

# Voices of Discontent: Unpacking Populist Rhetoric in Spain and the Rise of Anti-European Sentiment

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## Abstract

In the last decade, most EU countries have seen the unstoppable growth of populist parties, especially on the right, but also on the left. Their Euro-critical discourse, sometimes openly Eurosceptic, is helping to erode the legitimacy of the EU. This research aims to analyze the presence of populist discourse among major Spanish political parties during the 2024 European elections on platform X. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we collected tweets from the official accounts of parties represented in the Spanish parliament, focusing on Unidas Podemos, Sumar, Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Partido Popular, and VOX from May 24 to June 10, 2024. A quantitative analysis with large language models, specifically the Text-Zero-Shot model, BART-Large-MNLI, and a socio-hermeneutic qualitative interpretation facilitated the identification of key populist indicators, including anti-elitism, appeals to the people, the expression of popular will, and the delineation of enemies. Our findings reveal that VOX is the only political party that, in this specific communicative (social network X) and political (European Parliament elections) context, employs a populist discourse characterized by a marked opposition between the people and political elites, both national and European, as well as critical and/or exclusionary rhetoric toward certain immigrant groups, especially from Arab countries. The results underscore the need for further research on how national contexts shape the articulation of populism in political communication strategies through social media.

## Keywords

big data; European elections; large language models; political communication; political debate; populism; social media; social network analysis; Spain; soft computing

## 1. Introduction

Populism is a longstanding phenomenon in Europe, with its roots traceable back decades before the recent surge in populist movements (Betz, 2018). Beginning in the 1960s, populism's presence in national parliaments began to grow, and its relevance has intensified in the past decade in the context of neo-capitalist globalization. This surge has led some scholars to define the current climate as an "illiberal moment" (Pappas, 2014). Identifying the causes behind this populist upsurge is complex and multifaceted, influenced by a variety of political, economic, and social factors unique to each national context. A significant contributing factor is the perceived failure of democratic representation, which has fueled the rise of populist parties (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). This populist discourse is particularly worrying among the academic community due to the anti-Europeanism (Baldassari et al., 2020) and Euroscepticism (Treib, 2021) of some political parties, which question the social values and human rights defended by the EU.

The European Parliament (EP) elections have traditionally been categorized as second-order elections in the context of European integration and national politics. This characterization, originally posited by Reif and Schmitt (1980), suggests that EP elections are less salient and impactful compared to national elections. The notion of second-order elections is grounded in the idea that voters treat these elections primarily as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with their national governments, leading to a higher representation of fringe or Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt, 2009).

Euroscepticism, defined as skepticism towards European integration and the EU, has become increasingly significant in shaping political landscapes across Europe. A more comprehensive understanding of Euroscepticism involves recognizing its multifaceted nature, which can be categorized into soft Euroscepticism—where staying within the EU is supported but with calls for reform—and hard Euroscepticism, which advocates for withdrawal from the EU (Pirro & Taggart, 2018). The growth of anti-European sentiment can be attributed to several factors, including economic crises, perceptions of democratic deficit, and cultural concerns regarding national identity (De Vries, 2018).

Research indicates that the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties is often fueled by protest voting, wherein citizens express their grievances towards mainstream parties through their electoral choices in the EP elections (Norris, 2022). Moreover, social media has emerged as a critical platform for the dissemination of Eurosceptic messages, allowing fringe parties to amplify their anti-European rhetoric and engage with voters in ways that traditional media do not facilitate (Groshek & Al-Rawi, 2015). The digital landscape enables these parties to mobilize supporters by articulating dissatisfaction with the EU, connecting economic hardships to EU policies, and framing the discourse around national sovereignty (Boulianne, 2015).

Initially, Spain appeared somewhat insulated from the populist wave sweeping across Europe. However, this changed in 2014 with the emergence of Unidas Podemos, a party often categorized within the realm of left-wing populism (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2018; Kioupkiolis, 2016). The party's rise can be attributed to several factors, including widespread corruption scandals (Orriols & Cordero, 2016), the enforcement of austerity measures by the EU (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2014), and significant cuts to social spending (Ayala Cañón, 2014).

The 2015 general elections marked a pivotal shift in Spain's political landscape, ending the dominance of the two-party system historically held by the Partido Popular (PP) and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español

(PSOE). For the first time in 30 years, these two parties could not maintain a governing majority (Torcal, 2014). By 2018, VOX, often described as a populist radical right or extreme right party (Jaráiz et al., 2020; Ortiz Barquero & Ramos-González, 2021), gained parliamentary representation during regional elections. Its rise can be partially traced to the political crisis surrounding Catalonia's independence movement as well as ongoing corruption controversies related to the PP (Gamper, 2018).

Recent literature highlights the role of new media in the proliferation of populism (Ernst et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Moffit, 2016). New media platforms create opportunities for populist figures to generate and disseminate ideological content rapidly and to engage directly with audiences (Esser et al., 2016). Understanding new populisms (those that appeared in Europe from 2008 onwards, coinciding with the economic and social crisis and the expansion of social networks) necessitates analyzing the information and communication contexts that shape them. TikTok, specifically, has become an important medium for new populisms; parties leverage this platform to communicate directly with younger audiences through viral content and relatable themes, thus challenging traditional political communication (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Fuchs (2021) also emphasizes the role of social media in the formation of new political movements, stating that these platforms allow for rapid information dissemination and the organization of grassroots support, further enhancing the capacity of populist parties to attract disillusioned voters. The political use of social media has revolutionized electoral campaigns, notably affecting how political messages are crafted and delivered. Research by Ahmed et al. (2023) highlights how social media platforms serve as arenas for political engagement, where Eurosceptic parties leverage these tools to circumvent mainstream media filters. This transformation allows them to reach broad audiences, particularly younger voters who are increasingly disengaged from traditional political structures. Additionally, studies have shown that social media not only amplifies Eurosceptic sentiments but also shapes public perceptions about the EU (Evans & Mellon, 2019).

The combination of protest voting and the strategic use of social media creates a fertile ground for the proliferation of Eurosceptic sentiments, which are clearly reflected in the electoral successes of such parties in the context of EP elections. For instance, the substantial gains made by far-right and populist movements during the 2014 and 2019 EP elections highlight the impact of these dynamics on the electoral landscape (Kritzing et al., 2020).

