Politics @Pontifex: International Crises and Political Patterns of Papal Tweets

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ABSTRACT Political research on social media argues that new channels of technological communication influence political leadership. However, we do not know the extent to which social media affect the power of other authorities—for example, religious leaders—in the secular world. This article focuses on the social media presence of the Pope. I argue that the pontiff uses social media communication to explicitly address certain political issues. Specifically, I claim that his messages on the web tend to be more political when critical world events threaten peaceful international relations and frighten salient religious minorities. I investigated this argument by studying Pope Francis's statements on Twitter. The analysis indicates that the Pope is more likely to release political tweets during international crises, thus targeting issues that otherwise belong to other secular authorities. At the same time, it "normalizes" the Catholic Church's power in that it allows the Pope to maintain the Vatican's long tradition of safeguarding peace and protecting vulnerable populations. These findings have implications for the leadership of the Catholic Church in the modern world and extend to other papacies beyond Francis's.

Political leaders have long used technology to mobilize the masses (Deutsch 1961; Graber and Dunaway 2009). More recently, with the advent of the digital age, web-based communications have become a critical tool in shaping political discourse. Therefore, in light of the evolving relationship between politics and technology and its increasing relevance, a vibrant field of social science scholarship has arisen to explore the media-based language of political leaders and its connection to audience preferences and real-life events (Jamal et al. 2015; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).

A central debate in this large literature is whether the use of new media strengthens or undermines the power of leaders (see Zeitzoff 2011 for a discussion of conflict studies; see also Barberá 2015; Gainous and Wagner 2014; and Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012 for insights from party politics). Although this discussion has received substantive empirical attention, it is unclear how it travels to religious leaders who presumably have significant influence on political issues. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the political tones of the social media communication of the Pope. Exploring the political content of the pontiff's media messages is important to test the boundaries of the theories proposed by the media-communication literature. Furthermore, it is useful to probe

theories on the relationship between religion and politics in the digital era, a topic that is increasingly receiving attention in political science (Nielsen 2017; Weber and Thornton 2012).

I address the debate of whether and how the Vatican's leader communicates issues that belong to the realm of secular politics. I begin by positing that although the Pope's communication is intended to embrace social issues, it is unclear which issues he concentrates on and under which conditions the papal message becomes more political than usual. I then argue that the patterns of the Pope's political messages on social media should be consistent with an overarching goal of the Vatican: protecting the well-being of followers and religious minorities. Hence, I claim that the Pope's discourse on social media becomes more political at the outset of international events that threaten salient communities, issues that the Catholic Church deems important for its moral legitimacy and where the Vatican has long been best positioned to take leadership. More specifically, I expect that the Vatican's leader may be more likely to issue political statements on social media when international crises affect salient audiences around the world.[1]

To empirically test my argument, I studied the activity of Pope Francis's Twitter account @Pontifex and performed a quantitative text analysis of the tweets released between March 2013 and March 2017. I found that the Pope focuses mostly on spiritual matters but that a subset of his tweets is clearly political

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in nature. The more-political tweets concentrate on issues of war; however, Pope Francis also addresses the social problems of environmental disasters and immigration crises. Additionally, I found that the Pope's more-political tweets are not timed at random. In fact, he is more likely to take political positions in the aftermath of a range of critical events affecting religious minorities. This finding is relevant for theories of religious institutions and their influence on ideology (Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2004) as well as for the implications of tweeting leaders more generally (Campbell 2010; Munger 2017). Contrary to the belief that the Internet may undermine the legitimacy of traditional leaders, the evidence in this study indicates

Catholic groups, and vulnerable Christian populations. Thus, if critical issues threaten these groups or secular jurisdictions seem unprepared to protect these communities, then the Pope may be more inclined to make explicit references to the state of the world and the political problems surrounding such issues. Conversely, if a political event does not critically affect such communities, the Pope may be more reluctant to send a message of political concern on social media.[3]

Because this article focuses mainly on Pope Francis, it is worth discussing whether my theory may be pertinent only to Bergoglio's papacy. Evidently, not all Popes are the same, and some scholars have argued that Pope Francis—whose background is itself novel

Hence, I claim that the Pope's discourse on social media becomes more political at the outset of international events that threaten salient communities, issues that the Catholic Church deems important for its moral legitimacy and where the Vatican has long been best positioned to take leadership.

that the Catholic Church actively engages with the online political discourse. At the same time and contrary to the common wisdom around Pope Francis's "revolutionary papacy," this article suggests that the Pope's political voice on social media is still tailored to Rome's traditional role of filling a void for society when crises emerge.

