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Tweet to Follow, Tweet to Lead: Social Media Portrayal of Leadership Styles Among Canadian Mayors

Introduction

How well do municipal leaders engage with their constituents? The municipal level has the most direct impact on the public's everyday lives, but we know very little about that relationship. We address this by examining leadership styles through the medium of Twitter communication, focusing on non-election years.

Social media has become standard for many politicians, especially after Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign.¹ But studies of social media engagement largely focus on election campaigns. During political campaigns, Twitter users tend to want to interact with politicians more than politicians interact with them.² But a campaign is more about a marketing effort than about actual governing. While much interest is drawn into the permanent campaign and political marketing,³ other studies focus on how politicians brand themselves and interact with the public outside of campaigns.⁴ Political engagement outside of campaigns can identify what posture political leaders assume during the more "normal" context of a governing.

We base our analysis on Henneberg's typology of leadership style,⁵ based on two dimensions: the ability to lead and the ability to follow. The ability to lead refers to convincing others, or at least trying to. The ability to follow refers to soliciting and collecting input from the public, i.e., being more responsive. The typology produces four types (see Table 1). We examine if mayors can distinguish themselves along these types based on how they communicate on Twitter.

Research Question:

Do mayoral leadership styles affect political engagement on Twitter?

Table 1. Henneberg's typology of leadership styles⁵

Leadership	Convinced ideologist	Relationship builder
	Emphasis on promoting an ideology, or agenda, rather than acknowledging the public's priorities.	Eagerly engages with public, while trying to advance a particular agenda, often through engagement with certain key stakeholders.
Responsiveness	Political lightweight	Tactical populist
	Does not follow any strategy, does not promote any agenda, and not attentive to public mood.	Emphasis on observing trends in public opinion rather than promoting a particular agenda.

Methods

We selected at random a list of 10 mayors from Canada's largest cities. For each mayor, we extracted 20 random Tweets from 2011 to 2018 and coded each for various measures in order to run three separate tests.

First, Tweets were coded along two dimensions to determine each mayor's general score according to the Henneberg typology:

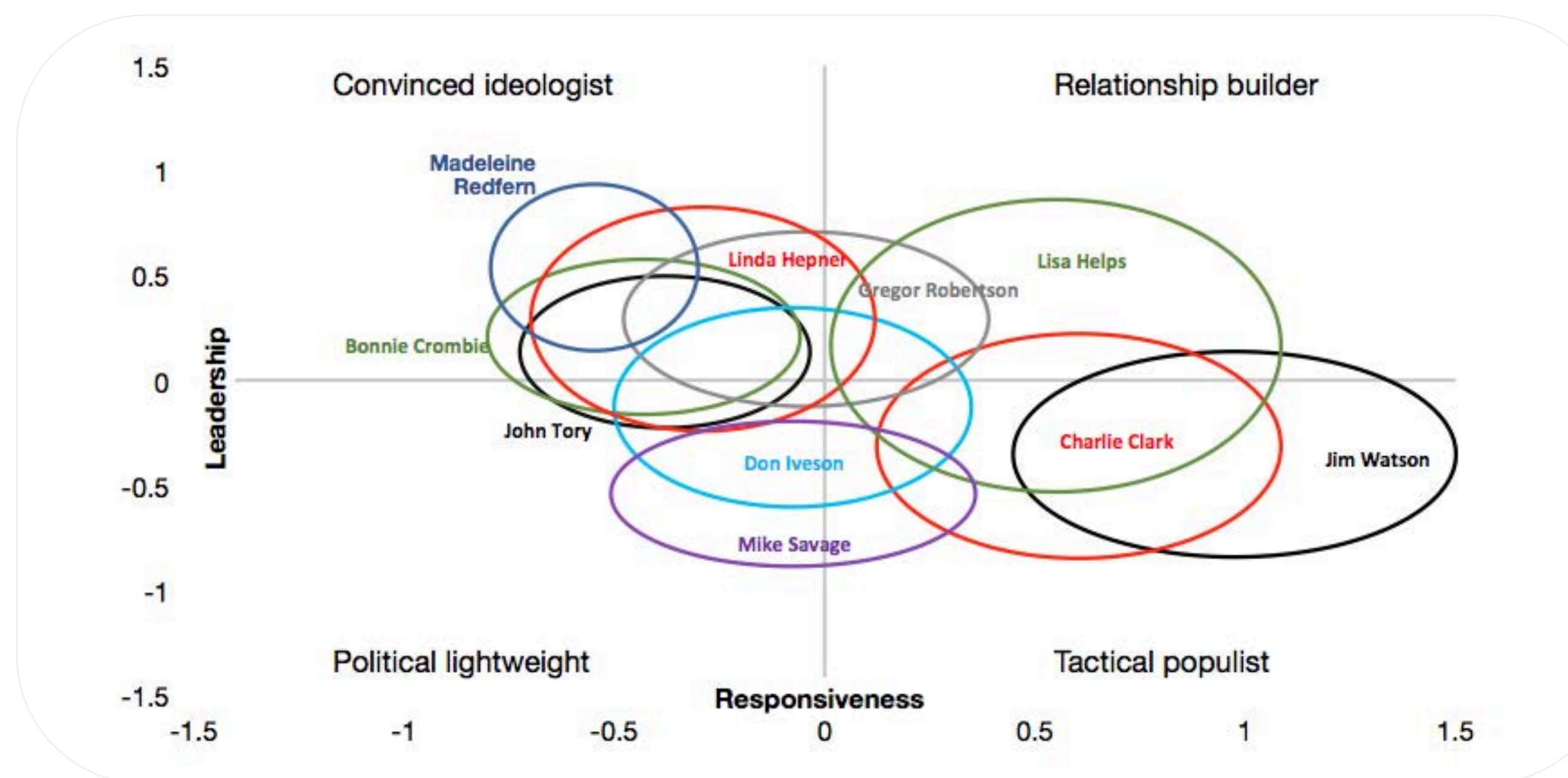
- Ability to lead:** mentions of attendance at public events/meetings; commentary; sharing of content (e.g., documents);
- Ability to follow/respond:** responding to a Tweet; expressing thanks/gratitude; seeking information; use of key certain words (i.e., sorry, contact, please call (various versions), help you, solution).

