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The populist political communication style in action: Podemos' issues and functions on Twitter during the 2016 Spanish General Election

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Abstract

Populism is a phenomenon that has been acquiring great relevance over recent years in the US and Europe. Literature on the subject has identified the existence of a populist style that also affects political communication. The aim of this article is to analyze the structure of issues and the functions of messages circulated by a populist party in order to determine the presence and incidence of this style's main components. The methodology is based on a quantitative analysis of the content of the Twitter profiles of the Spanish political party Podemos and its leader, Pablo Iglesias, during the 2016 Spanish elections. Totally, 2,612 tweets were analyzed. The results allow the identification of a strategy of complementarity, which appears as a new component in the communication style of populism in the digital environment. Podemos is also seen to lean towards anti-elitism and its leader towards the communicative construction of "the people."

Keywords: political communication, populism, Podemos, Twitter, social media.

Introduction

The recent appearance and increasing pugnacity of populist movements and parties in the US and Europe is a phenomenon that has acquired great relevance over recent years. This is mainly because it has significant political and communicative consequences for established democracies. Populism is contributing to the breakdown of the political and communicative status quo in several countries, and to various transformations in these realms.

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One of the areas of special interest relates to the changes populism is introducing in the process of setting the public agenda. The emergence, or empowerment, of these new populist parties and leaders in Europe and the US, together with the consolidation of social media as a communicative space in today's societies, is eroding the monopoly that mainstream media and traditional political actors traditionally held over this process. The use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to communicate and frame issues provides an opportunity for political populists to act as a counterweight to the political and media elites, while at the same time extending the reach of their messages.

Discourse and messaging assume a great importance in populism, and communication is a core element in the vision and action of populist parties and leaders. Two basic aspects of populist strategy are the impulse of issues, linked to the possibility of activating the agenda-setting process, and of frames, associated with launching the agenda-building process.

Academic literature on populism has identified the existence of a political communication style common among populist politicians (Aalberg et al., 2017). This style can be broken down into four main components: the communicative construction of "the people," the anti-elitism the exclusion of out-groups, and the narrative of "the crisis" (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014; Wodak, 2015; Block and Negrine, 2017).

The study of populist discourse has received attention in the way that it frames its subject (Bos and Brants, 2014), especially the analysis of the anti-immigration rhetoric used by the right-wing populist parties (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart, 2007; Hatakka, Niemi and Välimäki, 2017). However, the study of the issues have sparked less interest among scholars. The issues are significant for communicative and political strategy because they represent a basic medium used to manage the media agenda and the public agenda and therefore shape how the public agenda and debate are set. Doing so is essential for populist parties and leaders. For this reason, it is therefore necessary to study the communicative practices by populist political actors. This article aims to analyze the structure of issues and the functions of messages circulated on Twitter by a populist party, in order to determine their main strategic components.

To do so, this article analyzes social media. These platforms allow politicians to begin self-mediation processes (Cammaerts, 2012), through the autonomous production and circulation of content, linked to the model of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009). Social media has also increasingly been used by the public as a direct source of news and political information that bypasses the mainstream media. The 2016 US presidential election, in which 44% of the public turned to these digital platforms for information (Pew Report, 2016), is a good example of this

This study focuses on Spain's populist party Podemos, which appeared in March 2014 and has made decisive changes to the Spanish political scenery since then. This case is particularly interesting within the context of European populism because, unlike other countries like France, Germany, Holland, or Austria, where

right-wing populism is dominant, Spain's is a case of a prominent left-wing populist party. Furthermore, its communicative strategies have contributed to the renewal of models of political communication (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016).

The rise of left-wing populism in Spain: Podemos

At the start of 2014, a new political party called Podemos was founded. Its main leaders were a group of university professors headed by Pablo Iglesias. The party has its roots in the social movement 15-M, which in 2011 led thousands of Spanish citizens to occupy the streets and squares of several cities to protest the effects of the economic crisis on people's daily lives and advocate for the reform of Spanish democracy (Tormey and Feenstra, 2015; Romanos and Sádaba, 2015). At the same time, a significant number of its founders formed part of the Juventud Sin Futuro [Youth Without a Future] movement, which spoke out against the precarious situation facing young people in the country, and the Democracia Real Ya [Real Democracy Now] platform, which highlighted the inefficiency of the mechanisms of representative democracy in Spain.

