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***A True Party of the Populist Radical Right?
Analysing VOX's Discourse on Instagram***

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Abstract

Populism is often linked to right-wing parties, partly due to the complex nature of the concept and the 'populist hype' that obscures its identification. Spain's recently established far right party, VOX, has frequently been labelled as populist by commentators, academics, and the public. This paper delves into a minimalistic interpretation of populism and applies it to VOX's discourse, questioning whether the party truly fits this categorization. The study examines VOX's Instagram posts leading up to the November 2019 general election to offer a novel perspective on the party's discourse and communication. The analysis suggests that VOX's discourse leans more towards nationalism, nativism, and traditionalism than populism, which means that the party's categorization as primarily 'populist' might need to be reconsidered.

Introduction

Populism is a difficult term to define—scholars of the field are tired of repeating—to the point where 'difficult to define' has almost become part of its very definition. The various schools of thought chasing after its 'true meaning' have made populism a rather complex and arduous topic; it has indeed become 'one of political science's most contentious issues' (Moffit and Tormey, 2013: 381).

This problem is also reflected in the ease with which commentators have labelled parties of the radical right as populist, often conflating nativist-nationalist discourses with populist ones (Rydgren, 2017), damaging our ability to explain specifically to whom a type of political discourse belongs or appeals (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021: 3), and even risking degrading populism to a 'catch-all phrase' (De Cleen et al., 2020: 16). This exaggeration, or 'populist hype' (Glynos and Mondon, 2016), around the concept of (right-wing) populism by politicians, the media, and even academics, along with the use of the term to euphemize other—stronger—labels like nativism, authoritarianism or racism, has damaged the common understanding of the adjective *populist*. Furthermore, regarding the Populist Radical Right (PRR), Marcos-Marne et al. (2021) explain that, although the relevance of the term is unquestioned, its popularity, and the theoretical affinity between its three core elements (i.e., nativism, authoritarianism, populism), have caused radical-right parties to be systematically considered populist without adequate examination.

This is a concern that remains relevant in the academic literature today (Goyvaerts, 2021: 1), despite the efforts and critical work of numerous experts in the field. For instance, De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) dismantle the overlap between populism and nationalism that is often present in academic and public debates, in an attempt to resolve the confusion, and offer precise and operational definitions that allow researchers to distinguish one from the other. Similarly, and in light of the issue, Stavrakakis et al. (2017) problematize the applicability of the

category 'populist' to the far, radical, and extreme right in Europe, arguing that, in many cases, it may be other political 'tags' that better describe these parties.

VOX is a relatively new far-right party that has been treated in a similar manner and it often remains unclear to the public whether it is populist or something else (Moreno, 2021). Building on and contributing to the arguments developed in studies like the abovementioned, this working paper questions the populist character that media and commentators have ascribed to the party in an attempt to understand how it can best be categorized.

It must be said that scholars have already questioned the populist temper of VOX (Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Ramos-González and Ortiz, 2022), evaluating its discourse in speeches, electoral programs, and party documents. The social media of the party has also been subject to scrutiny. Concerning Twitter, Lava Santos (2021) examines VOX's discourse, and González Gómez (2021) that of Santiago Abascal. In contrast, Instagram presents a gap in this respect. López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021) do stumble upon populism as part of their study of VOX's Instagram. However, because the purpose of their research is to look at the audio-visual tactics of the party and not their populist nature, they do so somewhat superficially, lacking the analytical and theoretical depth to draw meaningful conclusions. Distinctively to such existing works, therefore, I herein analyze VOX's Instagram posts adopting a specific theoretical and analytical strategy to identify the extent to which the party employs a populist discourse on this social platform.¹

I look at social media because it has been deemed a propitious medium to promulgate a party's core messages (Holt, 2020: 205), especially those of right-wing populist parties (Gerbaudo, 2018: 747). VOX is also the party with the most followers and interactions on Instagram at the national level in Spain (Cea Esteruelas, 2020), a country where social media has become a significant political space (see for instance Kalogeropoulos, 2017). The ultimate goal is to contribute to the literature that focuses on the use of social media by the far right, by looking at VOX in particular, and on the categorization of VOX as a populist party.

