

ANALYSIS OF THE FINNISH TWITTER CONVERSATION SURROUNDING BERNIE SANDERS' NEVADA VICTORY IN THE 2020 DEMOCRATIC PARTY PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

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SONIA JUNTILA

INTRODUCTION

I did a limited case analysis of the change in tone and volume of the Finnish Twitter conversation before and after Bernie Sanders' major win in the Nevada caucuses for the nomination for the Democratic Party presidential primaries for the 2020 election in the United States of America (USA) (BBC News, 2020). The caucuses took place during the night between February 22nd and 23rd Finnish time and the timeframe I chose for my analysis was a two-week period bracketing the caucuses from February 16th to the 29th.

Bernie Sanders is an Independent senator from the state of Vermont and was running for the Democratic Party nomination for the second time after the 2016 primaries where he lost to Hillary Clinton. Sanders calls himself a democratic socialist (Golshan, 2019) and has run on a progressive policy platform not often seen in the USA. From the very beginning Sanders' campaign has been quite polarising in the American context (Martin, 2019), which was reflected in the tone of online conversation, especially on Twitter (Spencer, 2020). I was interested to see if this same polarisation would be echoed in Finland as well. Although the topic of conversation I analysed is a foreign politician and foreign elections, the subject of my analysis is the Finnish conversation about it.

DATA GATHERING AND CLEANING

I set up TAGS to collect tweets containing the exact word “sandersin” for a two weeks’ time starting from February 16th. I chose “sandersin” instead of “sanders” as a way to organically limit the tweets collected to the Finnish language. “Sandersin” correlates to two very typical Finnish cases for nouns, i.e., genitive (possession) and accusative (object).

Table 1: Examples of the use of “sandersin” in tweets		
Case	Original tweet	Translation in English
Genitive	<i>Demokraattisen puolueen sisäpiirissä puhutaan jo ”valkoisesta ritarista”, joka estäisi Bernie Sandersin ehdokkuuden.</i>	Democratic party insiders are already talking about a “white knight” who would stop Bernie Sanders’ nomination.
Genitive	<i>Tosin mielestäni Sandersin voittoa pidetään nyt vähän liian varmana. Heinäkuun puoluekokouksessa voittoon tarvitaan 1990 delegaattia, kun Sandersin takana on nyt 34.</i>	Although I think Sanders’ victory is considered too much of a foregone conclusion right now. 1990 delegations will be needed for a win at July’s party convention while at the moment Sanders has 34.
Accusative	<i>Sitä vaan, että miksi Suomessakin uutisoidaan Bernie Sandersin olevan radikaalivasemmistoa, kun täällä hän kävisi kokoomuslaisesta. #politiikka #usa</i>	Just saying, why are the Finnish news claiming that Bernie Sanders is radical left, when over here he’d be a member of the [centre-right] Coalition Party. #politics #usa
Accusative	<i>@SaskaSaarikoski Siksi venäläiset puuhaavat Sandersin ehdokkaaksi, että demokraattien jättävät äänestämättä. Trump voittaa.</i>	@SaskaSaarikoski That’s why the Russians are turning Sanders into the nominee, so that Democrats will skip the vote. Trump wins.

The collection yielded a dataset of 469 tweets of which 368 were in Finnish. The other language ones were easy to spot and delete due to foreign letters. Retweets are considered part of the dataset as they pertain to the question of volume. Similarly, the few tweets suspected of possibly being bots based on the incoherence of the grammar used were included. There were some tweets I randomly discovered to have been deleted since the original data collection. I removed those from the dataset in the spirit of right to be forgotten. The publication status of each and every tweet has not been manually checked. The final number of posted tweets included for the analysis is 344 tweets. Data was organised, calculated and cleaned on Google Spreadsheets. No additional software or coding was used.

ANALYSIS

My analysis was three-fold. First, I analysed the change in volume over the two-week period and teased out from the context of the tweets what could be the cause of these fluctuations. Secondly, I did sentiment analysis on the tweets, once again from the narrowly defined context of change in sentiment. And finally, I zeroed in to two specific topics of interest and the changes in volume in those.

