

Post-Truth Politics in Action? Representation of the Media in Spanish Radical Parties' Electoral Campaigns

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Abstract

Recent research on the EU’s institutional response to post-truth politics has shown a gradual shift of focus from external threats to internal democratic challenges, including populist parties and elections. The case of Spain is particularly relevant as the country’s “disinformation landscape” has been assessed as exhibiting “acute political and media polarisation” originating from weak media regulation and changes in political and media environments. Furthermore, the Spanish media landscape is characterised by high levels of media ownership concentration with a lack of transparency regarding media influence on governments and politicians. In this context, this article examines how Spanish left and right radical parties discursively constructed media elites for their political purposes and the (potential) evolution of their electoral campaign discourse in 2019 and 2024. We expect that the increasingly central role of the debate on digital regulation at the EU level and the context of post-truth politics more broadly serve as a new ground for radical parties with a populist discourse to delegitimise mainstream media. The primary sources of the study include the left-wing (Unidas Podemos/Sumar) and the right-wing (Vox) party leader campaign speeches and manifestos in national and EU elections in 2019 and 2024. Our findings show that, when it comes to European elections, the Spanish populist discourse has an increasing trend towards the inclusion of more transnational discourses on media and media elites, especially regarding disinformation and post-truth, although with significant differences between the left and the right.

Keywords

campaign speeches; European elections; media elites; populist discourses; post-truth politics; Spain

1. Introduction

In recent years, the EU has taken a proactive role in its institutional response to post-truth politics. This is seen in the growing policymaking and regulation regarding disinformation, fake news, and political advertising, to name a few. However, as it is highlighted in this thematic issue's editorial (Tuñón Navarro, Bouza García, Oleari, in press), the regulation only represents a part of the EU's response, as political actors are also creating innovative ways of communication due to changing journalistic practices. Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian unlawful invasion of Ukraine, policymakers, and the academic literature have become increasingly aware of the need to discuss how to protect democratic communication processes (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). It is in the context of the post-truth scenario and the assumed decline of democratic practices that the European Commission has started to create policies in defence of democracy (García-Gutián et al., 2024). In terms of policy focus, it has prompted a gradual shift of discursive framing from external to internal threats (Sampugnaro & Trenz, 2024). The assumed internal problems include the propagation of fake news, populist discourse, and new radical or populist political parties as likely challengers of "truth."

In this context, radical parties on the left and right have increasingly used a populist discourse that pits "people against the elites" and may mobilise a Manichean depiction of the political landscape (Mudde, 2004, 2021; Müller, 2016). Furthermore, the discourse operates with a multifaceted and changing representation of the elites, which are always negatively conceived but characterised differently depending on the left- or right-wing leaning of the political parties (see Roch, 2021; Roch & Cordero, 2024). Previous research has shown that radical left-wing parties focus mainly on economic elites, while radical right-wing parties confront primarily political and cultural elites (Gomez et al., 2015; Pirro et al., 2018). It still remains unexplored, however, *how* the populist discourse used by the left and the right may include media conglomerates as part of the elites and, more generally, how the media conceived as traditional media channels, as well as the internet and social media platforms (Voltmer & Sorensen, 2019), are undermined in the populist discourse by radical parties as a development of post-truth politics (Conrad, 2024).

This article offers insight into the populist "representation of the media" as discursive activity posed by the assumed conditions of post-truth politics that delegitimise mainstream media (Conrad, 2023; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Holtz-Bacha, 2021). It examines the populist discourse on the role of the media and media elites by Spanish radical right and left parties in the 2019 and 2024 European elections. Specifically, it aims to answer the research question: How do these parties discursively construct the role of the media and media elites, and in what ways has the Spanish populist discourse undermined the media as "elites" in the 2019 and 2024 EU elections? The intention here is not to make direct causal claims between EU policy-making on post-truth politics and the political activities of Spanish radical populist parties. Rather, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on post-truth politics and populist discourse with an analysis of this empirical case study comparing the 2019 and the 2024 electoral campaigns related to the role of the media and radical parties with populist discourses in a national context.

Through this Spanish case study, we examine how the radical parties discursively construct the assumed role of media elites and the representation of "the media" in two consecutive EU elections as well as its relationship with post-truth politics. In Spain, the mainstream media outlets have undergone more concentrated ownership and have been criticised for party political interference. According to a recent study, the "disinformation landscape" in the country shows "acute political and media polarisation"

(Romero Vicente, 2023, p. 3), which originates from weak media regulation as well as changes in political and media environments.

The empirical focus of this study is on the discursive framing of traditional media and digital media, including newspapers, TV, radio, and social media. The corpus is based on Spanish radical left and right party leaders' campaign speeches and party manifestos during the 2019 and 2024 European elections. Exploring campaign speeches is a way to capture direct political communication between the populists and their supporters. While social media can be viewed as another form of direct communication between politicians and citizens, some studies suggest that the political discourse in electoral speeches provides a more detailed picture of populist communication (e.g., Sorensen, 2021) with the "people" confronted by several types of "elites." We include the party manifestos in our corpus in order to explore a more formal genre in the analysis defining the positions and discourses of populist parties regarding the "discursive construction of discontent" (Schmidt, 2022), which is also valuable for this study.

This article first discusses the theoretical framework of post-truth politics and the role of populism in delegitimising the media before briefly explaining why Spain is a relevant case study. Next, we discuss the methods and data used for the analysis; then, we present the findings of the study; and, finally, we end with a discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework: Post-Truth Politics, Populism, and Delegitimation of the Media

Within the past decade, post-truth politics has become a major field of study for understanding the erosion of fact-based liberal democratic politics. It is, for example, understood in terms of distrust and uncertainty when it comes to truth claims (Harsin, 2018) in a hybridised media climate that sees a constant epistemic struggle over political discourse (Galpin & Vernon, 2024). This is manifested in the normalisation in Western democracies of accusations of "fake news" and "disinformation" (Monsees, 2023).

