



"A meaningless buzzword or a meaningful label? How do Spanish politicians use populismo and populista on Twitter?"

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ABSTRACT

While there is substantial research on populism and populist discourse, research on discourses about populism is still developing. Scholars highlight the need to understand why populism is so widely used and what the rapid spread of this socio-political keyword tells us about political and media discourse. The main objective of this paper is therefore to understand discourses on populism. To this aim, we examine for what purpose the terms populism and populist – henceforth *populis** – are used and what they allow to do in discourse. Based on the analysis of a corpus of tweets produced by political figures in Spain, we show that, contrary to previous analyses, *populis** does not have the sole function of being a randomly used buzzword or of proposing an anti-populist discourse. Indeed, our analysis shows that political actors resort to different patterns of use of *populis** depending on their political and communicative strategy.

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A meaningless buzzword or a meaningful label? How do Spanish politicians use *populismo* and *populista* on Twitter?

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Abstract

While there is a substantial amount of research on populism and populist discourse, research on discourses about populism is still developing. Scholars highlight the need to understand why *populism* is so widely used and what the rapid spread of this type of socio-political keyword tells us about political and media discourse. The main objective of this paper is therefore to understand discourses on populism. To this aim, we examine for what purpose the terms *populism* and *populist* – henceforth *populis** – are used and what they allow to do in discourse. Based on the analysis of a corpus of tweets produced by political figures in Spain, we show that, contrary to previous analyses, the uses of *populis** do not have the sole function of being a randomly used buzzword or of proposing an anti-populist discourse. Indeed, our analysis shows that political actors resort to different patterns of use of *populis** which depend on their political and communicative strategy.

Keywords: socio-political keyword; populism; political discourse; Twitter; Spain

1. Introduction

In 2014, the leader of the centre-left PSOE (Spanish Socialist and Workers' Party), Pedro Sánchez said in an interview: "Neither before nor after [the elections] will the Socialist party come to an agreement with populism. I will never make a pact with populism"¹ using the term *populism* referring to the left-wing political party *Podemos*. The negative connotation with which Sánchez used *populism* in this interview becomes apparent through his linking it to "Chavez's Venezuela, poverty, ration cards", also implicitly relying on the links between *Podemos* and Venezuela. In 2019, in a tweet posted right before the second general election on one of the PSOE's Twitter accounts, we can read: "On Sunday will be at stake whether we continue to make progress or go down a populist path between Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Trump, Vox, PP and Cs"². This time three right-wing Spanish political parties are mentioned together with international politicians known for being called populists and who mainly represent the far right. Why are all these political actors put in the same basket, whereas only *Vox* could be labelled as populist out of the three Spanish parties mentioned? And why is *Podemos* not mentioned this time? Is there any specific purpose behind the different uses of *populism*? These questions lie at the heart of the following analysis.

Populism as a phenomenon has been extensively examined over the past few decades by scholars in various fields, such as political science, communication studies and discourse analysis. The term has long been used in the academic literature to describe an array of political parties – of both the left- and the right-wing leanings – in a variety of contexts, making it a highly contested term with several competing definitions that depend on the specific context and host ideologies (Hunger and Paxton 2021). Despite its polysemy, there seems to be a consensus on the core features of populism, i.e. "the people, the elite, and the general will" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 9).

A relatively new direction of research that remains largely unexplored has recently emerged, shifting attention away from trying to define the phenomenon of populism towards examining *how* the term is actually used in discourse. Some

¹ Original quotation: "*Ni antes ni después el Partido Socialista va a pactar con el populismo. No pactaré con el populismo. [...] El final del populismo es la Venezuela de Chavez, la pobreza, las cartillas de racionamiento [...]*" (Hemeroteca 2015)

² Original quotation: "*El domingo nos jugamos seguir progresando o ir hacia una deriva populista que está entre Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Trump, Vox, PP y Cs.[...]*" (@psibpsoe, 8/11/2019)

discourse-oriented studies have analysed the use of the term and the construction of *populism* in the media (Brown and Mondon 2021; Demata, Conoscenti, and Stavrakakis 2020; Hamo, Kampf, and Weiss-Yaniv 2018). These studies have shown the relevance of investigating “vernacular and public uses” of the term (Hamo et al. 2018, 1) in order to understand what populism is and how it is constructed in discourse.

The term can be used positively, as ‘the people’ conveyed in the semantics of the term evokes mostly positive associations, for example when referring to “the closeness to the people” (Schwörer 2021, 10). However, previous research shows that *populism* is mainly a pejorative term that refers to political actors, attitudes and discourses which are seen as a threat to democracy (Stavrakakis 2018). Furthermore, discourse about populism often “promotes an anti-populism stance” (De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon 2018, 8), thus providing ground for the examination of anti-populist discourse (Stavrakakis 2018).

