

---

**Natalia Abuín Vences**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4153-9390>

nabuinve@ucm.es

Univ. Complutense de Madrid

---

**Daniel Francisco García Rosales**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6022-9021>

danielfrancisco.garcia@ucjc.edu

Universidad Camilo José Cela

---

**Submitted**

April 23rd, 2022

**Approved**

August 1st, 2023

---

© 2023

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

[www.communication-society.com](http://www.communication-society.com)

---

2023 – Vol. 36(4)

pp. 175-190

---

**How to cite this article:**

Abuín Vences, N. & García Rosales, D. F. (2023). Populist strategies on

Twitter: analysis of the political

discourse during the campaign for

the general elections in Spain on

November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019,

*Communication & Society*, 36(4),

175-190.

[doi.org/10.15581/003.36.4.175-](https://doi.org/10.15581/003.36.4.175-190)

190

## Populist strategies on Twitter: analysis of the political discourse during the campaign for the general elections in Spain on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**Abstract**

In recent years we have witnessed a resurgence of populism, which has relied on the virality of social networks to deepen its roots in society and spread its ideas. This paper analyses the populist strategies used by all parties to viralise their messages in the online environment, regardless of ideology. The present research has also examined the possible existence of complementary strategies used by the parties' organisational profiles and those of their leaders. To this end, a content analysis has been carried out regarding the publications made on Twitter during the 2019 election campaign. The posts have been delimited to those made by the parties and candidates that attained the highest percentage of representation in the Congress of Deputies, which include the PSOE, PP, Vox, and Unidas Podemos. The findings show that all the parties under study resorted to this type of strategy. The parties closest to centre of the political spectrum, both right and left, used mostly a populist strategy aimed predominantly at attacking their adversaries, while Vox and Unidas Podemos articulated their discourse beyond this argument, with Vox appealing to the emotions of the nation and Podemos positioning itself as the peoples' advocate. Furthermore, a complementary strategy used by both the parties and their leaders has been identified, which fosters the expansion of these kinds of populist ideas.

**Keywords**

**Populism, social networks, Twitter, political communication, viral content.**

### 1. Introduction

Populism has been studied extensively in the field of communication, mainly in the realm of political discourse and the mass media. However, the advent of social networks and their massive influence on society has turned them into a battleground for politicians of all ideologies. These media have fuelled the spread of populist ideas, a trend that became more visible after the 2014 European elections, when right-wing parties such as France's National Front, the UK's Independence Party (UKIP), and the Danish People's Party gained their largest share of votes ever in their respective countries. As the same time, left-wing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain achieved strong results as well (Engesser *et*

*al.*, 2017). Subsequently, Spain's far-right political party known as Vox became the third strongest political force in the Congress of Deputies as a result of the November 2019 elections, emerging with a formidable presence. Many of these groups have found their best ally in social networks, which have allowed them to spread their messages and experience high levels of growth in very short periods of time.

### 1.1. *Populism defined*

Populism is an umbrella term that encompasses various ideologies. The designation has its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a coalition of farmers, workers, and miners in the United States joined forces against the Gold Standard and the banking and financial establishment in the Northeast. Latin America also has a long tradition of populism dating back to the 1930s with Perón in Argentina (Rodrik, 2017) and Vargas in Brazil.

Populist discourse revolves around two focal points: "the people" and the "elite." Furthermore, these two core groups are pitted against each other and become antagonistic, as people are portrayed as the source of power and the elite as a small, illegitimate, and dominant group (De Cleen, 2017; Laclau, 2005a, 2005b; Stavrakakis, 2004; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

Gino Germani (1978) defined populism as a class movement organised around a charismatic leader. From this perspective, the key component of populism is not only a strong leader, but also the development of a movement that is attractive to social groups that are highly heterogeneous (Collier & Collier 1991; Conniff, 1999). Canovan (1999) noted that in modern societies populism is an appeal to the people against the established power structures and the dominant values and ideas in society. Populism implies a certain kind of revolution against the system in the name of the people. Moffitt and Tormey (2014) see populism as a political style, distinguishing four theoretical approaches to the concept:

- An ideology that divides society into two camps: the people and the corrupt elite.
- A political logic in which people become the driving force of change, thereby making populism the logic of all political activity.
- A discourse against the status quo, which divides society into the people (the disadvantaged), and the rest.
- A strategy through which a self-styled leader seeks or exercises power based on the direct, immediate, and non-institutional support of many unorganised followers (Weyland, 2001).

Populism is a flexible ideology, which can be further empowered by ideologies that are more substantive and deeper, such as nationalism, socialism, or liberalism. Depending on the interrelated ideologies with which it is associated, the dual concept of the people and the elites may vary (Ernst *et al.*, 2017).

Nowadays, populism comprises a wide range of political movements, including anti-EU and anti-immigrant parties in Europe, such as the National Front in France, UKIP in the UK, and Vox in Spain. It also includes parties that focus their discourse on attacking elites and giving power to the people, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Trump's anti-globalisation protectionism in the United States, Chávez's economic populism in Latin America, and many others. What they all have in common is an anti-establishment leaning, or a claim to speak for the people against the elites, as well as opposition to a liberal economy and globalisation and, frequently but not always, a fondness for authoritarian rule (Rodrik, 2017).

The resurgence of populism in Europe was triggered by the economic crisis that began in 2008, which led to large-scale mistrust of institutions that were supposed to protect and represent the citizens. Cases of political corruption, unemployment, and the eviction of families unable to meet their mortgage payments exacerbated the phenomenon (Edelman, 2018). Regardless of their ideology, populists promise to replace existing corruption with a political order that puts the people back in the spotlight and responds to their desires and aspirations (Lacatus, 2018).

Brubaker (2017) contends that we are living through a moment of history with extraordinarily intense populist movements, both at the pan-European and transatlantic levels. This same author points out that populism reached its peak with Donald Trump's victory in the United States and the vote in favour of Brexit in the United Kingdom.

As one can see, there are many definitions and nuances of populism. Engesser *et al.* (2017) have managed to identify five common features of this type of discourse: emphasis on giving power back to the people; acting as an advocate for the people; denouncing the elites; excluding certain social groups; and inducing patriotic feelings. The analysis carried out in this research will focus on these common principles.

