Everything for the People, but Without the People?
Illustrated Populism on Social Media in the European Political Context

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The rise of new populist actors and consolidation of the use of social media such as Twitter are changing the political communication field. The main goal of this research is to understand whether European populist political actors introduce 2 of the inherent elements of populism—the people and the elite—into their digital communicative strategy and how they frame it. The samples are composed by the messages shared on Twitter by 4 European political parties (Podemos, Movimento 5 Stelle, Front National, and UKIP) and their leaders. This study analyzed 9,128 messages. The results show that despite being an intrinsic characteristic of populism, these political actors practically never appeal to the people in their messages, but criticize the elites. It therefore produces an illustrated populism in their social media strategy, in which everything is for the people, but without the people.

Keywords: populism, political communication, social media, Twitter, Europe

Populism is a phenomenon on the rise, increasingly common in Western democracies. Its consolidation is generating important political and communicative consequences, so its study is especially attractive for the field of political communication. We are in what some scholars call populist momentum or populist Zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004), a historical period dominated by the emergence and development of new populist movements, left and right, that challenge the current neoliberal order in Western democracies (Gerbaudo, 2018). A transition is taking place between the old (incarnated by neoliberalism) and the new (populism as dominant narrative; Gramsci, 1971). These new political movements, which emerged after the crisis of representation, seek to fill the gap left by the establishment parties.

Although the uses of social media with populist purpose have been highly investigated (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson 2017; Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017; Jost, Maurer, & Hassler, 2020), scholarly research has mainly focused on the analysis of populism in a single country (Biancalana, 2014; Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella, & Franch, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, there is scarce scientific research on the

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development of populism on the Internet and social media in a cross-national comparison (Alonso-Muñoz, 2020; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

This study seeks to understand, from a comparative perspective, the communication strategy of a broad spectrum of left-wing, center, and right-wing populist political actors on social media in four Western democracies (Spain, Italy, France, and the UK). The objective is to understand how they construct the main characteristics of the populist discourse—the people, the elites, and the national sovereignty—on Twitter, to observe whether there are differences about the ideological axis.

Populist Political Communication Style: The Construction of the People and the Elite

Populism is a highly contested concept that has generated a particularly arduous and interesting debate in different disciplines and areas. In this sense, some authors emphasize the ambiguity of the concept (Taggart, 2000), the vagueness of the preceding definitions (Canovan, 1999), or define it as a chameleonic term that can be adapted to different contexts (Taggart, 2000).

In this sense, there are different approaches to address the study of populism. Some scholars consider populism as a concrete form of political organization based on the presence of a specific type of leader who raises government with the immediate and direct support of the people (Taggart, 2000). Others conceive it in various ways: as a communicative style that political parties and leaders employ to mobilize the masses (Block & Negrine, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), as a form of construction of the political (Hawkins, 2010; Laclau, 2005), as a set of ideas (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016), or as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)—that is, as a moldable ideology able to adapt to multiple contexts.

However, there is a broad consensus among researchers to recognize that the concept of the people constitutes a fundamental element for populism (Mudde, 2004). Populism aims to emphasize the idea that the people are a homogenous and sovereign entity. However, the term can receive very different meanings depending on the specific circumstances in which it is pronounced. For Laclau (2005), the term is an empty signifier, and its lack of definition makes the populism phenomenon so powerful. Populism holds different meanings to reach as many people as possible and unites them under a common label, even if they differ in their demands and values. In this way, they create a shared identity among different groups and facilitate their support for a common cause. Thus, when populist actors appeal to the people, they can refer to four different conceptions: political (the sovereign people), economic (the people as a class), national (the people as a nation), and cultural (the ordinary people), depending on their ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pasquino, 2008). In this context, popular sovereignty works as a link between left-wing and right-wing populists (Gerbaudo, 2017). Both seek to regain control of their territory and autonomy in an extremely globalized world where interconnections among countries oppress the decision-making capacity of the states. As such, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: Both center and left-wing populist political actors will make a cultural construction of the people on Twitter.

H1b: The right-wing populists will create an idea of the people based on the national community on their Twitter messages.

Some authors consider that populism is characterized by its communicative style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), a discursive style based on the confrontation between the people and the power (Laclau, 2005). In this sense, populism is constructed fundamentally under the antagonism between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Hameleers, 2018; Rooduijn, 2014). For the populist actors, the elites have betrayed the people and deprived them of their sovereignty. For this reason, they present themselves as the voice of a silent majority that speaks the language of ordinary people that fights against the irresponsible and oppressive elite (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). In this context, the populists speak in the name of the oppressed people, to emancipate them from the domination exercised over them by the elite.

The actors included in the elite depend on the context and the party's ideology. For right-wing populism, supranational institutions such as the European Union, the media, or traditional political institutions are part of the elite. In contrast, attacks on the elites by left-wing populist actors are directed mainly against the financial systems and the religious elites (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). Either way, they share the belief that both the political and the economic systems have been corrupted by the elites, whom they describe as arrogant and incompetent, accusing them of avoiding the problems that ordinary people consider important (Canovan, 2002). In this context, the populist actors, being part of the people and not the elites, feel that their struggle against the establishment is legitimate, as they are not corrupt. According to this, we will test the following hypotheses:

H2a: The right-wing populists will make an impersonal construction of the elites in their Twitter messages to foster a sense of indeterminacy and fear among citizens.