Populism has been and is extensively used and misused to the extent that scholars warn against the negative effects of the ‘populist hype’ (Glynos and Mondon 2016; Brown and Mondon 2021). According to Dean and Maignashca (2012, 2), academics need to “explore ‘the work’ that it does in disciplining our contemporary political terrain”, as the term itself “does far more politically than it does analytically” (Dean and Maignashca 2020, 12). Drawing on these premises, this paper examines the occurrences of *populis** – i.e. the terms *populismo(s)* ‘populism(s)’ and *populista(s)* ‘populist(s)’ – in the Twitter accounts of the five main Spanish political parties (PSOE, PP, Cs, UP and Vox) and their leaders during the last two months of 2019. I begin by presenting the background of this study in Section 2. I outline previous studies on how populism is used in discourse, and I establish the significance of the term in the context of Spain, as well as in Twitter discourse. After presenting the data and method in Section 3, I proceed with an overview of the use of the different forms of *populis** (4.1) and I present three types of the use of *populis** (4.2). Finally, I discuss the results regarding different uses, meanings, and functions that *populis** have in Twitter discourse of Spanish political actors in 2019.

2. Background

2.1 *Populism*, from empty signifier to socio-political keyword

Populism's vagueness and the multiplicity of definitions have provoked intense debate among scholars interested in the vernacular uses of the term. For some scholars, *populism* is an “empty” or “floating signifier” (i.e. a word without a fixed meaning) (Laclau 2005). Following this discourse-theoretical perspective, *populism* is viewed as “a vessel capable of accommodating an excess of heterogeneous meanings” (Stavrakakis 2014, 509). Studies in this vein have pointed out that the pejorative meaning of the term is constructed by those who oppose and demonise populism and populist politicians, i.e. by anti-populists (Demata, Conoscenti, and Stavrakakis 2020; Nikisianis et al. 2019). In this vein, *populism* in media discourse is described as “the synecdoche of an *omnipresent evil* and associated with all its manifestations imaginable: irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism.” (Stavrakakis 2014, 509).

Furthermore, previous research focusing on the term itself has shown that *populism* is used randomly in political discourse, earning it the label of a “meaningless buzzword” (Schwörer 2021, 4). Schwörer has examined the use of the term *populism* in Twitter posts by political actors from six European countries. The study argues that politicians use the term “with inconsistent meanings” and mainly attach it to political actors classified as populists in the academic literature (Schwörer 2021, 9). This study has also highlighted the presence of positive evaluations of *populism* (for example, in the Spanish context, *Vox* used the term positively referring to themselves) (Schwörer 2021, 6). Although this study has provided a thorough comparative quantitative analysis of who labels whom as populist in online political discourse, it has not shown how politicians actually *use* the term, what meanings they attach to it, and with what purpose this labelling is done.

Another strand of works approach vernacular uses of populism from a linguistic perspective. Kranert (2020) has conducted a corpus-assisted analysis of the terms *populism* and *populist* in the German and British press between 2012 and 2017. The data is analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, and involves corpus linguistics and discursive analysis methods to determine the meanings and pragmatic functions of the terms in newspaper discourse. This study approaches the terms as “socio-political keywords”, that is, as words that have “socio-political significance in a particular period”

(Jeffries and Walker 2017, 4). Such words participate in the processes of classification and categorisation of entities, actions, individuals and groups, related to political orientations and ideologies. This means that such socio-political keywords can have several functions in discourse.

In this paper, following a linguistic analysis of the use of the terms in discourse (Kranert 2020), I approach these terms as socio-political keywords. This implies seeing *populism* not only as a buzzword or a word used solely to discredit and demonise populists. This approach rather encourages us to look into different functions that this word might have in political discourse. Indeed, socio-political keywords can be used to discredit or legitimise, for example when stating who is and who is not populist, or who is anti-populist. In this line, earlier research has also suggested that *populism* is used as a “battle term” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Moreover, Kranert (2020) points out two pragmatic functions of the terms in media discourse: “a stigma term to discredit policies and rhetoric of political actors, or to name political ideologies and groups that are not part of the established political centre ground” (Kranert 2020, 54). The present paper aims to verify if these observations are confirmed in another discursive context, i.e. in the Twitter discourse of Spanish political actors.

2.2 The Spanish case study

The selection of the socio-political context of Spain in 2019 for analysing the uses of *populism* and *populist* is justified for the following reasons. Since the transition to democracy in 1975, the two-party system (*el bipartidismo*) has been characteristic of the Spanish political landscape, with the right-wing conservative PP (People’s Party) and the centre-left PSOE (Spanish Socialist and Workers’ Party) dominating Spanish politics. However, the emergence of the centre-right party *Ciudadanos* (‘Citizens’, Cs), the left-wing anti-austerity party *Podemos* (‘We Can’) and the far-right *Vox* (‘Voice’ in Latin) ended the two-party system of PP-PSOE. Since the emergence of Podemos in 2014 in Spanish politics, the terms *populism* and *left-wing populism* have been largely used, mainly in a pejorative way, to refer to this party and its former leader Pablo Iglesias. However, another political party, the far-right *Vox*, is classified as right-wing populist party by political scientists (Rooduijn et al. 2019). Two political parties with opposite ideologies can then be labelled as populist.

Furthermore, several elections took place in Spain in 2019: local, regional, European and two national elections. After the first inconclusive general election in April 2019, a second was held in November 2019. The results of the first general election brought a victory for PSOE, and the need for support from the left-wing electoral alliance UP (*Unidas Podemos* 'United, We Can', formed by *Podemos*, *Izquierda Unida* and EQUO) and the regional parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country to form a coalition government³. However, no agreement was reached between PSOE and UP. Furthermore, the far-right grew considerably in the April election and *Vox* became the third political party after PSOE and PP. The November election marked another victory for PSOE; however, the Socialist party once again fell short of a majority and needed to proceed with the negotiations with UP.