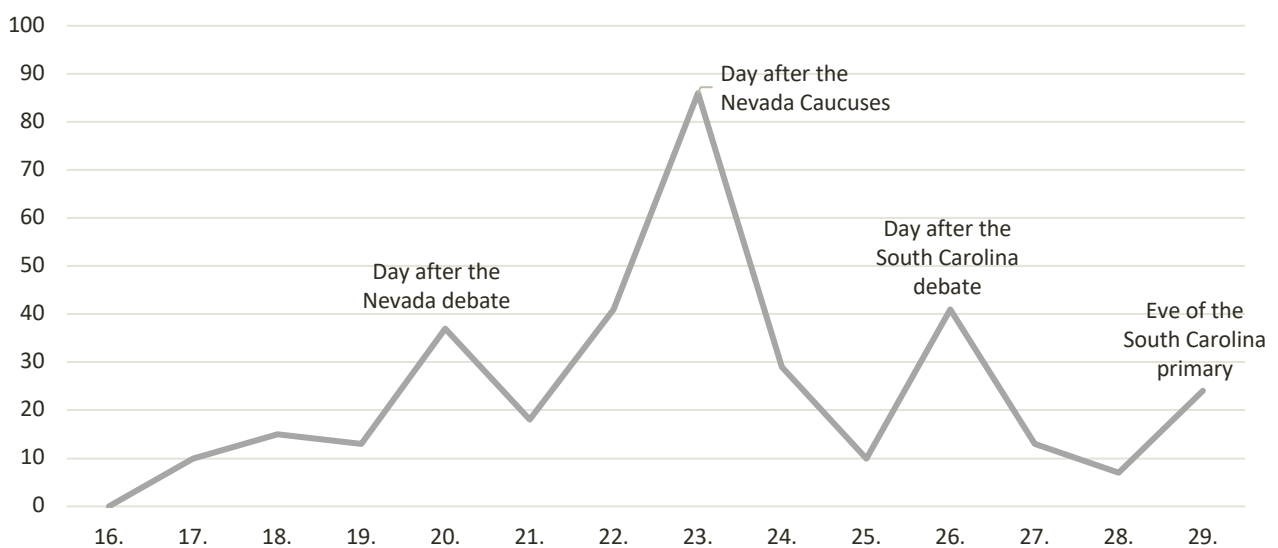
1. CHANGE IN VOLUME

As my dataset is comprised of the tweets mentioning two specific Finnish noun cases “sandersin”, I am missing a large part of the Finnish conversation as a whole. Thus, my study is not representative on the absolute volume of tweets, but I propose my sample can be viewed as indicative of the change in volume over the two-week timeframe.

Over the 14 days observed, the number of daily tweets fluctuated between 0 and 86. The minimum took place on the 1st day of data collection, on February 16th, while the peak of the entire dataset was the 23rd, the day after Bernie Sanders’ “decisive victory” (Lee & Weaver, 2020) at the Nevada Caucuses. Other smaller peaks were the 20th, the day after the Nevada Democratic debate, the 22nd, the eve of the caucuses, and the 26th, the day after the South Carolina debate. The South Carolina primary was held during the night between the February 29th and March 1st Finnish time.

All in all, the change in volume followed a predictable pattern with reporting on major political events in the campaigning would lead to a surge in tweets in commentary.

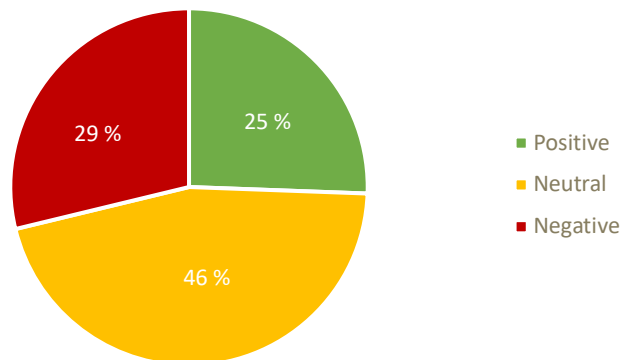
Chart 1: Number of tweets



2. SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

I did a manual sentiment analysis on the 344 tweets included in the dataset. My original plan was to code the tweets into three mutually exclusive categories of Positive, Neutral and Negative depending on the perceived sentiment expressed in the tweets but looking at the results I felt a lot of information was being missed.