H2b: Center and left-wing populists will identify the elite on their Twitter messages to expose that the elite is depriving the people of their sovereignty.

In this regard, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) distinguish four types of populism depending on three factors: the appeal to the people, the exclusion of minorities, and the fight against the elite. The first is called empty populism, and the particular discursive element of these political actors are references to the people. Mair (2002) calls it mainstream populism or conventional populism. The second is exclusionary populism, which usually appeals to the people while referring to the exclusion of ethnic groups or minorities located outside the people. Ideologically, the right-wing parties tend to meet at this point. The third type is anti-elitist populism, which functions by appealing to the people, and by harshly criticizing the establishment. Left-wing political actors usually follow this style. Finally, complete populism occupies the fourth place and is normally embraced by right-wing parties. The discourse defended by this type of populism involves three elements that, according to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), characterize populism. In other words, they appeal to the people, exclude certain groups, and attack the elite.

The antagonism between the elite and the people can be expressed in various ways: in a dramatic, simple, moralistic, direct, colloquial, vulgar, positive, or negative way (Charaudeau, 2009). Engesser, Fawzi,

et al. (2017) argue that the populist communicative style is mainly characterized by being simple, emotional, and negative. Populist actors tend to reduce the complexity of the messages (Canovan, 1999), placing themselves in binary positions most of the time (e.g., black and white, with me or against me; Hawkins, 2010). This dichotomous thinking serves them, for example, to present and defend the antagonism between the people and the elite: You are with us or with the establishment. To do this, they also use emotional rhetoric: fear, uncertainty or resentment are frequent in their messages (Wodak, 2015). Using these emotions helps them to differentiate themselves from the establishment.

The Populist Discourse on Social Media

As with other collectives, the success of populist political actors is closely related to the political opportunity structure and the discursive opportunity structure. The political opportunity structure refers to the conditions of the political environment that offer incentives for actors outside the establishment, such as social movements, to participate in political decision making (Jenkins, 1995; Tarrow, 1994). On the other hand, the discursive opportunity structure determines the possibility that a message has to be disseminated in the public sphere (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). In addition, Engesser, Ernst, and associates (2017) consider that populism also uses online opportunity structures—that is, it nourishes the values inherent in the system of digital media to promote its communication.

Social media increasingly plays a prominent role in the formation of political opinions, assuming some of the democratizing attitudes that conventional media had, such as the provision of information and different points of view on social and political issues of interest to public opinion (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015). Despite the importance that conventional media still has, it is very difficult for populist political actors to introduce their messages without restrictions (Mazzoleni, 2003). In this context, Web 2.0 and social media allow them to circumvent conventional media (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017), making it easier for their messages to reach citizens directly (Esser, Stepinska, & Hopmann, 2017). By using social media platforms, populist political actors can impose their interpretive frames on political events, a function that is part of the logic of media (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Araújo & Prior, 2021). In this way, they can select the aspects that they consider most relevant and highlight them in their communication strategy on Twitter, thus focusing the attention of citizens on the issues and frames they defend (Entman, 1993). Populist politicians capitalize on the power and influence of social media in shaping citizen opinions by disseminating populist ideas, such as attacking the elites or defending the people (Engesser, Fawzi, et al., 2017), therefore avoiding the intervention of the media, that could change the sense of the messages. Gerbaudo (2014) calls this phenomenon "Populism 2.0" (p. 67).

In this context, social media become an essential channel for populist actors to appeal to the people quickly, easily, and directly (Esser et al., 2017). In addition, they use the democratizing potential of the Internet to claim the popular sovereignty taken from the people. By using social media, they differentiate themselves from the elites, as they are presented as a conventional member of the people while emphasizing the fact that they do not assume the rules imposed by the elites (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017). According to the previous literature, we hypothesize the following:

H3:   *The communication strategy of the populist political actors analyzed on Twitter will be based mainly on criticism of the establishment, and appeal to the people will be a secondary element.*

Data and Methods

The goal of this research is not only to determine the presence of two characteristic elements of populism (the people and the elite) on the Twitter communicative strategies of European populist political actors but also to analyze the frame under which these types of messages are shared. In this sense, to test the hypotheses raised in this article, both quantitative and qualitative techniques have been used. First, a quantitative content analysis has been done in which each tweet was coded to identify whether the populist political actors in the analysis appeal both to the people and/or speak about the elite in their Twitter messages. Second, each tweet has been classified to understand the words that populists use when they appeal to the people and the collectives related to the elites in the messages (see Table 1). When appealing to the people, the terms used by the populist actors have been grouped into three different perceptions: (1) patriotism (when they want to link the people to the country of origin, from a legal perspective), (2) nationalism (when they want to link the people to the country of origin, in terms of nationality), and (3) communitarianism (when they want to link the people to the defense of civil society). Third, a qualitative content analysis was carried out to determine the frame of these messages, to evaluate their meaning, and to identify the similarities and differences between the different parties and leaders regarding ideology.

Table 1. Categories Used in the Quantitative Content Analysis.

