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## Fighting Fire with Fire

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## **Fighting Fire with Fire: Mainstream Adoption of the Populist Political Style in the 2014 Europe Debates between Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage**

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### **Abstract**

Advancing the concept of populism as a political style, this study compares the debate performances of two British party leaders, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage, as they clashed in a pair of televised debates over Britain's EU membership ahead of the 2014 European Parliament elections. The argument tested is that under certain conditions, mainstream politicians will adopt a populist communication style while retaining a non-populist agenda. A mixed methods approach combines computational text analysis with a qualitative rhetorical analysis to demonstrate how the populist and non-populist style can be distinguished and compared systematically. The results suggest that Clegg, although maintaining a non-populist ideology, adopts features of the populist style after losing the first debate. Farage's communication style, conversely, remains stable to the point of statistical significance. This suggests that one explanatory factor of populists' success is the *consistency* of their message and rhetorical delivery, bolstering their perceived authenticity among voters.

### **Introduction**

Across Europe, the increase in electoral support for so-called populist parties is dazzling. So, too, are the politicians who comprise them. Conflictual, controversial, and crude, the new wave of populist challengers is a far cry from the deliberative, temperate, and polished

politicians that have typically governed advanced liberal democracies. Although the academic literature tends to stress the similarity of populists by focusing on their ideological affinities (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn et al. 2012; Kriesi and Pappas 2015), European populist actors often differ along their domestic policy agendas, position on the political spectrum, and degree of opposition to European integration. An illustrative example of this difference is the present state of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament (EP), where they resemble more of a motley crew than a traditional party family. Despite garnering unprecedented electoral support in the 2014 EP elections by campaigning against both the national and European political establishment, right-wing populists cannot seem to coalesce into a cohesive front against the political mainstream at the European level. The UK Independence Party, the Danish People's Party, and the Front National – each winning the 2014 EP elections within their respective domestic arenas – are currently split among three distinct political groups in the EP. What the populist firebrands seem to share more than ideological cohesiveness is a certain *style* of political communication (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016).

The present study applies the concept of populism as a political style by comparing the debate performances of a paradigmatic populist, Nigel Farage, directly against those of an established politician, Nick Clegg, as they clashed in a pair of televised debates over Britain's EU membership before the 2014 EP elections. The Europe debates constitute only the second set of party leader debates in British history and the first time since 1975 a political debate over EU membership was broadcast live to the national public. The head-to-head confrontation between the two party leaders offers an interesting case to examine how diverging policy positions on EU membership were argued before the electorate two years prior to the historic 2016 Brexit referendum. Additionally, the juxtaposition of a high-ranking member of government (Clegg) and a populist challenger (Farage) mimics wider power

struggles across the continent, where mainstream politicians are increasingly pressured to engage unconventional, populist politicians over key policy issues regarding immigration and national sovereignty. The present study takes the Europe debates as an empirical site to investigate the discursive content and rhetorical strategies of the party leaders in order to answer the research question: *Do mainstream politicians adopt a populist political style while maintaining a non-populist agenda?*

Scholarly attention devoted to how mainstream political actors engage populists is relatively scant and predominantly focuses on whether mainstream parties adopt the political agenda of populists on issues like multiculturalism, immigration, or European integration (Bale et al. 2010, van Spanje 2010; Akkerman 2012; De Lange 2012; Mudde 2013; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2014). Taken together, these studies suggest that populists' electoral success can motivate both left- and right-wing mainstream parties to enact policy shifts, especially regarding social and cultural policies. They also stress, however, that the mainstream's co-option of populists' policies varies across cases and is largely contingent upon the specific conditions of the political system, such as whether the mainstream party is in government or opposition, the bargaining power of populists in forming coalitions, and the mainstream parties' willingness to collaborate with the populist insurgency.

Motivated to test whether populists can also impact the practices of the political mainstream at the level of individual politicians, this study takes an empirical case where a populist and non-populist party leader publically debated dichotomous policy positions on EU membership. Farage, the populist case, strongly advocated a British withdrawal from the Union whereas Clegg, the non-populist case and Deputy Prime Minister, unwaveringly supported Britain to remain in. The study's overarching claim is that under certain conditions, established politicians may adopt a *populist style* of political communication while retaining a non-populist agenda. The populist style is construed broadly as patterned practices of

political communication seeking to promote conflict and convey a sense of crisis. Although politicians in power would rationally attempt to avert political conflict and stem perceptions of crisis, the increasing electoral success of populist challengers places pressure on mainstream politicians to ‘fight fire with fire’ and adopt a populist style. By changing their political communication strategies but not necessarily their political agendas, mainstream politicians can advocate their existing policy platforms while attempting to appeal to a broader voter base.

The incentive for mainstream political actors to alter their communication strategy arises out of several challenges currently facing many traditional parties: declining party membership, low trust in incumbent governments, the rising popularity of anti-establishment parties, and the propensity of the media to cover populist politicians (Mazzoleni 2014). Considering these challenges, a number of conditions can incentivize mainstream adoption of the populist style, such as decreasing poll numbers, increasing public support for populist parties, and the saliency of polarizing issues in media coverage. These conditions are not investigated here but are taken as the constant environment in which to test the difference in political styles between Farage and Clegg. To answer whether mainstream politicians adopt a populist style under these conditions, two hypotheses are developed. The first examines whether the populist style can be empirically measured via the party leaders’ discourse; the second seeks to expound any change in their political style across the two debates.

After theoretically developing the concept of political style, a mixed methods research design is introduced to operationalize the political styles of Farage and Clegg. Quantitative, computational text mining methods are complemented with a qualitative, rhetorical analysis to assess both the discursive content and rhetorical strategies used by the politicians in arguing their positions on EU membership. The results suggest that the styles of the two politicians are indeed distinct, and that Clegg, having lost the first debate, adopts traits

characteristic of the populist style in an attempt to win the second. By contrast, Farage's discourse and rhetorical appeals remain remarkably stable across both debates. This suggests that one of the underlying mechanisms explaining populists' success is the consistency of an anti-establishment message. The consistency of Farage's political communication is interpreted as bolstering his authenticity among parts of the electorate, who sanction him as a legitimate challenger to the political establishment.

### **Populism as political style**

The academic community continues grapple with arriving at a sufficiently agreeable consensus over populism's definition. Some scholars advocate that populism is best conceptualized as a 'thin-ideology' (Mudde 2004) that reduces the body politic to two groups (i.e., people and elite), posits an antagonistic relationship between them, and affirms that the 'people' hold the sovereign right to select their governors. Others argue that this understanding of populism is too catch-all and prefer to focus on the specific discursive (Aslanadis 2015) or performative (Moffitt and Tormey 2013) elements of populists' communication. According to Kriesi (2014, 364), neither of these approaches is necessarily at odds with populism's ideological definition, since 'the populist ideology manifests itself in the political communication of populist leaders.'