In terms of methodology and theoretical framework, I follow the example of Stavrakakis et al. (2017) and Ramos-González and Ortiz (2022): I use a discourse-theoretical methodology and a 'minimal' definition of populism to conduct the analysis. The structure of the paper is as follows: first, the case study is introduced in detail; second, the definition of populism used herein and the methodology employed to identify it are presented; the analysis and results follow, and a brief conclusion brings the piece to an end.

Case-study background

VOX was born in 2013, but it was not until the regional elections of Andalusia in 2018 that the party became a force to be reckoned with, ending the Spanish so-called 'exceptionalism' in Europe as a country free of the far right (Alonso and

¹ There are, of course, other enquiries into the social media of VOX (e.g., Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020; Cervi and Marín-Lladó; 2021; Reig et al., 2021; Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020), but these do not look at populism expressly.

Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). Their rupture into Spanish mainstream politics was later confirmed by the April 2019 general election, and even to a greater extent by the November 2019 vote, in which the party obtained 52 seats, becoming the third largest in the country. As of 2023, VOX remains in third position, although with a lower number of representatives.

VOX as a party can arguably be placed on the *radical* right (Ferreira, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2019; Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020), however not on the *extreme* right (Norris, 2005), as it operates within—and respects—Spanish democratic procedures and institutions. Nativism, the notion that countries should be solely inhabited by native members (those belonging to ‘the nation’) while non-native elements (be that people or ideas) threaten the homogeneous nation-state (Rooduijn, 2013), is central to VOX’s platform (Ferreira, 2019), which is defined by anti-immigration rhetoric (Dennison and Mendes, 2019; Vampa, 2020), coupled with xenophobic, Islamophobic, and ethnonationalist policies (Ferreira, 2019: 87-8). Authoritarian tendencies, understood as a predilection towards the government’s profound moral weight over citizens’ freedoms and rights (Hooghe et al., 2002: 967), and favoring strict order and social discipline (Mudde, 2010: 1174), are clearly present too. It is characteristic that VOX vindicates Franco’s dictatorship (Proceso, 2021), advocates for the re-establishment of a single centralized government (VOX, 2018: 2-16), as well as the strengthening of punishment for those who threaten or mistreat the unity of Spain (ibid.). Moreover, VOX holds a nationalist, traditionalist (Santamarina, 2020: 895; Santana et al., 2021) and gendered view of society (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020); is critical of the EU without supporting an exit from its institutions (soft Eurosceptic) (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020: 4); eagerly protests against what it terms as radical left-wing feminism (Álvarez and Valdés, 2018); condemns the Catalan independentist movement; and calls for economic liberalism (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021).

VOX, therefore, fulfils some of the main characteristics of Mudde’s (2007) PRR Parties in its *nativist* and *authoritarian* core elements, which makes it rather safe to categorize the party as belonging to the broader radical right family. However, whereas there is little debate on these ideological/programmatic aspects of VOX, the idea of its belonging to the *populist* radical right in particular is not entirely clear.

Is Vox populist or not? Asking the literature

There are four key empirical studies that explicitly scrutinize the populist character of VOX (not focusing specifically on social media). These are divided between those that find VOX to be populist and those that do not, or at least not entirely. Rooduijn et al. (2019) employ a definition based on Mudde’s (2004) conceptualization of populism to categorize VOX as a populist party, i.e., that endorses the dichotomy between the homogenous groups of the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the former’s general will. However, there is barely any information on how the study operationalizes this theoretical framework to analyze the populist disposition or ideological profile of the party, giving the impression of a superficial conclusion. On the other hand, Ferreira (2019) inspects VOX’s electoral programs and speeches through qualitative content analysis and argues that populism as a ‘thin ideology’ is *hardly present* in the discourse of the party, subject to other much more prominent elements. Marcos-Marne et al.

