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The populist people and mediatized populism: the construction of “The People” by Iranian politicians on Twitter

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Democracies have always been susceptible to populism, and in recent years, there has been a growing concern about the threat posed by populist movements worldwide. Populism is defined by its support and praise of “the people,” particularly when their values differ significantly from those accepted by the elites. Therefore, “the populist people” has a unique meaning in populist definitions and is represented in various ways. The concept of populism after the 1979 Iranian revolution has been used to analyze some of the changes in Iran. This study focuses on the concept of “The people” and identifies dimensions of the populist people (Pure, Exclusive, Victim, and Other-antagonist) as well as the anti-populistic people (Plural and Immature). The study identified the characteristics of populism among Iranian politicians. It determined the differences in the use of politicians affiliated with appointed and elected institutions, with conservative and reformist tendencies. In this regard, we collected all the tweets of the official Iranian politicians (39,641 tweets). Using the combined content analysis method, the 909 tweets were categorized as either populist or anti-populist. Findings indicate that constructing the “Other-antagonist people” was the primary strategy used in Iranian populism, while the dimensions of the anti-populistic people were the least common. Iranian reformists represented a more pure and homogeneous people, while conservatives used a strategy of constructing the “other-antagonist people”. The people constructed by conservatives/appointees were more populist than the reformists/electives. The conclusion is that the ideology of populism has revealed its “thin” nature in Iranian politics. It has emerged as an auxiliary tool in the discourse of all conflicting political groups, creating a pragmatic populism with a conservative and power-oriented tendency. Reformists have become victims in the construction of the people, and conservatives have become custodians of the status quo.

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Introduction

The idea of “the people” has become increasingly significant in Iranian society since the Qajar period and the Constitutional Revolution. During this time, the concept of “the people” evolved from being seen as mere subjects (*ra'iat*) to being recognized as citizens. This evolution led to a greater emphasis on the opinions and rights of Iranian citizens in politics (Abrahamian, 2018; Amanat, 2017). The representation of “the people” as the central concept of populism (Diehl, 2018) intensified in twentieth-century Iran, and the challenge of how to represent the people and populist use of it in various political events was observed; Hence, some scholars have characterized the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its leaders as populist (Abrahamian, 1993; Cronin, 2021; Dorraj, 1990, 2005; Foran, 1991; Mashayekhi, 2005; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019). This populist orientation is reflected in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, which declares the revolution’s ultimate goal as supporting oppressed and deprived individuals worldwide in their struggle against oppressors. Such rhetoric mirrors both the revolutionary nature of the movement that overthrew the monarchy and the ideological stance of its leaders (Dorraj and Dodson, 2009).

In the post-revolutionary period, populism remained a key feature of Iranian politics, functioning both as an ideological framework and a political strategy. Political actors frequently invoked “the people” to legitimize their positions and demands (Diehl, 2018). This phenomenon has been further amplified in contemporary politics, where populist politicians tailor their messages to resonate with public sentiments. Furthermore, social media platforms have had a significant impact on political leadership and mobilization (Moffitt, 2020; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014), providing a platform for greater visibility of politicians’ messages. This has contributed to the rise of populism in politics, as social media platforms have provided the necessary background for populist messages to thrive (Mazzoleni, 2008). This process fosters interaction between populist leaders and the masses, enabling them to construct and communicate their vision of “the people” more effectively.

In Iran, politicians from various factions frequently invoke the concept of “the people” in their public statements, particularly on social media, to advance their political agendas. However, the meanings attributed to “the people” vary significantly across different political groups. This study aims to explore these variations by analyzing how Iranian politicians construct “the people” in their discourse. A deeper understanding of these rhetorical strategies can illuminate broader political practices in Iran and highlight distinctions in how different factions employ populist rhetoric on social media.

In light of the centrality of “the people” in populist discourse, this study explores how Iranian politicians construct and deploy this concept in their Twitter messages. It examines the distinctive discursive features of populism reflected in their rhetoric and investigates how different political actors—those affiliated with appointed versus elected institutions, as well as conservatives versus reformists—utilize various populist strategies. By analyzing these variations, the study aims to shed light on the broader patterns of populist communication in Iranian politics.

To address these issues, a combined content analysis approach was employed by analyzing a comprehensive sample of tweets from official Iranian politicians. This dataset, drawn from both appointed and elected institutional accounts, provided a robust foundation for examining how populist rhetoric is constructed and deployed in contemporary Iranian politics.

Populism in Iran

Populism is a key concept in analyzing Iran’s socio-political landscape. Its roots trace back to pre-Islamic religious beliefs,

such as Zoroastrianism, Mazdakism, and Manichaeism, which influenced the development of Shiite Islam in Iran (Dorraj, 1990). With the rise of Islam, populist elements expanded within the Shiite political tradition, becoming part of Iran’s collective memory (Dorraj, 2017; Tavakoli-Targhi, 1992). Populism also played a role in Iran’s early constitutional movement, where middle-class reformists emphasized “homeland (*vatan*)” and “social justice,” linking modern politicians with reformist clerics. This movement exhibited three main tendencies: populism, elitism, and traditionalism, with populism representing the revolutionary reformists (Afshari, 1993).

Modern Iranian populism notably emerged during the downfall of Mohammad Mossadegh’s nationalist government and the 1953 coup (Dorraj, 2017). Mossadegh is often considered the last populist leader before the 1979 Revolution (Rajaei, 2021). His populist policies, which included nationalization and anti-imperialist sentiments, aimed to assert Iran’s sovereignty (Banai, 2020). Central to his discourse were concepts like “freedom of the people” and “independence” (Mahdavi, 2003). Despite his populist leanings, some scholars argue that Mossadegh managed populism rather than succumbing to it (Ansari, 2012).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Pahlavi regime used both suppression and populist tactics to control the lower classes and undermine the upper classes, leading to significant social changes. The White Revolution of 1963 was a key outcome, resulting in the urbanization of the peasantry and social crises that contributed to the rise of religious populism and the 1979 revolution (Alamdari, 2005; Hatami, 2015). Populist themes were also present during the later years of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s reign, where populist policies aimed at securing political compliance from the lower classes (Azimi, 2009; Hatami, 2015). These strategies, combined with urbanization and social crises, ultimately fueled the conditions leading to the revolution.

During the 1979 revolution in Iran, populism was employed to unite opposition against the Shah, creating a multi-class movement led by a charismatic figure (Bayat, 1997; Keshavarzian, 2007; Mashayekhi, 2005). After the revolution, populism merged with nationalism and religious radicalism, interpreting Shiite political tradition through the ideas of revolutionary intellectuals like Ali Shari’ati (Abrahamian, 2009; Dorraj, 2017). This approach became dominant among revolutionary leaders (Abrahamian, 2018; Keddie and Richard, 2006). Islamic populism during this period allowed for adaptability in the face of modernity (Abrahamian, 1993). Ayatollah Khomeini fused Islamic principles, populist slogans, and Persian nationalist themes to form a cohesive narrative that addressed socioeconomic issues and political protests against the status quo (Abrahamian, 1993; Edelman and Takeyh, 2018). This narrative led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and was seen as the embodiment of the collective will (Dorraj, 2014; Holliday, 2016). Khomeini’s discourse also drew on Shia traditions, emphasizing justice, egalitarian ideals, and the concept of political leadership by the clergy (Velayat-e Faqih) (Dorraj, 2014).

