

Routledge Research in Language and Communication

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO DISCOURSE ON POPULISM

**TRACKING THE USES OF 'POPULISM' IN MEDIA
AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

Edited by

Laetitia Aulit, Anaïs Augé, Barbara De Cock,
Min Reuchamps, Sandrine Roginsky,
and Coline Rondiat



An Interdisciplinary Approach to Discourse on Populism

This collection examines the construction and circulation of discourses on populism, charting their role in shaping collective understandings of democracy.

This volume advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of populism as a form of categorisation used by several types of actors to label people and phenomena in political and social debate, with the first section highlighting chapters on making such a framework work in practice. Chapters collectively make the case for the possibilities afforded by interdisciplinary perspectives, demonstrating how the interplay of discursive, linguistic, political, and communicative analyses is imperative to understanding discourses on populism as discursive practices embedded in specific contexts. The second section showcases interdisciplinary empirical studies on the uses of populism(s) and populist(s) in various types of political and media discourse in Belgium, France, and Spain in 2019. This focus highlights not only analyses on the uses of this notion in different contexts where actors and actions attached to different ideologies have regularly been qualified as ‘populist’, but also the value of an interdisciplinary approach in analysing other concepts prevalent in contemporary public discourses more broadly.

This book will appeal to scholars interested in populism across disciplinary fields, including discourse analysis, language and communication, media studies, history, and political science, as well as those interested in interdisciplinary research methods.

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ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2027
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Aulit, Laetitia editor | Augé, Anaïs editor | Cock, Barbara De editor | Reuchamps, Min editor | Roginsky, Sandrine editor | Rondiat, Coline editor

Title: An interdisciplinary approach to discourse on populism: tracking the uses of 'populism' in media and political discourse / Laetitia Aulit, Anaïs Augé, Barbara De Cock, Min Reuchamps, Sandrine Roginsky and Coline Rondiat.

Description: New York, NY: Routledge, 2026. | Series: Routledge research in language and communication | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026012651 | ISBN 9781041005612 hardback | ISBN 9781041005681 paperback | ISBN 9781003610489 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Populism | Interdisciplinary research | Mass media--Political aspects | Communication in politics

Classification: LCC JC423 .I5724 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026012651>

ISBN: 9781041005612 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781041005681 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003610489 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003610489

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

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Acknowledgements

This book summarises the main outputs of the research project “Discourse, populism and democracy. Tracking the uses of populism in media and political discourse” conducted at UCLouvain (Belgium). This project was initiated by Barbara De Cock, Philippe Hambye, Min Reuchamps, and Sandrine Roginsky back in late 2017. Benjamin Biard and Vincent Jacquet contributed to the initial ideas and, on 23 September 2019, it was submitted as a *manifestation d'intérêt* for the university-wide research calls for “Actions de recherche concertée” (ARC). After a positive assessment, the full proposal was defended in December in front of a UCLouvain-UNamur delegation of the research council and sent out for reviews. No fewer than six reviewers assessed the proposal and all of them pointed to the originality of the project, its added-value to the existing literature, its ambitious data collection and analysis, its fine-tuned interdisciplinary, as well as the strengths and complementarities of the research team. TrUMPo was born under Grant no. 20/25-109.

But that was only the beginning of the adventure. And TrUMPo has been a collective adventure with Anaïs Augé, Axel Humbert-Labeaumaz, Catherine Goossens, Christoph Niessen, Coline Rondiat, Eva Rolin, Ferdinand Teuber, Jessy Bailly, Juliette Zanellato, Laetitia Aulit, Nadezda Shchinova, Raúl Nuevo Gascó, Romane Werner, and Rubèn Llorens Poblador as well as several *jobistes*. This book is also their book.

The Open Access version of this book has been made possible thanks to the generous support of the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) via the “Fonds spéciaux pour la recherche” (FSR), the School of Political and Social Sciences (PSAD), as well as the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE).

At Routledge, our book proposal was supported by Elysse Preposi and Jasmine Erice-Harling. At UCLouvain, Ituze Kelly Musabyimana acted as a highly dedicated Research Assistant to polish all the chapters before this book went into production. In this phase, the book was handled by the professional hands of Fiona Hudson Gabuya, Divya Dayalan, and their team.

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The book that you have in your hands or on your screen owes much to all these people and institutions. Its publication is our mark of sincere gratitude. Above all, it is the final touch to this great collective adventure that the TrUMPo project has been for so many of us. Long life to the TrUMPo spirit!

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Barbara De Cock
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Coline Rondiat
Sandrine Roginsky

1 Introduction

Tracking the uses of ‘populism’ in media and political discourse

*Laetitia Aulit, Anaïs Augé, Barbara De Cock,
Philippe Hambye, Min Reuchamps,
Sandrine Roginsky, and Coline Rondiat*

In contemporary democracies, political and media discourse often rely on the use of the word *populism*. For many observers worldwide, the spread of populism is one of the main threats to democracy (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This has led to the development of a booming literature on populist political parties and politicians. In this flourishing body of literature, two main ways to conceive the notion can be distinguished: on the one hand, populism can be presented as an *ideology* (e.g., Canovan, 2002) and, on the other hand, as a *strategy or instrument* used to communicate and/or to govern (e.g., Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Scholars thus focus on specific political and/or discursive/communicative strategies used by political parties and actors – labelled as ‘populists’ – to convince a larger fringe of the electorate and influence the political debate and the mainstream understanding of (representative) democracy. These works give valuable insights into the origin and development of populism, and the discourse and impact of particular actors considered to be populists.

Nevertheless, one major aspect of populism remains understudied: namely, the use of the term *populism* itself by different actors in the public debate. The term *populism* and its derivatives are not only used by academics and politicians, but also by lay people and the media to refer to very different (groups of) people, actions, and discourses. For the analysis of contemporary democratic dynamics, the way populism is built up in the public debate is a key issue, since it proposes, implicitly or explicitly, a particular view on the way the political field is structured: Which groups, attitudes, or policies are deemed to be populist and why? How does the use of *populism* shape the legitimacy of political actors? What does the overwhelming presence of this term in the contemporary public debate tell us about the way this debate is structured? How does this overwhelming presence give a place to different voices and perspectives? The way the word and the notion of *populism* are defined, used, and circulated, is directly related to competing conceptions of the way political actors should behave in general and act as representatives of the people

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in particular. These questions are even more relevant in the context of a deep democratic malaise worldwide and in particular in European, North American, and Latin American democracies (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Norris, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2013).

1 **Aims of this book**

The research project ‘Discourse, populism and democracy. Tracking the uses of populism in media and political discourse’ (TrUMPo) conducted at UCLouvain (Belgium) between 2020 and 2025 sought to understand in which contexts and situations this notion is used, what meaning it conveys in actual discursive practices, and how it circulates in the public debate. This book addresses these essential dynamics in contemporary democracies, presenting the main results of the project. As the object of our research – that is, the discourse about populism and its circulation – is interdisciplinary (it has a political, a discursive, and a communicative dimensions), the aim of this book is to offer a collection of chapters that presents the main results of our interdisciplinary analysis of the use of *populism* in public discourse.

We focus on populism as a categorisation (and not as an ideology or a strategy) used by several types of actors to understand and organise the political debate in ways that may differ from scholarly approaches (see above). This public discourse about populism has certain connections with the scholarly description of populism because it partly refers to the same reality. Still, public discourse on populism remains distinct from the scholarly discourse on this notion. In our research, the way the notion of populism is used in the public debate in general is considered to be a window into the contemporary political imaginaries that circulate within the public space, between political actors, media professionals, and citizens. Hence, we do not study what populism *is*, but rather what populism *is deemed to be* in public discourse and what these representations of populism tell us about the vision of legitimate or well-functioning political actors.

From a linguistic perspective, populism is not approached as a definite notion but as a term that plays a particular discursive role: it can be understood as a signifier (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018) and/or as a political keyword which is filled with specific meaning via the confrontation of competing discourses that is a central part of the political struggle (Laclau, 2005). This approach gives us the opportunity to get a grasp on verbal exchanges where a single term is used in very different ways, by addressing the following questions: (a) what does it actually mean to be qualified as ‘populist’ in discourse?; (b) what are the features or characteristics that are associated with people or with phenomena

deemed 'populist', considering the way this word is used in discourse and the meaning it conveys in discursive practices?; and (c) what are the consequences of such a qualification?

However, since the discursive strategies and linguistic processes are pragmatically oriented and contextualised, the articulation between political and communicative analyses is crucial to understand such discourses as discursive practices that are embedded in a specific context. Regarding the use of populism as a political category, we observe how populism is constructed and how its meaning emerges in actual discursive practices. These observations lead to a better understanding of similarities and differences between political actors and the ways in which they attempt to represent 'the people' as legitimate or not (Truan, 2019).

Moreover, from the point of view of political communication, the role that the media play in the circulation of discourse on populism is of particular relevance. Coleman reminds us that 'the media help us to make sense of the world' (2002: 88). They play a key role in political processes, whether they are established broadcast news or intermediary technologies such as social media platforms. They are also key to understanding how the category of populism circulates from the political sphere to the general public debate.

Therefore, this book contributes to research on discourse on populism by integrating the methodologies and analyses of three distinct research frameworks – political science, media studies, and linguistics. It also presents an innovative approach related to its comparative insight into different countries and arenas. Indeed, we analyse the use and circulation of the category of populism as a contemporary phenomenon occurring at the European level, through a comparison between three public spheres in three European countries. We have collected data in different arenas in which discourses about populism can be held: (i) the *parliamentary arena*, (ii) *mass media*, and (iii) *social media platforms*, acknowledging that the latter two are increasingly intertwined. Our aim is to understand how discourse about populism plays a role in the mediatised political debate in European democracies. We thus compare these discourses in the national public sphere of three countries: Belgium, France, and Spain. We thereby offer four case studies as the national public sphere in Belgium is both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking.

The choice of these case studies is justified by the fact that they allow for a comparison between different countries presenting different views on the way the State represents the people or the nations/nationalities. Furthermore, in these countries, actors and actions attached to different ideologies have regularly been qualified as 'populist'. In these four political contexts, we focus on the year 2019 because of the multiple elections that have occurred in all three countries during this time period. The focus on

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a particular electoral year allows us to look closely into the moment when political competition in democracy is at its peak and when most discourses are produced, possibly including the word *populism*.

2 **Structure of this book**

This book summarises the main outputs of the TrUMPo research project, namely, the methodological steps related to data collection and selection (Part I. Methodological framework) as well as the main results of the interdisciplinary analysis of the use of *populism* in the different spheres (Part II. On the notion and use of ‘populism’ in political and media discourse). The section dedicated to the methodological framework may arouse the interest of scholars and research teams interested in combining different methodological approaches. In this methodological section, we explain the annotation guide used for the analysis of *populis** from the perspectives of political science, media studies, and linguistics. We also reflect on methodological issues concerning data selection and inter-rater reliability testing. These chapters include pointers on how to use these approaches to analyse other phenomena. Their applicability has been highlighted by De Cock, Hambye, and Pizarro Pedraza in their chapter on ‘Annotation and mark up for representation analysis’ (2024). The chapters included in the section dedicated to the interdisciplinary empirical studies can attract researchers and students looking for original approaches to the study of populism. In this empirical section, we offer an innovative focus on discourses on populism and their circulation across different spheres-arenas. These chapters could therefore appeal to scholars interested in contemporary European political and media discourses, whether from a political, a linguistic, or media perspective. Some observations and results have been partially discussed in other publications, available on the project’s web page: <https://www.discourseonpopulism-uclouvain.com/>. Here, we propose eight original chapters that we present below.

The first section, dedicated to methodological considerations arising from the TrUMPo research project, comprises the following three chapters.

This first section starts with a meta-reflection on corpus collection for interdisciplinary research that includes different languages and different genres, in Chapter 2, entitled “Building a multilingual multi-genre corpus for interdisciplinary research: Data selection, collection techniques, and ethical considerations”, by Barbara De Cock, Eva Rolin, Ferdinand Teuber, and Romane Werner provide. Through a critical reflection on the data collection produced as part of the TrUMPo project, the authors point out methodological issues concerning which data should be collected, technical issues related to obtaining the data, and technical issues related to collecting, archiving, and (re)using the data. In doing so, they offer valuable and practical information for researchers or teams that wish to engage in similar corpus collection.

In the following chapter, Chapter 3, “Qualitative annotation for the analysis of ‘populism’ as a sociopolitical keyword”, Philippe Hambye, Barbara De Cock, Raúl Nuevo Gascó, Min Reuchamps, Sandrine Roginsky, Coline Rondiat, and Nadezda Shchinova address another important aspect when implementing interdisciplinary research: the annotation system. Accordingly, they discuss the general principles underlying our approach and describe all the analytical criteria and categories that we use to analyse the sociopolitical keyword *populism* from the perspectives of linguistics, media studies, and political science. They thus offer a concrete starting point for other interdisciplinary research on sociopolitical keywords.

Coline Rondiat, Christoph Niessen, Barbara De Cock, and Philippe Hambye show in Chapter 4, “Intercoder reliability in qualitative discourse analysis”, how intercoder reliability can support interpretive discourse analysis. It offers a practical framework for testing and reporting reliability when coding a sociopolitical keyword like *populis**, whose meaning is contextual and often multilayered. Drawing on the first reliability round conducted on the dataset, it maps patterns of agreement and divergence across variable types, revealing a consistent gap between formal descriptors and interpretive categories. It then traces these divergences to procedural, contextual, and epistemological factors, and reframes disagreement as a diagnostic resource: this procedure helps to identify ambiguous zones, refine category boundaries, strengthen the codebook, and make interpretation more transparent and collectively accountable.

The second section of this book, entitled “On the notion and use of ‘populism’ in political and media discourse”, includes five contributions that conduct empirical analyses of *populism* through different approaches and in different contexts related to the research project.

In Chapter 5, “On the notion and use of ‘populism’ and ‘populist’ in political discourse: a comparative study in Spanish parliamentary debates and politicians’ tweets”, Laetitia Aulit and Nadezda Shchinova investigate the uses of *populism* in two different forms of political discourse. Taking Spanish politics as a case study, the authors explore who uses the terms and what these uses allow the speakers to do in each context, relating the uses to the communicative practices and goals usually highlighted in the literature on political communication in parliament and on Twitter. By doing so, this chapter provides an insight into how the notion of *populism* is mobilised by political actors depending on their goals and the specific situational contexts in which they are involved.

In the subsequent Chapter 6, “A multi-layered and complexified linguistic approach to the analysis of discourse on ‘populism’”, Laetitia Aulit, Anaïs Augé, Barbara De Cock, Philippe Hambye, and Coline Rondiat propose to expand existing literature on discourse on *populism*, which mainly focuses on collocation analysis in media corpora. In this chapter, the authors provide

new insights, based on linguistic approaches, for its analysis in interactional contexts. In doing so, they demonstrate that the analysis of linguistic or discursive aspects – such as pragmatic mitigation and intensification, metaphors, agentivity, and argumentation – in relation to the uses of *populism* is necessary to grasp the complexity of these uses. Therefore, the authors argue that complexifying the analysis of discourse on *populism* through these approaches can improve our understanding of the representations associated with this phenomenon in contemporary societies.

The following chapter, authored by Sandrine Roginsky, draws our attention to the status of *populis** in press-media discourse: Chapter 7, “On the use of ‘populism’ in print media: a comparative study of press types in France and French-speaking Belgium”. The different newspapers show significant formal differences in terms of article length, analytical depth, and openness to external voices. Yet their uses of *populis** suggest that this notion functions as a common-sense concept rather than as an object of debate. By doing this, the author’s study demonstrates the status of *populis** as journalistic doxa, that is, its use as a naturalised classificatory scheme that constitutes political reality.

In Chapter 8, entitled “Circulating without circulation? Analysis of the uses of ‘populism’ in French and Spanish parliaments, mass media and social media”, Sandrine Roginsky and Raúl Nuevo Gascó treat circulation as an empirical and analytical object. They reflect on the contributions and limits of arena-based approaches through the study of the circulation of *populis** between the three arenas. Their empirical approach to the circulation of *populis**, which demonstrates convergent uses in the absence of traceable circulation, leads them to suggest an integrated perspective. Accordingly, this concept of *populis** emerges as a shared classificatory resource mobilised by actors who refer to their own professional positions through routinised communicative practices.

Coline Rondiat investigates in Chapter 9, “The populist problem. On the uses of ‘populism’ in public discourse”, how the term populism operates in contemporary European press discourse and what its recurrent problematisations reveal about competing democratic imaginaries. Based on a qualitative close reading of 100 randomly selected occurrences, the chapter reconstructs the rationales through which ‘populism’ is rendered negative, and evaluates whether these critiques are anchored in identifiable democratic principles or rely on under specified assumptions about what counts as legitimate politics. The analysis proposes a typology of uses, ranging from largely descriptive references to more evaluative, normatively grounded, or hierarchising uses, and concludes that one central issue is the costs of a vocabulary that can collapse legitimate contestation and anti-democratic threat into the same stigmatising label.

Tacking stock of all these chapters, this book ends with a concluding chapter, entitled “The Uses of ‘populism’ and democratic dynamics” by Jessy Bailly and Min Reuchamps, that sketches how democratic conceptions resonate and are articulated with the uses of *populis**. In order to do so, the conclusion of this book offers a brief glimpse at the extensive literature seeking to analyse altogether populism and democracy, before opening new grounds for investigation in the study of this intricate relationship between the uses of the term *populis** and democratic dynamics. Such dynamics are distinguished at three levels – micro, meso, and macro – that form the core of contemporary democracies.

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Part I

Methodological framework

How to make interdisciplinary
research work?



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2 Building a multilingual multi-genre corpus for interdisciplinary research

Data selection, collection techniques, and ethical considerations

*Barbara De Cock, Eva Rolin,
Ferdinand Teuber, and Romane Werner*

1 Rationale behind the data selection¹

In this section, we detail the rationale behind the data selection for the TrUMPo project.

The project aims to analyse the use of the term *populis** in society in order to understand in which contexts and situations this notion is used, which meaning it conveys in actual discursive practices, and how it circulates within the public debate (see Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume, for a more detailed description).

As we aim to understand how discourse about populism plays a crucial role in the mediated political debate in European democracies, we compare discourses in the national public sphere of three countries – Belgium, France, and Spain – offering four cases of investigation as Belgium can in some respects be considered to have a separate Dutch-speaking and French-speaking public sphere. The choice of these case studies is justified by the fact that they allow for comparing countries presenting different views on the way the State represents the people or the nations/nationalities which are part of the people (Niessen, 2022). Furthermore, in these countries, actors and actions attached to different ideologies have regularly been qualified as “populist” (see De Cock, 2026).

Given our interest in analysing the meanings of *populism*, we have searched texts including *populism* or *populisms* in the languages concerned (namely, Dutch, French, and Spanish), as well as derived adjectives and nouns (see Table 2.1). We do not include data in the third national language of Belgium, namely, German, nor in the co-official languages of Spain. This choice is motivated by their very limited presence

Table 2.1 Different forms of *populist* and *populism* in the languages included in this study

	<i>Abstract noun</i>	<i>Person-referring noun</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
Belgium Dutch-speaking	<i>populisme</i> <i>populismes</i> <i>populismen</i>	<i>populist</i> <i>populisten</i>	<i>populistisch</i> <i>populistische</i>
Belgium French-speaking and France	<i>populisme(s)</i>	<i>populiste(s)</i>	<i>populiste(s)</i>
Spain	<i>populismo(s)</i>	<i>populista(s)</i>	<i>populista(s)</i>

(for Belgium) or total absence (for Spain) in the national parliament. A further issue for German data would have been the difficulty of finding German data concerning Belgium in the vast amount of German language tweets (see Section 2.1).

In these four political contexts, we focus on the year 2019 because of the multiple elections that have occurred in all three countries that year, including EU elections, national elections, and elections at the substate level. The focus on an electoral year is justified by this being the moment where political competition in a democracy is at its peak and when discursive production is especially intense.

To account for the variety of uses, it is evident that various loci of production (so-called arenas of public discourse (Badouard *et al.*, 2016)) are to be included. The choice was made to include parliamentary debates, media, and Twitter (now X). Parliamentary debates are included because they are the central discussion space of the democracies involved in this study. Even though the access to this arena is also limited by various socio-political factors, it is in principle a public arena, whose proceedings are made public. While not necessarily directly reproduced, the discourses produced there play a crucial role in public life. From the perspective of political sciences, it is paramount to not only have the transcripts themselves, but also information concerning the speaker and their political party, which is relevant for subsequent analyses concerning the use of *populis** by certain political orientations and/or by government vs. opposition (see annotation system described in Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume). Being parliamentary regimes, all three chambers share fundamental legislative, representative, oversight, and communicative functions. To fulfil these functions, they have at their disposal various instruments and structures, such as plenary debates, legislative proposals, and parliamentary committees. So, while their levels of activity and institutional strength may differ, the three chambers are sufficiently similar to allow for comparisons on this basis.

Table 2.2 Media sources included in the data collection

	<i>Public-owned media</i>	<i>Elite media</i>	<i>Serious-popular media</i>	<i>Free daily and traffic distributed newspaper</i>
Belgium – Dutch-speaking	vrt.be/vrtnws	De Standaard	Het Laatste Nieuws	Metro
Belgium – French-speaking	rtbf.be/info	Le Soir	La DH	Metro
France	France Television / Radio France	Le Monde	Aujourd'hui en France/Le Parisien	20 minutes
Spain	www.rtve.es/noticias	El País	elespanol.com/elconfidencial.com	20 minutes

From the perspective of communication studies, the choice of mass media to be analysed is of the utmost importance. As shown in Table 2.2, our mass media corpus comprises four media per country. Concretely, have selected (1) public-owned media, that is, public broadcasting service which “cannot retreat from public information” (Coleman, 2002: 89), (2) elite media, that is, “established media [that] typically operate within the consensus, displaying a clear tendency to adopt the hegemonic-official position on issues” (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011), (3) “serious-popular” media (Sparks, 2000: 15) which include newspapers “which have a strong stress upon visual design and contain a large dose of scandal, sports and entertainment but that still demonstrate all, or a significant part, of the same inventory of news values as their more serious cousins” (Sparks, 2000: 15), and (4) free daily and traffic distributed newspapers. Free dailies, “whose most well-known titles are *20 minutes* and *Metro*” (Lamour, 2019: 1167), are given “free of charge to readers” (Serazio, 2009: 649). They concentrate on news and current affairs (Bakker, 2013). They are “short, illustrated and easily consumed content, distributed in large urban areas during the morning or evening peak hours” (Lamour, 2017: 1). Lamour describes them as “popular mass medium” (Lamour, 2019: 1167), the “only print medium able to capture a mass audience equivalent to prime-time TV news bulletins” (Lamour, 2019: 1169). Upon deciding on the extent of our data selection, we have come to realise that these journals are, due to their free distribution in public spaces and public transport, widely read and therefore an important source of information. In 2022, Belgian *Metro* has ceased its activities due to too limited income from publicity (as a consequence of the

pandemic). In 2024, French *20 Minutes* has ceased to publish a paper version and has become an entirely online media. These media outlets have then come to occupy a different place in news consumption and, for the Belgian case, downright lost their relevance. Spanish *20 Minutos*, by contrast, still exists in a paper version in major cities. The different current situation of these free media makes that they are no longer comparable, as they were in 2019.

The choice of Twitter is in the first place justified by the fact that Twitter plays a key role in the cycle of political information (Chadwick, 2013) and political discussion since it is a professional space, used by politicians but also by stakeholders, media, etc. (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018). Especially in the case of public figures, we know that their tweets may also be written by members of their communication team, and some politicians explicitly acknowledge this in their profile. However, the public figure remains the principal of the message in Goffman's terms (Goffman, 1981), that is, the person publicly responsible for the content. Twitter is used by journalists (Vis, 2013) and therefore contributes to the coverage of the political sphere by media professionals. Even though some media or journalists have left Twitter/X after Elon Musk bought the platform and following the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, many journalists remain on this platform, although some only in an observatory capacity. Furthermore, Twitter is used by political actors themselves (Roginsky & De Cock, 2015) but also by citizens who have a political interest (Roginsky & Huys, 2015). It is worth bearing in mind that only a minority of people are indeed Twitter subscribers. If numbers should be used with caution due to the difficulties to find official statistics provided by the platform, statistics provided by marketing websites indicate that, in 2019, 5.9% of the Spanish population, 6.4% of the Belgian population, and 6.1% of the French population were Twitter users. A second reason to use Twitter is that it contributes to "hybridising" and revisiting the "traditional cycle of political information" (Chadwick, 2013). Politicians can use Twitter to spread information themselves, without using press conferences or, indeed, media outlets at all. They often also retransmit news or comment on it.

The parliamentary debates and the mass media could easily be linked to one of the (sub)national public spheres we want to analyse; however, this is less straightforward with tweets. Indeed, while one can enable geolocalisation of one's tweets and/or mention one's location in the Twitter biography, it is not compulsory to do so, making tweets much less clearly ascribed to a specific geographical area. In addition, the geographical indications available bear some questions. The localisation mentioned in one's biography is not necessarily univocal. Indeed, users can choose to mention various locations, representing various aspects of their life (e.g., place of

origin vs. current residence or residence vs. workplace). Moreover, one can tweet while being for a longer or shorter time in a location different than the one indicated in the biography. Finally, some locations are downright fictitious, ranging from toponyms expressing a sociopolitical view (e.g., *Banana republic*) to toponyms that reveal personal hobbies or interests (e.g., *Hogwarts*, the school from the Harry Potter series) (see also Graham *et al.*, 2014).

For both practical and content-related reasons, we then decided to first gather all the 2019 tweets with *populis** and then apply various filtering techniques to them.

2 Collection and data treatment techniques

2.1 Tweets

The tweet collection was conducted via the company Tweet Binder, through which we obtained a corpus of tweets in Excel format. Each file corresponds to a specific form of *populis** (e.g., *populisme*, *populiste*) in 2019 and includes, for each occurrence of *populis**, various fields such as the date, the tweet content, the language used, the username, the number of likes, and the location.

A first round of filtering was carried out using OpenRefine, focusing on the “language” variable to keep only tweets written in our target languages: Dutch, French, and Spanish (whenever applicable). Indeed, some of the forms of *populis** also exist in languages outside the scope of this study, such as *populisten* in Swedish or *populisme* in Catalan, making a language filtering a necessary step. Concerning tweets that contained geolocalisation information (a minority of the tweets), we then refined this filtering further by using geolocation, keeping only tweets in Spanish from Spain, in French from Belgium and France, and in Dutch from Belgium.

The second filtering step was applied to tweets that contained a reference to a localisation other than geolocalisation, for example, mentioning a hometown in one’s Twitter biography. This step relied on a manually curated list of cities and towns in Spain, France, and Belgium, compiled from various online sources. Most tweets originated from larger cities rather than smaller villages. This step was implemented in Python using the Pandas library, which is specifically designed for data analysis and manipulation. Pandas offers powerful data structures and functions for efficiently handling structured data, such as tables. During this process, we also noticed that location names were often written in various ways (e.g., *Belgium*, *Belgie*, *Belgique*, and *Belgiïïïïque*). To account for this variability, we incorporated these noisy variations into our list to improve the accuracy of location matching.

Once each occurrence had been divided into three files (one per language), we applied regular expressions (regex) to transform certain variables, such as converting date formats (e.g., “Sat 05 Jan 2019 13:39:44 GMT”) into a simpler day/month format. Thanks to these new variables, we were able to generate visualisations showing minimum, maximum, and average tweet volumes for a given period of time, helping us identify spikes, that is, specific days or months when tweet activity increased. These spikes could then be linked to events identified within the tweet corpus.

