect of anger-triggering communication. The mobilizational role of emotions has been long discussed in social psychology literature. Scholars have shown that emotions are important in motivating people to take political action, such as voting and participating in protests (Panagopoulos, 2010; Sabucedo & Vilas, 2014). This is particularly the case with anger, which—as argued by Van Stekelenburg et al. (2011)—increases motivational strength for participation. To explore the mobilizational effect of emotions, we focus on the various forms of online participation that have emerged on social media platforms (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018). While often branded as "clicktivism" (Halupka, 2014), these micro-acts of participation can have an important aggregate effect in circulating political content, thus contributing to the strategy of different political forces.

Forms of online participation are highly stratified (Dolan et al., 2016). Different interactions with social media posts carry different meanings and levels of motivation (Heiss et al., 2019; Macafee, 2013). On Facebook, hitting the Like button requires less motivation than writing a comment or sharing a post. Sharing is a high-threshold interaction implying greater commitment as it involves public exposure using one's Facebook wall (Coursaris et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2019; Kim & Yang, 2017). It also contributes strongly to information diffusion: Facebook EdgeRank, the algorithm that controls the reach of Facebook posts, assigns a higher weightage to Shares compared to other interactions (Kim & Yang, 2017). Thus, the act of sharing offers a useful proxy for online mobilization.

To connect emotions and mobilization, we adopt the framework of the "social transmission of information." Social transmission researchers study how information is shared across human groups (Nicol, 1995), and have

attributed to emotional content the ability to shape the way information is transmitted (Heath, 1996). Emotions themselves can be transmitted across groups, as in the case of “emotional contagion”—when an emotional state is transferred from one person or a group to another (Hatfield et al., 1993), for example, from a leader to the crowd of supporters. While predating the popularization of the Internet, the study of the social transmission of information has found a fertile ground of analysis on social media platforms, in which the act of transmission is incorporated in features such as Facebook Shares and Retweets (Brady et al., 2017).

A key issue for this scholarship is the relationship between emotions and information transmission. Some scholars have argued that what matters is arousal, regardless of the positive or negative valence (Berger, 2011). Dang-Xuan et al. (2013) found a positive correlation between the emotional intensity of messages and the number of retweets during the 2011 state parliament elections in Berlin. They state that “the higher level of emotionality (positive or negative) a political Twitter message exhibits, the more often it is retweeted” (p. 817). Similar are the findings of Bene’s (2017) research on the Hungarian 2014 elections, and of Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013), who find that “emotionally charged tweets are more likely to be disseminated” (p. 241).

Some scholars have instead explored the effect of the positive or negative valence on information transmission. A widely cited study by Berger and Milkman (2013) on a data set of *New York Times* articles shows that positive news content is more likely to go viral on social media. Examining the content of political posts of Israeli politicians, Nave et al. (2018) highlight that “positive and high-arousal emotions have been demonstrated to be particularly effective in increasing involvement” (p. 2). However, other scholars have made the opposite argument. In a study of the Italian 2013 election campaign on Twitter, Ceron and d’Adda (2016) argue that “negative campaigns seem to matter [. . .] while positive campaigns only wield circumstantial effects” (p. 1947). Some scholars have even talked of a “negativity bias” in the social transmission of information (Bebbington et al., 2017). This seems also to apply to social media, a communication arena that has often been viewed as favoring right-wing populists who mobilize negative emotions such as “anger, fear, and resentment” (Engesser et al., 2017: p. 1285).

Some research has already started exploring the correlation between right-wing populists’ communication and Angry reactions on Facebook (Eberl et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020). Jacobs, Sandberg, and Spierings have analyzed the Facebook data from 342 MPs of Austria, The Netherlands, and Sweden, comparing populists and non-populists (Eberl et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020). They find that “posts by populist politicians have 4.14% angry reactions, whereas their non-populist counterparts’ posts only have 1.09% of such reactions.” Furthermore, in their content analysis, they show that populists are actively “playing into anger”

(p. 625), with “the posts receiving a lot of anger” appearing more often on their Facebook pages (p. 627). The article mentions in passing the possibility of a correlation between Angry reactions and Shares; this is precisely the hypothesis that we want to probe in this study.