Populist nationalism supported the revolution and accommodated diverse revolutionaries (Abrahamian, 2009; Bajoghli, 2019). The Islamic Republic’s constitution reflects a blend of religious and secular principles, democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, and populist and elitist traits (Boroujerdi, 2001). Consequently, post-revolutionary Iran witnessed a form of pragmatic populism similar to that found in Latin America (Abrahamian, 1993).

After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, revolutionary populism persisted in rhetoric (Kamrava and Dorraj, 2008) and economics (Saeidi, 2001). Post-revolutionary elites continued to equate the ‘self’ with ‘the people,’ a legacy of Khomeini’s discourse (Holliday,

2016). Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's discourse further established identity boundaries by using Islam to differentiate 'us/them' and internal/external, positioning actors as either legitimate or illegitimate (Kermani, 2022; Selvik, 2018).

The continuation of a state-centered economy was influenced by the religious origins of populism, the rentier state, and charismatic leadership (Keshavarzian, 2007; Saeidi, 2001). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013) marked the peak of this populism, characterized by interventionist economic policies, resource distribution to marginalized areas (Farzanegan, 2009; Saikal, 2019), a xenophobic foreign policy (Dodson and Dorraj, 2008; Holliday, 2020), and promises to eradicate corruption among elites (Dorraj and Dodson, 2009).

From the perspective of some scholars, populism alone cannot fully explain the socio-political situation in Iran (Harris, 2017). Another viewpoint suggests that the struggle for democracy in Iran has historically involved a constant back-and-forth between Islamic populism and Westernization by the government (Mirsepassi, 2010). Populism has become a stable and integral part of Iranian political culture under the Islamic Republic (Dorraj, 2005). Nationalism, social justice, and independence are the central concepts within this political culture (Bajoghli, 2019). Various conflicting political tendencies also employ populism, and the use of populist language and symbolism is essential for all Iranian political directions (Dorraj, 2005).

Populism and social media

Democracies have always been susceptible to populism, and in recent years, there has been a growing concern about the threat posed by populist movements worldwide (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Bang and Marsh, 2018; Katsambekis, 2017; Rummens, 2017). The definition of populism is not universally agreed upon, and its ambiguity is a fundamental characteristic of this concept (Anselmi, 2018; Taggart and Parkin, 2000). According to the research question, when defining populism, it is important to adopt a neutral stance and allow for flexibility in categorizing and understanding populism and 'the constructed people.' According to the Ideational Approach, populism is defined as a 'thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, *the pure people* versus *the corrupt elite*' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). It suggests that politics should reflect the general will of the people. This understanding of populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' allows it to coexist with other ideologies and encompass variations such as left-wing populism or neoliberal populism (Aslan, 2021; Freedén, 2017).

On the other hand, over the last few decades, populist parties and movements have increasingly focused their efforts on the media, particularly social media. This shift is seen as a hallmark of neo-populism (Mazzoleni, 2008). Populist politicians use charismatic personalities, dominant media strategies, and emotional appeals to address social realities and provide satisfaction to media audiences (Mazzoleni, 2014). In addition, social media, especially Twitter, serves as a direct and unmediated link for populists (Dittrich, 2017), allowing them to bypass traditional media. This gives them the freedom to express their ideology, spread their messages without conflict (Engesser et al., 2017), and use confrontational and disseminating practices (Dittrich, 2017).

The populist people. Populism is fundamentally characterized by its advocacy for and praise of "the people" (Krastev, 2017), particularly when their values contrast with those of the elites. Some scholars argue that allegiance to "the people" is the defining feature of populism (Taggart and Parkin, 2000). However, populism does not construct "the people" in a uniform way;

rather, different populist movements and politicians depict them in distinct forms, each reflecting varying intensities and characteristics of populism.

In the literature, several scholars have explored the ways in which populist discourse constructs "the people". Canovan (2002) and Mudde (2004) emphasize that populism often portrays "the pure people" as a homogeneous and virtuous group, excluded from political decision-making and lacking representation. This group is framed as innocent, oppressed, and silenced (Katsambekis, 2022; March, 2018). Hameleers et al. (2017) and Snow and Bernatzky (2018) discuss how populist leaders claim to be the sole representatives of these people, advocating for their interests against corrupt elites.

Another form of populist discourse, explored by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Müller (2016), can be defined as "the exclusive people". In this case, populist leaders define a narrow group of citizens as "the real people" and position themselves as their only legitimate representatives. This form of populism entails an exclusivist moral claim, as Roux (2022) notes, which often requires the rejection or dismantling of pluralist democratic institutions that accommodate diverse political voices.

The victimization of "the people" is also central to many populist movements. Fitzi (2018) argues that populist discourse frames "the people" as victims of exploitation by powerful elites. This perspective aligns with Inglehart and Norris (2017) analysis of Trump's populist rhetoric, which depicted his supporters as victims of immigrants, minority groups, and liberal elites—seen as obstacles to achieving the "American Dream". In this framing, "the people" are portrayed as innocent and blameless, while the elites are held responsible for their plight (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Finally, another common populist construction of "the people" is based on antagonistic opposition to an "other". Panizza and Stavrakakis (2020) highlight how populist rhetoric frequently relies on the creation of a hostile adversary, typically the political and economic elite, the oligarchy, or the establishment. Hartz (2019) discusses how this discourse constructs a collective identity for "the people" by defining them against an ambiguous and corrupt "other". Smelser and Baltes (2001) further illustrate how populist movements may extend this antagonism to groups such as self-interested elites, conspiratorial minorities, or even foreign actors, reinforcing a sense of struggle and polarization.

Based on these scholarly perspectives, this study identifies four key dimensions of "the populist people," which politicians may simultaneously employ in their discourse:

- Pure people—A homogeneous, innocent, and oppressed group excluded from political decision-making.
- Exclusive people—A narrowly defined group, recognized as "the real people" by populist leaders who claim to be their sole legitimate representatives.
- Victim people—A collective portrayed as suffering at the hands of elites, often depicted as brave and innocent, while elites are framed as corrupt exploiters.
- Other-antagonist people—A group defined in opposition to a perceived enemy, such as political elites, economic elites, etc.

Each of these dimensions can be further distinguished based on two key factors: the level of agency attributed to "the people" and the degree of antagonism toward "the other". Table 1 provides an overview of how these dimensions vary along these two axes.

This framework provides a structured understanding of how populist discourse constructs "the people" in different contexts, forming the foundation for the subsequent analysis of political rhetoric in this study.

Table 1 Dimensions of populist people based on agency and other-antagonism.

Dimensions	Agency	Other-antagonism
Pure people	Low	Low
Exclusive people	High	Low
Victim people	Low	High
Other-antagonist people	High	High

Anti-populist people. In the previous section, populism was defined as a thin-centered ideology. This definition allows us to create a spectrum for the degree of populism within the ‘constructed people,’ ranging from the most populist form to the least populist form. We refer to non-populist forms of the constructed people as ‘anti-populist people.’ Two approaches are in direct opposition to populism: elitism and pluralism. Thus, according to the negative definition of populism, which contrasts this concept with elitism and pluralism, the anti-populist construction of people can appear in two ways: 1. Plural and role-playing people, 2. Immature people.

