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Weaponizing Wedge Issues: Strategies of Populism and Illiberalism in European Election Campaigning on Facebook

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Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament elections took place against a backdrop of overlapping crises, including climate change, migration, and the Russian war against Ukraine, all of which have the potential to drive political polarization. These wedge issues can be strategically used in campaign communication to activate strong emotional and moral responses, exploit societal divisions, and fracture opposing coalitions. When combined with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric, they align closely with the attention dynamics of social media but also carry potential dangers for democratic discourse. However, research on how these elements are combined in parties' campaign communication remains limited. To address this gap, we conducted a comprehensive manual quantitative content analysis of 8,748 Facebook posts from parties in 13 EU member states, examining how wedge issues were communicated and combined with populism and

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illiberalism during the 2024 European Parliament elections. Our analyses reveal that populist parties relied more heavily on wedge issues and combined them with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric more often than non-populist parties. Certain wedge issues appeared more conducive to these elements than others. The combination of wedge issues with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric as exclusionary rhetorical strategies thus emerges as a defining feature of populist digital campaigning. These elements can be seen as mutually reinforcing tools that structure harmful political interpretation patterns, particularly in times of polycrises. This underscores how digital platforms can be used to redefine the contours of democratic debate, making it even more essential to understand the communicative mechanisms through which parties influence public discourse in order to defend democracy.

Keywords

election campaigning; European Parliament elections; European Union; Facebook; illiberalism; issue strategies; populism; social media; wedge issues

1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections unfolded against a backdrop of overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises, among them the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, intensifying climate change, and migration challenges, all of which can be associated with growing political polarization across EU member states. Citizens are confronted with what has been referred to as a polycrisis, in which multiple crises converge and interact in unpredictable ways. Polycrises are inseparable across political, social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Lawrence et al., 2024) and, unlike a single crisis, cause feedback loops where issues aggregate, leading to greater systemic stress and generalized public anxiety. The World Economic Forum (2023, p. 9) reported in its Global Risks Report that the idea of a world in permanent crisis mode has become normalized, resulting in social fragmentation and a decline in institutional trust. This includes declining trust in legacy media in many European countries, which is accompanied by the rise of highly partisan media and increased use of social media as political information sources (Newman et al., 2024, p. 67). A report from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (Watson, 2024) describes how Europeans are increasingly navigating their daily lives in fear, uncertainty, and fatigue—conditions that allow political actors to act on and influence public emotions and shift responsibility.

In such an environment, electoral campaigns operate under intensified constraints and heightened strategic stakes. One central challenge for political parties is how to communicate effectively in ways that mobilize their base and appeal to new voters while avoiding the alienation of core constituencies. A key strategy in this regard involves the use of wedge issues—topics that activate strong emotional and moral responses, exploit latent societal divisions, and can potentially fracture opposing coalitions (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002). Wedge issues that may or may not be associated with deep-seated social cleavages—such as the war in Ukraine, climate change, and migration—offer parties opportunities to shift the terms of debate and reposition themselves within a dynamic electoral landscape.

While numerous studies have examined the strategic deployment of wedge issues across traditional communication channels (Bale et al., 2010; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Lefkofridi et al., 2014), we know comparatively little about how these strategies are embedded within broader communicative repertoires,

especially on platforms that offer parties message control and allow them to adapt their communication in real-time. In contrast to manifestos that describe the positions of the parties in the long term, social media platforms such as Facebook enable parties to frame issues without journalistic mediation, respond rapidly to political developments, and target specific audience segments. They also provide fertile ground for the amplification of polarizing communication, including populist (Engesser et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017) and illiberal rhetoric (Bennett & Livingston, 2025), both of which have gained prominence in recent years.

We contribute to this growing body of literature with a comprehensive manual quantitative content analysis of 8,748 Facebook posts from parties in 13 EU member states on how wedge issues were communicated by political parties during the 2024 EP elections. We focus on three salient and politically divisive wedge issues—the war in Ukraine, migration, and environmental policy. Our analysis examines both the frequency with which these wedge issues were addressed by different party types and how they were related to populist and illiberal rhetoric, aiming to clarify whether wedge issues were used as a vehicle to agitate against elites or liberal democracy itself. If wedge issues are combined with populist or illiberal rhetoric, their divisive potential is significantly strengthened. For instance, portraying migration as a threat to national identity or security (rather than as a policy issue) taps into pre-existing fears and resentments, often targeting vulnerable groups and reinforcing hostility (Heft et al., 2022). Similarly, environmental regulations can be framed as elitist impositions that threaten local livelihoods rather than as necessary global commitments, invoking both anti-elitist and anti-EU sentiments (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024).

Despite a growing literature on populism, illiberalism, and wedge issues, to our knowledge, no study has so far comprehensively investigated how parties combine these elements in their campaign communication. Most prior research has focused on single countries, leaving a gap in understanding how these strategies vary across party types—particularly within the EU's multiparty and multilingual setting (Haas et al., 2023; Kollberg, 2024). By linking issue strategies to populist and illiberal rhetorical strategies across a novel, broad cross-national dataset, this study advances our understanding of how contemporary parties use social media to shape public discourse during campaigns. Our results show that populist parties were significantly more likely to highlight wedge issues than non-populist parties and to do so in conjunction with populist and illiberal rhetoric. Although the messaging of non-populist parties was not entirely free of polarizing elements, especially when addressing migration, the combination of wedge issues with exclusionary rhetorical strategies thus emerges as a defining feature of populist digital campaigning. This implies that wedge issues do not only structure campaign agendas but also serve as vehicles for the diffusion of illiberal and exclusionary rhetoric. This can have consequences for how democratic competition is conducted and how citizens experience political debates during elections.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Political Parties' Social Media Strategies

Political parties' strategic political communication on social media is intentional and goal-oriented, which distinguishes it from other types of communication such as spontaneously posting a status update (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). It encompasses all controlled communication activities of a party on social media that serve to coordinate actions with its various stakeholders, including members, supporters, voters more

generally, and journalists. Compared to other communication channels, social media provide political actors with several strategic advantages, among them both message control and agenda-setting power, particularly when it comes to divisive or emotionally charged topics (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). Party-controlled communication on these platforms allows for bypassing the news media, directly communicating with certain target groups and with the electorate more generally, maintaining parties' interpretive sovereignty (Kalsnes, 2016; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Stier et al., 2018). Moreover, social media communication enables parties to sense changes in their voters' opinions and react to them in real-time (Russmann, 2022), which is particularly advantageous regarding crisis-prone, emotionally charged issues such as wedge issues, where events and opinions in public discourse can change quickly.

When it comes to content, these strategic advantages are particularly important for communicating polarizing issues such as wedge issues that harbor the potential for the spread of extreme and divisive viewpoints and are therefore well-suited for reaching out to specific target groups. This makes this form of communication especially attractive for populist and other more extreme actors whose tendency to polarize seems to fit particularly well with wedge issues and for whom it is a strategic disadvantage that the news media often portray them in a negative light.

The essence of strategic social media communication is to engage people in the discussion of current issues and the shaping and co-creation of meaning around them (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategically, these communication efforts aim to contribute to the fulfillment of organizational goals (Hallahan et al., 2007; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014), which in election campaigns is primarily to win as many votes as possible. A key requirement for this is to produce communication content that attracts the attention of voters, the news media, and the wider public.