PAPAL AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL PRESENCE IN A GLOBAL AGE

This study concentrates on an understudied yet significant source of public opinion: the Pope. I focus on the Pope's Twitter stream because it has been active for several years and is one of the most followed social media accounts of a religious leader.[2] My main argument is that the Pope tends to tweet about international politics when international crises erupt. More specifically, I claim that whereas the Vatican's Twitter account may release, on average, a mix of sermons and social messages, it is systematically more likely to focus on the latter in the direct aftermath of dramatic events in the secular world—especially if important communities are affected.

To elaborate on my theory, I discuss the political role of the Pope and why he may or may not decide to engage with secular politics when crises erupt. Generally speaking, the debate on whether the Pope is consistently in or out of politics is hardly unsettled. Some scholars believe that an apolitical church does not exist and that religious institutions are constantly involved in politics to claim issues (Bueno De Mesquita 2000). By contrast, other scholars believe that religious institutions are well aware that engaging with politics can negatively affect their reputation and consequently do not consistently engage with it (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Against this light, even a Pope as socially active as Francis may be aware that making the church too political may hurt religious retention and that the papacy may be better off speaking out for some events and staying neutral on others (Plantak 1998).

I argue that the Pope may be more prone to directly address politics when political events affect communities that the Catholic Church deems most relevant, including religious minorities, poor

to the Catholic Church—has shown a particular predisposition for particular issues such as environmental degradation, immigration, poverty in the Global South and for spiritual reform more generally.[4] Despite the remarkable features of the current Pope, I argue that the idiosyncrasies of Francis's papacy do not necessarily determine the basic pattern of the Vatican leader's messages on the Internet. Stated differently, I expect that the statements of Pope Francis on Twitter still reflect the long-standing interests of the Catholic Church to protect its more vulnerable communities, which then emerge in the pontiff's reactions on social media.

In fostering this argument, this article suggests that the advent of digital communications has not undermined the popular legitimacy of the pontiff's traditional leadership. Rather, the Internet has allowed the papacy to claim influence on global issues in that it has integrated the promotion of concerns of vulnerable communities in the Vatican leader's online statements. Hence, this article also seeks to contribute to the theory of power in the information-technology sphere and to the long-standing debate captured by the equalization-versus-normalization literature (Gainous and Wagner 2014; Margolis and Resnick 2000). Whereas according to equalization scholars, the Internet is a force that allows "outsiders" to compete over issues with power holders (Barber 2001; Corrado and Firestone 1996), for normalization scholars, the web reinforces the advantage of incumbents (Hindman 2009; Stromer-Galley 2014). Against this light, my argument is in line with the equalization hypothesis, in that digital media gives the Pope a powerful way to comment on issues that, strictly speaking, are otherwise left to secular institutions to address. At the same time, I argue that new media has crystalized the Pope's tradition of addressing issues that affect important religious communities. Thus, when issues become particularly salient to the Vatican, social media provides the Pope with an opportunity structure for his message to be spread and for the authority of the Church to be reinforced. Within the boundaries of this article, this leads me to expect that in the midst of international crises, the Pope is more likely to voice political concerns on social media, *ceteris paribus*.

INTERNATIONAL CRISES AND THE POPE'S POLITICAL TWEETS

For my empirical analysis, I referred to Twitter because the Pope has no official account in any other large social network. Also, Twitter allows for short communications that can reflect only a small number of topical issues. Consequently, the nature of Twitter statements was useful for testing my hypothesis that the Pope should systematically engage global political events and address concerns at the outset of international crises.[5]

I collected all of the tweets from the @Pontifex English-language account from March 17, 2013, through March 26, 2017. The body of texts refers to messages only by Pope Francis

State. This suggests how outspoken the pontiff can be regarding political issues involving Christians around the world. A similar pattern is shown in retweets of the Pope's messages (figure 2). Overall, the public pays significant attention to papal tweets and (as of the end of 2017), on average, a tweet by Pope Francis receives roughly 8,000 retweets. However, in the past, specific messages have had higher success among his followers. These include statements about communal gatherings, such as the Pope's visit to the Philippines in January 2015, but also inherently political events such as the Paris terror attack in November 2015 and Donald Trump's 13769 Executive Order renowned as his first "Muslim ban" in February 2017.

