

Effects of populism: The agenda of fact-checking agencies to counter European right-wing populist parties

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Abstract

European right-wing populism is a widely studied phenomenon in recent years. At the same time, many fact-checking projects have been launched with the purpose of assessing statements from the most relevant social actors. The role of fact-checkers is growing, but there is scant literature on their agenda. In this study, we investigate the communication strategies on Twitter of European right-wing populist parties and their relationship with the agenda of fact-checking initiatives in Germany, France, Spain and Portugal. Based on a content analysis of tweets covering political content ($n=4212$), we analyze not only the agenda but also the use of propaganda mechanisms and the scope of the tweets. The results show how the agenda of right-wing populism was composed of ideological thematic issues. Fact-checkers focus on competitor leaders and generate lower interaction. These findings contribute to increasing research on both actors, arguing that the focus on political leaders impacts on fact-checking.

Keywords

Populism, European right-wing, fact-checking, agenda, Twitter

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Introduction

The interest in right wing-populism is a long-lasting phenomenon in Western Europe (Betz, 1994), which has gained more importance because of the use of social media by populist leaders and parties (Gerbaudo, 2018). Populism is a widely studied concept that combines a particular communicative style with a thin-centered ideology (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017; Block and Negrine, 2017), dividing the society between the elite and the people. This implies a simplification of complex political processes, which are treated from an emotional perspective.

The problem is not only the loss of an in-depth rational discussion but also the proliferation of inaccurate information, especially triggered by populist leaders. In this sense, a kind of misinformation society emerges (Pickard, 2019) since the role of news gatekeeper is now performed by social media platforms (Carlson et al., 2022). Hence, the traditional modes of the journalism craft are no longer effective (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023).

Consequently, there is a huge academic debate on the impact of digital technologies on democracy because of the rise of populism, as these platforms follow a top-down approach that excludes divergent positions (Entman, 2018). The current digital economy is assessed as a monopoly that threatens democracy (Hindman, 2018). Accordingly, elections do not promote responsive governments (Achen and Bartels, 2017), which overlap with an agenda more focused on strategies rather than on issues.

However, the digital age also brings a new turn in fact-checking. Although fact-checking is a classic task of journalism, this practice has been further developed by specific media and civic platforms as a response to the spread of misleading information. Specifically, between 2012 and 2017, there was a proliferation of fact-checking initiatives based on technologies (Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). In a time of acceleration of news production, the work of fact-checkers focuses on objectivity in order to verify false content and analyze its propagation (Graves, 2016). Moreover, these fact-checkers usually apply a triangulation approach between journalists and programming experts (Graves and Anderson, 2020), giving also the citizens the chance of being part of the verification process.

In this study, we examine the communication strategies on Twitter of European right-wing populist parties as well as if this agenda agrees on the topics addressed by fact-checking initiatives. As aforementioned, these projects aim to assess statements from the most relevant social actors, including populist parties. The role of fact-checkers is growing in the society, but prior scholarship has paid little attention to how their agenda is determined.

Beyond that, Twitter has worked as a channel for the dissemination of populist messages and a 'candidate-centered politics' (Waisbord and Amado, 2017). The use of this tool may change among countries due to national factors, but most of previous literature describes the practices of leaders (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Social media are shaping the current media culture in Western democracies; meanwhile, fact-checkers have shown its influence on political beliefs (Walter et al., 2020). The consolidation of digital platforms is accompanied by a decline of the agenda-setting power of journalism, triggering a fragmented and polarized news consumption (Deuze, 2019).

Therefore, it is relevant to further our understanding on which is the relationship between fact-checking and populism in Europe, whose right-wing parties have a long tradition.

Right-Wing populist communication in Europe

In recent decades, populism has marked many of the political debates in Western democracies. The emergence of new populist movements leads to a sort of historical populist period (Mudde, 2004). In the European framework, the sovereign debt crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit or the rule-of-law crisis in Poland and Hungary have reinforced a Eurosceptic approach (Bergbauer et al., 2019). According to Mudde (2007), the European Union (EU) is assessed as a government of elites. The EU institutions are not reprovved, but there is criticism of their policies.