## 1.2. *Populism and social networks*

It has been demonstrated throughout history that the emergence of each new media has had a strong impact on politics. This happened with the press, radio, television, the internet, and now with social media.

The link between populism and online communication has existed nearly from the beginning of the Internet, and the same is true for social media. European populist parties have been extremely quick to spot the opportunities offered by the new technologies in order to reach out to an increasingly disaffected and disenchanted electorate (Bartlett, 2014). These media offer politicians a channel for active promotion and communication, as well as immediate, direct, and low-cost access to voters (Jacobs & Spearings, 2016).

This trend toward political populism can be observed in different parts of the world, regardless of whether the political system in question is: 1) an established democracy; 2) emerging democracy; 3) or a democracy in general. The fact is that the populist movement has spread considerably in recent years.

In this context, social media pose epistemic challenges that could affect the functioning of democracies and lead to a transformation of the public sphere. Today's digital technology and social media ecosystems focus on blurring the sources of information, enabling deception regarding authorship, and ensuring the manipulation of social signals (Gil, Koc & Römmele, 2020).

There is an elective affinity between social networks and populist ideas. This means that SNs seem to provide platforms for populists, which enable the latter to request the support of ordinary people in fighting against the liberal establishment that supposedly victimises them (Gerbaudo, 2018). In addition, it should be added that social networks have democratised technology, allowing any user with basic computer skills to produce and disseminate content on a global scale, or in other words, to freely express their ideas and share them in a digital environment without time or geographical constraints. These media provide an optimal channel for populist claims, as they give the people a voice in confronting the former media oligopoly, which is allegedly corrupt and at the service of political and economic interests (Gerbaudo, 2018).

The emergence, or empowerment, of these new populist parties and leaders in Europe and the United States, together with the consolidation of social networks as a communicative space, is eroding the monopoly that the mainstream media and traditional politicians have historically maintained in this process. The use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube for the purpose of communicating and highlighting issues offers populist politicians the opportunity to act as a counterbalance to political and media elites, while at the same time broadening the reach of their messages (Casero-Ripollés, Sintés-Olivella & Franch, 2017).

There are four features that make social media highly compatible with populist ideas: direct access to the audience; close bonds with the people; the option of personalising the message; and targeting specific groups (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). These features enable the spread of populist ideas. In addition to the foregoing, they are also cheap and easy to use, which reduces the power of large political parties with big budgets. Any political party or candidate, even

those with meagre technical and economic means, can use social networks as their core communication strategy and get their message across to large numbers of users.

Engesser *et al.* (2017) conducted research related to Facebook and Twitter in order to verify whether the five key features of populism are present in the messages of politicians on social media: these include giving power to the people, acting as the peoples' advocate, attacking the elite, excluding certain social groups, and inducing patriotic feelings. The results confirm that all five features are present, and suggest that these ideas are conveyed to users in a fragmented way, using no more than two of the key components of populism for each publication. These researchers point to three reasons for the fragmentation of populist discourse by politicians: to keep the messages simple and easy to understand; to allow the audience to supplement populist ideas with their own input tailored to their specific political leanings; and because fragmented messages can travel faster among like-minded people and slip under the radar of opponents and critics. According to Ernst *et al.* (2017), the most extreme ideologies, whether right or left, use a larger number of populist messages on social networks than parties located near the centre of the political spectrum. This data is supported by Lacatus (2018), who analysed the populist content of the Twitter messages posted by the three main candidates for the US presidency: Trump, Sanders, and Clinton. The first two used populist strategies adapted to their respective ideologies to reach out to their voters. Of the three, Clinton was the least likely to use such messages.

Social platforms foster attachment and personality, which are key features of populist-style rhetoric. During the 2016 and 2017 US and French election campaigns, candidates at the extremes of the political spectrum, regardless of ideology, were more likely to resort to populist discourse, compared to more moderate candidates such as Macron and Clinton. Trump's populist rhetoric resembled a type of populism that was economically liberal, as well as politically and culturally anti-establishment, whereas Le Pen directed his message toward all segments of the ruling elite with the exception of the media. Moreover, the latter's rhetoric was focused on the people as the authority of democracy (Maurer & Diehl, 2020). In populism, the leader is portrayed as an individual whose true mission is to save the people from their enemies. For Donald Trump, the United States has not been a great nation since the Reagan era, and for Jeremy Corbyn, Britain is now suffering just as much as during the Thatcher years. Both leaders urge their supporters to perceive the alleged decline in different ways. Trump calls on his followers to confront the establishment for supposedly creating a national threat, alluding to illegal immigrants who steal their jobs and terrorists who endanger their safety. By contrast, Corbyn instructs his followers to trace the roots of evil to the social threat posed by the power of the establishment (Kissas, 2020).

During the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the concept of nationhood played a central role in the campaign in the case of Italy, with the European Union portrayed by national populists as the enemy, yet pro-EU advocates depicted the Union as the saviour. This strong populist presence may have driven some non-populist actors in Italy to focus on an even stronger European identity as a reaction to nationalist populism (Berti & Loner, 2020). In the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was observed that the presidents of Spain, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil shared some populist traits on Twitter, although these attributes were highly diverse and manifested in different ways. López Obrador and Bolsonaro made emotional appeals to the people with their salvific health measures, while Alberto Fernández and Pedro Sánchez displayed a profile of *pop politics* involving mediated leadership aimed at compelling the press to aggrandise their achievements (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado-Suárez & Waisbord, 2021).

Kessel and Castelein (2016) have shown that on Twitter, populist parties direct their attacks mainly at their opponents. However, their criticism becomes subdued once they reach power. These authors also conclude that such groups do not usually attack opposing parties that have a similar ideology. Their analysis also shows that criticism of opponents on Twitter

is in line with the ideological features of their respective parties. This suggests that Twitter messages can be a valuable source for assessing the ideological orientation and strategies of the parties. As expected, the tweets proved especially useful for identifying whom the politicians are criticising and blaming for existing problems.