Our purpose is to assess the mobilizational effectiveness of anger-triggering communication by right-wing populists. To this end our model comprises two elements: (a) the emotional response of the user base (as measured by Facebook reactions) to social media posts and (b) online mobilization and information diffusion activity (sharing). We take Angry reactions as a proxy of users’ anger in viewing social media content, and Shares as a proxy of users’ activation. We assume that what sparks sharing behavior is the anger triggered by negative social media posts, for which Angry reactions act as a proxy. Furthermore, we assume that the effect of anger-triggering communication on users’ anger and, in turn, of users’ anger on sharing behavior, is synchronous. Having established our analytical framework, we put forward the following questions and hypotheses:

Q1: Do Angry reactions on a post predict high-threshold interactions such as Shares, thus reflecting a high level of user activation?

H1: When considering right-wing populist leaders’ activity on Facebook, the higher the number of Angry reactions to a post, the higher the Shares. The same relation will not be found with non-populist political leaders.

Q2: How do different topics affect the number of Angry reactions and Shares?

H2: Posts on topics framed as controversial and polarizing, such as immigration and security, will attract more Angry reactions and Shares as compared to other topics.

Data and Methods

To answer the research questions, we combined statistical analysis and topic analysis (Pearce, 2012) in examining a data set of posts from the Facebook pages of some of the most prominent far-right populist politicians in Western Europe for the period 1 January–27 May 2019 coinciding with the European Union (EU) election campaign. We focused on four cases: Alice Weidel of *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, Marine Le Pen of *Rassemblement National* in France, Matteo Salvini of *Lega* in Italy, and Santiago Abascal of *Vox* in Spain. France, Italy, Spain, and Germany are all Western European EU countries that have witnessed the rise of right-wing populist parties. These countries were chosen as “typical cases” with a “confirmatory purpose,” to probe a causal mechanism (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), namely the correlation between anger and level of online mobilization. The aim to explore a coherent set of case of studies as well as considerations of

Table 1. Overview of the Data Set: Facebook Posts for the Period 1 January–27 May 2019.

Country	Facebook pages	Posts
Germany	Alice Weidel	332
	Annalena Baerbock	54
France	Marine Le Pen	454
	Emmanuel Macron	185
Italy	Matteo Salvini	2,446
	Nicola Zingaretti	516
Spain	Santiago Abascal	278
	Pedro Sánchez	381
Total		4,646

convenience, such as the research team's language skills, led us to focus on Western Europe's right-wing populists excluding Eastern Europe from the analysis. Furthermore, we decided to exclude the United Kingdom due to the idiosyncrasy of the Brexit transition. The 2019 European election campaign was chosen as a propitious time for data collection since anger-fuelled mobilization was likely to be prominent at this time. We decided to focus on Facebook over other platforms, given that this social media is central to right-wing populists' strategy "to activate anger" in the public (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 611).

We started by examining the relationship between Angry reactions and Shares, expecting to find a positive effect of the former on the latter within our sample. To better contextualize our analysis, we compared the reaction metrics of populist politicians to those of their main non-populist center-left opponent with significant Facebook presence in each country. This choice was motivated by the fact that right-wing populist leaders often frame center-left politicians as their main political opponents (Bobba, 2019), and the latter adopt a different style of communication, providing a useful term of comparison (Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Engesser et al., 2017). We compiled a list of the main non-populist center-left politicians in each country and chose the one with the highest number of Facebook page likes at the time: Annalena Baerbock, leader of Die Grünen in Germany; Emmanuel Macron, president of France and leader of La République en Marche; Nicola Zingaretti, who at the time was the leader of Partito Democratico in Italy; and Pedro Sánchez, the Spanish prime minister and leader of PSOE. For data collection, we used the online tool FanPage Karma.