One of the key reasons to attack the EU is the matter of popular sovereignty, which works as a link between both left-wing and right-wing populist political parties (Gerbaudo, 2018). In a globalized world, they ask to take back control of the territory, explaining why membership in supranational organizations is seen as a threat (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2020). This ideology connects with a cultural anti-globalism, opposed to cosmopolitan values (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

These movements are supposed to seek the break of the status quo. On this matter, populism links to anti-pluralism. A democratic majority is no longer relevant since they do not represent a part of the people, but the ‘people’ (Müller, 2016). It fosters a feeling of belonging to a community based on a politics of fear, putting the focus on migrants and the elite (Wodak, 2015). This elite is also composed of the news media, which are usually framed as enemy by the populist actors (Meeks, 2020).

The personalization of politics, through ‘individualization’ and ‘privatization’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), is also a trend of populism. Leaders are much more well-known than parties, shaping the political discussion through a very emotional style (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). As a consequence, consuming news about those leaders has become an emotional experience (Wagner and Boczkowski, 2021).

In this context, the communication actions of populism are mostly based on propaganda and inaccurate information (Mazzoleni, 2008), which may trigger a disinformation order. Although the US and Trump are mentioned as the main examples because of the political violence incited by this leader (Boydston and Lawrence, 2020), in Europe, there is also a right-wing populism that use disinformation as strategy (Vasilopoulou, 2018; Pérez-Curiel, 2020). Social media, and particularly Twitter, have played an important role for spreading populist messages (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Twitter was useful to maintain the populism’s top-down approach to public communication but with a wider audience (Waisbord and Amado, 2017). This social network provides a platform to lash out at the enemies, amplifying attacks and getting media attention. The literature also suggests the relevance of the external socio-political context to evaluate the social influence on Twitter (Casero-Ripollés, 2021), which makes it noteworthy to explore different countries.

In addition to that, Twitter has also been the preferred platform in Europe to develop political astroturfing, understood as a coordinated disinformation campaign (Keller et al., 2020). This type of campaign generates short-term effects by creating the impression that

some opinions are supported by most of the population (Zerback et al., 2021), which may be exploited by populism. More generally, previous literature found that social media boost a spiral of silence, being only avoided by users with strong opinions such as populist ones (Hampton et al., 2017). Therefore, the visibility of their positions is intensified on these networks.

The role of fact-checking platforms against disinformation

In times of identity-driven politics and increasing polarization, journalism struggles to adapt to the needs of the media culture (Carlson et al., 2022). The consolidation of digital technologies has contributed to a polarization of politics (Papacharissi, 2015), since in social media people tend to follow users with their political predispositions. This partisan selective exposure triggers polarization according to research (Stroud, 2010).

The changes in the information cycle and the dissemination of fake contents are phenomena that explain the emergence of independent fact-checking initiatives (Graves, 2016). Although politicians of right-wing populist parties were as dependent upon the media as other parties during the first decade of XXI century (Bos et al., 2011), their massive presence on social media has consequences in the media system such as the appearance of fact-checkers to verify their messages, among other purposes (Pérez-Curiel and Rivas-de-Roca, 2022).

A cornerstone of fact-checkers is that they are independent political organizations dedicated exclusively to evaluating the truth of posts on digital platforms or political claims, which were previously goals of journalism (Graves, 2016). The mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömback, 2014) and the lack of trust in the news media (Lewis, 2019) are also factors that fuel the success of fact-checking initiatives.

Between 2012 and 2016, most of fact-checking projects were launched in Europe (Graves and Cherubini, 2016). These organizations contribute to moderate the echo chamber effect on social media (Dubois and Blank, 2018) and are an example of journalistic autonomy (Sjøvaag, 2013; Örnebring et al., 2016), which is a key value of the professional identity. According to citizens' perceptions, fact-checking agencies are one of the best methods to fight against disinformation (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). However, due to its reactive nature, since it occurs after the hoax and does not prevent its circulation, it cannot eliminate much of the negative consequences generated by disinformation in people exposed to it (Andersen and Søre, 2020; Wittenberg and Berinsky, 2020).

By denying fake news, understood as news with low levels of facticity or deceptive contents (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018), the rise of fact-checkers contrasts with the aforementioned crisis of the news industry. Most of them are professionalized services that assess the statements of politicians compared to their previous speeches (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2018), also having an incipient collaboration with the EU institutions and major companies such as Google and Facebook (Graves and Anderson, 2020).