Another important issue is the relationship and strategic complementarity of the accounts of political parties and their leaders on Twitter in conveying populist messages. Casero-Ripollés, Sintés-Olivella and Franch (2017) conducted research related to the Twitter election campaign carried out by Podemos in 2016 and found that a complementary strategy was used in the messages of both the organisation and its leader. These authors observed that both the party and the leader shared tasks with regard to the objectives assigned to the messages, as well as the dissemination of issues through Twitter. As an organisation, Podemos dealt with ideological aspects and policies, whereas Iglesias focused on the party's relationship with the people and on building his image through personal issues. The only time their activities coincided to a significant degree is when both profiles placed significant emphasis on election campaign issues. This complementary strategy, which is a distinct method used in political communication through social networks, allows for greater diversity in political discourse without losing the solidarity of the message. The latter is made possible by the fact that communication by both the party and the leader is connected to basic features of the populist style.

In Spain, the leaders of the main political parties usually present a compact and focused agenda revolving around a small number of issues on Twitter, with the exception of Pablo Iglesias. The profiles of conservative leaders give more importance to topics related to immigration, terrorism, and foreign affairs, while the accounts of progressive leaders focus more on issues related to social policies, corruption, and democratic renewal. The presence of topics related to government coalitions is significant in both cases. However, the public's interest is more focused on messages in which politics as entertainment, irony or humour prevail. This interest decreases as the number of tweets increases, and vice versa, thereby causing a "more is less" effect in terms of disseminating the populist message (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018a). During the 2016 general elections in Spain, tweets about post-electoral agreements were dominant, which resulted from the failure of the parties to form a coalition government in the previous legislature. Progressive parties such as Podemos and the PSOE focused their publications on social issues, while right-wing parties such as the PP and Ciudadanos placed more emphasis on economic issues (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018b).

Recurring patterns of activity can be seen among the political campaigns of the elections held in Spain in 2015, which had to be re-run in 2016. These included collective behaviour that was intense in the face of social change, which were associated with the Spanish political landscape at the time. There was also a lack of debate between political parties on Twitter. Such interaction between these organisations may have intensified after a coalition was forged (Martín-Gutiérrez, Losada & Benito, 2018). During the 2016 Spanish general elections, a regular pattern of continuity was observed on Twitter. Candidates interacted for self-referencing or intra-party objectives, yet they avoided dialogue with citizens or other actors (García-Ortega & Zugasti-Azagra, 2018). There was scant involvement by political actors in debates on Twitter. Politicians seemed more interested in the dissemination of information and retweets than in debates. In the European Union, Spanish and Italian users are the most prolific in this regard, in contrast to German and Belgian users (Campos-Domínguez, 2017).

During the 2019 Spanish elections, the emergence of the far-right populist party known as Vox influenced the political structure of autonomous regions and the ideological distance between the different political parties. Vox united the cluster, or political subdivisions, of the Spanish right-wing, and at the same time weakened the links between the left and right-wing parties. The consequent increase in polarisation, which divided the parties into two major ideological camps, was more intense in the November 2019 elections than in the April 2019

balloting (Guerrero-Solé, Mas-Manchón & Aira, 2021). The use of Twitter by the front-runners in the 2019 general elections was similar in terms of being one-directional, as there was little interaction with other users, and the majority of the tweets had their own party-tailored content, which clearly shows the increasing polarisation of political communication in Spain (Gamir-Ríos *et al.*, 2022).

The legacy media, as well as Vox's official Twitter account, provided the public with a completely different discourse during the 2019 general elections. Vox created its own rhetorical framework and included populist features in its discourse that focused on sectorial policy issues, electoral confrontation, the unique course of the campaign, personal aspects, and the private life of its leader, Santiago Abascal (Lava, 2021). Despite their ideological differences, Unidas Podemos and Vox adopted a similar strategy and resorted to a new style of populism in order to reach as many voters as possible. The leaders of Unidas Podemos identified political power, followed by economic power, as the main threats. On the other hand, Vox targeted the media elite first, followed by the political elite (namely the extreme left) as the enemies of the people (González, 2021). The Twitter strategy of Vox during the 2019 election campaigns was based on disseminating populist proposals, developed within the metaphorical framework of "the far-left dictatorship," as opposed to Vox's concept of "the real Spain, and the hard-working Spain of common sense," which they believe was threatened by "savages," "coup plotters" and "fake news media" (Capdevila, Moragas-Fernández & Grau-Masot, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the study herein broadens our knowledge regarding the phenomenon of populism in political communication on Twitter. The data point to the use of tactics in which both political parties and their leaders use complementary populist strategies. At the same time, this paper also reinforces and validates previous findings. Given this scenario, it is essential to understand how populism manifests itself in social networks, in order to fully comprehend its impact on politics and society. Twitter provides fertile ground for the use of populist messages. By analysing how Spanish politicians have used this type of messaging system, we have assessed its impact on public opinion and how it might affect political debate and voter decision-making. Moreover, through the analysis of the way in which populist messages were used on the Twitter network during the 2019 general elections in Spain, we have provided an enhanced body of knowledge regarding how these posts contribute to political polarisation, as well as their impact on election dynamics.

## **2. Objectives**

The overall objective of this research is to analyse the messages emitted by the main political parties and their leaders on Twitter, in order to determine the populist content of such messages during an era of massive social network activity, which encompasses election campaigns. This comprehensive objective has been broken down into the following specific objectives:

- To identify the presence and proportional amount of the five key features of the populist narrative in Twitter posts published by the political parties and their leaders during the election campaign. These five aspects include giving power to the people, acting as the peoples' advocate, denouncing elites, excluding certain social groups, and inducing patriotic feelings.
- To analyse whether the features of populist discourse are mostly present in the extreme right and left-wing parties, or whether they are used consistently by all the political parties in question.
- To study the way in which the candidates and their parties use the key features of populism, in order to discover whether this occurs to the same extent and in the same proportion, or whether this type of message is more prevalent in either the personal or organisational profiles.
- To examine whether there is a complementary strategy involving both the organisations and their respective leaders when posting messages on Twitter.

### 3. Hypothesis

Based on the foregoing objectives, the initial hypotheses are outlined as follows:

- H1. The key features of populist discourse have been found in the messages of all the parties and candidates in the general elections in Spain.
- H2. The extreme right and left-wing parties account for most of the messages with populist content.
- H3. The key features of populist discourse are concentrated in the personal profiles of the candidates and occur to a lesser extent in the profiles of the parties.
- H4. There is a strategy of complementarity between the accounts of the organisations and those of their leaders, the aim of which is to achieve consistency in spreading populist ideas among potential voters.