This study aims to identify which political parties and leaders adopt a populist discourse during the Spanish European elections in the social media X. To achieve the main goal, the following objectives have been established:

- O1: Analyze how these discourses are articulated using established categories of populism from our theoretical framework.
- O2: Determine the specific characteristics of these discourses that classify them as populist of the left or of the right.

### 1.1. Review of the Literature on Populism

Populism is a complex and evolving socio-historical phenomenon, presenting both methodological and epistemological challenges (Ortí, 1988). The international literature has defined populism in various ways, yet consensus eludes scholars. Weyland (2021) describes it as a political strategy characterized by charismatic leadership seeking power. Mudde (2004) views it as a weak ideology with a Manichean worldview that pits “the people” against elites. The Essex School, led by Laclau (2005), theorizes populism as a discursive construction of “the people” within a divide between them and the oligarchy. Others, like De la Torre (2017), refer to it as a rhetorical approach that appeals to the masses against elites.

Recent shifts in the literature suggest a more discursive interpretation of populism (Castanho et al., 2019), where populism is approached as a strategic discourse comprising three analytical conditions: (a) anti-elitist rhetoric, (b) idealization of the people, and (c) the defense of popular will as fundamental to democracy. This dichotomy establishes a clear opposition between “the people” and elites, generating a collective identity from widespread social discontent, often through demonizing the elite and idealizing the people (Laclau, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2021).

To assess whether a discourse is populist, at least two of the analytical conditions proposed in the previous paragraph must be present, including the anti-elitist dimension. Merely appealing to democratic principles related to “the people” does not suffice, as this is commonplace in mass democracies (Müller, 2017). Furthermore, localized criticism of elites alone cannot indicate populist sentiment, lest it classify every critique as populism.

In contrast to the Essex School’s perspective, which assigns a definitive ontological status to discourse, this research adopts a more sober methodological approach. Populism is viewed as a dynamic discourse shaped by its communicative context. This allows for a situation where actors may employ both populist and non-populist narratives, as demonstrated by traditional parties resorting to populist rhetoric under certain circumstances (March, 2017).

Previous research indicates that Unidas Podemos has cultivated a leftist populist discourse (Damiani, 2020; Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2018), whereas VOX is often ascribed a right-wing populist discourse (Ferreira, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021). However, some argue VOX aligns more closely with radical right ideologies, with populism as a peripheral component (Ramos-González & Ortiz, 2024). Consequently, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Populism will be more prevalent in Unidas Podemos and VOX compared to other political parties.

The diverse expressions of populism necessitate a plural terminology, emphasizing the existence of multiple populisms shaped by distinct social contexts. The ideational approach recognizes that populist discourse interacts with broader ideologies like liberalism or socialism, leading to varied manifestations. Left-wing populism may align with underprivileged social sectors, advocating for wealth redistribution in a neoliberal context (Damiani, 2020; March, 2011). In contrast, right-wing populism often defines “the people” in terms of national identity and cultural preservation, excluding certain groups deemed alien (Mudde, 2007).

Additionally, the Essex School posits that both “people” and “elite” are empty signifiers, open to varied interpretations influenced by historical and cultural narratives (Laclau, 2005). In Europe, left-wing populism typically identifies “the people” through a social class lens, whereas right-wing populism frames it from a national identity perspective (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Right-wing populism rejects social groups that it considers alien to the cultural and/or racial community to which it belongs. This leads to several hypotheses:

H2: Left-wing populist discourses will frame “the people” in social class terms.

H3: Right-wing populist discourses will frame “the people” based on national identity.

H4: Right-wing populist parties will identify various enemies (e.g., feminism, communism, and/or immigrants).

The anti-elite dimension is crucial to populism, and its representation varies according to historical and ideological contexts. Previous studies have indicated that left-wing populism often critiques economic elites (Maurer & Diehl, 2020), while right-wing populism tends to target media and cultural elites (Bornschieer, 2010; Mudde, 2007). Therefore, our study proposes:

H5: Left-wing populism will exhibit a greater focus on rhetoric against economic and political elites.

H6: Right-wing populism will feature more criticism directed at media and cultural elites.

In this study, we synthetically and critically adopt elements of the definitions proposed by the ideational perspective and the Essex School (Rodríguez-Sáez, 2021). We understand populism, at the supply level, as a basic discourse (Ortí, 1988) based on a process of inclusion (people) and exclusion (elites), which is activated depending on the contexts of communication.

Populism is structured around three core components: defense of popular will, idealization of the people, and denunciation of elites (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). Ultimately, populism serves as a narrative of relatedness or affinity that helps construct national identity, and it is ideologically aligned to the left or right (Mudde & Rovira, 2017), channeling social unrest through the intense projection of an antagonist.

The emergence of new populisms closely intertwines with advancements in new media, particularly social media platforms, which offer opportunities for less-established actors to communicate directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Moffit, 2016). Social media enables the dissemination of emotional messages (not based on reasoned arguments) that may polarize public discourse, yet this aspect has not been thoroughly examined. Future research should investigate the nature of populist discourse on social media, its potential polarizing effects, and how it employs scientific advancements to support political narratives (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). This study aims to expand upon existing work on populist communication strategies within contemporary political landscapes.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using the Web Data Research Assistant X platform (formerly Twitter) API from May 24 to June 10, 2024, coinciding with the official campaign for the European elections. Election day in Spain was June 9, so it was relevant to download the data until the following day, as in other studies addressing electoral processes on social media, which capture the entire debate. These studies considered the day after the election because it may include many posts targeting opponents, both in a conciliatory tone and in an inflammatory tone (e.g., Casas-Mas et al., 2024; Guevara et al., 2024), with populist rhetoric that may even question the transparency of the election results (Casas-Mas et al., 2025). This analysis focuses on the discourse of the politicians and parties participating in the campaign. Data were filtered based on two criteria: (a) temporal criteria (tweets produced during the election campaign) and (b) the official accounts of national political parties and leaders that gained seats in the Spanish parliament during the 2024 elections. The analysis comprises five political units arranged from left to right ideologically: Unidas Podemos/Irene Montero, Sumar/Estrella Galán, PSOE/Teresa Ribera, PP/Dolors Montserrat, and VOX/Jorge Buxadé.

Data was extracted into five Excel files, each corresponding to the established analytical categories. During the data cleaning process, 667 records were identified, revealing a total of 1,118 duplicate entries in the *N* and *sequence* columns. To mitigate repetition bias, only the first instance of each record was retained, ensuring that each message appeared only once per topic, resulting in a final dataset of 2,218 unique messages.