There are two foundations on which the emergence and subsequent electoral consolidation of Podemos were based: First, the public discontent and dissatisfaction with how democracy was working and with the role of political actors, who were seen as overly privileged individuals with little concern for everyday working people and a tendency to get caught up in corruption and bad practice (Gerbaudo, 2017). This perception is linked to the existing processes of political disaffection in other countries around the world as well. The second foundation is the effects of the international economic crisis on the lives of the majority of Spanish citizens (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). These effects were evident in the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, increasing job insecurity, negative effects of austerity policies, increased social inequality and the loss of equal opportunities. Citizens have realized that they are the ones paying for the consequences of the crisis while those who have caused it—the political system, the financial system, and the banks—have got away scot-free (Fernández-Albertos, 2015). Podemos turned the resentment and frustration of the victims of the economic crisis into a force for radical political change (Stoehrel, 2016). It brought together these two major issues - the representative crisis and the economic crisis - and made them the core of its political program (Feenstra et al, 2017).

In tune with the strategy of populism in other countries, Podemos turned public disillusionment and outrage into political capital (Mudde, 2007). Unlike as was the case in France, Germany, or the UK, its populist backswing was towards the political left. Podemos' political program was based on left-wing populism influenced by the political theories of Gramsci (the concept of hegemony), Schmitt (the friend-enemy distinction) and Laclau and the Essex School of discourse analysis (the concept of populism and overcoming the left/right cleavage) (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016).

The eruption of Podemos has significantly changed the Spanish political landscape (Orriols and Cordero, 2016; Rodon and Hierro, 2016). This new populist party has contributed to the breakdown of the Spanish two-party system, which was constituted by antagonistic bipolarization (Sampedro and Seoane, 2008) present since the return to democracy at the end of the 1970s. Since then, the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the traditionally social democrat Partido Socialista (PSOE) have dominated Spanish political life, winning 83.8% of the votes between the two of them in 2008. In the 2014 European election, Podemos won 1.2 million votes and 5 seats in the European Parliament, just a few months after being founded. In the 2015 Spanish general election, it obtained 5.1 million votes and in the rerun of those elections in June 2016, it again received 5 million votes, approximately 21.1% of the total popular vote. It thus obtained 71 of the 350 seats in the Spanish Parliament. In these elections, the total number of votes received by PP and PSOE went down to 55.7%, a sharp drop in their popular support.

Social media, self-mediation, and the populist political communication style

Social media allow political actors to autonomously produce and circulate messages that directly reach people. They can therefore create and frame their own issues (Gainous and Wagner, 2014) and try to set the agenda for and influence public debate and opinion. In this sense, they have provided new opportunities and new spaces for political communication, spaces that populist parties exploit (Aalberg et al., 2017). Digital platforms broaden the communicative potential of populism because, by creating and distributing messages through Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, they can influence media agenda and achieve significant social impact (Mazzoleni, 2014). Podemos represents an example of this as, through an innovative dynamic of two-way street mediatization of politics, it has managed to access mainstream Spanish media with its proposals and discourse (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016).

Social media have an agenda-setting impact (Enli, 2017). They are also a powerful arena for participation in and setting of public agenda, especially for those agents who are recent arrivals to or at the margins of the political system. Podemos' use of social media has been successful in this sense (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016). The digital landscape provides populist parties with the ability to determine autonomously their own communicative strategies and then disseminate their discourse and narratives, both of which are central components of political action. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1. What issues and functions, linked to its political agenda, does Podemos produce and circulate through Twitter?