However, arguing that populist communication emanates from a populist ideology poses the implicit risk of selection bias. If anti-elitism is a defining feature of the populist ideology and is operationalized as critical discourse against the political mainstream, then empirical measures of populism will, almost by definition, register political outsiders as 'more populist' than established elites. People-centrism, another commonly ascribed component of the populist ideology, is not a sufficient counter-weight to correct this bias. People-centrism is the fundamental tenant of all representative politics, and appealing to 'the people' – a socially

constructed entity (Laclau 2005, 72-74) – is not a particular feature of populists. One could even envision a situation where an established political actor denounces a populist challenger by stating: ‘We, the *tolerant people* of Britain, reject your illiberal principles and deem you illegitimate to govern.’ If issued by a populist to a mainstream party leader, this statement would classify as populist on account of its appeal to the people and implicit criticism of the elite. If uttered, however, by an established politician to a populist in power, would the same phrase still be populist? And if so, would it indicate a populist ideology?

Aiming to recast populism as a concept applicable to more than just the fringes of a political system, the present study advocates approaching populism as a political style. Following Moffitt (2016, 28-29), a political style is understood as ‘the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political.’ Put another way, a political style refers to the empirically observable, patterned practices of communication exhibited by politicians in promoting their political agenda, both in terms of discursive content and performative features accompanying its delivery. Such performative features include the rhetorical strategies used in making an argument, non-verbal cues like body language and dress, and properties of language like accents, prosody, and diction. While performative features may be ‘secondary’ (Aslanidis 2015, 11) to discursive content in identifying populism, they are intertwined with the communication strategies of political leaders and are thus integral to explaining why populist messages are successful. The tendency of scholars to measure the degree of populist discourse in political speeches or party manifestos seems to imply that populists’ success is reducible to words or framing strategies – which is unlikely. Rather, systematic empirical inquiry into exactly *how* populist actors attempt to make their messages persuasive can help identify the elusive ‘micromechanisms’ (Pappas 2016, 14) that explain

populists' resonance with a given constituency and further, contribute to constructive theory building.

What unites populists, fundamentally, is their criticism of the political status-quo.

Approaching populism as a political style means investigating how political actors convey this criticism convincingly to the electorate, influencing their political preferences and mobilizing participation around alternative political platforms. The present study contends that rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is a critical component of political communication that, although underutilized in the populist literature, can inform our knowledge of how populist interventions are formulated, achieved, and maintained. The connection between populism and rhetoric is not new (Canovan 1984; Kazin 1998) but has been rebuffed for lacking analytical clarity, since rhetoric is part-and-parcel of all political communication. However, the argument put forth here is that the systematic deconstruction of politician's rhetorical strategies can reveal patterns of communication that help explain populists' success.

Approaching political communication from a rhetorical lens acknowledges the strategic, agential, and creative activity underpinning the process of formulating – and performing – political arguments (Finlayson and Martin 2008; Martin 2015).

The study of rhetoric in British politics has illuminated five aspects of political communication relevant for understanding populism as a political style. First, rhetorical strategies can be utilized to bring about change in the political status-quo, and one pattern that emerges from the literature is political actors' use of rhetoric to establish legitimacy by advocating a 'new' form of politics. Atkins (2011), for example, demonstrates how the Labour Party utilized moral arguments to rebrand itself as 'New Labour' and wrest power from the Conservatives. Similarly, Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats were able to challenge the establishment in 2010 by promoting a platform of 'new politics' (Parry and Richardson 2011, 480), a progressive mantra that was later rhetorically crafted to bind the



Liberal Democrat/Conservative coalition together, despite their ideological differences (Crines 2013a, 212).

Second, the literature on British rhetoric stresses the importance of politicians' personality and style in communicating their political agendas. Recent anthologies of Labour (Crines and Hayton 2016) and Conservative (Hayton and Crines 2015, 198) politicians highlight how much of their success 'depends on the personality and style of each individual orator'. Third and related, both old and new media increasingly influence the communication strategies of politicians. Complementing the case made by Atkins, Charteris-Black (2011, 225) argues that much of New Labour's success is attributable to the communication style of Tony Blair, who was able to harness the power of metaphor to convey messages in a way fitting the media's penchant for 'brevity, clarity, and simplicity.' Both David Cameron and Nick Clegg shared Blair's talent for addressing the media, and Charteris-Black (2011, 20) accredits their 'relaxed and informal style' as contributing to their persuasiveness in the 2010 party leader debates. Rolfe's (2016) work demonstrates how political actors can use digital media to craft the argument for a 'new politics', and he argues that both Barack Obama and Julian Assange shared a populist rhetoric complimented by their innovative use of digital technologies. Similar practices are observed by populist party supporters on social media; a recent study of citizens' Twitter use during the 2015 British General Election finds UKIP supporters overwhelmingly active in issuing mobilizing calls for action (Dutceac Segesten and Bossetta, 2016).

Lastly, the study of British political rhetoric has revealed a general shift in political communication towards a simplified, populist discourse. While Dommett (2014, 83) argues that Labour's brass have adopted the rhetorical technique of "using everyday language" from the Blue Labour movement, Finlayson (2012, 759) notes "an increasing tendency across all parties to cite 'ordinary' people" through the strategic use of anecdote (Atkins and Finlayson,

2013). The prevalence of invoking ‘the people’, witnessed even at the regional level of Welsh politics (Moon, 2014), indicates a stylistic change in British political communication culture emboldening the claim that the “very idea of Britishness is negotiated through rhetoric” (Atkins and Turnbull 2014, 173). The present study contributes to this body of literature by providing an analytical framework to identify the populist style through rhetoric.

Complimenting this theoretical contribution, the study provides a methodology grounded in the interpretive approach used by British rhetoricians while adding a systematic, quantitative component that captures the populist style at the level of language and performance.

In order to delineate the particular features of the populist style, the study builds on Moffitt’s (2016, 44) theoretical model distinguishing the populist style from the technocratic (or non-populist) style. Both styles are distinct modes of garnering political legitimacy and reflect dichotomous, ideal types of representation. At one end of the spectrum, adherers of the populist style appeal to the people versus an elite, exhibit bad manners, and strive to perform a sense of crisis. At the other end, politicians enacting a technocratic style will appeal to expertise or scientific knowledge, exhibit good manners, and aim to promote a sense of stability or measured progress (Moffitt 2016, 26).