The concept of post-truth politics itself remains contested (Hannon, 2023; Hyvönen, 2018). The ongoing scholarly debate about the related transformations on entering the "post-truth era" (d'Ancona, 2017), marked by "indifference" to facts and truth (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2023, p. 2), also includes those who do not fully agree with the diagnosis, focusing more on the *claims* about post-truth and how they shape public discourses on politics (Chambers, 2021; Christensen, 2022; Hannon, 2023). There is, however, general agreement on the epistemological challenges posed by what is commonly called "post-truth."

Furthermore, post-truth politics comprises several "interlinked phenomena" (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2023, p. 3), such as the decline of trust in experts (Harsin, 2018), democratic institutions (Cosentino, 2020), and news media (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021), which can be seen in various manifestations such as online rumours, conspiracy theories, and internet hoaxes. Cosentino (2020, p. 8) has pointed out that the ongoing "epistemic crisis" affects several political contexts globally and is not only caused by social media platforms but stems from a more general distrust of Western media and political institutions. This climate of distrust is favouring, in particular, the populist discourse.

In our case study, we focus on the populist discourse of Spanish radical parties and how it undermines trust in the media. For gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the populist discourse within the

framework of the changes in independent and pluralist media and political environments, it is useful to empirically investigate the discursive articulations of “truth” and “freedom” of the populist discourse, as well as the overall representation and definition of the media as “untrustworthy,” or even outright “illegitimate.”

As previous literature has confirmed, “post-truth politics” can be observed in populist accusations that the mainstream media is a generator of disinformation (Conrad, 2023, 2024; Egelhofer et al., 2022). Examining the effects of the populists’ frames of “fake news,” Egelhofer et al. (2022, p. 627) found that they are used with impunity to undermine journalists, suggesting that politicians’ accusations of disinformation have become normalised, which also supports the earlier findings that show growing public tolerance for “fake news” claims in politics (see Higgins, 2016). This is particularly the case of the radical right across the board in Western Europe. Providing a comparative view, Holt and Haller (2017) investigated accusations of how the right-wing PEGIDA movement in Germany criticised the assumed “lying press” on Facebook pages in Germany, Austria, and Norway, and their results showed two modes of contestation: affirmative allegations of “liar” state-owned media and opposing alternatives for mainstream media.

Recently, Conrad (2024) has employed the concept of “post-truth populism” to illustrate how the populist discourse is intrinsically related to post-truth phenomena, namely, how the populist discourse is *delegitimising*, not merely criticising or contesting, mainstream media. The undermining of trust in the media is deeply affecting the integrity of quality journalism. In populist discourse, professional journalists are framed as “part of a corrupt liberal elite” that disguises and fails to report the “truth” (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2023, p. 3). Recent developments even include assaults, both physical and verbal, especially from elements of the radical right, against public service media (Conrad, 2024; Holtz-Bacha, 2021). Conrad’s (2024, p. 167) finding is that populist discourse has a hypocritical element of “giving voice” to an allegedly marginalised group, while it actively is “imposing a singular version of truth.”

From a political communication perspective, populist claim-making can be viewed as the “performance of populist ideology,” forming part of a populist communicative process (Sorensen, 2021, p. 40). Populist ideology is highly dependent on communication with “the people.” “Populistic truth” hinges on representations of citizen discontent that build upon binary relationships, such as the “elites” vs. the “people.” Depending on the various national contexts, the populist performance of anti-elitism can mark as their target, for example, the “lying media” (Sorensen, 2021, p. 42). More importantly, the performative side of the populist discourse is further accentuated in the transforming political and media environments. The changes, including the proliferation of alternative media outlets and the growing role of social media, are connected to the mediatisation of politics. The transformations in media have created increasing pressure for politicians to adopt “mediatised discourse,” which has become the accepted way for them to communicate with citizens (Mazzoleni, 2014, p. 43). The mediatisation of politics, thus, affects political speeches by favouring populist simplifications for publicity.

The following analysis is a contribution to the post-truth politics literature on populist discourse shaping distrust towards media “elites.” Here, we loosely employ Christensen’s (2022, p. 95) definition of “post-truth politics” which, rather than framing it in terms of an “era” as such, refers to it as a “reconfiguration of institutional relationships and cultural patterns” that are challenging and shaping the “boundaries of political engagement and democracy.” This relational approach takes into consideration the international impact of “political truth-making” practices (Christensen, 2022, p. 92), which is useful for making sense of the populist

discourses in our Spanish case study in the EU post-truth politics response context. In other words, we seek to show the discursive constructions of truth claims by the radical parties in relation to their communicative processes, focusing on the delegitimation efforts of the media in EU election campaigns.

It is clear that the assumed vision of post-truth politics has become the main discursive framework for EU regulation to protect democracy, imposing media sanctions and affecting populist party politics at the domestic level (Sampugnaro & Trenz, 2024, p. 91). At the regulatory level, these threats are being reframed to legitimise new policies (García-Gutián et al., 2024). In this sense, we expect that the increasingly central role of the debate on EU regulation related to post-truth phenomena may have impacted the political landscape in Spain, in particular, the discursive articulations and frames mobilised by Spanish radical left and right parties about the media. Furthermore, we expect the campaigns of the 2019 and 2024 EU elections to reflect the highly partisan and polarised political and media environment, as radical parties with populist discourse hold a central role in national politics.