There is agreement among academics on populist movements in their identification of a populist communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014; Aalberg et al., 2017; Block and Negrine, 2017). This style has four components. First is the communicative construction of "the people," which implies a call to the public, putting their interests first in political decisions and placing their problems at the core of the political agenda. The second is anti-elitism, which is present in criticisms and attacks against the political and

economic elite in particular, and the establishment in general. The third component is the exclusion of out-groups, which is evident in the rejection of immigration and minorities. The fourth is the narrative of crisis, which centers around criticism of the financial system, capitalism and austerity (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014). Communication of these four components frequently depends on the use of discursive resources. Among these is the quest for provocation and controversy, which goes as far as the self-production of controversy or self-scandalization in order to approach issues in an emotive way (Haller, 2015). Populist parties also resort to calculated ambivalence, addressing contradictory and ambiguous messages to the public (Wodak, 2015). Another major feature of their strategies is the use of fear (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Wodak, 2015).

The four components characteristic of the populist political communication style can be expressed in the form of issues and functions that are circulated by social media. From this, a second research question can be determined:

RQ2. To what extent is the populist political communication style present in Podemos' production and circulation of political content through Twitter?

Method

The methodological design is based on a quantitative approach. The quantitative content analysis technique has been applied to the Twitter accounts of Podemos and its leader, Pablo Iglesias. The use of this digital platform by the political actors studied can thus be accurately, systematically, and objectively determined, and RQ1 can be answered.

The analysis model applied to Podemos and Pablo Iglesias' Twitter profiles was based on two variables. Variable one is "function" of each tweet produced and circulated during the period studied. For this variable, a total of 13 categories were identified, and these categories are shown and described in Table 1. The second variable is the "issues" circulated by Podemos and Iglesias through their Twitter profiles. In order to study this variable, each of the tweets during the research period was analyzed on the basis of 18 categories, shown and described in Table 2.

Table 1. Categories used to study the function of the political tweets.

Function	Description
Agenda and Organization of Political Actions	Tweets containing information on specific campaign actions in which the time and place are specified. Example: Over 1,880 people watching the Alicante event with @Pablo_Iglesias_ and @monicaoltra live
Electoral Program	Tweets on future political proposals or program proposals. Example: On June 26 we decide whether we want to stop being the most unequal country, poverty to no longer be around 25%
Management of Political Achievements	Tweets extolling or praising the achievements of the party and/or leader. Example: What we have done in the last two years is historic but we were expecting something different tonight

	@Pablo_Iglesias_
Criticizing Opponents	Tweets containing direct attacks on other political parties, other leaders or other ideologies. Example: Pedro Sánchez has achieved his party's worst results since democracy @Pablo_Iglesias_ #20DicPodemos
Media Agenda	Tweets sharing links to a journalistic interview or TV show. Example: @Pablo_Iglesias: Here is the interview I did this morning @carlos_alsina at @OndaCero_es
Interaction and Dialogue with users	Tweets containing a question from the party or the leader to users or appealing to them with a mention. Example: @ahorapodemos: Fear @facudiaz
Participation and Mobilization	Tweets directly looking for votes, requesting financial donations, or mobilizing volunteers. Example: @ahorapodemos: This Sunday #NoTeQuedesEnCasa [#Don'tStayAtHome]. On an historic day, families should vote together: grandchildren with grandparents.
Community Building: Values and ideology	Tweets reinforcing the party values and containing concepts that identify the party, its ideology, or its values. Example: Being patriotic is protecting your people, public services, jobs
Community Building: Personal Life/Backstage	Tweets where particularly the leaders show or talk about things from their private lives (leisure, hobbies, sport, etc.) or from backstage at political events or from the campaign. Example: @Pablo_Iglesias_: About to go into a screening of the film about Bárcenas. I recommend you see it
Community Building: Entertainment	Tweets encouraging community building around the party or the leader with an entertainment-based focus. Example: @ahorapodemos: @ahorapodemos here to #LaCueva (get out, you're going to suffocate from the heat). All ready with @ierrejon and @agarzon! #PrimerLatidoMLG
Humor	Tweets containing memes, jokes, or other humorous resources. Example: @Pablo_Iglesias_: @ierrejon If we start with engaged princesses
Manners/Protocol	Tweets of thanks, sympathy, greetings, special occasions, etc. Example: Still a queue! Many thanks to everyone. #PodemosRemontada
Others	Tweets that cannot be placed in the above categories.