As summarized in Table 1, we gathered 4,646 Facebook posts (3,510 from right-wing populists and 1,136 from their opponents) and as well as several KPIs (key performance indicators) related to each post, such as engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) and emotional reactions (Wow, Sad, Angry, Love, Haha). As regards the statistical analysis, we fitted a negative binomial regression to the data that come in the form of count variables; we used Angry reactions as the independent variable, and Shares as the dependent

variable. All other Facebook reactions together with Likes were included in the models as control variables. We ran separate models for each politician. To account for heteroskedasticity, we added robust standard error estimators. We also performed a topic analysis, manually coding posts dealing with immigration and security. The purpose of the topic analysis was to test whether posts concerning these controversial topics were associated with more Angry reactions and Shares. Coding was performed on all the 3,510 posts of right-wing populist leaders we collected, assigning 1 to posts on immigration and security, while the rest was labeled as 0. The coding process comprised two steps:

1. After conducting an exploratory content analysis of the posts, we saw that immigration and security topics were particularly salient in terms of attracting Angry reactions and Shares. We decided to count as "immigration" posts those containing references to asylum-seekers, immigrants, and other immigration-related policies and as "security" posts those covering crime, terrorism, separatist movements, and international security.
2. The coding of the entire data set was then carried out by one member of the research team acting as master coder, while a reliability coder performed coding on 10% of the posts: we then calculated the intercoder reliability between master and reliability coder using the percent agreement calculation. The coefficient of the percent agreement was 0.92.

Analysis

Measuring the Mobilizing Effect of Angry Posts

We started the analysis by comparing the number of Angry reactions per post for each leader. As shown in Figure 1, the Angry reactions associated with Facebook posts by populist leaders are significantly higher than those of their non-populist opponents. We ran *t* tests to confirm this for each country. With the sole exception of France,² the mean distribution of Angry reactions varies between populist leaders and their political opponents in a statistically significant manner. We find that (a) Weidel's posts attract an average number of Angry reactions ($M=893.7$ Angry reactions; $SD=70.2$) that is significantly higher than that associated with Baerbock's posts ($M=3.1$ Angry reactions; $SD=1.0$), with an average difference of 890.6 Angry reactions, $t(384)=5.11$; $p<.00$; (b) the average number of Angry reactions associated with Salvini's posts ($M=676.1$ Angry reactions; $SD=43.9$) is significantly higher than in Zingaretti's posts ($M=15.3$ Angry reactions; $SD=2.1$), with an average difference of 660.8 Angry reactions, $t(2,960)=6.91$; $p<.00$; and (c) the average number of Angry reactions associated with Abascal's posts ($M=90.9$ Angry reactions; $SD=15.9$) is significantly higher than that of Sánchez's posts ($M=14.1$ Angry reactions;

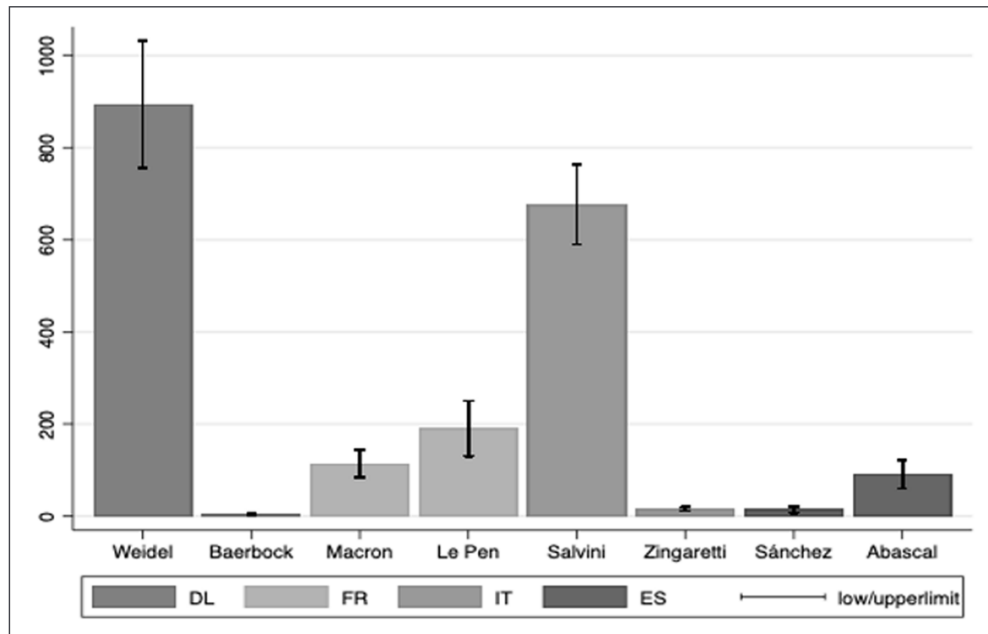


Figure 1. Mean differences in angry reactions between right-wing populists and their center-left opponents.