Finally, in order to create a specific subcorpus for more qualitative analyses, a random sampling of 1,000 tweets was realised, complemented with one further criterion, namely, the relevance of the tweets to the circulation of discourses on populism in Belgium (both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parts), France, and Spain. This criterion is motivated by the ecological approach (see Tréré, 2019) we adopt to the way Twitter users can receive tweets. We then aim not to select only tweets published in Spain, France, and Belgium, but rather to select tweets that would be read and considered a relevant part of the reading experience of users from those countries. Indeed, social networks do not function at a specific geographical level (although they can be more popular in some regions than others), and users read messages posted from different countries. Thus, Spanish Twitter users can also frequently read messages from/concerning Latin-American countries. Moreover, such an ecological approach allows for the consideration of tweets that can be published by users who are currently not living in what they consider their homeland. This approach also enables us to take into account the considerable circulation between France and the French-speaking part of Belgium due to the huge interest for French media and politics in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Thus, following a discussion among at least two project members on each specific tweet in this 1,000 tweet dataset, we discard tweets that would be considered entirely irrelevant or not understandable at all (in terms of sociopolitical context) from the Spanish, French, or Belgian perspectives, for example, a tweet published in French concerning a leader described as populist in a French-speaking country with which Belgium has little contact. This leads us to establishing four subdatasets of 666 tweets each.

2.2 *Media outlets*

To collect both the media and parliamentary data, web scraping techniques have been used. These are adapted to the specificities of the respective websites.

The primary objective of this project is to analyse the usage of the concept of *populis** within public discourse in Belgium, Spain, and France.

To this end, a large-scale corpus of media discourse has been compiled and systematically analysed.

We first present the techniques used for article extraction and data preprocessing. The collection of media articles is carried out through automated web scraping from 16 selected newspapers, representing diverse political orientations and linguistic contexts across the three studied countries.

This process relies on Perl and Python scripts specifically designed to extract structured data from news websites. Given the heterogeneity of web page structures across different media outlets, a tailored approach is adopted, using a combination of HTML parsing techniques, regular expressions, and XPath/CSS selectors to locate and extract relevant textual content.

The extraction workflow follows these key steps:

- 1 URL Identification: Scripts such as *get_all_urls_le_monde.py* and *get_all_urls_el_pais_1.py* retrieved article URLs from sitemap indexes or dynamically generated news feeds.
- 2 HTML Parsing and Content Extraction: The BeautifulSoup library (Python) and regular expressions (Perl) help to navigate the HTML DOM,² isolating article titles, publication dates, and main body text while filtering out irrelevant sections (e.g., advertisements, navigation bars, and multimedia content).
- 3 Normalisation and Cleaning: Extracted texts are processed to remove non-linguistic elements, standardise the encoding (UTF-8), and convert data into structured formats (.txt,.csv,.json) for further analysis.

The collected articles are subsequently categorised into two datasets:

- A complete dataset, encompassing all extracted files.
- A filtered dataset, containing only articles in which at least one occurrence of the studied terms is detected.

The created scripts used in this process include *extraction_le_monde.pl*, *extraction_rtve.pl*, *extraction_rtbf.pl*, among others. These scripts ensure consistency across multiple sources while adapting to site-specific HTML structures.

To analyse the linguistic and discursive contexts in which *populism* is used, concordances are generated using the TextStat library. A concordance is a structured representation of a keyword's occurrences within a corpus, showing its left and right co-text to capture contextual patterns.

The concordance-building process follows these steps:

- 1 Tokenisation and Lemmatisation: Texts are processed to segment words while preserving multi-word expressions (see Table 2.3).
- 2 Keyword in Context (KWIC) Extraction: The TextStat library generates KWIC concordances, providing a window of context around each occurrence of the target lexeme.
- 3 Data Structuring: The output files are formatted as spreadsheets (.xlsx), including the following columns (see Figure 2.1):
 - a Left Context (preceding words)
 - b Lexeme (target word)
 - c Right Context (following words)
 - d Source File (original document name)
 - e Date (when available)

This structured representation allows for both qualitative and quantitative analyses of discursive patterns related to *populism*.

A quantitative analysis of the occurrences of *populism* is conducted through descriptive statistical measures to assess frequency distributions and temporal trends in the data.

Table 2.3 Example of the tokenisation and lemmatisation of a sentence

A	B	C
Token	Lemma	Grammatical_category
les	le	DET (determiner)
discours	discours	NOM (noun)
des	de	PREP+DET
politiciens	politicien	NOM
populistes	populiste	ADJ (adjective)
influent	inflencer	VER (verb)
souvent	souvent	ADV (adverb)
l'	le	DET (elided determiner)
opinion	opinion	NOM
publique	public	ADJ
.	.	PONCT

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	sentence	left_context	lexeme	right_context	source_file	url	date
2	"Le MR semble se diriger plus vers la droite et il y a le style de Georges-Louis Bouchez qui est un peu populiste."	qui est un peu populiste	"	rtinfo	https://www.		26/10/23

Figure 2.1 Example of the result of data structuring

2.3 Parliamentary debates

In order to compile a list of mentions of the term *populis** in the parliamentary arena of the three selected national contexts, we collect data from the websites of the most important parliamentary chambers of each country (Belgium: www.lachambre.be; France: www.assemblee-nationale.fr; Spain: www.congreso.es). Our approach relies on automated web scraping implemented through Python scripts that are tailored to the specific institutional contexts of each country, the selected document types, and the specific structure of each website. As our goal is to analyse comparable types of parliamentary texts across countries, we include the following categories in our data collection:

- 1 Transcripts of plenary debates;
- 2 Transcripts of parliamentary committee debates;
- 3 Written questions submitted by members of parliament to the government³;
- 4 Legislative proposals and other documents debated or adopted by parliament (e.g., resolutions).

In practice, our workflow includes the following common steps:

1 URL Collection

For all three parliamentary chambers, the first step involves retrieving lists of parliamentary documents from their respective websites. Depending on the website, we rely on Selenium (namely, for the Assemblée nationale), BeautifulSoup⁴, and/or regular expressions in order to identify and extract links to the specific documents, for example, plenary debates or legislative bills.

2 Document Download and Storage

Once URLs have been collected, the scripts download the corresponding documents, typically in PDF or HTML format. To download the documents, we develop custom Python scripts using tools like wget (a command-line program for downloading files) and the requests library (which provides more control when accessing websites). These scripts are tailored to the structure of each parliamentary website and the specific types of documents we have been collecting, such as plenary debates or legislative proposals. Once downloaded, the files are saved in a folder structure that reflects the three national contexts and the various document types. File names follow consistent conventions, typically including the country, document type, and the date of the debate or publication.

3 Content Filtering and Keyword Search

To identify documents relevant to the study of *populis**, a filtering step based on keyword detection has been implemented. Similar procedures to those for the media data are applied to collect the relevant data in datasheets.

As a result of these steps, our dataset for the parliamentary arena consists in two parts: (1) a unique data file with metadata (e.g., date, document type) and keywords in context for the search term, and (2) a complete collection of full text documents, for example, legislative proposals or plenary debate transcripts, in which *populis** occurs.

Given the small size of this corpus, no descriptive statistics have been developed.

3 Ethical issues related to collecting, archiving, and reusing the data

All the data collected for this research have been produced in public spaces and are publicly available. A considerable amount of the discourse producers are public figures (politicians, journalists, researchers, etc.) communicating in their professional and public capacity.

In our study, when considering ethical issues, we adopt a double distinction depending on whether the method was large or small scale, and on whether persons involved were public or private persons.

For more large-scale studies, such as collocation analyses, data are treated in an anonymised way in that the discourse producers' identity is not revealed. We have not removed all proper nouns in the corpora since those that appear in large-scale studies are typically highly frequent names of public persons (e.g., Orbán, Salvini). For more small-scale studies (such as argumentative studies or metaphor analyses), we pseudonymise the data of the discourse producers who are not public figures, as well as mentions of non-public persons in other authors' discourses in the sense that we attribute a label "non-public person" to those references (see also Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume). In practice, this concerned especially the Twitter data since the speakers and references to concrete persons in parliamentary and media data only concerned public figures. (When non-public figures are included in the media, they are typically already represented in an anonymised manner.) In presentations and publications, such references within the tweets are replaced by @X.

Despite all our data being public, we have chosen not to retain the references to non-public figures since some of the utterances may be considered sensitive (e.g., calling someone populist). Indeed, discussions concerning *populis** can include strong expressions of political opinions.

Our decisions regarding these data have been inspired by the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke *et al.*, 2020), as also discussed in Andone (2025).

While analysing the data, we have seen that some of the tweets are no longer visible at the time of analysing or publishing output. The author may have decided to remove a specific tweet or removed their account altogether. Other authors may have become blocked.

The data have been stored on university servers with restricted access, limited to project members. Given the complex and evolving intellectual property rights issues related to the Twitter and media parts of the dataset, only the parliamentary data can be made available beyond the project. All data will be destroyed after 15 years, considering that this is a reasonable time to create all the research outputs and possible follow-up research.

4 Insights for future projects

As it has become clear throughout the project, and as it will become clear in the following chapters, creating this international corpus comprising multiple arenas has greatly enriched our research on *populis**. However, creating a corpus across countries and arenas also implies challenges and requires sufficient resources. We discuss some insights for future projects in what follows.

The possibility to collect tweets in a massive way has varied greatly over the years, which makes it difficult to collect longitudinal corpora (see De Cock & Greco, 2025). When we started the project in 2020, purchasing the tweets via Tweet Binder was the only viable solution to obtain huge quantities of previously produced tweets. Sometime later, academics could use the “Tweet downloader” tool, which required little technical skills and allowed researchers to obtain considerable amounts of tweets for research purposes (see Filardo-Llamas *et al.*, 2025). However, this tool disappeared in February 2023, leaving at the time of writing in practice only paid options to obtain tweets, which raises both economical and ethical questions. (An academic access to X exists but has so far not proven to be a useful or usable route for this kind of research.)

In addition to the difficulties to obtain the tweets, we have also encountered challenges related to tweets that are in the data collection but are no longer available online, for example, because the original poster erased the tweet or closed their account altogether. This also holds for tweets to which a tweet in our corpus is an answer or a retweet, making the interpretation of such tweets inherently complicated. We have made the choice to acknowledge these limitations regarding possible interpretations, since they are intrinsic to the way the platform works.

As pointed out above, the fact that Twitter does not follow geographical boundaries is a challenge for research focusing on a specific geographic entity. However, we have also considered it an opportunity to analyse Twitter precisely as a platform that does not follow classical geographical boundaries and to fully acknowledge in our research design that discourses on/relevant for a specific country can originate outside its geographical boundaries.

When comparing different media, it is paramount to take into account that different newspapers and newspaper archives have different search tools. Some allow for searching the full content, whereas other search systems are rather based on keywords defined by the journal itself. While some overarching (often subscription-based) systems give access to various media in a similar way, such as Lexis or Europresse, none of these included the combination of countries and types of newspapers we aim for. These tools can of course be very helpful if they match your research interests, but we would like to draw attention to the blind spots they create in terms of analysed media and collected data. This has led us to develop our own collection techniques described in this chapter.

The creation of the parliamentary corpus requires more than any other corpus a profound knowledge of the political system under study, particularly in order to consider the relevance and function of different types of subcommissions that constitute spaces of discussion. The added value of working with an interdisciplinary research team is crucial in this respect. The inclusion or exclusion of certain specific spaces in the parliamentary arena ultimately depends on the research aims. In our case, the public nature of discourses at the moment of their production is a relevant factor. A comparative functional approach where one can compare the position spaces take up in parliamentary debate is paramount to assess this. On a more technical note, while parliamentary data are the most easily available in the sense that they do not require paid subscriptions from a perspective of democratic transparency, the underlying technical tools do not always allow for easy massive downloading of the data. Finally, the available transcripts are not transcripts created for research aims. Thus, they tend to not include elements that transcripts for the linguistic or interactional analysis of spoken data would require, such as pauses, hesitations, and repetitions or, if they include them, they do so with a degree of accuracy that is insufficient for linguistic research. Rather, the parliamentary transcripts are edited versions of the text as pronounced in the public arena. This editing can be limited to removing specific features of spoken language, such as pauses or repetitions, but can go further in some national contexts (Gelabert, 2004: 78–79). In the context of this study, this edited version has been useful but a study focusing on spoken language features such as prosodic features and repetitions would need a more detailed transcript.

In this chapter, we have outlined the way in which we have established a corpus involving various languages, various types of sources with their technical specificities, in the context of an interdisciplinary project. We are aware that the decisions we have made and procedures we have followed are not necessarily the ideal solutions for other researchers or other projects. Indeed, these decisions are inspired by the project aims and taken in a specific timeframe. As discussed above, some technical aspects have already evolved in the meantime, particularly access to Twitter/X data. Moreover, as also discussed in Andone (2025), standards and practices concerning ethical aspects of research are in constant evolution.

However, we do hope that sharing our meta-reflection on this data collection can provide useful suggestions and ideas for colleagues who wish to collect data of a somewhat similar nature.

Notes

- 1 This research is part of the ARC project 20/25–109 “Discourse, populism and democracy – Tracking the uses of ‘populism’ in media and political discourse” (TrUMPo), funded by the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.
- 2 The HTML DOM (Document Object Model) is a tree-like representation of a web page’s structure. It allows programming languages like JavaScript to access, modify, and interact with the elements of a webpage dynamically.
- 3 We included written questions in our data collection since they are a classic instrument in the hands of members of parliament. Yet, it turned out that in the Belgian case we could not find a single occurrence of *populis** in over 1,700 written questions submitted to the federal government in 2019. In the case of Spain, we excluded written questions from the analysis because they were only available in OCR (image-based) format, leading us to exclude these from the data collection.
- 4 BeautifulSoup is a Python library used for web scraping and parsing HTML and XML documents. It helps extract data from web pages in a structured way by providing tools to navigate, search, and modify the parsed HTML/XML tree.

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3 Qualitative annotation of ‘populism’ as a sociopolitical keyword

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1 Introduction

Populism is one of those catch-all concepts that are heavily mobilised in media and political discourses, even though their meaning generally remains rather vague (see, e.g., Bale *et al.*, 2011; Herkman, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) – with the consequence that some people criticise what is considered the overuse of an empty category (see Schwörer 2021 for the case of populism). This paradox raises questions about both the functioning of sociopolitical discourse and the dynamics of the media and political spheres, which is why we consider an interdisciplinary analysis particularly well-suited to address these questions.

This chapter describes and discusses the analytical approach used in our research project on the uses of the term *populism* in contemporary sociopolitical discourse within several European linguistic and cultural spaces.¹ Through this example, we propose a method and a broader reflection on how to systematically study particular words that play a key role in contemporary discourse.

An important part of research in discourse analysis focusing on pre-selected words of particular theoretical or societal interest is based on quantitative methods and follows a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies approach (Baker, 2023). Works of this kind often engage with the collocations of the search term in large corpora in order to understand its meaning and, more fundamentally, to characterise the representation that discourse offers of the social reality designated by the keyword under study – see, for example, Alcántara-Plá (2020) on *democracy*, Baker *et al.* (2012) or Alcántara-Plá & Ruiz-Sánchez (2017) on *Muslims*, Schröter *et al.* (2019) on *multiculturalism*, and Taylor (2014) on *migrant*. Identifying the most frequent collocations and grouping them into relevant categories (using various techniques) makes it possible to identify competing representations, their relative frequency, or to situate them on a positive or negative polarity. This type of approach is sometimes supplemented by an analysis

of concordance lines in order to identify regular structural or semantic patterns and thus further clarify the overall trends that emerge from the analysis of collocations. Such an approach has already been applied to *populism* by several authors working on diverse languages (e.g., Göhring, 2022; Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024).

Other authors adopt a qualitative approach based on the systematic coding or annotation of all occurrences of the studied keyword observed in a given corpus (for the case of *populism*, see Bale *et al.*, 2011; Hamo *et al.*, 2019; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020). The choice of variables that are annotated and the definition of the categories available for each variable vary considerably from one study to another, depending on the authors’ research questions. In the case of studies on *populism*, coding procedures may thus include varying amounts of descriptive information on the context in which the discourse has been produced (e.g., in which newspaper does the occurrence appear? in what discourse genre?) and/or associate each occurrence with more interpretative categories constructed by the researchers and used, for example, to identify whether *populism* refers to a political style or to ideological content (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022) or with a neutral, positive, or pejorative implication (Bale *et al.*, 2011).

Our own approach to the keyword *populism* is inspired by these works and takes over several of their methodological proposals. Yet, as will be shown below, we adapt them to the specificities of our own research and sometimes explore new avenues in order to reach our own research objectives. Although our methodology is consistent with the objectives and characteristics of the TrUMPo project, it is based on general principles that would be valid for other research seeking to study the diversity of uses of any word considered to play a key role in sociopolitical discourse – what we call, following other authors, a ‘sociopolitical keyword’ (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025). Hence, while the codebook has been conceived as a coherent whole, it is undoubtedly possible to restrict oneself to certain subsections depending on the needs pertaining to specific projects.

In what follows, we first present the general principles underlying our approach and our annotation scheme (Section 1). We then describe this annotation scheme in detail, explaining the rationale behind the various choices that have been made (Section 2). Finally, we conclude this chapter with a discussion on the possibilities for transposing our method to other research and the main limitations and difficulties of this type of approach (Section 3).

2 General overview of methodological principles

The general aim of our study of *populism* as a keyword is to understand why the importance, frequency, and circulation of this term have increased in contemporary sociopolitical discourse. We also aim to understand why

and under which conditions this term could play a significant role in this discourse. Our objective is not merely to identify what people say about populism and how they consequently represent this concept – for instance, by using certain terms more frequently than others when talking about it. Rather, we take a broader approach, allowing us not only to answer these questions, but more generally to understand the rationale behind the uses of *populism*.

In order to understand why the word *populism* is so pervasive in contemporary discourse, we argue that it must be studied within the specific contexts in which it is used. We also assume that words like *populism* are used in a variety of ways and hence play different roles in discourse, depending on who uses them (vs. who does not), for what purposes, and in what contexts. Considering *populism* as a sociopolitical keyword implies that we take into account the fact that it can be used in multiple ways, for many different purposes, and hence for different reasons. *Populism* has been described as a highly versatile discursive label, characterised by multiple and variable meanings and functions (see Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume; see also Aulit & De Cock, 2025; Hamo *et al.*, 2019) : it is one thing to use *populism* to describe someone or some group ('the populism of party X'), another to talk about *populism* itself ('Populism is one of the main threats to democracy'), and yet another to refer to others' use of the term ('People call you a populist when you don't agree with them'). Consequently, we are not seeking to identify *the* meaning or function of *populism* as a single, unified, object. Rather, we consider that this word – due to its highly polysemic and evaluative nature, which it shares with other sociopolitical keywords (Hambye *et al.*, 2025), may be used by different people to achieve different purposes in different contexts, depending on different interests and issues at stake. For this reason, it would not have been appropriate to adopt a methodology that conflates all these types of uses or fails to distinguish between them. This would have been the case, for instance, if we had been limiting ourselves to exploring the main semantic fields associated with the term in a large corpus, or qualitatively examining a sample of occurrences in order to identify one or several regular patterns of use, without taking into account the contextual features of each occurrence of the keyword.

Accordingly, we opt for a mainly qualitative approach and for a methodology based on the systematic annotation of a large set of occurrences of *populism* analysed in context. We consider this to be the best way to take into account both information relating to the meaning and function of our keyword and other information concerning interactional situations, so that we can link them together. We believe that such an approach is also consistent with our interdisciplinary approach, which seeks not only to understand how *populism* functions as a word, but also to study how

journalists and politicians, as key actors in public debate, use it, and how this category reflects broader trends of how the current political field and its main divisions are perceived.

In order to provide a valid answer to our research questions, we construct a representative corpus of uses of the word *populism* (and its derivatives, which we refer to as *populis**). This corpus includes all occurrences of *populis** produced during a single year (2019) in three countries and four languages (Belgium (Dutch and French), France (French), and Spain (Spanish)) and appearing in three major areas of sociopolitical communication, what we call ‘arenas of public discussion’ (for a discussion of this concept, see Roginsky & Nuevo Gascó, Chapter 8 in this volume): parliaments, the media, and Twitter (now known as X). Our goal is to annotate this set of occurrences exhaustively. However, for feasibility reasons, we reduce the number of cases analysed in the media and Twitter by randomly constructing a smaller sub-corpus of approximately 500 occurrences for each of these two arenas (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume, for details on corpus construction and selection criteria).

As in any systematic annotation process of this type (see De Cock *et al.*, 2024), our objective is to characterise each occurrence of *populis** in relation to different variables considered relevant to our research questions. The annotation has been carried out in a spreadsheet where each row corresponds to a single occurrence of *populis** and each column to a variable regarded as relevant for the multidimensional analysis of this keyword (see example in Figure 3.1).

In order to account for the diversity of the uses of *populis**, and notably for the diverse meanings and functions it can take in discourse, we seek to identify three key aspects for each occurrence:

- the discursive, communicative, and sociopolitical context of use,
- the meaning and connotations associated with the term, and
- the function of the statement in which *populis** appears and to which it contributes.

A2

elle communautaire ou institutionnelle, pas de blocage politique mais un focus sur des réformes économiques et sociales." Priorité au climat (peu la Belgique, horizon l'Europe, avec des dossiers chauds en perspective, comme le Brexit ou la montée des populistes. Cela dit pour Charles Michel, la priorité européenne doit être l'urgence climatique: "L'Europe doit être au cœur du changement de paradigme, de la révolution copernicienne. On

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Text occ.	Occurrence	Topic	Gram. category	Related words	Text ID	Date	Arena	Arena type	Arena subtype	Language	Country	Discourse	Speaker ID	Speaker type
1	elle communautaire ou institutionnelle	Charles Michel	Nom défini	la montée des	2012_11_29	22-03-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Récit	ALF	Journaliste / A
2	elle communautaire ou institutionnelle	Radicalisation	Nom défini	tomber dans	2019_03_22	22-03-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Nicolas Bayge	Expert
3	ad hominem. Une populisme	Interview Ma	Nom défini	la montée	2019_00001	16-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Interview	Adrien de Ma	Journaliste / A
4	ark Eykens (CDR) populistes	Vol d'un bus à	Épithète	coalition	2019_00_23	22-03-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	AFP	Journaliste / A
5	test sur 50% des v. populistes	Election prési-	Nom défini	de gauche; Smer	2019_00004	26-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	AFP	Journaliste / A
6	test sur 50% des v. populistes	Retour sur un	Nom défini	de tout bord; ext	2019_00003	16-05-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Laasou	Journaliste / A
7	usé à l'apaisement populistes	Attentat Chi	Nom défini	la montée; gilets	2019_00001	16-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Grignat	Expert
8	tre de tueur à cha populisme	Résultat élec	Nom indéfini	les questions de	2019_07_27	27-07-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Iemot	Journaliste / A
9	ean Faniel, politici populisme	Interview Ald	Épithète	partis; de gauche	2019_00000	09-09-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Interview	Aida Girelli	Politique
10	anji. Il en ressort < populistes	Interview Ald	Épithète	partis; de gauche	2019_00000	09-09-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Récit	Alice Dulcizeu	Journaliste / A
11	béreux ? Au-delà < populistes	Elections UE	Nom défini	173 élus	2019_05_25	26-05-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Récit	Alice Dulcizeu	Journaliste / A
12	comme ailleurs < populistes	Elections UE	Nom défini	173 élus	2019_05_25	26-05-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Iemot	Journaliste / A
13	piratels ou religie populistes	Elections eur	Nom défini	pro-européens	2019_00001	04-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Récit	Benjamin Ma	Journaliste / A
14	tt power russe <ur populistes	Conférence <	Épithète	partis	2019_04_19	19-04-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Récit	Benjamin Ma	Journaliste / A
15	Joelents, cette <u populiste	Gilets jaunes	Nom défini	une partie du m	2019_02_18	18-02-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Édito/chroni	Benjamin Ver	Journaliste / A
16	e en date : celle <u populisme	gratuité tram	Nom indéfini	cet élan de	2019_00004	30-01-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Bianca Debae	Politique
17	le temps long. Set<u populistes	Interview Ben	Nom défini	aliments	2019_05_04	04-05-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Bernat Scheue	Expert
18	hls dans notre <u populisme	Réforme de l'	Nom défini	le plus bas de g	2019_12_30	30-12-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Récit	Bernard Dem	Journaliste / A
19	et pour deux rats<u populistes	Interview Ber	Épithète	poussée	2019_01_26	26-01-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Bernard Hent	Personnalité
20	érations se dést<u populisme	Vieillessement	Nom défini	la star autrichien	2019_04_22	22-04-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Commentaire	Bernhard Ode	Journaliste / A

Figure 3.1 Example of a set of occurrences of *populis** in the coding grid

These three analytical dimensions have also been studied in previous qualitative works on *populism* based on annotation procedures (see above). Yet, most of these studies do not combine all three dimensions (but only one or two of them) and generally focus on the question of the meaning of *populism* at the expense of analysing the role of this keyword in discourse and in the particular interactional situations in which it appears. Furthermore, they generally address each of these dimensions less comprehensively, using only one or two variables, whereas our approach is more ambitious and seeks to integrate a greater number of factors in order to understand what motivates the use of our keyword. Finally, our approach is often more data-driven than the one adopted in existing research: for instance, when studying the function of *populis**, other scholars only focus on a small set of predefined functions – self-, other-, and third-party ‘positioning’ for Hamo *et al.* (2019); to ‘discredit’ and to ‘name’ for Kranert (2020) – while our inductive identification of potential functions leads us to distinguish between five possibilities (see Section 2.3).

As a consequence, three main groups of variables are defined. As detailed below, each group includes several variables selected because they can provide relevant information about one of these three dimensions. Some of these variables are open-ended, while others are closed and allow only a limited set of predefined values. In the latter case, the accepted responses for a given variable are defined either a priori, based on relevant categories proposed in the scientific literature, or inductively by constructing categories ourselves on the basis of the analysis of an initial random sample of 100 occurrences. This procedure ensures that the categories developed can account for all the cases observed in our data, including the least frequent ones.

The final coding grid that has been used is the result of a collective and iterative process of elaboration. We have created a first version of the grid, with a certain number of variables and possible values for each of them and then we have started applying it to a sub-part of our sample (20 occurrences). Each member of our research team has recorded the difficulties they have faced during this first stage of the analysis, for example, need to add missing values for certain variables, difficulty to distinguish between two predefined responses/categories for a given variable, feeling that some observation related to a specific occurrence deserves to be taken into account but that none of the existing variables allows to capture it. Analytical disagreements between coders have also been taken into account and used to improve the coding grid and the codebook that has been elaborated simultaneously in order to give instructions as explicit as possible about the way each variable (and each available value for closed variables) should be understood (see Rondiat *et al.*, Chapter 4 in this volume). Six

rounds of test and revision have been needed to stabilise the coding grid and provide a version of the codebook which is reasonably transparent and accurate.

3 Rationale behind the selection of variables and the coding scheme

3.1 Context-related variables

In the spreadsheet we use, each occurrence of our keyword appears first in the exact form in which it appears in the source text (e.g., the plural noun *populistes* in French or the singular adjective *populistisch* in Dutch). The second column displays (a part of) the text in which the occurrence appears: for press or parliamentary data, it is presented in its close textual environment (the sentence including the keyword along with the preceding and following sentences); for tweets, the full content of the tweet is included.

On the right of the text comprising the occurrence, several columns provide metadata extracted from the source documents when the database was built up (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume): date, name of the source (e.g. Twitter, name of the newspaper where the source appeared), URL of the message for tweets or name of the source file in our corpus, language, and country of the source. It should be noted that our media corpus has been compiled by selecting four online news sites per country, corresponding to different types of media: public-owned media, so-called ‘elite media’ and ‘serious-popular’ media, and finally, media websites offering free full access to their content (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume for more details). Accordingly, for media occurrences, our data indicate both the specific outlet and the broader media category it belongs to. For tweets, additional information is available: the possible location of the account that posted the tweet, the number of retweets of the tweet analysed, the number of likes associated with the tweet, and finally the list of hashtags and other accounts mentioned in the tweet.