3. Spain as a Case Study

The case of Spain is relevant for this study as the country's "disinformation landscape" has been assessed as exhibiting "acute political and media polarisation" (Romero Vicente, 2023, p. 3), which originates from weak media regulation as well as profound changes in political and media environments since 2011. Increasingly, the Spanish media landscape is characterised by high levels of media ownership concentration with a lack of transparency regarding media influence on governments and politicians (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Even before, the old "informational ecosystem" was exhibiting signs of polarised political debate, which has since been expanded to digital media outlets with amplified intensity (Badillo-Matos et al., 2023, p. 81). The newly established populist parties on opposite sides of the political spectrum, namely Vox and Podemos, have brought with them the unexpected emergence of party-affiliated media. In a situation of weak regulation, where anyone can claim to be a journalist if supported by a communication outlet, increasing clashes between politicians and media are taking place. It was reported that the "de-escalation of the conflict over the Catalan independence issue, which had triggered a great deal of violence against journalists by protesters and police, has drastically reduced attacks" (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). However, an increasing number of journalists are being harassed on social media platforms, including by far-right and far-left politicians and trolls.

Based on comparative research of media systems (Bücher et al., 2016), showing largely the same case groupings as Hallin and Mancini's (2004) polarised-pluralist and democratic-corporatist models in Western European democracies, we know that the Spanish media system can be defined as a combination of a "noninclusive press market" and "low journalistic professionalism" which is labelled as "weak press" (Bücher et al., 2016, pp. 218–219). This literature categorises the country's media system as "polarised-pluralist," corresponding to other Southern European countries, such as Italy and Greece, highlighting strong "political parallelism" and high press subsidies (Bücher et al., 2016, p. 220). These features make Spain an ideal setting to explore how radical parties from both the left and right use media criticism as a tool for delegitimising mainstream media in the post-truth context. The relevance of Spain is further underscored by its increasingly central position within the EU, where ongoing debates about digital regulation, such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, are influencing how disinformation is framed and regulated across member states. As such, Spain is a critical case to examine how radical parties challenge the media in

the post-truth context, offering insights that can be applied to other EU member states with similar media system dynamics.

The transformations and increasing importance of Spanish radical parties in national politics since 2019 indicate their relevance in the formation of the national political agenda and political discourse. Hence, it is crucial to focus on the Spanish radical left (Podemos, Sumar) and radical right (Vox) parties, and how they discursively frame media and media elites in their electoral campaign agendas in the 2019 and 2024 EU elections. Podemos (since 2023 with Sumar) and Vox both emerged from previous political crises in Spain. The austerity measures enforced by the centre-left-wing Spanish government during the Eurozone crisis in 2009 led to a major economic downturn in the country. With it, a chain of events paved the way for the proliferation of radical parties, first active in the regions and then nationally. In 2017, the Catalan nationalists organised a unilateral independence referendum, affecting the rise of the radical-right party Vox, and led to its electoral success in the following years. The more recent Covid-19 pandemic crisis in Spain saw some elements of the previous crises (Plaza-Colodro & Miranda Olivares, 2022), as political polarisation and partisan politics became further amplified. During the pandemic, Spanish politics were dominated by the responses of “populist” parties to national government measures and a polarisation of ideological positions (e.g., Magre et al., 2021). A recent study has also shown that the pandemic recovery saw the employment of politicising strategies by right-wing opposition parties (Haapala, 2024).

By 2019, both Podemos and Vox had established their presence in regional and national parliaments. Since its founding, Podemos has evolved, and its complex internal dynamics have resulted in the emergence of divergent strategies within the party (Mazzolini & Borriello, 2022). While its leader Pablo Iglesias advocated a strategic partnership with Izquierda Unida (the United Left; of which the Communist Party is an important part), reflecting a more traditional leftist approach, its leader Íñigo Errejón emphasised a clearer populist strategy prioritising broad appeal and outreach to a wider segment of the electorate (Rico Motos & Del Palacio Martín, 2023). Although this ideological rift eventually culminated in Errejón leaving the party, Podemos never abandoned populist rhetoric and is still considered a populist party in most of the literature (Mazzolini & Borriello, 2022; Roch, 2024). Sumar is a left-wing coalition of parties created for the July 2023 national election and encompasses, among others: Movimiento Sumar, Podemos, Izquierda Unida, Más País/Más Madrid, Compromís, Catalunya en Comú, Chunta Aragonesista, and Més. Podemos had only five MPs in the overall 31 of the Sumar coalition. For the 2024 European elections, Sumar and Podemos ran separately. To date, there has been no systematic and definitive analysis of the populist discourse of Sumar due to its recent appearance. In the case of Vox, there is a lack of consensus regarding its classification as a populist party. While much of the literature identifies it as right-wing populist (Rama et al., 2021; Zanotti & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022), the nationalist and conservative elements often take precedence over its populist characteristics (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). Due to this ongoing debate on the categorisation of these parties as “populist,” we prefer to refer to left- and right-wing radical parties using contingently the populist discourse, in accordance with recent approaches (Roch & Cordero, 2024).

Vox and Podemos both had candidates in general elections and European elections in 2019. Sumar, a newly formed radical-left party that had allied with Podemos in the snap general election in July 2023, subsequently joined a new minority coalition government with the main governing party, centre-left Socialist Workers’ party (PSOE), presented separate candidates to Podemos in the 2024 European elections. The main reason for the previous merger of the two parties had been to unite the radical left-wing against the radical right. In the

municipal and regional elections held on 28 May 2023, Podemos lost regional government positions. Vox, for its part, had gained traction with the victory of the centre-right People's Party (PP) and joined, for the first time, several regional governments.