It is not surprising that the most frequent words mentioned in the tweets (i.e., more than 130 times) were God, love, and Jesus. *However, words such as* families, poverty, and work *were repeated more than 25 times, hinting at some consistent reference to other social and political issues.*

because all tweets by Pope Benedict XVI were archived after his February 2013 resignation and were too few to justify a quantitative text analysis.[6] The total number of papal tweets in my sample was 1,142 observations. It is not surprising that the most frequent words mentioned in the tweets (i.e., more than 130 times) were *God*, *love*, and *Jesus*. However, words such as *families*, *poverty*, and *work* were repeated more than 25 times, hinting at some consistent reference to other social and political issues.[7]

As for the temporal patterns of the Pope's tweeting activity, the median number of tweets per week was five: on average, the Pope releases one message per working day and rarely tweets on weekends. However, as shown in figure 1, at times the volume of tweets increases well above the median. The highest peak in the 2013–2017 period corresponds to the week of the release of the "Laudato Si" encyclical on June 18, 2015, when @Pontifex tweeted more than 60 times. The second densest window of tweets was the week of International World Youth Day, an event in July 2016 that focused on Catholic faith among the young generations. Relevant to the hypothesis explored here, the Pope also released a significant number of tweets at the outset of international crises. For example, in June 2014, the Pope tweeted more than 20 times in a row about the Christian Iraqi genocide perpetrated by the Islamic

These descriptive findings pointed to the Pope's sensitivity to events in the political world as suggested by my hypothesis; however, to systematically evaluate my expectation, I proceeded with an automated content analysis of the papal tweets.[8] First, I used a topic-model estimation to explore the extent to which political themes are discernible from the more "spiritual" ones in papal tweets. I then estimated whether the more-political tweets could be associated to times of political crisis. Technically, following a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) approach, I relied on an

Figure 1

Papal Tweets and Selected International Events (As of Tweets Collected in March 2017)

Weekly Frequency of Pope's Tweets, 03/2013–03/2017
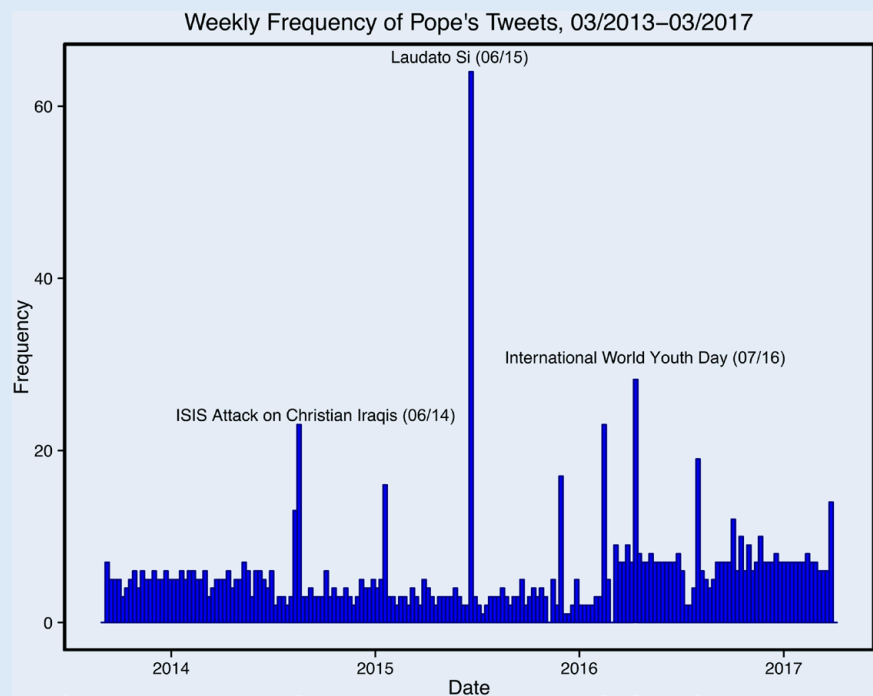
unsupervised topic model that found sets of words associated with the documents' latent dimensions (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003).[9] I pursued the LDA estimation to assess the systematic correlations of words in the body of tweets. In other words, I treated this as the first step to inductively identify topics that may be more or less politically based on a probability distribution over terms. In a second step—and assuming that the LDA process could identify political themes in the papal messages—I tested whether the onset of sudden political events (i.e., crises) is a significant correlate of the topical content of the papal tweets. To do so, I used a Structural Topic Model (STM), which allows covariates such as the onset of political crises to be included in the topic estimation (Lucas et al. 2015).

