THE DEBATE OVER CIVIC EDUCATION: ITS PLACE IN POPULIST RHETORIC

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Abstract The paper aims to elucidate the relationship between populist rhetoric and civic education, examining the political value the latter holds for the former. The paper addresses some of the major issues raised in the discussion around civic education emerging in the second half of the twentieth century and, again in the 2010s. The research thus centres on the different general interpretative frameworks approaching the core concepts of the civic education curricula. This leads the study to analyse populist rhetoric by contemplating what 'populism' might mean, yielding thereby a functional characterization of populist rhetoric and illustrating its link to civic education. Finally, the paper addresses the case studies of *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos*, Spain's respectively right-wing and left-wing main populist parties.

Keywords: Civic education, political rhetoric, populism, Spanish politics, party politics

Resumen El objetivo de este artículo es discernir cuál es la relación entre la retórica populista y la educación para la ciudadanía, examinando el valor político que tiene esta última para la primera. Para ello, el trabajo discute algunas de las cuestiones principales en el debate que rodea la educación para la ciudadanía durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX y, con argumentos renovados, durante la última década. En ese

sentido, la investigación se centra en los diferentes marcos interpretativos para estudiar los conceptos clave que se tratan en el currículum. Este hilo conduce a analizar la retórica populista desglosando qué podría significar 'populismo', lo que permite desarrollar una caracterización funcional de la retórica populista y su vínculo con la educación para la ciudadanía. Finalmente, el artículo trata los estudios de caso de *Vox* y *Unidas Podemos*, de derecha e izquierda populistas respectivamente.

Palabras clave: Educación cívica, retórica política, populismo, política española, política de partidos

Introduction

Education is ubiquitous in the public arena, and rightly so; it concerns the future of a given society in general and that of its individuals in particular. Indeed, individuals' preferences and curricular design rarely entirely match. Civic education is consequently a source of constant controversy among political parties and plays a major role in the populist discourse addressed here.

Civic education figures in the political agenda and rhetoric not only of mainstream parties but also of populist parties whose underlying narratives have in large part pervaded the entire ideological spectrum over the past decade. This is no coincidence; capturing votes is a means of attaining power in the immediate future, with education and citizenship education often reduced to political currency, occasionally tied to partisan interests or serving as a passport to ideological victory.

This piece argues that several of the core concepts in so-called citizenship education are polysemous (with

multiple meanings) and sufficiently flexible to produce a framework where they are contested. This conceptual flexibility is key to understanding how education and citizenship education are then enshrined in populist rhetoric. Thus, the research question is: What political value does citizenship education hold for populist rhetoric? In response, the working hypothesis states that the political value of civic education lies in its status as a means of identity creation for 'the people'.

This paper starts from the assumption that the political relevance and the conceptual flexibility of citizenship education make it attractive to populist rhetoric, relying primarily on empty signifiers. These are themselves terms without a closed reference. In other words, they are signifiers that are not anchored to a particular signified. Ernesto Laclau (1996) defines empty signifiers applied to the social world as 'signifiers without a signified'. It means that empty signifiers do not reference reality univocally and lack any solid or consistent meaning; that is, their content is constantly flowing in a process of emptying and re-filling or re-conceptualising. The content is dependent on the result of ongoing competition between alternative representations that seek to gain hegemony and thus provide meaning for the signifier.

The paper will, first, describe civic education in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century and the concepts addressed in the curricula formalized in the first decade of the twenty-first century, illustrating their usability in populist rhetoric. This analysis will elucidate its problematic nature. Indeed, there is a substantive change of disposition from subjects such as physics or mathematics to more 'subjective areas' – as some say – like citizenship education, where claims of brainwashing or ideologization are not uncommon.

Second, the paper will outline the approach to populism and its understanding of populist rhetoric,

namely, a pathway to a set of argumentative tools depending upon the conflict between 'people' and 'power' or between oppressed and oppressor, linked with identity-based cultural and political narratives. Several concepts appearing in populist rhetoric, both right-wing and left-wing, are emphasized in civic education curricula: 'Citizenship', 'ethnicity', 'race', 'gender', 'sexuality', 'identity' or 'social justice' are among the contested concepts used in populist rhetoric as empty signifiers, as they are consistently re-conceptualised and their meaning is disputed.

Finally, Spain's main populist parties, *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos* (United We Can), right wing and left wing respectively, serve as case studies to illustrate the argument of the paper: the former aiming to heavily modify the traditional curricula, and the latter reinforcing parental control over education, in both cases, albeit for different reasons, to challenge the liberal understanding of civic education.

Summarizing the civic education debate

Educating good citizens has been a political priority at least since the idea of *paideia* (education), for the ideal *polis* was discussed in the Greco-Roman world, albeit what makes a good citizen is an ongoing debate. Indeed, a crucial issue here is whether education should be about making good citizens or rather about making citizens that are fundamentally good and hence also good citizens.