### 4. Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives, the authors have carried out a content analysis of the postings made on Twitter by the main political leaders and parties during the campaign of the general elections held in Spain on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The analysis period ran from November 1<sup>st</sup> (the start of the campaign) to November 10<sup>th</sup> (Election Day).

The sample is comprised of the messages disseminated during the election campaign by the leaders of the four political parties that attained the highest percentage of representation in the Congress of Deputies, which included Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Casado, Santiago Abascal, and Pablo Iglesias, as well as the messages spread by the parties to which they belonged, which were the PSOE, PP, Vox and Unidas Podemos, respectively. These leaders and their parties posted a total of 1,755 tweets during the campaign for the general elections held in November of 2019. Given the large number of posts, we selected those that received more than 500 retweets, as this figure is an indicator of the viralisation of content on this social network. This allowed us to analyse the type of messages that work best on Twitter. With regard to data collection, the tweets were retrieved manually. In the end, a total of 384 tweets were analysed. The margin of error for this research is 4%, with a confidence level of 95%.

In line with the objectives pursued, the content analysis carried out was an explanatory, or verification type, as it enables inferences to be drawn regarding the dissemination, functioning, and effects of the messages analysed.

Considering the object of study, we have used a transversal content analysis. This has allowed us to compare the messages of leaders and political parties with highly diverse ideological positions and proposals during the same time period, referring to the dates that encompassed the electoral campaign.

Finally, the analysis carried out is both quantitative and qualitative, which has allowed us to measure the quantity of posts and their dissemination potential, but also the presence of populist discourse and its main argumentative strategies.

Following the methodology used in previous research by Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra and Casero-Ripollés (2018a; 2018b), Campos-Domínguez and Calvo (2017), Engesser *et al.* (2017), García-Ortega and Zugasti-Azagra (2018), Quevedo-Redondo, Portalés-Oliva and Berrocal-Gonzalo (2016), in order to reveal the issues, political personalities, and objectives upon which the populist strategies of the political parties are based, the following items have been taken into account in the analysis:

- The key populist features of each tweet: whether the emphasis is on giving power to the people, acting as the peoples' advocate, denouncing elites, excluding certain social groups, inducing patriotic feelings, or no key component.
- The issues addressed: employment, corruption and fraud, the economy, health, immigration, education, pensions, gender equality, territorial fragmentation crises, the political class, other social problems, etc.

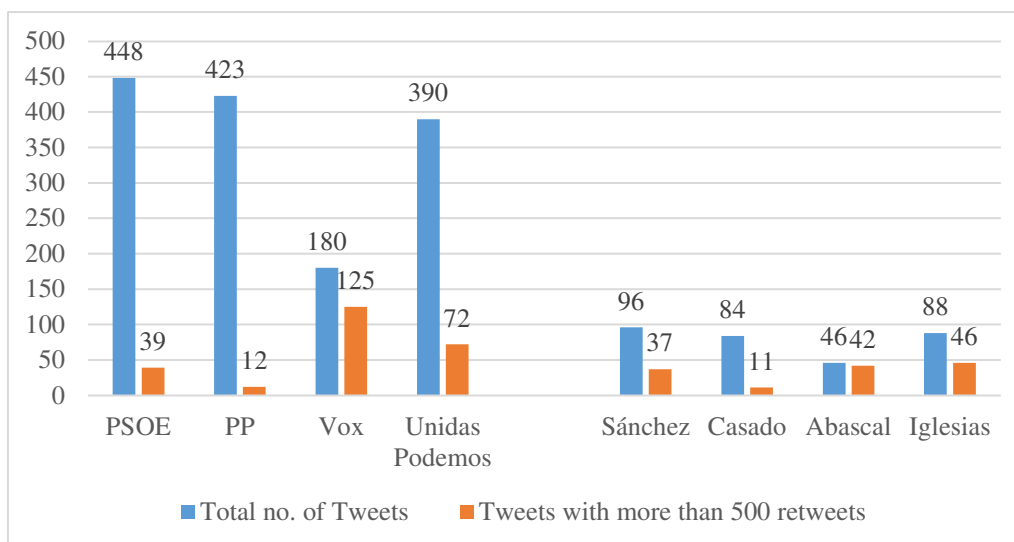
- Images and video: the presence of the candidate, party members, members of other political groups, and citizens.
- Links.
- Hashtags used.
- Mentions made.

## 5. Results

The election campaign under study ran from November 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> of 2019. It lasted eight days rather than the usual 15, due to the political scenario in which the event took place, as it was a re-run election resulting from the different parties' failure to form a coalition government after the general elections of April 28<sup>th</sup> of the same year. In order to minimise the economic impact of re-running the elections, the incumbent government made the decision to reduce the length of the campaign by half.

For the present study, the publications posted on Twitter by the four parties that obtained the largest percentage of representation in the Congress of Deputies were collected. These parties include the PSOE, PP, Vox, and Podemos. The collection period ran from the beginning of the campaign until Election Day.

**Graph 1.** Total tweets compared to tweets that obtained more than 500 retweets.



Source: Own elaboration.

The political parties under study published a total of 1,441 tweets on their corporate Twitter accounts during the election campaign. Of these, 17.21% (248) received more than 500 retweets. This level of viralisation was achieved in 69.44% of the Vox tweets, 18.46% for Unidas Podemos, 8.71% for PSOE, and 2.84% for the PP.

The leaders of these political groups published a total of 314 tweets during the period under study, of which 43.31% (136 tweets) received more than 500 retweets. This figure was reached in 91.30% of the tweets posted by Santiago Abascal, 52.28% by Pablo Iglesias, 38.54% by Pedro Sánchez, and 13.10% by Pablo Casado.

These data indicate that the parties and leaders with the most extreme ideologies (and the most recently-created), which are Vox and Unidas Podemos, are the ones that managed to viralise the largest number of publications. This is mainly due to these parties having been founded at a time when these new media were already prevalent, so they easily mastered the language of these instruments and knew how to reach their audience, which allowed them to optimise their digital strategy.