(2021), using Hawkins' (2009) holistic grading of core political discourses, find that populist elements of VOX—based on an ideational approach—are supplementary and subordinate to nationalist and traditionalist ones. Finally, Ramos-González and Ortiz (2022), who undertake a qualitative scrutiny of manifestoes and speeches using discourse-theoretical analysis, attain similar results to Marcos-Marne et al. (2021), identifying a lack of explicit interpellation upon *'the people'* as a political subject.

Turning to studies that draw on the social media realm, and more specifically Twitter, Lava Santos (2021) uses a definition that includes appeals to the people, criticism of elites, exclusion of 'others,' Euroscepticism, crisis references, the eulogizing of the leader, and the use of emotion, to categorize VOX as populist. However, when concluding, some of the arguments in favour of this categorization are grounded on nationalist/nativist elements of VOX's discourse, which suggests some degree of conflation between different ideological/discursive elements. González Gómez (2021) looks at populism from a linguistic lens, applying Charaudeau's (2009) four key features² of the populist language to Abascal's Twitter discourse. However, she too uses a rather 'lose' definition of populism—including for example Islamophobia or the exaltation of national values and symbols as part of that interpretation, which again, should be considered rather as nativism/nationalism—to conclude that the leader's discourse contains populist characteristics. Turning to studies that draw on Instagram, López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021) do find populist attributes in the use of VOX's social platform based on the portrait of Santiago Abascal as a strong, heroic leader. Yet, as mentioned earlier, they lack a coherent analytical and theoretical framework, dedicating little space to this section of their findings.

The rest of the literature that studies VOX, which does not necessarily focus on the populist character of the party, reacts differently to the findings of studies like the ones surveyed above. Firstly, there are those who vaguely assume the party to be populist (e.g., Gould, 2019; Miro and Toff, 2022), ignoring the ongoing scholarly debate. Others position themselves on one side or the other. Various articles use Rooduijn et al.'s (2019) arguments to justify their study of VOX as a populist party, aligning with the findings of that study (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020; Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Mendes and Dennison, 2020). On the other side, certain authors, who are more convinced by Ferreira's (2019) arguments in particular, over those of Rooduijn et al. (2019), are much more reluctant to categorize VOX as populist, being very much aware of relevant disagreements. For example, Arroyo Menéndez (2020), Arana (2021), or Barbeito Iglesias and Iglesias Alonso (2021) refer to VOX's particular brand of populism as 'nativist populism'—where populism is secondary to other discursive/ideological elements, especially nativism—when facing the issue of defining the nature of the party. In other words, these works study VOX as populist but do so while being very much aware that it is a particular form of populism that applies to the party, one where populist characteristics are not necessarily at the centre. Finally, Barrio et al. (2021) go even further and stay out of the controversy altogether, preferring to introduce the party simply as 'radical right', avoiding the populist tag entirely.

² These are: the description of a catastrophic situation in which the people are the victims; the identification of the culprits as the elites or the establishment; the exaltation of certain values; and the emergence of a charismatic leader determined to save society.

Contributing to the discussion

Contributing to the discussion, this paper scrutinizes VOX's Instagram posts during the two weeks before the November 2019 general election in order to determine whether VOX can indeed be considered populist or not—or to what degree. To do so, a discourse-theoretical strategy and a minimum definition of populism are employed, following the example of Stavrakakis et al. (2017) and Ramos-González and Ortiz (2022). I make use of these methods because firstly, a discourse-theoretical approach suits the analysis format of Instagram posts, where a common/repeating discourse can be exhibited. Secondly, as scholars working in this tradition have shown, employing a minimal definition based on specific discursive criteria facilitates a more rigorous classification of political actors as populist or not populist. Finally, like the authors above, this paper also has the objective of challenging uncritical categorizations of far-right actors as populists and hence allows for theory/methods testing and comparison of empirical results.