**Figure 1: The Technocratic-Populist Political Style Spectrum (Moffitt, 2016: 44)**

In a first step towards operationalizing political style, two hypotheses are formulated to test the enactment of the populist and technocratic style by Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage, who by-and-large correspond to the model’s ideal types. Discussed in further detail below, Clegg is a well-mannered, polished politician who led the Liberal Democrats into a coalition

government with the Conservatives in 2010 by running a platform of ‘honest’ and ‘sincere’ politics. Farage, by contrast, is the leader of the populist UK Independence party (UKIP) and is often depicted as a politically incorrect politician, renowned for his bombastic speeches in the European Parliament. Taking the 2014 Europe debates between the two leaders as a case study, the first hypothesis states that:

**H1: Farage will exhibit a populist style and Clegg will exhibit a technocratic style.**

More specifically, three individual features of the populist style are examined against those of the technocratic style in an exploratory attempt to apply Moffitt’s model. Moffitt marks a relevant stylistic distinction between good and bad manners. The populist style incorporates simplistic language, colloquial parlance, and unconventional behavior relative to the norms of a given political culture. The technocratic style, on the other hand, employs scientific language, esoteric parlance, and respects political customs and conventions. Although speech and behavior are distinguishable, the two can also be considered complementary, since formal speech is unlikely to be accompanied by inappropriate behavior and vice versa. As speech is more easily operationalized than behavior, I focus on the former and hypothesize in H1a that:

*H1a: Clegg will use more formal language than Farage.*

Another aspect in Moffitt’s model refers to the narrative – or ‘script’ (Alexander 2011, 57-59) – that political actors choose to communicate. Populists aim to convincingly portray society as in a state of crisis (Rooduijn 2014; Moffitt 2015), whereas technocrats usually attempt to counter the perception of crisis by conveying stability or progress. As Hay (1996) demonstrates, crisis is a discursive construction. The mediation of crisis versus stability, then, refers largely to the content of political discourse and the ‘story’ a political actor tries to tell.

Hypothesis H1b posits that:

*H1b: Farage will seek to discursively mediate a sense of crisis, whereas Clegg will mediate stability regarding Britain's EU membership.*

One of the primary strengths of Moffitt's model is that it uncouples populism from the ideological connotations that have long been associated with the concept. However, the first dimension of Moffitt's model, 'appeals to the people versus the elite,' arguably excludes those in power from being considered to enact a populist style, since governing elites will never rationally attack themselves. By the same token, populist politicians may refer to their expertise outside of politics in order to establish credibility among voters. To avoid this bias, hypothesis H1c proposes a focus on the rhetorical appeals politicians utilize in making their arguments persuasive: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. These appeals, grounded in the work of Aristotle, have been the backbone of other analyses of British political rhetoric (Atkins et al. 2014, 6-8; Martin 2014, 57-65).

The rhetorical appeal to *ethos* primarily relates to legitimizing a speaker's authority (Finlayson 2012, 760) and is directly related to democratic representation and power. *Ethos* strategies establish a speaker's credibility among an audience, usually through references to one's own personal character, qualities, or accomplishments. If a successful political performance depends on the extent to which an actor achieves 'authenticity' by coming across as 'straightforward, truthful, and sincere' (Alexander 2011, 7), then *ethos* is a necessary condition for a political leader in making successful representative claims.

*Logos* appeals can be identified when an argument is made on the basis of facts, examples, or reasoning. While voters need access to factual information in order to form accurate political preferences and make informed choices at the polls, political actors attempt to cue public opinion by selectively presenting information to voters (Hooghe and Marks 2005). Moreover, what constitutes a 'fact' can be based on false or tenuous premises. This notwithstanding, *logos* is evidenced by the invocation of facts, irrespective of their verifiability.

The third rhetorical proof, *pathos*, refers to making an argument by appealing to the sentiments of the audience. Emotional arguments can be either positive or negative, with the former generally promoting trust and the latter inducing a sense of threat. Affective messages are powerful tools in the repertoires of political actors, since emotional arguments can be seen as unfalsifiable and have been demonstrated to be more effective than cognitive-based appeals (Marcus 2000, 232).

The three rhetorical appeals are not mutually exclusive. They are often combined for persuasive effect and tailored to the context of a particular speech occasion. The present study adds to the established three appeals a fourth, *denigration*, to refer to the direct or indirect slander of a political opponent. Denigration is antithetical to ethos. Instead of seeking to build credibility through ethos, a political actor can attempt to undermine an opponent's legitimacy via attacks on his or her credentials, arguments, or personal character. Ultimately, the goal of denigration is to achieve an effect similar to what Krebs and Jackson (2007, 36) refer to as 'rhetorical coercion,' when an opponent lacks a 'socially sustainable rebuttal' and is 'compelled to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject.'

Relating these four rhetorical appeals to the concept of political style, this study argues that the populist style aims to establish political legitimacy via appeals to pathos while also striving to successfully denigrate a constructed enemy. The connection between populism and pathos has been acknowledged previously (Reisigl 2008, 103), and the denigration of a political elite or immigrant other, usually through blame attribution (Vasilopolou et al. 2014), is a necessary foil to construct the identity of 'the people.' The technocratic style, on the other hand, seeks to maintain legitimacy and reach consensus via appealing to personal expertise (ethos) and supported facts (logos). Crines (2013b, 84) has previously described the rhetoric of the British mainstream as 'logos-driven' and 'deliberative.' Whereas the technocratic style seeks to convey information substantiated by appeals to personal or expert authority, the

populist style seeks to drive conflict via appealing to emotions. Based on this nuanced understanding of the populist style, the last expectation for H1 is that:

*H1c: Farage will argue his anti-EU case using appeals to pathos and denigration, while Clegg will argue the pro-EU case making appeals to ethos and logos.*

Whereas Hypothesis 1 tests whether the discourse and rhetoric of the two leaders corresponds to their expected political styles, Hypothesis 2 is structured to identify changes in political style across the two debates. While both debates fulfill the conditions propitious for mainstream adoption of the populist style (low poll numbers for established politicians, rising popularity of populists, and a polarizing issue salient in the media), in the second debate these conditions are more pronounced. Clegg was interpreted as losing the first debate (YouGov 2014a), Farage was seen as having won, and although the polarizing issue was the same across the debates, the second debate was hosted by a larger media outlet (BBC) than the first (LBC). Expecting the circumstances in the second debate to be more favorable towards adopting a populist style, Hypothesis 2 expects that:

**H2: Clegg's performance will be more populist in the second debate compared to the first.**

The next section outlines the context of the empirical case chosen for the study, with an emphasis on why the case fits the conditions posited to incentivize mainstream adoption of the populist style.