### 2.2. Glossary of Populist Terms

Following data collection, the first step involved creating a “glossary of terms” associated with each analytical category outlined in populism definitions—i.e., (a) anti-elitism, (b) appeal to the people, and (c) popular will—as well as two additional categories—(d) the enemy of the left and (e) the enemy of the right. This glossary aims to capture the mechanisms of radical right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007) in its representation of “the people” against perceived internal (e.g., communism) and external (e.g., illegal immigration) enemies. The terms within this framework serve as indicators rather than direct classifications of populist discourse, which remains complex and dynamic.

The glossary development process included: an examination of the specialized literature concerning populism in Spain, focusing on commonly used words by parties like VOX and Unidas Podemos; a manual review of a sample of messages from party accounts; and the crafting of hypothesis-based texts (see Table Annex 1 in the Supplementary File) for training large language models (LLMs) in subsequent phases.

### 2.3. LLMs

LLMs have recently gained traction in social science research, particularly for text coding tasks. Following OpenAI’s release of its transformer-based chatbot model, ChatGPT-3.5, the application of LLMs has increased significantly (Brown et al., 2020), becoming widely accessible. The extensive availability of varied datasets across contexts has made traditional manual coding increasingly impractical (Ye, 2023).

In this study, we apply the BART model for classifying texts gathered from X. Although LLMs are acknowledged for their effectiveness, uncertainty remains regarding their applicability in political discourse analysis on social media. Nevertheless, an increasing body of literature supports their use in these contexts, provided they are supplemented with rigorous qualitative analysis (Bail, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

We employed the zero-shot classification technique (Radford et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019), enabling the models to classify data into categories not considered in the training phase. This approach leverages the models' capabilities in understanding and generalizing natural language prompts, allowing for classification tasks without needing labeled examples.

We used BART for the classification process, specifically the Text-Zero-Shot model, BART-Large-MNLI (last updated September 5, 2023), obtained from the Hugging Face (n.d.) repository. This model excels in tasks requiring deep textual comprehension, particularly with unstructured and imperfect text, such as that from social media (Kumar & Jain, 2024; Lee et al., 2024). Previous research has analyzed the consistency, reproducibility, and differences between open-source Zero-Shot models (Gutiérrez et al., 2024) such as BART (Lewis et al., 2019), BERT (Devlin et al., 2019), and RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019). Although they are continuously being trained, modified, and adapted to new contexts, these types of models have proven to be transparent and stable.

During the classification phase, we established a randomization seed and set the computation to CPU mode for improved floating-point precision. The classification hypothesis was defined as: "This text is about {topic}," applied to each message. Scores produced by the model reflect the likelihood that each hypothesis represents the content of a given post, such as the relevance of anti-elitism to a specific message.

While the classification engine effectively identifies terms within analysis categories, challenges persisted in data filtering, primarily due to linguistic polysemy and connotation. For example, the term "progre" (woke), employed derogatively by some right-wing parties to criticize left-wing forces, was misclassified during the qualitative review. This inconsistency illustrates the limitations of supervised learning algorithms in interpreting the multifaceted meanings prevalent in political discourse.

#### **2.4. Manual Cleaning and Word Clouds**

To address potential biases from theoretical design and the technical limitations of LLMs, we developed "word clouds" capturing significant terms used by the selected parties and leaders in their communications. These words extend beyond "strong messages" (scores  $\geq 0.8$ ) to encompass all messages from the electoral campaign, thus reflecting the overall debate context. This inductive approach allows for emerging terms not previously included in the initial glossary (e.g., "Left-wingers" for PSOE or "Green Pact" for VOX) and those originally excluded due to bias concerns (e.g., "Europe").

#### **2.5. Socio-Hermeneutic Qualitative Content Analysis**

The final step involved a socio-hermeneutic qualitative analysis (Serrano & Zurdo, 2024) of the aggregated results and word clouds. This analysis rests on the premise that populism, framed as a discursive logic (Laclau, 2005), is more than a tally of specific terms. It reflects a complex semantic articulation, where signifiers interplay with their meanings in concert with broader discourse.

Since the late 18th century, symbols such as the people (demos) or nation have been leveraged as strategic resources across diverse political ideologies (Álvarez Junco, 2016). The PSOE's frequent appeals to "the people" may reveal a "semantic inflation" in electoral competition rather than an authentic populist sentiment. Frequencies alone indicate word use rather than populist style, which encompasses deeper interpretive layers beyond manifest textual elements.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Our quantitative analysis revealed that while the final values of political discourse among the various parties show similarities, several factors allow us to distinguish between populist and non-populist rhetoric. The linguistic analysis, particularly the representation in word clouds (Figure 1), along with qualitative insights, clarifies that VOX distinctly embodies a populist discourse, setting it apart from its competitors in the 2024 elections. We will analyze the results, progressing from detailed (disaggregated) to broader (aggregate) observations.

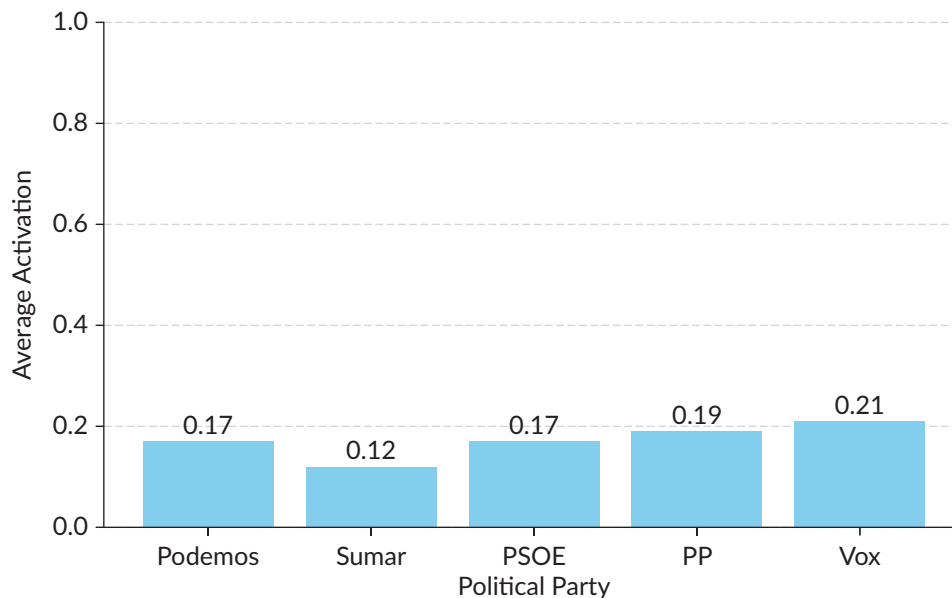


Figure 1. Word cloud of every political party and their leaders' discourse.