4. Methods and Data

As said, this article analyses discursive articulations about the media by Spanish radical left and right parties, aiming to shed light on the role of populist discourse to delegitimise the media in post-truth politics context. Using a text-as-data methodological approach, we integrate both quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore a comprehensive textual corpus. This corpus includes party manifestos and speeches by key leaders of Vox (radical right), Podemos, and Sumar (radical left) during the European election campaigns of 2019 and 2024 (see Table 1). Party campaign speeches are especially relevant for this analysis as they exemplify the direct communication between party leaders (representatives) and their audiences (citizens and potential voters), offering unique insights into the articulatory power of populist discourse. To complement this, we incorporate manifestos, a more formal genre, offering insights on party positions and discourses. The speeches collected correspond to the parties' primary representatives, considering their role in the party executive and their position as election candidates. As detailed in Table 1, the corpus comprises 93 campaign speeches and five election manifestos, forming the basis for a nuanced exploration of populist engagement with media narratives across the political spectrum. We collected all manifestos published by the three parties for the 2019 and 2024 European elections. For campaign speeches, our selection followed specific criteria: First, we focused exclusively on speeches delivered during election campaign events; second, these events had to occur within a window of one and a half months before or after election day; and third, the speakers were required to be election candidates or party executive leaders.

As a preliminary exploratory step, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the textual corpus to identify key terms used by the parties to refer to the media, encompassing both traditional and digital platforms. We specifically selected words that unambiguously pertain to the media landscape or various forms of communication media: *medios de comunicación* (media), *prensa* (press), *redes sociales* (social media), *televisión* (TV), and radio. Using these keywords, we performed a keyword-in-context analysis. Rooted in the text-as-data tradition, keyword-in-context is a textual analysis technique designed to examine how specific words or phrases are contextualised within a broader corpus. Keyword-in-context aims to capture the keyword along with a snippet of the surrounding text to provide insight into how the keyword is used in context. Thus, we identify all textual segments surrounding the keywords, specifically 10 words to the left

Table 1. Manifestos, campaign speeches, and periods of analysis.

	Vox	Podemos	Sumar
2019 European elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 campaign speeches • 1 election manifesto (6 April–26 May 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 campaign speeches • 1 election manifesto (23 March–26 May 2019)	—
2024 European elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 campaign speeches • 1 election manifesto (24 May–7 June 2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 campaign speeches • 1 election manifesto (23 May–7 June 2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21 campaign speeches • 1 election manifesto (17 May–7 June 2024)

and 10 to the right from the keyword in the text, to have a broader textual context surrounding the selected keywords (see Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, p. 11). After extracting these text snippets, we calculated the primary collocates associated with the keywords of interest for this study.

Collocation analysis is a technique of corpus linguistics to identify all words co-occurring significantly with the keywords and serves to capture one of the main forms used to generate patterns of signification (Baker, 2006; Baker & McEnery, 2015; Fairclough, 2003, p. 131). All collocates were extracted using the R programming language to analyse the textual corpus. Pre-processing steps and collocate computations were performed with the Quanteda package (Benoit et al., 2018), supplemented by additional R packages required for the calculations.

Collocates serve as valuable indicators offering initial insights into how an actor attributes meaning to a specific word, idea, or phenomenon. For example, the term “social media” can be framed either negatively or positively, depending on the collocates surrounding it. Additionally, it can acquire meaning through associations with broader economic, political, or cultural processes and phenomena. While collocates provide valuable initial indicators, a qualitative exploration of their context is necessary to deepen the analysis. This approach serves as a practical method for navigating the textual corpus, guiding the identification of nodal points and key meaning-makers related to the concept and phenomenon of “the media.”

Thus, primary collocates function as entry points into the textual corpus facilitating a subsequent qualitative exploration. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative techniques are not adversaries but complementary tools that together enhance the analytical process of revealing critical constructions of the media by radical parties. While the core task remains the qualitative exploration of the text, the initial collocation analysis brings structure and focus to this process. Without this step, the analysis would likely be more fragmented and less capable of identifying key nodal points of signification. By prioritising the most relevant collocates, the qualitative exploration searches for the most relevant meaning constellations within the corpus. This focused approach is far more efficient and systematic than hand-coding which, even in the best scenarios, would be an excessively time-intensive undertaking.

In the second step of qualitative discourse analysis, we examine the problematisations in which media institutions, media elites, or media events are embedded (see Keller et al., 2018; Schünemann, 2018). This approach allows us to capture the specific discursive articulations employed by political parties to conceptualise the media, identify key causal events and conflicts associated with it, and analyse the actors involved in the context of post-truth politics. The qualitative discourse analysis has two primary objectives. First, we aim to uncover how the media are integrated into broader chains of significance, linking them to economic, political, or cultural processes, and assess whether these connections are framed positively or negatively. Within these causal chains, we also seek to identify the key actors and explore the extent to which they align with populist discourses that construct antagonisms between “the people” and “the elites” aiming to delegitimise the media. Second, we aim to compare these signification processes across the 2019 and 2024 elections, paying particular attention to the evolving role of populist discourse in framing and delegitimising the media.

This allows us to disentangle the different meanings given to the media by these parties and how the meaning constellations around media elites have evolved from the 2019 to 2024 European elections, in

order to discuss them in the broader context of the EU post-truth politics response through increasing regulation. This methodological strategy and case selection is not without its limitations. Although we concentrate on two relevant communication genres (speeches and manifestos), they do not exhaust the heterogeneity of communication tools used by radical parties, especially if we consider the expansion of social media. However, we assume that the approach is reasonably capable of capturing the main frames and discourses utilised by radical parties to delegitimise the media in the context of post-truth politics.