The people		The elite
Patriotism	Citizens	Identified actors (using their complete name)
	Country	Political elites
	Compatriots	Economic elites
Nationalism	Spanish	Media elites
	Italian	Establishment
	French	Government
	British	Institutions
Communitarianism	People	Judicial system
	Homeland	

To carry out the quantitative content analysis, a codebook was created to systematically collect all the words used by the populist political actors that referred to the people and the elite. The sample was analyzed manually by two coders who were fluent in the four languages in which the messages were written. After a period of training between coders, intercoder reliability has been calculated using Scott's pi formula, obtaining a level of 0.97. Similarly, the qualitative content analysis was carried out by both coders jointly to seek the maximum possible consensus among them.

Sample

The selected sample for the analysis comprises the messages emitted by four European populist political parties and their respective leaders' Twitter accounts. In particular, the chosen accounts are Podemos and Pablo Iglesias (Spain); Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and Beppe Grillo (Italy); Front National (FN) and Marine Le Pen (France); and the Party for the Independence of the United Kingdom (UKIP), Nigel Farage (leader of the party until November 30, 2016) and Paul Nuttall (leader of November 30, 2016 until June 9, 2017; UK).

This article seeks to understand the usual communicative strategy of populist political actors, avoiding exceptional periods. Therefore, the analysis has excluded the electoral campaigns, considering that they can alter the routine use of Twitter by these political actors. Thus, three temporary periods are analyzed: May and November 2016 and March 2017. However, we should point out that in the case of UKIP, the accounts of the two leaders with whom the party has been counted during the reporting periods have been selected. It has been determined that during the periods of May and November 2016, the Nigel Farage account is analyzed, and for March 2017, the profile of Paul Nuttall is studied. In addition, with the aim that the few tweets published by Nuttall do not distort the correct analysis of the results, and since it had previously been observed that both Farage and Nuttall followed a very similar strategy, the messages of the two candidates have been unified and aggregated.

Three criteria were considered for the selection of the sample. First, they are parties and leaders that previous literature has considered as populist parties, at least concerning the communicative style they employ (e.g., Sanders, Berganza, & de Miguel, 2017, for Podemos; Bobba & Legnante, 2017, for the M5S; Hubé & Truan, 2017, for the FN; Stanyer, Archetti, & Sorensen, 2017, for UKIP). Second, the ideological axis, which allows us to know whether there are differences in communication between progressive and conservative political actors. Two of the accounts are located to the left and center left of the political scene (Podemos and M5S), while the other two (UKIP and FN) are far-right parties. And third, they are political actors from four similar countries in size and political relevance in Europe. Furthermore, according to the data published by the International Monetary Fund, France, the UK, Italy, and Spain are four of the five major European world powers in Europe.

The selection of Twitter as the reference network to carry out the analysis is due to it being the preferred digital platform for political actors. With 340 million active users in the world, the microblogging network has the highest number of official government profiles. Specifically, Burson Cohn and Wolfe (2018) have identified 951 Twitter profiles—372 personal and 579 institutional accounts—of heads of state and government and foreign ministers from 187 different countries. That is representative of the 96% of all 193 UN member states. Facebook is the second-most popular network among government leaders (represent the 93% of all the UN member states), followed by Instagram (representing 81% of all UN member states). Although populist actors, due to their organizational fragility, are much more dependent on conventional media than traditional parties (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017), on many occasions they receive hostility from the media, which criticize and discredit their demands (Mudde, 2007). Therefore, populist actors use social media with a double objective: (1) to challenge the discourse imposed by the political and media elites (McNair, 2006) and (2) to avoid the filter of conventional media

and spread their messages without intermediaries (Castells, 2009). In the same vein, authors such as Engesser, Fawzi, et al. (2017) consider that populism uses the online opportunity structures to favor its communication. In this context, Twitter is a very useful channel of communication for populist actors due to its speed and simplicity (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017).

Tweets were downloaded using the Twitonomy Web application, which in its paid version allows downloading of the tweets, retweets, and replies of the selected accounts. A total of 18,739 messages were collected, of which 9,128 are analyzed (2,348 belong to the leaders and 6,780 to the parties), which include both tweets and replies (see Table 2). Retweets have not been evaluated in this research, because this article is focused on the study of the message-producing dimension of the European populist political actors, and not in its distributing or diffusing dimension of external information (Larsson, 2015).

Table 2. Distribution of the Sample of the Research.