Second, Tweets were tracked for which category of Twitter users (private citizens, professors, other politicians, journalists, etc.) that were mentioned. This determines any patterns of engagement across the four types.

Third, the number of retweets and "likes" were tracked to determine reaction. An analysis of variance was generated to test any differences across the four leadership types.

See Appendix for further methodological details.

Figure 1. Distribution of leadership types among 10 Canadian mayors



Each mayor's posture is plotted as an area representing 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2. User mentions in mayor's tweets

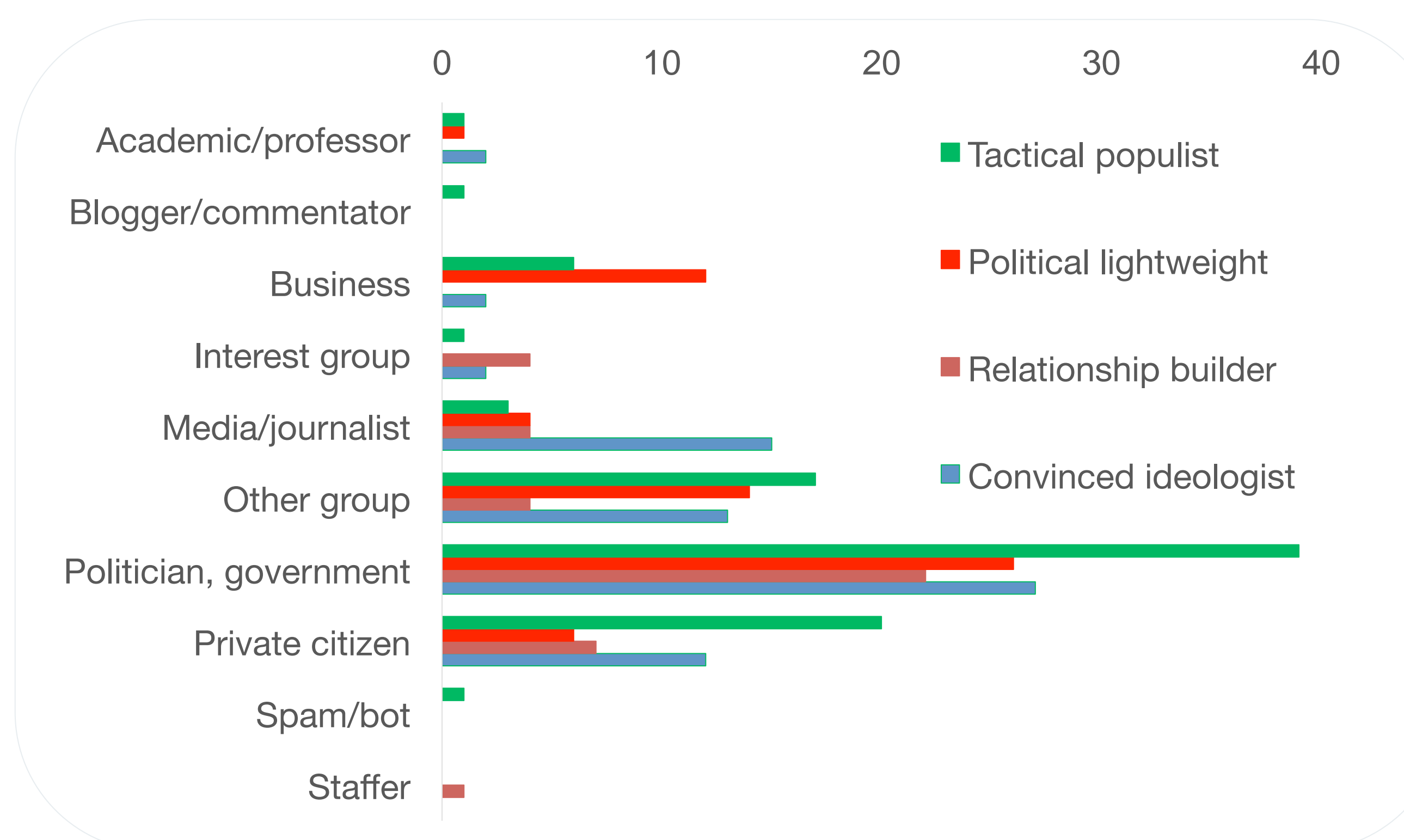
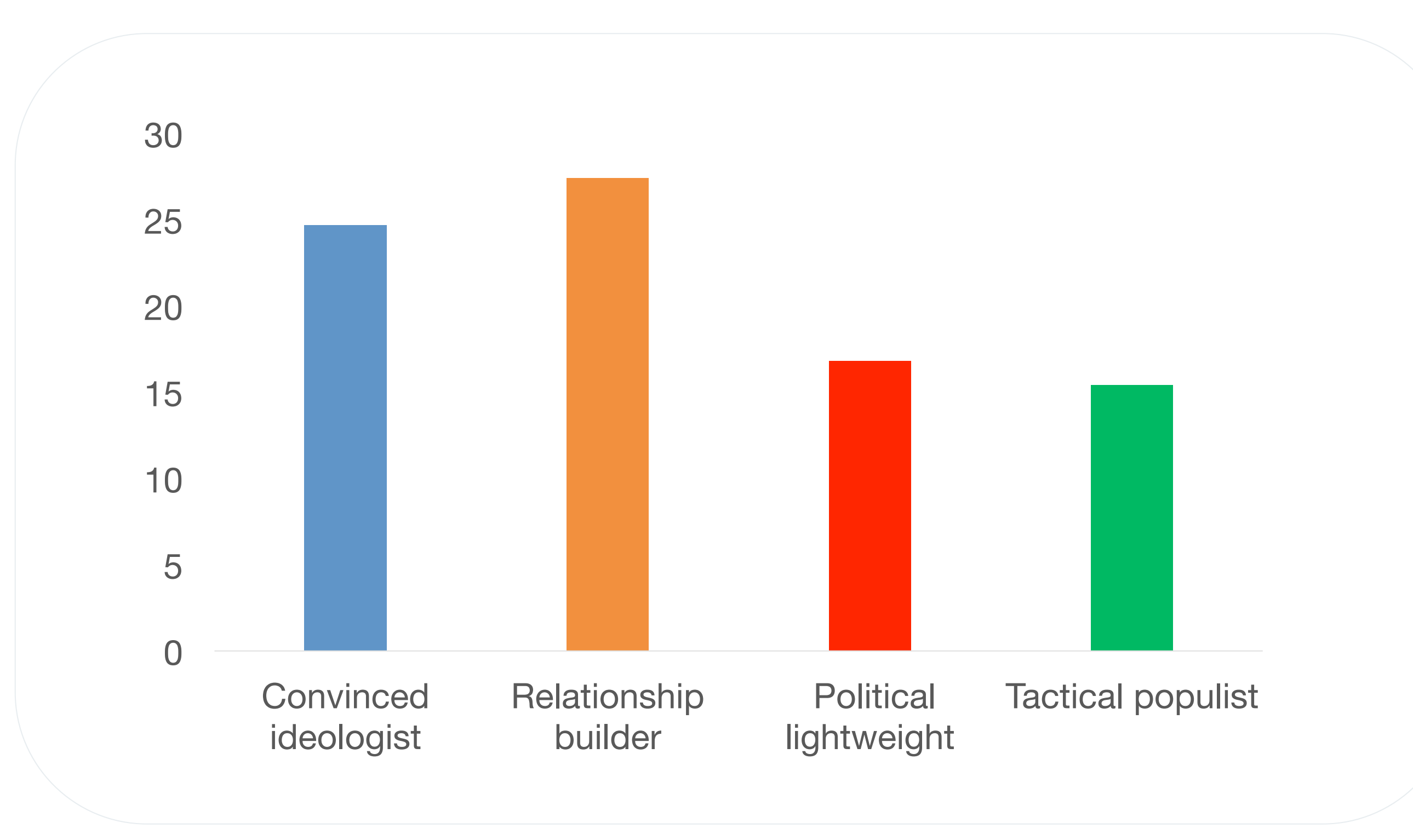