The fact-checking movement denies false information that appears both on social networks and in the media. Specifically, statements by political actors or hoaxes, defined as contents believed by fraud and also meant to trick (Finneman and Thomas, 2018), are usually verified. Many of them are located at a digital user community (Vizoso and

Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). This content adapts easily to the needs of the market and the audience.

Research on the extreme right-wing populism in Europe has widely analyzed the shaping of the main parties (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017) and its connection with Euroscepticism (Mudde, 2007; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2020), focusing on leaders. Our study addresses the aforementioned gap in the literature by considering little explored countries and parties, adding also a comparison between fact-checking and populist parties. Three research questions were posed:

- *RQ1*: Which topics characterize the right-wing populist parties by country?
- *RQ2*: To what extent does the agenda of right-wing populist parties correlate with that of fact-checking?
- *RQ3*: What is the focus and impact of the messages posted by those parties?

Methodology

For our study, we used a Twitter analysis based on the principles of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine the practices developed on this social network by different European right-wing populist parties and fact-checking initiatives. Specifically, we analyze the profiles of these two types of organizations in Germany, France, Spain and Portugal. This sample allows to compare little polarized countries like Germany with others having a strong partisan history (Hallin and Mancini, 2017). Partisanship fosters a low resilience to online disinformation in Southern European countries such as Spain and Portugal (Humprecht et al., 2020), which may be relevant to the strategy of populist parties. Furthermore, France has a long-standing tradition of far-right that overlaps with populism.

The sample is composed of the following political parties and fact-checking profiles:

- -Germany: Alternative für Deutschland (@AfD); CORRECTIV.Faktencheck (@correctiv_fakt).
- -France: Rassemblement National (@RNational_off); Les Décodeurs (@decodeurs).
- -Spain: Vox (@vox_es); Maldita.es (@maldita).
- -Portugal: Chega (@PartidoCHEGA); Polígrafo (@JornalPoligrafo).

The political parties selected are those of right-wing populism with the higher number of seats in each national parliament; meanwhile, the fact-checking initiatives are prominent in their specific context in terms of followers on Twitter. The data were captured for a three-month and non-electoral period (October–December 2021) in order to avoid the competition that marks electoral campaigns (Mazzoleni, 2018). On a general sample of tweets of 6,853, we applied a manual content analysis on tweets covering political content ($n = 4212$). All the messages posted are studied, including retweets.

A mixed methodological approach is applied. Firstly, we content-analyzed the main issue and game frames present on the tweets, following a well-known approach that states that the current political communication is triggered from this kind of contents

(Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017). Drawing upon the observance of the most frequent topics in the fact-checkers during the range of dates, eight dichotomous and exclusive categories were created to collect the issue frames. Regarding game frames, the four traditional categories defined by the literature were employed (Table 1).

Secondly, the analysis of the communication practices was also based on the presence of propaganda mechanisms. These items may be used not only by the populist parties but also by fact-checking platforms. Moreover, the type of link posted on Twitter to disseminate propaganda was also analyzed since each format has different characteristics. Particularly, we consider web, image, video, media outlet and tweet as the main links.

Categories were borrowed from discourse analysis and applied to propaganda (van Dijk, 2015): appeal to authority, appeal to emotion, fallacy against the man, appeal to force, appeal to ignorance, attributions, tendentious claims, emphasis, stereotypes, false analogy, speaking through other sources, opinions as facts, selecting information and use of labels, without any of them.

Lastly, we delve into the focus of the tweets in terms of determining which are the main actors, organizations or issues mentioned. On this matter, populists, competitors and thematic topics are examined (Table 2). This is reinforced by an analysis on message distribution (retweets) to investigate how the attention of the audience is shaped.

Table 1. Categories used for the analysis of tweet frames.