		Number of tweets analyzed
Parties	Podemos	4,025
	M5S	280
	FN	1,787
	UKIP	688
	Total	6,780
Leaders	Pablo Iglesias	563
	Beppe Grillo	300
	Marine Le Pen	1,229
	Nigel Farage	211
	Paul Nuttall	45
	Total	2,348
TOTAL		9,128

Results

The Construction of the People in the Communicative Strategy on Twitter by the European Populist Political Actors

The antagonism between the people and the elite is one of the defining elements of populism (Mudde, 2004). However, results show that, generally, the populist political actors analyzed do not refer to the people directly on Twitter regardless of their ideology, $\chi^2(1) = 59.485$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 shows how only Beppe Grillo follows a different strategy and clearly appeals to the people on his Twitter messages. Therefore, it can be observed how the leitmotiv of the populist political actors is to defend the people before the corrupt elite, although they opt for a more impersonal communication strategy.
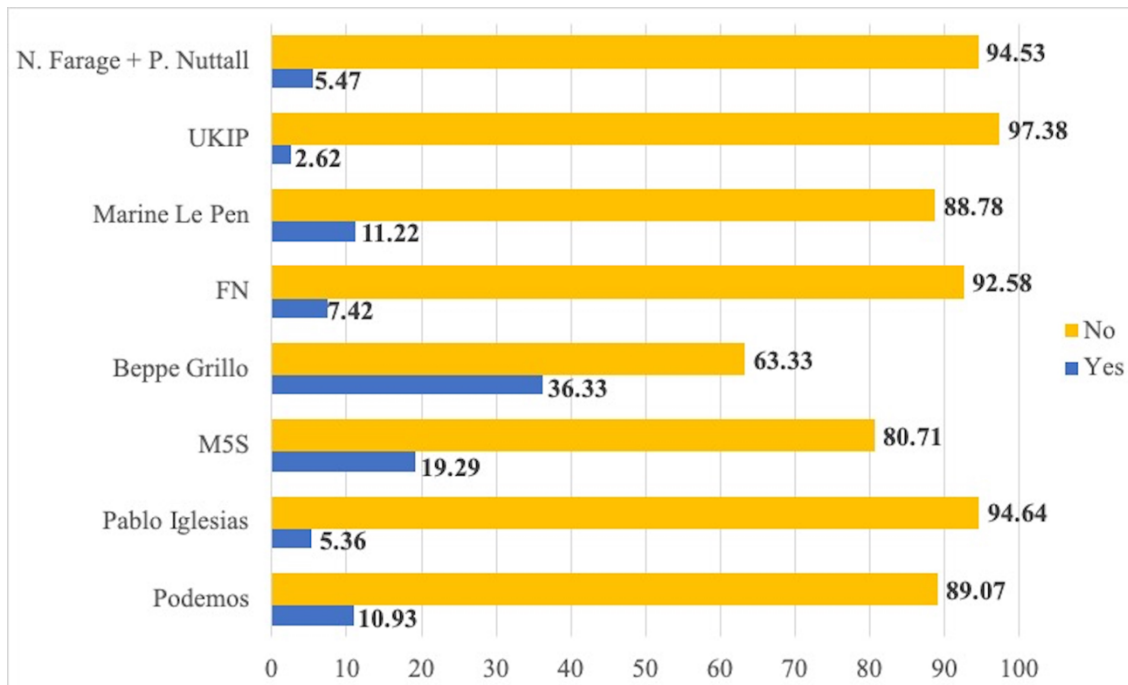
Figure 1. Appeal to the people in the messages shared on Twitter (%).

The four populist leaders rarely appeal to the people in their messages (see Figure 1). Pablo Iglesias (5.36%) and the leaders of UKIP, Nigel Farage, and Paul Nuttall (5.47%), direct their communication least to this collective. Marine Le Pen (11.22%) does not use this resource much, either. However, we must clarify that she is not responsible for administrating her Twitter account—her team updates it daily. Although the messages are written in the first person, she only writes those that are signed with the initials "MLP." On the contrary, Beppe Grillo appeals the most to the people in his messages (36.67%; see Figure 1). This may be because the leader of M5S rarely uses Twitter to disseminate messages in 280 characters, but uses it as a channel to disseminate what he writes in his personal blog, which has more space and is addressed in a more direct tone to the citizens. As can be seen in Figure 1, the populist parties follow a similar strategy to that used by their leaders, although, in general terms, they present slightly lower values.

A chi-squared test, $\chi^2(3) = 301.035$, $p < .001$, found statistically significant differences between the ideology of the analyzed populist political actors (left, center left, and right wing) and the construction of the people they make up on Twitter. In this sense, the qualitative analysis carried out allows us to detect differences based on ideology, not only in the way they address to the people but also under what characteristics they build the identity of this group.

Pablo Iglesias mostly builds his story using the word *people* (73.33%). He presents it as an honest and hard-working collective that suffers a situation of social injustice, because of the crisis caused by a corrupt elite that has been looting Spain (see Table 3). In the same way, Podemos also clearly opts for the use of the term *people* (66.51%). It is especially remarkable that they include themselves in this group, launching messages

such as the secret of Podemos is its people. In fact, the party, led by Pablo Iglesias, repeats on numerous occasions that political change in Spain has not been achieved by any party, but by the people, including in this group social movements such as 15M or the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages. In this sense, Podemos defines the people as a group of honest and hard-working people who have struggled to obtain the rights that we all enjoy today and who are being mistreated by the austerity policies applied by the Popular Party Government during the past years. Podemos appears before citizens as part of the people and, therefore, as the only political option that will defend their rights against the elites.