#### 3.1. Disaggregated Results of Anti-Elitism

Not every anti-elitist statement qualifies as populist; however, populist rhetoric inherently exhibits anti-elitism. Averages of anti-elitist sentiment among the analyzed parties are shown in Figure 2. SUMAR—coalition of leftist forces—records the lowest average at 0.12, suggesting the absence of populist characteristics. Qualitative analysis validates this result, as SUMAR and Unidas Podemos criticize European

leaders solely regarding their stance on the Israel–Palestine conflict, rather than engaging in an anti-elitist narrative against economic structures.



**Figure 2.** Average level of anti-elite discourse by political party.

Unidas Podemos, originally a party challenging political power since 2014, has diluted its anti-elitist rhetoric over time, especially post-2016, amid internal divisions and its integration into government. Our analysis shows that, in the context of the European elections, Unidas Podemos has not predominantly adopted a confrontational stance against elites. The PSOE's anti-elitism level mirrors that of Unidas Podemos, reinforcing the absence of populist markers within its discourse. The socio-hermeneutic analysis of messages (with an average of  $\geq 0.8$ ) and word clouds (the total of 2,218 messages) reinforces this hypothesis. This distances the PSOE, from the outset, from one of the basic populist markers.

The PP ranks second in anti-elitist rhetoric, primarily due to references to “corruption,” which skew results upward. Qualitative readings reveal that the PP's discourse is characterized by political confrontation rather than populism, focusing more on undermining the legitimacy of the government rather than critiquing elites. In this way, a qualitative reading allows us to analyze his discourse from a logic marked by referents typical of the Spanish political debate. What presides over is a logic of confrontation, polarized between opposition (PP) and government (PSOE), but devoid of anti-elitist elements. In the word clouds (Figure 1), we can see how the issue of “corruption” is central. In its campaign communication strategy, the PP does not allow accusations of corruption to be launched against the “government” and the “president of the government” with the aim of undermining its legitimacy. This leads us to interpret that, despite his attack on the government, the content and style of his speech can be explained entirely from a logic of political confrontation (opposition/government) and not from a populist logic.

VOX, in contrast, exceeds a 0.2 average in anti-elitism. Its rhetoric identifies adversaries in a polarizing way, aligning with populist discourse traits. The us-versus-them dichotomy portrays “Spaniards” versus political elites (the “PPSOE coalition” and “Brussels bureaucrats”), presenting a scapegoat narrative that resonates with broader European radical right trends.

In this sense, VOX's discourse is one of clear rejection of the main systemic parties in Spain. It seeks to present, with this, both political parties as if they were indistinguishable, with hardly any ideological-programmatic differences, which apply the political and economic measures imposed by "Brussels," thus emptying the popular will, another of the conditions of the populist discourse. VOX's Eurosceptic discourse feeds anti-European attitudes among its voters, who, far from seeing Europe as a necessary and desirable destination, as the philosopher Ortega would say, perceive it as responsible for their suffering. VOX's partners at the European and international level have a lowest common denominator: they are part of a kind of "nationalist international." An expression that is certainly paradoxical, but one that alludes to the alliance of sovereigntist parties that reject cultural cosmopolitanism and political subordination to supranational institutions, whether economic and/or political. For example: "The double standards of the ruling elites in Brussels. I just referred to it in Vistalegre. The interference of the European Commission in the patriotic or conservative governments of Europe must be put to an end" (Buxadé, 2024b).

The international literature has explained, from political variables, that the public perception of cartelization (Mair, 2015) and programmatic convergence (Kriesi & Pappas, 2024) would have caused the emergence and development of new populisms. It seems that VOX's strategy is to exploit this form of discontent by projecting an enemy of the people. But the attacks, at least in this context, are not directed against media and cultural elites, as expected in this study. On the contrary, the challenge is directed against the political elites. For example:

The pppsoe coalition has not gone badly for its MEPs. It has not gone badly for its lobbies. It has not gone badly for the bureaucrats they have placed in the institutions. It has not gone badly for large companies. But it has gone badly, very badly, for the Spaniards, the countryside and industry. (Buxadé, 2024c)

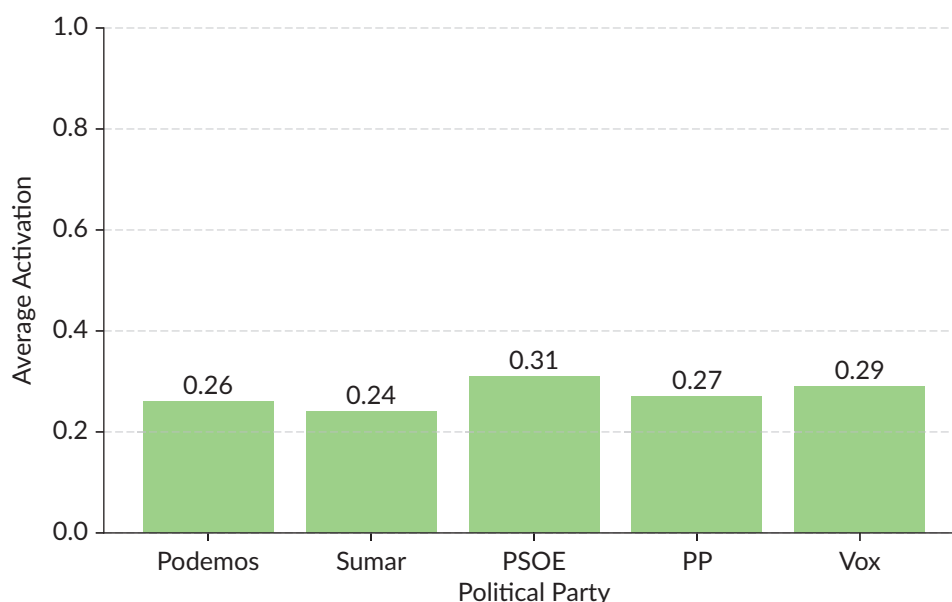
### **3.2. Disaggregated Results of "People"**

The people is an essential characteristic of any populist discourse (Urbinati, 2019). However, to be able to speak of a populist discourse, the anti-elitist dimension, at least, must also be present. Because otherwise, the concept would become too elastic, without well-defined boundaries capable of grasping the object and distinguishing it from nearby objects (Zanotti, 2024).