Chart 2: Sentiment (division into 3 categories)



The majority of the tweets lacked an outright, obvious bias one way or the other but even within the Neutral category not many of the tweets felt completely “neutral” to me, even if they fit the bill on the textual level. The topics of political discourse, tone, influence as well as the link between language and power go beyond the scope of this study, but to produce more useful and complete observations on the sentiment of the Finnish conversation, I felt I needed to introduce more categories to observe the nuances of the Neutral tweets.

I added categories Neutral + and Neutral - for tweets that lacked a stated sentiment towards Bernie Sanders or his campaign, but that would upon an encounter leave the reader with a positive or negative sentiment towards these topics. I did not assume for the author of tweet to hold a sentiment towards Sanders for the tweet to have a particular impact. E.g. the tweets posted by the official accounts of major Finnish news sources, i.e. magazines and TV news naturally landed in the Neutral category. Their tweets were seemingly impartial and factual. However, with the introduction of the + and - categories, the sentiment communicated – willingly or unwillingly – through these tweets was made more apparent.

E.g., on 22 February the accounts for the main news programs for the channel 1 and channel 3 broadcasters tweeted about the revelation of the Washington Post’s claims of Russian aid towards the Sanders campaign (The Washington Post, 2020). While channel 3 news’ account @MTVUutiset tweeted:

“Venäjän väitetään auttavan Bernie Sandersin presidentinvaalikampanjaa”

“Claims that Russia is helping the Bernie Sanders campaign”

and was coded as Neutral -, the channel 1 news' account @yleutiset tweeted:

“Venäjän väitetään auttavan Bernie Sandersin presidentinvaalikampanjaa – Sandersin mukaan kaikki vaikutusyritykset ovat täysin sopimattomia”

“Claims that Russia is helping the Bernie Sanders campaign – According to Sanders all attempts at interference are completely inappropriate”

and was coded as Neutral +, based on the assumption that reports of a foreign country's nefarious attempts to influence an election would be perceived as negative by your average reader, while Sanders' forcefulness in denouncing such behaviour would be approved of.

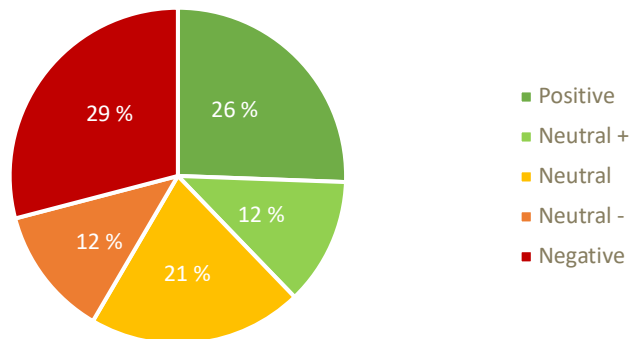
I am aware that such system of classification is by no account without its problems. I am taking some liberties in making claims about how particular tweets are to be read but for the purpose of this analysis where the point is not as much the overall sentiment expressed but the change in sentiment, I felt that if my own internal reading of the impact remains consistent, the use of this categorisation is worthwhile.