This concrete and easily identifiable information is supplemented by three types of annotation that also provide insight into the material context of the discourse analysed. For newspaper articles, we indicate the type of discourse to which each source article belongs, distinguishing between seven categories²: (1) news dispatch/short article, (2) narrative, (3) report, (4) commentary/analysis, (5) editorial/column, (6) interview, and (7) opinion piece/open letter. In constructing these categories, we draw on several typologies available in the literature (Marchetti, 2022; Ringoot, 2014), selecting the criteria most relevant to our research purposes. Thus, we contrast genres in which a member of the editorial staff of the newspaper is

responsible for the discourse (categories 2–5) with those where this responsibility is assumed by (or shared with) a person outside the editorial staff (categories 1 and 6–7). We also distinguish between discourse that is primarily descriptive or informative (categories 1–3), which involves minimal subjectivity, interpretation, or evaluation, and discourse that aims to offer a particular point of view, analysis, interpretation, or evaluation (categories 4–7). Finally, within informative discourse, we distinguish between short, strictly factual articles (category 1) and those that offer a more comprehensive description focused either on events (category 2) or on places, people, or institutions (category 3). Taking into account the journalistic genre where *populis** appears is relevant since these genres serve quite different ends: this may help explain the different uses of populism found in the news (e.g., strictly descriptive uses in news briefs vs. uses where the term is used to evaluate policies in editorials).

Regarding data from parliaments, two variables are used to characterise the nature of the discourse in which *populis** occurs. On the one hand, we take into account the type of document containing the occurrence, as mentioned in the document itself. The texts archived on the websites of the various parliaments generally indicate whether it is the text of a bill, the minutes of a plenary debate, or the minutes of a question period to the government. This information is useful for better contextualising the excerpt and understanding whether the term *populis** is used, for instance, to support the argument in favour of a law presented to the Parliament as a whole or rather in the context of a debate in which one politician addresses another directly. On the other hand, we annotate information about the circumstances in which the intervention containing *populis** has been made. Specifically, we record whether it is communicated to deputies in a written form prior to a parliamentary session (e.g., submission of a bill or written question), or delivered orally during a session. In the latter case, we further distinguish between interventions that are spontaneous (occurring outside any procedural right to speak) and those that are prepared.

Finally, for all three types of sources studied, we attempt to situate each message within its interactional context. Thus, we indicate whether the message studied refers to or comments on another message, and therefore responds to it in some way, specifying whether or not this previous message itself contains the term *populist** and whether it constitutes a question or an interpellation inviting a response. For example, excerpt (1) below contains the term *populist* and reacts to a previous message in which the term also appears. We also specify whether the message analysed is explicitly addressed to another person (e.g., with an @XXX mention for tweets) to which person it is addressed, and, in the case of parliamentary debates, whether it prompts or elicits a spontaneous reaction directly related to the occurrence of *populis**.

Another essential set of variables for understanding the context of the messages studied concerns the identification of the speaker responsible for each occurrence. We systematically identify the individual, group, or organisation that plays this role: for tweets, our database contains the account names automatically extracted during data collection, while for media and parliamentary discourse, we manually retrieve information concerning the speaker from the text associated with each occurrence. Although identifying the speaker may seem straightforward, it is rendered difficult when considering all the cases where the term *populis** appears within a quotation or a report of someone else’s speech. This situation arises frequently in parliamentary debates, where one speaker may use the term *populis** in response to its prior use by another speaker, as in the following example:

- (1) *Cela me révolte d’entendre ici que la suppression de la taxe d’habitation est une mesure populiste et populaire, alors qu’il s’agit seulement de baisser la pression fiscale des ménages, qui a augmenté de façon irresponsable et particulièrement drastique pendant le quinquennat précédent.*

It revolts me to hear here that the abolition of the housing tax is a populist and popular measure, when it is simply a matter of reducing the tax burden on households, which increased irresponsibly and particularly drastically during the previous five-year term.

(Oral statement by Laurent Saint-Martin, LREM deputy in the French National Assembly, 09 October 2019)

In this excerpt, the speaker refers to another deputy’s (from another party) use of the term *populist* and, in doing so, reuses the term in his own speech. In such a case, the rationale for using the term *populist* partly differs from that of a speaker who uses it independently, without reacting to a previous mention. Yet this too constitutes a use of *populis**, with its own specific motivation. Since our objective is to understand the meaning and functions of the uses of *populis**, we therefore consider it necessary to identify cases in which it appears in reported speech (see Holt, 2009; Rosier, 1999) by associating them with a specific category (‘reported speech’). For these cases, we indicate both the name of the speaker who produces the analysed occurrence and, whenever possible, the name of the speaker who previously used the term *populis**. Reported speech can be marked very clearly (as in ‘You said in an interview that our program was ‘populist’) or sometimes more indirectly, as in example (1). We consider as reported speech any occurrence of *populis** that is marked in some way as being taken from someone else’s speech, thereby indicating that the term is not entirely chosen by the speaker responsible for the analysed message. For

instance, in the excerpt ‘He regularly makes statements that are described as populist’ the mere presence of the passive verbal form *are described* is sufficient, in our view, to indicate the presence of reported speech, even when no specific source can be identified, since it suggests that the speaker is not responsible (or at least only co-responsible) for the labelling of the ‘statements’ as ‘populist’.

In the various cases of reported speech mentioned so far, the author of the message remains responsible for choosing to use the term *populis**, even when quoting someone else, insofar as they could have chosen not to reproduce that portion of speech or not to include the term at all. The situation is different, however, in another type of reported speech that is very common in our corpus, namely, when a journalist reports the words of a public figure, for example, in an interview. In such cases, although there is formally reported speech, the choice to use the term *populis** belongs entirely to the person being interviewed, whose words the journalist is expected to reproduce faithfully. We have therefore chosen to clearly identify these specific cases of verbatim quotation, but also to consider that only the interviewee is responsible for the use of *populis** in these cases. Accordingly, the interviewee is annotated as the ‘speaker’, as they are the ‘author’ of the quoted words, even if they are not the ‘presenter’ of the message in Goffman’s (1981) sense.

It can be useful to know the specific identity of each speaker. However, in many cases, what matters is not who the individual speaker is, but rather what type of speaker they represent: a journalist or a politician, for example. Therefore, each speaker is associated with one or more ‘speaker (sub) types’ in our spreadsheet. Given the nature of our corpus, we have initially distinguished the following types: politicians, journalists (or press agencies when credited as the author of messages), columnists (external personalities regularly invited to express their views in the media), experts (people with epistemic authority due to their status or experience and occasionally called upon to comment in the media), other public figures (e.g., artists, athletes, celebrities), and finally, ordinary citizens. In the latter case, the speaker information has been anonymised (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume). For political figures, two additional variables have been annotated to further characterise the type of speaker. We systematically indicate the political party to which the individual belongs, as well as any position held within a particular political institution. Specifically, we note whether the person is an elected representative of an assembly, a member of an executive body, a party leader, a head of an executive body, or a head of state, and at what level (e.g., local, regional, national, European). This information has not been coded at the time of analysis of each individual occurrence of *populis**, but rather at a later stage, based on the information in the ‘speaker’ column of our database, which has been filled

out during the annotation of each occurrence. This makes it possible to group all occurrences by speaker and to complete the information on each speaker once, rather than repeating it for every occurrence. This approach also makes it possible to isolate certain parts of the annotation work that are best done independently of the others: in general, it is more efficient to annotate the data occurrence by occurrence, completing all relevant variables for each message in one go (rather than completing the information for one variable for all occurrences before moving on to the next variable), since it requires reading and understanding the message and its context – a time-consuming task best done once per message. Conversely, secondary information about the speaker does not depend on contextual understanding but sometimes requires online research about the people in question, making it more practical to add this information retrospectively for each speaker.

Finally, the theme of the discourse is the last piece of contextual information included in the annotation scheme. This variable is open-ended and thus leaves room for more subjective and variable coding. As a result, occurrences sharing a similar topic can be associated with slightly different labels (e.g., 'European economy' and 'Economy of the EU' or the name of a party and the name of its president, since both can be the topic of the same message). Such variation can however complicate the subsequent identification of messages addressing the same topic. We could have defined a closed list of topics (economy, society, Europe, etc.) beforehand, but this would have been of limited use: the resulting categories would have been broad and non-exclusive, with many messages fitting into several topics at once. Information about topics can then be seen as too fuzzy to be worth including in the database. Yet, it is often very useful to have an indication of the theme of a given message when exploiting the database, for instance, when searching for good examples of particular uses of the keyword. For this reason, we have chosen to keep this variable in our scheme. Besides, the annotations of topics can later serve as a basis for constructing a closed list of macro-topics inductively, by grouping together recurring themes that emerge from the data. Then, this list of macro-topics can be used to reannotate the data and provide a quantitative foundation for examining whether certain macro-topics are more frequently associated with certain types of use of *populis**.

It thus appears that the contextual information annotated in our database is much more detailed than in other studies on keywords. This is directly related to our specific research objectives. This contextual information is useful in that it allows us to filter our data in various ways – for instance, to identify occurrences produced during a particular period, within a particular source, or by a given type of speaker. This then allows us to explore possible statistical correlations between variables and examine, for example, whether, in the press, the use of *populis** is more frequent

in the speech of journalists or in that of politicians, whether directly interviewed or quoted by the media. It also allows for the qualitative analysis of specific subsets of data in order to identify patterns that are particularly recurrent in specific contexts of use. In collocation studies (e.g., Göhring, 2022; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024; Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021), where the focus is on the general meaning of the searched term and where there is no strong interest for the function of the keyword in a specific interactional context, contextual information may not be taken into account at all or limited to one or two accessible variables (e.g., date of the occurrence or source where it appears when several newspapers are contrasted). In other studies on *populism* based on qualitative annotation (see Bale *et al.*, 2011; Hamo *et al.*, 2019; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020), contextual information may be less detailed and extensive than in our own project which offers a comprehensive view on the factors that can explain differences in the ways *populis** is used in discourse.

3.2 *Variables related to meaning and connotations*

The second set of variables concerns the meanings associated with the term *populis**. The first of these variables – called ‘object’ – aims to identify the reality associated with *populis**: this may refer to a political measure or a person described as populist, statements presented as ‘close to populism’, or even an event or social phenomenon, such as social networks accused of ‘fueling populism’. This is again an open variable, for which each annotator formulates a response that is often specific to the message, using wording that may naturally vary from one individual to another. For instance, if a press article discusses the ‘victory of populists’ in the United States in 2016, the associated ‘object’ could be noted as the ‘Republican Party’, ‘Trump’, or ‘Donald Trump’. To facilitate the systematic processing of this information, each specific ‘object’ is also classified into one of four broader categories, depending on whether the object refers to a specific individual, a clearly defined group (e.g., ‘the parties of the current Belgian government’), a group that is not clearly identifiable (‘the parties of the European nationalist right that play the populism card’), or actions or facts (behaviour, statements, measures, events, etc.).

This information allows us to observe which people, decisions, practices, and attitudes are frequently associated with *populis** and, hence, to understand, often by inference, what characteristics these realities share that justify their association with *populis** – and, therefore, what characterises populism itself in the mind of the speakers. In order to systematise the identification of the conception of populism that emerges from the use of *populis**, we identify, for each message, the main concept(s) at the heart of the conception of populism conveyed by the message. This therefore constitutes a second variable to analyse the meaning. To do so, we have developed a

list of possible conceptual categories, based both on the existing scientific literature on populism (among others, Mudde, 2004; Stavrakakis, 2014; Urbinati, 2019) and, inductively, on observations made on an initial sample of our data during the development of the annotation scheme. This process leads us to use the following categories: 'demagoguery', 'anti-system/anti-elite', 'nationalism/sovereignty/nativism/racism', 'extremism/radicalism', 'conservatism/traditionalism', 'popular' (in the sense of popularity), 'lies/dishonesty', 'autocracy', and 'based on popular sovereignty'.

To determine the main concept(s) associated with *populis**, we rely on the nature of the object identified in the message, but also on two linguistic characteristics of each occurrence of *populis**, which often help to clarify the meaning of the term. First, we systematically identify words that are directly linked syntactically to the term *populis**, such as verbs taking it as a complement (e.g., 'feed populism'), nouns/adjectives it qualifies or that qualify it (e.g., 'right-wing populism', 'populist far-right'), or coordinated terms (e.g., 'populism and extremism'). The grammatical category (noun vs. adjective) and the singular or plural form are also annotated information that can help clarify the meaning of the term, as these distinctions can point to semantic nuances (e.g., the noun systematically refers to people ('populists'), while the corresponding adjective has more varied uses, as in 'populist measures' vs. 'populist parties').

Although central to our approach, this endeavour to identify the concept associated with each occurrence of *populis** has significant limitations. Frequently, the term *populis**, like other sociopolitical keywords, is used not to refer to someone or something associated with populism, but directly to talk about populism itself. As illustrated by the following two examples, in such cases *populis** is self-referential, referring not to something that is populist, but to populism itself.

- (2) *Aujourd'hui, nos industries sont affaiblies, des milliers d'emplois sont détruits, et c'est l'Europe qui, par son impuissance complice, fait le lit des nationalismes et des populismes.*

Today, our industries are weakened, thousands of jobs have been destroyed, and it is Europe which, through its complicit impotence, has paved the way for nationalism and populism.

(Oral statement by Jean-Paul Lecoq, PCF deputy in the French National Assembly, 07 March 2019)

- (3) *J'ai toujours considéré qu'il ne fallait pas avoir peur du peuple et la meilleure réponse au nationalisme, au populisme que l'on dénonce ici ou là tient à la force des réponses que l'on apporte aux problèmes que rencontrent les gens, et le courage de donner la parole au peuple.*

I have always believed that we should not be afraid of the people, and that the best response to the nationalism and populism that we denounce here and there lies in the strength of the solutions we provide to the problems people face, and the courage to give the people a voice.

(Comments by Bruno Le Maire, member of the French government, reported by *France Info*, 03 January 2019)

In these self-referential uses, the meaning of *populis** is often difficult to identify. In example (2), and even more so in example (3), it may be tempting to associate the word *populis** with the concept of nationalism, given the cooccurrence of the two terms and their frequent association in political discourse. However, this interpretation remains debatable: one could just as well argue that in example (2), *populisms* and *nationalisms* are mentioned together precisely because they are distinct phenomena that should not be conflated. This is even clearer in the following example, taken from our Spanish corpus. Acknowledging the Spanish political context, it appears that the term *populistas* ('populists') refers specifically to a political group, namely, the Podemos party, which is not the same as the ones designated by the other two terms, *nacionalistas* ('nationalists') and *independentistas* ('independence supporters').

- (4) *En definitiva, la estrategia seguida por el Gobierno socialista, apoyado por populistas, nacionalistas e independentistas, y que en un sector regulado como el energético posee una importancia capital porque es el encargado de determinar el marco en el que se debe operar, no ha hecho sino muy complicado que Endesa apueste por llevar a cabo la inversión.*

In short, the strategy pursued by the socialist government, supported by populists, nationalists, and independentists, and that in a regulated sector such as energy is of paramount importance because it [the government] is responsible for determining the framework in which the sector must operate, has only made it very difficult for Endesa to commit to the investment.

(Oral statement by Dolors Montserrat Montserrat, PP deputy in the Spanish Parliament, 03 July 2019)

In example (4), as in example (1) where *populist* can be associated with the notions of 'demagoguery' and 'popular', the fact that *populis** refers to an identifiable reality facilitates the identification of the conception of populism. Yet, very often, the term remains polysemic and sometimes

completely vague. For this reason, as with several other variables, we have decided to indicate ‘unknown’ when we feel unable to choose any of the options available. To make the annotation process more transparent and systematic, annotators also have to indicate the specific elements on which their coding is based for this variable – whether it is the object associated with *populis**, the theme of the message (e.g., the measure being discussed even if not explicitly mentioned), or particular terms in the message and associated with the term *populis**. In some cases, there is no solid evidence to support the interpretation; in others, the interpretation necessarily relies on inference and on the annotator’s (relative) knowledge of the communication and sociopolitical context. Consequently, the results obtained through this variable must be treated with appropriate caution.

Through the variable ‘conception’, we try to obtain, by qualitative means, information that may seem similar to what corpus linguists look for when they use collocation analysis to identify the ‘semantic preference’ of a given word, that is, the semantic fields that are part of its regular environment (see Schröter *et al.*, 2019). Yet, while corpus linguistics tools aim at examining how the lexical environment of a word shapes its meaning, understood as the whole set of semantic traits typically associated with this word in general, our objective is instead to identify the specific conceptual content of a given occurrence of our keyword in a single message. This is key in our perspective because it allows us to articulate information about context, meaning, and function and, hence, to understand more precisely how and why *populis** is used in discourse.

The same difference holds for another variable, named ‘value’, which captures whether a negative, neutral, or positive value is associated with the notion of populism through the use of *populis**. In corpus linguistics, ‘semantic prosody’ refers to the positive or negative attitudes or evaluations conveyed by the collocates of a given word (Schröter *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, a word which is itself neutral may acquire a rather negative semantic prosody because of the words it is frequently associated with. In our approach, we only focus on the value of the term *populis** itself within a single occurrence. As for the variable aforementioned, our coding scheme requires that annotators explicitly identify the objective elements supporting the selection of a certain value for each occurrence of the keyword (whenever possible). This may be based on the presence of words with a clear evaluative load that is transferred to *populis** – as in examples (2) and (3) where the verbs *fait le lit de* (‘pave the way for’) and *dénonce* (‘denounce’) indicate a negative value, since, in French, they are only used with negatively loaded complements – or on the association of *populis** with a person or group that is clearly presented negatively from the speaker’s point of view, as in example (4) with Podemos.

Finally, given that sociopolitical keywords are often the object of metalinguistic comments (Hambye *et al.*, 2025; Kranert, 2020; Schröter, 2008), we systematically indicate whether the use of *populis** is marked metalinguistically, that is, whether the speaker signals that the meaning or the use of this word is not obvious, requires justification or explanation or is not totally endorsed by the speaker (through the use of quotation marks, for example). In excerpt (5), for instance, the speaker tries to clarify the meaning of *populism* through an explicit equivalence with nationalism in the Belgian context.

- (5) *Le néo-libéralisme n'est pas une solution mais un échec, qui mène au populisme, en Belgique, on appellera ça 'nationalisme'.*

Neoliberalism is not a solution but a failure, which leads to populism. In Belgium, we call it 'nationalism'

(Interview with Didier Gosuin, member of the government of the Brussels Region, in *Le Soir*, 07 January 2019)

3.3 *Variables related to the function of *populis***

The last set of variables aims to clarify the function of the uses of *populis** in the various messages that are analysed. By function, we refer to what this sociopolitical keyword achieves in the discourse due to its characteristics and specific added value, and therefore to what seems to motivate the use of this term (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025). In other words: why is it useful and relevant to use the term? What does it bring to the discourse that another word would not?

To shed light on this dimension of the uses of *populis**, we rely on two variables. The first identifies the general 'purpose' of the statement containing *populis**. Inductively, we define five main categories corresponding to recurring purposes observed in our data:

- 'Descriptive', when the statement aims to describe or even simply refer to a given reality (a person, an event, etc.) and the use of *populis** serves to identify that reality (e.g., 'The leader of Italy's populist party *Five Star Movement* addressed the press yesterday').
- 'Critical', when the statement includes an evaluative dimension and raises a question, concern, or even criticism towards a given reality associated in some way with populism – thereby implying that a negative value is attributed to populism. This category is subdivided into three subcategories according to the nature of what is being criticised: a general and abstract social phenomenon (as in examples (3) and (5) above); a specific and isolated measure or behaviour (as in the message

to which example (1) responds); or a person, group, or institution as a whole (as in examples (2) and (4)).

- ‘Denial’, when the statement uses *populis** to reject the association between a given reality (e.g., the speaker himself or a measure he has defended) and populism, as in example (1) – it therefore only concerns statements responding somehow to a previous discourse.
- ‘Legitimation by opposition’, when the statement asserts that a reality should not be associated with populism or is opposed to it, thereby legitimising that reality in contrast to populism (which is assumed to carry a negative connotation). The following example illustrates this type of usage:

(6) *Op de website van Renew Europe is te lezen dat de fractie zich uitdrukkelijk tegen populisme en nationalisme wil afzetten.*

The Renew Europe website states that the group is explicitly opposed to populism and nationalism.

(Website of the European political group Renew Europe
quoted in De Standaard, 12 June 2019)

- ‘Legitimation by association’, when the statement asserts that a reality must be associated with populism, presented in this case with a positive value, and thus gives a favourable image of this reality. Such cases are relatively rare in our corpus. Example (7) illustrates this type of use, where the term *populist* carries a positive value and is associated (according to the broader context) with closeness to the people or attachment to popular sovereignty.

(7) *Je ne suis pas sûr qu’il y ait un clivage à LFI entre populistes et de gauche. Moi je suis populiste de gauche.*

I’m not sure there is a divide in LFI between populists and the left.
I am a left-wing populist.

(François Ruffin, LFI deputy in the French National Assembly,
interviewed on France Inter and quoted on France
Info’s Twitter account, 12 June 2019)

The second variable that helps to define the function of *populis** refers to the person or group that may be ‘targeted’ or attacked by the message containing the keyword. Even when the statement containing *populis** is simply descriptive, the message that includes this statement, as a whole, may still serve to criticise a particular person or group. This is even more evident when the statement itself is critical. However, as shown in excerpt

(4), those criticised as populists and those targeted by the message are not necessarily the same. In that example, it is Pedro Sanchez's socialist government that is being attacked by the message, although the government itself is not labelled 'populist'. This provides a more complex understanding of the reasons why the concept of populism is mobilised in sociopolitical discourse. Our annotation system therefore systematically indicates whether a target is identifiable in each message and, if so, records the person or group concerned, assigning them to a category (according to the same principles as for each 'speaker', see Section 2).

4 Advantages and limitations of sociopolitical keyword analysis through annotation

One of the advantages of the annotation approach we propose is that it is reproducible and transferable to the analysis of other keywords. The general principle of distinguishing between three groups of variables, as well as the choice of most of the variables described above, applies equally well to the analysis of other words, since these dimensions derive directly from the characteristics generally associated with sociopolitical keywords (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume).

Adaptations may of course be necessary depending on the cases studied or the objectives of the research. These may involve defining new analytical criteria or other categories within the same variables. Another keyword could be associated with other concepts and would therefore require the development of a tailored list of potential concepts. More generally, other context-related variables could be considered relevant: we could have indicated the gender of all speakers (where known), the status of journalists within their editorial teams (editor-in-chief, head of the economics department, etc.), or the areas of specialisation of journalists and experts. Similarly, depending on the research objectives, research could integrate other linguistic characteristics of the use of the keyword (e.g., whether it is used as a topic or as a focus; Cruschina, 2022) into the annotation, or other ways of capturing the function of the keyword in discourse, for example, at the argumentative level, by specifying its place in argumentative structures (see Aulit & De Cock, 2025; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume).

The systematic nature of the annotation process is one of its main strengths. It allows analysts to focus on a variety of phenomena and to identify them even in their less explicit or expected forms. For example, systematically indicating whether the analysed message 'targets' a particular person or group (as in (4)) or whether the use of *populis** is accompanied by a metalinguistic marker (as in (5)) forces us to question, for each occurrence of the keyword, the presence of these particular characteristics – and thus to detect them even when they take more implicit forms.

More generally, as noted earlier, the systematic annotation of multiple dimensions makes it possible to establish descriptive statistics on the frequency and distribution of different types of occurrences of our keyword (according to the speaker, the form used, the meaning associated with the term, etc.) and to identify recurring patterns – for example, people in group 1 tend to use *populis** with the meaning X, in utterances aiming at Y (for instance, criticising political adversaries), within the context Z. In addition, the resulting database can then be easily queried to select and group occurrences sharing given characteristics (e.g., all 'critical' occurrences of *populis** produced by journalists; see Roginsky, Chapter 7 in this volume) and then to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of these subsets of data.

The downside is that this approach is very costly, both in terms of the preliminary work it requires and the time needed for systematic annotation. Preparing a complex annotation scheme for an interdisciplinary project such as ours involves extensive discussion and reflection upstream, as well as constant revisions at the beginning of the project due to the confrontation between ideas and proposals borrowed from theoretical sources and those emerging from the exploratory analyses of empirical material. Moreover, this work is never entirely achieved, as certain choices made in defining the annotation system could always be questioned. Regarding certain variables, such as the one concerning the 'conception' of *populis** or the 'purpose' of the statement containing the keyword, the list of categories proposed could be subject to discussion. We may aim to merge some of them, considering that it is difficult to distinguish them clearly, or, conversely, some may wish to subdivide them or add new categories that have not been considered.

For a corpus as large as ours (more than 3,000 occurrences), such systematic annotation work can only be carried out by a team of annotators. This inevitably introduces variation in how the data is annotated, both due to individual differences in interpreting the message and to possible ambiguities in the coding instructions themselves. Even variables that at first glance appeared factual (such as the discourse genre or the presence/absence of reported speech) can be challenging to code consistently, since real examples often resist neat classification, even when categories are defined as precisely as possible. In order to limit interpretive differences as much as possible and achieve a reasonable degree of inter-annotator agreement (see Rondiat *et al.*, Chapter 4 in this volume), it is necessary to provide a comprehensive and detailed coding guide, which includes appropriate examples to illustrate each category. This coding guide must undergo several rounds of revision, in successive versions. This can make it more precise and explicit by drawing on the differences or errors observed in the preliminary stages of the annotation work. This can also help to

identify where the guide is ambiguous or incomplete. Such iterative work is inevitable and inherent to the type of qualitative and interpretive analysis proposed here. However, this means that the balance between the costs and benefits of such a procedure for a given project must be taken into account before undertaking a project of this scope.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown why it is relevant, in the study of ‘sociopolitical keywords’, to use an analytical method based on the systematic annotation of occurrences of that keyword. Such an approach is appropriate when the research aims to capture the keyword in its context, in all its diverse uses and to understand the importance it takes in contemporary discourse and the reasons for its use and circulation (why is it used? by what type of speaker? in what context? for what purpose? etc.).

In this sense, the method presented aims to analyse ‘sociopolitical keywords’ by taking into account the characteristics regularly identified in the literature and by adapting the analytical dimensions to its characteristics. This method therefore aims to shed light on three main dimensions of analysis, each operationalised through a group of systematically annotated variables: the discursive, communicative, and sociopolitical context of each use of the keyword; the meaning and connotations associated with this term; the function of the statement in which the keyword appears.

In this chapter, we have detailed the different variables used and, for closed variables, the different categories or values considered for each variable, explaining the rationale behind the various choices made. This leads us to highlight both the advantages and the weaknesses or limitations of an annotation-based analysis approach as presented here, with the aim to inspire researchers and enable them to replicate and improve our annotation scheme.

Notes

- 1 This research is part of the ARC project 20/25–109 ‘Discourse, populism and democracy – Tracking the uses of ‘populism’ in media and political discourse’ (TrUMPo), funded by the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.
- 2 Plus a category, ‘other’, to accommodate the rare messages that do not fall into any of the other categories provided.

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4 Intercoder reliability in qualitative discourse analysis

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1 Introduction: reliability and reproducibility in qualitative research

Reliability, in its broadest sense, refers to the consistency and dependability of a measurement or classification process (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). As such, it constitutes a cornerstone of scientific inquiry: without reliable procedures, empirical findings cannot be meaningfully replicated or compared across studies. In recent years, debates about reliability have become more prominent within interpretive research, as scholars seek ways to demonstrate rigor without undermining the contextual and situated nature of qualitative inquiry. Central to this effort is the concern that qualitative interpretations should not be dismissed as merely idiosyncratic or contingent upon individual subjectivity. This issue comes to the fore in qualitative coding, where the demand for methodological rigor has led scholars to distinguish between different forms of reliability. These include: stability, or the extent to which a single coder applies codes consistently over time; accuracy, which assesses the alignment of a coding scheme with a recognised ‘gold standard’; and reproducibility, which evaluates the degree of agreement among multiple coders using the same coding protocol (Campbell *et al.*, 2013: 295).