Table 2. Categories used to study the issues of the political tweets.

Subjects	Description
Economy	Tweets including subjects such as jobs, unemployment, salaries, deficit, public spending, debt, crisis, taxes, entrepreneurship, contracts, self-employed people, etc.
Social Policy	Tweets including subjects such as pensions, health, education, the welfare state, social justice, equality/inequality (including gender-based violence), housing, immigration, childbirth, etc.
Culture and Sport	Tweets including subjects related to cultural industries (cinema, literature, art, mainstream media, social media, etc.) and sport.
Science, Technology and the Environment	Tweets including subjects related to R+D, network

	infrastructure (such as fiber optic, ADSL, or wifi), pollution, flora and fauna protection, climate change, etc.
Infrastructure	Tweets including subjects related to transport services (railway, airports) and infrastructure like roads, etc.
Corruption	Tweets including subjects concerning political corruption.
Democratic Regeneration	Tweets including subjects concerning democratic aspects that need to be renewed or removed, like changes in electoral law, putting an end to the establishment and the privileges of the political class, etc.
Political Strategy	Tweets including subjects concerning the intention of forming a certain type of government or possible (or impossible) government pacts in the future.
Voting and Electoral Results	Tweets on questionnaires, surveys, information, analysis, and assessment of electoral results. Tweets referring to the action of voting are also included in this category.
State Territorial Model	Tweets related to the territorial organization of the Spanish state. Tweets on the independence of Catalonia and nationalism are included in this category.
Terrorism	Tweets related to terrorism in all its forms.
Personal Subjects	Tweets referring to the personal life of political agents.
Campaign Organization	Tweets referring to the running of the campaign and the organization of events, like rallies, meetings, political events, etc.
Relationship with the Media	Tweets sharing information about the appearance of a politician in the mainstream media.
Foreign Affairs	Tweets alluding to the European Union or other parts of the world.
Political Harangue	Tweets exalting the importance of party unity and exhorting sympathizers to join the party and earn victory. Similar to campaign slogans.
No Subject	Tweets that do not have a defined subject or that include expressions of courtesy (acknowledgments, etc.).
Others	Tweets that cannot be placed in the above categories.

This system of variables and categories can also be linked to the four components of the populist political communication style. Where possible, the functions and issues have also been linked to these four components (Table 3 and Table 4). In this way, we can analyze the presence of the components of the populist political communication style in the issues circulated by Podemos and Pablo Iglesias on Twitter, and in the functions associated with their messages on this social media platform. RQ2 can therefore be answered.

Table 3. Core functions of political tweets related to elements of populist political communication style.

Elements of populist political communication style	Directly related functions
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Communicative construction of “the people”	Interaction and Dialogue with Users; Participation and Mobilization; Community Building: Values and Ideology; Community Building: Personal Life/Backstage
Anti-elitism	Criticizing the Opponent
Exclusion of out-groups	No functions related
Narrative of “the crisis”	No functions related

Table 4. Core issues of political tweets related to elements of populist political communication style.

Elements of populist political communication style	Directly related subjects
Communicative construction of “the people”	Social Policy; Voting and Electoral Results
Anti-elitism	Corruption; Democratic Regeneration
Exclusion of out-groups	State Territorial Model; Foreign Affairs
Narrative of “the crisis”	Economy

The sample of tweets analyzed in this research centers on the electoral campaign of the general elections held in Spain on June 26, 2016. This period includes the 15 official campaign days, the day of reflection, the day of the elections, and the day after the elections. Tweets issued from the official Twitter profiles of Podemos and its leader and its presidential candidate Pablo Iglesias were studied.

The sample was captured using the application Twitonomy, a web tool allowing tweets, retweets, and replies from selected Twitter profiles to be downloaded. The total number of downloaded tweets was 4,330. For the final analysis, only the tweets themselves and replies from followers were considered. Retweets were discarded, as they were not considered messages produced directly by the political agents in question. In total, 2,612 tweets were studied: 2,511 issued by the Podemos profile and 101 by the Pablo Iglesias profile. Intercoder reliability scores are .97 in Scott’s pi.