Beppe Grillo and M5S opted for the use of the word *citizens* (66.06% and 68.52%, respectively; Table 3). The terms *cittadino*, *cittadini*, or *cittadinanza* are frequently used in the messages launched by the M5S and its leader. Both actors define *citizens* as those who live day to day in Italy, and therefore as those who know what is really happening in the country. They present citizens as a kind and honest collective, victims of a poorly managed policy and a corrupt government that takes public money as though it was its own. In this sense, given that citizenship is good per se, and is not corrupt as the elite that manage the country, they consider that they should be listened to and play a fundamental role in the institutions. In other words, they defend the importance of citizenship in political decision making. They consider that citizens should act as watchdogs of democracy, control their representatives so that they do not act fraudulently, and demand accountability when they consider it appropriate. For that reason, M5S defines itself as a party made up of citizens who care about their peers, so defending that citizenship is at the center of their political project to govern.

Table 3. Main Signifiers to the Concept of People (%).

	Podemos	P. Iglesias	M5S	B. Grillo	FN	M. Le Pen	UKIP	N. Farage + P. Nuttall
P1. People	66.51	73.33	14.82	10.00	7.58	7.46	33.33	21.43
P2. Citizens	11.93	10.00	68.52	66.06	1.52	2.99	38.89	7.14
P3. Homeland	2.29	13.33			1.52	2.99		7.14
P4. Country	13.76					1.49		
P5. Spanish	5.50							
P6. Italian			16.66	14.68				
P7. French					84.85	80.60		
P8. British							11.11	64.28
P9. Compatriots		3.33				10.45	16.67	

Note. Only the values higher than 1% are shown.

Marine Le Pen and the FN appeal to the people on few occasions, and when they do, they use various terms. However, as shown by the data (see Table 3), both Le Pen and the FN are especially inclined to use the word *le Français* (80.60% and 84.85%, respectively). The employment of this term is a clear strategy of inclusion and exclusion. Using the generic French, they include within the people a very specific group—those who are born in France—and exclude immigrants, a collective that they harshly criticize for appropriating services that should be destined solely and exclusively to the French, such as the housing. They exclude even the second and third generations of immigrants, already born in France, exclusively for considering that they do not share enough the French culture and that they try to impose their religious beliefs.

In this sense, in the accounts of Marine Le Pen and the FN, the appeal to the people is built on the inclusion and exclusion of groups, since, they argue, for patriotism, their duty is to defend the French and not the others. Therefore, they defend vehemently the fact that France needs an option to govern that works solely and exclusively to defend the rights of the French people, postulating itself as the best option. This is demonstrated by one of the slogans used during the campaign for the presidential elections held in April 2017: *Au Nom Du Peuple*, which alludes to the fact that they speak on behalf of the French people.

Neither UKIP nor its leaders use Twitter as a channel to appeal to the people. Their communication is usually characterized by impersonal rhetoric. However, the construction strategy of the collective people presented by the party differs markedly from that of its leaders (see Table 3). While Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall built it in terms of inclusion and exclusion of groups, excluding immigrants from the group, the party did not. The use of terms such as *people* or *citizen* does not respond to the goal of building community. Therefore, the use of terms such as *people* refers to both the British who live and work in the UK and immigrants.

Generally speaking, data reveal two different perceptions to appealing to the people. On the one side, the Spanish populist political actors employ a communitarianism concept of the people (see Table 4). Podemos and Pablo Iglesias defend that civil society is the group more mistreated by the elite, who take their rights. They also consider that only if the common people come together and fight for their rights will society be able to advance and defeat the elites. In this context, Spanish populism introduces itself as the political actor that capitalizes the dissatisfaction of the people.

Table 4. Perceptions of Appealing to the People (%).

	Podemos	P. Iglesias	M5S	B. Grillo	FN	M. Le Pen	UKIP	N. Farage + P. Nuttall
Patriotism (P2, P4, P9)	25.69	10.00	68.52	66.06	1.52	14.93	55.56	7.14
Nationalism (P5, P6, P7, P8)	5.50	–	16.67	14.68	84.85	80.60	11.11	64.28
Communitarianism (P1, P3)	68.90	86.66	14.82	10.00	9.10	10.45	33.33	28.57

On the other side, the Italian, French, and British populist political actors appeal to the people using the patriotism and the nationalism (see Table 4). They seek to link the people with their patria as well as encourage the people's attachment to the nation to which they belong. In this way, they appeal to the legal, historical, and affective ties that people have with their country. To do that, in their messages they employ feelings like fear or uncertainty, and use the distinction between them and us to make people fight for their rights because they feel threatened by other groups.

In sum, the word used for the construction of the people responds to the concept of empty signifier, theorized by Ernesto Laclau (2005), whose thesis defends the idea that the people can include different meanings under the same word.

The Construction of the Elite in the Communicative Strategy on Twitter
by the European Populist Political Actors

As has been shown in the previous section, populist political actors build a story of the people based on their kindness and the struggle to recover what has been taken from them. For the populist actors, the people are dominated by the elites, dispossessed of the popular sovereignty that cost them to acquire so much (Rooduijn, 2014). A chi-squared test, $\chi^2(1) = 179.897$, $p < .001$, confirms that there are statistically significant differences between ideology and the way of building the elite. In general, all the populist political actors analyzed harshly criticize the elites. In this sense, two differences are found. The first is that the populist political actors of the left and center left clearly identify the elite by mentioning them by their complete names. This practice is also present in the FN's communication strategy on Twitter. The second is that we find differences in the type of actor criticized by the populist political actors analyzed.