Table 2. Summary of the Relation Between Angry Reactions and Shares for Right-Wing Populists and Non-populist Center-Left Opponents.

	Right-wing populist	Political opponent
Germany	Positive	Absent
France	Positive	Absent
Italy	Positive	Positive
Spain	Positive	Absent

The table indicates the positive, negative, or absent relation between number of (a) Angry reactions and (b) Shares (outcome variable) for right-wing populist leaders and their main center-left non-populist political opponents in the countries considered in the analysis.

$SD=3.6$), with an average difference of 76.8 Angry reactions, $t(657)=5.39$; $p < .00$.

Having confirmed the salience of Angry reactions among right-wing populist leaders, already identified in previous scholarship (Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020), we now move on to our main objective: exploring the correlation of Angry reactions with online mobilization using Shares as a proxy. As summarized in Table 2, we found that the number of Angry reactions has a statistically significant and positive effect on Shares for all right-wing populist leaders. This emerged after we ran negative binomial regression models, where all emotional reactions were regressed on the number of Shares, as detailed in Table 3.³ No similar pattern can be retrieved in the case of non-populist leaders (Zingaretti is the only exception).⁴ The models thus confirmed our initial hypothesis—the higher the number of Angry reactions to a right-wing populist post, the higher the number of Shares.

Topic Analysis

To understand in more detail the mobilizing effect of anger-triggering communication, we explored the relation of different topics covered in Facebook posts to Angry reactions and Shares. We compared the average number of Angry reactions on posts about immigration and national security—topics which, as previously discussed, are particularly salient for right-wing populists—to that of all other posts. As seen in Figure 2, posts dealing with issues of immigration and security generate more Angry reactions and Shares than all other topics, and this is true for all right-wing populist leaders. This suggests that posts on immigration and security are more effective both for triggering anger and for generating shares.

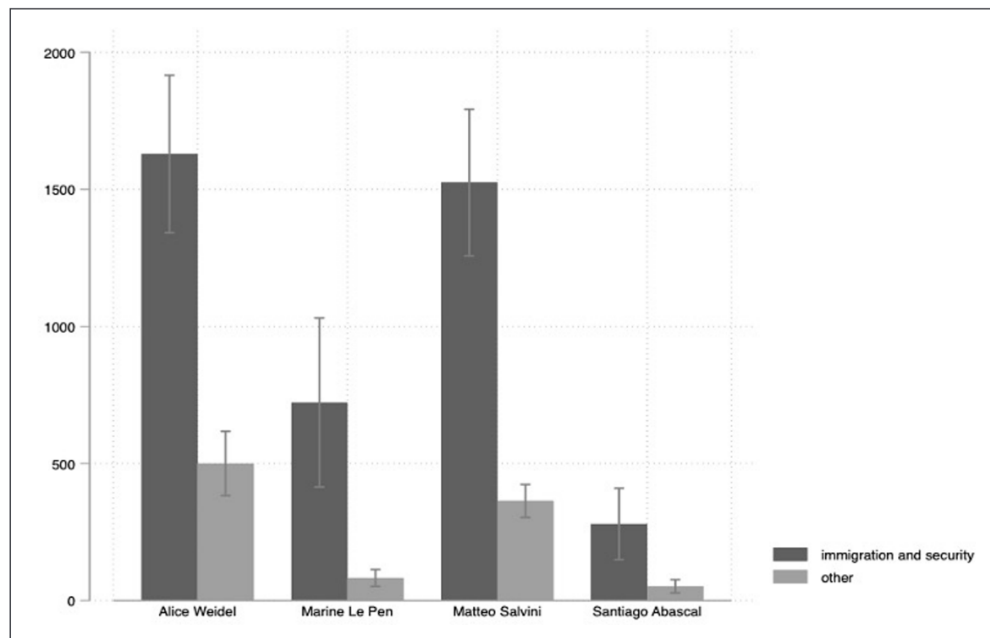
Furthermore, we ran a negative binomial regression where Shares are regressed on the topic of the posts (Table 4). As the topic of immigration and national security is particularly anger-triggering (as it attracts a higher average number of Angry reactions than other topics, as seen in Figure 2), we included Angry reactions in the model, to see whether the effect of the topic is independent from that of anger. From the negative binomial regression coefficients, it is evident that the topic of immigration and security is promoting sharing as the regression coefficient is statistically significant. This relation holds when controlling for the number of Angry reactions. This means that the topic of immigration and security does not need to spike anger to get shared. At the same time, the model also shows that the posts that produce a high number of Angry reactions do not need to be about immigration and security to promote sharing. In other words, both