The timeframe selected coincides with the emergence of VOX as an established force in Spanish politics and is similar to other discourse studies on the party (e.g., Reig et al., 2021; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2020). Moreover, analyzing Instagram posts offers an interesting perspective that can further contribute to the academic debate in question. Social media appears to be increasingly relevant for political parties. For instance, social platforms have been found to produce comparatively high visibility for right-wing parties (Sandberg and Ihlebæk, 2019) and provide a responsive venue to transmit typical populist themes (Engesser et al., 2016). It has even been identified as one of the keys to the success of populist endeavors (Gerbaudo, 2018), to the extent that some scholars talk about 'technopopulist' parties, which can no longer be understood without comprehending their relationship with social media (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018). Engesser et al. (2016) argue that social media allows for more direct populist communication, bypassing the intervention of elite gatekeepers. With respect to empirical evidence, Ernst et al. (2019) find that populist parties employ a populist discourse more often on Facebook and Twitter than in political talk shows.

Social media is also quite relevant to the case study, at least 38% of social media users in Spain follow a political leader or party (Kalogeropoulos, 2017), and the majority of adults (61%) 'consume' news through this channel (Pew Research Center, 2018). Within the wide variety of social platforms, Instagram is particularly important because VOX is the most followed Spanish political party and has the utmost degree of interaction with and commitment to this site at the national level (Cea Esteruelas, 2020). Furthermore, Instagram posts allow for messages to have sufficient depth and length for discourses to unfold, allowing for the discourse analysis of relevant material, such as videos of speeches, pictures displaying relevant texts, or lengthy captions.

Finally, given that studies of social media find a much stronger populist character of VOX than those that look at conventional data (party documents, speeches, etc.), one would think that social media does indeed present a favorable space where the populist traits of the party are exacerbated and clearly displayed. By looking at social media but maintaining a closer definition of populism to Ramos-González and Ortiz (2022), which analyze VOX's conventional channels of communication, this paper further contributes to evaluating this possibility and

questions whether it is an issue of theoretical compatibility between these two groups of articles.

Definition and methodology

A ‘minimum’ definition of populism is used in this paper based on its very core characteristics, argued to be in harmony with both the ideological and discursive approaches (Stavrakakis et al., 2017). When analyzing whether a party is populist or not, employing a concept of populism based on the following core parameters can also allow researchers to look at different case studies through a common conceptualizing loupe, enhancing comparability.

The Essex-School-oriented understanding of populism has developed two ‘operational criteria’ for identifying populism, premised on: (a) a discourse articulated primarily around ‘the people’ and no other central points of reference (i.e., the nation or class); and (b) the representation of society as an antagonistic struggle between ‘*the people*’ and ‘*the elite*’ (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Notice the centrality of ‘*the people*’ in particular, as political discourse entails a partial fixation of meaning around a privileged point of reference. This point is what structures its articulation, it is the *nodal point* (Howarth et al., 2000); it must be specific.

Following Stavrakakis et al. (2017), I steer clear of a strictly *moralistic* view of society and a *homogenizing* composition of ‘the people’ that are seen as defining characteristics of populism according to the ideational approach (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). As Stavrakakis et al. (2017) explain, these parameters could stem from a latent association of populism with the radical right, when actually populist discourse can construct popular *unity* without homogenizing the people and morally stigmatizing the elite. What is more, the attribution of a moralistic complexion to populism risks vacating it of a unique and distinguishable outline from any other form of politics (Kim, 2022). To summarize, because these criteria can be found in a variety of discourses, in an effort to avoid melding articulations, I exclude them altogether.

The parameters (a) and (b) above permit the appearance of Laclau’s *logic of equivalence*, which occurs through what is known as *populist (discursive) chains of equivalence*—an articulatory device for aligning diverse identities and demands in opposition to a common ‘enemy’ (Laclau, 2005, pp. 77–83)—allowing us to confidently identify a party as populist (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Indeed, a political actor or movement ‘[is] not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents’ (Laclau, in Ramos-González and Ortiz, 2022). Employing this conception of how populism is manifested, one is capable of determining the degree/type of populism of political entities, unlocking the possibility of nuanced analysis, while avoiding misleading ideological affinities.

