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Political communications on Facebook and populism. The 2019 European Parliament election in Spain

Abstract

Populist actors have more success than other parties on social media –particularly Facebook– where their posts receive higher levels of engagement. The entry of populist parties onto the Spanish political stage can spread the use of their rhetoric and influence citizens' political decisions, affecting the configuration of supranational institutions such as the European Union. The aim of this study is to use a quantitative content analysis to verify the presence of populist discourse in the 844 messages published on Facebook by Spanish parties during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign and to analyse their impact on user interaction. The results show that the newest and most extremist parties monopolise the messages with empty, anti-elite populism. However, the use of exclusionary populist discourse is also detected in more moderate conservative parties. Populist parties, especially VOX, lead user interactions, irrespective of whether the populist style appears in the messages. The results of the research show that the populist style is inexorably consolidating in Europe as an electoral communications strategy on Facebook. As with other European countries, extremist and opposition parties also adopt the populist style as a communications strategy. The results suggest that the success of populist actors on social media may be conditioned by the populist attitudes of their followers and less by the characteristics of these parties' publications.

Keywords
Populism, political communications, social media, Facebook, European Parliament election, online mobilisation, users.

1. Introduction

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election was held in Spain in an unusual context of political instability, just one month after the third general election in four years. For decades, Spanish democracy had been characterised by the alternating institutional hegemony of the two major parties: the social-democratic PSOE and the conservative PP. The collapse of the two-party system and the origin of political fragmentation dates back to the 2014 EP election, where the major parties felt the effects of the 2008 economic crisis and its political management (Boix-Palop & López-García, 2014). This election catapulted the left-wing populist Podemos party into the Spanish political arena. In the following General Election in 2015, Podemos and the liberal Ciudadanos (Cs) succeeded in entering Spanish Parliament,

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channelling social discontent over corruption and the political crisis in Catalonia (Rodríguez-Díaz & Castromil, 2020). The arrival of the two new parties triggered the collapse of the bipartisan system, heralding a period of institutional deadlock and adaptation to the new political reality. In the April 2019 General Election, the far-right populist party VOX entered the political fray, winning 10% of the vote, giving visibility to increased polarisation and political fragmentation, boosted by the entrenchment of the Catalan crisis.

Political parties went into the 2019 EP election whilst adapting their communication strategies to the new fragmented context, with different parties fighting for hegemony within the same ideological wing. The arrival of populist parties in the institutions may bring the contagion of their rhetoric to other parties and negatively affect the public debate and the political configuration of the European Union (EU), where populist parties maintain a negative discourse towards the European project (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Populism is a serious challenge to liberal democracy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), as it degrades the quality of public debate (Waisbord, 2018) and delegitimises the institutions and processes that underpin a social and democratic state (Plattner, 2010). Social media offer populist parties a channel through where they can disseminate their messages and reach a large number of citizens without the filter of the media (Bergman, 2020), which tend to critically evaluate them and exercise their gatekeeper function in a restrictive manner (Wettstein *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, different studies have shown that populist actors lead user engagement on these platforms –particularly Facebook– with a higher number of followers and interactions with their content (Fenoll & Hassler, 2019).

The main objective of the research is to test the presence of populist rhetoric in political discourse through a content analysis of the Facebook posts by the Spanish national political parties that won seats in the 2019 EP election. We hypothesised that the arrival of populist parties in the institutions may have transmitted their communication style to the discourse of the other parties (H1). Thus, the first research question aims to find out which parties use this communications strategy in order to determine whether it is unique to populist parties or whether its use has spread to other political actors (RQ1). To gain a deeper insight into the use of this strategy, the second research question seeks to find out whether there are ideological differences in the type of populist rhetoric used by Spanish political parties (RQ2). The simultaneous holding of elections at local, regional and European levels offers a multilevel electoral scenario that allows for an appraisal of where the populist communications approach is preferentially used and what impact it has on users' reactions. In line with these considerations, the third research question seeks to determine the political level at which populist appeals are addressed (RQ3), while the fourth research question focuses on whether there are differences in the way Facebook users of the analysed parties interact with posts that include populist content (RQ4).