5. Results

5.1. First Period: The 2019 European Elections

In 2019, the radical right party Vox entered the parliamentary institutions, both at the European and national level. While Vox was on the rise, Podemos, the radical left contender, was using a defensive strategy. As can be seen in Figure 1, these two parties exhibited different framing strategies towards the media and media elites. Both parties, however, adopted a critical stance toward the media, associating it with political and economic elites. In the case of Vox, the media were framed in particularly negative terms and closely linked to the left-wing cultural and political class. For Vox, the two most important collocates were “offices” (*despachos*) and “progressives” (*progres*). The latter term is used pejoratively by Vox to refer to left-wing actors, particularly leftist politicians and cultural elites—similar to how Javier Milei in Argentina refers to *zurdos* (leftists). Vox even employs the expression “*progre dictatorship*” to underscore their claim that leftist elites dominate the media and aim to demonise the party: “The ‘*progre dictatorship*,’ which is now dominating the media and is in the government of Spain, is only the vanguard and we can already glimpse where they want to take us with the demonisation of the media against Vox.” (VOX España, 2019a)

The collocate *despachos* (offices) serves to portray more precisely how the leftist elites negotiate (at their offices) with the media owners: “Those who are in the progressive [*progres*] offices of the media, those multimillionaires who distort the truth and who only have one goal, which is to prevent the awakening of the living Spain [*la España viva*]” (VOX España, 2019b).

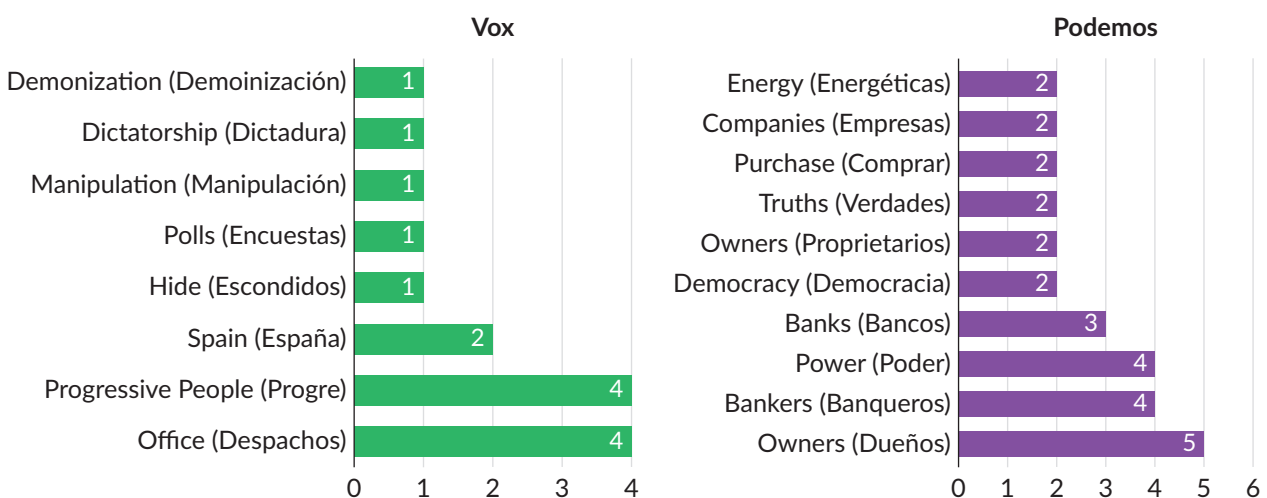


Figure 1. Main collocates of Vox (on the left side) and Podemos (on the right) for the 2019 European elections.

The other collocates were used by Vox to reinforce this representation of the media conglomerates controlled by the left. “Spain” was depicted in opposition to a coalition of media and left-wing elites. This alleged manipulation and control by the media extended to the “polls” which, according to Vox, were designed to influence Spaniards’ voting behaviour. It is also pertinent to note that Vox’s discourse concentrates on the traditional media, having no specific references to social media and digital media more broadly in the 2019 election campaign.

The radical left party Podemos also attacked the media but using a different discursive strategy. Podemos explicitly targeted media owners, emphasising the connections between media ownership and economic elites. In line with previous studies on populism and radical parties, Podemos seems to politicise more markedly economic issues related to the media, while Vox focuses rather on cultural issues (see Pirro et al., 2018; Roch, 2021):

Our democracy is a limited democracy. The owners of the private media have more power than any Member of Parliament, maybe they will make us feel it in interviews during this campaign, but somebody has to tell the truth, the bloody truth. (Podemos, 2019a)

Indeed, the most important collocate in the Podemos textual corpus, *dueños* (owners), serves to indicate property relations, and the two following collocates in importance are mobilised to accuse “bankers” of using their “power” to manipulate information in the media. According to Podemos, these are economic relations that also involve political power since they have implications for the quality of liberal democracy. Less important collocates such as “purchase,” “energy,” or “companies” are used by Podemos to reinforce this same representation of the media emphasising its interconnections with a fraction of the political class and economic elites such as energy sector businessmen: “It is a scandal that there are bankers who can buy political parties and media and shameful that there are energy companies that can buy political representatives by recruiting former ministers and former presidents” (Podemos, 2019b).

5.2. Second Period: The 2024 European Elections

For the June 2024 European elections, the Spanish radical left ran separately, with Podemos on the one hand and the new left coalition party, Sumar, on the other, running on its own. Vox remained as the main radical right alternative to the centre-right PP and, although it was united as a party, there were also new fringe parties competing for the support of radical right voters in these elections. Thus, it was a more fragmented scenario in comparison to the 2019 European elections. It is noteworthy that, in the run up to the 2024 elections, the European political landscape was increasingly shaped by the centrality of disinformation and fake news in public debates and regulatory efforts, reflecting broader challenges to European liberal democracies.