In addition to political uncertainty, 2019 was the year of social and political polarisation of regional nationalism (mainly Catalan and Basque) and Spanish nationalism. The country witnessed the trial of the Catalan independence leaders involved in the organisation of the 2017 Independence referendum, as well as numerous protests related to the Catalan crisis. Not only were there protests organised by the pro-independence movement in 2019, but also several demonstrations in support of a united Spain. One such demonstration under the slogan *Por una España unida, elecciones ahora* 'For a united Spain, elections now' was led by the right-wing political parties (Cs, PP and *Vox*) and denounced the leader of PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, because of the negotiations with UP and regional political parties. In the academic literature, several Catalan and Basque political parties with a pro-independence agenda (EH Bildu, ERC, JxCat) are sometimes classified as populist political parties (Olivas Osuna 2021). In addition, the Spanish media have labelled Catalan independentism as populism (Gamper Sachse 2018).

2.3 Political communication on Twitter

The microblogging platform Twitter has become a "social medium most commonly used for purposes of contemporary political communication" (Krzyżanowski 2018, 1). In the context of Spanish politics, Twitter has become widely used by politicians across

³ The election results can be found at the webpage of the Ministry of the Interior of Spain <https://infoelectoral.interior.gob.es/opencms/es/elecciones-celebradas/resultados-electorales/> (Accessed 17 April 2023).

the whole political spectrum (Padilla Herrada 2015). Previous studies on the use of Twitter by Spanish politicians have pointed out that they use the platform to have immediate and more direct interaction with their followers, making use of an informal style, colloquial expressions and personal anecdotes (Padilla Herrada 2015). In addition, Coesemans and De Cock (2017) have shown that during the 2014 election campaign for the European Parliament, Spanish politicians used Twitter for “self-promotional purposes, as they adapted their expressions of self-reference, often evoking professional identities” (Coesemans and De Cock 2017, 48). Finally, previous research has pointed out that Spanish political parties are “strongly engaged in campaigning on Twitter, publishing more content than parties in the other countries” (Schwörer 2021, 5). This extensive use of Twitter as a means of political communication might result in a high number of tweets containing *populis**.

All this makes the Spanish context in 2019 a promising avenue for the examination of the “complex and polarized language games” (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 3) involving the terms *populism* and *populist*. The questions that arise in the context of the use of *populis** on Twitter are whether *populis** is used to self-promote during election campaigning, and if so, in what way? How can the discursive context of Twitter reshape the uses of *populis**? What are the functions of *populis** in Twitter political discourse?

3. Data and method

In this paper, I examine online political discourse containing occurrences of *populis** – i.e. the terms *populismo(s)* ‘populism(s)’ and *populista(s)* ‘populist(s)’ – in the Twitter accounts of the five main Spanish political parties (PSOE, PP, Cs, UP and Vox) and their leaders during the last two months of 2019.

The data for this study were gathered as follows. In a larger corpus of Twitter historical data purchased from TweetBinder⁴ – containing all tweets with *populis** published in 2019 in several languages, collected as part of the TrUMPo project⁵ – I selected tweets in Spanish posted on the official Twitter accounts of the five main political parties (PSOE, UP, PP, Cs and Vox) participating in the general election on

⁴ Twitter analytical tool. <https://www.tweetbinder.com/>

⁵ Discourse, populism and democracy – Tracking the uses of populism in media and political discourse <https://www.discourseonpopulism-uclouvain.com>

10 November 2019 (often referred to as 10N) during the period from 1 November 2019 to 31 December 2019. In the TweetBinder historical report, I manually selected the tweets containing *populis** by searching for the usernames of the leaders and the parties studied. The tweets with *populis** in the TweetBinder report were posted on 2 accounts of UP, 7 accounts of Vox, 17 accounts of PSOE, 38 accounts of Cs, 39 accounts of PP. The complete list of Twitter accounts with usernames is provided in Appendix 1. All the tweets in the corpus were produced by public figures. The examples provided in the analysis are not anonymised.

The corpus contains 300 tweets (10,488 words) and is divided into sub-corpora for each political party under study (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of tweets and words per sub-corpus

Corpus	Number of tweets	Number of words
Sub-corpus Cs	212	7,399
Sub-corpus PP	57	2,089
Sub-corpus PSOE	20	667
Sub-corpus Vox	9	277
Sub-corpus UP	2	56
Total corpus <i>populis*</i>	300	10,488

This paper focuses on the tweets published during the last two months of 2019, making it possible to provide a more qualitative account of the linguistic aspects of online political discourse of the actors across the whole political spectrum and, thus, to reveal who and what is seen as populist, with what characteristics *populism* is associated, and with what purpose the terms are used by politicians themselves.

Drawing on a corpus-assisted discourse studies approach (Partington and Marchi 2015; Partington, Duguid, and Taylor 2013) and on a previous linguistic analysis of the pragmatic functions of *populis** in discourse (Kranert 2020), the data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively using a combination of collocation analysis and manual coding of the data. First, I ran a collocation analysis for each

political party separately, using the Word sketch function of the corpus linguistics software Sketch Engine. This function provides an overview of the collocates of the search word differentiated by grammatical relationships and based on a logDice statistical measure, which determines the strength of a collocate independently of the size of the corpus (Kilgarriff et al. 2014).