Table 3. Negative Binomial Regression of Shares (Dependent Variable) Regressed on Angry Reactions (Independent Variable), Controlling for All Other Facebook Reactions.

Shares	Germany		France		Italy		Spain	
	Weidel	Baerbock	Le Pen	Macron	Salvini	Zingaretti	Abascal	Sánchez
Reactions								
Angry	.001***	-.05	.001***	-.000	.0002***	.004***	.001***	.003
Haha	.0001*	.02	.001**	-.001**	.0001***	.004*	.000	.02***
Sad	.0002	.06*	.000	-.0001**	.000	.001	-.000	.000
Wow	.003*	-.25	.001	.013***	-.000	.02***	.000	-.04
Love	-.001*	.03	.000	.001***	-.000	-.002***	.000	-.003***
Like	.0003***	.005***	.0002*	.0001*	.0001***	.001***	.0003***	.001***
Constant	5.69	1.58	5.96	4.97	6.32	4.41	5.53	4.06
R ²	0.06	0.11	0.03	0.10	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.07
N Posts	332	54	454	185	2,446	516	278	381

The model controls for the number of Likes and all other Facebook reactions (Haha, Sad, Wow, Love). Regression coefficients and their level of significance are reported together with the total number of posts per politician and the coefficient of determination.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

**Figure 2.** Average number of angry reactions per content of Facebook post per populist leader. *N* immigration and security posts: 867; *N* other topics: 2,778.**Table 4.** Binomial Regression Coefficients of Shares Regressed on the Topics of Immigration and Security and the Number of Angry Reactions for Each Right-Wing Populist Leader.

	Weidel	Le Pen	Salvini	Abascal
Shares				
Immigration and national security	.32**	.66***	.80***	.79**
Angry reactions	.0004***	.0006***	.0001***	.0012**
Constant	6.71	6.55	7.33	6.47
R ²	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01
N posts	343	499	2,492	311

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

controversial topics and anger-triggering communication promote sharing independently of one another.

Discussion and Conclusion

Statistical analysis of our research data revealed that (a) the Facebook posts of right-wing populist leaders attract a high number of Angry reactions, which is significantly greater than that of their center-left opponents; (b) the topics of immigration and security generate more Angry reactions and are positively related to sharing; (c) Angry reactions are positively related to sharing behavior, in the case of right-wing populists, but has no similar effect in the case of their opponents; and (d) this relation remains unaltered when we control for the topics of immigration and security.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between populism, emotions, and online mobilization. Our work does not only support claims that anger-triggering communication is effective in eliciting anger in the public, as already shown by previous research (Eberl et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020); more importantly, we also show that this form of communication has a mobilizing effect because it engenders high-threshold forms of online behavior, such as sharing. Not only does it achieve “emotional contagion” (Hatfield et al., 1993), transmitting anger from populist leaders to their base of support; it also elicits more intense forms of online political behavior such as sharing, which are important for information transmission, and ultimately result in greater algorithmic visibility of political content. To go back to the terms of our analytical framework, “anger-triggering communication” does, indeed, result in “anger-fuelled mobilization.” The question remains open as to whether anger-triggering communication has consequences also for offline mobilization, such as voting or participation in rallies (Bronstein, 2013). This is an issue that we could not address, given the nature of our data, but that would be interesting to explore in future work.