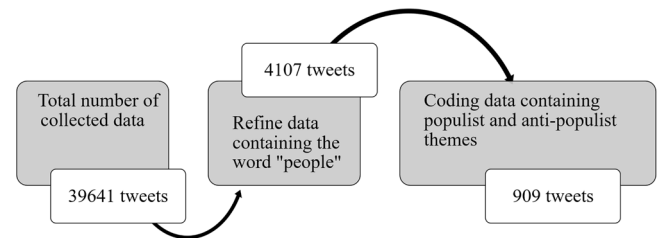
In a pure populist discursive strategy, the people are positioned as underdogs against the domestic power elite, which is accused of undermining popular sovereignty. This frames a state’s foreign policy as ‘elitist,’ driven by the interests of the elite without giving the common people any voice (Wojczewski, 2019). An elitist believes that people are dangerous, fraudulent, and inferior, and that the ‘elites’ are not only morally superior but also intellectually and culturally superior. As a result, elitists seek to give the elite exclusive or predominant control over politics while limiting the public’s role and participation in the political process (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). This approach views the general public as immature in the political arena.

Furthermore, populism opposes pluralism and promotes homogeneous “the people” rather than pluralism (Galston, 2018). The upsurge of populism is interconnected with anti-pluralism, globalization, and social and cultural matters, thereby posing potential threats to the fundamental principles of democracy, human rights, and pluralism (Donders, 2020). Pluralism holds that society is comprised of numerous social groups interconnected with diverse ideas and interests (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In this view, people are not considered a homogenous and unified group, but rather, their differences and diversity are acknowledged. Embracing pluralism involves recognizing the rights and roles of individuals in shaping their destinies and participating in political and social activities.

Methods and data

The primary objective of this study is to examine the characteristics of populism expressed by politicians on Twitter and to compare the features of Iranian populism across different categories of politicians, considering the influence of social media. Therefore, employing a mixed content analysis method will address the research requirements and help achieve the study’s objectives.

In contrast to the traditional emphasis on quantitative analysis in content analysis, this method is ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’ (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach aligns with the mixed methods approach (Creamer, 2017), as emphasized by Weber (1990), who stated that ‘the best content analytic studies utilize both qualitative and quantitative operations on texts.’ Within the mixed methods paradigm and based on data from Twitter, combined content analysis is performed in three main phases: 1. preparation, 2.

**Fig. 1** Steps to access the final data of the research.

organization, and 3. interpretation and presentation (Hamad et al., 2016).

In the initial phase, we formulated research goals and questions. In mixed methods research, quantitative and qualitative goals and questions are distinct and address various aspects of a phenomenon that are not yet fully understood. These questions can be answered using both numerical and narrative data (Tashakkori et al., 2020). Additionally, we selected the keyword “the people” based on the research questions to investigate Iranian populism on social media. Each tweet was treated as a unit of observation and analysis. Simultaneously, we developed the research conceptual framework by identifying the dimensions of populist individuals.

The study employed two variables—political orientation and the nature of political institutions—to differentiate the methods of populist construction among Iranian politicians. The first variable pertains to whether politicians are aligned with conservatism or reformism.¹ The second variable relates to the type of institutions to which politicians belong. In Iranian politics, governing institutions are broadly categorized into appointed institutions and elected institutions. Finally, based on the research goals and questions, we selected an ‘iterative sequential mixed design,’ which involves multiple quantitative and qualitative phases in a sequential research design (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2010).

In the second phase of the study, we determined the statistical population and sampling method. The statistical population included all tweets published on Twitter by official Iranian politicians, including the government, the judiciary, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Expediency Council, and other appointed institutions (such as the Imams of Friday prayers, the Guardian Council, etc.) from the beginning of their official presence until March 20, 2020.² For all user accounts except members of parliament, we used the ‘total population sampling’ method. Due to the large number of MPs and the disproportionate proportion of the data about the tweets related to them, we used the probabilistic sampling method in proportion to the total tweets each year.³

We identified the user accounts of Iranian politicians by connecting to the API of this social media platform and collected all relevant tweets using Academic Access. After gathering the tweets, we extracted those containing the word ‘people.’ We then conducted a three-step qualitative coding process—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—with a deductive approach based on a theoretical framework. Ultimately, we identified 909 tweets containing populist and anti-populist themes (Fig. 1).

In the third phase of the research, the findings are presented in the following sequence: Quan → Qual → Quan. During this phase, the validity and reliability of the findings were assessed. Because the data were collected partly through a census and partly through probabilistic methods, the results can be generalized to Iranian politicians on Twitter, ensuring external validity. For the qualitative coding phase, we evaluated intercoder reliability using Cohen’s Kappa coefficient rather than a simple

Table 2 Sub-dimensions of the pure people.

Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
Good people	51	22.57
We as servants of the people	53	23.45
Important people	60	26.55
People with the message, voice, and opinion	62	27.43
Total	226	100



محمدباقر قالیباف
@mb_ghalibaf

برای مردم اصلاح طلب و اصولگرا فرقی ندارد؛ آن‌ها می‌پسند چه کسی باعرضه است و چه کسی #بی‌عرضه. کسی از این تقسیم بندی ناراحت می‌شود که کارنامه اش از کار واقعی خالی است و می‌خواهد انتخابات عرصه رقابت بی‌عرضه‌ها و #یکجانشین‌ها شود!

Translate This Tweet



Mohammadbagher Ghalibaf; Appointed / Conservative
Member of Expediency Discernment Council

For the people, it makes no difference whether someone is a reformist or a fundamentalist; they ask who is corrupt and who is not. Only those who have no real achievements are unhappy with this division and want the elections to become .a competition between the corrupt and the mediocre

Fig. 2 Example of “People with the message”.

percentage agreement. Two independent coders examined a randomly selected subset of the coded tweets (specifically, 10% of the tweets) to assess reliability. This analysis yielded a Cohen’s Kappa value of 0.675, indicating substantial agreement between the coders. This method provides a more rigorous and widely accepted measure of reliability for the quantitative analysis of qualitative data.

Findings

In the findings phase, the results of qualitative coding are quantified, and the frequency of the dimensions is described. A significance test is then performed to evaluate differences between the dimensions. Following this, the quantitative results are analyzed qualitatively to provide a narrative report and an in-depth description of the dimensions. Finally, a quantitative approach is used to analyze the significance of differences in tweet frequency across the variables.

Quantitative and qualitative description of dimensions. The quantitative results of the coded data in this section have been analyzed using a narrative approach to describe the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the populist people constructed by Iranian politicians on Twitter.