It is worth noting that, following common estimation practices, I explored the topic density in the Pope's tweets with a so-called perplexity score, which is an LDA-based metric in which a lower value indicates better generalization performance (Chang et al. 2009). I calculated the perplexity score for 20 LDA models with a number of topics set from two through eight using different initialization values to ensure that my conclusions were not driven by the starting parameters. The values suggest that the identification of the topics improved significantly with more than three topics and only minimally after eight topics.[10] In the main analysis, I reported the results based on eight topics to allow for more subtle variations across the tweets; however, the substantive findings remained unaltered when I performed alternative estimations.

I first ran the basic LDA estimation. I removed basic English-language stop words and estimated the topic models 50 times using different random initialization values to ensure that my conclusions were not driven by the starting parameters. The LDA
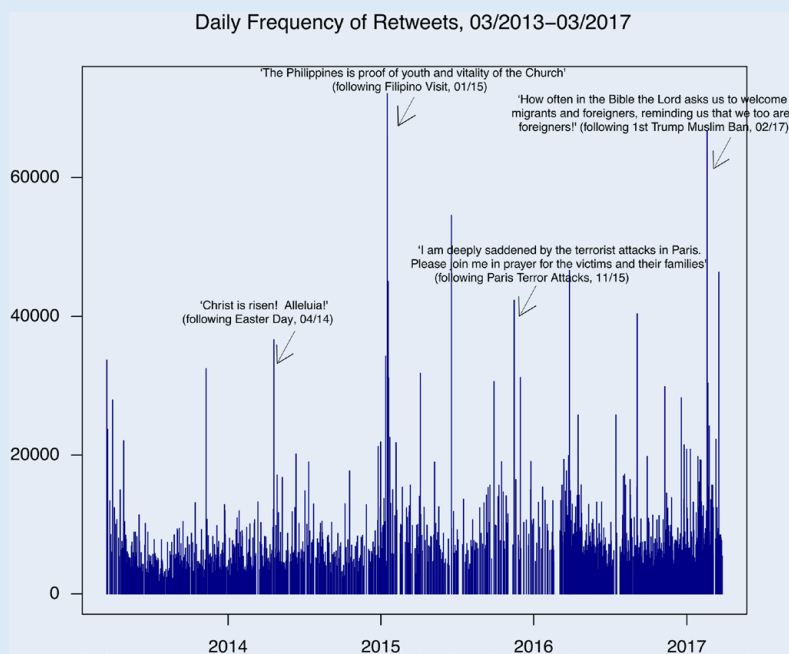
decomposed the words of the 1,142 tweets into eight clusters and provided a list of words loading on each dimension (figure 3). The eight topics were not exclusive in that some words overlapped, such as *God*, *Jesus*, and *love*. This suggests that most of the tweets consistently repeated the classical wording of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, some words were more exclusive than others (e.g., *peace*, *lives*, *brothers*, and *family*), most of which were especially clustered on some topics (i.e., topics 2 and 8), which accounted for almost 20% of the tweets. These terms corresponded to messages such as "We pray for the earthquake victims in Ecuador and Japan, may God and all our *brothers and sisters* give them help and support" (tweeted on April 18, 2016, after the Kumamoto and Ecuador earthquakes); "We run the risk of forgetting the suffering which doesn't affect us personally—may we respond to it and may we pray for *peace* in Syria" (tweeted on June 14, 2006, as ISIS declared a caliphate); and "May every parish and religious community in Europe host a refugee *family*" (tweeted on September 8, 2015, as thousands of refugees crossed Eastern Europe). Overall, these tweets extended the Pope's message of solidarity in moments of social despair and humanitarian disaster to salient communities around the world.