Yet, despite the expanding range of citizenship over the course of history – women, slaves, immigrants or racial minorities – and the change over time in civic expectations, e.g., expected duties, obligations and responsibilities to a particular political community, civic education remains one of the greatest tools not

only for affirming but also for changing the political *status quo.*

Throughout the twentieth century and both World Wars, civic education broadened its purposes regarding democracy, inclusion, and tolerance (Kennedy, 2019, p 2). In that sense, the school curriculum became a means to imbue youth with liberal democratic values in those countries across the world with at least some commitment to liberal democracy.

Thus, Civic Education (or Citizenship Education) was created as an independent subject in some education systems and in others was merged with other subjects such as history, philosophy or taught following a cross-curricular methodology (Eurydice, 2012, p 13). Extracurricular activities were also encouraged, including 'flag-raising ceremonies, visits to parliamentary institutions and giving a voice to guest speakers who have some political experiences to share' (Kennedy, 2019, p 2).

As of 2002, following *The Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States*,[1] civic education features in national curricula across Europe, although without consensus on a unitary approach. In the UK, for instance, it entered the curriculum in 2002, after the 1998 report by the Advisory Group on Citizenship which raised concerns over the democratic involvement of citizenship and perceived 'social decline' (Tonge et al., 2012).

The objectives outlined in these recommendations, although potentially aspirational, seem to assign the main responsibility to schools, and, as Elena Arbués argues, this seems a disproportionate task (Arbués, 2014, p 227). Schools have nevertheless

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[1] Available at: https://rm.coe.int/16804f7b87.

become the epicentres of civic education and the focus of political agendas on education.

General aim of citizenship education

What is the purpose of civic education? The Eurydice 2012 document, 'Citizen Education in Europe', listed four main objectives applied at least to some extent in every Eurydice country: a) developing political literacy, b) acquiring critical thinking and analytical skills, c) developing certain values, attitudes and behaviours, and d) encouraging active participation and engagement at school and community levels (Eurydice, 2012, p 27).

Of these four objectives, developing political literacy is the most relevant for the argument of the paper. It includes the understanding of issues such as 'social, political and civic institutions; human rights; national constitutions; citizens' rights and responsibilities; social issues; recognition of the cultural and historical heritage as well as the cultural and linguistic diversity of society' (Eurydice, 2012, p 27). It is a formal objective containing both what this paper deems the main goal of civic education and the key to understanding the subject's role in populist rhetoric.

It serves to protect or modify the political *status quo.* It is no coincidence that political forces claiming to seek a structural societal change target education in general and civic education in particular. In liberal democracies, mainly in the Anglosphere, proponents of 'active citizenship' abound, that is, citizens who engage politically and are active in promoting democratic values and human rights.

Yet these 'democratic values' are not necessarily shared by all citizens in a given country, and active citizenship could work as a Foucauldian 'disciplining

technology' (Luke, 1990) to promote and ensure commitment to liberal democracy. For Kennedy, civic education 'is best seen as a political construction designed to serve the purposes of the nation-state reflecting its values, its purposes and its priorities' (Kennedy, 2019, p 18). These purposes and priorities may indeed be liberal, illiberal, or authoritarian.

This general aim of citizenship education can be further illustrated by contemplating the widespread claim that democracy is under attack, and therefore needs protecting. It highlights the perceived role of civic education in the process of promoting liberal democracy and democratic values. After all, the argument for civic education seems to gain weight when imbued with the 'crisis of democracy' narrative.

Chantal Mouffe has been adamant about the 'populist moment' she diagnoses in Europe in recent times and how it represents a turning point of democracy, which, she claims, is in grave crisis. Populism's success is, in that sense, 'the expression of a crisis of liberal-democratic politics' (Mouffe, 2016). She argues that these movements successfully shape the people's demands, namely 'legitimate democratic aspirations' to take back the power from alleged elites. To face this challenge, she proposes, given that 'the people' can be conceptualized in various ways, constructing another people 'promoting a progressive populist movement that is receptive to those democratic aspirations and orientates them towards a defence of equality and social justice' (Mouffe, 2016). Thus, for Mouffe, the left ought to offer an alternative progressive vocabulary to articulate these demands. Education and civic education are a feasible path for fabricating such a narrative. It should be no surprise that populist parties with serious pretensions on the school curricula, such as *Podemos* in Spain, have

actively shared and promoted Mouffe's (and Laclau's) theses in the past (Mouffe & Errejón, 2015).

As shown in the following sections, populism, whether understood as the creation of political identities through discourse, as a *thin* ideology feeding upon thicker, established ideologies to give meaning to its conceptual core or simply as a political practice, has transversal elements cutting across other ideas. These elements include the conceptualization of 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'the other' as opposing poles in a in a quasi-dialectical conflict, the claim by a party or leader to be the sole representative of the people and the axiological divide of citizenship.