In the case of Vox, there were significant changes in the framing of the media and the main problems of the politics of media communication (see Figure 2). The main collocates were oriented to confront the centre-right PP and to emphasise the threat to one of the main concepts mobilised by the radical right party: “freedom.” This was then applied to confronting the media. Vox argued that media freedom was under threat, portraying it as one of the main challenges: “They have passed a European media law which means destroying media freedom and press freedom in Europe, they have passed a digital media law, a digital services law” (VOX España, 2024a). In Spain, the “old parties” and “systemic parties” (VOX España, 2024b), were portrayed as the

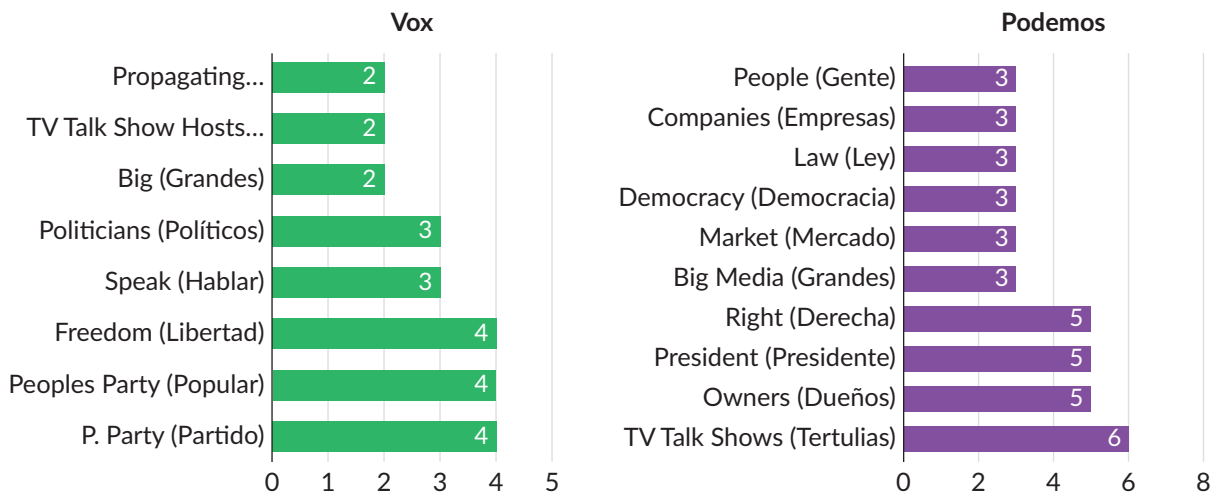


Figure 2. Main collocates of Vox (on the left) and Podemos (on the right) for the 2024 European Elections.

actors supporting policies that endanger media freedom and press freedom. In particular, Vox attacked the conservative PP:

We denounce the People’s Party, we denounce what they are doing, because I criticise them in the tribune of the Congress, and then the People’s Party and their media, and their talk show hosts, and their reporters start to say: there is a clamp between Vox and the PSOE. Between Vox and the PSOE? Really? I mean, have they not listened? Have they not listened to what we think of his majesty Sánchez? (VOX España, 2024c)

“Connivence” between Spanish politicians and the media is emphasised by Vox, similarly to the previous period before the 2019 European elections. However, in the 2024 European elections, Vox suggests more clearly the connections between the EU, national mainstream parties, and the media. The issue is no longer just the “*progre* dictatorship” at the national level, but rather a coalition of interests tied to the EU, its policies, and the large-scale media serving those interests: “These media have been disseminating and promoting the 2030 Agenda for years. The 2030 Agenda continues to be disseminated and promoted by the IBEX companies, Big Banking, because apparently, they seem to be very nice words” (VOX España, 2024d). Vox portrays political elites in Brussels as those controlling the media and seeking to manipulate and ignore the “real” problems and concerns of the Spanish people:

The mainstream media do not talk about the European elections. What do they want? What they want is for you to stay at home on June 9 and for them to continue with their grand coalition in Brussels, doing whatever they want, voting against the Spanish people and without any of the Spanish people finding out about it. (VOX España, 2024d)

In the case of Podemos, there are some continuities in comparison to the 2019 campaign, although we have also found significant changes. The radical left party still identifies property relations as one of the central problems of the media and relates this to the decay of democratic politics. The collocates “owners,” “big media,” and “democracy” serve to mobilise this representation of the media. However, new collocates emerge that introduce novel meanings in Podemos’ discourse. As shown in Figure 2, these include “President” and “right.”

The latter is used by Podemos to refer to specific forms of disinformation associated with the far right. One of the crucial problems identified by this party during this period is the propagation of disinformation and fake news by the far right, facilitated by sympathetic journalists and platforms:

The extreme right is stopped by guaranteeing rights, the extreme right is stopped by preventing them from spreading their hatred, their lies through the media, the extreme right is confronted by pointing out the corrupt journalists who lie to the people every day from their platforms. (Podemos, 2024a)

Podemos pressures Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) to take strong action against media actors aligned with economic elites and the far right. The collocate “President” serves to appeal directly to Pedro Sánchez, asking for a proactive response to these threats:

One question, President, what is it? Which ones? You have a lot of power, give it a name and a surname. Who are the presenters of these talk shows? What are their names? What does the judicial and media war mean to you? Something that affects the quality of Spanish democracy? Something that should push the government to ensure democracy in the media that act in a mafia-like and corrupt way with public licences? Something that should stop the elites of a judiciary that works politically for the right? (Podemos, 2024b)