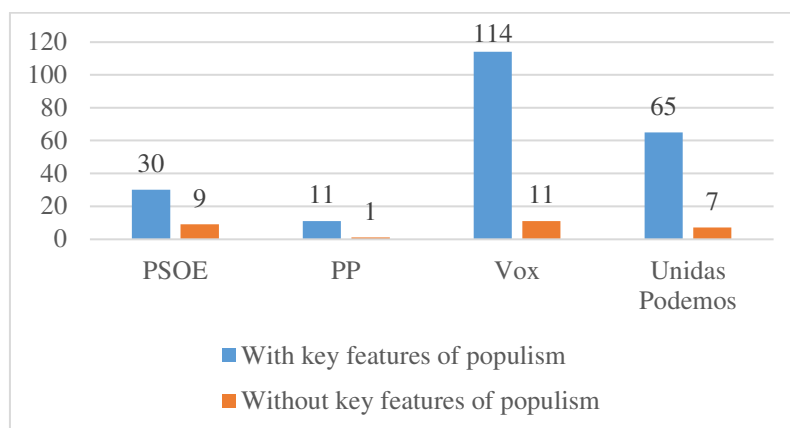
As seen in Graph 1, with regard to organisational profiles, the number of publications is inversely proportional to the number of viralised messages: In other words, the higher the number of posts, the lower the number of messages with 500 or more retweets. These data concur with those of a previous study involving the election campaign of April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, in which it was confirmed that the same does not hold true for the leaders' profiles. In fact, although Pablo Iglesias is second in total number of publications, he is first in terms of messages with more than 500 retweets. Vox is the party that optimised its strategy the most. The reason is, although it disseminated the least number of posts, this group managed to obtain the highest percentage of messages that went viral.

Likewise, if we compare the virality of organisational publications with those of the leaders, we can see that personal accounts went viral at a much higher rate, as voters prefer to interact with the politician rather than the party, which is one of the features that make social networks an ideal space for the dissemination of populist ideas: the close attachment to the people (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). Users prefer to interact with the leader of a party instead of the party itself, because they have a stronger feeling of closeness to the leader.

The virality of the tweets disseminated was highest on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of November, which were the days on which the three electoral debates were held: the “*Debate a 7*” [the debate of the seven]; the “*Debate 4N*” [November 4<sup>th</sup> debate]; and the “*Debate 7N: la última oportunidad*” [November 7<sup>th</sup> debate: the last opportunity]. Conversely, the virality of the tweets was lowest on November 9<sup>th</sup>, as this was the day of reflection. Regarding the accounts of the political parties, the virality of the messages disseminated by the leaders of these organisations was highest on November 8<sup>th</sup>, yet it remained fairly stable during the election campaign, with the exception of a drop on November 9<sup>th</sup> which, as stated above, was the day of reflection.

In the following graph, a comparison is made between the presence or absence of key features of populism in the tweets published by the political parties under study that received more than 500 retweets.

**Graph 2.** The most viral tweets made by the parties: a comparison of the presence or absence of key populist features.

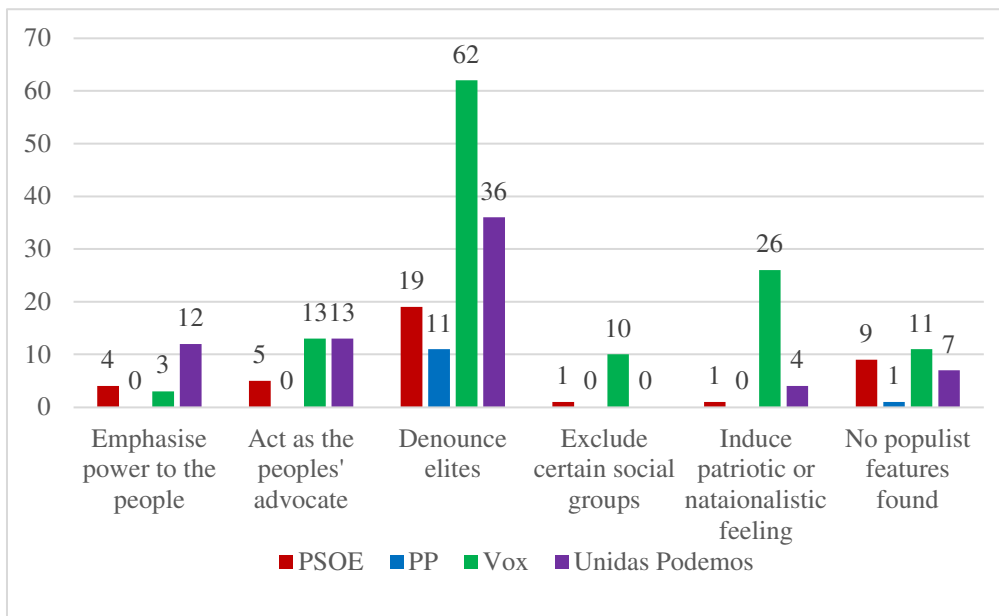


Source: Own elaboration.

As seen in Graph 2, the key features of populism are present in a higher percentage of the tweets: 76.9% of the most viral publications of the PSOE, 91.6% for the PP, 91.2% for Vox, and 90.2% for Unidas Podemos. On average, 87.4% of the political parties' most viral messages contained at least one key feature of populism.

Next, we analysed the key components of populism that are more prevalent in the different political parties under study:

**Graph 3.** The key features of populism in the tweets posted by political parties with more than 500 retweets.

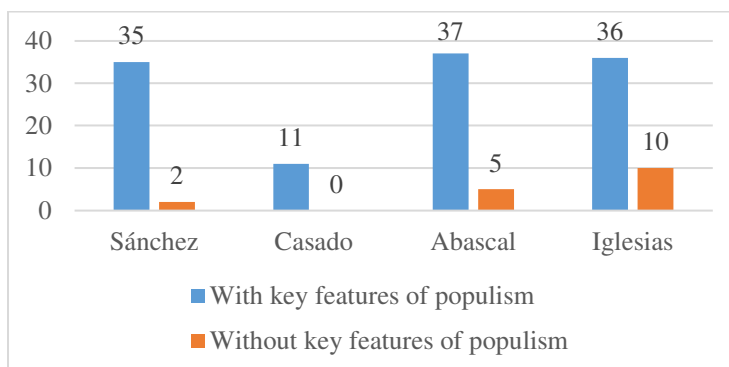


Source: Own elaboration.