## **Case Selection**

Political debates are classic bouts of rhetoric where politicians aim to convey their political messages convincingly to the electorate. Debates are therefore primary loci to capture political styles in action, and the cases selected to test the populist and technocratic styles are the 2014 Europe debates between Nigel Farage and Nick Clegg. The debates comprise only the second set of party leader debates in British history and the first time since 1975 a public

political debate over Britain's EU membership was broadcast live to the national public. The debates' context fulfills the criteria posited to incentivize the adoption of a populist style by a mainstream politician: the mainstream politician is unpopular and polling poorly, the populist politician is polling well, and the topic of the debates (EU membership) is highly polarized and salient in the media.

The once marginal UKIP, spearheaded by Farage, gained public support by promoting a populist, anti-establishment narrative framing national political parties, multinational corporations, and EU politicians as corrupt elites stripping the national sovereignty away from the British people. Although the anti-EU position is not monopolized by UKIP, their version of Euroscepticism is argued to be populist in comparison to the '*technocratic*, more elite-based Euroscepticism' (Tournier-Sol 2015, 144, my emphasis) exhibited by the mainstream Conservative Party. At the time of the debates, most polls projected UKIP would garner around 30% of the popular vote for the EP elections, placing the party in strong contention to emerge as the election's victor.

On the other side of the EU cleavage, the LibDems were the sole staunchly pro-EU party in Britain. Although generally a small party on the fringes of a British political system, in 2014 the LibDems were the minority party in Britain's first coalition government since the Second World War. The historic arrival of a third party alternative to a traditionally two-party system was due in part to Clegg's highly successful debate performances in Britain's first televised leader debates before the 2010 national elections (Parry and Richardson 2011). However, Clegg's star power eroded quickly after reversing a number of campaign promises, particularly not to raise tuition fees, and at the time of the debates the LibDems were polling an abysmal 10% for the EP elections.

In an attempt to bolster the LibDem's poll numbers ahead of the elections, Clegg challenged Farage to an open, public debate over Britain's EU membership. The first debate, taking place on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014, was transmitted over the radio, streamed live on YouTube, and televised on Sky News. The second debate, held two weeks later on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, was broadcast live exclusively on the public broadcast station BBC Two.

The Europe debates are a particularly suitable case since the two politicians involved fit by-and-large with the populist/technocrat spectrum. An outspoken anti-populist, Clegg promotes a pro-EU position, ascribes to a left-wing liberal ideology, and speaks from a high profile position in government. Farage, generally regarded as a populist, advocates an anti-EU position undergirded by a right-wing, anti-establishment ideology and speaks from a position of government opposition. Moreover, the format of the debate provides laboratory-like conditions to longitudinally test their communication strategies. Despite being hosted by different media outlets, the debates were both on the same topic (EU membership) and maintained identical formats. Each candidate had one minute for opening and closing statements, and in between them the candidates fielded pre-screened questions directly from the audience. A journalist moderated the discussions and interjected clarifying questions. Both debates were filmed live before a studio audience that was selected by the independent polling organization ICM to represent an equal number of 'In' and 'Out' supporters, as well as a smaller number of undecided voters.

## **Method**

To compare the political styles of Clegg and Farage across the two debates, a sequential mixed methods approach is employed and divided into two phases. The first consists of a series of quantitative, computational text mining methods based on automated content analysis, natural language processing, and statistical clustering. The strength of the computational approach is that it compares the two styles in strictly similar ways while



presenting the general picture of the two politicians' messages. While previous work on populism (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011, 1279) highlights 'accuracy' and 'reliability' as key advantages of computer-based content analysis, they also advocate 'an integrated man-machine approach that filters out the disadvantages and emphasizes the strong points' of both methods. Therefore, the second phase deepens the understanding of the differences between the two styles by using a qualitative coding of rhetorical appeals. A heuristic, qualitative reading has the advantage of being sensitive to the particular ways ideas are structured and expressed through speech by taking into account context largely neglected in quantitative methods. The same sample is used in both the computational and the qualitative phases to increase the validity of the results (Creswell 2014, 225).

The data collection process consists of transcribing the debates from available video recordings archived on YouTube *ad litteram*. This means that incomplete sentences, crosstalk, and emotional instances of interruption, such as laughter ('ha') or other interjections ('aw' or 'no'), are included in the transcription.

The quantitative phase is divided into five steps using the 'quantitative discourse analysis package,' or 'qdap' (Rinker 2013), for the programming software R. In the first step, which is aimed to test Hypothesis 1a and assess the formality of language used by each politician, I use the formality function of qdap. Based on a formula developed by Heylighen and Dewaele (2002), the frequency of parts of speech that generally carry substantive information are counted and divided by those that typically convey information implicitly through context. This natural language processing method corresponds to the linguistic differences posited by the populist/technocrat spectrum:

'A formal [technocratic] style of expression is characterized by detachment, precision, and objectivity, but also rigidity and cognitive load; a contextual [populist] style is much lighter in form, more flexible and involved, but correspondingly more subjective, less accurate and less informative' (Heylighen and Dewaele 2002, 334).

To test Hypothesis H1b, that Farage will mediate a sense of crisis and Clegg will attempt to convey stability by staying in the EU, I perform a word frequency analysis that singles out the top 15 words used by each politician per debate. This method identifies the most frequent topics discussed. In a third step, I identify the top 10 words used exclusively by each politician, in order to expound the idiosyncratic strategies in laying out their respective arguments.