Table 2: Examples of tweets coded by sentiment			
Colour	Sentiment	Original tweet	Translation in English
	Positive	<i>Vakavasti puhuen Yhdysvalloilla on Sandersin johdolla todellinen tilaisuus kääntää maan suunta siitä, mitä se nyt Trumpin jälkeen on, kohti parempaa, yhtenäisempää ja ennen kaikkea tasa-arvoisempaa valtiota. Toivon todella, että tällä kertaa se tilaisuus käytetään. #Bernie2020</i>	Seriously speaking under the leadership of Sanders, the USA has a real opportunity to change the direction the country, what it has been after Trump, towards a better, more united and above all more equal nation. I really hope that the opportunity is seized. #Bernie2020
	Neutral +	<i>Bernie Sandersin voittokulku esivaaleissa jatkuu. Pohdittiin #Politiikkaradio'ssa torstaina, miksi Sanders on niin suosittu. Hän on ainakin niin epätyypillinen persoona, että mistään identiteettipolitiikasta ei ole kyse. #esivaalit #USA2020 #trumpvsbernie</i>	Bernie Sanders' triumph in the primaries continues. On Thursday's #Politiikkaradio, we discussed why Sanders is so popular. At least he's such an atypical personality that it can't be about identity politics. #primaries #USA2020 #trumpvsbernie
	Neutral	<i>Elizabeth Warren aloitti Nevadan vaaliväittelyn heti todella tyyllä hyökkäyksellä Mike Bloombergia vastaan. Seuraan väittelyä Bernie Sandersin kannattajien kanssa. He nauttivat tästä.</i>	Elizabeth Warren begins the Nevada debate with a harsh attack on Mike Bloomberg. I'm watching the debate with Bernie Sanders supporters. They are enjoying it.
	Neutral -	<i>Hillary Clinton haukkuu Bernie Sandersin pataluhaksi uutuusdokumentissa – HS:n tapaama Clinton kertoo, mitä mieltä on Sandersista nyt</i>	Hillary Clinton slams Bernie Sanders in new documentary – Clinton tells HS what she thinks about him now
	Negative	<i>Ajatella, että journalistit ovat enemmän vasemmalla kuin Sanders. Ovatkohan he enemmän vasemmalla kuin</i>	To think that the journalists are more to the left than Sanders. I wonder if they are more to the left

	<i>Sandersin kampanjan henkilökunta, joka hekumoi oikeiston tappamisella ja lähettämisellä gulageille.</i> <i>#journalismi #äärivasemmisto</i> <i>#BernieSanders</i>	than Sanders' campaign staff who bask in killing the right and sending them to the gulags. #journalism #extremeleft #BernieSanders
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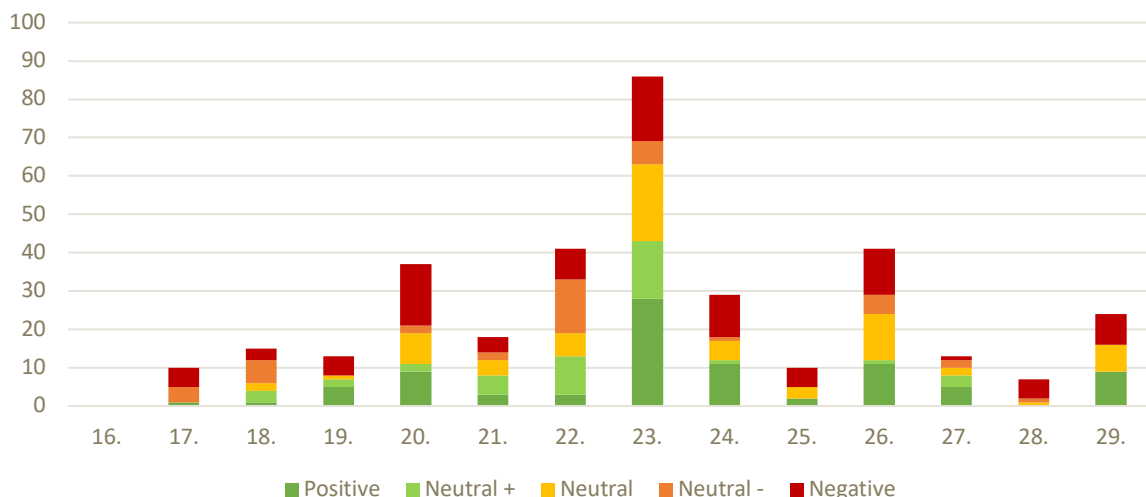
With this new 5-pronged division the subtleties of the “neutral” position gets better illustrated but in terms of the whole, the Finnish discussion remains quite balanced. The biggest group of total tweets fall into the Negative category (29%), followed by Positive (26%) and Neutral (21%). The new categories of Neutral + and - consist of 12% of the tweets both.