1.1. *Populism and social media*

Populism has been defined by some authors as a style of communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a political style (Moffitt, 2016) or a thin-centred ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) that can be used by both the extreme right and the extreme left (Ernst *et al.*, 2017; Mouffe, 2018). In the Spanish case, we have an example of this populist approach, with VOX on the far right (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020) and Podemos on the left (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2017). To identify key characteristics of presentation that may be associated with populist communications, some authors focus on stylistic elements such as emotionality or negativity (Barbeito Iglesias & Iglesias Alonso, 2021; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), while others point to the substantial content such as people-centrism, anti-elitism and the exclusion of out-groups (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Lilleker *et al.*, 2022; Reinemann *et al.*, 2016). In this study, we rely on the latter option, which focuses on what is expressed in populist political communications and analyses the use of these three core elements of populism in the discourse of the parties.

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While populist rhetoric is particularly useful to new entrepreneur parties (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020), it might also be used by any political actor, including mainstream parties (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). The arrival of populist parties in institutions enhances the visibility and impact of their messages, both in the media (Blassnig *et al.*, 2020; Fenoll & Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2016) and on social media (Ernst *et al.*, 2019). Once inside the system, the general political discourse is in jeopardy of being infected by populist elements (Engesser *et al.*, 2017b; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; van Spanje, 2018). In this regard, it is worth noting that extremist political actors and opposition parties are often more likely to use the populist style of communications, especially on Facebook (Ernst *et al.*, 2017), where they are significantly more popular than the other parties (Fenoll & Hassler, 2019). This trend of incorporating elements of populist rhetoric into Facebook campaigning has also been detected in EP elections (Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2018; Lilleker & Balaban, 2021). To track the advance of populist discourse, de Vreese *et al.* (2018) recommend focusing on the content of the messages of all political actors to assess whether they incorporate populist rhetoric elements, irrespective of whether they are officially labelled as populist or not.

To establish whether the messages published by political parties contain populist appeals, the presence of three characteristic elements of this type of rhetoric need to be checked: the construction and definition of the people, the articulation of the corrupt elite and the attack on external groups (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). First, empty populism is one of the core features of this style of communication, where a direct appeal is made to the 'pure people', of whom populist actors claim to be the authentic and legitimate representatives. Another element that often occurs with this strategy is attacks on the elites, be they media, political or economic, whom they blame for having betrayed the ordinary people. Finally, the most damaging populist strategy is the exclusionary discourse, which focuses on out-groups, who are accused of endangering the welfare of the in-group. The combination of all three elements is deemed complete populism (Reinemann *et al.*, 2016), although they can also appear independently. From an ideological point of view, excluding populism is more closely linked to the extreme right (Ernst *et al.*, 2017), which tends to focus its attacks on immigration or minorities (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). In contrast, anti-elite populism can appear at both ideological extremes (Koc-Michalska & Klinger, 2021): left-wing populists focus their attacks on the economic elite; while right-wing populists target the media elite (Ernst *et al.*, 2017).

Although considered second-order elections in Spain (Berganza, 2008) and the rest of Europe (de Vreese, 2009), EP elections play an important role for new and small parties, offering them a more favourable electoral context (Skrinis & Teperoglou, 2008). The 2014 EP election, for example, served as a springboard for Podemos, which gained five MEPs just four months after the party was founded and increased its prominence in media coverage (Fenoll & Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2016). This favourable context for the consolidation of emerging and challenging parties may end up making populist issues and rhetoric more visible, magnifying their influence on the political makeup of the EU, as the increase in the percentage of votes of these parties may end up pushing the EP towards a more Eurosceptic position (Mudde, 2014).