The pure people. The concept of “pure people” in populist ideology refers to a homogeneous, unified, and oppressed group that a populist politician or movement claims to represent, voice,



دکتر محمود احمدی نژاد
@Ahmadinejad_fa

همه باید بدانند که صاحبان اصلی #انقلاب، مردم هستند و هرکس به گونه ای عمل کند که مردم راضی نباشند و یا نظر و خواست آنان در مدیریت کشور ملاحظه و اعمال نشود، همان #ضد_انقلاب است.
#تالش

Translate This Tweet



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; Appointed / Conservative
Member of Expediency Discernment Council

Everyone should know that the main owners of the revolution are the people, and anyone who acts in such a way that the people are not satisfied or their opinions and wishes are not considered and applied in the management of .the country is counter-revolution

Talesh#

Fig. 3 Example of “The important people”.

and defend. In Iranian populism, the “pure people” encompass four sub-dimensions: “the people with the message, voice, and opinion,” “the important people,” “we as servants of the people,” and “the good people” (Table 2). These sub-dimensions are explained below.

The most frequent tweets about the “pure people” focus on “the people with messages, voices, and opinions” (for example, see Fig. 2). In these tweets, Iranian populism aims to blur the distinction between itself and the people, presenting itself as their true voice. Populist politicians depict the people as having diverse demands, which they claim to address. They assert that they alone can recognize and fulfill these demands, creating a parallel between the people’s demands and their own desires. Additionally, these tweets portray the people as a shapeless group with no specific representation, stressing the need for their voices to be heard, while politicians claim to be their voice.

Another way the “pure people” are constructed is through emphasizing “the important people,” highlighting their significance and high status in politics and society (for example, see Fig. 3). These tweets emphasize the importance of recognizing people as key subjects. Sanctification, which highlights the omnipotence of the people and their dependency on everything, is a prevalent concept in these tweets. Sanctification involves elevating people to a high position, aligning with them, and considering the state as their property, with politicians serving as their executive arm. However, this sanctification can also create barriers to political and social participation. Another form of sanctification is found in the discourse of ‘blessing’ and “guardian of blessing” (vali-e ne’mat). Populist people are portrayed as omnipotent subjects, implying that everything should align with their opinions, and politicians should conform to their will. Following these “omnipotent people” when their will is unrecognizable and immeasurable equates to following the politician’s will. A key feature of this sanctification is “presence without agency”.

Another approach to constructing the importance of the people in politicians’ tweets involves emphasizing their role as “servants



حسن روحانی
@Rouhani_ir

همه مسئولان و کارگزاران نظام باید یادشان باشد و برای خود تکرار کنند که صاحب این کشور مردم هستند و همه باید نوکر مردم باشیم.

Translate This Tweet



Hassan Rouhani; Elective / Reformist
President of Iran

All officials and agents of the system should remember and repeat to themselves that the people own this country and we should all be the servants of the people.

Fig. 4 Example of “We as servants of the people”.



Mahmoud Vaezi
@Dr_Vaezi

حضور گسترده و چشمگیر مردم روزه دار و شریف ایران در راهپیمایی روز #قدس که به نماد مقاومت در برابر ظلم و اشغالگری در جهان بدل شده، حقیقتاً مثال زدنی و باشکوه است. این مردم آگاه، معتقد و آرمانخواه را باید قدر نهاد و باور داشت که هیچ افتخار و عبادتی بالاتر از خدمتگزاری به این مردم نیست.

Translate This Tweet



Mahmoud Vaezi; Elective / Reformist
Chief of the President's Office

The large and impressive presence of the fasting and noble people of Iran in the #Quds Day march, which has become a symbol of resistance against oppression and occupation in the world, is truly exemplary and glorious. These knowledgeable, believing, and idealistic people should be appreciated and believed. that there is no higher honor and worship than serving these people.

Fig. 5 Example of “The good people”.

of the people” (khadem-e mardom) and portraying the people as subjects in need of “service” (for example, see Fig. 4). In this context, the politician aims to show that their role is to serve the people. Some tweets adopt a negative tone, suggesting that the politician is merely “the people’s servant,” while others imply they are working against the people. The phrase ‘service passion and not power thirst’ captures the sentiment of these tweets, reflecting both the positive view of the people as “subjects in need of service” and the negative aspect of “thirst for power”.

In some tweets, positive characteristics and values are attributed to the “good people” Here, the people are depicted as

Table 3 Sub-dimensions of the exclusive people.

Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
Real people	12	9.09
Actual representative of the people	16	12.12
Entrusting to the people	21	15.91
Pro-people	83	62.88
Total	132	100



محسن رضایی
@ir_rezaee

غرب چهل سال است که پشت دیوار انقلابی مردم # ایران متوقف مانده که علت آن حضور جدی مردم به رغم مشاهدهی همهی مشکلات در چهل سال گذشته است.

Translate This Tweet



Mohsen Rezaee; Appointed / Conservative
Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council

For forty years, the West has been stuck behind the wall of the Iranian people's revolution, and the reason for this is the lserious participation by the people, despite observing all the problems in the past forty years.

Fig. 6 Example of “The pro-people”.

a homogeneous, oppressed, and modest group that is generally virtuous, with mostly positive traits and free from vices (for example, see Fig. 5). Some tweets directly link the people's goodness to their alignment with politicians' opinions, portraying them as ‘good’ when they agree with the speaker or, conversely, as agreeing with the speaker if they are ‘good.’ Many tweets describe the people as “knowledgeable and punctual” because they support politicians' thoughts and symbols.

The exclusive people. The concept that populist politicians represent “the Exclusive people” reflects the characteristic of exclusivism in populist ideology. These tweets demonstrate that the populist politician is the sole representative of the people, and the term “the people” exclusively refers to the populist politician. In Iranian populism, the exclusive people have four dimensions: “the pro-people,” “entrusting to the people,” “actual representative of the people,” and “the real people” (Table 3). The following provides a description of these sub-dimensions.

The most common theme among these aspects is the “pro-people” tweets (for example, see Fig. 6). In other words, Iranian politicians on Twitter frequently construct an image of popular support by emphasizing that the people align with them and their views. Gaining legitimacy and demonstrating acceptance are crucial for portraying the people as supportive. The people are depicted as actively engaging in political and social matters, fully aligning with the speaker. These communications aim to show that the people wholeheartedly support the politician, their group, or institution. References to public events, media reactions, and street interactions act as symbols of endorsement and satisfaction for the politician. Additionally, the phrase “the nation always on



KHAMENEI.IR | فارسی
@Khamenei_fa

برادران و خواهرانی که این سخن را خواهید شنید: زمام بهبود اوضاع کشورمان دست مردم و بخصوص جوانهاست. همه چیز در سایه عزم، تصمیم و بصیرت مردم میتواند در مجرای صحیح قرار بگیرد و کشور را به نقطه مطلوب خودش برساند. اینکه ما میگوییم ظرفیتهای داخلی را باید جدی گرفت از این جهت است.

Translate This Tweet



Ali Khamenei; Appointed/Conservative
Leader of Islamic Republic of Iran

Brothers and sisters who are listening to these words: the reins of improving the situation in our country are in the hands of the people, especially the youth. Everything can be put on the right path under the shadow of the determination, decision, and insight of the people and bring the country to its desired point. When we say we must take domestic capacities seriously, it is for this reason.

Fig. 7 Example of “Entrusting to the people”.



حسن روحانی
@Rouhani_ir

برخی فکر می‌کنند، اگر کسی مخالف دولت شد، خیلی شهادت دارد. دولت نماینده مردم است و هر چه افتخار دارد از آن مردم است.