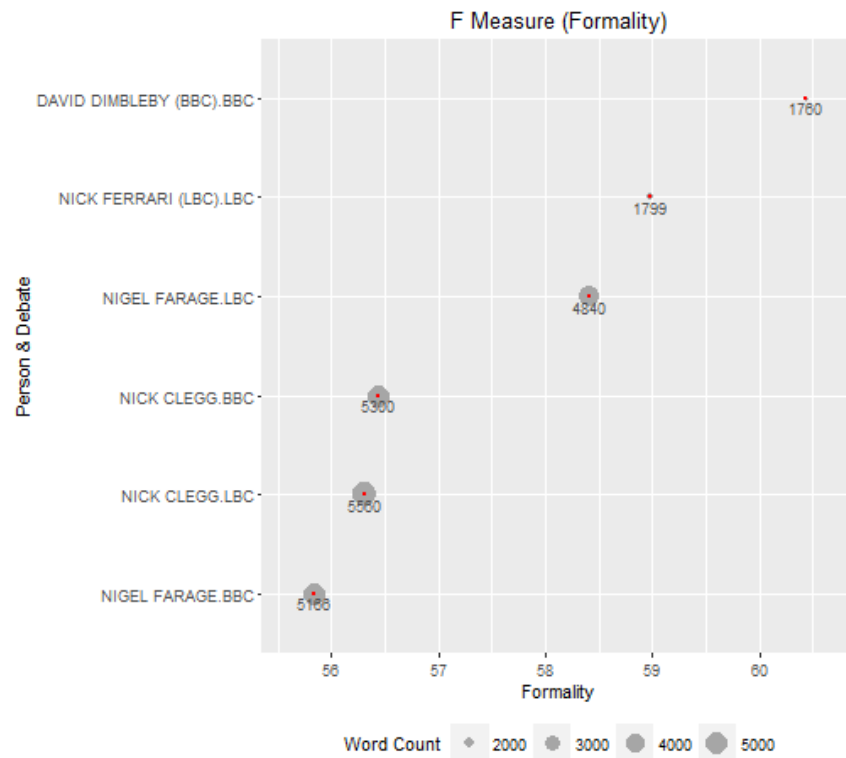
I operationalize Hypothesis 1c, which tests the rhetorical appeals of the politicians' discourse, through a qualitative reading of the text aided by the coding software MAXQDA. Delineating rhetorical appeals is a complicated exercise since different appeals are often combined and interwoven to enhance persuasive effect. Thus, to perform the qualitative reading as systematically as possible, a deductive coding scheme is developed and applied to a thematic unit of analysis (Budd et al. 1967, 34). I choose not to use the sentence as the unit of analysis, since sentences were difficult to separate in the spoken discourse of the politicians, especially during instances of crosstalk.

While there are no existing guidelines regarding how to systematically operationalize rhetorical appeals, the coding scheme is structured as follows. *Ethos* was coded to when the speaker specifically mentioned personal accomplishments or previous professional experience; both are considered means to garner legitimacy and establish credibility. *Pathos* was coded when values, emotional language, or interests relating to the people (e.g. job security, immigration, or safety against criminals) were invoked. *Pathos* also includes general identitarian references to 'we' or 'us' at the national level, such as 'our place in the world' or 'let's not meddle in international affairs,' since these can be seen as implicit references to the audience. *Logos* was coded when the speaker made a reference to a fact, figure, or concrete empirical example. This could be performed either through directly quoting an authority, report, or through mentioning an unsupported but reasonable figure, like 'we export a million

cars per year.’ Lastly, *denigration* was coded when one opponent slandered the other either directly, e.g. ‘you are willfully lying to the British people,’ or through indirect slights like ‘what you are owed are the facts, not simply a lot of opinion,’ which are considered not appeals to logos as much as attempts to attack an opponent. If no specific appeal could be identified, for example when an argument was not explicitly being made or during instances of uninterpretable crosstalk, the text was coded as *Other*. Following the first coding, one-quarter of the data was recoded after a three-month period and resulted in a coder reliability score of 77%.

Hypothesis 2, pertaining to the change in styles across the debates, is tested qualitatively through the rhetorical analysis but also quantitatively via statistical clustering methods that compare the difference in word frequencies across each of the variables (in this case, politician and debate). The fourth step of the quantitative phase uses multidimensional scaling (MDS), which graphically represents the politicians’ discursive content against one another and across the debates. Lastly, I use agglomerative hierarchical clustering (Kaufman and Rousseeuw 2005, 44) as a compliment to the MDS model. Whereas MDS is primarily used to uncover differences among variables, hierarchical clustering attempts to identify similarities in the data by clustering the variables into groups. The R package ‘pvcust’ (Suzuki and Shimodaira 2015) is also used to quantify the strength of correlations between the clustered texts.

## Results



**Figure 2: Formality Scores**

Figure 2 presents the formality scores for each politician, as well as the moderators for comparison. The higher the formality score, the more precise and informative one's speech is; the lower the formality score, the more contextual and less informative one's speech is. Figure 2 shows that the two moderators have the highest formality scores, which is to be expected given their role of relaying substantive questions from the audience and asking clarifying questions to the politicians. Farage's first (LBC) debate is shown to be the most formal of the two party leaders, while his second (BBC) debate is the least formal. Farage's particularly formal language in the LBC debate may be explained by the fact that this was his first debate appearance alongside another national party leader, and that he was attempting to attain legitimacy by presenting his platform pointedly. Another reason may relate to Clegg's demonstrated use of 'demotic modes of expression and direct address to audiences' in previous televised debates (Washbourne 2013, 113). Clegg's formality scores are almost

identical across the two debates but not significantly higher than Farage’s. Hypothesis 1a, that Clegg’s language would be more formal than Farage’s, is largely *unconfirmed*.

Nick Clegg				Nigel Farage			
LBC (n=5262)		BBC (n=5112)		LBC (n=4488)		BBC (n=4971)	
Word	Freq	Word	Freq	Word	Freq	Word	Freq
people	42	people	48	people	33	Nick	33
European Union	39	Nigel Farage	35	Nick	24	people	30
country	28	European Union	29	European	20	trade	25
job(s)	37	world	26	Europe	19	European Union	19
British	23	country	22	years	18	country	18
million	22	Britain	19	British	17	let's	18
rules	22	British	17	country	17	world	18
actually	21	percent	16	European Union	17	dear	16
law(s)	18	change	15	million	17	European	16
fact(s)	17	million	15	actually	16	percent	16
Europe	17	simply	15	law(s)	15	British	14
simply	17	actually	14	hundred	14	Europe	14
thousand	17	countries	14	trade	14	own	13
European	16	European	14	question	13	years	12
Nigel Farage	16	modern	14	Britain	12	immigration	11

**Table 1:** Word Frequency Analysis Result

Table 1 presents the results of the word frequency analysis, which is aimed at assessing the discursive construction of crisis versus stability. The columns divide the most commonly used words each by politician and debate. For both Clegg and Farage, *people* is the most used word in nearly all the texts. This is considered not an indicator of populism since *people* is among the top two hundred most commonly used words in English (Fry, 1997). Words used prominently by both politicians in each case are *European Union*, *Europe*, *European*, *country*, *British*, and *million*. The presence of these words is rather unsurprising given the debates’ theme and format, inviting topical discussions about the EU and the UK supported by figures, as indicated by *million*.