To summarize, results from the LDA analysis suggested that on contentious contemporary issues, the Pope's tweets seem to focus on more political themes. This finding fits with the claim that it is in the Pope's interest—or, in fact, moral domain—to encompass social concerns in the daily preaching of the Catholic Church (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Hence, the Pope seems capable of capitalizing on Twitter and strengthening its authority by addressing real-world contemporary issues (Campbell 2010). However, to fully validate this claim, we must ask: Is the timing of the more political tweets *systematically* correlated to critical international political events?

To verify the second part of my argument, I ran an STM analysis, which allows the calculation of statistical correlations between topics (i.e., the outcome variable) and external covariates at the tweet-level of analysis. To run STM, I generated the binary variable "event," which took the value of 1 if the day in which the tweet was published was one that included political events such as conflicts, diplomatic failures, and unexpected disasters (t = event).[11] To stay consistent with the previous analysis, I specified the model for eight topics. My argument suggests that topics that captured more-political themes should be correlated with crises because they should lead to more active political expressions by the Vatican's leader. For example, as shown in figure 3, the words in topics 2 and

Figure 2

Retweets of Papal Messages and Selected International Events (As of Tweets Collected in March 2017)

Daily Frequency of Retweets, 03/2013–03/2017

'The Philippines is proof of youth and vitality of the Church'
(following Filipino Visit, 01/15)

'How often in the Bible the Lord asks us to welcome migrants and foreigners, reminding us that we too are foreigners!' (following 1st Trump Muslim Ban, 02/17)

'I am deeply saddened by the terrorist attacks in Paris. Please join me in prayer for the victims and their families' (following Paris Terror Attacks, 11/15)

'Christ is risen! Alleluia!'
(following Easter Day, 04/14)

8 should be significantly and positively correlated with the "event" covariate.

I estimated the mean difference in topic proportions for the two different values of the covariate (i.e., 0 for no event and 1 for event). Figure 4 presents these results, controlling for the number of retweets and "likes." The point estimates with respect to topics 2 and 8 are positive and statistically significant at the 90% level. This is evidence that the Pope is more likely to discuss the themes captured by these topics (and words such as *followers* as well as *families* and *others*) at the outset of critical events in the secular world. Conversely, more "doctrinal" words (e.g., topic 6) are

Despite this evidence, we still may question whether the sensitivity to international crises and the expression of concern on Twitter are a function of the personal idiosyncrasies of the Pope in charge. Recall that the first Pope to ever use Twitter was Benedict XVI in December 2012. Is it possible that the format and timing of Pope Benedict's tweets differ significantly from Pope Francis, the "modern" Pope? Stated differently: Is social media truly strengthening the Vatican's outreaching tradition in moments of crisis, or is this a characteristic of Francis's papacy? Unfortunately, there are too few data to systematically compare Francis's and Benedict XVI's

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less likely to be tweeted in days when political events occur. The results remained overall unaltered when I estimated the STM model with fewer topics and when I omitted from the analysis the observations following Brexit and the 2016 American elections. These events alone may have triggered a more uncertain political atmosphere and thus more political tweets (additional estimations are in the appendix). In summary, the evidence supports the expectation that shape and timing of papal tweets are deeply correlated with international crises around the world.

social media presence to test personality trends in their tweets. Pope Benedict XVI resigned on February 11, 2013, having tweeted only 39 times. However, the qualitative evaluation of his tweets does not suggest that he would have been less likely than Pope Francis to raise political concerns at the outset of international crises. Of 39 texts, two are particularly similar to the more-"political" tweets of Pope Francis: (1) following the 2012 Christmas shootings in Nigeria by Islamic militants ("Nigerians have a special place in my heart, as so many have been victims of senseless violence in recent months"); and