Populist rhetoric and civic education

With this analysis of civic education in mind, this section addresses its relationship with and role in populist rhetoric. Hence, the paper will tackle how Euridyce's objective, namely, 'developing political literacy', is key to understanding the role of civic education in populist rhetoric. The objective emphasizes the conceptual flexibility of the subject, dealing mainly with civic and political-institutional legitimacy, human rights, citizen's duties, historical heritage and linguistic diversity.

These concerns encompass several concepts including the nature of citizenship (e.g., whether it is preferable to be an active or passive citizen), if liberal democracy is the best alternative, different interpretations of human rights and subsumes history ranging from the revision of colonial history to the reinforcement of 'western values' in history teaching. In that sense, the conceptual horizon widens considerably to include among others, discussions on matters of ethnicity, gender, or questions of social justice.

These concepts have received a discretionary interpretation dependent on political agents, or rather on their political positions and rhetoric. Indeed, as the following sections show, populist rhetoric employs these signifiers to conceptualize 'the people' and 'the other'. Thus, this section will first address the political interpretative frameworks from which civic education is approached then characterize populist rhetoric and its capacity to adapt to right-wing and left-wing narratives. Finally, the value of civic education for populist rhetoric will emerge from that analysis.

Competing interpretative frameworks

There are three relevant standpoints to approach the aforementioned conceptual debate on the focus and reach of civic education as understood by some theorists of education such as Schugurensky and Myers (2003), Kerr (2002) and Kennedy (2019): a) progressive, b) conservative and c) post-structuralist or critical. Although quite broad in scope and, as such, vague, they facilitate the subsequent understanding of the connection between populist rhetoric and civic education.

The so-called 'progressive' framework highlights public participation and active citizenship, with schools at the forefront. In the 'conservative' case, there may be a production-based concern, that is, to prepare future citizens for the job market or an emphasis on history and traditional values to maintain present conditions. Conversely, a 'critical framework' understands civic education as a tool for validating the power structure, embodied in 'capitalist democracies', where the political regime serves the economic system and financial markets. This approach criticizes the former two (Kennedy, 2019, p 6).

There are several differences between the so-called progressive and conservative approaches. According to some, the progressive approach is akin to traditional republicanism (Pettit, 1997) or liberalism, where participation and involvement in public life are encouraged and taken as key for civic education at schools. The conservative approach is understood as focusing on passive citizenship, passing on traditions and stressing that the teaching of history should highlight gradual progress and development.

They also have disparate views on the future of society, one of the main concerns of education. Conservatism underscores the presence of shared values, the need for gratitude to past generations by preserving their achievements and a certain hopefulness for a future built on the foundations of the past. The progressive framework understands the future as being actively constructed by participating citizens.

These two frameworks and their differences have been widely represented in the public arena. But these views can converge in that they both seek social cohesion, albeit offering different answers to the question of what makes diverse individuals come together and what makes them break apart. This is the central question posed by Charles Merriam in *The Making of Citizens* (1931, pp 33-35). It is a matter of how to cooperate peacefully and successfully in plural societies with citizens who only have their citizenship in common.

The paper mentioned Luke's view of civic education as Foucauldian 'disciplinary technology', and the third standpoint stems from that same position. Indeed, critical theorists – gradually infiltrating the political mainstream – and post-structuralists, claim that aiming at 'cohesion' renders education a factory of citizens, submissive to the *status*

quo represented by liberal democracy and capitalism. Therefore, for the proponents of this approach, both progressive and conservative views of civic education may exclude the possibility of radical renewal and revolutionary change (Luke, 1990).

These three interpretative frameworks, which are general outlines given the scope of this paper, propose quite disparate approaches to the concepts encompassed by civic education as a subject. Their relevance is due to populist rhetoric being practicable for each of them. Nevertheless, it is to the third, critical theory standpoint that populist rhetoric is akin to despite its conservative or progressive core: populist rhetoric aims to fuel conflict, not cohesion or harmony between diverse citizens.

Through conflict between two warring camps, 'the people' and 'the power', this type of oratory is harnessed to advance political change. However, to understand how populist rhetoric and civic education are linked, it is necessary first to characterize what the former might be.

Characterizing populist rhetoric

Achieving a fairly functional characterization of populist rhetoric involves initially trying to shed some light on what 'populist' entails. In that regard, there have been several approaches to populism, among which two stand out: a formal approach argued more representatively by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and an ideational approach defended by scholars such as Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart and Jan-Werner Müller.

The formal approach understands populism as a type of discourse which, largely by virtue of its argumentative character, appears as a condition of the possibility for political action. It manifests as a

redemptive force for democracy, a way to combat right-wing populism. The ideational approach focuses on populism as a set of ideas that can be combined with other ideological features at the core of populist speech (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p 514). For argumentative clarity, to accurately point out some features of populist rhetoric, consider first this second approach.