Looking only at Clegg, references to *job(s)* occur 37 times in the LBC debate but does not make the top 15 words in the BBC debate (used only 12 times there). Other words present in the top 15 list for Clegg in the LBC debate are: *law(s)*, *fact(s)*, *rules*, and *thousand*. These words suggest argumentation based on facts and figures, and they are largely absent in the

BBC debate. Instead, mentions of Nigel Farage more than double, suggesting an increased focus on Farage’s person from the first to second debate. This personalization comes at the expense of substantive words like *facts* and *laws*, while at the same time words indicating figures, like *million* and *thousand*, decrease. Clegg’s BBC list also hints to a heightened domestic focus, with the words *Britain* and *British* appearing 36 times combined, and the total number of references to the EU and Europe decreasing in relation to the LBC list.

For Farage, mentions of the EU are roughly equivalent to those of *country*, and the appearance of *trade* and *years* on both lists suggest that trade and historical references are key components to Farage’s arguments. Like in Clegg’s lists, words that indicate facts and figures, such as *million* and *hundred*, are present in the first but absent from the second debate. *Immigration*, a key UKIP policy issue, is mentioned 11 times in the BBC debate (compared to 6 times in the LBC debate).

All in all, the word frequencies suggest that the degree of deliberation, approximated through mentions of facts and figures, decreased from the first to the second debate, giving way to more mentions of the opponent for Clegg and increased focus on trade and immigration by Farage. Table 2 presents the unique words used by each politician in the debates, in order to gain a better idea of idiosyncratic arguments of the two politicians.

Clegg				Farage			
LBC (n=5262)		BBC (n=5112)		LBC (n=4488)		BBC (n=4971)	
Word	Freq	Word	Freq	Word	Freq	Word	Freq
simply	17	Nigel Farage	35	Nick	24	Nick	33
Nigel Farage	16	simply	15	Brussels	11	dear	16
elsewhere	13	dangerous	11	cost	8	control	11
facts	11	clock	9	free	6	political	11
claim	9	sort	8	mister	6	union	11
clout	9	climate	7	ability	5	free	9
sure	7	important	7	best	5	doing	8
against	6	Vladimir Putin	7	control	5	door	7
instance	6	instance	6	currently	5	EU	7
pull	6	red tape	6	door	5	ha	6

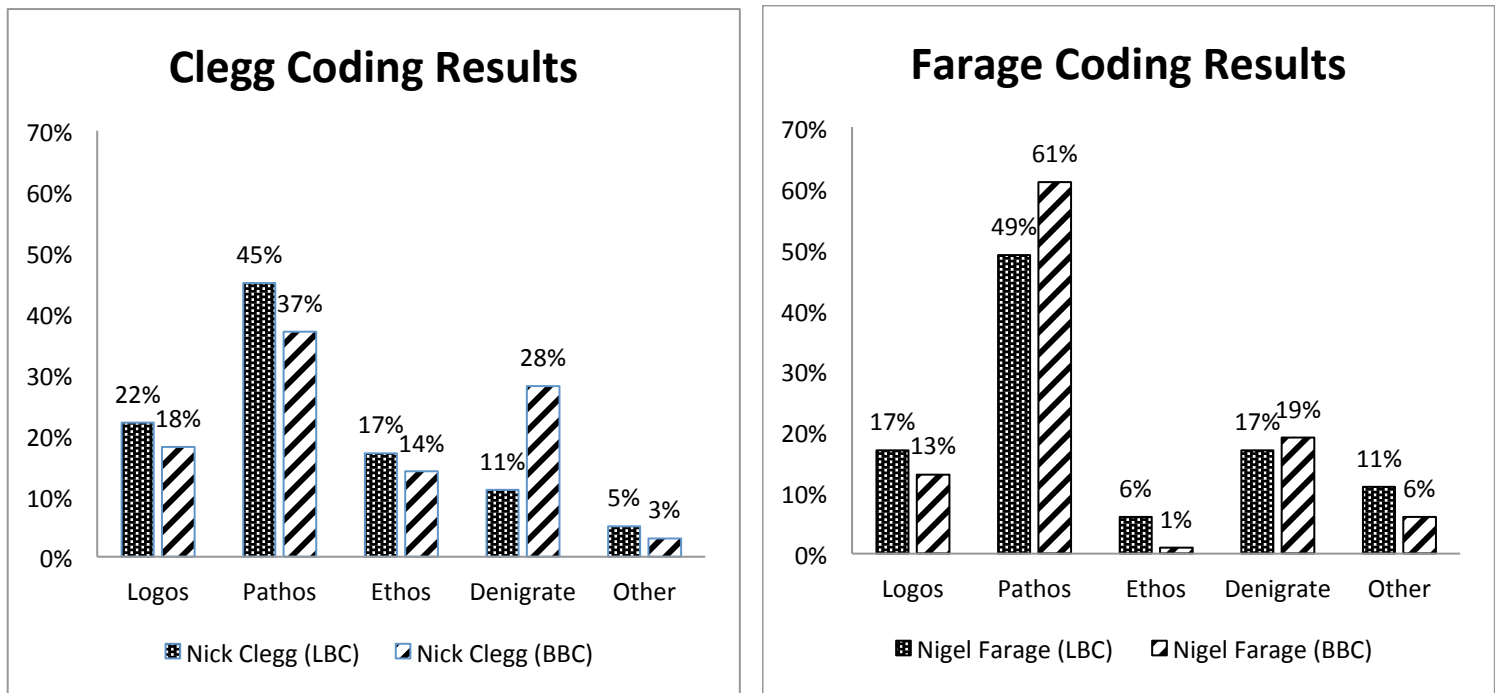
**Table 2: Word Difference Lists**

While some words that appear in the word frequency lists are also present in Table 1, a number of others that are relevant to the analysis come forth. Looking at Clegg's LBC list, we see the word *elsewhere* (a framing strategy to euphemize the word 'immigrants' as 'people from elsewhere'), *facts*, *clout* (referring to Britain's international clout in being an EU member), and *pull* (in relation to Clegg's chosen metaphor of leaving the EU, namely to 'pull up the drawbridge'). For Clegg's BBC list, the word *dangerous* is particularly high (referring to the 'dangerous fantasy' that leaving the EU will help Britain), alongside *clock* (another metaphor that compares leaving the EU to 'turning the clock back'), *climate* (referring to climate change), and *Vladimir Putin* (in reference to an interview held between the debates where Farage claimed to admire the Russian president).

Words unique to Farage in the LBC debate include framing the European Union as *Brussels*, bringing up the *cost* of EU membership, and deploring the *free* movement of people that he describes as an *open* door, which has left the British people lacking the *ability* to *control* their *border*. The word *best* refers to UKIP's slogan ('The best people to govern Britain are the British people themselves'), while *mister* refers to his mentions to other party leaders, namely David Cameron of the Conservatives and Ed Miliband of Labour. In the BBC debate, many of the same words are mentioned but with increased frequency (*control*, *free*, and *door*), and the *EU* is often referenced as a *political union*. Some words, like *dear* (as in, 'oh dear') and *ha* (indicating laughter), point to particular patterns in Farage's performative repertoire aimed at denigrating Clegg.