Chart 3: Sentiment (division into 5 categories)



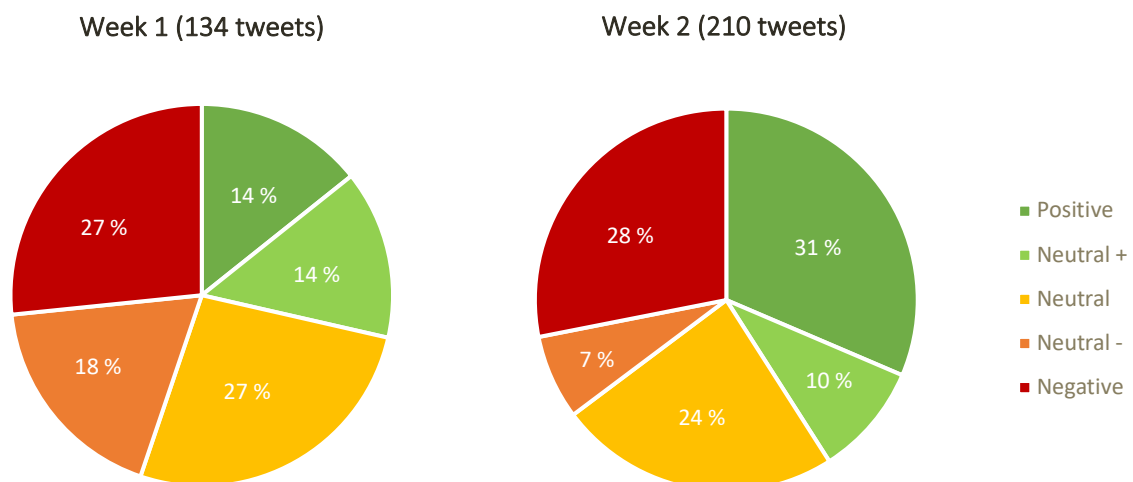
In terms of the sentiments expressed throughout the two-week period, the daily change is not huge and immediately noticeable. Only one day among the 14 observed gathers more than 41 tweets in a single day, so changes of just a few tweets per day can constitute a seemingly major shift. One successful tweet with up to 5 retweets can skew a whole days' sentiment division for its category's favour and give an impression of a more major shift than what the actual numbers show.

Chart 4: Change in sentiment per day



A more fruitful way of looking at the change in sentiment was to compare the two weeks before and after the Nevada Caucuses. On week one, from 16 to 22 February, the number of tweets with “sandersin” amounted to 134. Among those both Negative and Neutral tweets were the biggest categories with 27% of the tweets each. Neutral - followed with 18% while Positive and Neutral + both held only 14% of the tweets each. However, after the Nevada caucuses the Positive category became the largest with 31% of the tweets, followed by Negative with 28%, Neutral with 24%, Neutral + by 10% and Neutral - with 7%. The total number of tweets in week two grew to 210.

Charts 5-6: Change in sentiment per week



This revealed two worthwhile phenomena to note. One, the percentage of Negative sentiment remained virtually the same throughout the timeframe surveyed while the percentage of Positive sentiment doubled and then some. Two, the percentage of both the Neutral + and - categories shrank in week two.