Moreover, Podemos argues that the media operates as a “demand market” (Podemos, 2024c) in which politics and democracy become commodities. This urgent situation “should push the government to ensure democracy in the media that act in a mafia-like and corrupt manner” (Podemos, 2024b). Podemos focuses especially on the left-wing coalition government during the election campaign. This makes sense since, after the July 2023 snap general election, Podemos was excluded from the five ministers of the coalition government, broke up with Sumar, and campaigned alone for the 2024 European elections. In this context, Podemos tends to emphasise the inadequate measures by the left coalition to face the challenges of media disinformation and the far right. In a classical antagonistic divide of the populist discourse, Podemos represents the people (*la gente*) as opposed to the complex entanglement of the media, economic elites, and the far right:

And for once again demonstrating that this political organisation is made with the hands, with the efforts of a lot of humble people who never appear on television, but who are the heart of this project. So, thank you very much and the loudest applause is really for you, comrades. (Podemos, 2024d)

Finally, the new left-wing coalition party Sumar devoted much less attention to the issue of media, media conglomerates, and disinformation. There were only four significant collocates (see Figure 3) for the overall corpus in relation to our keywords representing media, television, radio, and social media. Interestingly, Sumar did not focus on issues of media ownership, nor did it strongly criticise the media or media elites in relation to economic elites. Perhaps due to its participation in the national government coalition, Sumar’s media discourse was much softer compared to that of Podemos.

Like Vox, Sumar focused especially on the idea of “freedom,” but with clearly different connotations. In this case, the problem of freedom in the media is framed as a problem caused by the far right and the mainstream right. Sumar asks if the model of Feijóo (who is the national leader of the PP in Spain) and Ursula Von der Leyen is similar to Giorgia Meloni’s attempts to control television and radio in Italy:

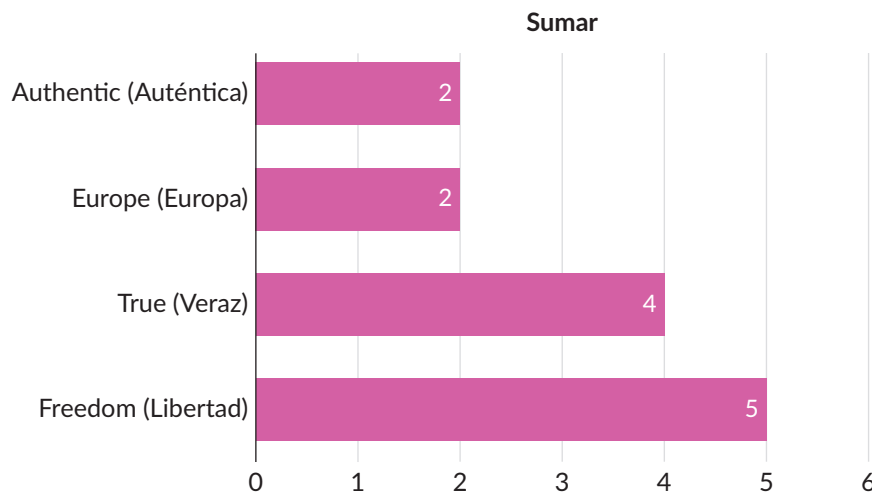


Figure 3. Main collocates of Sumar for the 2024 European Elections.

Is it or is it not acceptable to persecute freedom of the press and try to control the RTV as Mrs. Meloni has done? That is the model Feijóo and Von der Leyen are betting on, and we are not going to allow it in this election campaign. (Sumar, 2024a)

This is a position similar to that of Podemos, which consists of attacking the far right and mainstream right by linking them to the problems associated with media and democracy. However, the overall discourse of Sumar is not comparable to the strong confrontation proposed by Podemos. Most of Sumar’s relevant statements contain neutral references to the media. They argue that the quality and exhaustiveness of the information in the media and social media can be improved by also expanding coverage of EU issues:

We follow regional and national politics many times through the media or also through social networks, but what comes from Europe, from Brussels and Strasbourg, everything that reaches us many times is only echoes. However, I consider that there is a total connection between what happens in European institutions and what happens in our daily lives. (Sumar, 2024b)

In terms of the relationship between media and democracy, Sumar’s position is more vague than that of Podemos. This relation between democracy, media, and disinformation is marginal in the overall representation of the media, and when Sumar refers to these topics, it makes general claims about democracy without identifying specific or concrete problems or positioning about policy orientations or EU regulations: “We want more democracy and, by the way, we want much more freedom of a truthful press. We want the freedom of a truthful, authentic and free press” (Sumar, 2024a).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The results illustrate that the media and media elites were discursively framed by Spanish radical parties in their populist discourses with increasing attention paid to fake news and disinformation when comparing the 2019 and the 2024 European election campaigns. This finding confirms that the populist discourse exhibited by radical parties is a relevant object of study in the context of EU policymaking on post-truth phenomena with a shift to “internal” issues (cf. Sampugnaro & Trenz, 2024). However, while EU regulation on disinformation

does not directly constrain the populist discourse, it serves as a major background context for understanding the evolving framing strategy of radical parties, turning from a nationally defined debate to a discourse with transnational dimensions on disinformation. This context forces radical parties to take a more specific position on EU regulation and institutions that continues to hinge on the critique of the elites, as was seen in the case of Podemos and Vox, while adopting a pro-EU response and a lack of explicit anti-elitism in the case of Sumar. There are, however, substantial differences in the populist discourse regarding the media exhibited by these parties with distinct normative implications.