Hence, applying this definition and ‘logic’ to the analysis, a discourse-theoretical method is employed in this working paper, building on the two premises above. The objective is to identify (1) how centrally ‘the people’ is articulated within VOX’s discourse on Instagram, and (2) to what extent VOX’s view of society is defined by the dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite.’ Thus firstly, I seek to locate the exact position of populist signifiers, whether they are truly *nodal points* or

not. Secondly, I aim to examine (3) how exactly ‘the people and ‘the elite’ are constructed, articulated, illustrated, and pitted against each other. More specifically here, the expectation is that (4) ‘the people’ will rather be emptied of meaning, becoming *a signifier without signified* (Laclau, 2005: 69–72); thereby, if a discourse attempts to strictly moderate the hollowness of the term by ascribing it a certain connotation to ‘race’ or ‘nation’ for instance, it would no longer qualify as predominantly populist (Stavrakakis, 2017: 530). Once more, this is because what is then termed ‘exclusionary populism’ usually ends up referring back to a transcendental signifier (nation, race, etc.), common to other discourses with secondary populist elements. Finally, in order to be further able to distinguish between nationalism and populism, which seems to be the main conflating point in the case of VOX, I follow the spatial model developed by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017: 309–11). Populism proper, according to this work, is (5) articulated around a vertical (up/down) axis that refers to power and hierarchical positioning, rather than a horizontal (in/out) arrangement, particular of nationalist discourses, where populism remains at the periphery.

This theoretical and analytical arrangement allows for differentiating between a genuinely populist articulation of discourse from other nativist, nationalist, or authoritarian ones, without conflating them. The sample herein supporting the analysis entails 49 posts uploaded by VOX on Instagram during the timeframe selected, two weeks prior to the election. In a similar fashion to Bernardez-Rodal et al. (2020) (as well as others), the analysis is carried out considering the relevant speeches, captions, text on images, and hashtags—all apropos material for the unfolding of discourse.

Analysis and findings

When one looks at VOX’s discourse on social media, what quickly becomes apparent is the centrality of the Spanish *nation* in its public appeals. Indeed, the true nodal point around which the discourse of VOX is constructed, almost with utter passion, is the nation of Spain, rather than ‘the people’. It is the greatness of Spain, its history, and its unity that must be protected from ‘the left’, the incompetent government, the independentists and the terrorists. Thus, although an antagonistic narrative does take place—almost constantly—, it revolves primarily around the nation of Spain, rather than ‘the people’, or, for that matter, ‘the Spanish people’. An example is a post of Abascal’s speech on the 27th of October 2019, in which he states emphatically:

We will not give up! Because Spain deserves to be defended! March forward Spaniards! Without fear of anything or anyone! Spain always! Long Live Spain!³ (VOX, 2019a).

In this sense, it is ‘Spain’ that deserves VOX’s protection, rather than its people, who are almost seen as soldiers who must join VOX in its quest to preserve the integrity of the homeland. A further example of ‘the people’ as an instrument,

³ This and all the following quotes are the author’s translations.

secondary but necessary, for the unity of Spain, is a heroic-like, epic video of Spanish people fighting against those who want to destroy the nation, with a speech of Abascal reading over it:

Spain is not where it is for a gang of half-corrupt, half-fanatic rebels to defeat it. You do not know how many [people] will rise, forgetting their differences, when they feel their homeland is threatened (VOX, 2019b).

Therefore, although ‘the people’ does appear here, it is subjugated to the role of defending Spain, rather than being the subject of protection; it is not the nodal point, but a mere complement to it. We see, thus, an articulation of ‘the people’ as inextricably linked to the nation, as an absolute necessity to its integrity yet secondary, if not peripheral. In fact, one of VOX’s requisites to form part of ‘the people’ is that very capacity to do everything and more to maintain the unity of the nation, as we shall see below in more detail.

Spain therefore quickly emerges as the main nodal point. Very tellingly, thirty-three out of the thirty-seven posts that have hashtags include at least one that refers to Spain, the likes of #SpainAlways, #LongLiveSpain, or #SpainAlive, whereas there is only one hashtag—in the whole sample—that refers to the people (#VOX with the rural people). Finally, Spanish symbols are always present in the discourse of VOX, not simply physically, accompanying leaders and sympathisers, but also in their speeches and texts, to the point that one cannot think about VOX without imagining a Spanish flag. Not only is this true of the videos and photos in VOX’s Instagram posts, but also of their captions: twenty posts in the sample flaunt a Spanish flag emoji.