Regarding the leaders, highlights the case of Beppe Grillo, who in more than 60% of his messages on Twitter points to the elites as responsible for everything that happens to Italians. Pablo Iglesias (22.90%) and the UKIP leaders (19.14%) are approximately on the same line and use this resource in less than one-third of their messages, and Marine Le Pen (12.70%) is less active in using Twitter to criticize the elite (see Figure 2). Moreover, no significant differences are observed in the anti-elitism present in the messages share by the Twitter account of the populist parties. Data reveal that, in general terms, they employ the same strategy as they leaders (see Figure 2).
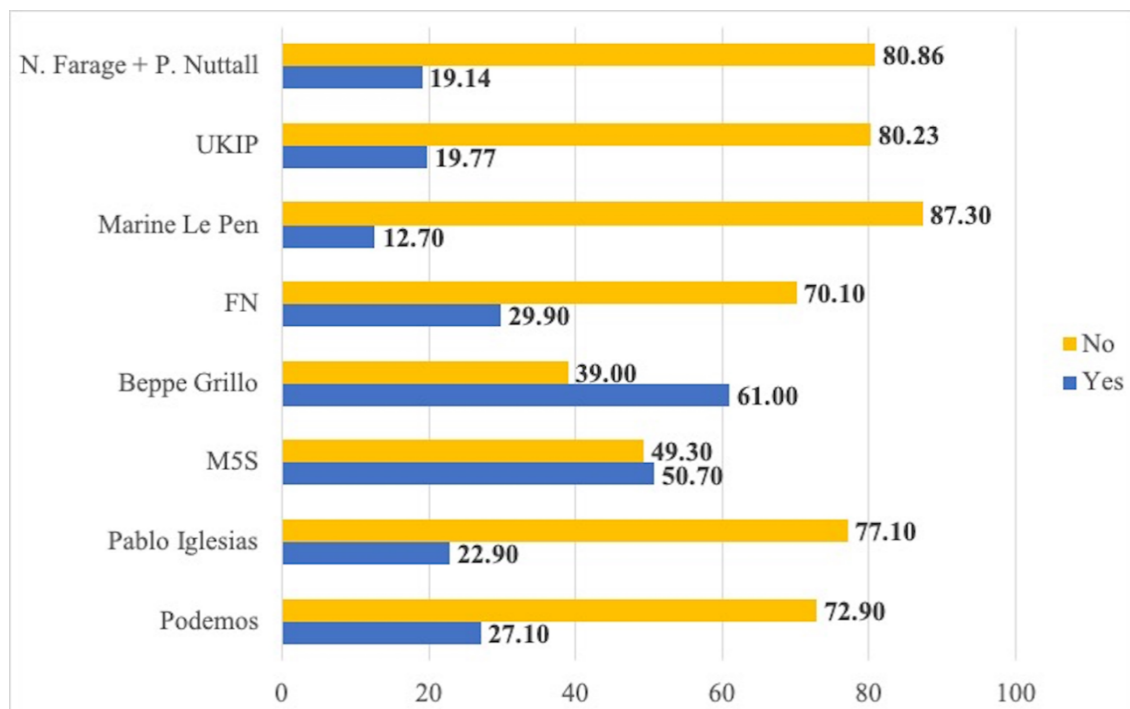

Figure 2. Anti-elitism in the messages shared on Twitter (%).

Although criticism of elites is present in all profiles, the way in which different leaders and their parties identify their adversary varies. Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall present up to six different types of enemies, and UKIP four. However, they always use generic terms for it. They criticize the political elites, the government, the institutions, or the establishment (see Table 5). There is an abstract, indeterminate, and impersonal identification of the adversary, something that, according to authors such as Charaudeau (2009), causes even more fear in citizens, who cannot clearly distinguish who is really the enemy they must overcome. Even when they criticize the government, they do so vaguely and imprecisely, blaming the executive, without attributing responsibility to any member. On very few occasions, UKIP and its leaders identify the culprits in a personalized way. Exceptionally in some tweets, they point to Theresa May, the prime minister of the United Kingdom.

The Spanish, French, and Italian populists opt for identifying their enemies with first and last names, especially the first two (see Table 5). The indicated ones are their political rivals. In the case of Pablo Iglesias and Podemos, their criticisms are mainly against the Popular Party, which they link in many messages with what they call *La Trama*, a corrupt network that affects the party and most of its leaders and extends beyond politics to areas such as the economy. Podemos and Iglesias also accuses the Popular Party for its austerity policies. However, it should be noted that the criticisms leveled at the government (25.28%), in fact, also refer to the Popular Party, that governed during the time periods analyzed. Podemos and Iglesias also criticize the two other political parties that are members of the Spanish political opposition, Ciudadanos and the Socialist Party, which they make accomplices with the Popular Party returning to govern again in Spain, and therefore the policies of austerity of the government of Mariano Rajoy are maintained.

Table 5. Main Actors Linked to the Anti-Elitism (%).