Take as a starting point the operational definition proposed by Cas Mudde: A "thin-centred" ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: elitism and pluralism" (Mudde, 2004, p 543).

For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, populism's three core concepts, namely, the people, the elite and the general will, come into play with this definition. That is, politics – say the populist politician – expresses the general will in the face of 'the elite'. 'The people', on the other hand, has three senses: as the holder of sovereignty, as the 'common people' or the nation, civically or ethnically understood, and the downtrodden, based on socio-economic class (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp 38-51).

Perhaps more interestingly, this is a definition that highlights the concept of citizenship in populist discourse. That is to say, a person may be a citizen, but not part of 'the people', which may indeed lead to their exclusion from the political arena or to a reduction in the range of their citizenship, amplifying the historical exclusionary dimension of the concept (Kiwan, 2016, p 3). As a direct result, there is polarization, exclusion and possibly discrimination

because of political leanings, social status, sexual orientation or race.

In this logic, using here Claude Lefort's argument, legitimate political power is only held by a subset of the whole population (Lefort, 1988, p 79) embodied by the populist leader or party. This is a rhetorical distinction seeking to set one part of the populace against the other for political gain, often pursuing radical institutional change. The nuances and argumentative contests of politics are thereby reduced to a struggle between two factions.

Following this rhetoric, populist politicians are conceptualized as the only valid voice of the *true* people. As Arato and Cohen (2017) claim, it is based on a *pars pro toto* dynamic, where some of the population "pretends to rule in the name of all". It factually excludes all those left outside of 'the people's' subset, as well as all those not committed enough to the cause the leader represents, which would advance the true demands of imagined "virtuous' citizens" (de la Torre, 2019, p 68).

As seen, from this minimal definition of populism it is possible to identify two salient features of populist rhetoric: on the one hand, it exacerbates political polarization as it is at its most effective in conflictive environments. On the other hand, it relies on *thin* or vacuous concepts, with no agreed reference to create a coherent discourse through which those concepts gain meaning depending on their context of use.

Exploring the approaches of Laclau and Mouffe to populism will help to further elaborate, albeit briefly, how populist discourse fuels political conflict through the creation of identities. This analysis will give the remaining keys to characterize populist rhetoric, making its relationship with citizenship education even more apparent.

To Laclau, populism is a practice that creates political identities dichotomizing society into two opposing sides, the people and the power (Laclau, 1977). He argues in his book, *On Populist Reason* (2005), for a contrast between stable and conventional administrative politics and exceptional moments of populist rupture, when the general population breaks into these two antagonistic groups.

This event follows what Laclau calls a 'logic of difference' and a 'logic of equivalence'. The former assumes that legitimate demands are attended to by the state administration, and the latter that these demands cannot be individually addressed, and in turn aggregate in what he calls a chain of equivalence that eventually leads to social rupture. This rupture is, in essence, the consequence of a moment or moments of profound disaffection with traditional politics and institutions that accumulate until it reaches a tipping point.

Thus, it operates following an anti-institutional logic that disassociates 'the people' from the institutions that become the alleged oligarchy's site of power. Those demands, ignored by politicians and mainstream parties, are personified by the figure of the leader, which unifies them in one voice (Mouffe, 2018, pp 69-71).

The conflict described, claims Mouffe (2018), is not one of antagonism *à la* Carl Schmitt (in her particular interpretation of his work) but of what she names 'agonism': a struggle between political adversaries (Mouffe, 2018, p 91). Yet this distinction is still quite ambiguous at best, as it fails, for example, to account for charismatic leaders and parties using populist rhetoric without attempting to undermine the state institutions or to produce radical political change through this conflict.

The figure of the charismatic leader, for Laclau, is a result of the singularity following the aforementioned logic of equivalence. However, the leader's identity would be irrelevant for Laclau and Mouffe. It is an "empty signifier", a signifier without a signified of the collusion of the hopes and passions of "the people" (Laclau, 2005, p 16). This figure acts then as a central agent in the conceptualization of 'the people' through discourse. It is an idea of representation as embodiment: the leader *embodies* the people (Borriello & Jäger, 2020, p 4).

Conflict is at the core of populist rhetoric, moving within a friend and enemy dynamic. It is a fictional conflict – a conflict existing initially only in the discourse – between two antagonistic (or agonistic, polemical) poles, namely, 'the true people' and 'the elite', 'the oligarchy'. These are formal, rhetorically constructed categories serving the populist narrative and applying equally to right and left. Furthermore, they may share certain political pretensions permeating populist rhetoric on civic education.

The flexibility of categories like 'the people' and 'the elite' leaves room for mutability and adaptation along with social and cultural trends. It allows a free margin of interpretation for these signifiers. It liberates populists from ideological ties and allows them to resourcefully navigate the political arena. This highlights the idea of populism as a political practice, a recourse to a plethora of argumentative tools available to a populist politician – or any politician – to achieve political goals.