Figure 3
LDA Topic Model of Papal Tweets
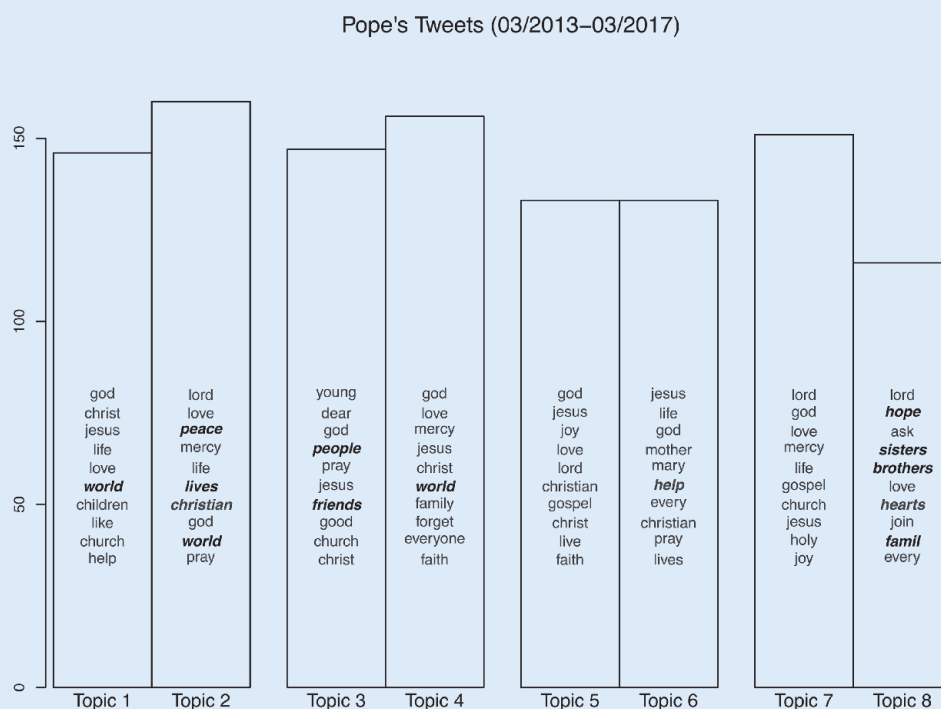
Note: This figure illustrates results of an eight-topic LDA estimation process with 50 random initialization values and indicates the relative loadings of papal tweets on the identified topics. Boldfaced words are unique loading words that are relevant for my analysis. N=1,142 tweets.

Figure 4

The Effect of International Events and Crises on Papal Tweets

Topic Prevalence Contrast: No Event (0) vs Event (1)
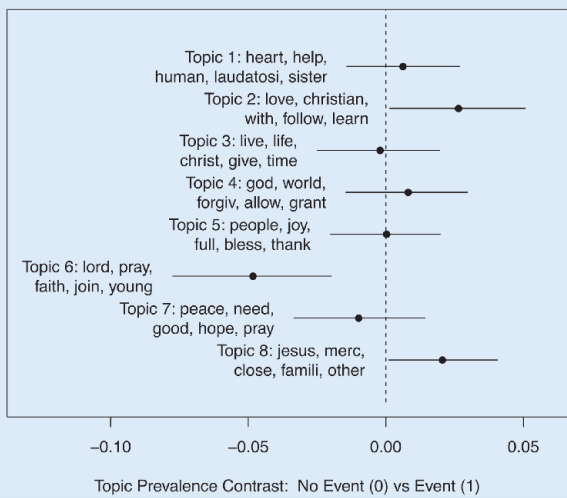
This figure illustrates the statistical influence of international crises on the content of papal tweets. The estimation is based on an STM specified with eight topics. Each dot corresponds to the estimated coefficient; the line corresponds to the 90% confidence interval. N=1,142 tweets.

(2) on Syria's conflict, at the outset of a UN human rights report issued on January 4, 2013 ("Please join me in praying for Syria so that constructive dialogue will replace the horrendous violence"). These tweets share some words with topics 2 and 8 from the previous LDA analysis, and they are the only tweets by Benedict XVI that use terms such as *dialogue* and *violence*, which suggest a distinct type of social message. I interpreted this as further evidence that the Catholic Church—and not Pope Francis per se—uses media communication to expand its influence and claim issues occurring to relevant communities all over the world.[12]