In most of the tweets that received 500 retweets, the key feature of populism used by the political parties in their discourse was to denounce the elites: in most cases, they were directed at political opponents, with the exception of Vox and Unidas Podemos, which also denounced the media and economic powers, respectively. While the PP made condemnations in 91.67% of its most viral tweets, the PSOE did so at the rate of 48.72%. Vox resorted to harsh criticism in 49.60% of its most viral tweets, focusing on the media in 19.35% of the cases. Unidas Podemos made denouncements in 50% of its most viral tweets, focusing on banks, multinationals, and large corporations in 44.44% of the cases. Vox was the party that induced patriotic feelings and nationalistic sentiment the most, while Unidas Podemos was the party that most frequently emphasised giving power to the people.

In Graph 4, a comparison is made of both the presence and absence of key features of populism in the most viral messages of the candidates under study:

**Graph 4.** The leaders' most viral tweets: a comparison of the presence or absence of key populist features.

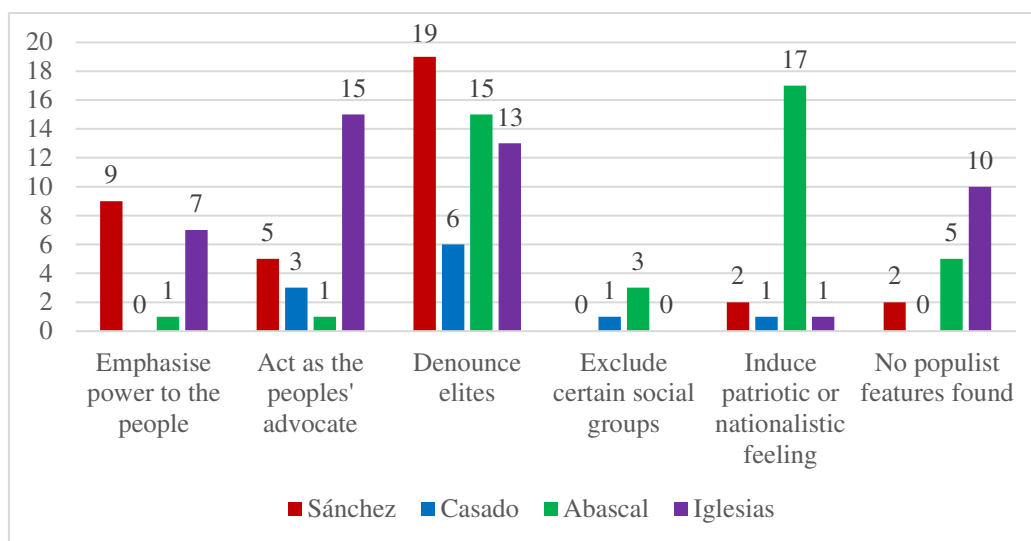


Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen, most messages that obtained higher levels of dissemination contain at least one key feature of populist discourse: this is the case in 94.5% of the posts made by Sánchez; 100% of those by Casado; 88% for Abascal; and 78.2% for Iglesias. It should be noted that the candidates closest to the centre of the political spectrum, both on the right and left, are the ones who employ this strategy the most.

On average, 90.7% of the candidates' messages contained at least one key feature of populism. If we compare this figure with that of the parties (87.4%), it can be seen that the leaders make more use of this type of strategy, although by a very small margin.

**Graph 5.** Key populist features of the tweets posted by the political leaders that received more than 500 retweets.



Source: Own elaboration.

Similar to the tweets posted by the parties, the leaders of these organisations tended to use the messages to attack their opponents. However, continuing with the same pattern as the tweets posted by the parties, the leaders at the ideological extremes of the political spectrum were the ones who used this strategy the most. Abascal's speeches appealed to patriotic or national sentiment on a higher number of occasions (40.48% of his tweets), while Iglesias' discourse was aimed at being the peoples' advocate in 32.61% of his messages.

Most parties focused their discourse on attacking traditional political elites, which is a key feature of populism. This issue was mentioned in 35.20% of the tweets posted by Vox, 39.89% by Unidas Podemos, 30.77% by the PSOE, yet only 8.33% by the PP. To carry out these attacks, the PP resorted to the issue of Spain's territorial fragmentation crisis, while Vox approached this same topic with a similar objective. With regard to other problems of a social nature, Vox was the only party that focused on immigration in order to include another key feature of populism in its discourse: the exclusion of certain groups, especially illegal immigrants. Unidas Podemos was the strongest advocate for giving power to the people in its messages, focusing on issues related to employment, the economy, health care, and other social problems.

Similar to the accounts of the political parties, the leaders of these organisations focused their discourse on the political class in order to carry out attacks on their opponents on most occasions. To reinforce the strategy of his own party, the second issue addressed by Abascal was illegal immigration. With regard to Iglesias, after criticising the political class, and following the guidelines of his own party as well, he tended to address issues of jobs, the economy, and other social problems in order to denounce economic powers and defend the

people. The second main topic discussed by Sánchez and Casado was the territorial fragmentation crisis in Spain, which was also linked to denouncements between parties and candidates.

To gain a deeper understanding of the existence of strategies designed to expand the populist agenda, two key components of Twitter posts were analysed: the use of hashtags, and the use of videos in the messages.

The hashtags most frequently used by political parties referred to the televised debates, the appeal for votes, and victory for their candidates. However, some parties tended to use this feature to reinforce their populist ideas.

Both the PSOE and PP used hashtags to contextualise the content of the TV debates, to ask for votes, and to support their leaders. However, Vox and Unidas Podemos used this resource to emphasise key features of populism. Among the hashtags most frequently used by the two latter groups were #EspañaSiempre, which was used by Vox to induce patriotic or national sentiment in its messages, and #UnGobiernoContigo (in Galician, #UnGobierno Contigo), used by Unidas Podemos to defend the sovereignty and power of the people. Along the same lines, these two hashtags were the most heavily used by the leaders of Vox and Unidas Podemos in their most viral tweets, respectively. Meanwhile, the hashtags most often used by Pedro Sánchez and Pablo Casado were focused on an appeal for votes: They were #VotaPSOE and #VotaPP.