3. TOPICAL ANALYSIS

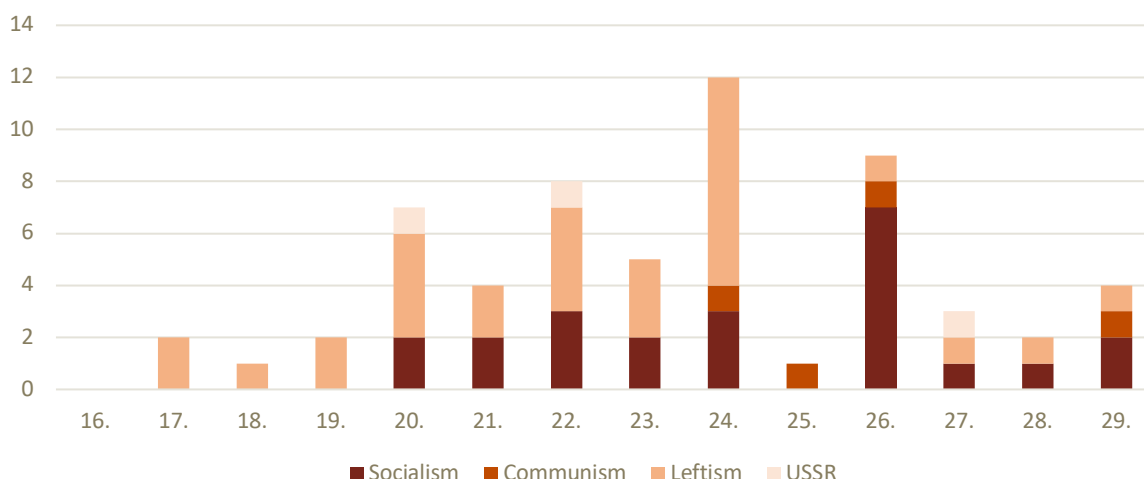
In addition to observing the overall volume and the sentiment of the dataset, I also chose a third aspect of analysis. I observed how much two topics of interest from the Finnish point-of-view came up in the tweets about Sanders or his campaign. First one was Sanders’ socialism, since it is a major point of contention in Sanders as a politician and as a hopeful for the highest office in the USA. It is also well-known that Sanders himself likes to bring up the Nordic countries as examples of the style of socialism he is championing for the USA as well (Zeballos-Roig, 2020). Finland’s own historical and current relationship with socialism is complicated and goes well beyond the scope of this report, but the subject is a potential societal sore spot and worth a closer look.

The second topic of interest is mentions to Russia since the country is a historical foe to both Finland and the USA. Ever since the presidential campaign and the election of the current president Donald Trump in 2016, the country and its leader Vladimir Putin have been a permanent element of U.S. political discourse – especially online, see e.g. the “Russiagate” scandal (Cohen, 2019). Finnish attitudes towards Russia as a potential threat as well as a close trading partner, made this connection an interesting topic to explore as well.

TOPIC: SOCIALISM

For the first topic I included all mentions in all Finnish cases of “socialism”, “communism”, “leftism” and “the Soviet Union (USSR)” in the tweets collected. Over the two-week period, this amounted to 66 tweets, i.e., 19% of all tweets.

Chart 7: Mentions to the topic of socialism (66 tweets)



The peak of daily tweets took place on February 24th, with a total of 12 overall mentions prompted mainly by a tweet by a Finnish journalist commenting on the supposed leftism of Sanders as compared to the domestic political landscape. Indeed, Sanders’ on-going campaign was often used as tool to comment on the Finnish right-left divide in general and at the time quite acerbic conversation about self-proclaimed domestic fascists and communists in particular, e.g.:

“Tätä meidän Suomen fasismi v kommunismi keskustelua sivuten oli kuitenkin mielenkiintoista lukea, kuinka USAn vasemmalle kallellaan olevatkin pitivät Sandersin Kuuba-kehuja mokana. Jos aatteen toteutus johtaa totalitarismiin, niin...”

“Apropos our Finnish fascism vs. communism conversation, it was interesting to read how the lefties in the USA consider Sanders’ Cuba praise a mistake. If the implementation of an ideology leads to totalitarianism, then...”

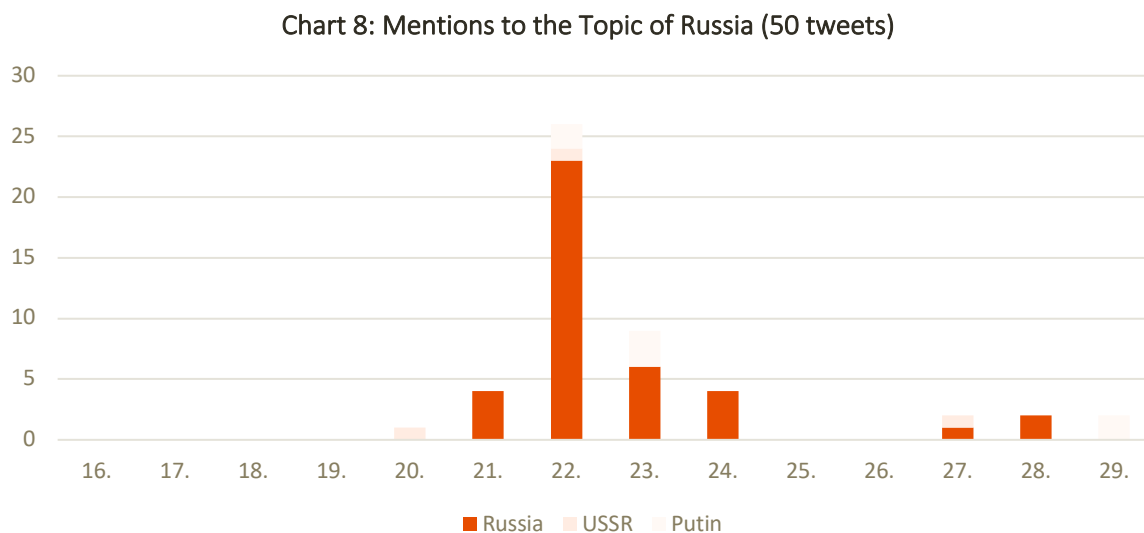
The seemingly sudden switch from a general discussion about leftism to “socialism” on 26 February in particular came about by a long-winded debate spurred on by a tweeted meme image comparing Hitler’s national socialism to Sanders’ democratic socialism. As a whole the socialism conversation was not dominant in the dataset, and the strands of conversation were sparse and scattered.