When ‘the people’ does appear in VOX’s posts on Instagram as a central reference, it is in conjunction with Spain: it is ‘the *Spanish* people’. The term is given a meaning of national community and therefore, is no longer void of significance. We see proof of this constant limiting and exclusionary use of ‘the people’, for instance, in Abascal’s concluding remarks during the national TV debate prior to the election, referring to his party’s main objectives:

We want to combat illegal immigration, which fills our streets with delinquency and discriminates and prejudices the humble Spanish people. We want to change the State of autonomies, recovering first the competencies of education, healthcare, judicial, and home affairs, to give back equality to the Spanish, to be able to pay pensions. And we want of course to defend liberty against the ‘*progre*’ dictatorship, which divides the Spanish people [...] (VOX, 2019c).

As we see, ‘the people’ is not necessarily relegated here to a secondary position, unlike above, but it is referred to in a nationalistic manner, in conjunction with Spain; it is always ‘the Spanish people’, ‘*los españoles*’, defined in an in/out manner against those that are outside the national-popular community, threatening it (i.e., ‘illegal immigrants’, autonomists/‘*independentists*’, the ‘*progre*’ dictatorship).

There are only two posts where ‘the people’ does come forth without being explicitly connected to Spain. Still, in both cases, the rhetoric does not contain clear-cut populist articulations. One example portrays VOX as a party that worries about the safety and security of the ‘common folk’ (VOX, 2019d).⁴ Nonetheless, that concern emanates as a result of ‘the other’, ‘the outsider’, who threatens to seize what is ‘ours.’ ‘The elite’ is not juxtaposed against ‘the people,’ but rather, it is *one people* (the original, the pure one) against *another* (the usurper). It resembles a much more nativist articulation than a populist one. We also see the exact same narrative in the previous quote, where ‘illegal’ immigrants are one of the enemies. Furthermore, in the other post, the issue that brings out ‘the people’ in the discussion is once again a national problem (VOX, 2019e), as Rocío Monasterio (VOX member) asks PSOE to apologise for misspending *Spanish* funds, i.e., belonging to Spain, or the Spanish people.⁵

The way in which VOX best—if not solely—resembles a populist discourse is in its incessant antagonistic portrayal of the enemy. There is a constant struggle against ‘the left,’ or ‘*progres*’ (as VOX describes them in a rather pejorative manner), the established government, the independentists and rebels. However, although all are delegitimised in VOX’s view, it is almost always because of their attitudes and actions towards Spain, and not ‘the people’, that they need to be opposed and fought off: In the case of ‘the left’ and the government, it is because of their passivity to defend Spain; and in the case of independentists and terrorists, because of their attacks against the unity of the nation. Therefore, the foe is indeed a foe not of ‘the people’, but against the nation, against the homeland, once again proving the latter to be the central discursive element, indeed a nodal point.

VOX, overall, predominantly uses a horizontal (in/out) setting in its discourse, differentiating between who can be considered part of ‘the Spanish people’ (a people-as-nation) and who cannot. Primarily, VOX separates between ‘the nationals’ and the immigrants. It does so in two ways. First, as we have seen, the immigrants are presented as a cause for reduced security affecting the Spanish people, and are identified as the enemy; and second, referring to economic issues, the immigrants are portrayed as the ones receiving state help instead of the Spanish people. However, this second category of differentiation does not put the blame on immigrants directly, but the elites that have allowed this to happen. We see this perfectly displayed in a speech by Abascal:

We say: yes, we have to help foreigners, but after we help the Spanish people who need it. Because for every foreigner that is being helped in this very moment, there is a young Spaniard who still lives with their parents. [...] But I say this with precaution. We cannot go

⁴ The post shows a video of Rocío Monasterio (VOX member) walking through the streets of Hortaleza (a district in Madrid) and speaking to the neighbours. The neighbours talk to Ms. Monasterio about the difficult situation they are facing with immigrants—especially unaccompanied minors—who are assaulting and stealing from them. The video is used to denounce the immigration situation in Madrid and portray VOX as a party that protects and cares for the ‘common folk’.