Of the various strategies to achieve these goals, we focus on three that can be used to instrumentalize the current prevailing sense of crisis and uncertainty among the population and may thus seem particularly promising from a party perspective in today's times of polycrisis: the strategic use of wedge issues, of populist political communication, and of illiberal rhetoric. While it is undoubtedly important for society that parties address crisis-related issues, there is a risk of increasing and fostering the disintegration and polarization of society if these issues are linked to populist and illiberal narratives. We therefore consider it crucial to examine these three strategies in conjunction with each other—a focus lacking from research on social media campaigning so far.

2.2. The Strategic Use of Wedge Issues

The main task of democratic politics is to implement a representative mandate to solve problems (respectively political issues) that affect society as a whole (Warren, 2017). Which of the many possible issues parties choose to campaign on can determine the outcome of an election. Wedge issues have long been recognized as a powerful tool in electoral politics. Schattschneider (1960, p. 69) described political conflicts as battles in which coalitions of diverse interests align behind a dominant cause while attempting to exploit "cracks in the opposition." This strategic approach to political competition often involves deliberately amplifying contentious issues that can fracture opponents. Wiant (2002, p. 276) expanded on this idea by defining wedge issues as "a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social concern, that is intentionally constructed to divide party voters and polarize the public in order to gain political advantage." To be

effective, wedge issues must create disagreement within the opponent's electorate while making voters perceive that their party is either neglecting or mishandling the issue (Hillygus & Shields, 2008).

Existing research has discussed various strategies for how parties can strategically instrumentalize issues in their election campaigns (for an overview, see Farkas et al., 2024). For the strategic use of wedge issues, three approaches seem particularly central: parties can highlight topics where they are perceived as especially competent (issue ownership), they can deliberately elevate issues neglected by other political actors (issue entrepreneurship), often in the form of contentious or morally charged concerns, or they can "ride the wave" by responding to issues that have gained salience through external events or media attention, regardless of ownership advantages (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). In multiparty systems, issue entrepreneurship is particularly accessible to outsider or challenger parties with fewer constraints linked to coalition formation or institutionalized party competition (Haas et al., 2023; van de Wardt et al., 2014). For political issues more generally, research from diverse European countries has shown that in parties' social media campaigns, the issue ownership strategy is most commonly used (e.g., Bene et al., 2024; Haßler et al., 2021; Magin et al., 2024; Plescia et al., 2020). In the case of wedge issues, however, it is possible that parties will combine all three strategies: wedge issues are typically high on the public agenda and have the potential to divide the electorate, since different parties and voter groups have diametrically opposed views on how to solve these problems. They thus allow parties to "ride the wave," polarize debate, and mobilize voter segments (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002), while at the same time aligning with both issue ownership and issue entrepreneurship strategies (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024).

While much of the early research on wedge issues focused on the U.S. two-party system, scholars have increasingly applied the concept to multiparty contexts, where the dynamics are more complex (Haas et al., 2023). Van de Wardt et al. (2014) argued that simply being in the opposition is not enough for a party to use wedge issues successfully. Because coalition-building is an ongoing process, parties that have been part of past governing coalitions—or expect to participate in future ones—may be hesitant to aggressively campaign on wedge issues, as doing so could strain relationships with (potential) partners. By contrast, parties that have never been in government coalitions face fewer constraints and are more likely to use wedge issues to mobilize support and distinguish themselves in the electoral arena. This includes fringe parties, which are often populist or extremist, and frequently do not have a particularly good chance of participating in government.

Wedge issues are by no means a new phenomenon, neither in national nor EU contexts. However, their influence on contemporary politics continues to grow, with social media providing new channels for their strategic use. Their potential to attract attention and user engagement by means of polarization makes their strategic use on social media even more promising. In the 2024 EP election campaign, three wedge issues emerged as pivotal: Migration, while having been a perennial wedge issue for a long time, has particularly occupied the EU since the 2015 "migration crisis," which deepened divisions within both center-right and center-left parties, forcing leaders to navigate difficult policy choices and exposing ideological rifts (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2020). Climate change is a highly polarizing issue that has risen even higher on the public agenda in Europe in recent years as its consequences have become ever clearer. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 poses existential questions for the EU regarding peace in Europe, its own defense capabilities, and its relationship with Russia (see also Broniecki & Høyland, 2025). We are interested in the importance that parties across the EU attached to these issues in their campaigns and ask:

RQ1: To what extent did (non-)populist parties address wedge issues on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

2.3. The Strategic Use of Populist Communication

Populism divides the world into antagonistic parts: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004) and sometimes other seemingly "dangerous outgroups" (Reinemann et al., 2017). In political communication research, populism is widely understood as a communication style, flexible in the sense that it is not tied to any specific political ideology. As such, it has been described by Mudde (2004) as a "thin-centered" ideology. According to a well-established conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2017), populist communication encompasses three elements: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups. Who exactly is meant by "the people" remains vague and is often determined solely by opposing "the people" to "the elites" (e.g., political institutions, the EU) or (certain) outgroups (e.g., migrants, parties with opposing viewpoints). Appealing to "the people" in a vague manner creates an impression of closeness and opens up the possibility that large groups of voters will feel addressed (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Populist rhetoric can employ colloquial, emotionally charged, and simplified language, as well as personalization, dramatization (Engesser et al., 2017), vulgarities, rudeness, and directness (Aytaç et al., 2025; Gründl, 2022). All this suggests that populist communication can be strategically combined with wedge issues which, in addition, resonate with the antagonism inherent in populism due to their polarizing nature.

As previous research has shown (Bene et al., 2025; Engesser et al., 2017), social media appears to be a perfect environment for populist political communication since it enables political actors' direct contact with "the people" without the mediation of traditional media (Ernst et al., 2017). Moreover, the attention economy of social media resonates well with the characteristics of populist communication described above, generating a relatively large amount of reach measured in reactions (Bene et al., 2022). This helps explain why populist political actors are often particularly engaged on social media (Ernst et al., 2019). Even though the use of populism as a communication style is neither limited to populist or extreme parties nor to right- or left-wing parties (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017), previous research from various contexts has shown that populist and extremist parties, which have a particular interest in polarizing communication, often (but not always) make above-average use of this strategy (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Gründl, 2022). So far, however, these relationships have mainly been examined for the social media communication of political parties in general, without differentiating more closely between individual topics (for an exception, see the special issue of Bene et al., 2024). This leads to our second RQ:

RQ2: To what extent did (non-)populist parties combine wedge issues with populist communication on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

2.4. The Strategic Use of Illiberal Rhetoric

Populism and illiberalism share a common hostility towards democratic power-limiting institutions (Enyedi, 2024), and previous studies have observed a rise of populism as a communicative phenomenon (de Vreese et al., 2018; Lilleker et al., 2022) with negative consequences for liberal democracy (Mudde & Rovira

Kaltwasser, 2017). While there is a clear link between populism and illiberalism, however, both are distinct phenomena that parties can use strategically, either in conjunction or separately, in their campaign communication.