This is the other key to populist rhetoric: belonging to a 'political repertoire'. It opens up a performative dimension that understands it as a resource to be employed, a suit for the politician to 'slip in and out' of (Kranert, 2020, p 9). Populist rhetoric bridges political agents with their social basis (Ostiguy,

2017, pp 73-74), but rather than 'contesting world views' it is a relationship of identity creation.

As implied throughout the paper, civic education grants access to that social basis in an identity creation process. Through civic education, populist politicians and politicians employing populist rhetoric can fuel political conflict and exacerbate social polarization. It focuses on conceptualizing citizenship in a friend and enemy dynamic, through discourse it imbues the conceptual core of civic education with meaning.

These are discussed in works such as *The Palgrave International Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Social Justice* (2016): citizenship, race, gender, sexuality, native peoples and history. It includes those items outlined by Eurydice, especially the first objective, mentioned several times during the study and, as said, holding the key to better understanding the value of civic education for populist rhetoric.

Case studies from Spain: the political relevance of civic education

The Spanish example serves here as a case study to present in a clearer light the complex relationship between politics, populist rhetoric and citizenship education in practice, as education policy and the role of citizenship education has long been a heavily contested matter in Spain.

As outlined in the second section, citizenship education has assumed a central position in the global curricula from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, especially democratic citizenship. However, there is no consensus on approach or method, and its relationship with national politics varies significantly

across borders. Briefly, there is accord on the subject matter, but not so on its content.

What, then, is the goal of civic education? By the end of the last century, a general commitment to liberal democracy produced the notion that it could be safeguarded through education. Indeed, the words of Woodrow Wilson when entering the First World War aptly characterize the overall goal of citizenship education, namely, 'making the world safe for democracy' (see Wilson's speech, 2 April, 1917). Such, in short, is the spirit of Eurydice, thoroughly explored in this study.

The legitimacy of such an aspiration is not considered here, although it poses a relevant question: when is it fulfilled? As a goal, it is vague enough to provide politicians, especially those favouring populist rhetoric, with a basis for modifying laws and reforming education policy. After all, it is left for them to draw the line, for instance, between what is real democratic citizenship and what is not.

In this view, citizenship education is instrumentalized to protect liberal democracy, and with that alleged goal, populist politicians can use it to pursue their aims, which paradoxically may conflict with the general aspiration of citizenship education. Indeed, the issue has commonly been shrouded in controversy, more so since the 2010s.

Agreement between political agents has proven so far impossible in that regard, and civic education is largely reduced to 'symbolic citizenship courses devoid of any critical thinking element' (Buxarrais & Ortega, 2019, p 332). Likewise, a compulsory course introduced in 2006 aimed at A level students in Education for Citizenship and Human Rights was excluded from the curricula by the Spanish government in 2012, the year of Eurydice's publication. The Spanish Minister of Education at the

time opted rather for an optional course 'whose syllabus would be free from controversy and not susceptible to ideological indoctrination issues' (Barcala, 2012).

Spain has certainly encountered difficulties in establishing a continuous and cohesive education policy since the promulgation of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, and each political party in power has approved a new education law following their respective ideological agendas. In short, education has been used, and continues to be used, as political currency to purchase an ideological victory. It is no coincidence, then, that populist rhetoric has pervaded the debate over civic education.

Taking the Constitution of 1978 as a pivotal milestone, it is interesting to see a timeline of education laws to put the palpable lack of cohesion into perspective. Prior to the Constitution, as Naval and Arbués note (Naval & Arbués, 2016, p 597): a) The 1945 *Ley de Enseñanza Primaria* (Law of Primary Teaching), in force for approximately twenty years; b) The so-called 'technocratic' period, beginning in the 1960s, which achieved universal access to teaching; and c) The 1970 *Ley General de Educación* (General Law of Education), in which the state assumed responsibility for education. These were all approved during the Francoist regime.

After the promulgation of the Constitution, as listed by Buxarrais and Ortega (Buxarrais & Ortega, 2019 p 332): in 1990, the LOGSE (Organic Law of the Education System) 'approved while the Socialist Party was in power'; in 2002, the LOCE (Organic Law on the Quality of Education) 'passed while the [conservative] Popular Party was in government', although it was never officially implemented; in 2006, the LOE (Organic Law of Education) 'was adopted with the Socialist Party once again in government'; and in 2013,

the LOMCE (Organic Law on the Improvement of Educational Quality), 'passed when the Popular Party returned to power'.

As of 2020, following the results of the general election of 10 November 2019, the Socialist Party returned to power by forming a coalition government with *Unidas Podemos*, a coalition of forces mainly represented by *Podemos* and United Left. As tradition dictates, this government passed yet another education law in 2020: the LOMLOE (Organic Law of Modification of the LOE).

Table 1 below summarizes the evolutionary process of education laws in Spain and key milestones for citizenship education worldwide.