The rise of social media is another element that negatively influences the quality of democracies by increasing political polarisation in society (Tucker *et al.*, 2018). Citizens have incorporated digital media into their information diet and, currently, the main source of news for Spaniards is online (78%), including social media (Newman *et al.*, 2021). According to Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Facebook remains the most used social media for news consumption in Spain (Newman *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, social media is a central element in the electoral campaigns of populist actors (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). On platforms such as Facebook, populists are more successful among users than other parties (Blassnig *et al.*, 2020), both in the number of followers and in the reactions they generate from 'likes' or 'shares' (Fenoll & Hassler, 2019), which are considered indicators of posts' popularity (Porten-

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Cheé *et al.*, 2018) that help disseminate messages to a wider secondary audience (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015).

Some authors claim that this trend is associated with populist actors, who messages have greater 'shareworthiness' and enhanced recognition in the form of 'likes,' regardless of the content of their Facebook posts (Ceccobelli *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, there is evidence that this success is underpinned by the populist attitudes of these parties' supporters (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). The populist attitudes of users can be defined as their agreement with the three core features of populism (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Schulz *et al.*, 2018), which is manifested by reinforcing support for populist parties and candidates in negative political contexts (Hawkins *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, other studies point to populist content as a trigger for user interaction (Bene *et al.*, 2022) and downplay the importance of the authorship of posts (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019). However, other research has found evidence that both elements drive the popularity of Facebook posts (Blassnig *et al.*, 2020).

2. Method

The corpus consists of all the posts published on Facebook during the month prior to election day (26 May 2019) by the national political parties that obtained representation in the EP. The time frame analysed therefore offers a broad corpus that allows an in-depth observation of the parties' strategy by including both the campaign and the pre-electoral campaign. Due to the lack of activity during this period on the Facebook page of the left-wing coalition Unidas Podemos, the analysis focused on the posts published by Podemos, the coalition leader. The posts were collected daily using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). The collection was manually verified by cross-checking the collected posts with the posts available on the Facebook pages of the parties for the first and the last date of the research period. In total, 844 Facebook posts were stored.

The study follows a quantitative content analysis methodology, where the unit of analysis is the post. The coding scheme is based on the design used in other research on political communications on social media during the EP election campaign (Haßler *et al.*, 2021), which is available in an online repository[1]. The manual coding covered all elements of the Facebook posts, including visual elements such as images and the first minute of videos. To ensure the reliability of the manual coding, a test was conducted among the coders on a random sample of 50 posts. The results of the Holsti *CR* test show a common understanding of the coded categories (all Holsti ≥ .7), giving the study good reliability values (Igartua, 2006; Neuendorf, 2016).

To determine which parties present populist rhetoric and what differences in usage exist (RQ1 and RQ2), we follow the typology of de Vreese *et al.* (2018), who classify populist rhetoric according to the occurrence of one of the following three appeals: empty populism (when only the 'people', as an in-group or political sovereign, are appealed to), anti-elite populism (when the elite are blamed for the problems harming ordinary people) and exclusionary populism (when an out-group is presented as dangerous, antagonistic or excluded from the pure people. The dangerous others might be ethnic, political or cultural minorities, or people with views that are presented as minority). Finally, full populism is coded when all of the above elements are present. To find out which political level the parties focus on (RQ3), we code whether the topics in the post refer or mainly relate to local, regional or national level (1) or EU level (2). To measure the interaction that posts with populist rhetoric received (RQ4), the number of 'shares' and 'likes' from users of the analysed posts were downloaded in Facepager.

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[1] See https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF.

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3. Findings

Table 1 shows the number of posts in which the different populist style elements appear, as well as their percentage of each party's posts. Overall, populist rhetoric is present in more than a quarter of the messages posted on Facebook. However, the Chi-square test reveals that there are significant differences between the parties [$\mathcal{X}^2$ (16, $\mathcal{N}$ = 844) = 386.20, $p < .001$]. The two populist parties lead in the use of this type of discourse, especially VOX, which uses populist rhetoric more frequently (79% of its posts). In contrast, the populist style is barely present in the messages of the incumbent PSOE (7%).

Table 1. Type of populist appeal used by party.