Importantly, reproducibility is deemed to act as a partial safeguard against interpretive idiosyncrasy, insofar as it evidences that independent coders can reach comparable judgments. In practice, reproducibility is most often assessed through intercoder reliability (ICR), a statistical indicator that measures the consistency of coding across different individuals. This assessment typically employs coefficients such as Cohen’s κ , Krippendorff’s α , or Scott’s π , each based on distinct statistical assumptions which may yield marginally divergent outcomes. These coefficients are used to quantify the degree of agreement among two or more coders when classifying the same dataset into predefined categories (Cofie *et al.*, 2022: 73; O’Connor & Joffe, 2020: 2; Wilson-Lopez *et al.*, 2019: 8). When

exceeding an established threshold, ICR is typically taken to indicate that the coding procedure is being implemented in a stable and replicable manner throughout the dataset. For this reason, it has come to function as a widely adopted quality metric across a range of disciplines, often taken as a warrant for the overall procedural reliability of a given stage in the research process (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 309).

While a growing number of scholars advocate for the explicit assessment of coding reliability – including through ICR – in qualitative research (Campbell *et al.*, 2013: 295), critics argue that this development reflects an epistemic importation of positivist assumptions, most notably that of a single, objectively recoverable reality, into interpretivist frameworks that understand meaning as contingent, situated, and co-constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 308; Stenbacka, 2001). Such tension often surfaces when coders working within a constructivist paradigm reach divergent yet equally defensible interpretations of an item. In these cases, coder disagreement does not signal a shortcoming in the analytic procedure, but rather reflects the interpretive richness of the data. From this vantage point, the recourse to ICR can be seen as reducing a dialogical and iterative process to a procedural exercise in alignment. Critics therefore identify an ‘epistemological problem’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013): namely, the conflation of consistency with validity, and the tacit flattening of interpretive complexity to satisfy externally imposed standards of rigor. The notable lack of consensus on how ICR should be operationalised in qualitative contexts (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020: 1) may, in part, reflect this underlying philosophical resistance.

An alternative reading – one increasingly prevalent in multidisciplinary and team-based research contexts – casts ICR not as a positivist imposition but as a pragmatic tool. In this view, ICR is mobilised less as a claim to universal truth than as a device to (i) enhance transparency of coding decisions, (ii) mitigate the influence of individual cognitive or cultural bias, and (iii) facilitate the replicability of interpretive judgments across research teams (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 309; Krippendorff, 1980; O’Connor & Joffe, 2020: 4). What is sought, then, is not a potentially homogenous or unique interpretation, but the disciplined management of variability in interpretive labor. This pragmatic orientation tends to surface in team-based coding, where ICR is deployed as a means of coordinating standards and adjusting analytic instruments. Divergent readings among coders are not uncommon, and, in response to those, teams usually produce a shared codebook to stabilise interpretations. High ICR is hence taken as evidence that the codebook provides a solid framework, while low scores are read as signals for refinement. In practice, this usually entails an initial coding round, followed by structured discussions to address discrepancies; the codebook

is then revised and successive rounds are conducted until an acceptable level of agreement is reached (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 313). In this way, ICR functions not only as a measure of agreement but also as a diagnostic instrument for improving the clarity and usability of the coding scheme (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 3).

Some scholars therefore argue that low agreement should be read primarily as an occasion for reflexivity: disagreement can expose ambiguities or unexamined assumptions within the coding team, thereby prompting deeper reflection on the coding scheme and procedure (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 6). When persistent coding issues emerge, several remedial strategies may be implemented. These include eliminating or merging poorly performing codes, revising definitions and coding instructions, or supplementing the codebook with concrete examples (Campbell *et al.*, 2013: 300). There is, however, little consensus on the most appropriate course of action. Ultimately, the choice depends on the researcher's epistemological stance, the aims of the project, and whether ICR is being used as a validation tool or a developmental aid. In highly standardised studies, discarding unreliable codes may be preferred since the priority lies in maintaining measurement reliability and comparability across coders. In contrast, in exploratory or constructivist research, refining and re-testing such codes may better serve the study's interpretive goals, as apparent inconsistencies can reveal meaningful ambiguities in discourse and contribute to the reflexive refinement of analytical categories (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 9). What remains consistent across traditions, however, is the importance of making these processes explicit. Best practice in reporting recommends that researchers not only present their ICR statistics but also describe the process undertaken to achieve them, including coding rounds, codebook changes, and decision rationales (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In doing so, ICR is situated within a broader architecture of reliability and validity checks, and functions not as a standalone guarantor of analytic quality but as one element in a transparent, well-documented research process.

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how ICR can be meaningfully applied within an interpretive, discourse-analytic framework. Using the ICR conducted on the coding of 'populism' and its derivatives (henceforth *populis**) as an illustrative case, it first considers the specific methodological difficulties involved in analysing these terms. It then outlines how the coding grid has been designed to address such issues and describes the procedures used to assess reliability across multiple category types. Finally, it offers an interpretation of the resulting patterns of agreement and divergence. Taken together, these discussions aim to clarify what reliability can reasonably signify within and bring to a discourse-analytic approach.

2 Specific challenges of the study of sociopolitical keywords

The qualitative coding of sociopolitical keywords (henceforth SPKW; see Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume), such as *populis**, entails distinctive methodological difficulties, particularly when the aim is to capture both their explicit and implicit dimensions within public discourse. These challenges bear directly on ICR and, by extension, on the epistemic claims that can be made about the findings.

A first issue concerns data segmentation, which requires balancing two competing demands: preserving the contextual richness in which an SPKW appears, and managing the interpretive complexity entailed by larger coding units. Prior research indicates that coding extended units – full sentences or discourse segments – enhances interpretive validity by retaining contextual cues essential to meaning-making (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 6), especially when working with linguistically and semantically dense material. Yet broader segments frequently contain multiple, and at times overlapping, meanings, which increases the potential for interpretive divergence among coders (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 319; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 6). The study illustrated here focuses on a single lexical item – ‘populism’ and its morphological variants. All occurrences were interpreted using the entire discourse segment in which they appear, as the analytical priority was to capture their discursive functions and contextual meanings (Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume). Such an approach is indispensable for a semantically and politically informed analysis (Hambye & Rondiat, 2024). When focusing on ICR, however, such extended and heterogeneous units inevitably broaden the scope for interpretive variation (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004).

Interpretive depth constitutes a further challenge. Coders were instructed to give prevalence to close textual engagement and to avoid speculative or excessively inferential readings. Yet, the very task of reconstructing SPKW meaning, including the more implicit nuances conveyed through lexical cues, necessarily demands a fine-grained judgment. As a result, the coding process was concerned not only with identifying surface features, such as word class, but also with reconstructing implicit meaning. For instance, in excerpt (1), ‘populism’ functions as a definite noun, implying that the phenomenon is already known and readily identifiable (*‘le populisme de droite’*), as if its meaning were self-evident. The association of ‘populism’ with ‘right-wing’ and its juxtaposition with ‘extreme-left’ establish a discursive symmetry: populism is positioned along an axis of radicality, operating as a mitigated synonym for extremism and deviation from democratic normality. This parallel implicitly constructs political centrism and moderation as the benchmarks of democratic legitimacy. The convergence of populism with radicalism is further reinforced by the identification of

its cause, namely, the ‘radicalisation of the electorate’. The expression ‘submerged by right-wing populism’ carries a distinctly negative evaluative charge through the metaphor of submersion, which evokes loss of control and collective threat. This metaphor contributes to depoliticising the phenomenon: rather than depicting populism as a social dynamic or a recognisable political discourse, it presents it as an irrational, quasi-natural force capable of engulfing entire countries.

(1) *En attendant, la radicalisation d'une partie de l'électorat pose de sérieuses questions. La Flandre semble suivre la voie d'une série de plus en plus longue de pays européens submergés par le populisme de droite. La Wallonie et Bruxelles font figure d'exception en penchant à gauche mais à la faveur, entre autres, du score du PTB, parti d'extrême-gauche, d'origine maoïste, qui ne s'est jusqu'à présent jamais frotté au pouvoir et n'entend pas dévier.*

In the meantime, the radicalization of part of the electorate raises serious questions. Flanders seems to be following in the footsteps of a growing number of European countries submerged by right-wing populism. Wallonia and Brussels are exceptions, leaning to the left, but this is due in part to the strong results of the PTB, an extreme-left party with Maoist origins, which has never been in power and has no intention of deviating from its course.

(Metro, 27 May 2019)

The coding process also required contextual knowledge of the political and media landscapes of Belgium (both Dutch- and French-speaking), France, and Spain. In example (1), understanding the Belgian political context made it possible to infer that the phrase ‘far-right populism’ refers to the Flemish party Vlaams Belang, even though it is not explicitly mentioned. As the literature underscores, coding frameworks that aim to encode such kind of observations tend to depress ICR scores, precisely because they require interpretive labor at the intersection of text and context (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020: 8). This tension suggests that reduced statistical agreement should not be read simply as coder inconsistency, but rather as an index of the epistemological difficulty of capturing discursive phenomena that operate precisely through ambiguity and semantic drift. To support coder judgment without overly constraining it, our codebook includes concrete examples and explanatory notes, which proved useful in clarifying borderline cases, though the inherently interpretive nature of the task left room for reasonable disagreement.

An additional methodological issue arises from the fact that multiple codes were allowed. Coders could assign several codes to the same unit when appropriate (see below). For example, one coder might classify

an occurrence of *populis** as part of both elite and nativist critique (see Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume), while another might code it only as elite critique. This raises important questions about how to evaluate coder agreement when partial overlap, rather than complete alignment, is expected. Standard ICR metrics generally assume binary or mutually exclusive coding and therefore struggle to accommodate justified plurality. For coding schemes that reflect the inherent ambiguity and multidimensionality of public discourse, such measures risk underestimating substantive agreement. As we discuss below, we argue that, in these contexts, agreement should be reconceptualised in terms of substantive convergence rather than strict formal equivalence, that is, whether coders identify the same core discursive function, even if one also recognises additional interpretive layers.

3 Description of the intercoder reliability procedure

As the study sought to capture not only formal textual properties but also implicit meanings, we designed a reliability strategy attentive to both statistical rigor and the epistemic challenges of interpretive coding. Our approach was shaped by three considerations. First, coders needed systematic training and calibration to ensure a shared understanding of the categories, which range from strictly formal descriptors to conceptually demanding interpretative judgments. Second, the interdisciplinary composition of the coding team – spanning linguistics, political science, and communication science – required procedures that accommodate diverse analytical perspectives while still enabling robust measures of convergence. Third, the coding grid itself integrates multiple category formats (closed, open, and mixed), which required different reliability metrics and harmonisation strategies. In what follows, we describe the composition and training of the coding team, the sampling design for the reliability test, and the procedures used to calculate and interpret agreement across the four category types.

3.1 Coding grid, coders, and coding categories

The codebook, developed by one of the principal investigators and presented in Chapter 3, was designed with a dual purpose: to capture both the formal properties of discourse and the implicit dimension. Accordingly, the coding grid integrates closed, open, and mixed category types (see Table 4.1), with variation in the number of admissible responses. In practice, the coding scheme combines factual descriptors, such as speaker identity and institutional arena, with interpretative dimensions that address implicit meanings, including the discursive function of *populis** within the

Table 4.1 ICR method per type of coding category

Type	Description	ICR method	Example of categories
A	Closed list, single response	Krippendorff's alpha	Addressee type, Discursive genre, Function, Grammatical category, Object type, Reference to type, Reported speech, Reported speech source type, Self-evident meaning, Speaker type, Value, Target type, Type of marking
B	Closed list, multiple responses allowed	Krippendorff's alpha	Conceptual field
C	Open set of responses	% agreement	Associated terms, Object ID, RS Author ID, RS Source ID, Speaker ID
D	Mixed open/closed, multiple responses	% agreement	Addressee ID, Reference to ID, Target ID

message, the conceptual field in which it is embedded, and its value. This, in turn, required broad theoretical grounding, drawing on key concepts, such as extremism, elite critique, and nationalism.

To ensure the methodological robustness of the coding process, particular emphasis was placed on the recruitment, training, and evaluation of coders involved in establishing ICR. Coders were selected from students in the three disciplinary domains represented in the project, that is, linguistics, political science, and communication science. Unlike many qualitative research projects (Campbell *et al.*, 2013), the project thus incorporated multiple coders from the very beginning. This team-based design made it possible, at a later stage, to conduct an ICR assessment without additional recruitment (i.e., external to the coding team). Given the conceptual sophistication of the coding frame, a carefully staged training protocol was implemented. The process began with a three-hour introductory seminar led by one of the principal investigators and the primary architect of the coding grid. During this session, the full codebook was presented and exemplified through detailed examples, and special instructions were introduced to address recurrent edge cases.

Following the introductory session, each coder independently completed a trial coding exercise consisting of 15 occurrences, deliberately selected for their complexity and because they had previously prompted disagreement or discussion within the research team during an earlier test phase. The performance of the coders was then assessed by the project's core team (principal

investigators and researchers), who provided written and verbal feedback. A second three-hour training session was held to review these initial results. This session aimed at resolving coding ambiguities and reinforcing interpretive consistency through group discussion and targeted clarification. After this stage, each coder conducted an initial round of coding on a subset of 80 occurrences. This work was subsequently double-checked by a member of the research team, not with the intention of systematically correcting every potential error as if a single correct interpretation existed, but to identify and address recurring divergences between the coder's application of the codebook and the practices expected by the team. This comparative review served to detect possible misunderstandings of the coding framework and to further calibrate individual interpretations to ensure coherent use of the analytical categories across the research team.

The category system, summarised in Table 4.1, comprises four recurring types that also structured the strategy for calculating ICR (see below). Type A categories are closed lists with a single permitted response. They include several variables – amongst which notably the grammatical form of *populis** (see Appendix 4.1 for a thorough description of the variables), the discursive genre of the source text, the type of speaker employing *populis** (e.g., journalist, politician, expert, other), whether it appears in direct or reported speech, as well as the valence and function of the occurrence. Type B consists of a single category, the conceptual field associated with *populis** (e.g., nationalism, extremism, Euroscepticism, demagoguery), coded as a closed list with multiple possible responses. Type C categories are open-ended and allow for a wide range of responses, including the specific terms associated with populism in the discourse, the identity of the speaker using *populis**, or the object to which *populis** refers. Finally, Type D combines closed and open formats and permits multiple responses; examples include identifying the target of the message containing *populis**, that is, the person, group, or institution explicitly targeted or criticised through the use of *populis**, or the intended addressee.

3.2 *ICR strategy*

ICR was assessed through a 'double-coding' procedure, in which coders independently re-coded data segments previously coded by one of their peers. To preserve the independence of judgment, this was done without any prior discussion or coordination between coders. Only a portion of the dataset was double coded for ICR because of resource constraints. The subset comprised 300 items, representing 10% of the full corpus. These 300 items were randomly selected from the corpus already coded by the six project coders (designated as Coders 1 in Table 4.2), with 50 items drawn from each coder's contributions. Each batch of 50 items was subsequently

divided into two subsets of 25, which were then independently re-coded by two colleagues from within the same pool of six (designated as Coders 2 in Table 4.2). This procedure yielded a total of ten unique coder pairings, rather than the six that would have resulted from simple one-to-one pairing, thereby enhancing the diversity of combinations. The full allocation matrix is presented in Table 4.2. In total, the process produced 300 double-coded segments (286 after a cleansing phase) spanning ten sub-corpora, increasing not only the robustness of the reliability assessment but also the variation in coder interactions. This expanded diversity may reduce raw agreement scores but offers a more realistic measure of reliability across epistemic positions. At the same time, the broader distribution of pairings helps dilute pair-specific effects and avoids strongly skewed agreement patterns driven by chance or by atypical coder combinations, reducing the influence of outliers and producing a more balanced estimate of overall reliability.

As shown in Table 4.1, reliability metrics were matched to category type. For closed list, single response categories, Type A, intercoder agreement was evaluated using Krippendorff's alpha. For closed list, multiple response categories, Type B, Krippendorff's alpha was also used with adaptations appropriate for multi-label coding. Our choice of Krippendorff's alpha was motivated by its suitability for datasets with multiple coders, missing values, and mixed formats. Krippendorff's alpha computes agreement across the full set of coders and the entire category, which makes it efficient and scalable in a design like ours and appropriate for (Feng, 2013: 2960). Cohen's kappa is frequently used in reliability studies, yet it requires pairwise comparisons and is therefore less efficient in multi-coder (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 313). Krippendorff's alpha corrects this inflation and provides a more conservative and realistic estimate. We interpreted

Table 4.2 ICR distribution

Coder 1	Coder 2	N items
A	B	25
	C	25
B	C	25
	D	25
C	E	25
	F	25
D	A	25
	E	25
E	A	25
	F	25
F	B	25
	D	25

(e.g., Cicchetti, 1994; Landis & Koch, 1977) where values above 0.80 are often described as almost perfect or excellent, and values below 0.40 are often described as poor. At the same time, we followed O'Connor and Joffe (2020: 9), in treating such thresholds as indicative rather than binding. Benchmarks remain arbitrary unless situated in the context of the task, the distribution of categories, and the consequences of coding errors, and we therefore contextualised any reported alpha accordingly.

For open answer categories, Type C, and for mixed categories that combine open and closed response options with multiple possible answers, Type D, we relied on manual harmonisation procedures and percentage agreement used cautiously, with explicit acknowledgement of the limits of simple agreement measures to account for chance agreement. While the choice to include open and mixed categories was conceptually motivated by the multidimensional character of *populis** and of its discursive functions (Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume), it also had computational consequences. In these categories, chance agreement in the strict statistical sense was practically impossible, which removed the rationale for some standard reliability estimators (Enschot *et al.*, 2024: 5) and therefore justified relying on simple agreement measures.

A central methodological challenge concerned the evaluation of coder convergence in categories B, C, and D when responses were either not identical or downright entirely divergent. To address this, we introduced a typology of intermediate correspondence that captures partial alignments, as shown in Table 4.3. First, partial agreement with extent divergence occurs when one coder lists more relevant items than the other but at least one item matches, for example, Coder 1 codes Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump and Coder 2 codes Orbán only. Second, partial agreement with composition divergence arises when the number of items is similar, but the referents are conceptually related rather than identical, for example, Salvini versus Lega Nord (Salvini's political party). Third, partial agreement

Table 4.3 Types of agreement for categories BCD

Type of agreement	Coder 1	Coder 2
Perfect agreement	Orbán	Viktor Orbán
Partial agreement – extent divergence	Orbán; Trump	Viktor Orbán
Partial agreement – composition divergence	Donald Trump; Brexit, M5S; Lega Nord; Viktor Orbán	Trump; Salvini; Orbán; Johnson
Partial agreement – extent-composition divergence	Orbán; Salvini; Lepen	Orbán; Trump; Johnson
Disagreement	Orbán	Trump

with extent-composition divergence appears when some items coincide while others diverge in both form and substance, for example, Orbán, Salvini, Le Pen versus Orbán, Trump, and Johnson. Distinguishing the type of agreement as such adds value to the coding process by making interpretive discrepancies analytically visible instead of treating them as mere noise. It allows coders to document and justify divergent interpretations while maintaining a shared analytical framework. From the perspective of ICR, it introduces a graduated understanding of convergence, going beyond the binary logic of agreement/disagreement that often obscures the interpretive dimension of qualitative coding. In the analysis of results, this approach provides a fine-grained view of how meaning is negotiated through the coding process. It helps identify systematic patterns of divergence – whether stemming from conceptual overlap, contextual ambiguity, or differential salience judgments – and thus informs subsequent discussions about category refinement and coder calibration.

An additional consideration was that certain dimensions in the coding grid follow a hierarchical logic. Coders were first asked to identify an overarching category, for example, the speaker using *populis**, and only then to specify a subtype, for example, journalist, politician, and expert. Following van Enschoot *et al.* (2024: 13), we calculated agreement for subcategories only when coders concurred on the parent category. This contingent approach avoids distortions in reliability metrics that would otherwise arise from upstream disagreement (Enschoot *et al.*, 2024: 11).

4 Interpreting the ICR results

As in many interpretative research projects (Hruschka *et al.*, 2004: 321), our initial round of double-coding produced relatively low agreement scores (see Appendix 4.2). Rather than interpreting this outcome as a methodological shortcoming, we approached it as an analytic opportunity: a chance to probe more deeply into the sources of divergence between coders and to reflect on what such divergences reveal about the practice of assessing ICR in conceptually rich, interpretative inquiry.

The purpose of this section is twofold. First, we present the main empirical patterns of coder agreement and disagreement, distinguishing between variables that yield high reliability and those that prove more challenging. This descriptive synthesis highlights how category design, distributional properties, and the nature of the interpretative task shape the outcomes of statistical measures such as Krippendorff's alpha. Second, we move beyond description to consider what these patterns reveal about the practice of assessing reliability in interpretative research. We argue that statistical

indices provide only a partial picture: they must be interpreted in light of procedural factors (such as coder training and coding rules), individual factors (such as coders' familiarity with the sociopolitical discourse under study and their willingness to engage rigorously and conscientiously with the interpretative task), and epistemological choices (such as whether categories are open, closed, or deliberately polysemic).

The ICR assessment covers 19 variables spanning the four main category types of the coding grid. Overall, the results reveal a clear divide between formal descriptors and interpretative dimensions, with the former yielding consistently higher levels of agreement. Type A variables, which required coders to select a single response from a closed list, show the clearest internal differentiation. Grammatical and structural descriptors perform best: GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY and OBJECT TYPE display strong Krippendorff's alpha coefficients (0.83 and 0.91, respectively), indicating consistent identification of the morphosyntactic form of *populis** and the ontological type of its referent. SPEAKER TYPE also performs well ($\alpha = 0.78$), showing broad coder consensus on whether the utterance originated from a politician, journalist, or citizen. By contrast, interpretative dimensions such as DISCURSIVE GENRE ($\alpha = 0.41$), VALUE ($\alpha = 0.35$), and FUNCTION ($\alpha = 0.41$) yield lower reliability. These categories demand contextual judgment – determining, for instance, whether *populis** is used descriptively or evaluatively, thus inviting interpretive variation. REPORTED SPEECH and REPORTED SPEECH SOURCE TYPE both achieve moderate reliability ($\alpha = 0.66$), as coders occasionally differed in identifying whether the term appeared in direct quotation or verbatim. SELF-EVIDENT MEANING represents a special case: raw agreement is extremely high (97%), yet alpha is modest (.54) due to a skewed category distribution, with nearly all instances coded as 'Yes'. Similarly, REFERENCE TO TYPE, ADDRESSEE TYPE, and TYPE OF MARKING (α between 0.32 and 0.41) perform weakly, confirming that inferential tasks, such as identifying communicative relations or evaluative mechanisms, reduce convergence. TARGET TYPE ($\alpha = 0.47$) follows this pattern, as coders sometimes disagreed on whether the implicit target was an individual actor, an institution, or a broader collective like 'the elite'.

This divide between formal and interpretive dimensions becomes even more pronounced when moving from single-response closed categories (Type A) to multi-response or open formats (Types B, C, D). In these latter categories, coders had to not only recognise explicit textual features but also reconstruct semantic and pragmatic relations around *populis** based on lexical cues. CONCEPTUAL FIELD, the only Type B variable, exemplifies this dynamic. With an agreement rate of 43%, it yields one of the lowest reliability scores. Coders typically agreed on one salient conceptual domain, such as demagogic, but diverged on whether additional dimensions (anti-elite, nationalist, conspiratorial) were also relevant. This pattern illustrates how multi-label coding captures interpretive richness at the

cost of statistical convergence. Yet, as shown by the partial agreement rate (see Appendix 4.2), such cases often reflect substantive convergence on a shared interpretive core, even when coders differed in scope or emphasis.

Type C variables, which allow open-ended responses, produce more heterogeneous but generally acceptable outcomes. *SPEAKER ID* and *OBJECT ID* achieve moderate to good agreement (73% and 61%), indicating frequent convergence on referents. *ASSOCIATED TERMS* generates the highest proportion of partial agreements (32%): coders often shared at least one term linked to *populis**, though their lists rarely matched exactly. *REPORTED SPEECH AUTHOR ID* and *REPORTED SPEECH SOURCE ID* reach higher reliability (87% and 80%), as these categories rely on factual identification once coders agreed on the presence of reported speech. Type D variables, which combine open and closed formats with multiple possible responses, yield both the strongest and weakest results. *ADDRESSEE ID* and *REFERENCE ID* show very high agreement (94% and 92%), confirming coders' consistency in identifying the interlocutor and intertextual reference of an utterance. *TARGET ID*, however, displays low reliability (57%), reflecting the interpretive difficulty of discerning implicit or indirect targets in complex discourse segments.

Taken together, the ICR results reveal a consistent pattern. Variables anchored in clear, directly observable textual features, such as *GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY*, *OBJECT TYPE*, *ADDRESSEE ID*, and *REFERENCE ID*, achieve strong convergence, as their definitions are operationalised through mutually exclusive categories supported by examples in the codebook. As a result, convergence is consistently high, with Krippendorff's alpha values above the conventional 0.80 threshold in most cases. Conversely, categories requiring inferential or contextual interpretation, such as *VALUE*, *FUNCTION*, or *CONCEPTUAL FIELD*, produce weaker agreement. Their operational difficulty stems from conceptual abstraction, overlapping meanings, and the need to weigh tone, irony, or evaluative framing. A low Krippendorff's alpha, however, does not imply that coders disagreed on the overall tendency – for example, that the *VALUE* of most occurrences of *populis** is negative. The coefficient reflects the absence of strong convergence in coding decisions, not unreliability in the underlying data or in the interpretive conclusions drawn from it.

Additional complexity arises from structural and statistical factors. Multi-label categories inherently broaden the interpretive space, while variables with highly skewed distributions, like *VALUE* or *SELF-EVIDENT MEANING*, inflate expected chance agreement and depress alpha coefficients. From this perspective, low alpha does not necessarily indicate error, but the open-ended nature of interpretive work itself. Krippendorff's alpha, which adjusts for agreement expected by chance, is designed precisely to reveal this: it measures the degree of interpretive convergence among coders across all possible categories, not the likelihood of coding error in the results (which remains low). *DISCURSIVE GENRE* poses a distinct but related difficulty: the classification depends partly on the

coder's background knowledge of communicative forms and media conventions, which varies across individuals. Such variation in familiarity produces uneven applications of genre distinctions, leading to lower reliability scores.

Finally, partial agreements, especially in CONCEPTUAL FIELD, carry analytical significance. They reflect substantive convergence on core meaning accompanied by variation in interpretive breadth. Such cases mark zones of semantic density and contestation. The divergences that can be found therefore reflect differences in interpretive background and analytical emphasis: distinct disciplinary lenses or theoretical sensitivities can lead coders to privilege different semantic associations, all justifiable within the coding frame. TARGET ID displays a similar pattern. Because targets are not always explicitly named, coders frequently had to infer them from their knowledge (see (1)), reconstructing the implied object of critique or reference. This task, by nature, invites variation in interpretation.

Overall, coder divergence emerges in predictable and interpretable ways. Variables anchored in directly observable textual features tend to produce high scores, whereas those requiring coders to weigh contextual cues, infer implicit meanings, or prioritise among competing interpretive possibilities yield lower scores. This pattern, namely lower convergence on interpretive categories, has also been reported in previous work on populism (see Hatakka & Herkman, 2022: 1528). Structural characteristics such as multi-label coding or skewed distributions further complicate the statistical picture, sometimes depressing coefficients despite significant substantive alignment. These findings underscore the need to interpret ICR statistics with care – especially in research explicitly designed to capture the polysemic, layered, and interpretive character of political discourse.

At the same time, the ICR exercise proves methodologically productive beyond its diagnostic value. It prompts a reflexive refinement of the coding scheme and encourages cautious treatment of ambiguous cases. In several instances, disagreement reveals that certain categories are intrinsically difficult to apply because the discourse itself is ambivalent. Flagging such borderline cases proved useful for two reasons: first, it allowed us to decide whether to include, exclude, or explicitly annotate them in quantitative summaries; and second, it identified analytically rich examples for subsequent, more qualitative explorations. In this sense, ICR does not merely assess the convergence of coding decisions. It also serves as a device for detecting zones of ambiguity and interpretive interest within the corpus.