In a democracy, almost all political parties appeal to the people, as the averages of all political parties reveal. Values are placed above the indications of anti-elitism. However, when most social and political forces speak of the people, they refer to the entire demos, to the whole of citizenship, to what Rosanvallon (2021), in an attempt to differentiate it from the people of populism, defines as the "people number." The people, even in their most inclusive (numerical) sense, under the modern nation-state, are necessarily based on a constitutive exclusion. Citizens are not all. So the recognition of belonging is not universal. It excludes other forms of identity, such as the diaspora, founded on the principle of exile and diversity (Mate, 2024). Populism does nothing more than participate in the nationalism that has inhabited modern politics since the 18th century. However, it hypertrophies the principle of exclusion based on ethnic and/or cultural criteria.

Quantitative data (see Figure 3) show that most political parties appeal to the people in one way or another, with the PSOE having the highest average. However, the PSOE, but also the PP, when they speak

of the “Spaniards” (or “Spain”), do not appeal to the people as a homogeneous entity or with a defined identity. Its vision is inclusive: the citizens of Spain. Therefore, they do not draw an ethnically exclusive identity border.



**Figure 3.** Average level of “People” discourse by political party.

When carrying out the socio-hermeneutical analysis, we see that Sumar or Unidas Podemos, in the ideological bloc of the left, do not seem to exclude anyone from the people either. It does not do so with the elites or with other subordinate social categories, such as migrants. Both are spheres absent from his discursive strategies. What we do find, in both cases, in X’s messages and in the word clouds (Figure 1) is a plebeian (“the people,” “la gente”) and feminist (“the workers,” “las trabajadoras”) representations, close to modern socialist forms that include social positions that go beyond the hypothesis of social class.

Only VOX, according to the qualitative analysis carried out, speaks of the people in terms of populism, although its quantitative values are close to those of the rest of the political parties. This is because populism can be considered a relational discursive structure made up of three constant and interconnected spheres. They form, to use an expression by Bajtín (1999), discursive chains. Each link is related to the others. VOX, like the PSOE or the PP, speaks of the “Spaniards” and/or “Spain.” However, it does so in opposition to the political elites (“Europe,” “the Brussels bureaucrats,” or the “PPSOE coalition”) and to everything that comes from outside the Spanish borders (“illegal migrants”). All of them are part of that axis external to the people.

Its representation of the people, being inter-classist (“middle classes” an/or “businessmen”), but also appealing to social class (“ordinary Spaniards” and/or “rural workers”), is based, essentially, on a conception of the ethnic and cultural nation, far from the civic and enlightened path inaugurated by the French Revolution. The nation is, from this point of view, a community of belonging, a welcoming home, united by the bonds of tradition. For example: “Unmasking the pppsoe pincer in Brussels that has voted for a green and immigration pact and economic policies that only benefit lobbies and the powerful, leaving the middle and popular classes defenseless” (Buxadé, 2024d). Furthermore: “We have come to change the system.

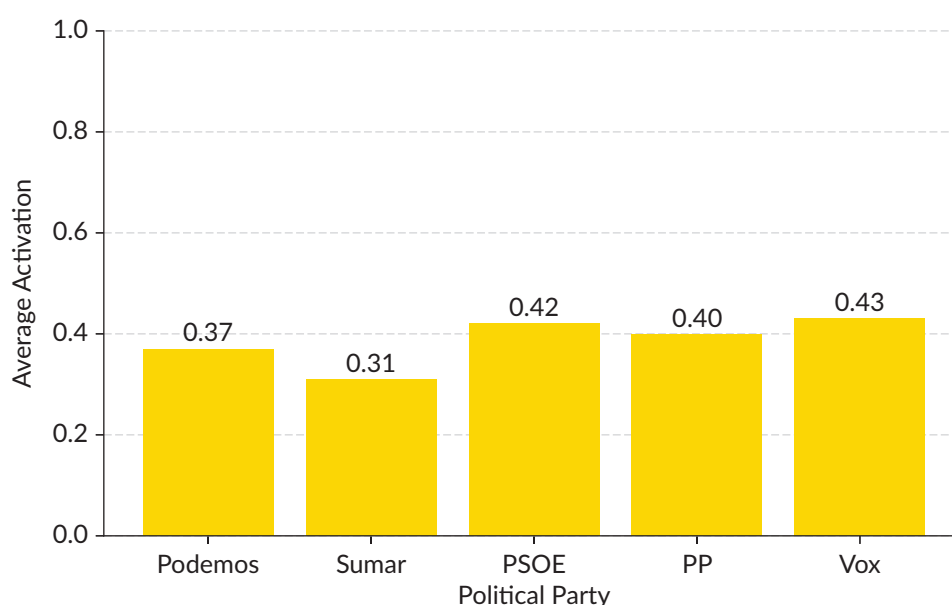
Against corruption. Against political waste. Against the agenda of the powerful. For ours, our neighborhoods, our communities, our families, our trades” (Buxadé, 2024f).

The defense of this mono-linguist/cultural conception of the “homeland” excludes the diversity, which comes to occupy the figure of the anti-Spanish. The nation of “Spaniards” would therefore find itself besieged and threatened on several fronts. On the one hand, at the cultural level, by a cosmopolitan, postmodern, and progressive spirit, synthesized in the word woke, which dissolves the web of meaning that defines the people. On the other hand, economic globalization and the constitution of supranational institutions would be causing the loss of national sovereignty. Also, the sovereigntist challenge of the “separatists” in Catalonia, with the active support of the “socialists” and the “communists,” would imply, internally, a direct attack on the unity of the nation. Finally, connecting with the ethno-nationalist spirit that has been sweeping Europe since the 2007/2008 crisis, the waves of “illegal immigrants” from Arab countries are importing values that are alien to and opposed to Spanish culture, as well as posing an economic challenge for the national working classes in the struggle for employment.

### 3.3. Disaggregated Results of Popular Will

In some theoretical perspectives, such as ideational, the people and the popular will are usually analyzed together (Hawkins & Rovira, 2018). This is what is known as people-centrism. This methodological tactic is explained, at least in part, by the fact that in political discourses both levels tend to overlap, which makes their interpretation difficult. Because of their entanglement, they can be considered conjoined conditions. This stumbling block has also been presented in our research.