Findings

Analysis of the tweets produced and circulated by Podemos and Pablo Iglesias allows the main functions of and the issues distributed through this social media to be identified (RQ1). The first significant finding is a difference in both aspects observed between the profile of the party and that of the leader (Table 5). Regarding the functions of the tweets, Podemos concentrates on the "Electoral program/promises" (31.1% of all tweets), "Criticizing the Opponent" (21.9%) and "Community Building: Values and Ideology" (12.9%). On the other hand, Pablo Iglesias’ profile concentrates on "Interaction and Dialogue with users" (25.7% of the total), "Participation and Mobilization" (9.9%) and "Community Building: Personal Life/Backstage" (11.9%).

These results show that the leader’s communication is directed towards maintaining a direct relationship with the people, encouraging their participation and mobilization, and seeking an interaction and dialogue, using this platform to humanize his image and connect with "the common man" by circulating messages about his private and personal life. In contrast to these aspects, the Podemos

profile is used mainly to publish electoral proposals, to criticize other political agents, and to disseminate the party's ideological values. Podemos' Twitter use is characterized by a clear complementarity between the party and leader accounts. The leader focuses on cultivating a relationship with the people and on humanizing his image, while the party takes care of policy and ideological issues and attacking political opponents. A clear distinction and distribution is established between the two types of political agents in order to cover a broader spectrum of functions through their communicative strategy on Twitter.

Table 5. Function of political tweets on the profiles of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias

Function	Podemos	Pablo Iglesias
Agenda and Organization of Political Acts	9.2%	7.9%
Electoral Program	31.1%	6.9%
Management of Political Achievements	6.7%	3%
Criticizing Opponents	21.9%	5%
Media Agenda	2.4%	7.9%
Interaction and Dialogue with Users	1.4%	25.7%
Participation and Mobilization	9%	9.9%
Community Building: Values and Ideology	12.9 %	6.9 %
Community Building: Personal Life/Backstage	1.3%	11.9%
Community Building: Entertainment	0.4%	3%
Humor	0.1%	5.9 %
Manners/Protocol	2.6%	7.9 %
Others	1%	1%

The analysis of the issues of the tweets by Podemos and Iglesias also allows Podemos' strategy of complementarity to be identified (Table 6). The profile of the party is directed towards the publication of messages on "Political Strategy" (17.2% of the total), "Political Harangue" (12.3%), "Democratic Regeneration" (11.5%), "Campaign Organization" (11.5%), "Economy" (11.4%) and "Social Policy" (11.5%). On the other hand, the most commonly circulated issues from the Pablo Iglesias profile are "Campaign Organization" (18.8% of the total), "Personal Subjects" (12.9%), "Relationship with the Media" (12.9%) and "Voting and Electoral Results" (10.8%).

Another difference is in the degree of fragmentation of the issues presented in the two profiles. Pablo Iglesias' profile presents a greater concentration of issues, in which the four main issues account for 55.4% of the total. In contrast, the party's profile, in which 6 of the 18 defined categories of issues account for over 10% of messages each (Table 6), offers a greater diversity.

As a result of this complementarity, Podemos is directed towards issues related to the campaign (organization, political harangues, and post-electoral strategies), democratic regeneration, and policy issues linked to the economy and social aspects. However, Iglesias gives a higher priority to personal topics and the relationship with the mainstream media, in both cases to build his image as a leader. At the same time, he pays attention to aspects related to the campaign. It is in this aspect that the only crossover of the importance given to one issue (linked to the organization of the campaign) can be seen. Again, it is possible to identify in

this a distribution of the issues approached, in order to diversify the political message. Even so, some issues have a very low presence on both the Podemos and the Iglesias profiles, at values of 1% or below (Table 6). These are "Culture and Sport," "Science, Technology and the Environment," "Infrastructure," "State territorial model," and "Terrorism," issues that generate minimal attention both for the party and for the leader.