			Podemos	PSOE	Cs	PP	VOX	Total
				Party				Total
Appeal	Non-populist	N	124	225	92	145	24	610
		%	66	93	79	79	21	72
		Residual	-2.1	8.5	1.7	2.2	-13.1	
	Empty populism	N	22	0	0	0	35	57
		%	12	0	0	0	31	7
		Residual	3.1	-5.0	-3.1	-4.1	11.0	
	Anti-elite populism	N	29	0	0	0	9	38
		%	15.5	0	0	0	8	4.5
		Residual	8.2	-4.0	-2.5	-3.3	1.9	
	Exclusionary populism	N	8	17	25	39	33	122
		%	4	7	21	21	29	14.5
		Residual	-4.5	-3.9	2.3	2.9	4.7	
	Complete populism	N	4	0	0	0	13	17
		%	2	0	0	0	11	2
		Residual	0.1	-2.6	-1.7	-2.2	7.7	
Total		N	187	242	117	184	114	844
		%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

References to the people as a community or as political sovereigns that are typical of empty populism appear exclusively in the two populist parties –particularly VOX. While Podemos appeals to the 'real people', the far-right party alludes to the 'living Spain,' which is the slogan used during the *#EspañaViva* campaigns. Podemos makes significantly more use of anti-elite populism in its messages (15.5%), which especially criticise the economic elite, whom they accuse of holding the real power and pressuring democratic institutions to favour markets over citizens' rights (Podemos, 11-05-2019) as can be seen in the United We Can Change Europe advertising spot (Image 1). VOX, however, focuses its anti-elite attacks mainly on the media, which it describes as the "mouthpieces" and "henchmen" of power (VOX, 20-05-2019) and claims that the "media hegemony of the left" deceives the electorate (VOX, 08-05-2019).

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Image 1. Podemos advertisement for the 2019 EP election.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/ahorapodemos/posts/1225379180952152.

Exclusionary populism appears significantly in the discourse of the three parties in the right-wing bloc, albeit with the populist party having a greater intensity in its publications (33% of its posts). VOX, Cs and PP use a strategy of delegitimisation and demonisation of their political adversaries, accusing the PSOE of being controlled by what they call "terrorists" (PP, 26-05-2019) and "coup plotters" (PP, 20-05-2019; VOX, 23-05-2019), in reference to the Basque and Catalan pro-independence parties, respectively. Cs and PP refrain from making exclusionary attacks against immigration, unlike VOX, which suggests underage immigrants arriving in Spain without their parents are violent people (VOX, 10-05-2019) and immigration as a threat to be defended against (Image 2). Finally, complete populism appears almost exclusively in posts published by VOX, although they only account for 11% of the messages.

Image 2. VOX advertisement for the 2019 EP election.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/vox.espana/posts/1896771287094950,

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Table 2 shows the percentage of posts with populist content according to the party and political level at which the message is aimed. The results point to populist rhetoric being used more intensively when posts concern the European level. Although the two populist parties incorporate populist appeals more frequently than the other parties, the use of this type of rhetoric in VOX's discourse stands out significantly, as it is present in almost all its publications at the European level (95%) and in three quarters of its posts at the local level. VOX's attacks at the European level focus on the "fight against immigration" and against the European institutions, which they call the "Brussels oligarchy" and opine the "riding roughshod over national sovereignty" (VOX, 24-05-2019). At the national level, exclusionary attacks are directed against immigration and Islam, which are linked to crime and paedophilia (VOX, 08-05-2019).

Table 2. Percentage of posts with populist content according to party and political level.

		Party					Total
		Podemos	PSOE	Cs	PP	VOX	
Political level	EU	42	13**	17**	33	95*	37
	Non-EU	31	6**	22	20	75*	26

*Adjusted residual > 2. **Adjusted residual < 2.

Source: Own elaboration.