	Podemos	P. Iglesias	M5S	B. Grillo	FN	M. Le Pen	UKIP	N. Farage + P. Nuttall
Identified actors (with a complete name)	57.06	53.17	31.89	21.86	76.92	53.95		
Political Elites	3.90		47.48	37.70		5.26	2.26	32.65
Economic Elites	5.20	6.35		3.28	2.31	3.95		
Media Elites		3.97	2.83	12.57	1.92	3.95		4.08
Establishment	1.30	11.90	5.75	4.92				16.33
Government	25.28	15.87		15.30	11.15	26.32	39.10	20.41
Institutions			12.05	4.37			54.14	24.49
Judicial System	3.90	6.35			5.77	5.26	4.50	2.04

Note. Only the values higher than 1% are shown.

Marine Le Pen and the FN do the same as the Spanish populists with their political rivals. However, they focus on pointing out the leaders of the main parties in France. In the first two periods of analysis (May and November 2016), the criticism focuses on politicians such as the conservative François Fillon or the president of the Republic at that time, Françoise Hollande. In the third period of analysis (March 2017), close to the presidential elections, the trend changes, and they strongly reprove Emmanuel Macron, the most direct rival of Marine Le Pen. The leader of the FN reprimand Macron for his socialist past and for his lack of concreteness and challenges him not to make empty electoral promises, but to present concrete action plans, as she does.

In their messages on Twitter, the FN links Macron with submission to the political and economic elites to present him as the establishment's candidate against Marine Le Pen that is the voice of the people. In the same way, the FN defends that Macron is the candidate of submission to the European Union. They also harshly criticize the candidates of the left-wing parties, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who they link with the regularization of illegal immigration and with more redistributive and social economic policies such as increased taxes. The FN also considers the government (11.15%), led by Françoise Hollande, as an enemy to stand up against (see Table 5). They criticize him from working more to prevent terrorism and from taking drastic measures such as closing the French borders so as not to allow more people to enter illegally.

Italian populists highlight as the main enemy of the Italians Matteo Renzi and the Democratic Party, whom they blame for embezzling public funds, for being immersed in numerous cases of corruption, and for thinking more about staying in power than about solving the daily problems that citizens suffer. Nevertheless, the populists' strategy of M5S is a bit different, because they focus their efforts on criticizing the political elite (47.48%), blaming what happens in Italy to an abstract adversary, which they do not identify (see Table 5). However, although they allude to the political elite as a whole, they are especially belligerent and critical about Matteo Renzi and the Democratic Party. Following the same strategy as Beppe Grillo, the party links its opponent to the great corruption cases that occur in Italy. It also accuses Renzi of making numerous electoral promises to the citizenship without actually fulfilling them. This is the reason why M5S calls Renzi "ad man."

Media elites are also harshly criticized by the populist political actors analyzed. Beppe Grillo (12.57%) and Marine Le Pen (3.95%) accuse the media elites of serving the interests of a small group of people and not the general interest. Beppe Grillo practically never shares information that comes from conventional media, and everything he has to say is published on his personal blog. In fact, Grillo denounces in one of his messages that TG1 News, one of the most watched television shows in Italy, criticized the intervention of the mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, when she welcomed the European heads of state and government to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. While Raggi was delivering her speech, the television channel was broadcasting advertisements. In his blog, Grillo published an article against the news and accused the television channel of censorship and lack of press freedom. The harshness in the words used by Grillo and the negative campaign he launched on Twitter, supported by both party members and numerous citizens, led to the RAI, the company to which the TG1 belongs, issuing a statement to defend against the harsh accusations and public derision in social media.

Marine Le Pen also harshly criticized conventional media, however, it adopts quite a different attitude than that employed by Grillo. Le Pen believes that the media treat her much differently than they do Emmanuelle Macron. In various tweets she defends the idea that the media elites are in tune with the leader of *En marche!*, and denounces a positive campaign for Macron to reach the Eliseo and become the next president of the French Republic. However, although Le Pen denounces unequal treatment, it does not cease its appearances in talk shows and interviews in different media. In this way, she tries to take advantage of the legitimacy conferred by the media to present itself to citizens as a valid and reliable option to govern.

Judicial elites are also strongly criticized by the Spanish, French, and British populists (see Table 5), although their detraction is always linked to the lack of ethics of the political and economic elites and their influence in the judiciary system. The criticism of the judicial elites is especially intense in the profile of Pablo

Iglesias due to the prosecution process of Cassandra Vera, a young girl that published some joking tweets about the death of one of the ministers of the Spanish dictatorship, who was murdered more than 40 years ago. This case had a great impact both in Spain and in Europe because it was judging a case of freedom of expression, a right embodied in the Spanish Constitution.

Therefore, it can be observed how both the populist leaders and the political parties they represent build part of their discourse around the existence of a kind group, the people, who are being mistreated and punished by an increasingly harassed elite for corruption cases, generating a rhetoric based on the inclusion and the exclusion of groups.

Conclusions and Discussion

The main objective of this research is twofold: first, to know whether two of the main characteristics of the populist discourse, the people and the elite, are present in the Twitter communicative strategy of European populist political actors. Second, to determine whether there are differences in the construction they carry out of both collectives based on their ideology.