5 Considerations for assessing reliability in interpretive research

The descriptive patterns outlined above show that ICR in interpretive research, especially discourse analysis, is not reducible to technical indices. To understand why some categories achieve high convergence while

others generate disagreement, it is necessary to situate reliability outcomes within a wider framework. Based on what we observed, three domains, procedural and technical, contextual, and epistemological, jointly shape reliability in ways that conventional metrics only partially capture.

5.1 Procedural and technical factors

The first layer of influence stems from the mechanics of coding itself. Coders in this project received training through seminars, trial exercises, and feedback loops, which helped standardise their application of the scheme. Nonetheless, some limitations persisted. For example, coders who were not involved in the original design of the codebook found it harder to fully internalise its logic, which occasionally resulted in lapses such as leaving lines uncoded, inconsistently applying the ‘x’ marker for inapplicable categories, or discontinuing their assignments. These issues echo the literature on naïve or insufficiently trained coders, which highlights the persistent gap between formal comprehension of coding instructions and their consistent operational execution in complex interpretative tasks, in spite of the training module they attended (Enschoot *et al.*, 2024: 2; Spooren & Degand, 2010).

Technical properties of the data also play a significant role. As noted above, variables with skewed distributions, such as VALUE or SELF-EVIDENT MEANING, produce low coefficients. Krippendorff’s alpha, like Cohen’s kappa, is sensitive to prevalence effects: when one category dominates, expected chance agreement increases, thereby lowering the coefficient even if coders substantively agree in most cases (Di Eugenio & Glass, 2004; Jeni *et al.*, 2013). This effect can however be mitigated through the use of alternatives such as Kappa Max (Umesh *et al.*, 1989), which adjusts observed kappa relative to the maximum possible given the data’s marginal distributions, and PABAK (Byrt *et al.*, 1993). While rarely applied in qualitative research, these adjustments underscore the need to pair numerical indices with awareness of their limits.

5.2 Human factors

A second domain concerns the coders’ familiarity with the sociopolitical and cultural context of the material. Because the corpus included discourse from Belgium, France, and Spain, coders with limited prior exposure to these contexts faced difficulties in interpreting certain idioms, references, or implicit cues. This sometimes led to misidentification of referents or under-detection of implied meanings. For instance, judgments on TARGET ID often hinge on contextual knowledge, such as inferring which political actor is implied as the target. In such cases, divergence reflected uneven contextual competence. Beyond contextual knowledge, this points to a broader human or individual factor – the degree of professionalism and commitment that coders bring to the interpretative task. A professional

and committed coder, aiming for a ‘job well done’, will actively seek to understand what their contextual knowledge alone does not allow them to grasp, instead of settling for surface interpretation. This engagement dimension also has concrete methodological implications: for example, the initial distribution of coder pairs (see Table 4.2) had to be revised following the withdrawal of one participant before completing the assigned task.

In this sense, differences in reliability may also depend on varying degrees of diligence and involvement. It is then the combination of contextual knowledge and professionalism that allows bridging the gap between abstract category definitions and the situated meanings embedded in discourse.

5.3 *Epistemological factors*

The third and most profound layer of influence stems from the epistemological orientation of the coding scheme. Categories in Types B, C, and D were deliberately designed to capture polysemy, overlap, and multiplicity – features intrinsic to political discourse. This openness was an intentional design choice, in line with the aim of the project to preserve the layered character of discourse rather than reduce it to a single ‘correct’ code. The correlation between conceptual complexity and lower reliability is well documented in the literature (Feng, 2013: 1804; Fort *et al.*, 2012: 898), and our results confirm this: interpretative categories with broad or polysemic definitions return lower alpha values not because of coder error, but because multiple defensible judgments are possible.

6 Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that reliability in qualitative research cannot be meaningfully reduced to numerical indices. While statistical measures such as Krippendorff’s α provide a useful snapshot of coder convergence, their interpretive value depends fundamentally on the nature of the variables under examination. In the present study, high agreement on formal descriptors and lower convergence on interpretative dimensions reflect not methodological inconsistency but the very nature of the analytical task: the attempt to capture implicit, polysemic, ambiguous, and context-dependent meanings. Beyond mere scores, the ICR exercise reveals that coder divergence can itself be analytically productive. When properly documented and discussed, disagreement exposes zones of semantic ambiguity, conceptual tension, or contextual complexity that warrant closer examination. Rather than being treated as error or noise, such divergences point to the discursive density of the material and guide the researcher toward passages of particular interpretive interest.

The results underscore the importance of coder training, contextual competence, and professional engagement. Familiarity with the sociopolitical environments (Belgium, France, and Spain in our case) proves essential for consistent interpretation, while differences in diligence or depth of engagement shape the precision and granularity of coding decisions. At a more fundamental level, the findings reaffirm the epistemological specificity of interpretive reliability. Categories designed to capture polysemy, implicit meaning, or evaluative nuance will, by design, produce lower statistical convergence. This outcome reflects a research philosophy that privileges meaning reconstruction over mechanical replication. The challenge is therefore to make the interpretive process traceable, transparent, and theoretically coherent.

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Appendix 4.1 – Codebook variables

Example: *Et après un appel à la population à «faire bloc» #Macron ose encore accuser les autres de faire dans le #populisme et la démagogie 🗣️🗳️👉 Les Français ont élu un #gouvernement pour gérer les affaires du pays et non pas pour que le contribuable👤 fasse de la police de proximité!👎👎*

And after calling on the population to “stand united,” #Macron dares to accuse others of engaging in #populism and demagoguery 🗣️🗳️👉 The French elected a #government to run the country’s affairs, not so that taxpayers 👤 would do community policing! 👎👎

Variable	Description	Example
Grammatical category	Indicates the grammatical form of the occurrence of populis* in context. Possible values: adjective (epithet or attributive), definite noun, or indefinite noun. This identifies the morphosyntactic status of the term.	Definite noun
Associated terms	Lists the term(s) syntactically or semantically linked to populis*, such as modifiers, complements, or coordinated items. If multiple, separate by semicolon (;). If none, code X.	Demagoguery
Discursive genre	Refers to the type of discourse or text in which the occurrence appears, according to institutional and communicative conventions. For media data, options include news brief, report, editorial, analysis, interview, and opinion piece. For parliamentary data, options include oral intervention, written communication, question to government, and report.	Tweet
Speaker ID	Unique identifier or name of the speaker who produced the utterance (the person responsible for the use of populis*). Can be a proper name, pseudonym, or Twitter handle.	Lambda twitter user

(Continued)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Speaker type	Identifies the social or professional status of the speaker (the person who produced the utterance containing <i>populis*</i>). Possible values: politician, journalist/press agency, expert, columnist, public figure, other, Unknown	X
Reported speech	Indicates whether the term <i>populis*</i> appears as part of another person's discourse (i.e., whether the speaker is quoting, paraphrasing, or reproducing someone else's words). Possible values: No / Verbatim / DR (reported discourse).	Reported discourse
RS Author ID	Identifies the author of the reported speech (the person whose words are quoted or paraphrased when <i>populis*</i> occurs).	Emmanuel Macron
RS Source ID	Identifies the source or medium (e.g., <i>Le Monde</i> , European Parliament, Twitter) from which the reported speech originates.	X
RS Source type	Identifies the original arena or type of medium from which the reported speech originates: political, traditional media, social media, other.	X
Object ID	Identifies the concrete entity (individual, group, action, etc.) to which the attribute <i>populist</i> is applied in the utterance. If self-referential, code AR.	Self-referential
Object type	Specifies the ontological category of the entity characterised as <i>populist</i> (the object of the characterisation). Values include individual, defined group, undefined group, individual/group, action/event/fact. If the use is self-referential, leave blank or code 'X'.	X
Value	Captures the evaluative polarity attached to <i>populis*</i> in the utterance. Possible values: positive, positive-ironic, negative, negative-ironic, neutral, ambivalent, NC. This assesses the explicit or implicit normative charge of the term.	Negative
Type of marking	Indicates the linguistic mechanism by which the evaluative value of <i>populis*</i> is marked. Values: lexical (value-bearing adjective, noun, or verb), person/group (contrast or association with a valued referent), inference. If Value is neutral or NC, leave blank.	Lexical

(Continued)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Self-evident meaning	Indicates whether the meaning of <i>populis*</i> is presented as self-evident or as requiring clarification. Yes means the meaning is taken for granted (no definition provided). No means the meaning is questioned, explained, or defined in context.	Yes
Conceptual field	Identifies the broader conceptual domain or ideological frame associated with <i>populis*</i> in context. Possible values: demagogic, anti-system/anti-elite, traditionalist/conservative, nationalist/ethnicist/souverainist, popular/coarse, extremist/radical, autocratic, conspiratorial/dishonest, people-based, NC.	Demagogy
Function	Refers to the primary pragmatic or argumentative role of the occurrence within the utterance. Possible values include description/characterisation, critique of process, critique of act, critique of actor/group, denial, legitimisation by opposition, (self-)legitimation/promotion.	Description
Target ID	Identifies the person, group, or institution explicitly targeted or criticised through the utterance (when applicable).	Macron
Target type	Refers to the social or institutional type of the target explicitly criticised or attacked through the use of <i>populis*</i> (distinct from the grammatical object). Uses the same typology as Speaker Type (politician, journalist, expert, etc.).	Politician
Reference ID	Identifies the external message or source text to which the utterance refers (if the occurrence comments on another text or message).	X
Reference to Type	Identifies whether the utterance is primarily a commentary or reaction to another message or text.	X
Addressee ID	Identifies the person or group to whom the utterance is directly addressed (e.g., through mention, response, or reply).	X
Addressee type	Specifies whether the utterance is directly addressed to another actor, and if so, what form the address takes.	X

Appendix 4.2 – ICR results

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Total items</i>	<i>N Disagreement</i>	<i>N Agreement</i>	<i>N Partial agreement</i>	<i>Agreement rate</i>	<i>Partial agreement rate</i>	<i>Krippendorff's α</i>	<i>Agreement type</i>
Grammatical category	A	280	28	252		0.9		0.831	Strong
Discursive genre	A		111	120		0.519		0.406	Poor
Speaker type	A	231	29	171		0.855		0.78	Acceptable
Object type	A	200	11	190		0.945		0.906	Strong
Target type	A	201	2	17		0.895		0.475	Poor
Reported speech	A	19	55	229		0.806		0.661	Poor
RS source type	A	284	2	5		0.714		0.664	Poor
Value	A	7	86	195		0.694		0.346	Poor
Self-evident meaning	A	281	8	276		0.972		0.542	Poor
Function	A	284	120	159		0.57		0.405	Poor
Reference to type	A	279	114	164		0.573		0.354	Poor
Addressee TYPE	A	278	19	267		0.934		0.282	Poor
Type of marketing	A	286	111	175	0	0.612	/	0.324	Poor

Conceptual field	B	286	133	122	31	0.427	0.108	0.424	Poor
Associated terms	C	286	20	169	92	0.590	0.321		Poor
Speaker ID	C	286	70	208	8	0.727	0.028		Acceptable
Object ID	C	286	77	173	36	0.605	0.126		Acceptable
RS Author ID	C	286	36	248	0	0.87	/		Acceptable
RS Source ID	C	286	51	229	6	0.8	0.021		Acceptable
Target ID	D	286	114	164	8	0.573	0.028		Poor
Addressee ID	D	286	16	268	2	0.937	0.007		Strong
Reference ID	D	286	21	264	6	0.923	0.021		Strong

Agreement type is based on Krippendorff's alpha when applicable, and on the raw agreement rate in other cases. The thresholds follow Krippendorff (2004): ≥ 0.800 : Meets standard (reliable); 0.667–0.799: Tentatively acceptable; < 0.667 : Below standard (unreliable).



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Part II

Interdisciplinary empirical studies

On the notion and use of ‘populism’
in political and media discourse



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5 On the notion and use of ‘populism’ and ‘populist’ in political discourse

A comparative study in Spanish parliamentary debates and politicians’ tweets

Laetitia Aulit and Nadezda Shchinova

1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the notion and uses of *populism* and *populist* (hereafter *populis**) in two different forms of political discourse: in parliamentary debates in official institutional settings on the one hand and, on the other, in digital messages posted by political parties’ accounts on social media such as Twitter (now X).

Scientific literature on discourses on populism shows a real interest in the uses of these notions in mediated political discourse (Hamo *et al.*, 2019; Kranert, 2020), on social media (Schwörer, 2021; Shchinova, 2023) and in the parliamentary arena (Aulit & De Cock, 2025; Bailly *et al.*, 2025; Shchinova, 2024). Yet, to our knowledge, there is a lack of contrastive insight into the uses specific speakers make of them in the different contexts they are involved in. Given the vagueness of this ‘political buzzword’ (Schwörer, 2021: 10) and the lack of consensual definition both in scholarly discourse (Hunger & Paxton, 2022) and in public discourse (Bale *et al.*, 2011, among others), we believe that analysing the uses of *populis** by specific speakers and what these uses allow them to do depending on the communication context is essential to better understand the growing use of these words worldwide. Indeed, in her study on the meanings associated to *populis** by some Spanish political figures and their parties in the tweets they published during the second election campaign of the General Spanish election of 2019 (in November and December), Shchinova highlights that ‘at least in political discourse, the uses of *populis** are far from being random or meaningless’ (2023: 862), explaining that ‘specific leanings are attached to *populis** depending on the political actor, i.e. association with demagogu (PSOE), regional nationalism (Cs and PP) or communism (Vox)’.

The aim of this chapter is to go in depth into this perspective that ‘the uses of *populis** are far from being random or meaningless’, by contrasting the uses displayed by political parties in parliamentary debates with their uses on Twitter, and by linking them to the characteristics of the discursive genres in which these uses occur. To do so, we conduct a comparative analysis of the references to *populis** in Spanish parliamentary speeches and tweets from the main national political parties in 2019. The choice to focus on discourse produced by Spain’s national political parties is explained below.

First, the Spanish political landscape in the 2000s and 2010s is characterised by the emergence of new parties (the right-wing Ciudadanos – Cs – in 2006, the far-right Vox in 2013 and the far-left Podemos in 2014) which have been, in a greater or lesser extent, associated with populism either because some populist characteristics have been identified in their speeches, or because their political views are considered as populist (Alcaide Lara, 2019; Juncos Zori, 2023; Osuna, 2021; Rhodes-Purdy *et al.*, 2023; Sosinski & Sánchez García, 2022). Their emergence put an end to the two-party system (*bipartidismo*) comprising the right-wing conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the centre-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) that had defined Spanish politics in the postdictatorial period. Moreover, it allowed for new and more complex power relationships between the political parties, as evidenced by the instability of the Spanish political context in 2019, which led to the organisation of two national elections (in April and November), in addition to the local, regional and European elections. Although the PSOE won the first general election in April 2019, the party needed support from the left-wing electoral alliance UP (Unidas Podemos, formed by Podemos, Izquierda Unida and EQUO) and the regional parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country to form a coalition government and approve the Spanish budget proposal. However, given the failure of negotiations, new elections were held in November, leading to a rise of Vox, which became the third political party after PSOE and PP, and a new victory of PSOE, which this time did reach a coalition with UP. Therefore, these elections saw the emergence of the first coalition government at the national level since the Second Republic in Spain. Second, the interest in the discourse of Spanish political parties on Twitter is explained by the fact that the engagement of Spanish parties and political figures on social media has been stressed, in particular by Schwörer (2021: 5) who observes that ‘Spanish and Italian parties are strongly engaged in campaigning on Twitter, publishing more content than parties in the other countries’. Furthermore, their engagement on social media is also evident from the amount of scientific research conducted on their uses of such platforms (see, e.g., Calvo Rubio, 2017; de Sola Pueyo & Pascual Santistevé, 2024; López-Rabadán *et al.*, 2016; Marcos García, 2018; Padilla Herrada, 2015).

Therefore, by contrasting the use of *populis** by the main Spanish national parties in parliamentary debates and on Twitter, we aim to improve our understanding of how *populis** can be employed depending on the specific communicative goals of their users and why *populis** can function as a socio-political keyword (see Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume). To do so, this chapter is structured as follows. We first reflect on the selected discursive genres and their main characteristics, before presenting the data and methodology that have been employed in this research. We then comment on the main results, highlighting the general tendencies and the different uses in each communicative context. Finally, this chapter ends with some conclusions regarding the findings and their effects on our understanding of the uses of *populis** in political discourse.

2 Political communication in parliamentary debates and on Twitter

Political discourse unfolds in contemporary public space in various forms of communication, from parliamentary debates to election debates, as well as mediated political interviews, and posts on social media, to name just a few examples. As mentioned above, this chapter focuses on two specific forms of political communication, parliamentary debates and social media posts (from Twitter) to investigate how the references to *populis** are used depending on the discursive context and the speakers’ communicative goals. Given that these two types of political communication are characterised by different communicative goals and, at first glance, different target audiences, as detailed below, our contrastive analysis will allow us to shed light on a broad variety of uses of *populis** in political contexts.

Parliamentary debates, as debates taking place during parliamentary sessions where important issues and decisions concerning the country, its legislation, and political life must be decided, are part of institutional communication. As a result, while the communicative purposes of the debates revolve around the discussion and approval of laws and measures for the welfare of the country, situational characteristics are also determined by the institutional context of parliament, and communication is generally highly ritualised, even though each national parliament may differ slightly in how it organises its debates. Regarding the Spanish context, the highly ritualised nature of parliamentary debates has been highlighted by Blas Arroyo (2011). Spanish parliamentary debates are then described as a form of polylogical communication in which different political parties participate through a spokesperson who represents them and speaks in turn when the chairman of the session – who acts as moderator – gives them the floor (Blas Arroyo, 2011: 51–53). Therefore, politicians themselves are the main target audience of parliamentary debates, even though transcripts and, in some cases, video streams of the sessions are

made available online to the general public. Moreover, topics of discussion are predetermined, and announced by the chairman, on the basis of bills and debates proposed by the different parties. A party representative then presents a proposal or position, which is subject to debate among the other deputies of the parliament.

In order to analyse the communication that characterises this type of highly ritualised debates – and hence the role of *populis** in these contexts –, it is important to rely on a typology that considers the different strategies that may arise. In this regard, we believe that Kondratenko *et al.*'s (2020) research, which is based on the analysis of the communicative strategies used in another ritualised parliamentary context, that is, in Ukrainian parliamentary debates between 2004 and 2019, is appropriate since it has led to the development of a typology of communicative behaviour strategies in parliamentary discourse that takes into account both cooperative and conflict strategies. According to the authors, parliamentary discourse is characterised by the uses of cooperative strategies, that is, strategies 'aimed at achieving success in communication' (Kondratenko *et al.*, 2020: 20), which include regulatory, informative and consolidating strategies. While the regulatory strategies principally appear in chairmen's speeches, to explicit the procedures and moderate the debates, informative and consolidating ones are used by parliamentarians (Kondratenko *et al.*, 2020). Informative strategies concern the reporting of new information relevant to the debated bills and entail strategies such as the use of citations, references to sources and known facts. As for the consolidating ones, they appear when the politicians call for unity and joint collective work, or when they express support to another party's bill. In addition to the cooperative strategies, Kondratenko *et al.*'s typology include conflict strategies, defined by 'a lack of willingness for a common result, opposing positions of participants in interaction and demonstration of verbal aggression' (2020: 24), which is in line with the conflictive dimension of political communication, highlighted by Blas Arroyo (2011). These strategies include declarative, confrontational and argumentative-critical ones. The first is directed to the self-presentation of the speaker's political entity, through the expression of their own position and the enhancing of their image, which generally implies a devaluation of the opponents' position and image. In contrast, confrontation and argumentative-critical strategies are explicitly addressed to the opponents and their speeches, and encompass, respectively, strategies aimed at discrediting and attacking them, and at argumentatively criticising them or denying their positions and speeches. Therefore, this typology underlines that parliamentary discourse is characterised by both cooperative and conflict strategies, which may affect the nature of the debates or the way in which the political parties present themselves and their opponents in their speeches.

As for the social media sphere, the development and popularity of platforms such as Twitter have led to their increasing use for political communication purposes, which has attracted the attention of scholars from different academic fields worldwide (Jungherr, 2014), particularly in relation to election campaigns. This interest has manifested itself in a growing body of literature on the use of Twitter by politicians and campaigners, by different types of publics in the context of election and issue campaigns, and by unknown users who comment on mediated campaign events (Jungherr, 2014). Focusing on research dealing with politicians' and campaigners' uses of Twitter, Jungherr (2014, 2016) observes similar patterns in different studies on elections campaigns from 26 countries between 2008 and 2014. The conclusions indicate that 'parties and candidates tended to use Twitter predominantly to post information on their campaign activities, and links to their own Web sites' (Jungherr, 2016: 76). Conversely, they do not seem to frequently use it to discuss policy nor to call their supporters to action and, even less, to interact with other users on Twitter, although these uses can be observed in the political communication of some specific politicians (Jungherr, 2016). These findings are in line with those of Roginsky and De Cock (2015), who also observed similar trends in politicians' uses of Twitter in the late 2010s (Roginsky & De Cock, 2022), which suggests a certain consistency in the use of Twitter for political communication.

In the Spanish context, research focusing on more recent election campaigns highlights similar patterns in the uses of Twitter by the main Spanish political parties. Both Calvo Rubio's (2017) study on the 2015 General Elections and López-Meri *et al.*'s (2017) research on the 2016 General Elections show that the main Spanish political parties at the time (Partido Popular, PSOE, Ciudadanos and Podemos) used Twitter during the two weeks of the official election campaigns mainly as a tool to disseminate messages and information relating to their campaigns. In this regard, Calvo Rubio presents Twitter as an amplifier that allows the parties to relay their most noteworthy messages to audiences other than those usually present at their events (2017: 128):

El interés en propagar sus mensajes queda también patente en el empleo mayoritario de Twitter para retransmitir los contenidos más destacados de las intervenciones de los representantes de los partidos en los actos de campaña o en los medios de comunicación.¹

Conversely, criticisms of political opponents are a minority in the context of election campaigns, representing around 10% of parties' Twitter posts in 2015 (Calvo Rubio, 2017) and 21% in 2016 (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017). Thus, these studies show that, during election campaigns, political parties tend to opt for self-promotion and self-referencing on Twitter, rather than attacking

their political opponents. This self-promotion also allows for the exaltation and strengthening of the values defended by the political formations, which is crucial particularly for the newer parties that do not benefit from a long history. López-Meri *et al.* (2017) observe in that respect that Podemos and Ciudadanos are the parties that most frequently employ rhetoric and language that reflect their political ideology, with a large number of speeches centred around the idea of change and political regeneration. That said, it is important to note that, while opposition parties focus more on their proposals and future commitments, the ruling party (PP in 2015 and 2016) emphasises its achievements (Calvo Rubio, 2017; López-Meri *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, some differences in relation to self-promotion are observed depending on the party's position in relation to power. That said, all these uses demonstrate that the main audience targeted by political parties' accounts on social media is the electorate, that is, their supporters and other citizens they could reach, even though the public nature of the platforms also allows for their opponents to be part of the recipients of the posts. Nevertheless, these studies show that, although Twitter is seen as a tool that enables politicians to interact with their followers and appear closer to them through personalisation content, these functions are rather rarely used, leading to conclude that political communication on Twitter is unidirectional and does not really foster dialogue between politicians and their supporters. Once again, it should be noted that these uses of Twitter highlighted in the political communication of the main Spanish national parties still seem to be the main trends, as evidenced by de Sola Pueyo and Pascual Santistevé (2024) in their study on the use of Twitter by the PSOE and PP in the 2023 Aragon regional election campaign.

Moreover, it is worth noting that, according to the concept of 'permanent campaign', there would be a blurring of the boundaries between the communicative management of election campaigns and the communicative management of the exercise of power and opposition. As a consequence, some studies focus on longer periods than the official election campaign, aiming to shed light on the general strategies used by the political parties on social media (López-Rabadán *et al.*, 2016, among others). In this chapter, we aim to examine whether references to *populis** in political parties' publications appear to contribute to these uses of Twitter related to election campaigns purposes, as the data we analyse focus on 2019, a year characterised by the organisation of two national elections, as well as local, regional and European elections, as previously mentioned.

3 Data and methodology

This research is based on the data collected and the methodology developed in the context of the project 'Discourse, populism and democracy. Tracking the uses of *populism* in media and political discourse (TrUMPo)' (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume, for more information on data selection,

collection techniques and ethical considerations, and Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume, for more information on the qualitative annotation that has been developed to analyse *populism* as a sociopolitical keyword).

Concretely, we analyse here the occurrences of *populism(s)* and *populist(s)* (*populismo(s)* and *populista(s)* in Spanish) in two different forms of political discourse, that is, parliamentary debates and tweets from the five main Spanish political parties (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Vox and Podemos), in 2019. Regarding parliamentary debates, all the occurrences have been extracted from the 2019 plenary debates on the Spanish Congress of Deputies web page using Python script. This data collection allows us to identify 72 occurrences of *populis** from 19 plenary debates, 63 of which come from discourse by representatives of the five main parties selected for this study. As for Twitter, the data has been obtained using Tweet Binder, a tool for tracking online conversations, through a search by account owner. The preselection is then manually reviewed to remove irrelevant and duplicate tweets and to select the data to include in our dataset. This part of the data collection process enables us to identify 508 tweets posted by an account belonging to one of the selected political parties.

The comparative analysis is based on some analytical categories developed in the methodology of this project:

- 1 the discursive genre/situational context of use of *populis**
- 2 the topic of the message containing *populis**
- 3 the grammatical category of *populis**
- 4 the lexical items which co-occur with *populis**
- 5 the speaker/user who uses *populis** and his/her affiliation to a political party
- 6 the object, person or reality that is associated with *populis**
- 7 the connotations associated with *populis**
- 8 the entity (person/group) targeted by the message containing *populis**
- 9 the pragmatic function of *populis**

The combination of all these categories allows us to take into account the situational characteristics of the discursive contexts in which *populis** is used, but also the collocations in which these references appear. Moreover, it gives us a tool to reflect on the communicative purposes related to them.

4 Analysis

4.1 General results on the uses of *populis** in political discourse

As mentioned in the methodology, our data collection allows us to obtain 63 occurrences of *populis** in parliamentary interventions by the five main Spanish political parties, and 508 occurrences from their respective Twitter

Table 5.1 Results of the quantitative analysis of the political parties who use *populis**

	<i>Parliamentary debates</i>		<i>Twitter/X</i>	
	<i>N (occurrences)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N (occurrences)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Ciudadanos	33	52	441	86
Partido Popular	19	30	44	9
Podemos/Unidas Podemos	3	5	0	0
PSOE	6	10	20	4
Vox	2	3	3	1
Total	63	100	508	100

accounts. That said, it is important to note that the analysis of the political parties who use *populis** in these types of discourse reveals an uneven distribution, both in the parliamentary debates and tweets on which we focus on in this research. Table 5.1 shows that most of the uses of *populis** appear in discourse by right-wing political parties, namely, Ciudadanos and, to a lesser extent, Partido Popular. Both parties competed in 2019 to become the leader of the centre-right of the Spanish political spectrum. However, while 52% of the uses in parliamentary debates come from Ciudadanos' discourse and 30% from PP's discourse, the occurrences of *populis** on Twitter seem to be mainly produced by Ciudadanos (86%). That said, it is important to remember that these observations on which parties are responsible for most uses of *populis** in the two discursive contexts analysed here do not inform us of the proportion these discourses including *populis** represent in their own parliamentary speeches and social media posts.

By contrast, the other Spanish political parties exhibit a very infrequent use of *populis** both in parliamentary debates and on Twitter. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the ruling party, the PSOE, refers to *populis** more often than the parties situated at the extremes of the political spectrum and sometimes portrayed as *populis** in public opinion and scientific literature. Given the very limited number of occurrences by Podemos, PSOE and Vox, we mainly focus on discourse by Ciudadanos and Partido Popular in the qualitative comments presented below regarding the uses of *populis** depending on the type of discourse.