Year	Key hallmarks in the global context for Citizenship Education	Spanish education laws	Spanish political context
1945-1960	End of World War II and post-war period	*Ley de Enseñanza Primaria* (Law of Primary Teaching)	Francoist regime: Enforced for twenty years until the technocratic period beginning in 1960. Universal access to education
1970		*Ley General de Educación* (General Law of Education)	Francoist regime: The state assumes

			responsibility for education
1975	First international attempt by researchers Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen (1975) to ascertain young people's notions of citizenship		Death of Francisco Franco on 20 November and beginning of the Spanish Transition (1975-1982)
1990		Passing of the LOGSE (Organic Law of the Education System)	Government of the Socialist Party
1978			Promulgation of the Spanish democratic Constitution
2002	Civic Education features in the national curricula across Europe following *The Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States.* For example, it	Passing of the LOCE (Organic Law on the Quality of Education)	Government of the conservative Popular Party

	was introduced in Britain for the first time		
2006		Passing of the LOE (Organic Law of Education)	Government of the Socialist Party
2012	Eurydice document: Civic Education in Europe		
2013		Passing of the LOMCE (Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality)	Government of the Popular Party
2020		Passing of the LOMLOE (Organic Law of Modification of the LOE)	Coalition government of the Socialist Party and *Unidas Podemos*

Table 1. Evolution of civic education and the political context in Spain (1945-2020).

In the context of the passing of the LOMLOE in 2020, the arguments raised respectively by the right and left-wing populist parties, *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos* will be discussed next. This will show how in practice,

following the theoretical framework developed in the preceding sections, education in general and civic education in particular are targeted by populist rhetoric and integrated into these politicians' overarching discourse, then instrumentalized to achieve their goals.

The position of Vox

In *Vox*, the conflict between 'the people' and the "others", morally inferior in their view, stems from an ethnonationalist conception of the people, and an historical narrative arguably having little to do with actual historical events. In the April 2019 general election campaign, they chose Covadonga, Asturias for its launching. In 722, the legendary King Pelagius of Asturias allegedly won a major victory against a vastly superior Muslim army, setting the stage for the *Reconquista*. In this election, one of the main issues was Catalonia's claim to independence and Spanish national unity, making referencing the *Reconquista* all the more attractive for *Vox*.

In Covadonga, party leader Santiago Abascal said that Spaniards must 'ride on the steed of patriotism to the general election against the enemies of Spain': those enemies were listed as Catalan secessionists, progressives, gender politics advocates, communists, Islamists and what he labelled the "cowardly right", namely, centre-right parties and moderate conservatives. All were presented as threats to the unity of Spain (Carvajal, 2019).

These groups constitute the "others" that follow, in his view, a hidden agenda created by the left-wing and 'globalist elites'. Against these enemies, superior in force as the Moors were to Pelagius' army, the *true* people would have to defend Spain's territorial integrity to the end.

This historical narrative with the *Reconquista* as its symbol was used to justify certain political measures urged by *Vox*, more symbolic and rhetorical than factual, such as the proposal in Andalusia to change the day commemorating the Autonomous Community from 28 February to 2 January. This was thought to celebrate the day the *Reconquista* ended with the conquest of Granada in 1492 (Pérez, 2019).

To study the party's view of education and civic education, this section focuses on the parental veto proposed by *Vox* (and exercised in communities like Murcia) and their opposition to the last education law. As will be seen, *Vox*'s position is primarily reactive, although their arguments reveal their approaches to matters of civic education. This is due to their parliamentary position, having so far remained in the opposition.

Since 2019, *Vox* has proposed what they call a 'parental pin' or veto (*pin parental*). In Andalusia, under the label 'freedom of education', *Vox* argued for a parental veto. It consists of making compulsory for schools consulting parents on their children's assistance in workshops, seminars or activities with an ideological or moral attitude contrary to their convictions (Pérez, 2019). This is a direct reaction to the Socialist Party's and (mainly) *Unidas Podemos*' rhetoric on gender issues, which, much like *Vox*'s, is born of an identity-based narrative with a different conceptual backdrop.

It was met with a vigorous backlash from the government, a response to be addressed below, and by members of the LGBTQ+ community. They asked for the affective-sexual education of children to be respected as it was protected by the education law. Abascal responded that 'equality between men and women as well as respect for homosexuals are already accepted in Spain'. The parental veto targets, according

to him, the protection of minors against 'indoctrination in erotic games and gender ideology' (Grande, 2020).

Against the new education law, popularly dubbed by the Socialist Party the 'Celáa Law' after the Minister of Education, Isabel Celáa, *Vox* said that they 'would not consent to its sectarian, totalitarian and relativistic indoctrination'. *Vox*'s congresswoman, Georgina Trías, duly presented an amendment to the totality of the new education law, saying: 'they want to impose on our children at their earliest age that supposed sexual, ideological and sectarian education. And they want to do it in an organized, curricular way, as it pertains to a good old fashioned totalitarian regime […]' (*Vox*, 2020).