As with the people, all political parties have fairly high values in the condition of popular will (see Figure 4). Sumar is the one with the lowest average (0.31) as opposed to VOX, which has the highest average (0.43). In a democracy, the volitional subject is the people. Appealing to it is an intrinsically democratic resource.



**Figure 4.** Average level of popular will discourse by political party.

Populism is considered an illiberal project of democracy; a radical democracy, according to some defenders of (left-wing) populism (Mouffe, 2018). In the sense that they go back to the Athenian model. Among other possible reasons, the illiberal logic would be due to the type of defense they make of the popular will, as if, following Rousseau, it were closed and homogeneous, without counterweights, unrestricted, and free from any obstacle (Müller, 2017; Urbinati, 2019). Plebiscite mechanisms—referendums—are the preferred resource of populist leaders in their promise to return power to its rightful owner: the demos (Rosanvallon, 2021).

But this is not clearly found in the communication strategies of the different parties, which encourage the people, as we have recorded through the qualitative analysis of the messages, to “vote” or “participate” in the elections to the EP. Only VOX, once the socio-hermeneutical analysis has been applied to the different data (messages and word clouds in Figure 1), uses a “populist style” when referring to the will of the people. But it is not understood if it is not in connection with the other dimensions analyzed. Again, it is the intense interlocking between spheres, not the quantity (the values of the averages), that allows us to penetrate the tangle of populist discourse. In this sense, when VOX defends the “will of the Spanish people” it is because it considers that it is being “trampled on” by the national and “Brussels” political elites, who impose their agenda (for example: the “green deal” that threatens “the interests of the Spanish countryside”), without considering the wishes of the citizens. For example: “Vote to end the political corruption of the institutions in Brussels that induce the vote to maintain their privileges in the absence of neutrality” (Buxadé, 2024e). Furthermore: “The green scam is faltering, vote for vox and let’s knock it down. Freedom and prosperity in the face of the prejudices of bureaucrats. The European Green Deal is faltering in the presence of the far right” (Buxadé, 2024a).

### **3.4. Disaggregated Results of Enemy**

The category of enemies is not necessarily populist. As Schmitt (2024) describes, politics is characterized by an adversarial logic (us and them). A conflict that in modern societies responds to the opposition of values, beliefs, and interests. Therefore, the projection of enemies or adversaries, as Mouffe (2007) prefers in his attempt to hide from Schmitt all existential edges (enemy as “hostis”), is not something defining of populism. On the other hand, the way (below against above) and the (high) intensity in which it does so is.

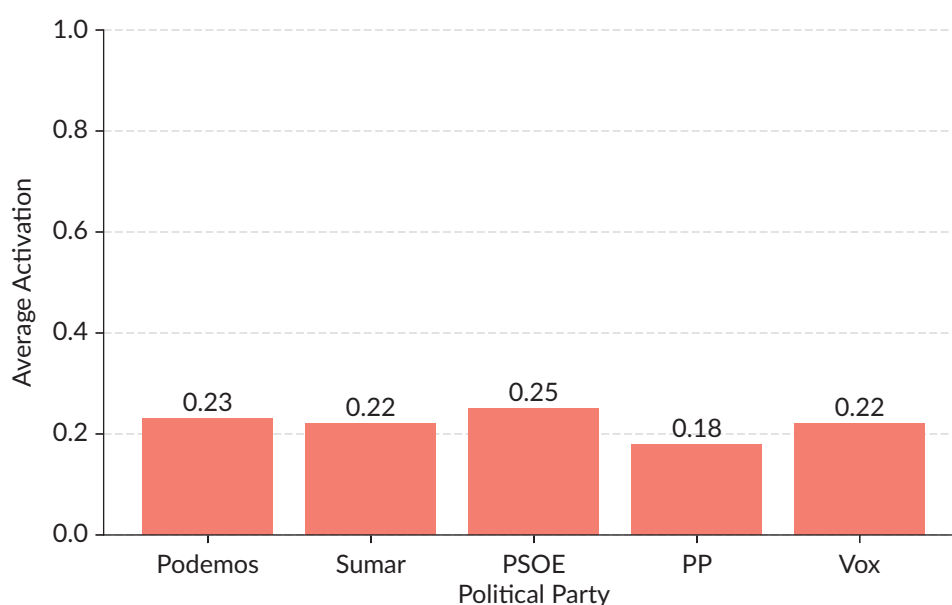
We understand that left-wing parties have their own adversaries (on the right) and right-wing parties have theirs (on the left). These parties also compete for the vote in their own ideological space. For this reason, it is common to see crossfire within the same ideological bloc (VOX accusing the PP of being the “cowardly right-winger” that assumes socialist policies). But in this study, we have focused above all on the struggle between ideological blocs. What we have observed, in aggregate, is that the averages are quite high, which reflects a climate of polarization of ideological blocs.

#### **3.4.1. Enemies of the Left**

The averages are quite even in all the parties of the left (see Figure 5). They come out, against all odds, quite high in those on the right, which is due to the distorting effects of some words included, within the “glossary of terms,” in the category of enemies of the left. This is the case, for example, of “ultra-right,” a weapon-word used by left-wing parties to discredit, in this case, the VOX party. However, this political party also uses this word in its messages, but in a radically different way. He does so with irony or to try to resignify it in a positive sense, as

an expression of rebellion and “freedom” in the face of the “progressive consensus.” As is made explicit in the methodology, language is polysemic and, at times, equivocal (Ricoeur, 2003). The parties of the right use those same words, but with a different meaning. This is something that, for technical reasons, the sorting machine is not yet able to capture. Latent meanings, omissions, ironies, etc., require a qualitative interpretation.

The PSOE presents the highest average in the left bloc. As can be seen in the word cloud (Figure 1), “ultra-right,” rather than “fascism” and/or “Franquista,” is a central signifier of its communicative framework. It reveals a clear strategy of confrontation. Whose objective, presumably, is to instill a certain fear in its electorate (less active and/or floating) in the face of the possibility of victory of political forces that have their echo in the old fascisms. So the PSOE presents itself as the guardian of democracy, of social rights, diversity, and freedom. A confrontation that is carried out from words such as “right,” “respect,” “future,” or “progress.” This is a type of communication strategy whose trait is repeated in Sumar and Unidad Podemos.