Regarding the distribution of the terms *populism(s)* – *populismo(s)* – and *populist(s)* – *populista(s)* –, the plural form *populists* and the singular noun *populism* are the most frequently used in both parliamentary debates and Twitter discourse, as can be seen in Table 5.2.

The terms *populists* and, to a lesser extent, *populist* appear in both types of discourse mainly to refer to Podemos and its leader, either explicitly (*los*

Table 5.2 The distribution of *populis** forms in parliamentary debates and Twitter discourse

	Parliamentary debates		Twitter/X	
	N (occurrences)	Percentage	N (occurrences)	Percentage
Populism	19	30	161	31
Populisms	5	8	34	7
Populist	9	14	19	4
Populists	30	48	294	58
Total	63	100	508	100

populistas de Podemos ‘the populists of Podemos’) or implicitly through contextual references, by alluding to the negotiations carried out by Pedro Sánchez to form a coalition with left-wing parties and approve the budget proposal. One may recall that the uses mainly come from Ciudadanos’ and PP’s discourse, two right-wing parties that oppose the PSOE. In these discursive contexts, *populists* collocates with other terms such as independentists (*independentistas*), nationalists (*nacionalistas*) and separatists (*separatistas*), among others. That said, these collocations seem to serve different communicative purposes, depending on the communicative context and type of discourse in which they appear, as we discuss in more detail below.

As for the noun *populism(s)*, it mainly co-occurs in both types of discourse with concepts which denote ideologies and political leanings such as ‘nationalism’ (*nacionalismo*), ‘socialism’ (*socialismo*) and ‘independentism’ (*independentismo*), with negatively charged nouns as ‘threat’ (*amenaza*) and ‘regression’ (*retroceso*), and in metaphors based, for example, on a ‘wave’ (*oleada*) and a ‘breeding ground’ (*caldo de cultivo*). Again, these occurrences principally appear in Ciudadanos’ and PP’s discourse and allow them to associate populism with left-wing ideologies and politics, as well as with separatist movements. These associations were also present in Ciudadanos’ and PP’s discourse after the 2019 elections, when the coalition government came in place (De Cock, 2023). Through this discourse, Ciudadanos and PP present populism as a dangerous phenomenon that must be seriously faced. In doing so, these right-wing parties target political opponents and present themselves as the parties who seek to counter the dangerous threat posed by populism. *Populis** is used in these contexts as a strategy for promotion and self-legitimation. However, once again, a closer look at the discursive context of parliamentary debates and social media posts enables us to better understand how this political keyword functions in both types of discourse.

These general findings on the uses of *populis** show that this concept can be employed in similar structures in both parliamentary debates and Twitter posts. However, our reflection on the main characteristics of these

types of political discourse has enabled us to highlight different purposes and strategies that appear in each of them. Therefore, we propose now to continue our reflection on the use of *populis** in political discourse by illustrating how this reference contributes to achieving the communicative goals of the speakers in the communication context in which they are involved. To do so, we first discuss the uses of *populis** in parliamentary debates, before focusing on the uses on Twitter.

4.2 *Uses of *populis** in parliamentary debates*

In addition to highlighting the frequent use of *populis** by right-wing parties, our analysis of parliamentary debates indicates that the occurrences principally appear in unfavourable or nuanced interventions to opponents' proposals or appearances. Moreover, even though the occurrences are mainly involved in reactions to government's proposals or appearances, the data show that all political groups can be targeted. In these contexts, *populis** seems to participate in two types of conflict strategies, according to Kondratenko *et al.*'s (2020) typology. On the one hand, *populis** is used in contexts in which what is at stake is the disqualification of the other's politics and the self-legitimation of one's own political parties. In these cases, the reference contributes to the qualification of opponents' politics or criticism concerning the collaboration with populist forces. In the specific case of the PSOE in 2019, for example, the data includes parliamentary debates in which the PSOE's political opponents resort to *populis** in speech acts that criticise the PSOE for the way it has come to power and the parties from which it receives support. By emphasising the populist nature attributed to Podemos (instead of using the party's official name) along with the negative characteristics attributed to other PSOE allies, opponents appeal to the negative connotations associated with populism and populist actors, thereby reinforcing the discrediting of and attacks to the PSOE. In example (1) for instance, María Teresa Palmer (PP) presents a PP amendment to a bill on property transfers, presenting it as a solution to problems that the government has been unable to resolve. 'Populists' (*populistas*) appears at the beginning of the speech, in a fragment that mainly focuses on how the politician represents the government. Since it is used in reference to the parties whose support has helped the PSOE to come to power and combined with the claim that the government's actions are directed to its maintaining power, *populistas* participates in a confrontation strategy (Kondratenko *et al.*'s, 2020), that is, a strategy aimed at discrediting and attacking the PSOE. In this context, we analyse that highlighting the populist characteristics of Podemos (instead of presenting this political actor in a more neutral way) intensifies the discredit and criticism directed at the PSOE because the discourse draws the attention to some characteristics of the PSOE's allies that are socially depreciated.

- (1) *Señorías, debatimos hoy en Pleno una iniciativa presentada por mi grupo, [...] Trataré de explicarme y concretar cuál es el problema que nos trae hoy aquí porque, así descrito, uno podría pensar en muchas situaciones de estos últimos meses en los que este ha sido el escenario, un escenario en el que el fondo de las actuaciones y de la toma de decisiones no ha sido la solución de los problemas de los ciudadanos españoles sino el mantenimiento a toda costa de un Gobierno que llegó de la mano de independentistas, **populistas** y filoetarras, un Gobierno que no solo llegó de su mano sino que también quedó en sus manos por esa obsesión por seguir en el sillón, por aguantar.*

Your lordships, today we are debating in plenary session an initiative presented by my group, [...] I will try to explain and specify the problem that brings us here today because, described like this, one could think of many situations in the last few months in which this has been the scenario, a scenario in which the basis for actions and decision-making has not been the solution of the problems of Spanish citizens but the maintenance at all costs of a government that came to power with the help of separatists, **populists** and ETA sympathisers, a government that not only came to power with their help but also remained in their hands because of its obsession with staying in power, with holding on.

[María Teresa Palmer, Partido Popular, parliamentary debate, 28 February 2019]

On the other hand, the analysis shows that *populis** also appears in argumentative sequences, to qualify an action, proposal or behaviour of an opponent – regardless of their political affiliation – or to refer critically to an opponent's alliance or collaboration with Podemos. Therefore, we observe that the allusion to the alliance with populist figures is used in parliamentary debates as a criticism concerning others' acts, but also as an argument that justifies a posture in the context of a debate. This is what happens in example (2), where Albert Rivera (Cs) uses the noun *populists* in a speech in which he defends his party's amendment to a proposal made by Pedro Sanchez and the PSOE. The fragment appears towards the end of Albert Rivera's speech, in which he explains why his party opposes the budget proposal. *Populists* is employed in a reference to the alliance between Sánchez, the nationalists and the populists as an argument that presents Ciudadanos' budget rejection as a means of preventing a future alliance between these political actors that is considered harmful (*Con el no a estos presupuestos estamos defendiendo también que no haya una futura alianza...*).

- (2) *Con el no a estos presupuestos estamos defendiendo también que no haya una futura alianza entre el señor Sánchez -el sanchismo-, los nacionalistas y los **populistas** en un mismo Gobierno. El señor Iglesias*

decía hoy, y es legítimo que lo diga, que quiere formar un Gobierno con el señor Sánchez. Por tanto, lo que nos jugamos hoy aquí también no es solo que salgan o no los presupuestos, es que se configure a base de privilegios, pactos e indultos una futura mayoría.

By rejecting these budgets, we are also preventing a future alliance between Mr Sánchez – Sanchismo –, the nationalists and **the populists** in the same government. Mr Iglesias said today, and it is legitimate for him to say so, that he wants to form a government with Mr Sánchez. Therefore, what is at stake here today is not only whether or not the budgets will pass, but also whether a future majority will be formed on the basis of privileges, pacts and reprieves.

[Albert Rivera, Ciudadanos, parliamentary debate,
12 February 2019]

Although he does not explain why it is necessary to oppose this alliance, we can see here that Albert Rivera uses common nouns to refer to political opponents that highlight characteristics with negative connotations attributed to them. Therefore, the use of *populists* contributes to the argumentative purpose of the speech, since we infer that it is precisely because Podemos is populist that an alliance between them and the PSOE is undesirable. In this case, *populists* is then used in an argumentative-critical strategy (Kondratenko *et al.*'s, 2020), that is, in an argumentative act that indirectly includes criticism of the government's actions and its coalition choices. In many cases, criticism of the government in the context of an argumentative-critical strategy focuses on the fact that the alliance with populists and nationalists for the budget proposal highlights the PSOE desire to do whatever it takes to remain in power, rather than taking into account the real needs and well-being of Spanish citizens (Aulit & De Cock, 2025).

In addition to these uses, it is important to note that *populis** is also referred to in declarative strategies, which are linked to the positive presentation of the speaker's political party. This is what happens in example (3). This example reports a fragment of speech appearing at the end of an intervention by Carlos Rojas García, a PP representative. This discourse is part of the defence of an amendment by the PP to a bill proposed by Unidas Podemos to repeal the maximum time limit for investigation in a criminal procedure act. The politician uses the singular noun *populism* in an assertive act that presents him and its party, the PP (through the mention of the discourse by his colleague Jordi Roca), as a force that will stand up against populism (*vamos a combatir el populismo*). The fact that this reference appears at the end of the presentation of their amendment and that it appears alongside a similar structure (*vamos a combatir el ataque a las instituciones*) suggests that Unidas Podemos' proposal is perceived as an attack on institutions.

- (3) *Quien pretenda atacar esa raíz nos va a atacar a todos, porque en todos nosotros reside la soberanía, en todo el pueblo español. Por eso, señorías, en estos momentos más que nunca, como decía mi compañero Jordi Roca, vamos a combatir el **populismo**, vamos a combatir el ataque a las instituciones. Y lo vamos a hacer en las urnas y luego lo vamos a hacer en el Gobierno, con toda la ley y con todo el derecho.*

Anyone who attempts to attack that root will attack us all, because sovereignty resides in all of us, in all the Spanish people. For this reason, your lordships, at this time more than ever, as my colleague Jordi Roca said, we are going to fight **populism**, we are going to fight against the attack suffered by the institutions. And we are going to do so at the ballot box and then we are going to do so in the Government, with all the law and with all our rights.

[Carlos Rojas García, Partido Popular, parliamentary debate, 21 February 2019]

Through the reference to *populism*, it is the author of the initial bill – Unidas Podemos – that can be targeted, and the initial bill is presented as a populist proposal. Even though the confrontational and argumentative-critical dimensions are underlying, given that the discursive context is characterised by an amendment proposal, this final fragment of the speech seems to focus more on the self-presentation of the PP as the party who will combat populism and fight those who threaten the Spanish institutions. We analyse that the vagueness of the notion of populism contributes to allowing the speaker to play on these different dimensions, since we can infer that it is the bill proposed by Unidas Podemos that is being presented as populism – because the notion appears at the end of the amendment proposal – and, at the same time, this use refers to a global phenomenon in society that the PP will combat. This use of populism therefore appears in a fragment that suggests the use of declarative strategies of self-presentation of the speaker's political entity, following Kondratenko *et al.*'s (2020) typology.

Furthermore, *populis** can also be employed in favourable interventions, to defend a proposal under debate. In this case, the proposed policy is presented as a decisive action against populism, which indirectly contributes to the positive image of the party who presents it. Example (4) represents a fragment of speech by José Javier Lasarte (PSOE) that follows an appearance by the Secretary of State for Budgets and Expenditure with the aim of emphasising the social ground of the budgets. The politician uses *populismos* to present the budget proposals as a decisive action against populism and ideological radicalism, which contributes to defending the legitimacy of the government's proposal and, indirectly, affects its self-presentation in the political sphere.

- (4) *En tiempos de desafección de la ciudadanía ante los efectos negativos de la crisis económica entre los más vulnerables, las clases medias y trabajadoras, y el aumento de la desigualdad, la sensibilidad de la acción pública plasmada en los presupuestos y sus efectos de redistribución de rentas y riqueza se convierte en una acción decisiva contra **populismos** y radicalismos ideológicos.*

In times of public disaffection with the negative effects of the economic crisis on the most vulnerable, the middle and working classes, and the rising inequality, the sensitivity of public action reflected in budgets and their effects on the redistribution of income and wealth becomes a decisive action against **populism** and ideological radicalism.

[José Javier Lasarte, PSOE, parliamentary debate,
29 January 2019]

4.3 *Uses of **populis*** on Twitter*

We have seen in the above sections that political parties' uses of social media, mainly Twitter, seem to be prominently linked to self-promotion and display of activities and events, particularly in the context of political campaigns. Our analysis of references to *populis** in Twitter posts by the Spanish parties covered by this study seems to confirm this trend. Indeed, our data show posts that focus on sharing messages and fragments of speeches or videos produced during different events related to election campaigns and events that took place in 2019. This is the case in example (5) in the context of the European parliament elections, and in example (6) in the context of the regional elections.

- (5) 😊 ¿Te perdiste el minuto de oro de @lugaricano en #EuropaDebate? Aquí te lo dejamos 📺

EU “Europa está en crisis y las opciones están claras: retroceso con el **populismo** y el nacionalismo, seguir igual o un proyecto de cambio que lidera Cs” [video de 1 minuto y 3 segundos en el que se escucha parte del discurso de Luis Garicano en el debate televisivo en la RTVE]

😊 Did you miss @lugaricano's golden moment in #EuropaDebate? Here it is 📺

EU “Europe is in crisis and the options are clear: regression with **populism** and nationalism, continuing as before, or a project for change led by Cs” [1 minute 3 second video featuring part of Luis Garicano's speech in the televised debate on RTVE]

[Ciudadanos Twitter account, 23 May 2019]

- (6)  El próximo domingo nadie se puede quedar en casa: todos somos parte del cambio.

 @begonavillacis “Madrid no necesita cuatro años más de **populismo** sino libertad, igualdad, solidaridad; y eso es lo que propone Cs para esta ciudad.” #VamosAGanar [video de 1 minuto y 22 segundos en el que se escucha parte del discurso de Begoña Villacís en un acto de campaña en Madrid]

 Next Sunday, no one can stay at home: we are all part of the change.

 @begonavillacis “Madrid does not need four more years of **populism**, but rather freedom, equality, and solidarity; and that is what Cs proposes for this city.” #VamosAGanar [1 minute and 22 second video featuring part of Begoña Villacís’ speech at a campaign event in Madrid]

[Ciudadanos Twitter account, 24 May 2019]

In both cases, the tweet consists of sharing a quote from the politician, taken from a speech given during a campaign event. In each example, the quote presents the party as an alternative to populism, presented as a negative phenomenon affecting society, which is associated with negative concepts such as regression (*retroceso*) in example (5) or opposed to positive values such as freedom, equality and solidarity (*libertad, igualdad, solidaridad*) in example (6). *Populism* therefore refers to a type of ideology for which the party presents itself as an alternative. It should be noted that, according to the results from our dataset, this reference usually alludes to specific political opponents who are not, however, explicitly targeted. Furthermore, presenting oneself as an alternative often allows the party to highlight the values it defends (e.g., freedom, equality and solidarity) and to emphasise the need for change (*un proyecto de cambio que lidera Cs; todos somos parte del cambio*), which was also a characteristic identified in the literature, particularly in Ciudadanos’ and PP’s tweets (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017).

In addition to this type of use of *populism(s)*, we observe that *populists* is also used in our data to refer to Sánchez’s alliance and Podemos’ involvement in political decisions. In these cases, the quote shared via the tweet targets Sánchez and/or the PSOE, which therefore nuances previous findings on the relatively low level of criticism towards political opponents (Calvo Rubio, 2017; López-Meri *et al.*, 2017). However, these uses also seem to participate in speech acts that primarily seek to present the party posting the tweet as the best alternative for solving society’s problems. Example (7) displays a tweet in which the PP refers to *populists of Podemos* in a speech act that contrasts Sánchez’s needs (*Sánchez necesita la respiración asistida de los independentistas, de los populistas de Podemos y la abstención de los batasunos para seguir*

gobernando) with what the PP proposes to the Spanish society: alliances with parties that want a united Spain (*la única alternativa es el PP, que puede llegar a alianzas con partidos que quieren una España unida*).

- (7) ► @pablocasado_: “Sánchez necesita la respiración asistida de los independentistas, de los **populistas** de Podemos y la abstención de los batasunos para seguir gobernando, y la única alternativa es el PP, que puede llegar a alianzas con partidos que quieren una España unida”. [video de 31 segundos en el que se escucha parte de una entrevista de Pablo Casado con periodistas de varias cadenas de televisión]

► @pablocasado_: “Sánchez needs the breathing assistance of the separatists and the **populists** of Podemos, and the abstention of the Batasuna party to continue governing, and the only alternative is the PP, which can form alliances with parties that want a united Spain.” [31-second video featuring part of an interview by Pablo Casado with journalists from various television channels]

[Partido popular Twitter account, 31 January 2019]

The collocation in which *populists* appears allows for the explicit identification of the targeted political figure, Podemos. The emphasis on some characteristics attributed to Sanchez’ allies (e.g., the populist characteristic of Podemos) participates in the opposition presented between the parties chosen by Sánchez (which do not seek the unity of Spain, since they are separatist or populist), and the possible PP allies, who want a united Spain. Therefore, even though the reference to *populis** seems at first glance to be part of a strategy to attack a political opponent, we observe that the quote reproduced on social media is in the end an attack that is part of a broader strategy of self-promotion and self-legitimation of the party. This strategy is in line with what has been highlighted before with Calvo Rubio (2017) and López-Meri *et al.* (2017), namely, that opposition parties tend to focus more on their proposals and future commitments in social media posts, while ruling parties tend to emphasise their achievements.

Interestingly, example (8) also illustrates the use of *populis** as part of a broader strategy of self-promotion, but in this case in a context where a party shares information about a position taken during a debate. This example represents a discourse by Ciudadanos about Albert Rivera’s position on a proposal made by Sánchez. In this case, *populists* appears in collocation with ‘separatists’ (*la banda de separatistas y populistas*) and the allusion to the alliance between Sánchez and them (*que quiere gobernar de la mano de Pedro Sánchez*).

- (8) ES @Albert_Rivera y el Grupo Parlamentario de Cs han votado ‘NO’ al Plan Sánchez y ‘SÍ’ a España. 🇪🇸 Es hora de oponerse a la

*banda de separatistas y **populistas** que quiere gobernar de la mano de Pedro Sánchez #SánchezNO [video de 5 segundos en el que se ve a Albert Rivera levantándose para decir “no”]*

es @Albert_Rivera and the Cs Parliamentary Group have voted ‘NO’ to Sánchez’s Plan and ‘YES’ to Spain. It is time to oppose the gang of separatists and **populists** who want to govern alongside Pedro Sánchez #SánchezNO [5-second video showing Albert Rivera standing up to say “no”]

[Ciudadanos Twitter account, 23 July 2019]

This post seems primarily aimed at informing followers about the party’s position on Sánchez’s plan (@Albert_Rivera y el Grupo Parlamentario de Cs han votado ‘NO’ al Plan Sánchez), given that this information appears in the first speech act of the tweet and that the content of the video – that shows Albert Rivera standing up to say ‘no’ – confirms this information. In this context, however, although a possible appeal to followers to oppose separatism and populism could be considered here, we analyse that the other elements that form the tweet, namely, the speech act containing *populists* and the hashtag #SánchezNO, also contribute to the communication purposes of informing about Ciudadanos’ stance regarding the politics of Sanchez and the PSOE, and reaffirming its position on the Spanish political scene (*Es hora de oponerse a la banda de...*). We then interpret the use of *populists* and *separatists* instead of the official names of Sánchez’ potential allies as contributing to the reaffirmation and highlighting of Ciudadanos as a political party who opposes separatism and populism in Spanish society. Therefore, the reference to *populists* appears in an act of self-promotion, following the functions highlighted in the literature on political communication on Twitter.

Finally, our results show that the selected parties do not seem to use *populis** in online discussions on policies or in interactions with their supporters or other users on Twitter. More generally the scientific literature concerning political communication on Twitter has determined that these uses are not very frequent (Jungherr, 2016).

5 Conclusion

This study analyses the uses of *populis** in two types of political discourse, parliamentary debates and social media posts. Given the vagueness of *populis** and the lack of consensual definition, our aim is to deepen our understanding of the uses of this political keyword in discursive genres characterised by different communication contexts and communication goals. To do so, we take Spanish politics as a case study and we investigate how the main national parties have used the terms in their parliamentary speeches and on Twitter in 2019, a year characterised by numerous elections.

The first part of the study, more quantitative, allows us to highlight that the five Spanish political parties covered by this study demonstrate unequal uses of *populis**, a result that has been highlighted in previous studies (Shchinova, 2023, 2024). That said, our contrastive analysis enables us to go further by observing that the parties responsible for most uses of *populis** in parliament and on Twitter are the same. Indeed, the right-wing parties Ciudadanos and Partido Popular are the parties responsible for most uses of *populist** in the Spanish political landscape, and this occurs both on Twitter and in the parliamentary arena.

Then, our qualitative analysis of *populis** in each arena, based on the communication goals highlighted in the literature, shows that, even though these terms co-occur with other concepts and in constructions that are similar in parliamentary debates and on Twitter, the effects produced by their uses vary depending on the speaker's communicative purposes and the issues that are at stake in the interactions. For example, we have seen that similar constructions, composed of *populists* and *nationalists* or *separatists*, for instance, may participate, respectively, in an argumentative-critical strategy in a parliamentary debate (2), and in a self-legitimation strategy which allows the party to present itself on Twitter as an alternative to the targeted opponent (8). These examples have therefore allowed us to demonstrate that, depending on the types of communication context in which the speakers are involved, the negative connotations attributed to populist figures can contribute to the pursuit of the speakers' communication goals by guiding audience's inferences in one direction or another. Through this research, we have therefore highlighted how *populis** can be employed in different contexts to meet the communicative purposes of political parties' discourse.

Note

- 1 The interest in spreading their messages is also evident in the widespread use of Twitter to broadcast the most noteworthy content from party representatives' speeches at campaign events or in the media.

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6 A multi-layered and complexified linguistic approach to the analysis of discourse on ‘populism’

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1 Introduction

Discourse on populism has triggered many interrogations. Research has highlighted the referents targeted by the use of *populism* or *populist* and has shown that these terms are usually employed negatively to refer to issues, policies or political enemies from different ideologies, rather than to allude to populism as a concept or phenomenon (e.g., Bale *et al.*, 2011, for the study of *populism* in British newspapers), at least until 2014, as shown by Hatakka and Herkman (2022). Current approaches mainly focus on collocation analysis of *populism*, that is, on quantitative corpus analysis of the frequent word combinations of this term. These studies, which have analysed corpora from different countries, have underlined the following patterns in the discourse on populism.

On the one hand, some studies shed light on the concepts and phenomena associated with populism in public discourse, highlighting the negative connotations that contribute to painting a pejorative picture of populism. For example, Santiago-Guervós (2015) observes that Spanish newspapers frequently refer to populism in combination with demagoguery, irresponsibility, anti-democracy, manipulation and fascism, among others. Kitis and Kitis (2015) show that *populism* is coupled with concepts such as extremism, misery, racism, opportunism, poison and terror in the Greek Prime Minister’s discourse, concluding that ‘all instances [...] have a derogatory use *due to their collocations* [emphasis from the authors], and not due to background knowledge’ (Kitis & Kitis, 2015: 23).

Moreover, the analysis of the nouns and verbs that collocate with *populism* points out particular metaphors that participate in the construction of this phenomenon as a negative one. Populism is generally depicted as a threat (Göhring, 2022, for the analysis of French newspapers; Kranert, 2020, for the analysis of British and German press; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024, for the analysis of Belgian newspapers). However, this threat can take different forms, as shown by the analysis of articles from France (Borriello,

2022), Greece, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021): populism can be linked to a battle or war as in *populist attack* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 3), a natural force as in *populist earthquake* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 4) or *populist wind* (Borriello, 2022: 116), or a disease as in *populist plague* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 4) or *populist fever* (Borriello, 2022: 117), among others.

On the other hand, although it has been demonstrated that discourse on populism can refer to a wide range of political actors, movements and ideologies from the whole political spectrum (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Borriello, 2022; Kitis & Kitis, 2015, among others), research on collocation analysis of *populism* highlights that this phenomenon is frequently associated, in different countries, with the right-wing and the far-right. Borriello's (2022) and Göhring's (2022) studies on the use of *populism* and *populist* in French newspapers show, for example, that the associations with right-wing political parties and lexical fields related to the (far) right (e.g., xenophobia, authoritarianism, and nationalism) are much more recurrent than the associations with the left-wing and its related lexical fields. Moreover, the association between populism and (extreme) right-wing politics seems to be increasingly frequent, as pointed out by Kranert's (2020) diachronic study on the uses of *populism* and *populist* by journalists and politicians in British and German press releases between 2012 and 2017. Indeed, the author shows that nationalism, extremism and xenophobia are among the most frequent collocates in both corpora and that the association between populism and nationalism is stronger from 2015 onwards. This is in line with Brown and Mondon's (2021) results on the use of these terms in *The Guardian's* investigative series on populism published in 2018–2019 as well as with Shchinova *et al.*'s (2024) analysis of populism in Belgian French-speaking and Dutch-speaking newspapers.

This non-exhaustive overview of studies on collocation analysis of populism has allowed us to underline some characteristics of the discourse on populism, that is, the negative portrayal of this phenomenon and the frequent association between populism and right-wing politics. However, while this literature provides valuable insights into how populism is presented in public discourse, it does not focus on how speakers try to achieve their communicative goals (other than discussing populism) in discourse. The uses of 'populism' and 'populist' show that these terms are used inconsistently and lack consensual definitions in media and political discourses. This has led several scholars to speak about the vagueness of the terms and present them as 'meaningless buzzword' (Schwörer, 2021: 4) or 'one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 1). It has yet been demonstrated that the uses are 'far from being random or meaningless' (Shchinova, 2023: 17). For example, in the interaction between the two Belgian politicians Raoul Hedebouw

(PTB-PVDA, far-left party) and Catherine Fonck (cdH, French-speaking Christian-democratic party) in example (1), one may wonder what the use of *populism* by both interlocutors allows them to do in this interaction.

- (1) *Dès le début, vous avez dit que c'était impossible, parce qu'on ne pouvait pas toucher aux douzièmes provisoires et que cela relevait du populisme. Non! C'est de la politique sérieuse que nous pratiquons ici : 402 millions d'euros, c'est très important! [...]*

From the beginning, you said it was impossible, because we couldn't touch the provisional twelfths and that this was **populism**. No! We're doing serious politics here: 402 million euros is a lot of money! [...]

[Raoul Hedebouw, PVDA-PTB, 21 November 2019]

*Promettre à un secteur, avec de la communication à tour de bras, qu'il y aura 20 000 infirmiers en plus, c'est non seulement du **populisme** mais c'est se moquer des infirmiers qui, chaque jour, ont un parcours particulièrement difficile et une charge de plus en plus importante! [...] Monsieur Hedebouw, osez reconnaître qu'il a fallu bétonner votre histoire qui, dans un premier temps, n'était que du vent, et qu'il a fallu dire la vérité! La vérité est que ce ne sont pas 20 000 infirmiers mais aux alentours – je l'espère – de 8 000 infirmiers complémentaires.*

Promising a sector, with communication flying in all directions, that there will be 20,000 more nurses is not only **populism**, but it's also making a mockery of the nurses who, every day, have a particularly difficult journey and an increasingly heavy workload! [...] Mr Hedebouw, dare to admit that your story had to be concreted over – because at first, it was nothing but hot air – and the truth had to be told! The truth is that it's not 20,000 nurses, but around – I hope -8,000 additional nurses.