The findings illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 *partially confirm* Hypothesis 1b, that Clegg performs stability and Farage performs crisis. In the first debate, Clegg casts the UK's membership of the EU as bringing stability and jobs, as well as granting Britain clout in trade negotiations by being part of the world's largest single market economy. However, it is noteworthy that Clegg's stability narrative is buttressed by a 'conditional crisis' based on the

scenario of a UKIP victory, leading to a British exit from the EU. Clegg communicates this conditional crisis through claims that the National Health Service would collapse, jobs tied to foreign investment would be lost, Britain’s clout would shrink in negotiating trade deals, and the country would become less safe without the European Arrest Warrant. In the second debate, this conditional crisis comes to the fore of his argument. Clegg attacks Farage personally, specifically in regards to Farage’s vision to leave the EU as a dangerous fantasy and a con. Across the two debates, Farage remains on point with his crisis narrative, focusing on immigration and the loss of national sovereignty. As Table 2 shows, in both debates he consistently bemoans the free movement of people as open door immigration, the cost of EU membership, and a loss in the ability to control Britain’s borders due to governance from Brussels. The results of the word frequency analysis also point out that the policy positions defended by the two speakers, pro- and anti-EU respectively, remain consistent across the debates.



**Figure 3: Qualitative Coding Results**

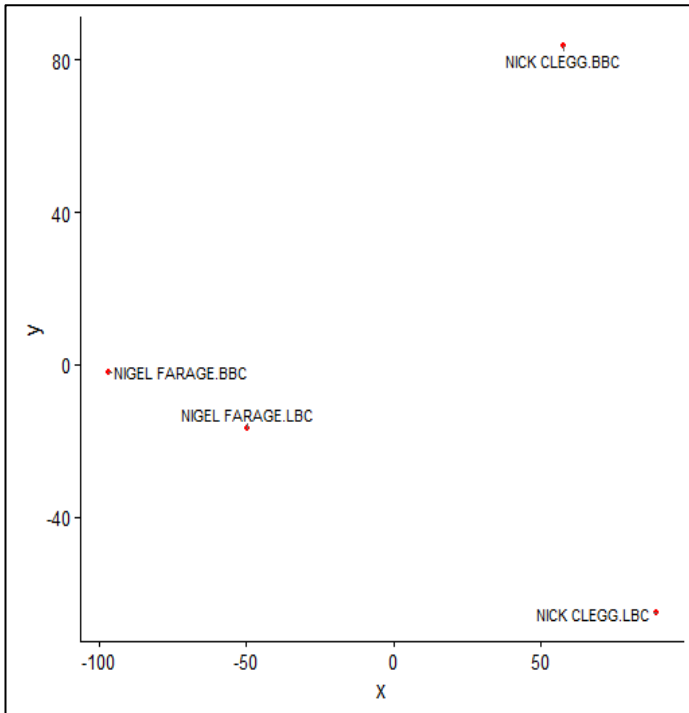


Figure 3 presents the results of the qualitative coding meant to test H1c, which suggested that Clegg (the non-populist) would rhetorically appeal to ethos and logos and Farage (the populist) would exhibit pathos and denigration. H1c is, however, only *partially confirmed*. While both politicians appeal primarily to pathos (Farage significantly more so than Clegg), Clegg uses more references to personal accomplishments (ethos) and facts (logos) than the Farage, who denigrates his opponent as a consistent strategy.

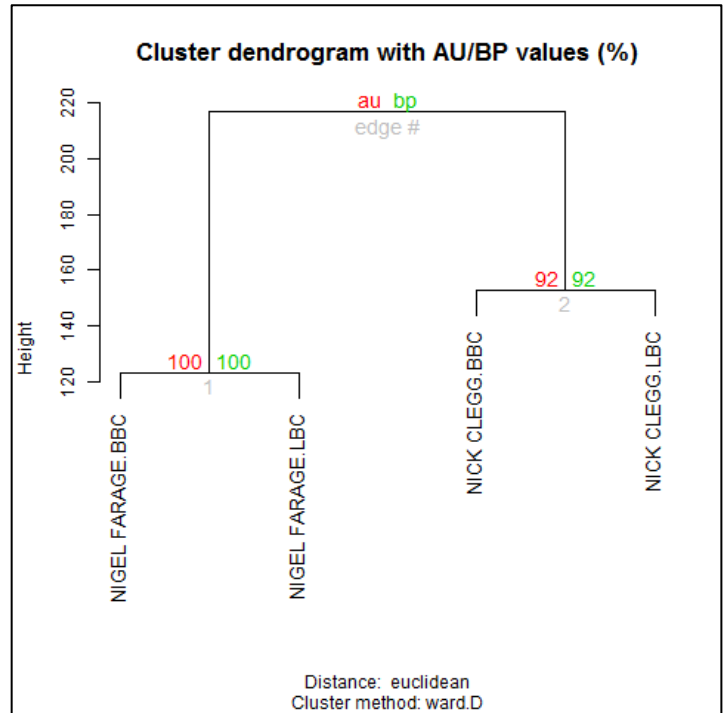
Clegg's ethos appeals alluded to the successes of his current government, whereas Farage's ethos appeals were largely in connection to his experience in private business as a commodities broker and his leadership position in the Eurosceptic EP political group Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy. Clegg's logos appeals, especially in the first debate, related to job creation and were backed by direct quotes from the prominent private sector managers of Siemens, Hitachi, Nissan, and Ford. For Farage, logos appeals were based on trade figures, energy prices, and his own party's estimate of the cost of EU membership. Clegg's pathos appeals were most tightly knit to claims that leaving the EU would bring about a loss of jobs and clout in international negotiations, whereas Farage's pathos appeals centered around immigration negatively impacting British workers and diminished national sovereignty due to EU membership.

Most interestingly, Figure 3 shows that from the first to second debate, Clegg's denigration category more than doubles. In the first debate, Clegg primarily attacked 'UKIP and other people' who want to leave the EU. In the second debate, Clegg's denigration took a much more personalized scope, attacking Farage personally. These attacks were most often in reference to Farage's statement between the two debates that he admired Vladimir Putin, which was also a prominent word in Table 2. For Farage, denigration was more consistent and diffuse across the two debates: he often disparaged Clegg together with the other two national party leaders, framing them as conspiring with multinational corporations and EU

elites. While only a partial confirmation of H1c, the results of the qualitative coding seem to *confirm the adoption hypothesis (H2)*, that Clegg would embrace a more populist style in the second debate.