Table 6. Issues in the political tweets on the profiles of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias

Subjects	Podemos	Pablo Iglesias
Economy	11.4%	3%
Social Policy	11.4%	7.9 %
Culture and Sport	1%	1%
Science, Technology and the Environment	1.2%	1%
Infrastructure	0.1%	1%
Corruption	6.5%	1%
Democratic Regeneration	11.5%	3%
Political Strategy	17.2%	2%
Voting and Electoral Results	6.6%	10.9 %
State Territorial Model	1.5%	0%
Terrorism	0.6%	1%
Personal Subjects	0%	12.9 %
Campaign Organization	11.5%	18.8%
Relationship with the Media	3.1%	12.9 %
Foreign Affairs	3%	5.9 %
Political Harangue	12.3%	8.9 %
No Subject	0.1%	2%
Others	1%	6.9 %

Analysis of the links between the functions and the issues in the political tweets of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias leads to a number of findings regarding the elements of the populist political communication style (RQ2). The first is the difference between the party and the leader in terms of their communicative strategies. With regard to the issues (Table 7), it can be observed that the tweets published and circulated by the Podemos profile have a greater connection to the elements of the populist political communication style. 51.9% of its messages on this social media platform correspond with this style. In contrast, in the case of Iglesias, the percentage drops to 28.7% of tweets. This shows that the link with populism is stronger and more evident in the case of the party than that of the leader.

Another significant difference is associated with the use of anti-elitism. This feature of populism is channeled specifically from the Podemos profile and not from its leader's. With regard to the issues, the party dedicates 18% of its tweets to criticizing the establishment and the ruling class or the caste. Iglesias, however, only dedicates 4% of his tweets to such matters (Table 7). This tendency is seen more clearly in the functions of the tweets. Podemos dedicates 21.9% of its messages to functions linked to anti-elitism, compared to the 5% recorded by Pablo Iglesias (Table 8). Indeed, reproach of the established system, criticism of the political mainstream and questioning the validity of the existing democratic mechanisms are the main functions of the Podemos Twitter profile.

Podemos also resorts to another element of the populist political communication style, which is the narrative of “the crisis”; 11.4% of its tweets’ issues are directed at articulating economic and anti-austerity policies linked to the basic needs of the people, such as minimum income, energy poverty, evictions and redistributive tax reforms (Table 7). The presence of this characteristic can be explained because Podemos was born, in part, as a mechanism of protest against the negative effects of the global financial recession on the lives of "the working people" (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). In contrast, Pablo Iglesias gives little attention to this factor in the issues circulated by his Twitter profile (3%).

Table 7. Elements of populist political communication style in the issues of political tweets by Podemos and Pablo Iglesias

Elements of populist political communication style	Directly related subjects	Podemos	Pablo Iglesias
Communicative construction of “the people”	Social Policy, Voting and Electoral Results	18%	18.8%
Anti-elitism	Corruption, Democratic Regeneration	18%	4%
Exclusion out-groups	State Territorial Model, Foreign Affairs	4.5%	5.9 %
Narrative of “the crisis”	Economy	11.4%	3%
TOTAL		51.9%	28.7%

However, common trends between the communicative strategies of the party and the leader can be observed in terms of the use of elements of the populist political communication style. The main trend is that their tweets focus on the communicative construction of "the people." This element is addressed in a high percentage of the issue category in tweets from both the Podemos (18%) and the Pablo Iglesias (18.8%) profiles (Table 7). The pre-eminence of the leader in this regard can be seen, in particular, in the analysis of the functions of the tweets. Of his messages (Table 8), 54.5% tend towards using the construction "we." The production of political content on this social media platform by Iglesias seeks to connect with the problems of "the man on the street" and to give a voice to "the silent majority."

The data also indicates that the issues in the political tweets of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias related to the exclusion of out-groups are fewer. The rejection of immigration and minorities, of "others," which is understood to mean someone from outside the national political community, is very small in the tweets of both the party (4.5% of the total) and the leader (5.9%) (Table 7). This reaffirms that left-wing populists renounce the xenophobic discourse characteristic of right-wing populism.