[Catherine Fonck, cdH, 21 November 2019]

In this interaction, *populism* is used to categorise and recategorise a debated proposal. Raoul Hedebouw speaks about the implementation of an amendment proposed by PTB-PVDA in the context of a bill to create a 'white coats' budget fund and refers to another context in which the bill was discussed and in which an opponent, Catherine Fonck, categorised their proposal as *populism*. The objection *Non! C'est de la politique sérieuse que nous pratiquons ici* ('No, we're doing serious politics here') in reaction to *vous avez dit que c'était impossible (...) et que cela relevait du populisme* ('you said it was impossible (...) and that this was populism'), linked to the idea of telling the truth in Catherine Fonck's discourse, shows

that her use of *populism* was intended to refer to lying by proposing something favourable to the people but not implementable in reality and, consequently, to disqualify the PTB-PVDA's proposal.

However, given that the PTB-PVDA's proposal is finally approved, the fact that Catherine Fonck's statement is explicitly reported in Raoul Hedebouw's speech undermines the opponent's image while playing positively on the PTB-PVDA's image. On a formal level, Raoul Hedebouw reports his opponent's discourse (*vous avez dit que...* 'you said...') to explicitly deny it (*Non! c'est...* 'No! we're doing...'). Catherine Fonck reaffirms the populist nature of the PTB-PVDA's proposal (*c'est non seulement du populisme mais...* 'is not only populism, but...') by alluding to the fact that the measure will not guarantee exactly what the PTB-PVDA has proposed (*La vérité est que ce ne sont pas 20 000 infirmiers mais aux alentours – je l'espère – de 8 000 infirmiers complémentaires*. 'The truth is that it's not 20,000 nurses, but around – I hope – 8,000 additional nurses'), which affects her opponent's image. Facing this reaffirmation, the PTB's politician does not renegotiate the categorisation as populism.

As shown by this example, referring to populism can serve different purposes, ranging from the disqualification of opponents' proposals and discourse to the renegotiation of populist categorisations. Therefore, we argue that, alongside the strand of research into collocation analysis, the study of specific linguistic or discursive aspects linked to the uses of *populism* and *populist* (hereafter *populis**) in interactional discourse is necessary to grasp the complexity of these uses. As a result, this chapter is aligned with a field of research which investigates, for example, the analysis of newspapers' framing¹ of populism (Herkman, 2016), the argumentative schemes used by intellectuals to support their viewpoints on populism and engage with divergent standpoints in the press (Degano & Sicurella, 2019), and the uses and functions of *populism* and *populist* in mediated political discourse (Hamo *et al.*, 2019) and political discourse on Twitter (Schwörer, 2021). Nevertheless, while the research aforementioned mainly focuses on corpus-based studies of the media, we propose to expand the field of research on discourse on populism by focusing on discursive genres other than the media (parliamentary debates and interactions on Twitter) and by proposing new avenues for their linguistic analysis.

2 Pragmatic mitigation and intensification

As discussed in the introduction, existing research shows that *populism* and *populist* usually carry pejorative connotations, and are consequently employed to qualify opposing ideologies, movements or political figures and to criticise their actions, policies or statements. This leads Kranert (2020) to speak about 'stigma terms', that is, terms that are used to 'discredit policies and rhetoric of political actors, or to name political ideologies and groups

that are not part of the established political centre ground' (Kranert, 2020: 54). Given the threatening nature of the attribution of a populist characteristic to an opponent, derived from its use as a stigma term, the study of *populis** in relation to face and facework in specific interactional contexts can deepen our understanding of the use of this stigma term and the effects it can produce in different types of discourse. Indeed, labelling someone as populist can constitute a face-threatening act, that is, an act that challenges this person's basic wants for respect, approval and positive social valuation by others (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). It is worth mentioning that producing a face-threatening act towards another also affects the speaker's own face, because of the image projected through the interaction. As a result, speakers may take action to ensure that their discourse is consistent with their basic wants and those of their interlocutor (see the concept of *face-work* in Goffman, 1967), for example, by reducing the potential threatening effect of their discursive act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, given the conflicting nature of political discourse, politicians may choose to play with these types of face-threatening act, depending on their goals. For this reason, when interested in studying the uses of *populism* and *populist* in contexts of interactional political discourse, we propose to look at linguistic mitigation and intensification, two rhetorical and pragmatic strategies linked to the face needs and argumentative aims of the participants in interaction.

Mitigation and intensification have been seen as two opposite poles of the same *continuum* (Albelda Marco & Briz Gomez, 2020; Bazzanella & Gilli Favela, 2009; Labov, 1987; Mihatsch & Albelda Marco, 2016). Indeed, they are defined as strategies that are used, respectively, to soften and strengthen the propositional content and/or the speaker's commitment towards it (Albelda Marco & Briz Gómez, 2020). However, the linguistic strategies do not produce these effects *per se*. Rather, mitigation and intensification arise within a concrete communicative context, according to the speaker's communicative goals regarding their argumentation and the faces of the participants in the communication.² In example (2), Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas from the Spanish political centre-right party Ciudadanos takes part in a debate on the creation of new commissions by reacting to an unfavourable position expressed by Iván Espinosa de los Monteros from far-right Vox. His intervention consists in opposing Vox's position and presenting it, as well as their discourse, as an instance of populism.

- (2) *Señor Espinosa de los Monteros, la verdad es que si usted quiere hacer una competición de **populismo** tiene dentro de la Cámara grupos parlamentarios que desde luego vienen haciendo gala de ese **populismo** desde que llegaron a estas instituciones. No me gustaría que fuera su caso, pero desde luego su exposición de hace unos minutos apunta en ese sentido. Este es el peor **populismo** que se puede hacer.*

Mr. Espinosa de los Monteros, the truth is that if you want to engage in a **populism** competition, you have parliamentary groups in this House that have certainly been flaunting that **populism** since they arrived at these institutions. I would not like that to be your case, but your statement from a few minutes ago certainly points in that direction. This is the worst **populism** one can engage in.

[Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas, Ciudadanos, 10 September 2019]

In this intervention, Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas resorts to a series of intensification and mitigation strategies in order to play on the images projected of his opponents and the strength of his discourse. On the one hand, he uses a mitigation strategy when referring to his interlocutor's intention. The conditional structure in *si usted quiere hacer una competición de populismo* ('if you want to engage in a populism competition') allows him to mitigate an assertion that could threaten his interlocutor's face and, as a result, be debated, producing a face-threat directed to himself because of the objection. Consequently, this strategy ultimately appears to protect the speaker's face and to anticipate any threat that may arise, which also contributes indirectly to the strength of his intervention.

On the other hand, he employs different intensification strategies that strengthen the propositional content or his commitment towards it. Through the uses of *desde luego* ('certainly'), he expresses a strong commitment towards the points of view he communicates on some parliamentary groups' behaviour ('you have parliamentary groups in this House that have *certainly* been flaunting that populism') and the interlocutor's previous statement ('your statement from a few minutes ago *certainly* points in that direction'). Moreover, the superlative in *el peor populismo* ('the worst populism') intensifies the populist characteristic attributed to Vox representative's discourse, as well as the negative connotations arising from it, by expressing the greater degree. In addition to that, the structure *la verdad es que* ('the truth is that') can be seen as a marker of argumentative strength in this communication context, as it highlights the expression of the speaker's attitude towards his message. All these intensification strategies affect the expression of the Ciudadanos representative's point of view regarding the Vox representative's discourse. Indeed, in a context where Ciudadanos holds a stance opposed to that of Vox, the association between populism and the opponent's discourse not only affects the opponent's face in the interaction, but also the image that is projected of his position, which delegitimises it. In this context, the intensification strategies strengthen these associations, which reinforce the speaker's argumentation regarding the debate and the effects produced on the opponents' face.

This example shows that the analysis of mitigation and intensification strategies in relation to the uses of *populism* or *populist* sheds light on the

way in which the references to populism and the attribution to a greater or lesser degree of a populist characteristic to an opponent contributes to stance-taking and the management of faces in political discourse or discourse on political topics. Our data from parliamentary debates mainly include the uses of intensification strategies when the political figures position themselves with regards to opponents' statement – as in example (2), when they express their own position on a political proposal (3; see below) or when they defend a proposal they submit for debate (4; see below). In example (3), below, Carlos Rojas, a member of the right-wing Partido Popular, expresses the unfavourable position of his political party regarding a royal decree proposal from the government. He uses the adjective *auténtico* 'authentic' to insist on the noun *populism*, which qualifies the government's conduct in relation to its proposal. In addition to conveying an emphasised pejorative image of the government's conduct, this statement contributes to justifying the unfavourable position of the Partido Popular regarding the debated royal decree. As for example (4), below, Dolors Montserrat, also member of the Partido Popular, presents a bill to restore the criminalisation in the penal code of the call of illegal referendums. She resorts to a superlative sentence (*el populismo más rancio y antidemocrático de Europa* 'the most rancid and antidemocratic populism in Europe') to qualify the instance of populism she attributes to Catalan nationalism, the main target of the bill. Therefore, like in example (3), the intensification strategy used in relation to *populism* simultaneously contributes to justifying the bill proposed by her party and to affecting the image of the opponent that is projected in this context.

- (3) *Hablamos claro y lo que decimos lo hacemos, señorías. Estamos ante un auténtico **POPULISMO** institucional. El Gobierno vuelve a emponzoñar el origen de las normas para dotar de rango jurídico sus prisas electorales.*

We speak clearly and what we say we do, your lordships. This is authentic institutional **populism**. The government is once again contaminating the origin of the rules in order to give legal status to its electoral hastes.

[Carlos Rojas, Partido Popular, 03 April 2019]

- (4) *Señorías, en España el nacionalismo catalán practica el **POPULISMO** más rancio y antidemocrático de Europa [...]*

Your lordships, in Spain, Catalan nationalism practices the most rancid and antidemocratic **populism** in Europe. [...]

[Dolors Montserrat, Partido Popular, 19 February 2019]

These examples show that these strategies and their uses in relation to populism appear in different communicative contexts and play diverse roles depending on the communicative aims of the speaker. They furthermore show how insisting or mitigating a negative characteristic attributed to others – through the notion of *populism* and *populist* – can meet the speaker's goals regarding argumentation and the representation of others.

3 Metaphors

The unfavourable and even threatening characteristics of populism (see above) have led discourse producers to perceive the phenomenon as a 'beast running through' one's nation or a 'virus spreading across' one's nation (de Barros, 2022; Stulik, 2019). Indeed, metaphors are present in everyday communication (Kittay, 1987), and thus in political communication (Perrez *et al.*, 2019). The analysis of metaphors related to populism is particularly relevant because metaphors can shape the public's perception of the phenomenon (Musolff, 2020; Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015).

Indeed, as noted in the Introductory chapter, populism is a highly complex phenomenon, from which many scholarly debates have emerged regarding the definition(s) of the concept (see Bailly *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, metaphors can act as decomplexifying devices through which the concept is represented through the characteristics of a different, more concrete, concept (e.g., a 'beast' or a 'virus'). A metaphor can only be decoded by identifying the two concepts at play: the concrete, familiar concept ('the beast'), is referred to as the source concept, and the complex, unfamiliar concept ('populism'), is referred to as the target concept (Kittay, 1987).

In the context of political discourse, however, this metaphorical concretisation requires further decoding processes. The metaphor helps discourse producers to promote a decomplexified image of the target, which is thereby exclusively perceived through the characteristics it shares with the source concept. Accordingly, a metaphor inevitably conveys a partial and eventually biased image of the target (Augé, 2023; Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2020). In discussions of political concerns, this biased image shapes the target concept in a way that specifically fits the political orientation adopted in discourse.

This metaphorical bias has been widely documented in the existing literature (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2020; Perrez *et al.*, 2019). Notably, metaphor scholars demonstrate that a metaphor is particularly persuasive when included within a comprehensive narrative (Hanne *et al.*, 2014) that structures the discourse according to a particular point of view (e.g., populist actors as 'villains' and political discourse producers as 'heroes' of the 'storied world'; Bamberg, 2004).

Scholars interested in populism have significantly focused on the polarising functions of metaphors (de Barros, 2022; Peterssen & Da Silva, 2024; Szabo & Szabo, 2022). For instance, metaphors can help a political party

to promote itself as a ‘barrier’ preventing the spread of the populist threat (Valdivia, 2019; 2020). Studies reveal that metaphors insist on the attribution of populist characteristics to the out-group (‘them’) while suggesting that the in-group (‘us’) is deprived of such unfavourable characteristics (Filardo-Llamas *et al.*, 2022). Metaphorical discourses can also associate concerns of populism with immigration: the discourse producer’s identity is to reflect national characteristics opposed to immigrants’ identities shaped according to a limited description of immigrants’ cultures and traditions (Saíz & Breeze, 2020; Stulik, 2019).

Drawing on these existing findings, one may explore how populism can be conceptualised through metaphors in political discourse. In order to identify and analyse metaphors, the methodological procedures of Critical Metaphor Analysis can be applied: (1) Identification, (2) Interpretation, and (3) Explanation (Charteris-Black, 2011). In the Identification phase, the researcher looks for concrete, alien concepts (i.e., source concepts) characterising *populis**, as a target concept. The Interpretation phase considers the characteristics of the source and target concepts that have been highlighted by discourse producers. In the Explanation phase, the aim is to observe how these characteristics could promote a particular viewpoint on *populis**. By applying these procedures, one can observe that metaphorical conceptualisations of a concept such as populism often rely on a limited set of recurring metaphors. In the case of populism, the following examples illustrate the association of populism with three metaphors: the *body politic* metaphor, the *war* metaphor, and the *organic* metaphor.

- (5) *Il revient désormais à la puissance publique de traiter pleinement cette information, dans le strict respect de la liberté individuelle et des données personnelles, afin de limiter au maximum cette thrombose démocratique que constitue l'évitement fiscal. Les rapporteurs forment le vœu que leurs propositions, certaines pragmatiques et faciles à mettre en œuvre, d'autres plus difficilement réalisables dans un monde d'interdépendance des territoires fiscaux, connaîtront un accueil favorable; elles peuvent toutes agir pour la résorption de ces comportements qui alimentent le POPULISME.*

It is now up to the public authorities to deal fully with this information in order to limit the democratic thrombosis that is tax avoidance. The rapporteurs hope that their proposals will be favourably received; they can all help to curb this behaviour, which feeds POPULISM

[Émilie Cariou and Pierre Cordier, LREM, 25 September 2019]

- (6) *Por eso, señorías, en estos momentos más que nunca, como decía mi compañero Jordi Roca, vamos a combatir el POPULISMO, vamos a combatir el ataque a las instituciones.*

For this reason, your lordships, at this time more than ever, as my colleague Jordi Roca said, we are going to fight POPULISM, we are going to fight against the attack suffered by the institutions

[Carlos Rojas García, Partido Popular, 21 February 2019]

- (7) *Certains diront ou ont déjà dit que cette résolution n'est qu'une goutte dans la Méditerranée alors que d'autres n'hésiteront pas à nous traiter d'irresponsables et à brandir la menace de l'invasion pour, une nouvelle fois, surfer entre POPULISME et popularité. À ces derniers qui nous ont malheureusement quittés, je dis "fake news".*

Some will say or have already said that this resolution is only a drop in the Mediterranean Sea whereas others will not hesitate to call us irresponsible and to brandish the threat of invasion in order, once again, to surf between POPULISM and popularity

[Hervé Rigot, Parti socialiste, 28 November 2019]

In example (5), from French parliamentary discourse, the growth of *populis** is described as a consequence of a 'democratic thrombosis' by two MPs from La République En Marche (centre-right party). This follows a particular metaphorical reasoning (Perrez *et al.*, 2019) according to which tax avoidance acts like a disease within the body politic (Musolff, 2020). The politician refers to a disease that prevents natural blood flows within the body: in the political context, this conceptualisation suggests that tax avoidance prevents the smooth development of democratic procedures (Taylor, 2017). This body-related conceptualisation serves to support the political argument according to which tax avoidance causes the growth of populism: by decomplexifying democratic obstacles as a 'thrombosis', the politician refers to a reality where democratic procedures can take place (i.e., a healthy body politic) opposed to a reality where democratic procedures are prevented (i.e., a body politic affected by thrombosis). It is precisely this limit to democratic procedures that allows for the growth of populism. This causal relation is reinforced by another body-related metaphor ('feeds') which is aimed at warning the audience regarding the urgent need to act upon this democratic obstacle (tax avoidance). *Populis** is thereby conceptualised as a growing body that is presented in opposition to the body politic.

In example (6), from Spanish parliamentary discourse, *populis** is explicitly identified as the enemy of the institutions. The politician insists on his opposition to populism by declaring a metaphorical war against this phenomenon. This war is justified through the repetitive metaphorical references to the political 'fight' that is presented as a mere defence strategy: indeed, this 'war' is not only legitimised by the negative connotations

associated with the concept *populis** (Bailly *et al.*, 2024), but also by the description of a prior metaphorical ‘attack’ performed by a personified version of populism. This example is extracted from a political intervention referring to investigation delays during penal procedures, as alleged by Unidas Podemos (far-left party). Such delays are hereby perceived as ‘an attack’ suffered by institutions. This repetitive metaphor thus serves a hyperbolic function, which is mainly rooted in metaphorical reasoning: the metaphorical ‘attack’ leads to the identification of a metaphorical ‘enemy’.

In example (7), the Belgian MP Hervé Rigot – a member of the French-speaking socialist party – identifies three groups (‘some’, ‘us’, and ‘others’) pertaining to three reactions regarding a political resolution. This resolution aims to establish a mechanism that would split the number of asylum seekers among different EU member states. The different reactions regarding this resolution are distinguished through the extended organic water-related metaphor. This metaphor has been selected to echo the main theme (asylum seekers) of the resolution: the politician does not generally refer to a ‘Sea’ concept, but to the ‘Mediterranean Sea’, which migrants are required to cross to reach Europe (Porto, 2022). This specific metaphorical expression thus represents an instance of topic-triggering (Silaski, 2009). As the politician exclusively focuses on particular reactions (‘some’ and ‘others’) regarding the resolution, he exploits the source concept ‘Mediterranean Sea’ to refer to organic elements that compose this ‘Sea’, that is, ‘drop’. At the conceptual level, the politician refers to a hierarchical scale according to which a ‘drop’ only constitutes a minor ingredient comprised within the concept ‘Mediterranean Sea’. Thus, following ‘some’s’ reactions, the resolution does not represent a significant change in asylum policies, just like adding a drop to the Sea will not alter its current. This reaction (by ‘some’) therefore aims at delegitimising the scopes of this resolution. The reference to such reactions eventually anticipates prospective criticism from opponents. Another instance of the organic metaphor appears in the description of ‘others’ who are ‘surfing between populism and popularity’. The metaphor suggests that criticising the resolution (‘brandishing the threat of invasion’) eventually enables ‘others’ to shape their own path within the Sea (like surfing in-between waves). On the one hand, the prospective political discussion regarding the resolution is allegedly perceived as an opportunity for political opponents (‘others’) to strengthen their own political images (‘brandish’, ‘opportunity’). On the other hand, following the discourse producer’s viewpoint, this political image is associated with an implicit image of a ‘populist wave’. This suggests that populism is a concept that is being progressively built up by a multitude of similar political reactions to asylum policies (perceived as a threat). Eventually, political opponents may rely on these political reactions to receive public attention.

The three metaphors aforementioned suggest that, in parliamentary discourses, *populis** is represented as a political threat. However, through the use of metaphors, this populist threat can be attributed various characteristics. First, the examples analysed in this section echo existing findings on populist metaphors (de Barros, 2022; Peterssen & Da Silva, 2024; Szabo & Szabo, 2022): the populist threat may be decoded through the use of particular source concepts that denote explicitly negative processes, such as disease or war-invasion. Accordingly, the metaphors strengthen the negative connotations attributed to *populis** by referring to the public's experiential knowledge (i.e., disease) and/or dichotomous conceptualisations of political actors (i.e., the identification of 'allies' and 'enemies'). Second, this threatening image may also rely on complex exploitations of metaphors, which require further contextual investigation: for instance, the organic metaphor may refer to an ever-growing phenomenon (e.g., like a plant or a wave) that is perceived negatively following the argumentative exploitations of the metaphor in the political interventions. Third, the metaphors of populism may also be analysed through the lens of political narratives (Hanne *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, the populist metaphors discussed in this section can, respectively, fulfil specific functions (Schubert, 2010) that represent the defining features of political narratives: they can describe political polarisations (e.g., the body politic vs. the populist body; populism as an enemy), they can serve integrating functions, that is, the emphasis on the values of the nation-political party (e.g., populism as an unnatural political development), they can fulfil exemplifying functions (e.g., an 'attack' justifying the 'war' on populism), and they can serve personalising function (e.g., by making political actors stand out from the populist realm).

This leads us to conclude that, through the use of negatively connoted source concepts, through argumentative exploitations, and through the production of political narratives, populist metaphors can effectively promote a biased description of politics and political actors. This biased description can eventually produce a persuasive, yet incomplete, image that may guide the public's perception of current political debates.

4 Agentivity

As shown above, the analysis of metaphors related to *populis** highlights the representation of populism as a threat. In addition, collocational analyses of *populis** have shown similar results (Shchinova *et al.*, 2024), and this threatening depiction has been described as a feature of antipopulist discourse (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). Based on this research, one would expect *populist(s)* to be typically represented as agents of intentionally harmful actions.

Focussing on the semantic role associated with certain actors has proven to be an important aspect of analysing the representation of a certain group

in other types of discourses. Thus, in his analysis of the representation of the people in populist discourse in the Netherlands, Van Leeuwen (2015, 2019) has shown that it is important to not only look into the frequency with which a certain term appears, but also the syntactic function with which a certain term appears. Van Leeuwen shows that the main difference between a populist politician (Wilders) and a non-populist politician (Pechtold) is not necessarily the frequency with which they refer to the people, but draws on a variety of stylistic choices. Wilders often presents the people as the subject of an utterance, and as the subject of a verb expressing cognition, perception, or emotion. In doing so, he constructs a discourse where the perspective of the people has a much more central position than in Pechtold's discourse where, moreover, (Wilders suggests that) his party represents the ideas of the people.

Building on this insight, De Cock (in press) has looked into how *populist(s)* are represented in tweets, namely, whether or not *populist(s)* are presented as the agents of intentionally harmful acts, which would be expected given their frequent association with the idea of threat. This approach then proposes to go beyond the mere collocation with nouns or verbs referring to the idea of threat and to look into which semantic role *populist(s)* are given with respect to menacing or harming behaviour. For this analysis, the agent will be considered as the cause or instigator of an action (Palmer, 1994: 25). The patient is the entity affected by the action. The recipient is indirectly affected. However, in this analysis patient and recipient are considered together in that they are both at the receiving end of the agent's actions. Intentionality will be understood as the 'the degree of the Agent's involvement' (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2012: 137). Considering intentionality in this analysis is important because it helps to understand the extent to which *populist(s)* are represented as intentionally harmful, that is, as carrying out harmful actions on purpose.

Drawing on a study of comparable corpora of 200 tweets in Dutch, French, and Spanish, De Cock (in press) shows that the representation of *populist(s)* as agents of intentionally negative actions is not as pervasive as one might expect based on collocational analyses. Indeed, *populist(s)* are frequently presented as such, for example, (8) as attacking democratic institutions.

- (8) *Wat een goed verhelderend stuk v @michelvanbaal. Populisten vallen democratische instituties (bv wetenschap en journalistiek) aan gaan zelf in slachtofferrol zitten. Creëert een catch-22 voor media. <https://t.co/BiDbUPTuKM> ([link to text in De Volkskrant]*

What a good enlightening piece by @michelvanbaal. Populists **attack democratic institutions** (e.g. science and journalism), and install themselves in the role of victim. Creates a catch-22 for media. <https://t.co/BiDbUPTuKM> ([link to text in De Volkskrant]

However, in the Spanish Twitter data, they are more often presented as the patient or recipient of intentional actions than as the agent, and in the French and Dutch data, patient/recipient uses represent slightly less than half of the uses of *populist(s)* with intentional actions. These representations trigger one's attention to the ways other parties or actors behave towards populists. In the French tweets, these cases represent *populist(s)* as the ones against whom others are or should be fighting.

- (9) @alainjuppe @FranceInsoumise @RNational_off @DLF_Officiel @laurentwauquiez... *Il faut un rapprochement et relancer les réformes et aussi **barrer le chemin aux populistes**. Si vous doutez qu'il y a des dingues dans ce pays lisez les commentaires que votre tweet a suscité.*

@alainjuppe @FranceInsoumise @RNational_off @DLF_Officiel @laurentwauquiez... A rapprochement is needed, as well as launching reforms and also **blocking the road to the populists**. If you hesitate whether there are crazy people in this country, read the comments that your tweet has elicited.

This representation is also present in the Dutch and Spanish tweets, but is complemented by another one, namely, one where other actors try to form a coalition with *populist(s)*. This can be explained by the 2019 political situation, when a coalition with a party considered populist by some members of society could have been a possibility both in Spain and in Belgium. One can note that tweets commenting on forming coalitions with populists do not necessarily applaud this. A similar discourse with a similar use of *populistas* is to be found in Spanish parliamentary debate.

- (10) #InvestiduraRTVE. @sanchezcastejon. *Por qué quieren gobernar con nacionalistas populistas independentistas o sea #LaBandadeSánchez*

#InvestitureRTVE. @sanchezcastejon Why do they want to govern with nationalists populists independentists in other words #TheGangofSánchez

A considerable number of tweets do not associate *populist(s)* with intentional actions, but with a simple label, that is, simply labelling someone as populist (11) or engaging in discussions concerning who is labelling whom as populist (12). In the latter case, the use of the term by Peter De Roover is contested by a Twitter user who considers that De Roover does not know the real meaning of populist.

- (11) @wbeke Wouter Beke dit is een groteske schandalige uitspraak van een zeer laag niveau. Schrap de C maar dringend uit de naam van de CD&V. Zielig ventje. Degoutante populist.

@wbeke Wouter Beke [chairman of the Christian-Democrat party] this is a grotesk scandalous quote of a very low level. Remove urgently the C from the name of the CD&V [Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams – Flemish Christian-Democrat party]. Pathetic little man. Disgusting populist.

- (12) @PeterDeRoover1 @destandaard Uw probleem is dat je de definitie niet kent van ‘populisten’. Vreemd eigenlijk want je bent er zelf één.

@PeterDeRoover1 [federal MP for the N-VA Flemish regionalist party] @destandaard [Belgian Dutch-speaking newspaper] Your problem is that you don’t know the definition of ‘populists’. Weird actually since you’re one yourself.

These uses are in line with other research in this volume that reflects on the on-going debate about the meaning of *populist*. They are significantly more frequent in the Dutch data than in the Spanish and French data. This can be explained by two elements. On the one hand, there is a strong debate on the legitimacy of far-right parties both in the Netherlands and in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which often leads to discussions on whom is populist and what populist really means. On the other hand, in our data *populist* is also frequently used in discussions concerning the 2019 youth climate marches, following the example of Greta Thunberg’s school strike for climate. In this context, (adult) supporters of those marches are often labelled *green populists*. These marches represent a much more frequent phenomenon in Belgium than in France and Spain, naturally leading to them being the subject of societal debate.

This approach focused on the semantic roles of *populist(s)* has proven a useful contribution to a richer and more nuanced view of how *populist(s)* are represented in a small corpus of tweets. This approach could be further upscaled. It could indeed be applied to a larger corpus and /or to other types of public discourses.

5 Argumentation

Another productive direction for expanding the study of how *populis** operates in discourse is to examine its role in argumentative processes. To this end, approaching *populis** as a sociopolitical keyword (hereafter SPKW; see Hambye *et al.*, 2025) proves particularly useful. This label – like alternative ones such as ‘discourse keywords’ (Schröter & Veniard, 2016) – refers to words that are ‘socio-politically significant’ (Jeffries & Walker, 2017: 4) and play a ‘key role’ in discourse due to their specific features.³ Words like *populism*, *wokism* and *terrorism*, but also *democracy*, *integration* or

freedom, have all been studied as sociopolitical/discourse keywords. As SPKWs, they are understood to possess several properties that enable them to fulfil multiple discursive functions, especially in argumentation.