To address these issues, the parties used video as the first option to accompany the text: Unidas Podemos used video in 91.67% of its most viral tweets; the PP in 83.33%; Vox in 74.40%; and the PSOE in 69.23%. The protagonists of the videos uploaded on the tweets of the political parties' accounts are the leaders or members of the party that represent them. However, Vox and Unidas Podemos posted more videos with their members in the presence of citizens, or of citizens without politicians, in order to reinforce the key features of populism that focus on the following: on the one hand, to induce patriotic or nationalistic feelings; and on the other hand, to emphasise the sovereignty or power of the people, or acting as the peoples' advocate. Most of these videos were filmed at party events during the election campaign.

With regard to videos published in the most viral tweets made by the political leaders, the protagonists of videos posted by Sánchez and Abascal mainly featured party members in the presence of citizens. Those published by Abascal featured party members in the presence of citizens in 76.92% of the cases, while this occurred in 51.72% of those posted by Sánchez. Regarding Casado and Iglesias, these two leaders were the protagonists of their own videos on most occasions, yet the leader of Unidas Podemos was the one who posted more videos of citizens without politicians being present. This strategy was used primarily by Casado and Iglesias, due to the fact that the leadership of both candidates had been strongly questioned following the April elections in which both parties experienced a sharp decline in votes. In the case of Unidas Podemos, along with criticism of the poor results, there were also denouncements by followers who did not understand why they were unable to reach a coalition agreement with the PSOE. As such, the party felt the need to restore its image.

It bears mentioning that none of the videos released by the candidates show members of other parties as protagonists in any of their most viral postings, with the exception of the organisational profiles of Vox and Podemos. Both of these parties engaged in this activity in messages attacking their political adversaries, except for one tweet from Unidas Podemos in which the party denounced the economic elites by means of an interview with Sánchez by journalist Jordi Évole.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

In line with previous research by Ernst *et al.* (2017) and Lacatus (2018), the data obtained indicate that all the political parties in Spain involved in this study use the key features of populism in their messages. Moreover, consistent with the findings of Lava (2021) González (2021) and Capdevila, Moragas-Fernández and Grau-Masot (2022), the political parties Vox

and Unidas Podemos, together with their respective leaders, tend to use them above and beyond merely attacking their political adversaries, as they also try to induce feelings of nationhood and act as an advocate for the people, respectively. These results allow us to verify Hypothesis 1: All the political parties and leaders use populism in their communication strategies. Hypothesis 2, however, has been refuted, as all parties and leaders disseminate a large number of messages with populist content in their discourse. Thus, it cannot be confirmed that such messages are concentrated only in the most extreme ideologies. Nevertheless, in line with research by Maurer & Diehl (2020), candidates at the extreme ends of the political spectrum, regardless of ideology, resorted to populist rhetoric to a larger extent. Political parties with more moderate views, both on the right and left, focus their populist discourse mainly on denouncing their political opponents. In spite of this, parties closer to the right and left extremes of the political spectrum use other key features of populism to reach out to the electorate. In addition to attacking their political opponents, these parties also attack the economic elites and the media. Moreover, Vox and Abascal use populism to induce patriotic or nationalistic sentiment, to act as an advocate for the people, and to exclude certain social groups, while Unidas Podemos and Iglesias use it to call for sovereignty and power to the people, and to act as the peoples' advocate as well.

Consistent with the findings of Kessel and Castelein (2016), attacking the elite is one of the populist features most frequently used by the political parties and leaders under study, and such criticism is mainly focused on the political class personified in their adversaries. Nevertheless, Vox and Abascal also denounce the media, while Unidas Podemos and Iglesias criticise the economic powers that undermine the power of the people, in their view.

In order to enhance the dissemination of key features of populism and to make them more appealing to users, Vox and Unidas Podemos have the tendency to use hashtags that go beyond the request for votes or support for their parties to include the inducement of patriotic feelings and power to the people, respectively. Along the same lines, these two parties publish the largest amount of multimedia content from their respective party accounts in which their members are either in the presence of citizens, or in which citizens appear without any politicians. The audio-visual material accompanying the messages attempts to personify the leader and reach out to the electorate.

The data indicate that candidates use the key features of populism more than their parties, while organisational accounts use these strategies to a lesser extent, and from a more ideological point of view. These data allow the authors to verify Hypotheses 3 and 4: candidates use the key features of populism to a greater extent to appeal directly to voter sentiment and exalt themselves as leaders, while the parties focus on ideological aspects. This confirms the existence of complementary strategies, especially in parties with more extreme ideologies, which aim to maximise the dissemination of their agenda. These data confirm and broaden the conclusions obtained by Casero-Ripollé, Sintés-Olivella and Franch (2017). Vox and Unidas Podemos use hashtags with key features of populism in order to promote the dissemination of populist messages, which are associated with both the candidates and their parties. Consistent with the work of Berti and Loner (2020), which affirms that the concept of nationhood played a key role in the case of Italy in the 2019 European Parliamentary campaign, nationalism was also one of the main strategies used by Vox in the general elections of the same year in Spain. This party was the most prolific in using video with the presence of citizens for the purpose of engendering patriotic or nationalistic sentiment, whereas Unidas Podemos emphasised power to the people and acted as the peoples' advocate in the messages.

The results and conclusions obtained from the present study reinforce the existence of a close relationship between social networks and populism. This situation has made these media the driving force behind messages designed to have a direct impact on the emotions of citizens, which can be widely disseminated by taking advantage of the viral power of such networks, regardless of the ideology behind the message.

Due to the constant evolution of this platform, future lines of research on populist strategies in political communication on Twitter will have the opportunity to address a much wider range of topics and approaches. As generally occurs, this study has limitations, due to its exclusive focus on the 2019 election campaign in Spain. Therefore, future research might consider addressing populist strategies on this social network in forthcoming elections in order to reinforce the findings of the present study, as well as to identify patterns and factors that could have an impact on election results.