	Items	Description
Issue frame	Conspiracy theories	Tweets regarding possible conspiratorial explanations for political problems, as those mentioning a corrupted elite.
	Denial of hoaxes	Tweets that verify hoaxes especially related to the political system.
	Immigration/security	Tweets that refer to immigration and/or citizen security issues.
	Covid-19	Tweets that present contents about the pandemic.
	Social policy	Tweets that allude to social issues such as education, healthcare or youth.
	Economy/industry	Tweets on economic issues such as macroeconomy, unemployment or industry.
	Foreign affairs	Tweets on international affairs such as trade or relations between countries.
	Elections and electoral program	Tweets that focus on elections (past or future), including electoral polls.
Game frame	Horse race and governing frame	Tweets on the competitors, post-electoral pacts or strategies.
	Politicians as individuals' frames	Tweets that focus on aspects of the personal life.
	Political strategy frame	Tweets on political events, ranging from TV debates to public meetings.
	News management frame	Tweets related to mass media, including journalistic contents or the assessment of their work.
Other	Unclassifiable tweet in the previous categories.	

Table 2. Tweet focus.

Items	Description
Populist leader	Tweets whose main focus is the populist leader.
Other populist party members	The cornerstone of the tweets are other members of populist parties.
Competitors (leaders)	Tweets that have a focal point in the leaders of parties that compete with the populist one.
Competitors (parties)	Tweets that have a focal point in not populist parties.
Thematic issues	Tweets on thematic issues not related to leaders or parties.

The codification was carried out by five coders. To evaluate the intercoder reliability, a pretest was conducted on 10% of the sample (421 units), reaching acceptable levels ($\alpha = 0.85$) for all the variables according to Krippendorff's alpha values (Neuendorf, 2002). A descriptive analysis of frequencies is provided together with a selection of the most outstanding quantitative figures as they are relevant to illustrate trends on the sample.

Results

Agenda

The action on Twitter of the selected right-wing populist parties was marked by an ideological communication with topics such as migration and social policy. During the last three months of 2021, the four parties developed a narrative based on measures to care for working middle class, which was affected by a loss of purchasing power according to them. This links to a typical social approach of populism, consisting of 'talking about people's interests' (Mudde, 2004).

Nevertheless, some remarkable differences emerged within a fragmented agenda (Table 3). In Germany (AfD), Covid-19 (17.9%) and social policy (19.7%) were the main topics; meanwhile, in France (RN), migration (16.1%) and elections (23.5%) focused the program. Elections were also a key issue for the Iberian parties (10.9% in Spain and 15.9% in Portugal), together with social policy (19.4% and 16.6%, respectively).

By contrast, fact-checkers devoted greater attention to Covid-19 and the denial of hoaxes, imbedded as cornerstone of their work. Although no electoral competitions were scheduled, elections were also important for Les Décodeurs in France (22.7%) and Jornal Polígrafo in Portugal (14.6%). Beyond that, it is shown the mismatch between the issue frames of parties and fact-checking organizations.

According to Table 4, the importance of the elections was also evidenced by the outstanding use of the horse race and governing frame (game frame). This means that the tweets focused on competition, criticizing the opponent. The right-wing populist parties in Spain (14.3%), Portugal (8.7%) and Germany (5.8%) were the ones that most resort to this frame.

Moreover, the style of Vox (Spain) and Chega (Portugal) was much more oriented to political events through political strategy frames (7.7% and 6.3%, respectively). In fact,

Table 3. Issue frame by party and fact-checker.

	Conspir. theories	Denial of hoaxes	Migration / security	Covid-19	Social policy	Economy / industry	Foreign affairs	Elections / program
Alternative für Deutschland (DE)	11.6	4.0	12.7	17.9	19.7	5.2	5.8	13.3
CORRECTIV.Faktencheck (DE)	11.1	11.1	-	44.4	18.5	7.4	-	7.4
Rassemblement National (FR)	5.4	-	16.1	6.7	14.8	18.1	3.4	23.5
Les Décodeurs (FR)	13.6	22.7	4.5	-	-	4.5	4.5	22.7
Vox (ES)	5.7	0.6	10.6	4.6	19.4	7.7	6.6	10.9
Maldita.es (ES)	2.0	29.4	-	21.6	17.6	9.8	3.9	-
Chega (PT)	6.8	-	2.1	15.3	16.6	10.6	1.3	15.9
Jornal Polígrafo (PT)	-	32.2	-	5.4	9.8	6.2	-	14.6

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

Table 4. Game frame by party and fact-checker.