Translate This Tweet



Hassan Rouhani; Elective / Reformist
President of Iran

Some people think that it takes a lot of courage to oppose the government. However, the government represents the people, and any honor it has comes from the people.

Fig. 8 Example of “Actual representative of the people”.

the scene” (mellat-e hamishe dar sahne) is used to further emphasize the pro-people narrative. This phrase suggests that the nation is perpetually present and ready to demonstrate the social power of political groups when needed.

Some tweets refer to the concept of “entrusting to the people” (for example, see Fig. 7). In this context, the people are seen as a unified group to whom all matters belong and should be entrusted. Entrusting matters to the people implies guiding them in the direction intended by the speaker. When a politician discusses giving matters to the people, it is implied that these matters will align with the speaker’s desired direction.



Saeed Jalili | سعید جلیلی
@DrSaeedJalili

وقتی عده ای به خیابان می آیند و برای جنایتکاری مثل رضاخان ابراز احساسات می کنند، جای تردید باقی نمی ماند که این حرکت نه تنها برای مردم نیست بلکه یک #ارتجاع آشکار است و باید در برابر آن ایستاد.

در باطل بودن حرکتی که دشمنان مردم مثل ترامپ را به وجد می آورد نباید تردید کرد.

Translate This Tweet



Saeed Jalili; Appointed/Conservative
Member of the Expediency Discernment Council

When some people take to the streets and express their emotions for a criminal like Reza Khan, there is no doubt that this movement is not only not for the people, but also a clear #reversal, and we must stand against it.

There should be no doubt about the futility of a movement that excites enemies of the people like Trump.

Fig. 9 Example of “The real people”.

Exclusivity in defining the representative people, within the category of “actual representative of the people,” is considered from two perspectives: First, it is shown that the speaker is the sole representative who effectively represents the people. Second, it is demonstrated that the true representative of the people, who can address their main and actual demands, is exclusively the speaker (for example, see Fig. 8). In the first perspective, the speaker presents themselves as the only one who can represent and speak for the people. In the second perspective, the speaker views ‘being a real representative of the people’ as fulfilling and supporting their actual demands.

The “real people” sub-dimension has fewer tweets (for example, see Fig. 9). These tweets attempt to identify real people by describing their behaviors and characteristics. They also distinguish groups outside the “people” category, referring to them as “non-people”. The “people” in this context are those who uphold the status quo and support the speaker’s views and approaches. Conversely, “non-people” are those who challenge the status quo and may be labeled as “disturbers of order” or “rioters”. This method of categorizing people is more frequently observed during times of crisis and discontent.

The victim people. Constructing people as victims is another aspect of Iranian politicians’ tweets. In these tweets, the people are depicted as victims and oppressed individuals with low agency, subjected to abuse, oppression, or deception by others. Victimhood in Iranian populism can be broken down into four sub-dimensions: the suffering subject, people injected with hope/despair, people subject to deception, and protester people (Table 4). The following is a description of these sub-dimensions.

In the first category of the victim people dimension, individuals are depicted as “suffering subjects” who face numerous challenges and endure suffering without agency (for example, see Fig. 10). These tweets illustrate an awareness of the people’s suffering, efforts to alleviate that suffering, and acknowledgment of other

Table 4 Sub-dimensions of the victim people.

Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
Protester people	19	10.61
People subject to deception	33	18.43
People injected with hope/despair	55	30.73
Suffering subject	72	40.22
Total	179	100



سید فرید موسوی
@sfaridmousavi

توصیف غیرواقعی #اقتصاد کشور توسط تیم اقتصادی
#دولت، آن هم در شرایطی که مردم به عینه مشکلات
را می بینند و نخبه پنه تحمل می کنند، جز زوال سرمایه
اجتماعی و تعمیق شکاف دولت - ملت چه عایدی دارد؟
با مردم صادقانه گفتگو کنید و از آن ها کمک بخواهید.

Translate This Tweet



Seyed Farid Mousavi; Elective / Reformist
Representative of the Parliament

Describing the unrealistic state of the country's economy by the government's economic team, especially when people see and endure the problems firsthand, only leads to the decline of social capital and deepening the gap between the government and the people. What benefit does it have? Have an honest conversation with the people and ask for their help.

Fig. 10 Example of "Suffering subject".

parties' responsibilities in creating these problems. This strategy portrays suffering individuals as having issues that the politician recognizes, sympathizes with, and supports. In contrast, the other party is depicted as ignorant and inattentive to this suffering. Another approach involves assigning responsibility for these crises to the other party. The politician is positioned as someone who empathizes with these problems and represents the people's voice. From this supportive stance, the politician holds the other party accountable for the situation and demands resolution.

Some tweets portray "the people injected with hope/despair," depicting them as passive recipients of hope or despair (for example, see Fig. 11). The politician appears to protect the people's hope while highlighting factors that contribute to their hope or discouragement. Additionally, the politician describes how the people's hope is negatively impacted by external actions and behaviors, attributing increased frustration and discouragement to these influences.

In other tweets, people are portrayed as "the people subject to deception," as involuntary victims of deceit by others (for example, see Fig. 12). These tweets either accuse others of deceiving the people or express confidence that "the nation will not be deceived by the other". The politician is depicted as free from such deceit, offering the right choices. If the people reject the deception of others, they align with the politician's



Ali Rabiei
@AliRabiei_Iran

من از جامعه ناامید و مأیوس می ترسم. چالش های
بزرگ را در جامعه ناامید نمی توان تدبیر کرد. نباید
اجازه دهیم مردم مایوس شوند.

Translate This Tweet



Ali Rabiei; Elective / Reformist
Government Spokesperson

"I am afraid of a hopeless and despairing society. Big challenges cannot be addressed in a society that has lost hope. We must not let people become despondent.

Fig. 11 Example of "People injected with hope/despair".



اسحاق جهانگیری
@Eshaq_jahangiri

مردم عزیز هوشیار باشید؛ میخواهید فردای فرزندان شما
چگونه باشد؟ #محدودیت می خواهید یا #آزادی؟
توسعه می خواهید یا آشفستگی؟
#جهانگیری
#انتخابات

Translate This Tweet



Eshagh Jahangiri; Elective / Reformist
Vice President

Dear people, be vigilant; how do you want the future of your children to be? Do you want restrictions or freedom? Do you want development or turmoil?

Fig. 12 Example of "The people subject to deception".

perspective. This aspect of Iranian populism reflects a form of absolutism, suggesting that the correct opinion or action rests solely with the politician.

A smaller set of tweets depicts people as "the protester people" challenging the status quo (for example, see Fig. 13). In this category, the politician conveys the people's demands and protests regarding the current situation or rival politicians. The politician uses the language of the people and positions themselves as a figure amplifying their voices to the ruling elites. They appear as powerful figures aware of the protests, aligning themselves with the people and confronting the elites responsible for the current situation, while emphasizing the need for greater attention to resolving the issues. people's protests.