Figure 3. Whose Tweets are "retweeted" the most?



Mayors Are Most Often Convinced Ideologists

Figure 1 plots each mayor's general leadership posture along the two dimensions, encircled by 95% confidence intervals. Most mayors fall into the "Convinced ideologist" type, with "Tactical populist" in second place. Only one mayor qualifies as a "Relationship builder," consistent with Henneberg's theory that suggests this type is the rarest. But another perspective shows few mayors are "pure" types. The confidence regions show most straddle multiple types. In this perspective, six mayors show characteristics of the "Relationship builder." One mayor, Don Iveson, has a Twitter communication style consistent with all four types. Only Madeleine Redfern seems more purely situated within the "Convinced ideologist" type.

Mayors Tend to Talk to Politicians/Governments

The most common user mentioned by mayors is other politicians or government members (see Figure 2). This reflects an "elite" tendency of mayors to engage mainly within an inner circle of colleagues and other political leaders. However, the most frequent in this category are tweets of the Tactical populist. This could reflect the small sample size. Out of 41 Tweets in this category, five mentioned a total of 12 users who were politicians or government members. This type's dominance in interacting with private citizens seems consistent with the posture's general attentiveness to public opinion.

Tweets from Convinced ideologists are the most likely to mention media. This may reflect mayors' efforts to use the media to disseminate an agenda or initiative.

Relationship Builders Get More Retweets

There are no differences across the four leadership types in regards to "likes." Analysis of variance shows significant differences among the types for retweets ($F=3.186$, $df=3$, $p<.05$). In particular, Relationship builders scored highest, averaging 27 retweets (see Figure 3). This is consistent with this type's efforts to engage with – and be attentive to – the public. Convinced ideologists are a close second, averaging about 25 retweets.

Political lightweights score close to the bottom (17 retweets). This is not surprising given this type's reluctance to engage. More surprising is that Tactical populists scored lowest (15 retweets). This type is more oriented to citizen engagement.

Endnotes

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- Henneberg, S.C.M. 2006. Leading or following? A theoretical analysis of political marketing postures. *Journal of Political Marketing* 5: 29-46.

Appendix: Further methodological details

Leadership type for each Tweet is generated assigning a 1 to assigned to item contains the requisite content. These scores are added and standardized to generate a typology. Each mayor's average ability and follow score is plotted in Figure 1, encircled by a corresponding 95% confidence interval.

We then examined what type of user a mayor mentions, focusing on: academic/professor; blogger/commentator; business; interest group; media/journalist; other group; politician, government org.; private citizen; spam/bot; staffer. A score of 1 is assigned to a category if the corresponding user is mentioned in a Tweet.

Analysis also takes into account user response, namely in the form of "retweets" and "likes." These were transformed into a per-capita natural log to account for highly variant populations for each of the mayors' communities. Analysis of variance was used to compare the four leadership types.