While populism does not seek to abolish democracy but rather "challenges democracies from within the democratic system" (Ernst et al., 2017, p. 1348), illiberalism is defined by hostility toward liberal democratic institutions and minority rights (Enyedi, 2024; Zakaria, 1997). It promotes majoritarian rule, ethno-nationalism, and cultural traditionalism (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024), undermines liberal norms, reframes pluralism as weakness, and can intensify political polarization (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Laruelle, 2022). Illiberal democracy refers to regimes that violate liberal and constitutional principles and conduct unfair elections (Zakaria, 1997). Illiberalism works against principles such as limited power, a neutral state, and an open society (Enyedi, 2024). The illiberal public sphere is a communicative space where illiberal views, attitudes, and actors are promoted and reinforced, being hostile to the liberal public sphere and working to usurp its liberal opponents. Hence, illiberalism aims to undermine liberal democratic institutions and exploit internal conflicts among them (Laruelle, 2022).

All this puts illiberalism in direct opposition to the EU project: The European values stipulated in the Treaty on European Union, such as pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, and solidarity, are the basis for the functioning of the EU as a community (Article 3). Deviation from these values, through actions, policies, and communication that undermine or ignore them, represents a retreat from liberal democracy and a move towards illiberalism (e.g., Laruelle, 2022). This brings with it the risk of social division, which makes wedge issues particularly fertile ground for the spread of illiberal rhetoric. Parties relying on illiberal rhetoric as a communication strategy are thus calling the EU itself into question.

In Central and Eastern Europe, illiberal discourses have been strategically used to diminish trust in media, judiciary systems, and the EU (Havlík, 2019; Kondor et al., 2022). Štětka and Mihelj (2024) highlighted the emergence of an illiberal public sphere in Central and Eastern Europe and discussed the support for majority rule, ethno-nationalism, and cultural traditionalism. Bakardjieva and Konstantinova (2021) analyzed the case of Bulgaria, where illiberal discourses foster widespread dissatisfaction, undermine the authority of liberal values, and contribute to the erosion of civil society. Havlík (2019) discussed the case of the right-wing populist ANO movement in the Czech Republic engaged in technocratic populism and illiberal communication, finding evidence for the denial of political pluralism, anti-partyism, anti-constitutionalism, and support for majoritarianism. Kondor et al. (2022) demonstrated that Hungary's public service media has effectively become a propaganda instrument for the government, closely linked to the hostile stance of their audience towards issues such as immigration.

Despite its potentially devastating effects, the use of illiberal rhetoric as a communication strategy by parties on social media has hardly been researched to date. Therefore, we ask:

> RQ3: To what extent did (non-)populist parties combine wedge issues with illiberal rhetoric on their Facebook pages during the 2024 EP election campaign?

As explained above, it is reasonable to assume that the use of populist communication and illiberal rhetoric is particularly appropriate in the context of wedge issues that are in themselves polarizing and divisive. However,

it remains an open question how well various wedge issues are suited to these strategic goals, which leads to our final RQ:

> RQ4: Which wedge issues were most likely to be combined with populist or illiberal communication styles by (non-)populist parties?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

To answer our RQs, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of the Facebook posts published by national parties during the 2024 EP election campaign across 13 EU countries: Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. These countries were selected because they differ significantly both geographically and in terms of various characteristics in their political and media systems relevant to our research interest (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). The countries analyzed have a combined population of 315.7 million (70% of all EU citizens; European Commission, 2025) and cover 12 of the 24 official languages. Together, they reflect the diversity of EU countries and thus provide a good basis for investigating the 2024 EP election campaign on Facebook across the EU.

For cross-country studies of national party communication, social media platforms offer the advantage of not being nationally bound to the same extent as traditional broadcasting channels, providing similar conditions to users in different countries. Of the various social media platforms, we chose Facebook because it was the most important social media platform for news in most EU countries according to the most recent Reuters Digital News Report available during the planning of the study in 2023. Only in Germany did Facebook rank third, after YouTube and WhatsApp (no data available for Cyprus and Latvia; Newman et al., 2024).

Our sample includes the official Facebook pages of all political parties that received at least 5% of the national votes in the EP elections, except Ethniko Laiko Metopo (Cyprus), Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas (Greece), and TISZA (Hungary) which received more than 5% of the votes but did not have Facebook accounts. Parties that were part of a coalition were included in the sample if the coalition received more than 5% of the votes. In total, the Facebook activity of 85 parties was analyzed (for an overview of the parties, see Table A4 in the Supplementary File).

For each country, all Facebook posts published by the parties during one month before and including election day were collected with CrowdTangle one day after the election date, which varied slightly between the countries (June 7–8: Czech Republic; June 8: Latvia; June 9: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain), resulting in slightly different investigation periods. For reasons of research economy, only a sample of 50% of all posts by all parties could be coded for Hungary ($n = 694$). For all other countries, full samples were coded. In total, our novel cross-country dataset consists of 8,748 Facebook posts (for the periods under investigation and the number of posts coded per country, see Table A2 in the Supplementary File).

3.2. Measurements

A manual content analysis enabled us to code not only written text, but also visual materials such as pictures and videos included in the Facebook posts which are pivotal to fully understanding their meaning. To ensure cross-country comparability of the data, we developed a joint coding scheme used in all countries. The descriptions of all categories used in this article can be found in Table A3 in the Supplementary File. For practical reasons, our coding encompassed the full text of each post, along with the first image or the first video (first minute).

As described above, we defined three policy issues as wedge issues: the war in Ukraine, migration policy, and environmental policy. We coded for each of these issues separately, indicating whether it was addressed (= 1) or not (= 0) in each post. Thus, several wedge issues could be coded as present in the same post.

Employing the concept by Reinemann et al. (2017), we measured the use of populist communication in the posts by means of three separate categories, each coded as present (= 1) or not (= 0) in each post: criticizing elites, referring to the people, and defining outgroups. For the analyses below, we categorized all posts as populist if at least one of these three elements had been coded as present.

To operationalize illiberal rhetoric, we derived 15 categories from the Treaty on European Union that measured whether core values of the EU were explicitly attacked or rejected (= 1) or not (= 0), such as rejecting the rule of law, countering academic freedom, or attacking minority values (for details see Table A3 in the Supplementary file).

To categorize parties, we used two well-established validated sources: The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Rovny et al., 2025). We categorized as "populist" all parties that were categorized as such by either PopuList or CHES (Table A4 in the Supplementary File). The PopuList uses a binary coding system, categorizing parties as either populist or not, and lists populist, far-right, and far-left parties. For identifying populist parties in the CHES dataset, we used the "anti_elite_sentiment" scale which measured "How salient has ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT and ANTI-ELITE RHETORIC been to each party during 2024?" on a scale from 0 (*not important at all*) to 10 (*extremely important*) and categorized parties scoring higher than 6.66 as populist (that is, the upper third of all parties). We labeled parties as "non-populist" if they were categorized as non-populist by CHES and PopuList or if they were categorized as non-populist by CHES and not listed by PopuList at all. Finally, we labeled parties that were neither categorized by CHES nor by PopuList as "not categorized." Following this systematic categorization, 24 parties were categorized as "populist," 50 parties as "non-populist," and 11 parties as "not categorized."