In a second step, each tweet was stored in an Excel database that was used to manually code the data. The database contains analytical categories that were developed based on the codebook of the project aimed at the interdisciplinary analysis of discourses on populism. For each occurrence of *populis**, this codebook proposes to annotate several categories that may serve as cues to understand the meaning and the goal of the use of this term. Analytical categories were developed both deductively, by drawing on previous research partly presented in Section 2, and inductively, by reading the data and manually coding samples of the data, in several instances by several researchers. Manual coding of the data aimed to analyse the occurrence of *populis** in its immediate context, without going into further details, for example by examining threads, comments and embedded links.

In this study, each token of *populis** was coded for seven categories: grammatical category, topic of the tweet, author, target, connotation, conceptual field, and pragmatic function. The grammatical category of *populis** aimed to identify nouns and adjectives. In Spanish, *populismo* and *populismos* are nouns; *populista* and *populistas* are both nouns and adjectives. The use of a different grammatical category, for example *populist* as a qualifying adjective or as a singular noun, may reveal different functions attached to the concept. The topic of the tweet was used to determine the main subject of the tweet. The author of the tweet refers to either the original use of *populis** and the person who used the term, or to the use of *populis** in reported speech and, if possible, who initially used the term. The target of the use of *populis** was coded following the distinction between explicit target (i.e. explicit labelling of a specific politician/party/political leaning/ideology) and implicit target, and what linguistic and contextual cues help to understand who or what is implied using *populis**. The connotation of *populis** was coded following the distinction between positive, negative and neutral, and by determining how we understand the connotation (e.g. by co-occurrences, the socio-political context). The category of the conceptual field of *populis** refers to the semantic domain *populis** is linked to or associated with in the tweet. The coding was performed by attributing such codes as demagoguery, anti-

elite, extremism/radicalism, simplistic, authoritarian or unknown. The coding of the pragmatic functions was performed by attributing the pragmatic functions identified in the previous research (Kranert 2020) outlined in Section 2.1.

The combination of collocation analysis and the qualitative analysis of the occurrences of *populis** based on these seven categories allowed us to inductively build up a typology of the uses of the term in our corpus. For instance, we observe that the use of the singular noun *populismo* without a specific target and in association with specific words has a different meaning and purpose in discourse than the use of the plural noun *populistas* associated with a particular target and a specific conceptual field. In proposing this typology, the aim is not to associate each occurrence of *populis** in the corpus with a given type of use, but rather to highlight the variety of uses of *populis** that can be found in political discourses on Twitter, as well as to show how the meaning and functions of the term in discourse are reshaped depending on the specific context of the message.

4. Analysis

4.1 Overview of the occurrences of *populis** in the corpus

In the first step of the analysis, I determined which political actors used *populis** and with what frequency (Table 2). I then looked at the absolute number of tweets with *populis** in the accounts of the leaders of the political parties studied and in all the accounts of the parties studied, and compared this with the number of all tweets posted in these accounts, obtained by using a Python script in the Twitter API (column 2), in order to determine the proportion of tweets with *populis** during the study period (column 3). Furthermore, I determined which specific grammatical form was used by each political party. The absolute number of tweets containing each term produced by each political party and the percentage of the use of each term can be seen in Table 3.

Table 2. The absolute number of tweets with *populis** (column 1), the absolute number of tweets on the accounts studied (column 2) and the proportion of tweets with *populis** (column 3)

Political party and leaders	Number of tweets with	Number of tweets on the account studied Nov. – Dec. 2019	Proportion (as percentage) of tweets
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	<i>populis*</i> Nov. – Dec. 2019	with <i>populis*</i> Nov. – Dec. 2019	
UP	2	695	0.29%
Iglesias	0	2,114	0
Garzón	1	3,156	0.032%
PSOE	20	9,546	0.21%
Sánchez	0	2,193	0
Cs	212	38,451	0.55%
Arrimadas	11	1,899	0.66%
Rivera	1	1,622	0.062%
PP	57	21,881	0.26%
Casado	7	3,059	0.22%
Vox	9	5,751	0.16%
Abascal	0	3,997	0

Table 3. The absolute number and the proportion of the use of *populismo(s)/populista(s)* by each political party in November-December 2019

Political party					Total number of tweets per party
	<i>populismo</i>	<i>populismos</i>	<i>populista</i>	<i>populistas</i>	
Cs	34	16	3	159	212
	16.04%	7.55%	1.42%	75.00%	100%
PP	39	4	3	11	57
	68.42%	7.02%	5.26%	19.30%	100%
PSOE	6	4	7	3	20
	30.00%	20.00%	35.00%	15.00%	100%
Vox	2	0	5	2	9
	22.22%	0	55.56%	22.22%	100%
UP	2	0	0	0	2
	100%	0	0	0	100%
Total number of tweets per term	83	24	18	175	300

Even though the dataset is rather small and the number of tokens is low in absolute value for several actors, percentages show a significant difference between the frequency with which parties used *populis** on Twitter. In addition, the low frequency with which the parties use *populis** was not considered as drawback, firstly because the main objective of the study is to examine the uses of the terms in a more detailed way, but also because this low frequency already indicates something about the use of *populis** in political discourse. Mainly, it indicates politicians' reluctance to use the term (except for Cs). This might suggest a certain awareness of the effects that the use of the term might have, or it can also point to the reluctance of using a polysemous and vague term.