Table 8. Elements of populist political communication style in the functions of political tweets by Podemos and Pablo Iglesias

Elements of populist political communication style	Directly related functions	Podemos	Pablo Iglesias
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Communicative construction of “the people”	Interaction and Dialogue with Users; Participation and Mobilization; Community Building: Values and Ideology; Community Building: Personal Life/Backstage	24.6%	54.4%
Anti-elitism	Criticizing the Opponent	21.9%	5%
Exclusion out-groups	No functions related		
Narrative of “the crisis”	No functions related		
TOTAL		46.5%	59.5%

Discussion and conclusion

This study’s findings provide new insights into the communicative strategies of left-wing populist parties in the social media. The data reveals the existence of a use of Twitter determined on the structure of complementarity between Podemos’ and Pablo Iglesias’ Twitter profiles. The party and the leader share the tasks both in the functions assigned to the messages and in the circulation of issues through Twitter. Podemos addresses the ideological aspects and policies and Iglesias concentrates on the party’s relationship with the people, and on building his image through personal topics (RQ1). Their activities only significantly overlap in the importance both profiles give to issues related to the electoral campaign. This strategy of complementarity, which appears as a distinctive formula of political communication through social media, allows a greater diversification of the political discourse without losing the unity of the message. The latter is possible thanks to the fact that communication by the party and by the leader connects with the basic elements of the populist style.

The case of Podemos demonstrates that populist parties are linked to the use of the elements of a specific style, the populist political communication style (RQ2). Analysis of the Twitter profiles of this party and its leader allows the presence of three of its four elements to be observed. Only low levels of use of the exclusion of out-groups, linked to attitudes against immigration and minorities, are observed. The left-wing orientation of Podemos explains the rejection of xenophobic discourse. This represents a divergence from the strategies of the radical right populist parties and leaders such as Donald Trump, who make anti-immigration rhetoric one of central features of their platforms (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Bos and Brants, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014; Fuchs, 2017). As such, Podemos should be classed as anti-elitist populism (Jagersand Walgrave, 2007), because it combines calls to “the people” with criticism of the establishment, while rejecting a rhetoric of exclusion of out-groups.

In this regard, the findings also reinforce the theory of complementarity in their use of the elements of the populist political communication style. The Podemos Twitter profile leans towards anti-elitism. Tweets from the party focus on criticism of political opponents and call for democratic regeneration and denunciation of political corruption. This strategy presents Podemos and its supporters as “pure

people" versus "the corrupt elite." Anti-elitism is shown as a discourse in the name of the sovereign people, following the populist formula (Aslanidis, 2016; Mudde, 2004). However, the Podemos anti-establishment is not only a condemnation of the privileges and corrupt practices of the political elite, but it also incorporates a criticism of the devaluation of democracy in Spain and a desire to regenerate its principles and mechanisms (Rendueles and Sola, 2015). Unlike right-wing populism, Podemos does not want to put an end to democracy, but rather to reform it. In this sense, its anti-elitism is constructive, not just destructive.

In contrast, Pablo Iglesias' profile opts for a strategy that centers on people and the communicative construction of "we." His messages are aimed at maintaining a direct relationship with the people (encouraging their political participation and interactivity) and the humanization of his image through the circulation of facts about his personal life. This last formula of personalization is common for tweets by political actors (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2016), a strategy designed to reduce the gap between political elites and citizens (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). The search for this greater proximity to its followers aims at acquiring an appearance of democratic representativeness and accountability with the citizens. For this reason, it is especially linked to populism and its communicative orientation towards "the common man." In this way, the leader is humanized and appears as a subject born of "the people" (he is one of us), embodying and defending the interests of "the man on the street."

The case of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias is relevant because it shows the existence of a populist style that is evident specifically in the field of political communication. This highlights the possibility of empirically studying the presence of these elements in the US and other European countries. It also highlights a significant contribution: the identification of a strategy of communicative complementarity in the use of social media. Further research is required to determine whether this new integrating element of the populist political communication style is also used in other geographic contexts. Cases like that of US president Donald Trump or the ex-leader of the UK Independence Party Nigel Farage give cause for such expanded consideration.

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