Vox, moreover, lists up to ten reasons for rejecting the Celáa Law. Here those are considered highlighting *Vox*'s views on civic education, namely: first, the alleged imposition of sexual, ideological and sectarian education, contrary to the principles and basic rights enshrined in the Constitution; second, it accentuates the absence of Spanish language from schools across Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, the Valencian Community and the Balearic Islands. In that regard, it fails to guarantee the established minimal hours of teaching in Spanish and disregards parental demands for their children to receive classes in their mother tongue.

Third, it wastes the opportunity to reform vocational training given its current status in comparison to Europe. Finally, it strips religion of any academic value thus contravening the International Accord with the Holy See that mandates religion be taught on the same grounds as any other discipline (*Vox*, 2020).

As previously stated, *Vox*'s approach to education policy is mainly reactive. Yet it is possible to provide a good picture of their view on civic education, following

their conceptualization of 'the people', 'the elite', and the core of their argument for the parental veto and against the Celáa Law. Arguably, the proposal of the parental pin fuels political conflict and polarization and portrays them – as intended – as those who protect children against leftist gender ideology.

Thus, a neutral, possibly reasonable proposal becomes a vehicle for promoting the demands of a subset of the population. Their reasons for opposing the new education law underscore their vindication of the Spanish language, their defence of traditional family values and their support for Catholic education. Indeed, their rhetoric conceptualizes identity from those coordinates.

Vox's arguments seem to follow trends commonly associated in the literature with populist rhetoric. As discussed in the theoretical debate on populism above, on the one hand, they build up an axiological conflict between 'the people' and 'the others'. Following an ethnonationalist logic, the former presents the latter, depending on the context, as traitors, brainwashers and relativists. On the other hand, this Manichean view produces an exclusionary narrative –as Kiwan (2016) argues, where not belonging to the *true people* risks being branded as enemies.

Furthermore, other cues are visible, such as the claim to sole representation reflected on the view of *Vox* as the one and true defender of youth against those 'liberal elites' attempting to seize their minds. However, populist rhetoric serves preeminently an instrumental purpose and fuels their arguments concerning civic education. In that sense, populism affords access to different argumentative antics to achieve the party's goals.

The position of Unidas Podemos

Born of the 15-M movement of 2011, the *Podemos* party as of 2014 frequently defined the elite in socio-economic terms, using "caste" to refer to the establishment. On the one hand, the political establishment, representatives of what they derogatorily call the "Regime of 78" (*Régimen del 78*), the political *status quo* emerging after the Constitution of 1978. They argued that the transition from the Francoist regime to democracy was never really achieved. It was only covered by a different layer of paint. Hence, they "left the plazas and ran for office", exporting the assembly model of 15-M and exploiting appearances in public acts as manifestations of the "popular will" (Valdivielso, 2017, p 5).

On the other hand, there was the political establishment: the Troika (jargon for the triumvirate formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). The German government was also presented as an abusive European neighbour (Ramiro & Gómez, 2016, p 112). *Podemos* explicitly argued for "the people vs. the elite" divide to cultivate resentment and maximize their election prospects. This achieved tangible results in the European Parliament elections of 25 May 2014, where *Podemos* voters were those "particularly dissatisfied with the workings of democracy [...] and an intense lack of confidence in politicians" (Cordero & Montero, 2015, p 374).

For the general election of 29 April 2019, *Unidos Podemos*, a left-wing coalition where *Podemos* and United Left are the main members, opted for changing its name to *Unidas Podemos* feminizing *Unidos* to *Unidas* to underscore their commitment to feminism in response to the alleged threat of the far right to women's rights. It was presented as a reaction to the

alleged sexism of *Vox*. Thereafter, *Vox* became the opposite pole of the dichotomy for the left in Spain.

Unidas Podemos has adopted feminism and several other social causes, such as LGBTQ+ rights. In that sense, their discursive conceptualization of 'the people' and 'the elite' have shifted from socio-economic conditions to a dichotomy between, in their view, historically oppressed minorities and their oppressors. This shift follows the rise in the influence of critical theories of society in the United States and elsewhere related to post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School (Lindsay & Pluckrose, 2020).

This emphasis on minorities, who in this rhetoric are presented as the *true* people, inherently virtuous, enables populist politicians to question the motivations and moral standing of those challenging their arguments, law proposals or any other political initiative. It is a win-them-all argument in the sense that questioning labelled feminist or supposedly equality-seeking policies can be branded as sexist and those who question them are instantly dubbed conservatives, fascists or homophobes. This is, fundamentally, a way to construct 'the other' as the enemy: those seen as opposed to 'the people' or not sufficiently convinced by the 'cause' of the populist party or politician.