Firstly, the two parties at the extremes of the political spectrum that are described by others as populists are those that used the terms the least. Secondly, Cs is the political party that used *populis** the most, with a rate of 0.55% and 212 tweets out of 300 tweets in the corpus. Cs use the term two times more than other parties. The same holds for its leader Arrimadas. These figures also show that the salience of *populis** is very limited for all the parties, except for Cs with 1 tweet over 200 containing *populis**: during the timespan of two months under study, accounts linked to Cs published 212 tweets with *populis**, that is more than three tweets per day on average.

Political parties on the left-to-right spectrum examined in this study used the four forms of the term *populis** during the last two months of 2019. The proportion of the use of each form is not the same for each of the three political parties which present a sufficient number of tokens. While the ruling PSOE used the four terms in relatively equal proportions, the corpora for the two other parties (Cs and PP) present much more contrasted and opposite frequencies of these forms. Indeed, 75% of the uses of *populis** by Cs were represented by the plural noun *populistas*, and 16% of the uses by the form *populismo*. This is in sharp contrast with PP which has 68% of tweets with the single noun *populismo* and 19% with the plural noun *populistas*. Usage of *populismos* and *populista* was relatively equal for PP and Cs.

Several observations can be drawn from these two tables. First, we see that the two parties which are usually labelled as populist – UP and Vox – are the ones who use this term the least. As we will see, they are rather the target of the use of *populis**. Besides, the third political party that emerged as a response to the two-party system, that is Cs, is the one that is the most involved in the debate about populism and

appears as the one that targets others or at least evokes the most populism and populists.

In the following section, these observations are coupled with the collocation analysis and manual data annotation to understand why there are differences regarding which political actor used *populis** and why there are differences in the use of each term studied.

4.2 What happens when Spanish politicians talk about *populismo(s)* and *populista(s)* on Twitter?

The abstract use of *populis**

The first type of the use of *populis** in the corpus is characterised by referring to *populism* as something abstract or vague. The analysis suggests that this type of use can mainly be observed in tweets containing the singular and plural nouns *populismo(s)* and adjectives *populista(s)*. Firstly, it can be a self-referential use of the term when the speaker uses *populismo(s)* to talk about *populism* as a political concept and a political phenomenon in general. Let us consider Example 1.

- (1) @JLambanM: “La crisis ha hecho salir del baúl de los recuerdos al **populismo que es el peor enemigo que tiene la democracia**. Nosotros que creemos en la democracia, **hemos de erradicar a los populismos**”. #votaPSOE #AhoraSi (@aragonpsoe, 5/11/2019)
‘@JLambanM: “The crisis has brought **populism, which is democracy’s worst enemy**, out of the trunk of memories. **We** who believe in democracy **must eradicate the populisms**”. #votePSOE #NowYes’ (my translation)⁶

This tweet, posted during the election campaign, illustrates the abstract use of *populis** by PSOE in tweets containing political hashtags that call upon citizens to vote for PSOE. It contains a direct quotation from PSOE’s regional candidate, with two occurrences of *populis**. In the first, the meaning of *populism* is suggested by the metaphorical description in which *populism* is presented as something extremely negative. The tweet juxtaposes *populism* and *democracy*, and *populism* is described using a noun phrase with a superlative, *peor enemigo* ‘worst enemy’. In the second occurrence, the use of the plural noun *populismos* suggests that there is more than

⁶ All original quotations are translated by the author.

one populism. It is not clear what ideology or political party is the target of the use of the term, but the negative connotation is clear since *populisms* are presented as something that must be eradicated.

Similar uses of negatively loaded lexical items are observed in the tweets by PP, in which *populism* was claimed to be *el nuevo enemigo del siglo XXI* 'the new enemy of the 21st century', and *los enemigos de la libertad el nacionalismo excluyente y el populismo* 'the enemies of freedom are exclusionary nationalism and populism'. The leader of PP, Pablo Casado, uses *populis** to show his concern about populism as a phenomenon in the context of not only Spain, but also the European Union. Example 2 illustrates how the leader of PP targets both the left and the right, denouncing the danger that populism represents, and positioning PP as the political force capable of averting this danger, as suggested by the phrase *vacuna ante el populismo* 'a vaccine against populism'. This example also shows how this abstract use of the term indirectly targets opponents on both the left and the right and contributes to positioning PP in the political centre and as a political force capable of preventing the negative consequences of populism. This example also contains an explanation of the meaning of *populism* by characterising it as proposing apparently simple solutions to complex problems.

- (2) ***El populismo de izquierda y derecha pone en riesgo la UE. Frente a sus soluciones simples a problemas complejos no podemos doblar la apuesta sino combatirlo con principios. El PPE es vacuna ante el populismo que asola la economía, bienestar y concordia civil en nuestras naciones.*** (@pablocasado_, 21/11/2019)

'**Left and right populism** puts the EU at risk. Faced with **its simple solutions to complex problems**, we cannot double down but must fight it with principles. **The EPP is a vaccine against the populism** that devastates the economy, welfare and civil harmony in our nations.'