Podemos uses more populist rhetoric than non-populist parties, although at a much lower level than VOX. At the European level, they also use populist rhetoric to attack the European elites, whom it accuses of being in the pockets of the markets (Podemos, 21-05-2019), while at the local level it focuses its attacks on the three right-wing parties, which it disparagingly calls "trifachito"[2] and accuses of "lying" and "destroying people's lives" (Podemos, 20-02-2019). Regarding the other political groupings, the strategy of the ruling party (PSOE) is diametrically opposed, as it is the party least likely to use populist discourse at all levels. Also significant is the low frequency of populist posts in the European-level campaign of Cs, where the liberal party shows a less belligerent and populist mood than at the national level. This difference in strategy may be determined by the influence at the local level of the arrival of the extreme right in the institutions, which has reshaped the Spanish political stage and intensified the struggle for hegemony in the right-wing political spectrum.

To test whether there are differences in the interaction received by posts with populist rhetoric according to party, two-factor ANOVA tests were carried out, where the dependent variables were the number of shares and likes of the post and the independent variables were populist content and party. Table 3 shows the average number of 'shares' and 'likes' of posts by party and style used. The results of the analysis of variance show that there are no significant differences in the frequency with which posts with populist content are shared [$F(1, 822) = 1.27$, $p = .261$] nor in the average number of 'likes' they receive [$F(1, 823) = 3.55$, $p = .060$]. They also confirm that there is no interaction between party type and the presence of populist style that affects the number of times a post is shared [$F(4, 822) = 0.82$, $p = .514$] nor the amount of positive reactions it gets [$F(4, 823) = 1.13$, $p = .342$].

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[2] A portmanteau of "tripartito" (related to three parties) and "facha" (a colloquial term for fascist).

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Table 3. Average number of 'shares' and 'likes' of posts by party and presence of populist content.

		Party					Total
		Podemos	PSOE	Cs	PP	VOX	
Shares	Non-populist	807	354	126	154	1811	423
	Populist	783	316	154	121	1351	790
	Total	799	351	132	147	1448	526
Likes	Non-populist	1423	722	403	329	4137	860
	Populist	1088	593	451	292	3428	1751
	Total	1309	712	413	321	3577	1111

Source: Own elaboration.

As for the effect of the source of the message on user interaction, the results clearly show that the type of party publishing the post has a major impact on the frequency with which it is shared, regardless of the presence of populist content [$F(4, 822) = 32.42, p > .001$] or whether it is liked [$F(4, 823) = 98.68, p > .001$]. Scheffé's post-hoc test reveals that the two populist parties stand out significantly from the non-populist parties. VOX's publications are shared by Facebook users the most ($M = 1448$), with an average number of shares that almost doubles that of the other populist party ($M = 799$) and is ten times the results of the other conservative parties. Despite the most shared post during the period analysed being published by PSOE (11572 shares) –to announce the death of a former socialist leader (10-05-2019)– the governing party obtained an average of 351 shares per post, four times less than the average of the far-right populist party. An example of populist content not being a determining factor in its 'shareworthiness' are the posts with the most shares from the two populist parties. VOX's most shared post (7972 shares) focused on housing policy during a local electoral debate (VOX, 06-05-2019) and Podemos' (6993 shares) was on the testimony of a homosexual artist (Podemos, 30-04-2019). VOX's messages are also the most popular among Facebook users and score an average of 3577 'likes' per post, almost three times as many as Podemos in second place, which receives 1309. Next, and in descending order, are PSOE ($M = 712$), Cs ($M = 413$) and PP ($M = 321$). The post with the highest number of likes was VOX's (13657 likes) and is related to the reaction of the public attending a football match when the Spanish national anthem is played (26-05-2019).

4. Discussion and conclusion

The research findings confirm the presence of populist content in the electoral communications strategy of all Spanish political parties on Facebook. Almost 28% of the posts published during the month prior to the 2019 EP election included some populist rhetoric element, a percentage similar to the 27% observed in other EU countries in the same election (Lilleker & Balaban, 2021). These data point to a consolidation of populist discourse in Europe, as they reveal a comparable percentage of use as in the 2014 EP election (Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2018), where populist appeals were present in 31% of publications.