## References

- Alonso-Muñoz, L. & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2018a). Communication of European populist leaders on Twitter: Agenda setting and the 'more is less' effect. *El Profesional de la Información*, 27(6), 1193–1202. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.nov.03>
- Alonso-Muñoz, L. & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2018b). Political agenda on Twitter during the 2016 Spanish elections: Issues, strategies, and users' responses. *Communication & Society*, 31(3), 725. <https://www.doi.org/10.15581/003.31.3.7-25>
- Bartlett, J. (2014). Populism, social media and democratic strain. In C. Sandelind (Ed.), *European populism and winning the immigration debate* (pp. 99–116). Stockholm: Fores. Retrieved from <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/104297/1/Korr%20igen.pdf>
- Berti, C. & Loner, E. (2020). The 2019 European elections on Twitter between populism, Euroscepticism and nationalism: the case of Italy. *Società Mutamento Politica*, 11(22), 275–288. <https://www.doi.org/10.13128/smp-12654>
- Brubaker, R. (2017). Why populism? *Theory and Society*, 46(5), 357–385. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s11186-017-9301-7>
- Campos-Domínguez, E. & Calvo, D. (2017). La campaña electoral en internet: planificación, repercusión y viralización en Twitter durante las elecciones españolas de 2015. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 29, 93–116. <https://www.doi.org/10.32870/cys.voi29.6423>
- Campos-Domínguez, E. (2017). Twitter y la comunicación política. *El Profesional de la Información*, 26(5), 785–793. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2017.sep.01>
- Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2–16. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>
- Capdevila, A., Moragas-Fernández, C. M. & Grau-Masot, J. M. (2022). Emergencia del populismo en España: marcos metafóricos de Vox y de su comunidad *online* durante las elecciones generales de 2019. *El Profesional de la Información*, 31(3), e310317. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.may.17>
- Casero-Ripollés, A., Sintés-Olivella, M. & Franch, P. (2017). The populist political communication style in action: Podemos's issues and functions on Twitter during the 2016 Spanish general election. *American behavioral scientist*, 61(9), 986–1001. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0002764217707624>
- Collier, R. & Collier, D. (1991). *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Conniff, M. (1999). *Populism in Latin America*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Edelman (2018). Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report. Retrieved from [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report\\_FEB.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf)
- Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F. & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(8), 1109–1126. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2016.1207697>
- Ernst, N., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Blassnig, S. & Esser, F. (2017). Extreme parties and populism: An analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9), 1347–1364. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2017.1329333>

- Gamir-Ríos, J., Pop, A.-I., López-García, G., Llorca-Abad, G. & Fenoll, V. (2022). Unidireccionalidad, promoción partidista y polarización. Actividad en Twitter de los candidatos a la presidencia del Gobierno de España en las elecciones generales de 2019. *El Profesional de la Información*, 31(2), e310203. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.mar.03>
- García-Ortega, C. & Zugasti-Azagra, R. (2018). Gestión de la campaña de las elecciones generales de 2016 en las cuentas de Twitter de los candidatos: entre la autorreferencialidad y la hibridación mediática. *El Profesional de la Información*, 27(6), 1215-1224. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.nov.05>
- Germani, G. (1978). *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Koc Michalska, K. & Römmele, A. (2020). Populism in the era of Twitter: how social media contextualized new insights into an old phenomenon. *New Media & Society*, 22(4), 585-594. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893978>
- González Castro, J. (2021). Comunicación y populismo 2.0 en la nueva política española: el caso de Unidas Podemos y Vox. *Adresearch: Revista Internacional de Investigación en Comunicación*, 26(26), 76-103.
- Guerrero-Solé, F., Mas-Manchón, L. & Aira, T. (2021). El impacto de la ultraderecha en Twitter durante las elecciones españolas de 2019. *Cuadernos.Info*, (51), 223-245. <https://www.doi.org/10.7764/cdi.51.27471>
- Hendrickson, C. & Galston, W. (2017). Why are populists winning online? Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2017/04/28/why-are-populists-winning-online-social-media-reinforces-their-anti-establishment-message/>
- Jacobs, K. & Spierings, N. (2016). *Social media, parties, and political inequalities*. Berlin: Springer.
- Kissas, A. (2020). Performative and ideological populism: the case of charismatic leaders on Twitter. *Discourse & Society*, 31(3), 268-284. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0957926519889127>
- Van Kessel, S. & Castelein, R. (2016). Shifting the blame. Populist politicians' use of Twitter as a tool of opposition. *Journal of contemporary European research*, 12(2), 439-461. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01585.x>
- Laclau, E. (2005a). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2005b). Populism: What's in a name? In B. Aretxaga, D. Dworkin, J. Gabilondo & J. Zulaika (Eds.), *Empire and Terror. Nationalism/Postnationalism in the New Millennium* (pp. 103-114). Nevada: Center for Basque Studies. Retrieved from [http://scholarworks.unr.edu:8080/bitstream/handle/11714/117/empire\\_terror-web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=104](http://scholarworks.unr.edu:8080/bitstream/handle/11714/117/empire_terror-web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=104)
- Lava Santos, D. (2021). El discurso populista de VOX en las Elecciones Generales de 2019: análisis comparativo de las agendas temáticas en televisión y Twitter. *Dígitos. Revista de Comunicación Digital*, 7, 37-65. <https://www.doi.org/10.7203/rd.vii7.200>
- Manfredi-Sánchez, J. L., Amado-Suárez, A. & Waisbord, S. (2021). Twitter presidencial ante la covid-19: entre el populismo y la política pop. *Comunicar*, 29(66), 83-94. <https://www.doi.org/10.3916/C66-2021-07>
- Martín-Gutiérrez, S., Losada, J. C. & Benito, R. M. (2018). Recurrent patterns of user behavior in different electoral campaigns: A Twitter analysis of the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016. *Complexity*, 2018, 1-15. <https://www.doi.org/10.1155/2018/2413481>
- Maurer, P. & Diehl, T. (2020). What kind of populism? Tone and targets in the Twitter discourse of French and American presidential candidates. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(5), 453-468. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0267323120909288>
- Moffitt, B. & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political studies*, 62(2), 381-397. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12032>

- Rodrik, D. (2018). Populism and the Economics of Globalization. *Journal of international business policy*, 1(1-2), 12-33. <https://www.doi.org/10.1057/s42214-018-0001-4>
- Quevedo-Redondo, R., Portalés-Oliva, M. & Berrocal-Gonzalo, S. (2016). El uso de la imagen en Twitter durante la campaña electoral municipal de 2015 en España. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 71, 85-107. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/rlds-2016-1085>
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2004). Antinomies of formalism. Laclau's theory of populism and the lessons from religious populism in Greece. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 253-267. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263519>
- Stavrakakis, Y. & Katsambekis, G. (2014). Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of Syriza. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2), 119-142. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266>
- Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1-22. <https://www.doi.org/10.2307/422412>