3.3. Reliability

The coding process was decentralized, with each country team responsible for coding both the posts used for intercoder reliability testing and the posts from parties in their own country. National coder teams consisted of two to five coders (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). All coders were trained within their country teams to develop a common understanding of the codebook. To assess the reliability of the coding, intra-country reliability tests were conducted in each national team. Once sufficient reliability was achieved within country teams, all participating coders coded the same 100 English-language campaign posts from

European parties (e.g., European People's Party or Socialists and Democrats). Since these posts could be understood and coded by all coders, we were able to conduct inter-country reliability tests, which allowed us to assess the quality of the data for international comparisons. Reliability for all categories used in this analysis was sufficient, except for "references to the people," where Holsti and Lotus achieved sufficient scores but Brennan-and-Prediger's Kappa did not (see Table A3 in the Supplementary File). Since two out of three reliability indicators achieved good scores for "references to the people," and in order to reflect all three sub-dimensions of populism, we decided to retain this variable. As a robustness check, we also conducted all corresponding analyses excluding the sub-dimension "references to the people" from the populism variable; results are available in the Supplementary File.

4. Results

The results show that parties categorized as populist were more active on Facebook (*Mean* = 153.83 posts per party, *SD* = 110.88) than non-populist parties (*Mean* = 87.94, *SD* = 70.87) and parties that could not be categorized (*Mean* = 59.91, *SD* = 46.86; see Figure 1), confirming the close relationship between populist actors and social media as a communication channel, as found in previous research (Bene et al., 2022; Engesser et al., 2017).

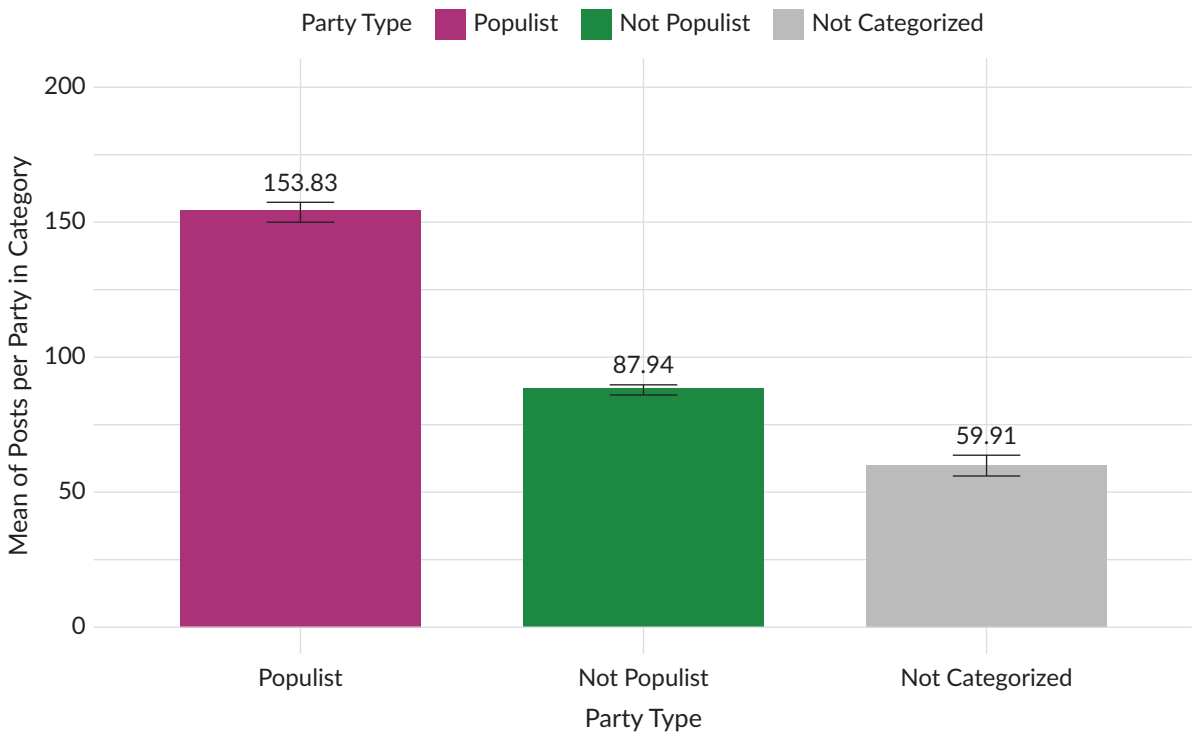


Figure 1. Mean of the number of posts by party types with confidence intervals (*n* = 8,748—Populist: 3,692, Not Populist: 4,397, Not Categorized: 659).

Further, the results show that wedge issues were highlighted frequently in the EP election campaign across the 13 countries, though they did not dominate the campaign (see RQ1 on the frequency of wedge issues). A minority (15.6%) of all posts contained wedge issues (84.4% did not). Populist parties referred to wedge issues more frequently in their posts (18%) than parties categorized as non-populist (14%) or non-categorized (14%) (Figure 2). Furthermore, wedge issues tended to be highlighted increasingly over the

course of the campaign, although Facebook activity was lower on weekends (see Figure A3 in the Supplementary File). Wedge issues were thus relevant across all party types; however, the most significant differences emerged in the communication strategies employed: populist parties were most likely to use populist communication (27%) and illiberal rhetoric (21%). By contrast, non-populist parties employed populist communication in only 13% of their posts and adopted illiberal rhetoric (3%) particularly rarely. The communication style of non-categorized parties closely resembled that of non-populist parties, but at an even slightly lower level for both populist communication (9%) and illiberal rhetoric (1%). Among the parties that used illiberal and populist rhetoric, the most were the German AfD and Hungarian Fidesz (see Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File).