Similarly, in the tweets by Cs, this abstract use of *populis** occurs in metaphorical descriptions that suggest the danger of populist politics for Spain, positioning Cs as the only party that can stop populism: *cerrar la puerta al populismo y al nacionalismo* 'close the door to populism and nationalism', *aislar al nacionalismo y al populismo*

'isolate nationalism and populism' and *frenarle los pies al populismo* 'put a stop to populism'.

Secondly, the abstract use of *populis** can be expressed by its adjectival use to describe an entity or object. The collocation analysis indicates the presence of the singular and plural adjectives *populista(s)*, which modify a noun providing a description, as in the collocates *deriva populista* 'populist drift', *una nueva época populista* 'a new populist era', *discurso populista* 'populist discourse' and *odio populista* 'populist hatred'. This use is recurrent mainly for PSOE but also appears to a lesser extent in the messages of other political parties. Within this abstract use, the tweets by Vox are worth mentioning, as this is the only party to associate populism with communism. Among nine occurrences of *populis**, the following lexical items co-occurred with *populis**: *comunismo populista* 'populist communism', *extrema izquierda y populista* 'extreme left and populist', without explicitly naming *Podemos*.

In these examples, the discourses containing *populis** are mainly of anti-populist nature. *Populism* is presented as a negative phenomenon by opposing it to something presented as legitimate (e.g. democracy, welfare) or by associating it with ideologies presented as illegitimate (e.g. nationalism, communism), and by using powerful and often metaphorical terms to highlight the need to oppose them (e.g. enemy, vaccine, to eradicate, to close the door). In the Spanish context, the abstract use of *populis** can indeed refer indirectly to particular political actors, but it can also refer vaguely to a general political trend which is not specific to certain political parties and not even specific to Spain. The purpose of using *populis** is not only to discredit political opponents, but to present oneself as the best solution against the dangers of populism.

The concrete use of *populis**

The second type of use of *populis** in the corpus consists of labeling specific political orientations or specific political actors. This use targets mainly political actors on the opposite end of the political spectrum (the left targets the right, and vice versa). However, this label can also apply to a political opponent in the centre or can target a list of opponents, who are not necessarily considered populist in the literature.

Example 3 illustrates this use of the term in a tweet posted before the general election. A PSOE regional politician's use of *populis** on a radio programme is cited in a tweet from the regional Twitter account. The tweet contains the deontic verbs *deber*

and *hay que*, both meaning ‘must’, and two electoral hashtags, thus serving as a directive speech act by asking people to vote for PSOE. The explicit naming of political rivals is accompanied by the names of foreign politicians, i.e. Bolsonaro, Le Pen and Trump, traditionally associated with far-right populist politics. However, in the Spanish context, among Vox, PP and Cs, only Vox can be seen as a far-right populist party (Vampa 2020; Rama et al. 2021).

(3) @perejoanpons en @SERmallorca *El domingo nos jugamos seguir progresando o **ir hacia una deriva populista** que está entre **Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Trump, Vox, PP y Cs**. No debemos cansarnos nunca de votar y hay que hacerlo por el @PSOE #AhoraSí #VotaPSOE* (@psibpsoe, 8/11/2019)

‘@perejoanpons in @SERmallorca On Sunday what’s at stake will be whether we continue to make progress or **go down a populist path** between **Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Trump, Vox, PP and Cs**. We must never get tired of voting and we must vote for @PSOE #NowYes #VotePSOE’

Example 4 illustrates the use of *populismo* by the left wing. The tweet was posted several days before the second general election in November 2019. The leader of IU, Alberto Garzón, evokes the context of the Catalan crisis.

(4) *Vox, PP y Cs han “anunciado” que encerrarán a los líderes independentistas. El PSOE “anuncia” que traeré a Puigdemont a España. Luego se dicen constitucionalistas y liberales. Este **populismo incendiario y ultranacionalista es el nutritivo alimento de la extrema derecha**. (@agarzon, 6/11/2019)*

‘Vox, PP and Cs have “announced” that they will lock up the pro-independence leaders. The PSOE “announces” that I will bring Puigdemont to Spain. Then they call themselves constitutionalists and liberals. This **incendiary and ultra-nationalist populism is the nutritious food of the extreme right.**’

Garzón points out that the support of the right-wing parties and the centre-left PSOE for the imprisonment of the Catalan politicians is a populist act that fuels the far right. The token *populismo* co-occurs with the adjectives ‘incendiary’ and ‘ultra-nationalist’ that denounce and criticises four political parties, suggesting a negative connotation of the term. Garzón, using *populismo*, refers to several political parties that approved of the imprisonment of the Catalan leaders (Vox, Cs, PP and PSOE), stating that all these parties show an inclination towards the extreme right, while claiming to be “liberals” and “constitutionalists”. Of these parties, only Vox is frequently considered a populist party in the literature, but Garzón attributes the label to all four parties and associates them with the far right and Spanish nationalism. Moreover, in this tweet, *populismo* is used to discredit both a stance and the parties mentioned.

The concrete use of *populis** is also achieved by employing the plural noun *populistas*, as in a coordination construction in a tweet by Cs: *una banda de populistas y nacionalistas* ‘a gang of populists and nationalists’. This use occurs mainly in the tweets of Cs and, to a lesser extent, PP. Example 5 shows the use of the plural noun *populistas* without explicitly naming who is being referred to by this use.