The study shows that conservative parties in Spain are more likely to adopt exclusionary populist rhetoric, as is the case in other European countries, where mainstream parties have incorporated populist elements into their communications strategy in an attempt to counteract the parliamentary success of far-right populist parties (van Spanje, 2018). Nevertheless, the two (newer and more extreme) populist parties monopolise the messages with empty and anti-elite populism. In line with other studies (Ernst *et al.*, 2017), left-wing populists (Podemos) mainly attack the economic elite, while right-wing populists (VOX) focus their criticism on the media elite. The virtual absence of populist narrative in the publications by the governing socialist party is noteworthy, confirming that this communications strategy is mainly used by extremist political actors and opposition parties (Ernst *et al.*, 2017).

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Populist rhetoric has greater weight in European-level publications, where VOX manages to transfer the polarisation of national-level parties to European institutions, leading attacks on immigration and Catalan independence, as well as claiming Spanish sovereignty in the face of what they call the outrages of the Brussels oligarchy. However, the main contribution of this study in the field of political communications on social media is the confirmation of the message sender's importance in the interaction of Spanish political party followers. The findings indicate that, regardless of whether the content contains populist elements or not, the posts of the two populist parties receive significantly more 'likes' and are shared more frequently than those of the non-populist parties. The success of populist parties on Facebook is also observed at the European level, where VOX and Podemos formed part of the top 10 of European parties by engagement during the 2019 EP campaign, a ranking led by populist parties in Italy, Hungary and the UK (Novelli & Johansson, 2019). At the national level, the newcomer VOX stands out above all other Spanish parties, doubling the engagement values of the other populist party and almost tenfold the average number of interactions achieved by the two conservative parties. This finding is consistent with other studies on Facebook (Ceccobelli *et al.*, 2020; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017), where the source of the publication conditions the popularity of the posts, without the presence of populist content in the message being a determining factor. Thus, it could be inferred that the greater interaction on the Facebook pages of populist parties is rooted in the attitude and predisposition of the users who visit them, as pointed out by some experimental studies (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

The findings of this study call for a reformulation of the focus of research on the effects of populist communication where a more complex framework of interactions can be established in which the characteristics of the sender, but also those of the receiver, come into play. Instead of exclusively assuming that certain content or actors 'trigger' user interaction, the results suggest that the differentiated attitude of users of these parties can also help explain the success of populist parties on social media. In this sense, future studies should address this element and also analyse the reactions obtained by populist parties' posts from the perspective of the recipient. Rather than asking what characteristics of the message generate participation, research should focus on the 'populist' aspects that define the users who interact on these parties' pages. In any case, the elements that receive the most attention can help to establish a profile of the followers of these parties and the modus operandi of the 'populist user.'

Moreover, the incorporation of the extreme right into the Spanish public debate has infected the populist rhetoric on the other conservative parties, and also generated a more negative discourse at the European level. The naturalisation of populist discourse is detrimental to democratic societies and might have significant cultural and institutional effects in the long term (Moffitt, 2020). In this respect, the collaboration of all actors involved in shaping public opinion is important to curb populist rhetoric and avoid political polarisation and the backlash against democratic rights and values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Firstly, moderate political parties should shy away from populist rhetoric, especially when it has been demonstrated in this study that it does not afford them any benefits in terms of interaction with users, and the electoral returns of this strategy are questionable. Secondly, the media must generate a more favourable information context for democratic political debate, excluding the populist rhetorical elements that fuel polarisation from political coverage (Wettstein *et al.*, 2018) and recovering their role in editing the content that circulates in the public sphere (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). Finally, citizens should be made aware of the negative effect that the dissemination of populist messages through social media has on civic culture and liberal democracy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The results of the study, however, concentrate on the analysis of a rather unusual political period, just after the general elections and with a government still in office.

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Furthermore, the simultaneous holding of local and regional elections, the emergence on the public scene of a new extreme right-wing populist party and the struggle for hegemony in the conservative space configure an extraordinary electoral context, which may make it difficult to generalise the findings. Despite these limitations, we consider that this research provides a detailed snapshot of the background to the 2019 EP campaign and allows us to document the impact of populism and extremism in Spanish politics. Further studies will be necessary to confirm whether the trends we have glimpsed crystallise and are sustained over time or whether they were just the fruit of a particular juncture.

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