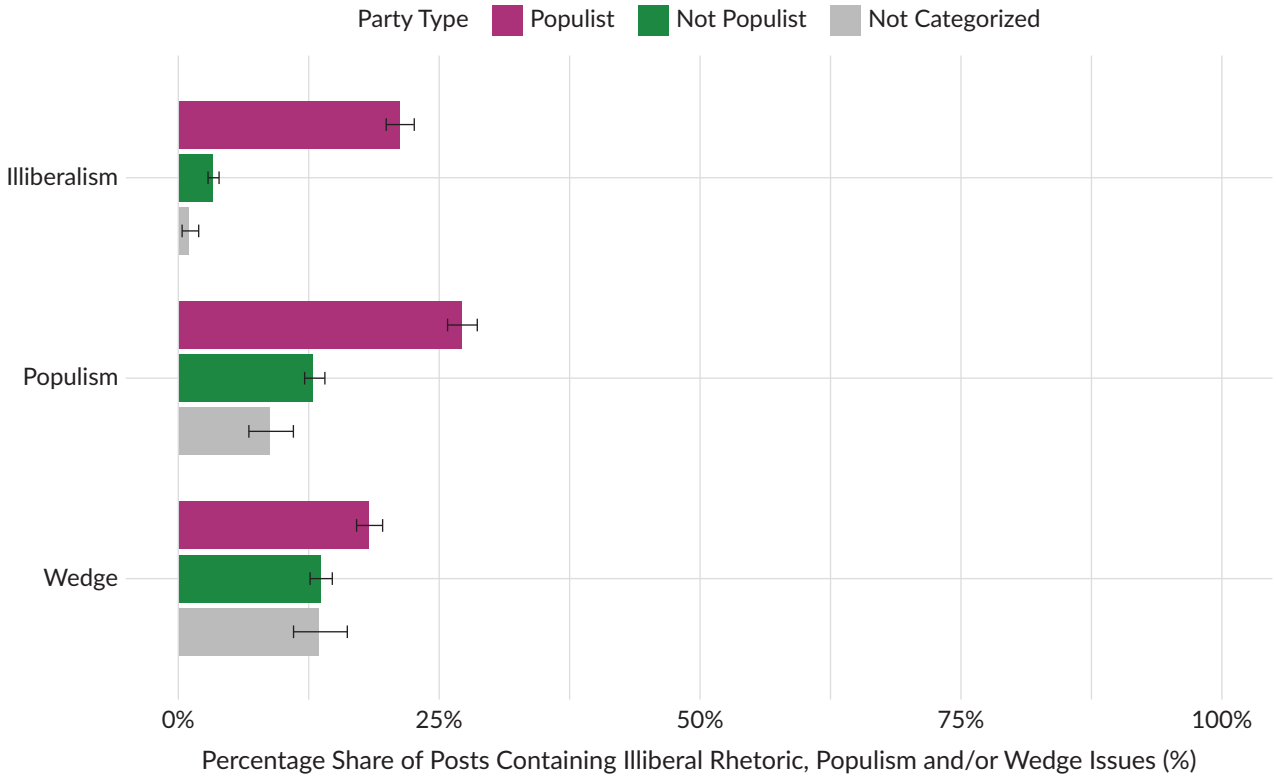


Figure 2. Content categories by party types with confidence intervals (n = 8,748).

While these differences are rather small, much larger differences emerged when analyzing whether wedge issues were combined with populist and/or illiberal communication styles (see RQ2 on the combination of wedge issues with populism and RQ3 on the combination of wedge issues with illiberalism). Even in posts without the analyzed wedge issues (Figure 3), populist parties used much more illiberal rhetoric (12%) and populist communication (22%) than non-populist parties (2%, 12%) and non-categorized parties (0%, 9%).

However, these differences were even more pronounced in posts addressing wedge issues (Figure 4): In these cases, populist parties used illiberal rhetoric in 65% and populist communication in 51% of their posts, compared to only 12% and 18% for non-populist parties, respectively (non-categorized parties: 6%, 9%). These results show that parties' public communication on Facebook differed substantially depending on whether they were categorized as populist or not: Populist parties highlighted wedge issues more frequently, and when doing so, combined them much more often with illiberal rhetoric and/or populist elements (even

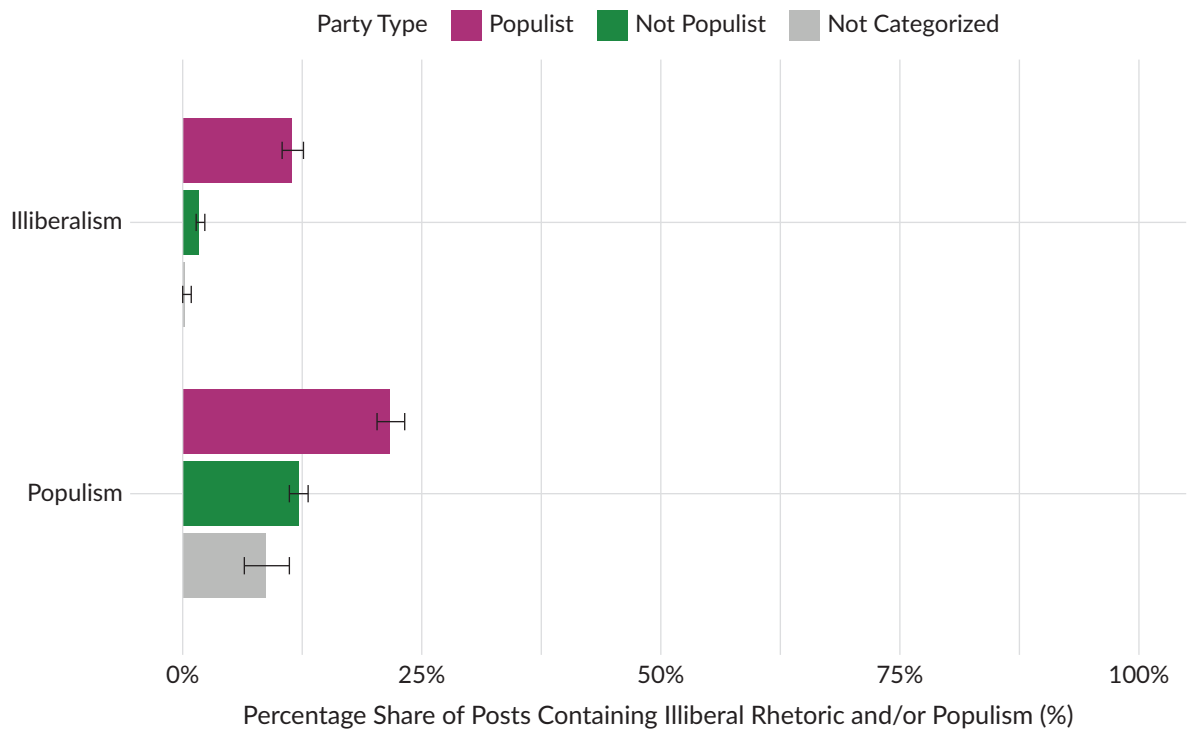


Figure 3. Content categories in posts not addressing the analyzed wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals (n = 7,386).