- (5) @InesArrimadas "Quiero explicar a todos los españoles que hay una alternativa política de 221 escaños constitucionalistas y moderados" Sánchez debe rectificar y **romper sus relaciones con populistas y nacionalistas** y dar la mano a los constitucionalistas. (@CsCantabria, 02/12/2019)

‘@InesArrimadas “I want to explain to all Spaniards that there is a political alternative of 221 constitutionalist and moderate seats” Sánchez must rectify and **sever his relations with populists and nationalists** and shake hands with the constitutionalists.’

This example demonstrates how Cs, the political party that used *populis** the most in the corpus, indirectly evokes the context of regional nationalism in Catalonia, and the possible left-wing coalition between PSOE and UP. The concept of constitutionalists is presented as legitimate and contrasts with *populists*, which collocate with the noun *nacionalistas* and with the verbal phrase ‘to sever relations with’, suggesting a negative connotation. In this tweet, Cs positions itself as an alternative for a coalition

government and legitimises its proposal of 221 seats shared between PSOE and the right-wing Cs and PP parties, instead of a coalition of PSOE with the left-wing UP. Moreover, it includes a direct quotation by the Cs leader in which the politician self-positions herself as the new leader who came in after Cs's sharp decline and the resignation of the previous leader, and who can offer a better alternative for a coalition government.

Example 6 illustrates this type of use by PP. The tweet contains explicit targeting of Sánchez and his political partners, describing them as *pro-independence* and *terrorists*, and asking people to vote for PP by using political hashtags.

(6) *El 10-N tenemos una nueva oportunidad para desalojar a **Sánchez** y sus **socios populistas, independentistas y proetarras** de la Moncloa. No lo dudes y #VotaPP #PorTodoLoQueNosUne @pablocasado_ @populares (@PP_Elda, 01/11/2019)*

'On 10-N we have a new opportunity to oust **Sánchez and his populist, pro-independence and pro-ETA associates** from Moncloa. Do not hesitate and #VotePP #ForEverythingThatUnitesUs @pablocasado_@populares'

***Populis** in the reported speech of an opponent**

This use of *populis** is characterised by a reaction to a previous use of *populis** attributed to a political actor. In the corpus, those labelled as populists hardly ever use *populis**. In a few occurrences, UP and Vox do not accept or reject the label attributed to them by others, but they use this previous reference to counterattack and discredit the author of the initial use. UP does this, for instance, to talk negatively about the media, while Vox self-praises in contrast with the opponent. In this corpus, such uses are scarce, yet they represent a large proportion of the use of *populis** by these two parties. In addition, they point to a specific use and function of *populis**, i.e. the reaction of populist parties to being called populist.

One tweet by Vox (Example 7) contains a reaction to a previous use of the *populist* label attributed to Vox by the leader of PP, directly addressing the politician by his surname. This illustrates how Vox reacts to being called *populist*, without accepting

or rejecting this label. However, they do counterattack the politician who called them *populist*. On the one hand, there is delegitimisation of his politics, by referring to his party as “doing nothing” and, on the other, self-praise, by referring to Vox as “brave”.

(7) **Habla de populismo** el líder de un partido político que no hizo nada teniendo mayoría absoluta...Señor Casado abra paso a los valientes (@voxlarioja, 21/11/2019)

‘The leader of a political party that did nothing when it had an absolute majority **speaks of populism**... Mr. Casado, make way for the brave’

Another tweet that illustrates this type of use of *populis** (Example 8) is by the regional representative of *Podemos*, who reacts to the description of the agreement between PSOE and UP as being *abrazo al populismo* ‘the embrace of populism’. The use of *populismo* in Example 8 is characterised by the presence of reported speech and the reaction to a previous use of the term in the press. The tweet contains the embedded link to the article in *El Diario* and the classification of the newspaper as conservative. It does not contain either acceptance of the populist label, or its rejection, but it does reject the attempt to use it as a delegitimisation tool.

(8) “Engendro gubernamental” y “**abrazo al populismo**”: a la prensa conservadora se le atraganta el pacto PSOE-UP (@PJamuz, 14/11/2019)

“Government monstrosity” and “**embrace of populism**”: the conservative press is choking on the PSOE-UP pact’

5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the tweets containing *populis** posted by Spanish politicians is guided by a linguistic perspective on the use of the terms *populism* and *populist* in discourse. Previous research has claimed that the term is a randomly used “meaningless buzzword” (Schworer 2021). Our analysis confirms that the meaning of *populis** can be rather vague and variable. Yet, it also shows that at least in political discourse, the uses of *populis** are far from being random or meaningless. Indeed, specific leanings are attached to *populis** depending on the political actor, i.e. association with

demagogy (PSOE), regional nationalism (Cs and PP) or communism (Vox). The analysis of a variety of uses of the four terms and their collocates suggests that *populis** is intermingled with other socio-political concepts. Some of these, such as nationalism and demagogy, are linked to the semantics of the term as used in the field of political science; others, such as communism and constitutionalism, are more context-specific.

In line with Kranert's (2020) observations, we have shown that *populis** is used with specific purposes, notably to discredit actions or political actors and to name political ideologies and groups. The former case is mainly observed with what we have called 'the concrete uses of *populis**': in this case, a political opponent is labelled populist to delegitimise them. We have seen that all Spanish parties studied may be called populist by other political actors. This confirms the idea that the term has no clear definition and can be used to label very different objects. In other words, with this usage of *populis**, the labelling depends to a lesser extent on the actual ideology or style of the parties involved, but rather on who is your political adversary. This is reflected by the fact that PSOE did not target UP as populist during the campaign, as it was considered an ally.