The other antagonist people. The predominant theme in the populist rhetoric of Iranian politicians on Twitter is the construction of "the other-antagonist people". This aligns with the central tenet of populism, which involves positioning the "pure people" against a "corrupt other". In Iranian populism, the



همایون هاشمی
@homayonhashemi

عمده #تجمعات اخیر در شهرهای مختلف جنبه غیر سیاسی دارد لذا #دولت، مسئولان و #حکومت می بایست با رویکرد #غیرسیاسی به آنها بپردازند زیرا #مردم #مطالبات اساسی در زمینه #بیکاری فرزندان، #فقر ناشی از بیکاری و #رکود دارند و احساس می کنند هیچ مقام مسئولی #صدای آنها را نمی شنود.

Translate This Tweet



Homayoun Hashemi; Elective / Reformist
Representative of the Parliament

The recent major protests in various cities have a non-political aspect, so the government, officials, and authorities must deal with them with a non-political approach because people have fundamental demands regarding their children's unemployment, poverty caused by unemployment, and recession, and they feel that no responsible authority is listening to them.

Fig. 13 Example of "The protester people".

Table 5 Sub-dimensions of the other-antagonist people.

Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
Foreigner against the people	37	14.12
People against rival	43	16.41
Anti-foreignness	49	18.70
Rival against the people	133	50.76
Total	262	100

"other-antagonist people" can be categorized into four sub-dimensions: "rival against the people," "anti-foreignness," "the people against rival," and "foreigner against the people" (see Table 5). These categories are based on the type of other being represented (internal/external) and the relationship between the people and the other (people against other/other against people).

In more than half of the tweets, the theme of "rival against the people" is discussed, with the politician expressing support for the people against the harmful actions and intentions of internal rivals (for example, see Fig. 14). The politician positions themselves as informed while portraying the people as unaware of the actions of these internal rivals. Some tweets emphasize transparency, conveying the message that "the people are not alien" and revealing truths that internal rivals aim to conceal from them.

The tweets also focus on the concept of "anti-foreignness," portraying the people as a united front against foreign countries, labeled as the "enemy" (doshman) of the nation (for example, see Fig. 15). These tweets assert that the people are aware of the malicious intentions of these foreign entities and cannot be deceived by them. Notably, in these tweets, the 'foreign other' is constructed differently from the typical definition in populist ideology, where the "other" is usually the internal elite. Here, the politician presents the people as a homogeneous group opposing the external "other".



جمشید انصاری
@jamshid_ansari

اینکه به رئیس جمهور منتخب مردم تبریک نمی گویند و او را با لحن غیر مودبانه مورد خطاب قرار میدهند یعنی اینکه خیلی از مردم عصبانی و ناراحتند!!

Translate This Tweet



Jamshid Ansari; Elective / Reformist
Assistant to the President

Not congratulating the elected president and addressing him disrespectfully means they are very angry and upset with the people.

Fig. 14 Example of "Rival against the people".



غلامعلی حدادعادل
@HaddadAdel_ir

به وزیر امور خارجه امریکا: ۲۸ مرداد نزدیک است و مردم ایران شمارا هم در تاریخ دیروز کشور خود شناخته اند و هم شاهد رفتار امروز شما در جهان هستند. تنها فایده حرف های شما این است که مردم ایران را علیه امریکا متحدتر خواهد کرد.

Translate This Tweet



Gholamali Hadad Adel; Appointed / Conservative
Member of the Expediency Discernment Council

To the US Secretary of State: August nineteen is approaching, and the Iranian people are well aware of you both in their country's history and in observing your current behavior in the world. The only benefit of your words is to unite the Iranian people against America.

Fig. 15 Example of "Anti-foreignness".

Another category of tweets represents "the people against a rival (internal other)" (for example, see Fig. 16). In these tweets, politicians use language that portrays themselves as representatives of the people. They advocate for addressing internal rivals and seek to distinguish these rivals from the people. Many of these tweets frame the people as supportive of the politician and opposed to their internal rivals while also being aware of potential threats from others.

The tweets expressing the "foreigner against the people" sub-dimension had the lowest frequency compared to other tweets that antagonized the people (for example, see Fig. 17). These tweets depict outsiders attempting to harm the people in various ways. The people are portrayed as a unified, oppressed, and resilient group that has successfully overcome these external pressures. In these tweets, the outsiders consistently fail in their attempts to undermine the people.



محمد رضا بادامچی
@Badamchi_Media

مردم در انتخابات مجلس آینده به #تندروها رای نخواهد داد. صحبت‌های تندروها دور از انصاف و واقعیت است. حتما #مردم با علم به این موضوع به این افراد رای نمی‌دهند. مردم عملکردها را می‌بینند و براساس آن رای می‌دهند. باید مقایسه‌ای بین عملکرد ما در مجلس دهم با مجالس گذشته صورت بگیرد.

Translate This Tweet



Mohammadreza Badamchi; Elective / Reformist
Representative of Parliament

People will not vote for the hardliners in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The hardliners' rhetoric is unfair and unrealistic. Surely, the people will not vote for them knowing this. The people judge based on actions, and accordingly, they vote. A comparison should be made between our performance in the tenth parliament and previous parliaments.

Fig. 16 Example of "People against rival".



محمد باقر قالیباف
@mb_ghalibaf

تاریخ گواه جنایات آمریکا علیه مردم ایران است؛ یک روز با سرنگونی هواپیمای مسافربری و امروز با وضع تحریم‌های غیر انسانی و اخلاف در معیشت مردم.

تنها راه حفظ استقلال و عزت ملی در مقابل این شیطان، کار و کار و کار است.

Translate This Tweet



Mohammadbager Ghalibaf; Appointed / Conservative
Member of Expediency Discernment Council

The history bears witness to the crimes of America against the people of Iran; one day with the downing of the passenger plane #IR۶۵۵ and today with inhumane sanctions and disruption of people's livelihood.

The only way to preserve independence and national dignity against this devil is through hard work and perseverance.

Fig. 17 Example of "Foreigner against the people".

The plural and role-playing people. The tweets analyzed in this study show that Iranian politicians frequently construct anti-populist people by portraying them as a diverse group with important roles in political and social processes. This collection of

Table 6 Sub-dimensions of the plural and role-playing people.

Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
The need to communicate with people	13	12.15
People's agency	13	12.15
People with roles	14	13.08
People with rights	67	62.62
Total	107	100



Hosamoddin Ashena
@hesamodin1

لزوم گفتگو با مردم؛

لازم است قبل از اجرای هر طرحی پیرامون اصلاح یارانه حامل‌های انرژی، طرح مسئله‌ای از طرف دولت برای مردم در این باره صورت گیرد و دولت به تبیین طرح مد نظر خود بپردازد.

Translate This Tweet



Hesamoddin Ashena; Elective / Reformist
Head of the Center for Strategic Research of the Presidency

:The necessity of dialogue with the people

Before implementing any plan regarding the reform of energy subsidy carriers, it is necessary for the government to present a plan to the people on this matter and explain its intended plan

Fig. 18 Example of "The need to communicate with people".

tweets can be broken down into four sub-dimensions: "people with rights," "people with roles," "people's agency," and "the need to communicate with people" (Table 6).

The tweets in this category emphasize the importance of recognizing and respecting people's rights (for example, see Figs. 18–21). The politician acknowledges and advocates for this right, representing a pluralistic society that values diversity. Acknowledging the right to be different promotes acceptance of pluralism in society. Therefore, discussing and advocating for people's rights is considered an anti-populist approach.