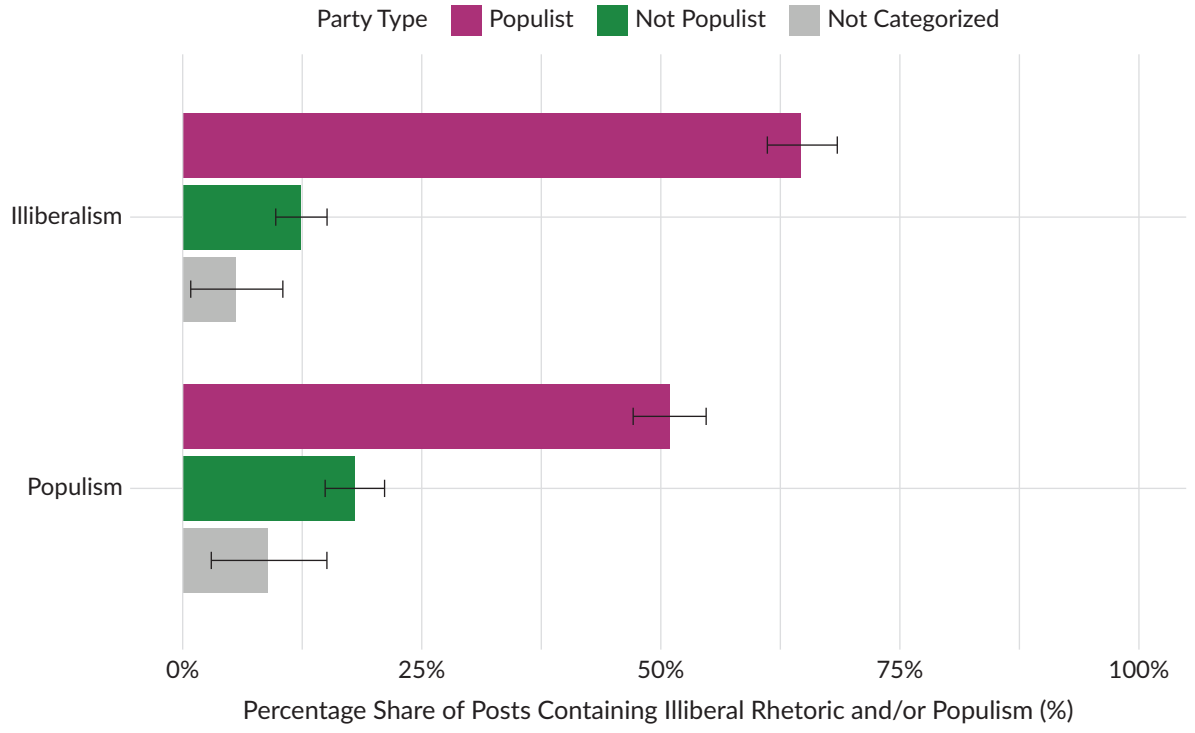


Figure 4. Content categories in posts addressing wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals (n = 8,748 Facebook posts; n = 1,362 Facebook posts containing wedge issues).

though these elements were also slightly more often used by other parties in the context of wedge issues compared to other issues). Thus, it can be assumed that populist parties not only sought to put wedge issues on the public (Facebook) agenda but also engaged in setting the tone of the debate by using illiberal rhetoric and populist communication, potentially derailing a goal-directed, problem-oriented public discourse during election campaigns. More generally, it can be assumed that it plays into the hands of populist parties when other parties and the media emphasize wedge issues.

Next, we investigate how often the different party types addressed the three wedge issues (Figure 5). All party types addressed the war in Ukraine very rarely (3–5%). Environmental issues were used nearly equally by populist (5%), non-populist (7%), and non-categorized (7%) parties. This was also the wedge issue most often addressed by both non-populist and non-categorized parties. By contrast, by far the wedge issue most often highlighted by populist parties was migration (12%), which was only addressed in 4% of non-populist parties' posts and 2% of non-categorized parties' posts.

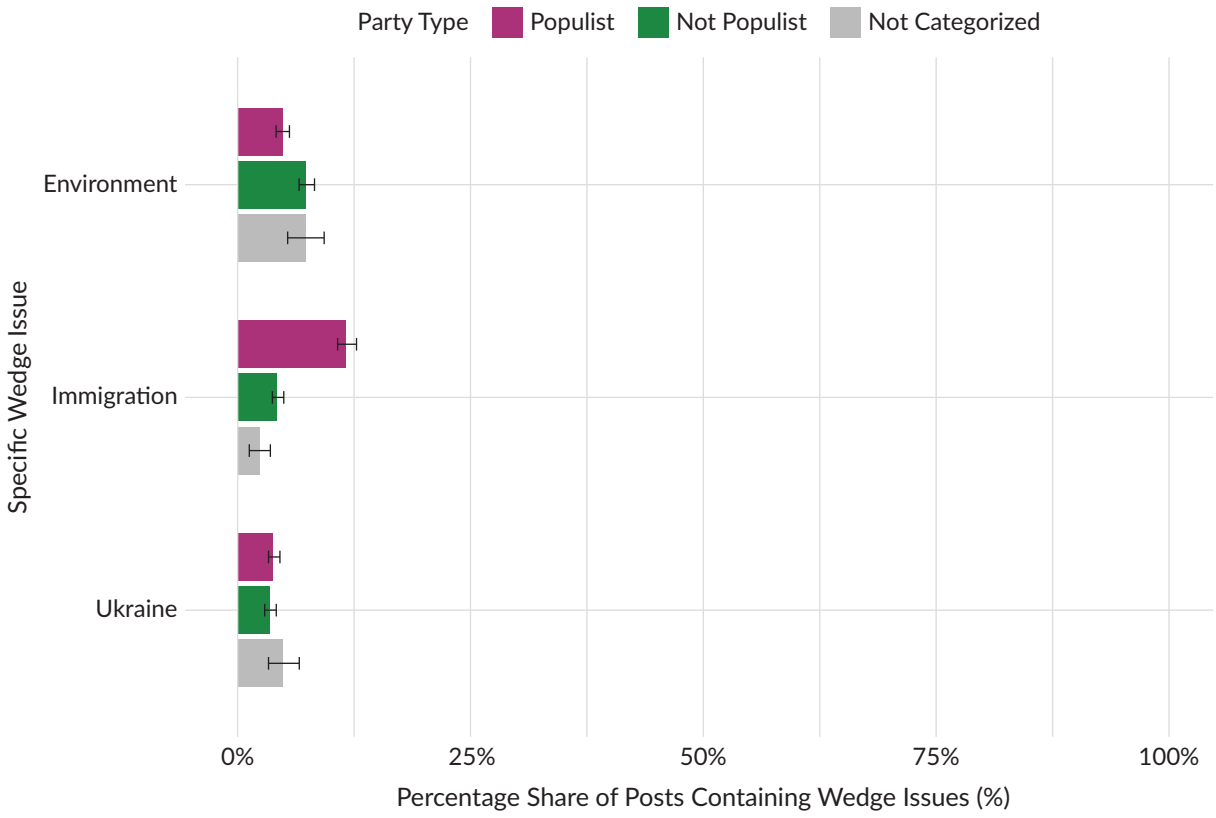


Figure 5. Posts addressing different wedge issues by party types with confidence intervals (n = 8,748).

Furthermore, we investigate how the different party types combined the three wedge issues with populist communication and illiberal rhetoric (see RQ 4). In total, we observe clear differences across issues and parties in both the use of wedge issues and the communication style adopted in them. Figures 6–8 show that, across all three wedge issues, populist parties used both populist communication and illiberal rhetoric by far most frequently, but in the context of environmental policy and migration, they employed illiberal rhetoric even more often than populist communication. Compared to populist parties, non-populist parties used far less populist communication and illiberal rhetoric in wedge issue posts but still used both elements relatively often in the context of migration policy.

A closer examination of communication strategies in the context of the three wedge issues individually reveals distinct trends among party groups. In posts related to environmental policy (Figure 6), populist parties employed both illiberal rhetoric (in 59% of their posts) and populist communication (52%) in more than half of their posts. By contrast, both non-populist parties (populist communication: 11%; illiberalism: 6%) and non-categorized parties (populist communication: 10%; illiberalism: 2%) used both elements far less frequently.