This article aimed to examine whether the populist discourse of Spanish radical parties would show signs of post-truth politics, especially as an effort, as recent research has shown in the case of the radical right in particular, to undermine and, ultimately, delegitimise the mainstream media (e.g., Conrad, 2023, 2024; Egelhofer et al., 2022). We loosely applied Christensen's (2022, p. 95) definition of post-truth politics, which refers to a "reconfiguration of institutional relationships and cultural patterns" that are challenging and shaping the "boundaries of political engagement and democracy." This relational approach focusing on the international impact of "political truth-making" practices was particularly useful in the context of the EU response to disinformation, in which populist claims about "truth" can have transnational relevance. Our findings indicate that the Spanish radical parties reshaped their populist discourse regarding the media in the run-up to the 2024 EU elections, indicating a transnational influence of the pre-electoral warnings by the EU institutions of the rise of radical right and electoral disinformation.

Furthermore, we showed that truth-claiming, especially by the radical right, corresponds to the interpretation of post-truth populists by Conrad and Hálfðanarson (2023), who argued that it relates to assertions of freedom of expression. The radical right party Vox discursively framed the media as controlled by leftist elites and contrary to the interests of "Spain" in the 2019 European elections. The mainstream political parties were said to conspire with the media, and thus, all of them were framed as untrustworthy. The radical right party portrayed the political and media elite as conniving and "distorting the truth." This term was applied to make a point about the assumed problem around media elites, to alert voters about the supposed collusion of political and media elites who try to prevent them from seeing "the truth" of the situation and threats to the Spanish nation. This discursive strategy of representing "the truth" on behalf of their voters corresponds to the radical right discourse in other countries, such as Germany (cf. Conrad, 2024). This was to be expected in light of what we already know about right-wing parties' populist strategies in Western Europe (see, e.g., Gomez et al., 2015; Pirro et al., 2018). Regarding the radical left, Podemos argued that the media is run by market entrepreneurs and economic elites. This party pointed more directly to the private funding and ownership issues related to the media. According to Podemos, it was the only one telling "the truth" to the Spanish public about the real relationship between the privately owned media and powerless parliamentarians in the 2019 EU elections, namely that the private investors ran the media and had politicians on their payroll.

In the run-up to the 2024 elections, European institutions and politicians warned about the threat of the far right and the disinformation spread in social media. The results showed references to the European pre-electoral debates in the populist discourse of Podemos and Vox in their portrayals of media representation, with only marginal references by Sumar. Vox focused on "media freedom," with the main threat being the enforcement of EU regulations, especially the Digital Services Act. At the domestic level, the radical right accused the conservative mainstream PP of supporting the passing of EU regulations on disinformation. In the 2024 election context, it should be noted that the Spanish radical right was attempting

to discursively distance itself from PP, who had also started to actively employ the rhetoric of freedom, especially since the regional president of the autonomous community of Madrid had successfully used it in recent elections (see Haapala, 2024). The claim was that the PP owned the media, which were part of the Brussels elite, who did not want to tell “the truth” about what was being decided on “against the Spanish people.” This general and diffuse attack on the media undermines its very basic role as a legitimate intermediary actor to determine what is relevant, unimportant, or “fake” regarding the public interest. In other words, Vox party’s discursive strategy about the media seeks to spread a generalised distrust of the media’s role in democratic societies. From an international perspective, this strategy shows nothing new in terms of the developments of radical right populist discourse. While the radical right populist discourse in Western Europe has moved from merely confronting the media as the “lying press” (Holt & Haller, 2017) to accusations of “disinformation” (Egelhofer et al., 2021) and “fake news” of the mainstream media (Monsees, 2023), the same pattern can be confirmed in our analysis of the Spanish case.

Podemos used their populist discourse of deception but in a different way. In 2024, the focus on private ownership of the media addressed the social media presence of the radical right in the pre-electoral campaigns. The radical left confronted the privately owned, radical right media elites: “The corrupt journalists who lie to the people” (Podemos, 2024a). The party argued that the Spanish left coalition government’s measures, in which it had no ministerial positions, were inadequate to face the challenges of media disinformation and the far right. This economic critique of the media implies a normative evaluation of the extent to which capital and economic interests more broadly may undermine the role of the media as intermediaries. What was specific to this radical left populist strategy was the direct appeal to the mainstream left-wing government led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. In contrast to the radical right, it confronted the assumed “media war” with “mafia-like” media addressing the national government.

Podemos’ critique of the media seeks to promote a more pluralistic and democratic media system capable of eliminating or reducing the intervention of big corporations and economic interests in media structure and communication. While the radical left party was calling out a “lying press,” it did not seek to undermine voters’ trust in mainstream, public service media. Sumar’s discourse was framed by its newly acquired coalition government position and the right-wing parties’ insistence on the term “freedom” as it tried to influence its reinterpretation. The European context was inferred by comparisons of the leadership of the PP with Von der Leyen and Meloni. Also, the party’s confrontation with media elites was reduced to mere demands for “freedom of a truthful, authentic and free press” (Sumar, 2024a).

In sum, the results show that there is a distinct difference between left and right radical parties in confronting the media elites in the context of post-truth politics. It is in relation to the representations of the mainstream media that we find the radical right delegitimising the media, claiming that they are not telling the “truth,” while the radical left presents its legitimate critique about “corrupt press” in a more pluralistic way, challenging the governing mainstream left-wing party to solve the problems. As shown, the populist discourse and different depictions of the elites and media elites by the left and right have particular normative implications for the critique and restructuration of the media. This research has shown how the repositioning of these parties in EU election campaigns implies the increasing centrality of social media and fake news, and the use of populist tropes in this arena, excluding Sumar, which avoids the topic. Further comparative research will be needed to explore the reactions of other radical parties in different European countries, to identify the extent to which national factors may intervene in the way in which these parties represent the media and media elites.

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