Further, it is crucial to insist on the axiological content of the claims raised against these so-called 'conservatives, fascists and homophobes'. The *others*, in this view, must be evil and rebutted using political power only legitimately held by a subset of the population, following Claude Lefort's (1988) standpoint, represented in this case by *Unidas Podemos*.

A similar exclusionary element is present, although in a different vein from *Vox*'s, where citizenship is not necessarily tantamount to being part

of 'the people', allegedly represented solely by the party (thus affecting their civic education policy). In *Podemos* there is a solid Laclauian-Mouffian influx, seen in their attempt to redirect the demands of the population, seemingly – in their view – unmet by so-called elites or establishments.

Crisis also seems to be the driving political force in several key arguments. Two moments stand out: In their political youth, the context of the 2008 economic crisis was an ideal, concrete backdrop for their plunge into mainstream politics. On the other hand, their continued performance of crisis is usually framed in a 'crisis of democracy' narrative described above. Other 'performances' arguably include the outcry about an alleged influx of gender violence, persecution of LGBTQ+ people by far-righters or claims of a judicialization of politics or lawfare instigated by the old elites against *Podemos*.

To show *Unidas Podemos*' conception of civic education, mirroring the analysis of *Vox,* also consider their reaction to the parental veto and their defence of the Celáa Law. In the case of the former, Irene Montero, Minister of Equality and member of *Unidas Podemos*, accused those promoting the parental pin of contravening the State Pact Against Gender Violence (*Pacto de Estado contra la Violencia de Género*), which established an education in values that promotes 'effective equality' between men and women (Grande, 2020). She also said that the children of homophobe and sexist parents have the right to be educated in the promotion of human rights, equality and feminism. In other words, parents favouring the parental veto on these workshops are *de facto* labelled as sexists and homophobes (María, 2020).

Pablo Iglesias, who at the time was second vice-president of the Spanish government and Alberto Garzón, Minister of Consumer Affairs also expressed

their opposition to this proposal on Twitter and on TV respectively (*20 Minutos*, 2020). Iglesias, for his part, claimed that the parental veto wanted to normalize the right's legal disobedience. Garzón, like Montero, stated that children of homophobic parents should be taught to love whomever they chose, and that *Vox* was targeting public education with this measure.

In response to criticism of the new education law by opposition parties, namely, the Popular Party, the Citizens' party and *Vox*, Joan Mena, spokesman for education and vocational training of the *Unidas Podemos-En Comú Podem-Galicia en Común* (Galicia in Common) confederal group, said that although they claimed to champion liberty, they actually stood for privilege and class distinction (Sanmartín, 2020).

Unidas Podemos' rhetoric identifies mainly the Popular Party and *Vox* as 'the other', or rather as the oppressors. The identity of 'the people' is created upon a shared identity feature, be it race, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, which marks a given person as part of the oppressed. In that logic, the party alone can accurately grasp the demands of these groups.

Thus, civic education also serves as a bridge for creating said identity, and fuelling a social conflict that works as an electoral platform against those who would deprive these minorities of their rights. As argued above, far from seeking social cohesion and harmony between diverse citizens, populist rhetoric on civic education thrives on their clash.

Conclusion

This paper sought to answer the question on the value of citizenship education in populist rhetoric. Hence, the working hypothesis was that the political value of civic education lies in its status as conduit for the process of identity creation of 'the people' in its

conceptualization. Scrutinizing this hypothesis began by tracing the subject's history starting after WWII. To achieve its purpose, the paper studied the objectives detailed in the Eurydice document, redacted in 2012, highlighting the first as pivotal: developing political literacy. This objective was critical to understanding the political value of civic education in populist rhetoric, as it is prone to a discretionary interpretation dependent on political agents. With that in mind, the paper explained the various interpretative frameworks through which Eurydice's objectives could be addressed.

Mindful of the previous steps centred on civic education, the paper characterized populist rhetoric, analysing the Laclauian formal approach and Cas Mudde's ideational approach to populism. This enabled an adequate framing of the role of empty signifiers in populist discourse and opened a performative dimension of populist rhetoric. With these findings, the political value of civic education for populist rhetoric emerged: using civic education as a rhetorical instrument, populist politicians can fuel political conflict. The focus of populist rhetoric is on the fabrication of citizenship through discourse which gives meaning to the conceptual core of civic education.

Finally, after exploring the state of the education laws in Spain, the paper examined the cases of *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos* to ascertain how populist rhetoric on civic education operates in practice. These results will hopefully encourage further debate, as the findings presented here are by no means definitive. An extensive field opens up from these results to discuss how national legislation could promote civic education, maybe via multi-party parliamentary agreement among non-populist parties and moderates. The matter of populist ambitions or conflict fuelled by these

politicians instrumentalizing citizenship education also comes to the fore: how to curb them? Perhaps constitutional precautionary measures can be taken or enhanced, or perhaps the exit from this conundrum is to be found through citizenship education itself.

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