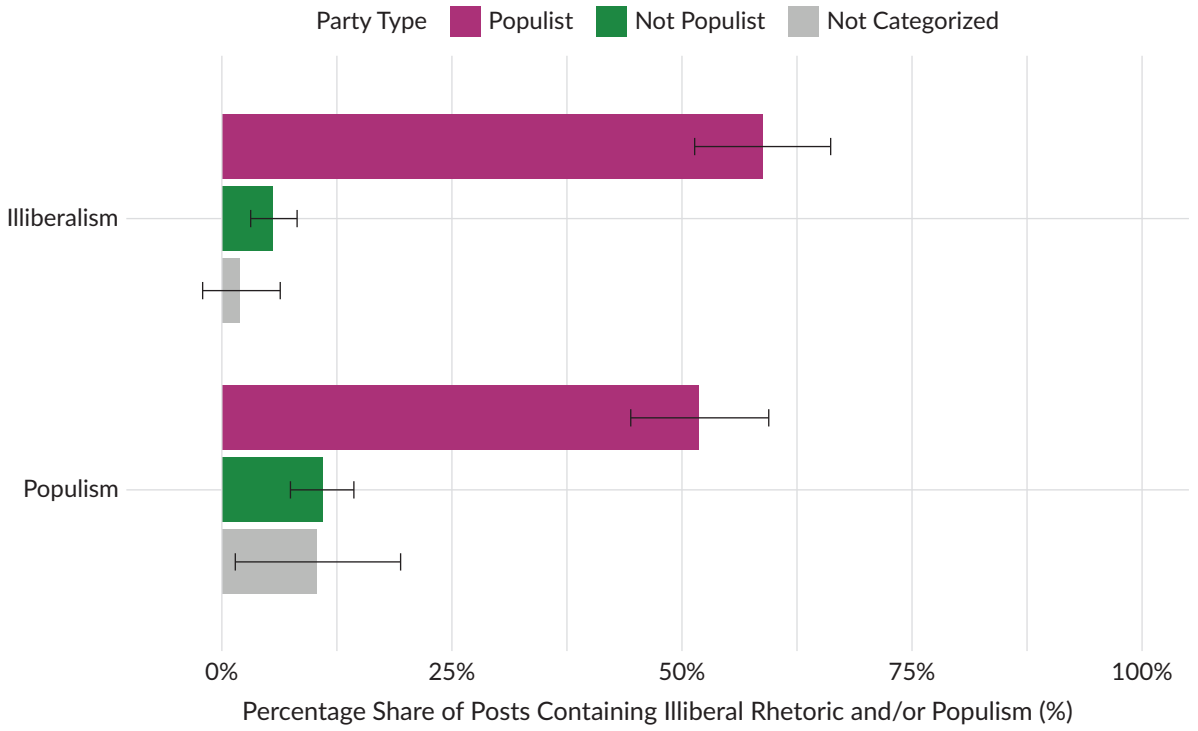


Figure 6. Content categories in posts addressing environmental policy by party type with confidence intervals ($n = 546$).

For posts addressing the war in Ukraine, populist parties once again favored illiberal rhetoric (59%) and populist communication (62%), with the latter being used more commonly than for both other wedge issues (Figure 7). Non-populist parties employed illiberal rhetoric only rarely (11%), while populist communication appeared in 24% of their posts. Once more, non-categorized parties used both illiberal rhetoric (6%) and populist communication (9%) least often.

Regarding migration-related content, populist parties used illiberal rhetoric in 73% and populist communication in 50% of their posts, compared to only 23% and 24% of posts by non-populist parties, respectively, on migration policy (Figure 8). Non-categorized parties published only 15 posts addressing this wedge issue, adopting illiberal rhetoric in 20% and populist communication in 0% of these posts.

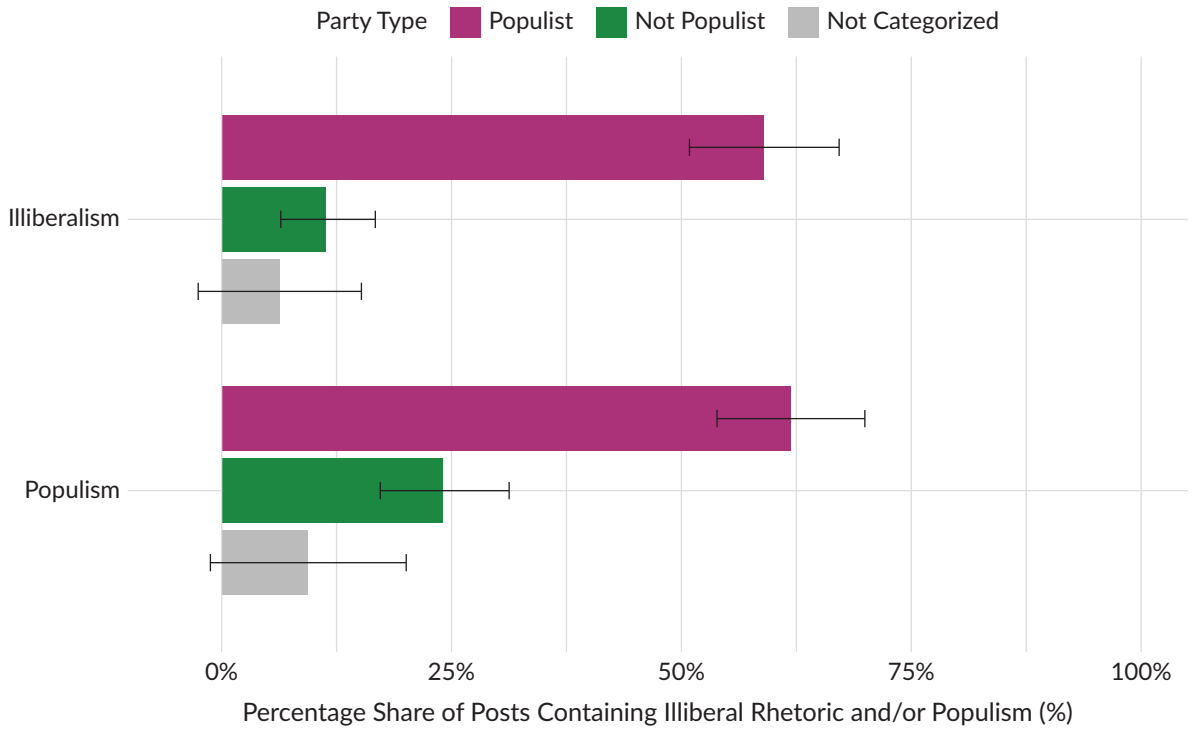


Figure 7. Content categories in posts addressing the war in Ukraine by party type with confidence intervals (n = 325).