This mobilizational effectiveness of anger may be explained as deriving from this emotion’s greater ability to increase motivational strength for political participation (Van Stekelenburg et al., 2011) as well as from the “negativity bias” in the social transmission of information (Bebbington et al., 2017). Furthermore, mobilizing anger fits well the purpose of strong identification against outgroup members, which constitutes a typical tactic of right-wing populists (Costello et al., 2019; Rico et al., 2017). The question remains open as to whether non-negative emotions may achieve the same increase in motivational strength in the case of other actors. In this regard, our regression coefficients (Table 3) indicate that also “Wow” is positively correlated with Shares. Wow is normally taken as a proxy of the emotion of surprise, one with high arousal and positive valence (Barrett & Russell, 1998). It is, however, important to note that this Facebook reaction has a more contradictory

attribution than Angry, with some users assigning it a negative or neutral value (Giuntini et al., 2019).

Another important insight concerns the relationship between topics, emotions, and online mobilization. We find that anger-triggering communication has a strong thematic focus. Posts on immigration and security attract more than three times the number of Angry reactions compared to other posts (Figure 2). Furthermore, they tend to be strongly correlated with Shares (Table 4). These findings explain why right-wing populists dwell so much on such topics: doing so is a highly rewarding tactic, given that they are both conducive to triggering anger and strongly correlated with information transmission. As our regression coefficients suggest, immigration and security are so salient that they do not need to elicit high levels of anger to be shared. Conversely, the same coefficients highlight that the effect of anger on online mobilization is independent of the topic; in other words, also posts on other issues can trigger anger and promote sharing behavior. Hence, anger-fuelled mobilization is a general (or non-topic-specific) effect of right-wing populists’ anger-triggering communication. Retrospectively, this confirms the value of using Angry reactions as research data, as users’ anger is not reducible to the topics triggering it.

We also find some differences across the different cases in terms of the prominence of anger-triggering communication and anger-fuelled mobilization. Weidel and Salvini display a higher average number of Angry reactions on posts on immigration and security. This may reflect the radical rhetoric of these leaders, especially around the 2019 campaign (Berti, 2020; Ulrich et al., 2022). Furthermore, it should be noted that Italy and Germany are among the European countries where the salience of the issue of immigration and security has grown the most in recent years (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). As regards the counter-case of Zingaretti, the only non-populist center-left candidate for whom the regression coefficients representing the effect of Angry reactions on Shares are positive, this remains difficult to explain. Possible reasons for this behavior may be found in (a) differences in the communication of Zingaretti compared to other center-left leaders and (b) cultural differences across European countries in terms of the way Facebook reactions are used (Tian et al., 2017).

Our research has methodological and empirical limitations. Methodologically, some of the Angry reactions appearing on the Facebook pages of right-wing populists may not be coming from supporters but rather from opponents expressing anger at right-wing populist leaders and their contents. This interference is likely to be limited given the scale of Facebook pages comprising tens of thousands of users. Furthermore, our analysis concentrates on a limited time period around the 2019 European elections and a selected number of leaders; hence, our findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of right-wing populists. To confirm these findings more systematically, it would be necessary to conduct a larger-*N* study on more countries.

In conclusion, our research contributes to the growing scholarship on the relationship between politics and emotions on social media by better elucidating the link between emotional communication and online mobilization. Our statistical analysis provides evidence that anger-triggering communication plays a key mobilizing role on right-wing populist Facebook pages. From this standpoint, the focus of right-wing populist leaders on anger-triggering content appears as an expedient tactic: it is rewarding not only for transmitting negative emotions to supporters but also for mobilizing users online and achieving “viral” diffusion of political content. Given the importance of this tactic in recent election campaigns, the link between anger-triggering communication and anger-fuelled mobilization deserves to be studied further, by examining these processes in the context of other case studies and social media platforms or explaining in greater detail some of their internal mechanisms.

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Notes

1. “Facebook reactions” are additions to the Facebook Like button which were introduced globally in February 2016, which are similar to emojis and allow users to express different emotions: Wow (surprise), Sad, Angry, Love, and Haha (laughter).
2. We found that the average number of angry reactions for Le Pen ($M=190.3$ Angry reactions; $SD=30.5$) is not significantly different from that of Macron ($M=113.8$ Angry reactions; $SD=15.3$), with an average difference of 76.5 Angry reactions, $t(637)=1.57$; $p<.12$.
3. These standard coefficients use the same unit of measurement and hence can be compared to one another.
4. The Italian case constitutes an exception, as the number of Angry reactions has a positive effect on sharing for both Salvini and Zingaretti; still, the effect is stronger with Salvini when compared to non-populist leader Zingaretti (although only slightly).

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