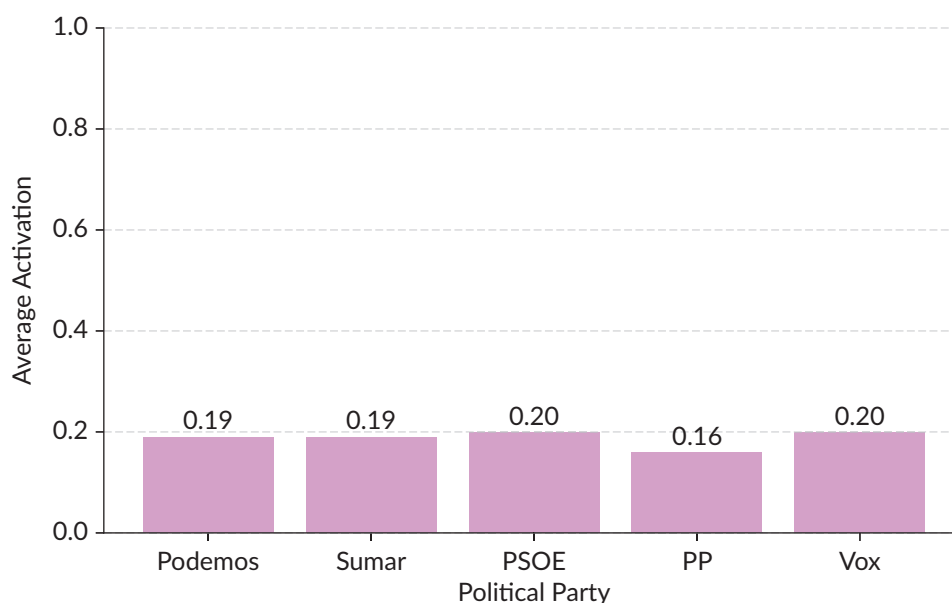
**Figure 5.** Average level of left-wing adversaries’ discourse by political party.

### 3.4.2. Enemies of the Right

The main objective of introducing this category was to capture the way in which right-wing populisms, as well as right-wing nationalist parties, the radical right, or the extreme right, attack other social groups (e.g., immigrants, LGBT collectives, and/or communists). Which is part of the anti-people. In the case of VOX, that of the Spanish evil (“communists”), non-Spanish (“illegal immigrant”), or anti-Spanish (“separatists”).

The final results, as with the category of enemies of the left, have been distorted for the same reason: the difficulty of the machine to understand that when left-wing political parties use “progres” (or progress) it is not pejorative. With the word clouds (Figure 1), we have also been able to detect that the PSOE uses, in an ironic and positive way, the term “left-handed,” a word that, in the Argentine context, Milei uses to insult left-wing parties.

In the case of the PP, the average (see Figure 6) is lower than in the rest (0.16). Some terms, such as “fugitive,” “independence,” or “separatism” have been identified in the messages and word clouds (Figure 1) that show one of the lines of confrontation of the Popular Party. All of these terms are related to their rejection of Catalan separatism and the “amnesty” law sponsored by the socialist government, which they consider a traitor to “the interests of all Spaniards.” Precisely, its main attack, in its attempt to present itself as the most reliable alternative government, is against the current government (the party governing Spain at the time of the European elections) and “President Sánchez.” They constantly relate to the word “corruption,” which was the one that skewed the results in the anti-elitist condition.



**Figure 6.** Average level of right-wing adversaries’ discourse by political party.

VOX, for its part, has all the characteristics that specialists attribute to the nationalist populist right. This party builds its national discourse based on the exclusion of other groups considered part of the outgroup. Among them are, as we have been able to verify in the socio-hermeneutical analysis, “the separatists,” the “progres,” and the “communists.” They constitute the internal enemy of the nation. However, in quantitative terms (averages) and centrality in the word cloud (Figure 1), “illegal immigration” of Arab origin stands out. That is their main scapegoat. On which it unloads the responsibility for what happens to the “Spanish worker.”

However, his attack is not based on a racial narrative, which has become taboo since the end of World War II. His rejection of immigration is clothed in socially accepted cultural arguments, such as the defense of freedom, a symbol of high emotional value that, given its polysemy, evokes very different meanings in people’s minds. In this way, Vox describes the Arab immigrant as an existential threat (due to the successive terrorist attacks suffered since 11-M and the alleged levels of crime) and a cultural one. For VOX, Islam, with its (alleged) religious dogmatism, based on sexism or patriarchy, represents a civilizational model antithetical to the European one, which would be an oasis of freedoms. They therefore refuse to play the card of multiculturalism, as the postmodern left would, since they consider it potentially corrosive to let in intolerant religious discourses. The Arab immigrant is the perverse reverse of the nation. For example: “We want a Europe with free women, not with beaten women or in burqas” (VOX Europa, 2024).

### 3.5. Aggregate Synthesis of the Results

In summary, our analysis, quantitative (classification machine learning) and socio-hermeneutic (qualitative interpretation), allows us to identify and point out that the political party VOX is the only political party of those analyzed that has activated a populist discursive strategy on platform X in the last European elections. In Figure 7, it can be seen that VOX is the only political party that presents high values in all spheres.

However, these averages, as we have been explaining, are only signs or indications of the brand of populism. However, subsequent qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative results. VOX's discourse is articulated on the basis of a dichotomous contrast between the European political elites (represented by Brussels) and national political elites (represented by the PP and the PSOE, as a coalition of interests), and the people (the Spaniards), understood as an ethnic-cultural nation that rejects other internal enemies (communists and separatists) and external enemies (immigrants).