	Horse race and governing frame	Politicians as individuals frames	Political strategy frame	News management frame	Other
Alternative für Deutschland (DE)	5.8	-	-	1.7	2.3
CORRECTIV.Faktencheck (DE)	-	-	-	-	-
Rassemblement National (FR)	2.7	1.3	-	0.7	7.4
Les Décodeurs (FR)	9.1	-	4.5	-	4.5
Vox (ES)	14.3	0.6	7.7	2.3	9.1
Maldita.es (ES)	2.0	5.9	-	-	7.8
Chega (PT)	8.7	7.3	6.3	4.0	5.1
Jornal Polígrafo (PT)	1.3	10.0	10.6	-	9.9

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

they had massive public meetings, which were not connected with elections. Other relevant finding was the personalized style of Chega (10% of the messages used politicians as individuals' frames). The Portuguese party made the difference by employing tweets on aspects of personal life such as family and hobbies.

Considering fact-checking platforms, their agenda was relatively fragmented. As seen in Table 3, the main purpose of most of them was to deny hoaxes (issue frame). In terms of game frames, no specific trend was found. However, the high use of politicians as individuals' frames and political strategy frames in Chega (7.3% and 6.3%) was accompanied by the fact-checker Jornal Polígrafo (10% and 10.6%) in Portugal. Populist messages were their main objective, especially when leaders were involved in Spain and Portugal.

Propaganda mechanisms

To further investigate the details of the populist communication, we analyzed the association between the presence of propaganda mechanisms. The employment of these items was highly plural among the right-wing parties selected, ranging from appeal to ignorance (20.8% in AfD) or attributions (16.1% in RN) to emphasis (13.7% in Vox) or appeal to emotion (12.9% in Chega). Some messages of fact-checkers did not have this kind of mechanisms, but we found that appeal to ignorance was key for both the party (20.8%) and the fact-checking initiative (42.1%) in Germany (Table 5).

Our findings indicate that there was not a common pattern of using propaganda mechanisms by these parties in Europe. Hence, the communication of the right-wing populism was not as homogeneous as expected, at least in the field of propaganda. National factors could be helpful to understand why different mechanisms were employed by country. This argument may also be applied to the fact-checking initiatives, although it should be noted that Les Décodeurs (36.4%), Maldita.es (66.7%) and Jornal

Table 5. Propaganda mechanisms on Twitter (party/fact-checker).

	Alternative für Deutschland (DE)	CORRECTIV. Faktencheck (DE)	Rassemblement National (FR)	Les Décod. (FR)	Vox (ES)	Maldita.es (ES)	Chega (PT)	Jornal Polígrafo (PT)
Appeal to authority	8.7	-	4.7	4.5	13.2	-	8.3	-
Appeal to emotion	17.3	-	20.8	-	9.4	-	12.9	-
Fallacy against the man	8.1	-	9.4	13.6	9.1	5.9	10.1	15.3
Appeal to force	1.7	-	2.0	-	3.4	-	3.6	-
Appeal to ignorance	20.8	42.1	1.3	-	-	4.0	-	6.7
Attributions	0.6	23.4	16.1	-	13.1	9.8	9.0	21.9
Tendentious claims	1.7	-	3.4	4.5	5.7	-	6.1	-
Emphasis	2.3	-	3.4	-	13.7	-	7.4	-
Stereotypes	1.7	-	11.4	-	3.4	2.0	-	-
False analogy	12.7	-	-	-	5.1	-	-	1.6
Speaking through other sources	13.3	14.5	6.7	9.0	1.7	-	5.6	-
Opinions as facts	4.0	8.3	8.7	-	8.9	2.0	9.3	9.2
Selecting information	6.9	1.9	0.7	31.7	7.4	9.8	4.4	17.8
Use of labels	-	-	4.7	-	3.4	-	12.6	-
Without any of them	-	-	6.7	36.4	2.3	66.7	10.0	27.5

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

Polígrafo (27.5%) had in common that they sometimes did not use any of them. As aforementioned, the German case is noteworthy as CORRECTIV.Faktencheck always referred to propaganda mechanisms, which reveal to what extent this sort of persuasion is noteworthy.

How are these propaganda items built? As we are dealing with the role of Twitter for political communication, it is key to assess the conversation shaped by hyperlinks (Casero-Ripollés and Micó, 2022). In this sense, we analyzed the presence of propaganda mechanisms on the tweets according to the use of links (Table 6).