⁵ In particular, Ms. Monasterio asks PSOE to apologise for hypocritically wasting Spanish resources (or the resources of the Spanish) on using the *Falcon*, the presidential plane, to travel to Valladolid, a city relatively close to Madrid, for which road transport could easily—and more cheaply—be used.

against the foreigners who make use of social help. They do what they can and make use of the legislation that the 'progres' have created in Spain and all of Europe. But they are not to blame. We have to blame the suicidal policies of the left (VOX, 2019f).

Therefore, although the cause of antagonism stems from an in/out conception of who should receive state help, this kind of argumentation articulates the elites as the primary enemy and not immigrants. We see here an interesting combination of horizontal (immigrants vs nationals) discursive traits with an antagonism toward the elite, which is the part of VOX's rhetoric that best resembles a populist narrative. Further, VOX employs a hierarchical articulation to convey the idea that foreigners are being positioned before the Spanish when receiving economic support, thus a horizontal axis mixed with a vertical enunciation. Although this hierarchical structure is not the traditional 'rich elite' vs. 'the poor people,' it is still arguably an up/down articulation. However, what motivates such construction is the idea that foreigners are not part of the people, are not Spanish, or even equal to the Spanish, thus dealing with a clearly exclusionary arrangement. To complicate matters even further, VOX then blames the elite for having allowed immigrants to be hierarchically above 'the Spanish people'. This is actually a very curious aspect of the discourse of the party, where populist and nationalist articulations become tangled together very closely—merging horizontal and vertical rhetoric—, thus why it gives the impression that populism is inherent to the discourse of the party when in truth, it only emerges peripherally or in combination with other discourses and ideological elements.

VOX creates another horizontal in/out narrative that does not necessarily refer to immigrants, nor the traditional issue of outsiders vs. insiders: to be part of the Spanish people, according to VOX, one must not only be a Spanish citizen in the stricter sense of the word, but also abide by certain values that are very much connected to Spanish traditions and unity. For example, in one post we see Iván Espinosa (VOX member) meeting a blue-collar worker (VOX, 2019g). The latter is described in the video as an exceptional man because he works with pride, following the traditions and responsibilities of his ancestors, with the desire to pass his goldsmith job down to his son. Thus, the party sets a line of distinction based on a traditional understanding of society, between someone worthy of being considered part of 'the Spanish people', and the rest. Further, VOX also discriminates based on one's feelings toward Spain and contribution to the nation: those who work, 'chip in', are proud to be Spanish, and defend the unity of Spain at all costs, belong to 'the people'. All others, 'progres', the government, separatists—although all Spanish citizens—are left outside. Consequently, there is a further dimension to VOX's horizontal articulation of the popular subject: immigrants are left outside, but this also applies to those who do not share the party's tenets and principles.

We find this idea of a very specific construction of 'the people', differentiating along a horizontal axis, exemplified in another video (VOX, 2019h). In it, we see various stereotypes of VOX voters that appear tagged by the party as: 'the morning hard-worker', 'the heavy' (portrayed by a middle-aged man with a ponytail and motorcyclist jacket), 'the hipster', 'the autonomous woman', 'the black man'. They are all physically different, indeed *heterogeneous* as a group, yet by sharing the common values of VOX (symbolised in the video by the wearing of a Spanish flag in

the form of a wristband or a keychain) they come together, they unify as ‘the people’. Avoiding being exclusionary in a stereotypical way, VOX instead distinguishes between who is and who is not part of ‘the people’—very meticulously—based on who shares the values of the party and a commitment to the homeland, as described above. Therefore, even in VOX’s nativism/nationalism, the homogenising position of Mudde does not seem to hold. To put it differently, it seems that in VOX’s romanticised portrayal of the popular-national community, addressing and including different social, economic, or even racial groups becomes a strategic necessity (Katsambekis, 2022: 65)—provided these ‘people’ individually align with the party’s own principles. Instead of a rigid homogenisation of ‘the people’ (a people-as-one), what arises is a sense of unity, discursively linked by the national and traditional values VOX seeks to instil across society.