According to the data, the Twitter communicative strategy of the analyzed populist parties and leaders is based mainly on discrediting their political rivals and/or the opposition's political options, leaving in the background the construction of the people, the collective they represent. In other words, they employ the technique of the negative campaign intending to highlight the flaws and discrediting the elites, mainly political, but also economic and the media. In this sense, its communicative strategy is similar to those presented by the establishment parties and leaders (Ceron & d'Adda, 2015). The construction and defense of the people are not considered a priority in the communicative strategy on Twitter of the populist actors analyzed. Thus, although they present themselves as the protectors of the people and the popular sovereignty, they do not prioritize messages toward this group, which leads us to affirm the presence of what we call illustrated populism, a type of populism that refers to the ideas defended for the illustrated despotism: Everything for the people, but without the people.

According to the previous literature (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), the people, the elite, and popular sovereignty are the core elements of the populist discourse. Despite its importance, the analysis carried out in this research has shown that this is not equal in the communication strategy on Twitter of the populist political actors analyzed. In this sense, the data reveal how the references to the elite are above the messages that seek to appeal directly to the people, confirming the third hypothesis. At this point, there are no differences with respect to ideology, as chi-squared test confirms ($p < .001$).

However, as we see with the results of the chi-squared test ($p < .001$), we observe differences in the way of constructing the people and the elite on Twitter depending on the ideology of the populist actors analyzed. Regarding the construction of the people, a homogenous and sovereign entity, we found that, except for Pablo Iglesias and Podemos, the rest of the leaders and parties use the technique of exclusion. Thus, the Italian, French, and English populists make a construction of the people based on the national community, defined by ethnic and civic terms using a conception linked with the nationalism and the patriotism. They place within this group all those who were born in their country and those who participate

actively in the community, sharing common values and culture. The use of words like *Italiani*, *cittadino*, *Française*, *compatriote*, *British*, or *British people* reinforce this idea. For these actors, if you do not have Italian, French, or British nationality, or you are not the holder of political rights and you submit to the laws of the State, rights granted by the status of citizen, you cannot be part of the people. Therefore, using an inclusion and exclusion logic, they discriminate against immigrants, who do not usually meet either of the two conditions. These findings are in line with previous research (Pasquino, 2008; Taggart, 2000).

Conversely, Pablo Iglesias and Podemos use the cultural conception for the construction of the people, using words such as *people* or *homeland*, appealing to the communitarianism. The cultural notion appeals to normal people and vindicates the dignity and recognition of groups excluded by power because of their sociocultural condition (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Spanish populists, in addition to including immigrants when they talk about the people, vehemently criticize that they do not have the same rights as those born in Spain, as is the case of free universal health care. These findings corroborate partially our first hypothesis because the strategy of M5S regarding the construction of the people are similar to the strategy raised by the right-wing populist political actors, not the left-wing ones.

Therefore, the premise exposed by Laclau (2005) is fulfilled. As an empty signifier, the concept of the people includes different conceptualizations, whose common nexus is the need to improve their situation. In this sense, an illustrated populism can be observed. Although their leitmotiv is defense of the people, the European populist political actors analyzed use Twitter to disseminate their ideas using an impersonal discourse. In this sense, they use Twitter in the same line as the illustrated despotism: All for the people, but without the people.

Regarding the construction of the elite, the data show that all the populist political actors analyzed use Twitter as a mechanism to criticize the establishment, making continuous and fierce criticism against some political agents. A chi-squared test ($p < .001$) corroborates that significant differences regarding ideology can be found here, too.

Except for the British populists, the rest clearly identify their enemies in their communicative strategy on Twitter. They emphasize with names and last names those who dispute the sovereignty of the people. In this way, their potential voters can clearly identify the culprits of the current situation. Conversely, UKIP and its leaders present the elite in an abstract way, without personalize the disapproval in any particular agent. These impersonal criticisms foster a sense of indeterminacy and fear among citizens, who do not know who is really the enemy they must fight (Charaudeau, 2009). We can support partially the second hypothesis because the center and left-wing populist political actors, as well as the FN, clearly identify the elite, while the UKIP makes an impersonal construction of the elites to foster a sense of indeterminacy.

As the previous literature show, the relationship between populists and the media is dichotomous and changing, and fluctuates from love to hate because populist political actors consider the media a part of the establishment and show a hostile attitude toward them (Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde, 2004). Most of the criticisms observed in the analyzed accounts are directed to the political and institutional sphere. However, harsh criticisms have also been detected against the media elites. Two accusations are done about them.

The first one is its connivance with the political and economic powers, which are decisive in making decisions about what is published. The second one is that the media are accused of starting a negative campaign or resorting to media silence regarding the candidates outside of the establishment.

However, as powerless organizations, they are much more dependent on the media than traditional parties (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017). This is what happens to the Spanish, French, and English populists who, despite criticizing the media, have a very high presence in newspapers, radio, and television programs, since they need their legitimizing capacity to seem valid political options before citizens.

The empirical study of the presence of the main characteristics of the populist rhetoric in the communicative strategy on Twitter of four European populist political parties and their leaders show the presence of illustrated populism, where they consider themselves as the voice of the people without communicating directly to them. In addition to exposing different ways of constructing the people, this research has also shown that populists follow the same strategy of promoting a negative campaign against the political actors of the establishment.

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