TOPIC: RUSSIA

For the Russia topic, all mentions to “Russia”, “Putin” or “the USSR” were included. The three USSR mentions were already included the socialism topic as they appeared mainly in reference to Sanders’ 1988 honeymoon trip to Moscow, i.e. his implied communist past. Still, I felt their inclusion to the Russia mentions was warranted as well – especially when considering the Russophobic implications of the tweeting:

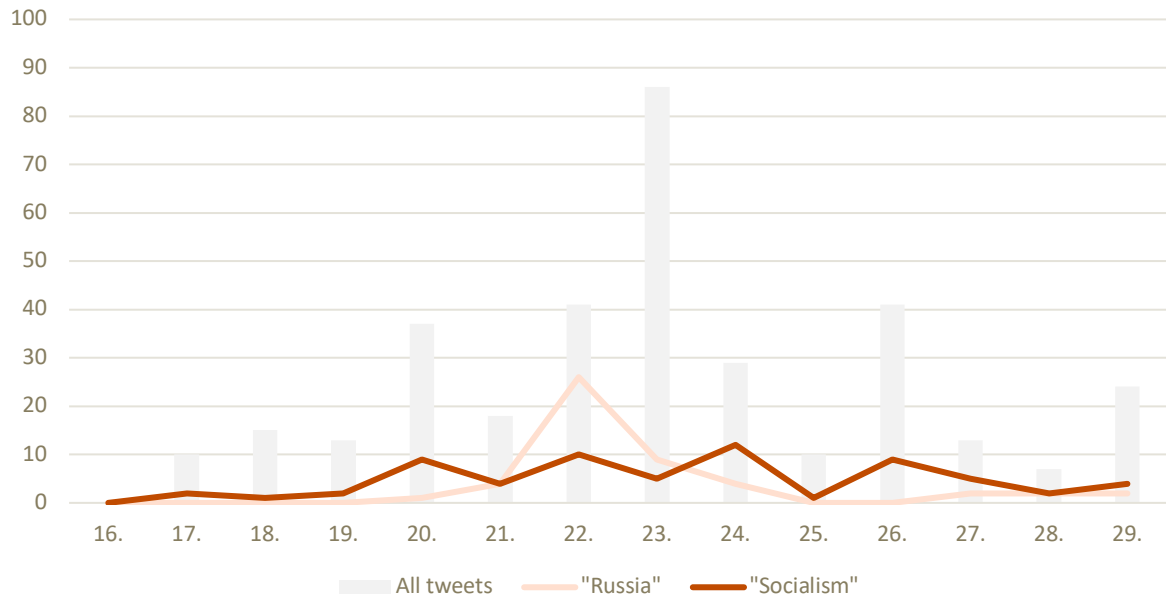
“Veikkaanpa, että Mike Bloomberg tulee seuraavaan vaaliväittelyyn ensi tiistaina mukanaan mappi täynnä Bernie Sandersin övereimpiä juttuja vuosien varrelta. Kuherruskuukausi Neuvostoliitossa jne.”