The study of the type of link reveals that appeal to ignorance was predominant on tweets that shared web content (26.7%), image (15%) and those that did not use links (25%). Conversely, appeal to emotion was present on tweets with videos (14.5%), which show the importance of emotions for audiovisual contents. This finding is aligned with prior scholarship (Boydston and Lawrence, 2020).

Beyond that, sharing articles from media outlets or tweets from other accounts brought also different types of links. News items were characterized by emphasis (14%), putting the focus on a specific topic; meanwhile, resorting to other tweets was based on attributions. This mechanism directly attributes values to the people involved, which is very usual on the political Twitter bubble (Keller et al., 2020).

Focus and impact

When it comes to message focus and distribution, some insightful findings are provided. The analysis of the main focal point of tweets by party and fact-checker shows that most of the populist right-wing parties focused on thematic issues (Table 7), but Vox (Spain) preferred to refer to competitor parties (34%), also mentioning leaders (23.1%).

Table 6. Propaganda mechanisms by type of link.

	Web	Image	Video	Media outlet	Tweet	Other	None
Appeal to authority	7.4	7.0	7.4	5.8	5.7	-	3.6
Appeal to emotion	3.7	9.0	14.5	7.0	5.7	4.2	25.0
Fallacy against the man	6.8	12.0	8.7	7.0	8.6	25.0	5.4
Appeal to force	5.4	5.0	1.7	1.2	5.7	-	1.8
Appeal to ignorance	26.7	15.0	7.4	2.3	2.9	-	25.0
Attributions	11.1	13.0	11.6	7.0	24.3	4.2	3.6
Tendentious claims	0.7	3.0	3.3	10.5	4.3	-	3.6
Emphasis	1.4	7.0	9.9	14.0	14.3	-	0.9
Stereotypes	0.3	7.0	6.2	4.7	4.3	-	2.7
False analogy	3.4	4.0	2.1	7.0	4.3	16.7	7.1
Speaking through other sources	8.1	2.0	4.1	3.5	1.4	16.7	8.0
Opinions as facts	6.4	3.0	12.0	7.0	7.1	4.2	2.7
Selecting information	7.4	7.0	2.9	12.8	2.9	16.7	8.0
Use of labels	-	2.0	4.5	1.2	7.1	-	0.9
Without any of them	11.1	4.0	3.7	9.3	1.4	12.5	1.8

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

By contrast, it is striking to what extent the fact-checking initiatives centered on competitor leaders, revealing a will to deny hoaxes towards them. This is the trend in CORRECTIV.Faktencheck (32.1%), Les Décodeurs (31.8%) and Jornal Polígrafo (35.6%).

Populist leaders, and namely other members of the populist parties, are not so present. Nevertheless, populist leaders appeared over ten percent in the German (14.5%), the French (14.1%) and the Portuguese fact-checkers, which were the ones with more allusions to competitors.

For its part, the analysis of the impact of the messages (retweets) reveals that there was not an issue that monopolized the attention of the public. Conspiracy theories, migration and security, Covid-19, social policy, foreign affairs and elections and program received more than 299 retweets as the most frequent category (Table 8).

Taken together, our findings show that the fact that right-wing populist parties focused on thematic issues did not mean a particular level of attention to a specific issue frame.

Table 7. Main focus of the tweet by party and fact-checker.

	Populist leader	Other members – populist party	Competitors (leaders)	Competitors (parties)	Thematic issues
Alternative für Deutschland (DE)	5.2	6.9	11.6	22.5	53.8
CORRECTIV.Faktencheck (DE)	14.5	13.4	32.1	20.3	19.7
Rassemblement National (FR)	14.1	2.0	27.5	14.8	41.6
Les Décodeurs (FR)	13.6	4.5	31.8	22.7	27.3
Vox (ES)	7.4	7.1	23.1	34.0	28.3
Maldita.es (ES)	3.9	-	17.6	5.9	72.5
Chega (PT)	26.5	3.8	18.2	17.5	34.0
Jornal Polígrafo (PT)	17.3	3.1	35.6	19.3	24.7

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

Table 8. Retweets by tweet topics (issue frame).