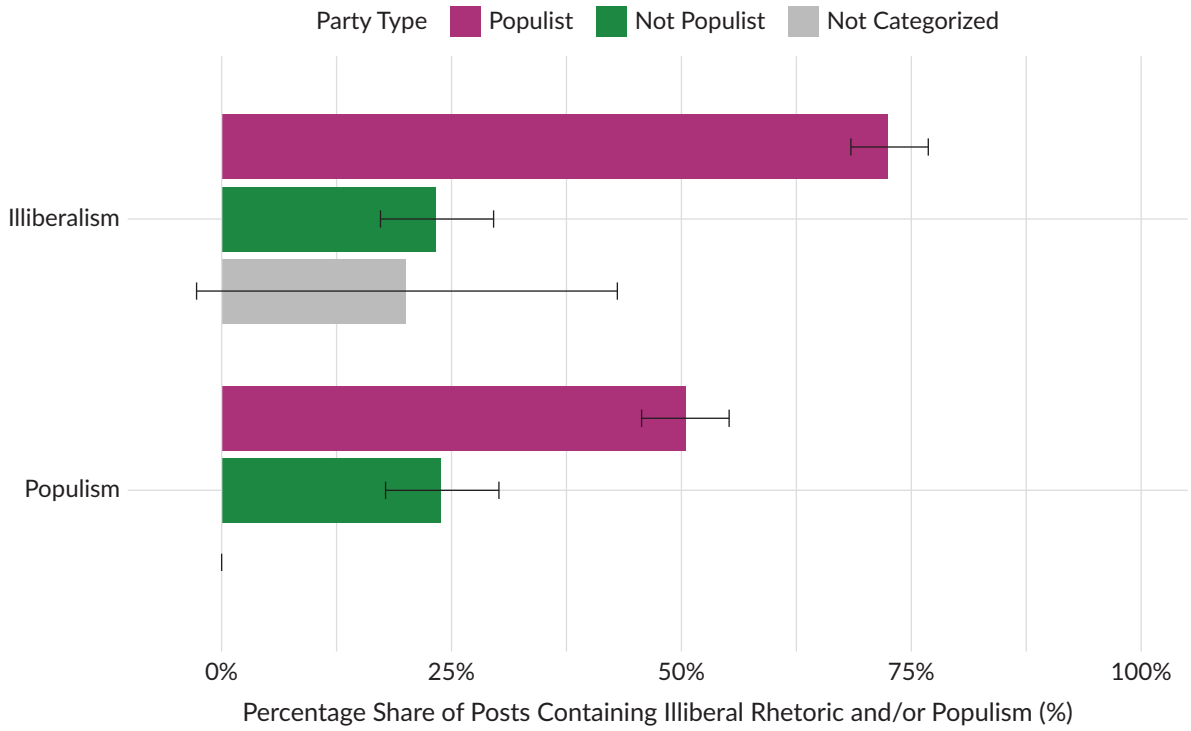


Figure 8. Content categories in posts addressing migration by party type with confidence intervals (n = 632).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how political parties across 13 EU member states employed wedge issues and rhetorical strategies in their Facebook communication during the 2024 EP elections. The analysis revealed that wedge issues were used systematically, and that their treatment varied significantly depending on party type (RQ1). Populist parties relied more heavily on wedge issues and frequently combined them with populist communication (RQ2) and illiberal rhetoric compared to non-populist and non-categorized parties (RQ3). Moreover, the use of both populist communication and illiberal rhetoric clearly differed depending on which wedge issue the parties addressed (RQ4), indicating that some wedge topics are more conducive to these elements than others. Taken together, these findings shed light not only on how parties navigate elections during periods of intense political strain but also on how digital platforms are reshaping the structure and tone of electoral communication in Europe.

Two core findings stand out. First, populist parties were more likely than non-populist or non-categorized parties to focus on divisive issues and to frame these issues in polarizing ways. These results support existing research that conceptualizes wedge issues as tools for activating affective and attitudinal divisions within electorates (Hillygus & Shields, 2008; Wiant, 2002). Populist parties appear to strategically combine issue ownership and issue entrepreneurship, selecting topics where they are seen as competent while also elevating neglected or controversial concerns to set themselves apart from mainstream competitors (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024). Their communication practices align with the broader logic of populist discourse, which emphasizes the antagonism between a virtuous "people" and a corrupt "elite," often coupled with the exclusion of external or internal outgroups (Engesser et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004).

Second, the findings showed that populist parties not only focused more frequently on wedge issues but also used them to influence the tone of debate. Posts addressing controversial topics were significantly more likely to include populist and illiberal elements. This indicates that wedge issues are used not only to attract attention but also to steer public conversation towards conflictual and exclusionary framings. These findings resonate with research showing that social media provides a favorable environment for emotionalized, polarizing communication (Ekman & Widholm, 2022; Stier et al., 2018). The strategic use of populist communication and illiberal rhetoric in digital campaign communication contributes to shifting the structure of debate away from deliberation and toward ideological confrontation.

The interaction between wedge issues and communication styles has further implications. When populist parties repeatedly combine wedge issues with populist, illiberal, and exclusionary messaging, they may initiate a discursive dynamic in which other actors feel pressurized to respond in similar terms. This rhetorical escalation can break taboos, normalize illiberal rhetoric, and shift the boundaries of acceptable political speech. Such dynamics challenge democratic norms from within the political system and may contribute to broader changes in political culture. This includes how crises are interpreted, how democratic legitimacy is understood, and how voters relate to and how much they trust liberal democratic institutions (Enyedi, 2024; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The findings also contribute to research on digital political communication by highlighting the centrality of message control and platform-specific affordances in shaping campaign strategies. Facebook and other social media provided parties with an opportunity to bypass traditional media and present unmediated messages

that align closely with their strategic goals. While earlier scholarship emphasized the positive potential of social media for increasing participation, mobilization, and citizen empowerment (Hallahan et al., 2007; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014), this study underscores the risk of social media providing a platform for coordinated rhetorical action designed to fragment audiences and amplify ideological conflict. Rather than independent content features, wedge issues, populist communication, and illiberal rhetoric are mutually reinforcing tools that can be used to structure harmful political interpretation patterns in times of polycrises.

Some limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focused exclusively on public Facebook communication and did not include other relevant platforms, private communication channels, or paid political advertising. Thus, we are unable to detect differences in communication strategies between platforms. Furthermore, while our data allow for cross-national insights, they cannot fully account for country-specific political and media dynamics that influence how populist and illiberal styles are interpreted. We did not compare parties with differing political ideologies (but see Figure A4 in the Supplementary File for a comparison of left-wing populists and right-wing populists). As this article was intended to provide an initial overview of this new research topic, comparisons focusing on countries and party ideologies would have gone beyond its scope. However, future studies should definitely tackle these issues, and our data offer unique potential for this. Finally, the study focused on message production rather than audience reception and media effects. Future research should examine how users engage with these messages, how algorithms amplify specific types of content, and how these patterns shape public attitudes over time.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the evolving relationship between political strategy, digital media, and democratic discourse. For political communication research, the study points to the need for more integrative analyses that examine how parties combine issue agendas with communication styles to shape electoral competition. For public debate and democratic practice, the findings raise concerns about the growing importance of polarizing and illiberal rhetoric in campaign communication, particularly in times of political and societal polycrises, as in the case of the 2024 EP elections. The campaign strategies analyzed in this study reflect broader transformations in how parties engage with electorates under such conditions. The increased use of wedge issues and exclusionary rhetoric, especially by populist actors, underscores how digital platforms are used to redefine the contours of democratic debate. Wedge issues could potentially be used as a "Trojan horse" to introduce illiberal rhetoric into public debates and ultimately call democracy itself into question. As democratic systems face internal and external pressures, understanding the communicative mechanisms through which parties influence public discourse becomes essential. This study contributes to that understanding by showing how strategic communication in digital environments intersects with ideological positioning, institutional norms, and the fragility of democratic cohesion in contemporary Europe.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Interested researchers are encouraged to contact the authors to request access to the data, which will be provided whenever feasible. For copyright and privacy reasons, the data cannot be published freely.

LLMs Disclosure

In creating this manuscript, we used ChatGPT (GPT-4o) to assist in writing the R code for the analysis. ChatGPT (GPT-4o) and DeepL were used for language editing and to improve the consistency and flow of the original text. The initial texts were always written by the authors. All results were carefully reviewed and edited.

Supplementary Material

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

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