**Figure 4: MDS Model**



**Figure 5: Hierarchical Clustering**

Figures 4 and 5, respectively, visually represent and quantify the change in the politicians’ discourse across the two debates. Together, they help *validate the second hypothesis (H2)*. On the left, the MDS model represents the politicians’ discourse based on calculations made at the level of differences in word frequency across the transcripts. The MDS model clearly illustrates a high similarity between Farage’s discourses in both debates, whereas Clegg’s discourses are dissimilar both from Farage’s as well as his own across the debates. Figure 5 confirms the findings of the MDS model by using hierarchical clustering, which attempts to identify clusters between text variables based on their similarity. The results show that Farage’s transcripts could be clustered together and identified as statistically correlated (clusters with values of 95 and higher are statistically significant), whereas Clegg’s transcripts could not be grouped together with statistical certainty.

In sum, Hypothesis 1 tested the theoretical model of populist/technocratic styles via three measures: degree of formality, performance of crisis, and rhetorical appeals. Of these three measures, the most accurate demarcation line was drawn by the use of rhetorical appeals. Language formality turned out not to play a consistent role in its association with the expected populist or technocratic distinction. However, viewed in tandem with the results of the qualitative analysis, the rather steep decrease in Farage's formality score from the LBC to BBC debate may be related to the increase in denigration by Clegg. This suggests that denigration strategies during a policy debate reduce the quality of substantive information communicated by the politician being attacked. The performance of crisis, meanwhile, was a rather ambiguous criterion, as *both* politicians tried to communicate a sense of impending alarm, although justified by different reasons. Hypothesis 2 tested the idea of adoption of a populist style by a mainstream politician who otherwise remained faithful to his policy positions. Overall, H2 was confirmed. The quantitative methods demonstrate Farage's discourse and rhetorical strategies were stable across the debates, albeit a slight deviation in his formality scores. Clegg, on the contrary, exhibits a clearly observable difference, with the main change between the debates being the increase in personalized attacks against Farage.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study sought to answer the question: *Do mainstream politicians adopt a populist political style while maintaining a non-populist agenda?* The populist style has been defined here as political communication privileging conflict and crises at the expense of consensus and substantive facts. The results show that across the debates Nick Clegg, the non-populist case, reduces his references to substantive information, adopts a personalized attack frame against his opponent, and conveys a sense of crisis around the potential scenario of Britain withdrawing from the EU. Although Clegg's policy position remained staunchly in favor of EU membership, his political communication style from the first to the second debate shifted

towards one more typical of a populist politician. As populists continue to rise in the polls and increasingly play the role of kingmaker, mainstream politicians are pressured to adopt elements of the populist style by attacking their opponents' ethos and attempting to undermine their legitimacy.

Bale et al. (2010, 413) argue that political parties can incur significant risks by adopting a populist policy agenda, and the same seems to hold true of mainstream politicians adopting a populist style. While Clegg was deemed to have lost the first debate with 36% support against Farage's 57% (YouGov 2014a), Clegg's change in style was interpreted unfavorably by viewers, who gave him only 27% support to Farage's 68% in the second debate (YouGov 2014b). A host of factors external to the debate help explain Clegg's defeat: his position in government, his low popularity from entering a coalition with the Conservatives, his advocating a status-quo policy position, Farage's opposition status, and/or a Eurosceptic British public. However, these external factors do not fully account for why Clegg was viewed less favorably in the second debate, despite virtually no variation in Farage's arguments.

In light of the analysis, the reason posited here is internal to Clegg's debate performances: Clegg's stark contrast in political communication between the two debates contributed to his coming across as contrived and inauthentic, which ultimately undermined the persuasiveness of his pro-EU message. Such a change in style may negatively affect trust and, when combined with a general public dissatisfaction with politics or a particular sense of grievance regarding a policy area, may undermine the perceived authenticity of mainstream politicians who adopt the populist style (Liebes 2001; Gilpin et al. 2010).

While the same external factors outlined above similarly contributed to Farage's victories, they do not explain why he was perceived to win the second debate by a larger margin than

the first. Given the debates were only two weeks apart, had exactly the same format, and concerned the same issue, structural factors alone cannot account for the wider spread of Farage's victory in the second contest. Farage's discourse and rhetorical appeals across the debates were surprisingly stable according to both the quantitative and qualitative tests. Interestingly, Farage was able to win more public support for his position without altering his message or its delivery. This suggests that one explanatory factor of populists' success may be the consistency of their message, and its rhetorical delivery, over time.

Previous work by rhetorical scholars helps explain how such consistency, demonstrated here at the level of statistical significance, can enhance the persuasiveness of a political argument. Charteris-Black (2011, 10) stresses that 'repetition communicates a sense of conviction' that can positively contribute to a politician's ethos. Martin (2014, 98), in a similar vein, highlights how effective political rhetoric can create 'feedback loops,' where earlier arguments crystallize into enthymematic premises for later ones. Seemingly alluding to populism, Martin (Ibid.) illustrates the concept of feedback loops by writing, 'What was once rhetoric later comes to be 'common-sense' premises to routine decisions; what began as an audacious intervention becomes a coherent discursive frame.' Supporting this notion, the findings of the rhetorical analysis demonstrate that Farage did not prioritize the proofs of factual argumentation (logos) or appeals to his own credibility (ethos) in arguing his anti-EU position. Rather, the results corroborate earlier findings that Farage's political communication is primarily pathos-driven (Crines and Heppell 2016), highlighting the significance of rhetoric in contemporary politics. If democratic legitimacy can be successfully garnered through emotional argumentation, there may be less incentive for politicians to ground policy preferences in verifiable facts. The spreading of a populist style seemingly opens up the door to post-factual democracy, intimately affecting the electorate's ability to arrive at informed political preferences.

This study has argued that Nick Clegg, then Deputy Prime Minister, adopts a populist style from the first to the second Europe debate in an attempt to ‘fight fire with fire’ against a populist politician. However, in studying only two politicians at two points in time the conclusions remain tentative. More research is needed, particularly in fragmented multi-party systems, to further explore the conditions argued here as conducive for mainstream adoption of the populist style, namely: declining polling numbers for the mainstream politician, increasing popularity for populist actors, and the saliency of polarizing issues in the media. Future studies should aim to disentangle these factors and test whether they, independently or together, can explain mainstream adoption of the populist style. Despite its limitations, this study provides further evidence that although British politicians have been argued to resist the conflict-oriented political style witnessed by established politicians in other national contexts (Brants and Voltmer 2011, 13), the populist style has penetrated the mainstream in British politics.

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