Elite communication has the potential to influence public opinion, civil conflict, and diplomatic interactions. However, a comparative study of leaders' public rhetoric has proven elusive due to the difficulties of developing comparable measures across countries and over time. The advent of social media sites, and its widespread adoption by world leaders, offers a unique new source of data to overcome these challenges. Here, we demonstrate its validity by examining two key explanations in the study of elite communication: the diversionary theory of foreign policy and the relationship between regime type and responsiveness to domestic publics. We test these hypotheses using a novel dataset that contains all social media posts (Facebook and Twitter) published by any head of state or government in all U.N.-member countries since 2012. We rely on a combination of automated translation, dictionary methods, and supervised machine learning to characterize leader rhetoric along a series of key dimensions. Our findings show that leaders try to divert attention from national crises, such as social unrest and a declining economy, by emphasizing foreign policy issues; and that the greater degree of accountability associated with democratic institutions creates incentives for leaders to be more responsive to domestic audiences.