	Conspir. theories	Denial of hoaxes	Migration /security	Covid-19	Social policy	Economy /industry	Foreign affairs	Elections/ program
0	1.4	5.8	-	3.1	2.6	3.5	2.4	0.8
1–49	12.9	34.6	9.4	5.9	9.1	7.0	7.1	18.5
50–99	20.0	21.1	11.8	16.1	9.1	16.2	11.9	13.1
100–299	21.4	11.5	32.9	28.5	36.4	37.2	38.1	31.5
Over 299	44.3	26.9	45.9	45.4	42.8	36.0	40.5	36.2

Bold data with a significance level of 0.05.

However, the item preferred by fact-checkers had the lowest level of interaction (denial of hoaxes). It seems that these fact-checking initiatives did not trigger many retweets when they focused on their main purpose: verifying. The audience was more likely to retweet classic topics. This is related to the difficulty for fact-checkers to eliminate the negative effects of falsehoods after its circulation (Andersen and Søe, 2020; Wittenberg and Berinsky, 2020).

In the same vein, we analyzed possible effects in the dissemination of tweets. The Pearson correlation coefficient was applied ($r=0.226$), reaching low levels between the number of retweets obtained and the number of messages posted. This data provides evidence that the user's attention to these accounts has not to do in a significant way with the figure of tweets.

Discussion and conclusions

This study can be appraised as a first assessment of the relationship between fact-checking and right-wing populism in Europe. The relevance of both actors in the current political sphere led us to examine their communication on Twitter, exploring the frames and focus of their tweets. As the European society lives now in a kind of politics of fear (Wodak, 2015) fuelled by disinformation, the practice of watchdog journalism has been reinforced by the creation of fact-checking projects, based on original business models (Esteban-Navarro et al., 2021).

Our article contributes to a budding literature on the development of fact-checking and the working of populism, offering three inter-related findings. These conclusions respond to the research questions and shed light on the influence of the agenda of the right-wing populist parties, which are traditionally considered as key actors for disinformation (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017).

First, it is shown that elections and social policy were essential issues for populist right-wing parties, even in a non-electoral period, but with differences by country. For instance, migration played an important role in France. Besides that, it should be taken into account that the preference for elections was not only found through the use of this specific issue frame but also because of the presence of game frames on competition.

Our second contribution offers evidence on the relationship between the agenda of right-wing populist parties and fact-checking. Extreme right-wing parties focused on thematic issues, but fact-checkers did it on competitor leaders, who were the objective of the dissemination of hoaxes. Therefore, populist leaders are less present in the verification tasks than traditional politicians. The predominance of the thematic approach is a phenomenon already detected by the literature regarding populism (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This means that the ideological axis conditions the agenda.

Third, we further our understanding on the focus and impact of the messages posted on Twitter. Leaders were much more relevant for parties and fact-checking projects rather than other groups. However, the main focus of right-wing populist parties was oriented to the aforementioned thematic issues based on propaganda mechanisms. Oppositely, fact-checkers mostly alluded to competitor leaders. The type of link shared on Twitter influences on the propaganda mechanism applied, being remarkable the connection between appeal to emotion and videos or the presence of attributions when posting tweets from other users.

Regarding the impact of messages through retweets, there was not a single issue that caught attention. We also found that the mission of fact-checkers (denial of hoaxes) was the category with less retweets, showing to what extent right-wing populism boosted higher interaction compared to the fact-checking task.

Our research provides some insights that contribute to current discussions on the communication style of right-wing parties on Twitter in Europe, arguing that propaganda and frames are differently used by countries, within a common pattern of social and electoral messages. On the other hand, the focus on political leaders within a thematic agenda seems to impact on fact-checking, which alluded to leaders, but not so much to the populist ones.

Fact-checking platforms mostly pay attention to the competitor leaders of the extreme right-wing parties, which could overlap with a journalistic practice of verifying false information. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge some limitations in this study. Our sampling method only covers four European countries whose right-wing parties and fact-checkers have different traditions. This may generate unequal sample sizes, also explaining some of the trends found. For instance, the German fact-checker publicly addressed the most remarkable propaganda mechanism in its country (appeal to ignorance), but this approach was not detected in the rest of the countries.

Future research may consider further exploring the implications of referring to issue frames such as elections by expanding time frames and samples. The focus on leaders, either populist or traditional, represents a new version of the personalization of politics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), which affects here to the journalistic coverage carried out. This should foster a theoretical debate on the effects of this political-centered agenda, even though populists and well-known fact-checkers work as two different spheres, having a limited influence on each other's agenda.

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