Finally, we may question whether the results have implications for the media usage of only the Pope or also for other global spiritual leaders who may be as sensitive to international crises. To explore this, I collected the Dalai Lama's tweets for the same years used in my papal analysis. The pattern of tweeting of the Dalai Lama is basically similar to the Pope's in that both tweet regularly (the former slightly less frequently than the pontiff at a rate of one tweet every three days). I ran the same type of quantitative text analyses on this text corpus, using the same coding of crisis events as in the previous analysis (results are in the appendix). The direction of the findings suggests that the Dalai Lama may have a propensity to tweet more about *anger*, *tolerance*, *peace*, and *change* and less about *teaching* and affairs in Dharamsala when a crisis occurs. However, these estimates overlap and do not reach the 90% confidence level. This null result may be driven in part by the smaller sample of the Dalai Lama's tweets but also because the Buddhist leader represents a smaller and more confined community of followers. Consequently, the international events coded in my dataset, on average, may be beyond the authoritative mandate of the Dalai Lama. This interpretation strengthens the thesis that the Vatican, as a truly global actor, is more likely to issue political tweets when it deems that crises affect salient groups around the world.

CONCLUSION

The rise of social media has motivated a range of studies on the effects of new communication technologies on leaders and their forms of expression. In line with the equalization-versus-normalization debate put forward in the information-technology literature, researchers have discussed whether new means of technological communication strengthen the legitimacy of traditional leaders or undermine it by benefiting outsiders. However, this research has focused mainly on "classical" political authorities, ignoring equally powerful and politically relevant institutions such as religious leaders. This article argued that we still have little understanding of how this authority type adjusts to mass communication and the implications their use of social media has for politics.

Focusing on the case of the Pope, I argued that the pontiff is more likely to release political statements on social media when secular powers are non-effective at managing events that threaten to shake peaceful relations across religious minorities. A quantitative content analysis of Pope Francis's tweets supported my argument, in that I found that the Pope is more inclined to take more-political positions following international crises. One main implication of the study is that whereas digital communication channels may weaken some political leaders, they may empower those who have a credible moral aura around issues they own. Consequently, the Internet may equalize the power of the Vatican vis-à-vis other more pertinent secular authorities while simultaneously normalizing the overall clout of the Vatican in the modern world. Finally, by highlighting the link between papal statements and social affairs beyond the domain of Pope Francis's papacy, the study has implications for the political use of social media by religious institutions and other types of spiritual representatives.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518001038

NOTES

1. Crises defined here as events that involve public tension and generate attrition among several parties.

2. As of January 2018, the Dalai Lama Twitter account, which was opened in 2009, had 17.9 million followers—roughly 1 million more than the English-speaking Pope account, which was opened at the end of 2012. However, as of January 2018 @Pontifex has "sister accounts" in eight other languages, which together represent more than 40 million followers.

3. Silence then may follow, for instance, events in which a secular authority with direct jurisdiction is handling the situation.

4. Mark Silk, 2015. "Who Says Laudato Si Is Not a Political Manifesto?" *Religion News Service*, June 25. Available at http://marksilk.religionnews.com/2015/06/25/getgetreligion-who-says-laudato-si-is-not-a-political-manifesto.

5. It also is worth noting that papal communications on Twitter are almost always less than the 140-character limit and they never involve chains of tweets ("threads"). This implies that one tweet counts as one message, which was useful for my analysis.

6. In total, Benedict XVI released 39 tweets between December 12, 2012, and February 28, 2013. His tweets were generated at the same rate as Pope Francis's tweets—that is, an average of five tweets per week and a median of one tweet per day.

7. See the word cloud and the histogram of most-tweeted words in the appendix.

8. I prefer this to human coding to maximize efficiency and to avoid any human-coding bias in interpreting the content of the tweets. The qualitative evaluation of several tweets (see table A.1 in the appendix) suggests that this interpretation is consistent with the quantitative results.

9. Assuming that each topic is characterized by a distribution over words w, the LDA estimator first created the list of words w used in the set of encyclicals and then counted w_{ij}, the number of times each word j appeared in each tweet i.

10. See figure A.1 in the appendix.

11. Events coded for the STM analysis were collected from the following Wikipedia sources: the portal of "current events," the page on annual "conflicts," the list of annual "terrorist incidents," and the page on "natural disasters." I identified events during 46 days in which the Pope tweeted a total of 72 times. Some of these events are listed in table A.1 in the appendix. Note that if the day corresponding to such an event was absent in the Twitter line, I coded it as 1 the day immediately after.

12. This also is in line with previous research on other papal writings, which indicated little evidence that Popes have different ways to linguistically address social and political issues (Genovese 2015).

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