Politicians also depict individuals as playing a role in the political and social arena. This approach involves positioning people alongside the state as a factor that influences and plays a role in societal processes. This perspective assumes both the agency of society members and their diversity. Highlighting the collaboration between the state and the people to address issues is a common theme in this context.

The immature people. Elitism is an uncommon anti-populist approach to forming public opinion and is only used by a few politicians in a small number of tweets (for example, see Fig. 22). This infrequency suggests that the Iranian politician rarely employs this strategy on social media platforms, which have a wide-ranging audience. The limited use of elitism in these tweets



حسن روحانی
@Rouhani_ir

دولت، نظام و دینی که در اعماق وجود همه مردم وجود دارد متعلق به مردم است و این مردم باید به صحنه بیایند تا مشکلات حل و فصل شود.

Translate This Tweet



Hassan Rouhani; Elective / Reformist
President of Iran

The government, system, and religion that exist at the depths of everyone's being belong to the people, and these people must come to the scene to solve the problems

Fig. 19 Example of "People's agency".



Mahmoud Vaezi
@Dr_Vaezi

دیروز جلسه بررسی عملکرد دولت در خصوص حقوق شهروندی در همایشی با حضور اقشار مردم و در" اتاق شیشه ای" وبا شفافیت مطرح شد. مطمئن باشید دولت دوازدهم بر پیمانی که بامردم بسته، باقی مانده و خواهدماند و مطمئن هستم همانگونه که رئیس محترم جمهور فرمودند دولت و مردم با هم این راه را ادامه خواهند داد

Translate This Tweet



Mahmoud Vaezi; Elective / Reformist
Chief of the President's Office

Yesterday, a session was held to review the government's performance regarding citizens' rights in a conference with the participation of various segments of the People, with transparency and openness, in a 'glass room.' Rest assured that the government will remain committed to the agreement made with the people, and as the honorable President stated, the government and the people will continue this path together.

Fig. 20 Example of "People with roles".

depicts an audience that is emotional and immature, influenced by the media, and unlikely to be swayed by inaccurate information.

Quantitative overview of findings. According to the theoretical framework, populist individuals exhibit four distinct yet interconnected dimensions. Each dimension contains specific sub-dimensions, which were identified through a multi-step coding process. By quantifying the results of the qualitative coding, we obtained the frequency and percentage of each dimension and sub-dimension (see Table 7).



محمود صادقی
@mah_sadeghi

اگر اعتراضات مردمی سازماندهی هم شده باشد، مسئولان دولتی باید پاسخگو باشند. به جای پاسخگویی، به تئوری توطئه پناه نبریم. برگزاری راهپیمایی بدون حمل سلاح از حقوق اساسی مردم است. دولت باید در عمل به حقوق اساسی مردم احترام بگذارد نه در شعار و ایجاد تشکیلات غیرضرور معاونت حقوق شهروندی.

Translate This Tweet



Mahmoud Sadeghi; Elective / Reformist
Representative of the Parliament

If there are organized popular protests, government officials must be accountable. Instead of conspiracy theories, we should respect people's fundamental rights. Holding unarmed rallies is a basic right of the people. The government must respect people's fundamental rights in practice, not just in slogans and unnecessary citizen rights organizations

Fig. 21 Example of "People with rights".



Hosamoddin Ashena
@hesamodin1

در این حالت، صداهای پوشالی رسانه های جدید و اتاق های پژواک بر مبنای باورهای پیشداورانه فعال می شوند. طنز تلخ عصر اطلاعات این است که مردم خیلی کمتر به نتیجه گیری های عقلانی مبتنی بر اطلاعات واقعی متکی هستند، و در عوض به داشتن واکنش های غریزی و پر از تعصب رجعت می کنند.

Translate This Tweet



Hesamoddin Ashna; Elective / Reformist
Head of the Center for Strategic Research of the Presidency

In this situation, the echo chambers of new media and propaganda rooms become active based on the preconceived beliefs of their proponents. The bitter irony of the information age is that people rely far less on rational conclusions based on actual information, and instead resort to instinctive and biased reactions

Fig. 22 Example of "the immature people".

Based on Table 7, the majority of tweets centered around the concepts of "other-antagonist people" and "immature people," with the latter representing only 0.33% of the total tweets, indicating the lowest frequency. This suggests that the strategy of portraying "other-antagonist people" is prominently utilized among Iranian politicians. Among the sub-dimensions, the

Table 7 Dimensions and sub-dimensions of the populist and anti-populist people.

Dimensions	Frequency (%)	Sub-dimensions	Frequency (%)
Populist people			
Pure people	226 (24.86%)	Good people	51 (5.61%)
		We as servants of the people	53 (5.83%)
		Important people	60 (6.60%)
		People with the message, voice, and opinion	62 (6.82%)
people Exclusive	132 (14.52%)	Real people	12 (1.32%)
		Actual representative of the people	16 (1.76%)
		Entrusting to the people	21 (2.31%)
		Pro-people	83 (9.13%)
Victim people	179 (19.69%)	Protester people	19 (2.09%)
		People subject to deception	33 (3.63%)
		People injected with hope/despair	55 (6.05%)
		Suffering subject	72 (7.92%)
Other-antagonists people	262 (28.82%)	Foreigner against the people	37 (4.07%)
		People against rival	43 (4.73%)
		Anti-foreignness	49 (5.39%)
		Rival against the people	133 (14.6%)
Anti-populist people			
Plural and role-playing people	107 (11.77%)	The need to communicate with people	13 (1.43%)
		People's agency	13 (1.43%)
		People with roles	14 (1.54%)
		People with rights	67 (7.37%)
Immature people	3 (0.33%)	Immature people	3 (0.33%)
Total	909 (100%)		909 (100%)

Table 8 Freq. and freq. percentage based on political orientation and appointed/elective of politicians.

Dimensions	Political orientation		Elective/appointed	
	Reformist Frequency (%)	Conservative Frequency (%)	Elective Frequency (%)	Appointed Frequency (%)
Populist people				
Pure	130* (25.84%)	96* (23.65%)	135** (24.59%)	91** (25.28%)
Exclusive	66 (13.12%)	66 (16.26%)	71 (12.93%)	61 (16.94%)
Victim	105* (20.87%)	74* (18.23%)	114** (20.77%)	65** (18.06%)
Other-antagonist	119 (23.66%)	143 (32.22%)	144 (26.23%)	118 (32.78%)
Anti-populist people				
Plural and Role-playing	80** (15.90%)	27** (6.65%)	82** (14.94%)	25** (6.94%)
Immature	3 (0.60%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.55%)	0 (0%)
Total	503 (100%)	406 (100%)	549 (100%)	360 (100%)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

portrayal of internal rivals in opposition to the people has been more frequent compared to other sub-dimensions.

Table 8 displays the tweet frequency in each dimension categorized by the political orientation of users and whether they are elected or appointed.

Based on Table 8, a non-parametric Binomial Test was conducted to analyze significant differences between the frequency of tweets from reformist/conservative and elective/appointed groups in each dimension of populist and anti-populist categories. The results, with a 95% confidence level, indicate a notable difference between the appointed/conservative and elective/reformist groups in the construction of “pure people,” “victim people,” and “plural and role-playing people”. However, the difference between these groups in the construction of “exclusive people” and “other-antagonist people” was not significant. This suggests that reformists and those from elected positions more frequently utilize strategies associated with “pure people,” “victim people,” and “pluralistic and role-playing people” compared to conservatives and appointees.