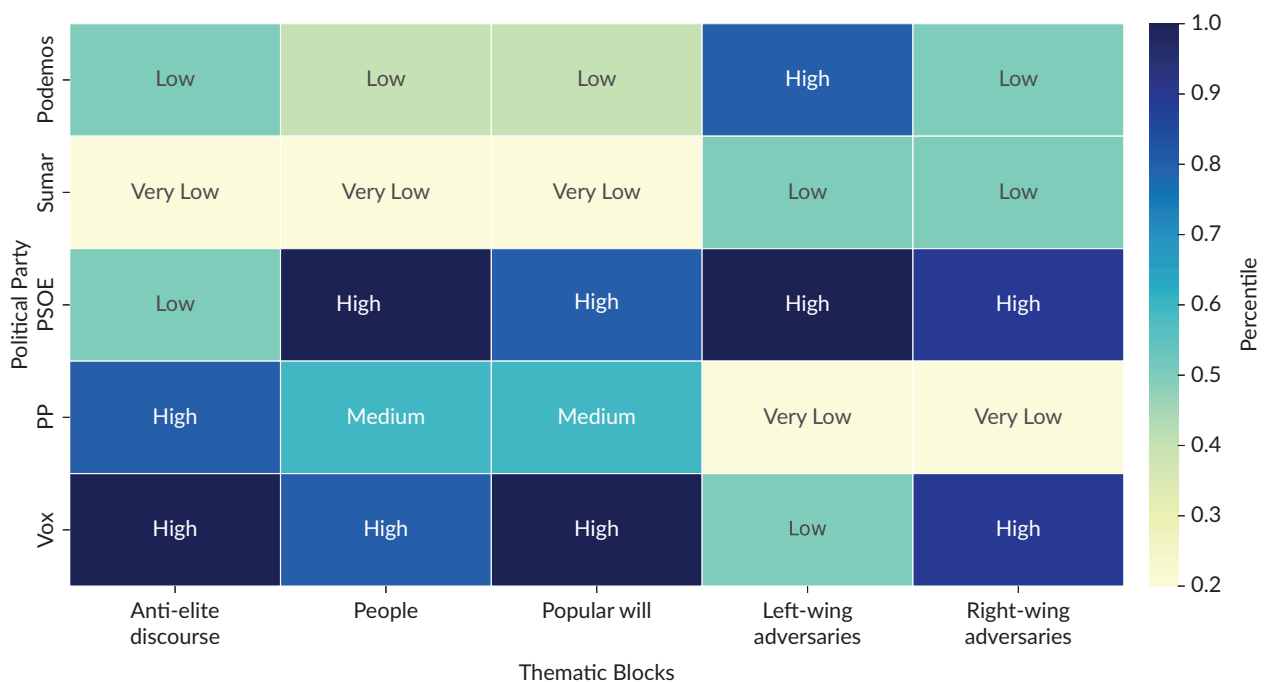


Figure 7. Categorical heatmap by party and block.

## 4. Conclusion

In this study, we set out to analyze the possible presence of populist discourse in the communication strategies of the main national political parties in the 2024 European elections in Spain on the platform X. We have seen that in this communicative and political context, there is no true populist climate. Of the political parties where we expected to find traces of populist discourse (H1), only VOX seems to have activated this kind of communicative narrative. In the rest of the political parties, once both the quantitative analysis, applying the Zero-Shot technique based on LLM, and the qualitative analysis, with a socio-hermeneutic interpretation of the downloaded messages and the word clouds, have not been carried out, we have not found the populist markers. This means, therefore, that no left-wing party, including Unidas Podemos, where we did expect to

find elements of populism, has launched a populist discourse. Consequently, H2 and H4, relating to left-wing populism, are not fulfilled.

With this, it is not being claimed that VOX is a populist party, and the rest are not. In a more modest way, from a formal and discursive approach, we maintain that in this precise context, only VOX has used a populist rhetoric. It is the only one that presents averages in all markers of populism. In accordance with the rest of the European right-wing populist parties, when VOX appeals to the people, it does not do so in an inclusive way (i.e., including all citizens). Its conception of the people, as expected (H3), is that of a culturally and ethnically homogeneous nation. However, the appeal to that people-nation (ethnos) merges and intersperses with other forms of representation that include social class (Spanish workers), a typical, although not exclusive, formula of left-wing populism.

The people who, as in any populist formula, are built by drawing highly exclusive political borders. The adversarial logic that defines politics has been exacerbated in a polarizing way. In the first place, in order for a national-popular identity to be symbolically constituted, the united people, it is necessary to project an enemy or them: the elites. VOX is the only party that has a clearly anti-elitist discourse. But, contrary to what we expected to find (H6), the criticism is not directed against the media (the dominant media) and cultural elites (left political hegemony). The people are built, instead, in opposition to the political elites, both national ("PPSOE coalition") and European ("Europe" and/or "Brussels bureaucrats"), to whom it is responsible for not wanting to respond to the real demands of Spain.

Finally, as is often observed in the case of right-wing populisms, VOX not only projects an enemy in an anti-oligarchic key. It also tries to weld an identity unity where there were only differences, denying other social groups (H4). The discourse of rejection, in this case, is turned against immigrants, especially of Arab origin, a segment of society that is excluded from the national identity (Spain). However, it also repudiates and attacks, as if they were symbolic figures of anti-Spain, part of the left ("progressive" and/or "communists") and the political parties with the desire to gain independence from Spain ("separatists").

Although the effectiveness of LLMs is widely acknowledged and empirically supported, there remains some uncertainty regarding the performance of these models in specific contexts, such as political discourse analysis in social media environments. Nonetheless, an increasing number of studies endorse their use for such purposes, provided that it is complemented by a thorough qualitative analysis (Bail, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

The discursive construction of anti-European sentiment (Valdeón, 2006) began to take shape when Europe experienced various fractures that questioned the slogan of an "ever closer union." This fracture, in the case of Europe, tends to have anti-European features that are easily disseminated through propaganda on the internet (Caiani & Parenti, 2016). The cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia are examples of the rise of far-right networks with a radical and Eurosceptic discourse (Caiani & Kluknavská, 2017). The rise of radical right-wing populist discourse in Europe (Ortu, 2014) has also been supported by a negative image of the EU, such as in the Serbian (Dražković et al., 2016) or German (Schafroth, 2022) media. Tensions in the eurozone have been rising through social media, with citizen discourse characterized by populism, Euroscepticism, and illiberalism (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2023).

The Spanish case seems to confirm the thesis that the right-wing populist project, which some define with other concepts, such as national-populism (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018) or radical right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007), is making its way into the cosmopolitan project represented by the EU, undermining its spirit of unity in diversity. Right-wing populism, including that of VOX, is largely a defensive retreat, with tribal overtones, on the community of belonging in the face of the proliferation of a plurality of cultures and the dissolving effects of a global economy that escapes the control of states. The growing political use of social media by this political party has significantly shaped the nature of Euroscepticism, allowing anti-European sentiments to flourish in the Spanish public sphere. Understanding these elements is crucial for analyzing the evolving dynamics of European politics and the implications for future electoral outcomes in the country. It is in a context of uncertainty, at which time spirits lose their serenity, that right-wing populism has burst in with promises of security. Its offer of meaning lies in the affirmation of strong identities capable of providing the impression of protection. Right-wing populism, with its exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, in the final analysis, can end up leading to political expressions that were thought to have been overcome.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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