“I’m guessing Mike Bloomberg will be arriving at the next debate on Tuesday with a binder full of extreme stories about Bernie Sanders’ past. A honeymoon to the USSR, etc.”



On the topic of Russia, the overall number of tweets amounted to only 50, but they came in a lot more unevenly. The majority of the tweets (total 26) were posted on the day after the Washington Post revelation of suspected Russian aid to the Sanders campaign (The Washington Post, 2020). These tweets consisted of news reporting on the revelation as well as speculation about the truthfulness of the claim and the source of the leak. However, after the caucuses the conversation on the topic quickly petered out into irrelevancy.

Chart 9: Mentions to socialism and Russia overall



INTERPRETATION

In light of my analysis, it seems that from the Finnish perspective the topic of Bernie Sanders and his campaign was quite a distant topic. Had I gone into more in-depth analysis on the participants of this conversation, it is my overall impression that the group would have been revealed as quite small and active, with the cues for debate taken from news reporting appearing on the platform. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that the main mode of sentiment expressed in the tweets on him ended up in the realm of Neutral (see Chart 2).

It was only when the spectrum of the Neutral was further categorized and two-week timeframe partitioned, that a more dynamic picture could be observed. The accounts that held a Negative opinion on Sanders kept their sentiment and their frequency of posting both before and after the Nevada caucuses. Sanders' surge did not win them over but nor did it add to their number, unlike in the USA where Sanders' victory quickly led to a media meltdown (Rosenberg, 2020).

On the contrary, on Finnish political Twitter, Sanders' unlikely win seemed to give the somewhat reserved Finns an opening to express some positive and hopeful sentiments on the prospects of Sanders' policy positions and potential going forward. Similarly, the shrinking of the percentage of the Neutral + and - categories after the win suggested that perhaps some underlying sentiments were being dressed down into a seemingly more neutral language while Sanders' prospects still seemed weak.

On the special topics of interest, Sanders' socialism was somewhat kept as an undertone in the conversation throughout the timeframe, even as it was often tied to commentary about domestic affairs and attitudes. On the contrary the Russia topic was quite strictly tied to the one Washington Post revelation and even then, remained on a remote point of curiosity, not in any way viewed as tied to Finland's geopolitical situation. To understand the full scope of this finding, a more throughout deep dive into Finnish online attitudes and practices towards Russia would be required.

REVIEW

As I anticipated the main challenge to my research was in the sentiment analysis part and specifically how to determine how to categorize the sentiment expressed. In political discourse, in online debates, it is very typical to want to hide your pre-held political position and put up an air of impartiality in order to convince your audience of the objectivity of your analysis. For my sentiment analysis to work I had to make judgement calls about the biases held and transmitted by the twitter posts, but if I wanted my analysis to hold more weight as a look into actual sentiments expressed, the coding would have had happened as a group effort, with the sentiment evaluated by two or more researchers. As is, my study can only try to illustrate how the overall sentiment changed over the two weeks, as calibrated by me.

In technical terms, I chose a limited dataset and a qualitative rather than quantitative research question precisely to escape having to do coding myself – as it is not my forte. But if I wanted my research to give a more complete picture of the Finnish conversation, the dataset should be bigger and as such would be in need of more robust data wrangling. The limitation of data collection to the “sandersin” case was artificial in terms of the research topic, but useful for the purpose of this study.

In terms of this particular topic, it would have been interesting to widen the perspective to include other Democratic presidential hopefuls to give a fuller picture of the Finnish perspective. From my study alone it is impossible to say if Bernie Sanders as a unique “Nordic-style socialist” politician held any specific interest in the Finnish Twitter conversation. In terms of volume of tweets, a comparison to Donald Trump, arguable the most notorious but also most bombastic of U.S. politicians today, would have been interesting as well.

Ultimately, it is worth pondering how useful it even is to study Finnish online discourse about subjects that do not directly affect the lives on Finns. Shouldn't the focus be on Finnish politicians, policy and social movements? I guess the answer would be that in a modern, interconnected online world, nothing really is that insular. Finnish attitudes about foreign politics mirror attitudes at home. A skilful researcher with a well thought out and defined research question will be able to articulate new and useful perspectives to the current domestic phenomena.

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