Conclusion

The concept of populism initially gained traction during the early stages of state-building in the Middle East. However, contemporary politics often criticizes it as being anti-democratic and non-liberal. Many studies have employed populism as a lens to analyze political developments in the Middle East, particularly in Iran (Harris, 2017). This study aimed to explore how Iranian politicians use populism on social media within the theoretical framework of populism. It focused on how politicians construct and portray “the people” and how this portrayal aligns with populist ideology. A typology of populist and anti-populist constructs was developed to clarify the conceptual boundaries and sub-dimensions of each dimension.

Based on the research findings, the primary trend in Iranian populism on Twitter is characterized by conservatism and power-driven attitudes. Additionally, the dominant discourse in this type of populism revolves around maintaining the status quo, and the primary method of defining the people involves creating an “other” as an antagonist. Iranian politicians have played a key role

in shaping this “other,” which extends beyond just foreign entities to include domestic and rival political groups, as noted by some researchers studying populism in Iran (Ehteshami, 2002; Kermani, 2022; Selvik, 2018). The article delves into different forms of othering by Iranian politicians. The findings revealed that Iranian politicians employ strategies beyond intimidating the other. They also depict the people’s opposition to the other and place them in the politician’s camp, creating a form of other-antagonism. In essence, the politicians portray the people’s support and their alignment with the politician’s views, as well as the people’s desire for the politician and his political approaches. These findings build on Selvik’s (2018) results and demonstrate that othering is not limited to the discourse of specific figures, like the Supreme Leader, but is a prevalent feature of populist discourse among Iranian politicians.

When considering political tendencies, it should be noted that theoretical views suggest that liberal and evolutionary populism place more emphasis on antagonizing others. In contrast, organic and conservative populism focuses more on a pure and homogeneous populace and uses fewer strategies that antagonize others (Mackert, 2018). Contrary to these views, the research findings indicate that Iranian reformists, who are often marginalized due to Iran’s political structure, are more inclined to create a united and homogeneous populace. On the other hand, conservatives, who tend to uphold the existing state of affairs, are more likely to employ tactics that create an “us versus them” dynamic. These results suggest that the image of the populace depicted by conservatives and officials is more populist compared to the portrayal by reformists and voters.

The use of populist strategies in constructing “the people” has persisted in Iran since the 1979 revolution. The results of this study align with perspectives that highlight the continuity of populism in post-revolutionary Iran (Bajoghli, 2019; Dorraj, 2005; Holliday, 2016), demonstrating that all political groups still employ populism as a strategic tool. Although populism alone cannot fully explain the political and social dynamics in post-revolutionary Iran (Harris, 2017), its thin-centered nature (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) is evident in Iranian politics, serving as an auxiliary tool across various political factions. Moreover, the pragmatic populism observed at the inception of the 1979 revolution (Abrahamian, 1993) continues to resonate in the populist discourse of the fifth decade of the Islamic Republic”.

Furthermore, the construction of the people by Iranian politicians on Twitter is more populist, contrary to views that emphasize the duality of Iran’s political structure and the simultaneous presence of populism and elitism (Boroujerdi, 2001). This can be attributed to the direct communication nature of these media, without mediating and confrontational tools, which aligns with the communication strategies of populist leaders (Dittrich, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). Additionally, the use of colloquial and emotional language, less logical reasoning, and the high mobilizing power of social media have led to more populist methods on Twitter (Manucci, 2017).

An important aspect of Iranian politicians’ presence on Twitter, despite the platform being officially filtered in Iran, is that this act itself can be considered a populist move. By circumventing state-imposed restrictions, politicians project an image of directness, authenticity, and detachment from traditional media gatekeepers. This aligns with common populist communication strategies, where leaders claim to bypass intermediaries to speak “directly” to the people. Thus, the medium not only facilitates populist discourse but also reinforces the populist image of the politicians using it.

This article delves into the concept of “the people” and its usage on the Twitter platform to offer a deeper understanding of how Iranian politicians employ populism. The construction of

“the people” reveals the stance of each political group on public will and their position relative to their rivals. These findings provide a toolkit for identifying the diverse ways in which Iranian politicians leverage the concept of “the people”.

Additionally, applying this framework to other theocratic or authoritarian regimes can help assess the broader applicability of these findings. The analytical framework developed in this study, which identifies distinct dimensions of the “populist people” (including Pure, Exclusive, Victim, and Other-antagonist) and the “anti-populist people” (including Plural, Role-playing, and Immature), provides a precise and generalizable tool for analyzing how politicians construct this key concept in non-democratic political settings.

This research demonstrates how diverse political groups with varying orientations (reformist and conservative, appointed and elected) employ a range of populist strategies to advance their objectives and establish discursive dominance. Consequently, the findings not only deepen our understanding of political dynamics in Iran but also lay the groundwork for comparative studies on populism in similar political systems. Furthermore, by examining the use of the concept of “the people” on the social media platform Twitter, this study explores the role of social media in shaping and reinforcing populist discourses within these regimes. Given the increasing importance of such platforms for direct political communication and the unmediated dissemination of populist messages, this research offers valuable insights into how these tools facilitate political mobilization and the creation of social cleavages in authoritarian systems.

While this study focused on populist discourse among Iranian politicians, future research could extend this analysis by examining the populist rhetoric of Iranian opposition figures on Twitter. Comparing how opposition actors construct “the people” versus how state officials and mainstream politicians do so could offer deeper insights into the role of populism in Iran’s fragmented political landscape. This approach would further clarify whether populism functions similarly among all political actors or if there are structural differences between how different factions employ it as a rhetorical strategy.

Ultimately, by presenting a rich case study and developing a cohesive theoretical framework, this research contributes to the broader academic literature on populism and illustrates how this “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) is employed across diverse political contexts by actors with differing aims.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Notes

- 1 The variables of political orientation fall into two categories: Eslahtalab and Osulgara. These two groups in the second period of the Islamic Republic (1989–2020) are known as the two main factions in the country. In the theoretical literature, Eslahtalab groups can be considered as groups with reformist ideas, and Osulgara groups can be regarded as close to conservative views.
- 2 After the parliamentary elections in Iran on March 20, 2020, the political system became more uniform, and reformist political groups had a limited role in the political system.
- 3 In the initial sampling stage, 508 tweets were selected using Cochran’s formula to achieve a 99% confidence level. In the subsequent stage, the sampled tweets were distributed proportionally based on the total number of tweets for each year, maintaining their chronological order.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study did not involve direct interaction with human participants or the collection of personally identifiable information. It was based solely on publicly available data from Iranian politicians’ Twitter accounts. According to the ethical guidelines of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and in compliance with national regulations, formal ethical approval was not required for this type of study. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent revisions.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not applicable to this study, as all data were obtained from publicly accessible social media content (Twitter), voluntarily posted by users in the public domain. No private or personally identifiable information was collected, and no direct interaction with individuals occurred.

Additional information

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