While labelling someone as populist always conveys a negative connotation in our corpus, and hence has some delegitimising purpose, it is important to observe that the naming and discrediting functions can actually target different actors. For example, in the tweets by Cs, using *populistas* to implicitly or explicitly refer to UP does not seem to aim primarily at discrediting UP, but rather at attacking PSOE via its potential ally. In other words, naming/referring to and labelling/discrediting correspond to two distinct and potentially independent uses and functions of *populis**. Similarly, this strategy of delegitimising PSOE and the left-wing coalition by the use of *populis** attached to UP and employed by actors that position themselves in the political centre has been pointed out in the analysis of the parliamentary discourse of Spanish politicians (Shchinova 2024). The recurrence of this pattern indicates that *populis** can call up multiple functions and can be used to do more than one thing at a time.

The abstract uses of *populis**, characterised by the self-referential use of the nouns *populismo(s)* and the qualifying adjectives *populista(s)*, do not primarily aim at discrediting or naming individuals or groups, but rather at referring to populism in general as a negative and dangerous phenomenon build up in opposition to something legitimate (for example, democracy). Interestingly, in political communication on Twitter, talking about populism as a general phenomenon is not meant to describe or

analyse it to propose solutions for avoiding it. Rather, populism is evoked as a spectre to self-legitimise. Such uses of *populis** exemplify anti-populist discourses and show how *populis** is used as a means of self-legitimation and self-positioning as somebody who could stop this abstract negative phenomenon.

Finally, the use of *populis** in the reported speech shows that the term can take even more functions than those described above. In the corpus, *populis** in reported speech is used to present someone else's use of *populis** as being exaggerated and irrelevant. This is again a way to discredit a political opponent. However, this time not because they would be populist, but for having used this term. The data analysed include only a few occurrences of such uses. An examination of the reaction to the label is indeed a possible direction for future analysis.

In summary, our findings reveal the complexity of functions of *populis**. Indeed, the meaning of populism can be evasive, and its negative connotation is used to delegitimise an opponent or to self-legitimise by positioning oneself against populism. However, we see that in the context under study, political actors resort to different patterns of use of *populis** which depend on their political and communicative strategy.

Finally, the findings of this study characterise the use of the terms in a relatively small corpus and can only represent the Spanish context at a specific period. A comparative corpus-based analysis of the use of the terms in different discursive and socio-political context (for example, a comparison of the uses of *populis** in several European democracies) may provide more generalised results and further understanding of the complexity and fluidity of the contested concept of populism and its role in contemporary socio-political debate.

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Appendix 1

The tweets in this analysis were produced in the following Twitter accounts:

				
@agarzon	@aragonpsoe	@InesArrimadas	@pablocasado_	@vox_es
@PJamuz	@ParlaGrupoPSOE	@CiudadanosCs	@populares	@voxestepona
	@psoearanjuez	@CiudadansCs	@ppambite	@voxlarioja
	@PSOEAlmeria	@CsRegionMurcia	@PPCoruna	@vox_retiro.madrid
	@psoesanbraulio	@Cs_Albacete	@ppandaluz	
	@psoe_loradelrio	@Cs_Europa	@PP_Badajoz	@voxbaleares
	@PsoeLug	@CsAlicante_C	@ppbalears	@Vox_Alcorcon
	@camaspsoe	@CsBalears	@PPBarcelona_	@Vox_LPA
	@PSOEdeAvila	@CsCiempozuelos	@PPBierzo	
	@psoedistritocen	@Cs_Euskadi	@PPBrunete	
	@psoe_m	@CsHortaGuinardo	@PopularesCyL	
	@psoemolina	@CsLaRioja	@ppchamartin	
	@PSOE_Ayto_Guada	@CsMadLatina	@ppmadrid	
	a	@CsMollet	@ppdegallcia	
	@psibpsoe	@Cs_SantaMartaTormes	@ppguadalajara	
	@socialistesGND		@pphuelva	
	@PSOECantabria	@CsAlmeria_Prov	@Populares_Jerez	
		@Cs_Avila_	@PPMelilla	
		@CsCantabria	@ppdemoralzarzal	
		@CsCadiz_Prov	@PPdePalencia	
		@Cs_Aragon	@PPPopularCC	
		@CsCordoba_Prov	@dtosalamancapp	
		@Cs_Andalucia	@ppsanclemente	
		@CsCValenciana	@ppsanse	
		@CsHuelva_Prov	@pptarancon	
		@CsGranada_prov	@PopularesTorres	
		@CsMadridCiudad	@PP_Almeria	
		@Cs_Navarra_	@ppalcorcon	
		@CsSevilla_Prov	@ppcoslada	
		@Cs_Sevilla_	@PopularesCuenca	
		@Cs_Leon_		
		@CsPalafolls		

@Cs_Utrera

@Cs_Zamora_

@Cs_Manresa

@CiutadansBCN

@Cs_Badalona

@CsHospitalet

@PP_Elda

@PopularesMora

@PopularesMurcia

@ppmostoles

@PP_Ceuta

@PPdeSalamanca

@ppmontcadaireixac

@PPEivissa

@PPCatalunya