Thereupon, the discourse of VOX based on the analysis of its Instagram posts as examined here presents the following key characteristics: (1) it has the *nation* at its centre; (2) it dichotomises between the (Spanish) ‘people’ and a very specific version of ‘the elite;’ (3) this core antagonism almost always refers back to the nation as the core issue of what is at stake; (4) ‘the people’ is bestowed the meaning of ‘Spanish,’ constructed in a very specific and exclusionary way by the party; (5) the overall narrative is developed much more around a horizontal (in/out) axis than a vertical (up/down) one, that seeks to exclude ‘others’, located outside the national-popular community. Consequently, VOX’s discourse emerges as much more nationalist, nativist and traditionalist than populist, with populism functioning more as a peripheral and strategic tool in its discourse.

Concluding remarks

This working paper has focused on the discourse of VOX on social media, contributing to the ongoing debate regarding the party’s populist nature. In line with other authors (Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Ramos-González and Ortiz, 2022), I conclude that (as of 2019) populist elements in the discourse of VOX are supplementary and peripheral to national/nativist ones; VOX’s membership as a Populist Party of the Radical Right family holds as long as it is clear that populism is not a key defining feature of the party and is often secondary to other discourses and ideological elements. In this sense, it seems much safer to label the party as simply radical right or far right and avoid labelling it merely ‘populist’ as this seems to lead to a problematic ‘*euphemisation*’—something which scholars in the field have highlighted as problematic (e.g., Brown et al., 2021).

The findings, however, clash with those of previous studies on populism and the social media of the party. The reasons for the disparity in results are arguably down to theoretical and analytical differences. Grounding the definition of populism on a number of parameters without a clear operationalisation can lead to the conflation of discourses and ideologies. Lava Santos (2021: 57), for example, quotes Mudde’s (2007) definition of nativism to conclude that VOX is a populist party in their use of a ‘Spanish-centred ideological narrative,’ which goes against what was defined here as constituting a populist discourse. We face a similar issue when reading González Gómez’s (2021) conclusion that Islamophobia or the reverence for national values (among other contents) are what forms part of VOX’s populist rhetoric. Finally, López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021) base the entirety of

their (short) argument on the exaltation of Santiago Abascal as a strong leader, which although can be a plausible one according to a political-strategic framework (Weyland, 2021), differs entirely from the understanding of populism as developed here and across the emerging consensus in populism studies nowadays.

The problem seems to be the use of different conceptions of populism, which sometimes blur our ability to compare results. Within the research areas of social media and populism, it would be productive to apply similar or at least compatible approaches to the different data and research questions that have been raised, as this could settle remaining debates, such as the one discussed here.

Another finding of the paper is that social media as a channel does not necessarily exhibit the use of a stronger populist discourse in the case of VOX—or barely a populist discourse at all, for that matter. I would dare to speculate that a stronger, freer, less formal discourse does take place, but this is not necessarily a populist one. A comparison between discourse articulation in traditional sources of analysis, such as party documents, and in social media could thus be interesting in that respect, inquiring into whether the discourse in social media does indeed emerge as an exaggerated—or even more sincere—version of that in traditional documents.

This working paper is not without its limitations. The span of time analysed is short and the sample quite specific. It could be revealing to carry out a similar investigation across a longer, wider chronological space—in a longitudinal manner—to assess the evolution of VOX's discourse on social media from its emergence until now. I would therefore like to emphasise that the results obtained here must be treated *exclusively* as part of the period analysed and not lead to gross generalisations. Evidently, any future research that includes greater proportions of data and a longitudinal approach shall enhance, further validate or invalidate, the findings presented here.

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY **POPULISMUS**



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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project (2014-5) involved a comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS endorsed a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings and the continuation of its activities we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it put forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of consecutive crises.



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