Three properties of SPKW generate a particular argumentative force. First, SPKWs are imbued with strong evaluative dimensions, either positive or negative. This evaluative weight of SPKW may stem from broadly shared social values, grounded in ‘widely held beliefs’ (Rigotti & Rocci, 2005: 907), or it may be highly polarised, indexing conflicting meanings across social groups. For instance, terms like *diversity* or *anti-racism* may evoke positive associations for some while carrying pejorative implications for others. In either case, the evaluative weight of SPKW is transferred to the realities related to them. In other words, when a reality is discursively categorised through the use of an SPKW, it becomes associated with (or opposed to) the negative or positive connotations the term carries for its audience. Thus, when a particular political orientation, along with its proponents, is labelled as populist, as in example (4) (‘Catalan nationalism’), it is framed as illegitimate, reflecting the negative public perception of the term (see above). This framing, however, relies on the assumption that the categorisation achieved through the SPKW – in example (4) the labelling of Catalan nationalists as populists – is regarded as warranted instead of disputable. However, such categorisations are often difficult to contest precisely because of the two remaining features that endow SPKWs with their distinctive argumentative force. Second, SPKWs are often polysemic, related to a variety of meanings, because they condense diverse ideas, values or political issues. This semantic density, evident in *populis** (see, e.g., Shchinova *et al.*, 2024), produces vagueness, making it difficult to contest such categorisations, since there is neither a settled definition nor a stable referent to anchor disagreement. Third, because SPKWs like *populis** are commonly used in sociopolitical discourse (Hambye *et al.*, 2025), their use to label a given reality may become normalised rather than something that raises suspicion or attention. This ‘effect of obviousness’ (Krieg-Planque, 2010: 19) makes the use of terms like *populis** appears ubiquitous and uncontroversial, thereby covering the categorised reality with an obviously and undeniably positive or negative value. Because of this ‘effect of obviousness’, a SPKW like *populis** appears to play a key role in argumentation, as statements containing *populis** can serve as effective arguments to support a given standpoint. It can indeed be used strategically following different argumentative patterns to harness its argumentative force.

The idea that *populis** is principally used as a ‘stigma term’ (Kranert, 2020) may suggest that it mainly serves to *directly* criticise or discredit political opponents and their behaviour or decisions. While this is indeed a frequent pattern, observations show that *populis** can be used for many other, sometimes more complex, purposes. In the following example, for

instance, *populis** is used not so much to directly discredit the group labelled populist – the Spanish far-left party *Podemos*, referred to here by the term *populistas* ‘populists’ – but rather to contest the legitimacy of another party (the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, PSOE) through its association with *Podemos*.

- (13) *Estos PGE son dañinos y tramposos, y, por ello, doblemente dañinos, para nuestro país. Reflejan la debilidad de un gobierno respaldado por un grupo con 84 diputados de los 350 que tiene el Congreso y las concesiones a sus potenciales socios. El PSOE, con su intento de contentar a independentistas y a populistas, está poniendo en riesgo la recuperación económica, la creación de empleo y la prosperidad de las familias españolas con el único objetivo de mantener unos meses más en la Moncloa a Pedro Sánchez.*

The General State Budget is harmful and deceitful, and therefore doubly harmful, for our country. It reflects the weakness of a government backed by a group with 84 MPs out of 350 in Congress and concessions to its potential partners. The PSOE, with its attempt to please pro-independence and populist supporters, is jeopardising economic recovery, job creation and the prosperity of Spanish families with the sole aim of keeping Pedro Sánchez in the Moncloa for a few more months.

[Juan Carlos Girauta Vidal, Ciudadanos, 14 January 2019]

In this case, the frequent characterisation of *Podemos* as a populist party in Spain (De Cock, 2023; Shchinova, 2023) renders the label seemingly unmarked, which is presented as self-evident and requiring no further justification. This taken-for-granted association of *Podemos* with populism functions as an argument that supports an implicit dual standpoint: (i) the PSOE, which seeks to please *Podemos*, is not a reliable or legitimate political actor; (ii) due to the PSOE’s acquaintance with populists, the General State Budget they propose is detrimental. Indeed, framing the PSOE’s budgetary measures as driven solely by their desire to appease its political allies in order to retain power implicitly delegitimises both the party and its policies. This argument, however, relies on two interlinked assumptions: that *Podemos* is inherently populist,⁴ and that populism is inherently undesirable. This illustrates the specific ‘persuasive power’ of keywords in argumentation, as described by Rigotti & Rocci (2005: 904–905), who argue that such terms possess the capacity ‘to supplement an adequate unstated premise, which is presupposed to be shared by the speaker and the hearer’, without ‘any need of further motivating [the] value judgement’ that constitutes this premise.

In example (2), we observe another instance where the categorisation of a reality with populism is used indirectly to discredit a political opponent by associating him with this ‘populist’ reality. In this case, the argumentative strength of the statement including *populis** does not primarily derive from the conventional usage of or habitual association with the term, but rather from its vagueness (as mentioned above) and the weakly articulated link between populism and the targeted opponent. Instead of directly accusing Espinosa de los Monteros (Vox, far-right party) of ‘being populist’ – a claim that could be very threatening and would likely require substantial justification – the speaker merely suggests that his statement aligns with or approximates *populist* discourse. Crucially, no clarification is provided regarding what populism entails or why the statement should be categorised as such. The strength of the argument thus lies in its vagueness. The latter makes it difficult to counter-argue effectively or to prove that the statement is actually *not* populist, therefore the argument remains plausible. As a result, an implicit conclusion is suggested: the targeted opponent’s behaviour is inappropriate. Once the opponent’s discourse is framed as populist, the framing extends its negative evaluative load not only to the speech act, but also to the speaker himself. Here again, *populis** functions as a vehicle of devaluation, drawing on its entrenched negative evaluative load.

*Populis** also appears in argumentative patterns where the categorisation of a given reality as populist is not presented as self-evident, but rather as the conclusion of an argumentative intervention. In the following example, the Belgian Minister of Justice Koen Geens (CD&V, Flemish Christian-democratic party) reacts to a criticism by Annick Lambrecht (SPA, Flemish Socialist party) about the prosecution of offenders involved in child trafficking.

- (14) *Verwijt ons dus niet dat wij op dat vlak niets doen. Verklaar ook niet publiekelijk dat er straffeloosheid is. Dat is immers niet waar. Het ging hier niet om een recidivist. Het was de eerste keer. Hij heeft tweeënhalf jaar van de uitgesproken zes jaar effectief uitgezeten en is een jaar via een enkelband van zijn vrijheid beroofd. Voor de minste fout die hij nog zal maken, gaat hij opnieuw de gevangenis in. Wees over het dossier dus niet te populistisch.*

So don’t accuse us of doing nothing on that front. Also, don’t publicly declare impunity. After all, that is not true. This was not a repeat offender. It was the first time. He effectively served two-and-a-half years of the pronounced six years and was deprived of liberty for a year via an ankle bracelet. For the slightest mistake he will make again, he will go to jail. So don’t be too populist about the case.

[Koen Geens, CD&V, 10 January 2019]

In his rebuttal, Geens counters Lambrecht's criticism by asserting that she has provided inaccurate information regarding the specific case in question. His closing remark ('so don't be too populist about this case') only makes sense if one infers that Lambrecht's dissemination of incorrect information serves as evidence of a populist stance. Once again, the semantic vagueness of *populis** enables various inferences⁵ and hinders direct contestation of the connection between false information and populism. The argumentative move culminates in a conclusive statement that presupposes Lambrecht *has already engaged in a populist attitude* and demands to limit this presupposed populist stance. This implicit framing ultimately supports the implicit conclusion presented in the previous examples: Lambrecht's behaviour is illegitimate. A similar pattern appears in example (3) above, where 'authentic populism' derives its meaning from the accusation that the government manipulates legal procedures for electoral gain. The vagueness of *populis** hinders contestation, allowing the term to implicitly frame the government as acting in bad faith and thus lacking legitimacy.

In both examples (3) and (14), the use of *populis** has a dual effect: it serves to delegitimise political opponents while simultaneously reinforcing the speaker's own legitimacy. In (14), the term is used defensively to undermine the credibility of prior criticism and thus restore the speaker's legitimacy. In (3), the juxtaposition between 'we speak clearly and what we say we do' and the accusation of populism constructs a contrast between political honesty (claimed by the speaker) and manipulation (ascribed to the government), thereby suggesting that the government's actions are illegitimate while the speaker represents principled politics.

Similarly, *populis** is used argumentatively in contexts where the primary aim is not to directly attack or delegitimise political opponents, but rather to bolster the speaker's own legitimacy by contrasting themselves with populism. Example (15) clearly illustrates this dynamic. José Javier Lasarte Iribarren (PSOE, left-wing party), for instance, does not engage in direct criticism of populist actors or parties. Instead, populism is depicted as symptomatic of deeper social inequalities produced by ineffective neoliberal policies. In this framing, Lasarte positions himself as a responsible alternative to both elitist neoliberalism and populist backlash. Here, *populis** functions as a discursive tool that helps to shape a moral and political ethos: the politician's credibility and competence are affirmed through opposition to the destabilising consequences (the rise of populism) that arise when the progressive, equitable values he claims to defend are ignored.

- (15) *No es una casualidad, no son resultados casuales, son la consecuencia de la aplicación de unas políticas económicas y presupuestarias con marcado sesgo ideológico elitista, de derechas. Yo todavía no*

lo entiendo, porque eran las políticas de PP y Ciudadanos, pero son políticas que priman la supuesta búsqueda de la eficiencia en detrimento de la equidad, persiguen reducir el Estado y bajar impuestos a los más pudientes y tienen como corolario el aumento de la desigualdad social que alimenta la crisis de legitimidad de las instituciones y el alza de los movimientos políticos de corte populista.

They [i.e., rising inequality, youth poverty, and social exclusion] are not a coincidence, they are not casual results, they are the consequence of the application of economic and budgetary policies with a markedly right-wing, elitist ideological bias. I still don't understand it, because they were the policies of PP and Ciudadanos, but they are policies that prioritise the supposed search for efficiency to the detriment of equity, they seek to reduce the state and lower taxes for the wealthiest and have as a corollary the increase in social inequality that feeds the crisis of legitimacy of institutions and the rise of populist political movements.

[José Javier Lasarte Iribarren, PSOE, 28 January 2019]

Ultimately, these examples illustrate how categorising a reality in relation (or in opposition) to populism can serve a variety of purposes depending on the contexts. They emphasise that the discursive importance of such a keyword lies in the range of actions it enables to perform in discourse.

Examining the argumentative role of *populis** and the argumentative patterns in which it appears thus offers a promising avenue for research into the uses of this keyword across various discursive contexts. As demonstrated here, the function of *populis** in argumentation is shaped by several variables. The association, or opposition, between populism and a given reality may be conventional and presented as self-evident, or relatively novel yet difficult to dispute due to the semantic vagueness of the term and/or the presence of supporting arguments. The relations between the statement containing *populis** and the conclusion it supports – typically the (de)legitimisation of political actors or policies – can also vary in its degree of explicitness and argumentative complexity. Finally, *populis** may serve a range of rhetorical purposes across different discursive settings (see Aulit & De Cock, 2025).

6 Conclusion

Existing literature on discourse on populism has mainly focused on how populism is presented in public discourse – based on collocation analysis in media corpus. This chapter proposes new avenues for linguistic research: the analysis of how references to populism are used to achieve speakers' communicative goals in different interactional contexts. To this end, we present a complexified approach including different perspectives such as the study of pragmatic

mitigation and intensification, metaphors, agentivity, and argumentation. The analysis of pragmatic phenomena used in relation to the act of labelling someone or something as *populist* allows us to investigate the realisation of face-threatening acts and their (secondary) effects on argumentation. The study of *populism* as a sociopolitical keyword highlights how such keywords can be employed in argumentative patterns. Moreover, we show that approaching metaphors on populism through the lens of political narratives deepens our understanding of the different functions these metaphors can fulfil in political and public discourses, and that the study of agentivity is necessary to get a comprehensive understanding of how populism and populist are presented in society, according to the actions they undertake or deal with. By complexifying the analysis of discourse on populism through these approaches, we argue that we can improve our understanding of the representations associated with this phenomenon in contemporary society.

Notes

- 1 Defined as the ‘strategies, practices and techniques by which the media or journalism bring meanings to the fore and the way certain aspects of reality are stressed and others are deemphasised’ (Herkman, 2016: 152).
- 2 See Aulit (2023) for a detailed list of potential mitigation and intensification strategies.
- 3 SPKW should not be conflated with statistical keywords, which are defined on the basis of relative frequency (Baker, 2023).
- 4 An assumption that seems all the more obvious in this context that the leader of the PSOE (Pedro Sanchez) had himself labelled Podemos as populist when he was rejecting an alliance between this party and his own.
- 5 For instance: Lambrecht has conveyed false information, hence, she is populist, since populists are known to spread fake news; Lambrecht has conveyed false information to suggest that the Justice is not severe enough with sexual criminals, supporting demagogically that more severe convictions are needed, hence being populist (in the sense of demagogic).

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7 On the use of ‘populism’ in print media

A comparative study of press types in France and French-speaking Belgium

Sandrine Roginsky

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on media discourse understood as textual features embedded in institutional routines, professional norms, technological formats, and power relations (Fairclough, 1995). In this chapter, the media therefore refer to mass-market media which ‘adhere to professional norms and news values’ (Engesser *et al.*, 2017: 1110), that is, in which ‘professionals judge what constitutes worthy information or not’ (Klinger & Svensson, 2015: 1247). Due to their broad accessibility and extensive reach, they can operate as both reservoirs and authoritative sources for ‘the circulation of words, phrases and discourse styles’ (Spitulnik, 1996: 162). This is why it is particularly relevant to explore how these outlets refer to *populis**. Thus, this chapter examines how the various media outlets analysed here contribute to establishing a frame of reference for populism that structures the interpretation of related news stories. It is argued that *populis** operates as a consensual classificatory category in media discourse, in the sense that is used consensually across all outlets without definitional debate or reflexive scrutiny. The chapter draws on media studies and labelling theory literature (Becker, 1963; Hallin, 1986; Neveu, 2009; Schudson, 2003) to examine the use of the term *populis** in three types of newspapers in France and French-speaking Belgium: the so-called serious press, the so-called popular press, and the free daily and distributed newspaper. First, we review the key theoretical elements that inform our analysis of media discourse. Then, we present the corpus explored specifically for this chapter, before highlighting the significant elements that emerge from the analysis.

2 Studying media discourse to understand the discursive construction of *populis** by journalists

The analysis of media discourse requires a simultaneous consideration of journalism as a democratic institution and as a commercial and

professional industry (Marty, 2019). In other words, media discourse reflects economic, technical, social, cultural, and political conditions of production (Charaudeau, 2011). The production of discourse is thus a collective process, involving journalists but also sources, editors, technical staff, and institutional routines that shape how events are selected, edited, and made publishable. Even though this chapter focuses on published discourse, rather than newsroom practices, it is necessary to keep in mind that each text embodies these institutionalised routines of mediation. From this perspective, the study of media discourse involves examining both what is said and how meaning is produced and stabilised. Categories such as *populis** do not simply describe pre-existing political realities; they actively constitute them through classificatory work (Bourdieu, 1979). Drawing on Becker's labelling theory (1963) and Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power and language (1982, 2001), we understand *populis** as a category whose meaning emerges through the recurrent labelling practices of those endowed with socially recognised authority to produce classifications that are taken as meaningful. In this perspective, authority refers to the socially recognised capacity to produce classifications that are received as self-evident – what is conceptualised by Bourdieu as symbolic power,¹ going beyond individual expertise or correctness, precisely because the institutional and symbolic conditions that authorise them remain largely unexamined. This authority derives from actors' positions and the symbolic capital they accumulate through institutional recognition, professional credentials, or media visibility. Thus, the act of labelling (Becker, 1963) constitutes a social process of classification that creates the reality it claims to identify. Similarly, the label *populis** is applied by what Becker calls 'moral entrepreneurs' – in this case, journalists, political commentators, and established political elites who possess the authority within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1996) to categorise what constitutes *populis**. Bourdieu's concept of nomination as an act of institution is particularly relevant here. For Bourdieu, naming and classifying are performative acts that go beyond mere description: 'Naming contributes to the structure of this world, and all the more profoundly the more widely it is recognised, that is to say, authorised' (1982: 83). The efficacy of such acts of classification depends on the accumulated symbolic capital of those who pronounce them (i.e., the accumulated recognition of their authority) and the institutional framework – in this case, the journalistic field – that authorises and legitimises their speech.

Within the journalistic field, major newspapers, established political journalists, and recognised experts function as 'primary definers' (Hall, 1978) whose classifications carry a particular weight. Their repeated application of the label *populis** to specific political actors, movements, or discourses works to establish and naturalise these classificatory schemes.

Through sustained journalistic practice, certain political figures or acts become routinised through recurrent labelling, producing stabilised categories (e.g., the ‘populist threat’), that is, objectivated categories (Bourdieu, 1991) that structure perception. As Becker (1963) demonstrates, labels do not merely describe pre-existing reality but actively constitute it: the repeated act of naming creates the social fact. These classifications become taken-for-granted features of social reality, shaping not only what journalists say about politics but how they perceive it. This is part of what Bourdieu (1977: 167) terms ‘doxa’: ‘that which goes without saying’ – the taken-for-granted ‘shared beliefs’ that structure perception and judgement. As Deer notes, ‘in modern societies, language and linguistic exchanges and the misrecognised arbitrary classifications, categorisation and differentiation they operate and reproduce are key elements of the symbolic power that contribute to the legitimisation of doxa’ (2013: 122). The use of *populis** has acquired this doxic² status in journalistic discourse, manifesting the unspoken common sense of the profession – what ‘everybody knows’ about *populis** – thereby rendering these acts of classification invisible as exercises of symbolic power. Journalism thus plays a key role in the symbolic ordering of politics. When journalists use the term *populis**, they do more than describe a political phenomenon: they participate in its discursive construction, assigning positions and meanings within a broader classificatory system. Studying journalistic uses of *populis** therefore reveals how classificatory schemes become stabilised, reproduced, and naturalised – ultimately becoming part of journalistic doxa: a category whose ubiquity reflects not analytical clarity but the classificatory power of those authorised to speak.

We believe this approach is original and could contribute to the abundant literature on media and populism which has already offered significant insights into the dominant uses and meanings of the term. However, as highlighted in the state-of-the-art review compiled by Bailly *et al.* (2025), most studies treat ‘the media’ as a homogeneous entity, without considering the editorial diversity of news outlets or the positionality of journalists within the field. For example, Borriello’s (2022) examination of *Le Monde* provides a valuable overview of the use of the word *populism* in the newspaper, yet it does not account for the discursive norms specific to journalism – its genres (editorials, interviews, reports, etc.), its professional conventions, and its hierarchies of recognition. By contrast, this chapter seeks to reintroduce these contextual specificities into the analysis. We approach journalistic discourse as a situated practice, shaped by institutional norms, editorial identities, and field positions. The aim is therefore not so much to identify recurring representations of *populis**, but to understand how these representations are conditioned by the media outlets that produce them. In doing so, this chapter simultaneously

relates to the symbolic hierarchies within the press (understood as unequal distributions of recognition, authority³, and visibility between outlets, genres, and voice) and the institutional mechanisms through which categories acquire meaning. To this aim, this chapter examines how *populis** is positioned within journalistic discourse by analysing its distribution across Hallin’s (1986) three spheres of media representation: the sphere of consensus (where it functions as an unproblematic descriptor), the sphere of legitimate controversy (where its meaning is debated), and the sphere of deviance (where it serves as a moralised disqualification that excludes it from legitimate debate : it crosses the line of what is agreed as acceptable). Hallin’s model provides a heuristic for distinguishing different types of uses of *populis**. Rather than tracking the ways in which the term may move between these spheres, we use these spheres as an analytical tool to map the range of ways *populis** functions in journalistic discourse. Building on this theoretical and methodological stance, the following section situates the analysis within the broader structure of the French and French-speaking Belgian press.

3 Focus on press coverage in three types of newspaper in France and French-speaking Belgium: consideration of editorial positioning

The analysis that follows focuses on the printed press, examining how the term *populis** is employed and framed across different editorial environments in France and French-speaking Belgium. As shown in Table 7.1, the study considers six newspapers selected to reflect distinct segments within the journalistic field: *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, and *20 Minutes* in France; *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure (DH)*, and *Métro* in French-speaking Belgium. As Ringoot (2014: 19) reminds us, journalistic texts do not exist in isolation: they are shaped by an editorial identity that expresses institutional norms, professional values, and market strategies. While corpus construction necessarily involves extracting articles from their original context, attention must nonetheless be paid to these editorial identities, which condition the production and reception of discourse.

Table 7.1 Selection of newspaper

	‘Elite press’	‘Serious-popular press’	‘Free daily’
Belgium (French-speaking part)	Le Soir	La DH	Métro
France	Le Monde	Le Parisien	20 minutes

In this sense, comparing newspapers that belong to different segments of the press – elite or quality media, serious-popular media, and free daily newspapers – provides a way to observe how editorial contexts influence the framing and categorisation of political phenomena. The typology adopted here does not imply rigid boundaries between forms of journalism; rather, it serves as a heuristic framework for examining how discursive practices may vary according to the symbolic capital, audience, and production logic of each outlet.

Le Monde in France and *Le Soir* in the French-speaking part of Belgium are identified as the so-called elite press or quality press, that is, ‘established media [that] typically operate within the consensus, displaying a clear tendency to adopt the hegemonic-official position on issues’ (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011). This category designates newspapers that distinguish themselves from the popular press through their emphasis on political, economic, and international affairs, their relatively high journalistic standards, and their strong symbolic capital in public life (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Independently of readership size, the authority of the elite press rests on reputational capital and symbolic influence in public discourse (Schudson, 2002).

La DH in Belgium and *Le Parisien* in France are identified as ‘serious-popular’ or ‘middle market’ media (Sparks, 2000: 15) which include newspapers ‘which have a strong stress upon visual design and contain a large dose of scandal, sports and entertainment but that still demonstrate all, or a significant part, of the same inventory of news values as their more serious cousins’ (Sparks, 2000: 15). The category is frequently discussed within the broader scholarship on tabloidisation and commercialisation, where ‘tabloid’ denotes both a compact format and a stylistic repertoire; importantly, serious-popular outlets adopt some popularising devices (such as visual emphasis, eye-catching headlines, personalised narratives, and accessible language) while maintaining a public-affairs agenda and professional news values (Esser, 1999). According to Sparks (2000), unlike the quality press which tends to reach a limited number of educated elites, the serious-popular press attracts large, socially diverse audiences. It provides political information in a simplified, approachable format and thus broadens accessibility. At the same time, it avoids the extreme sensationalism of mere tabloid outlets.

20 minutes in France and *Métro* in Belgium are amongst the most ‘well-known titles’ (Lamour, 2019: 1167) of free daily and traffic distributed newspapers. Free dailies are given ‘free of charge to readers’ (Serazio, 2009: 649). They concentrate on news and current affairs (Bakker, 2013). They are ‘short, illustrated and easily consumed content, distributed in large urban areas during the morning or evening peak hours’ (Lamour, 2017: 1). Lamour describes them as ‘popular mass medium’ (2019: 1167), the ‘only

print medium able to capture a mass audience equivalent to prime-time TV news bulletins'. Launched in Paris in 2002, *20 minutes* has ceased its print edition in July 2024 being limited to online content. *Métro Belgique* was launched in 2000, initially backed by the Belgian national rail company and distributed in train stations across the country, but ceased its activity in 2022 due to declining advertising revenues. These newspapers have a small editorial staff (Bakker, 2013). More generally, it is important to consider the significant differences in terms of staff in each newsroom on either side of the border. Although it is difficult to find precise information on this subject, it is certain that newsrooms of the French newspapers in the corpus have more journalists than their French-speaking Belgian counterparts.

Even though it is useful to distinguish between different forms of newspapers and therefore journalism, from an analytical perspective, we understand that contemporary journalism increasingly requires popularisation strategies, making boundaries between journalistic forms more permeable (Conboy, 2007: 4). Conboy indeed notes an increasing popularisation of journalism and the migration of popular rhetoric into elite journalism (Conboy, 2007: 2). Similarly, Maurer *et al.* (2019) challenge simple media categorisations, calling us to be cautious against oversimplified media comparisons, as grouping individual outlets under single labels can be problematic. Our research contributes to this discussion by examining how discourses move across media outlets, in what Conboy describe as processes of permeation and profusion (2007: 2). We therefore approach the term *populis** as a category whose meaning is shaped by the editorial and institutional environments in which it is used. In this sense, the study of *populis** across these different press outlets is not aimed at comparing levels of political engagement or ideological orientation, but rather at understanding how the same term acquires distinct meanings and functions within specific editorial regimes. Our focus on the uses of the term *populis** thus provides a lens through which one can observe these editorial grammars at work: it reveals how journalism, through its everyday discursive practices, participates in the symbolic ordering of politics. Building on this framework, the following section turns to the empirical analysis. It investigates whether and how the use of the term *populis** can be interpreted as an indicator of editorial positioning.

4 Detecting editorial positioning through word choice: can the use of *populis** be interpreted as an indicator of editorial positioning?

The corpus that has been composed for the present analysis includes all articles that mention *populis** in the newspapers aforementioned. All articles

Table 7.2 Number of articles mentioning *populis** and number of occurrences of *populis**

	<i>Number of articles that mention populis*</i>	<i>Total number of occurrences of populis*</i>	<i>Average amount of occurrences of populis*/article</i>
Le Soir	533 (35.2%)	902	1.7
Le Monde	355 (23.4%)	784	2.2
La DH	142 (9.4%)	182	1.3
Le Parisien	267 (17.6%)	432	1.6
Métro	137 (9%)	171	1.2
20 minutes	82 (5.4%)	120	1.5
Total	1,516	2,591	1.7

Note: The percentage corresponds to the number of articles in the French-speaking press article corpus alone.

were published in 2019. They have been retrieved from the websites of these newspapers (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume for details): it is therefore possible that some may not have been printed in the paper edition. Furthermore, as some articles have been updated online, they appear several times in the database. When it comes to duplicates, these have been deleted. However, when an article is modified, the different versions have been kept in the database. Ultimately, our corpus for this chapter consists of the number of articles indicated in Table 7.2, and the analysis has therefore been conducted on this corpus.

First, it should be noted that since we do not have access to the total number of articles published (online or in print) by each newspaper during 2019, it is not possible to determine whether the difference observed between newspapers regarding the number of articles referring to *populis** is statistically significant. Nevertheless, the relatively small size of the corpus suggests that the term remains only marginally used within the press discourse as a whole. It is also important to emphasise that the number of articles does not correspond to the number of occurrences: in many cases, the term appears several times within a single piece. This is particularly evident in newspapers such as *Le Soir* and *Le Monde*, where articles tend to be longer and more analytical, sometimes featuring up to fifteen or twenty instances of the word *populis** within a single text. Such variation already hints at differences in editorial treatment and discursive density, which are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

If the frequency of the term varies across newspapers, so too do the conditions under which it is produced and circulated. In around 20% of the cases, the presence of *populis** in an article does not result from a specific editorial initiative, but from the use of news agency material. Wire services such as AFP in France or Belga in Belgium supply pre-formatted news content

Table 7.3 Articles that use news agency feeds in the corpus

	<i>Number of articles from news agency (AFP, Belga)</i>	<i>Proportion of articles that use news agency reports</i>
Le Soir	28	5.3%
Le Monde	22	6.2%
La DH	54	37.8%
Le Parisien	32	11.9%
Métro	118	84.3%
20 minutes	41	50%
Total	306	19.97%

that is often republished verbatim or with minimal rewriting.⁴ News agencies function as centralised suppliers of standardised information (Boyd-Barrett & Palmer, 1981; Lagneau *et al.*, 2013; Paterson & Sreberny, 2004), enabling rapid publication but also contributing to the homogenisation of discourse across outlets, since identical or nearly identical formulations can appear in several newspapers simultaneously. However, the reliance on agency material is not evenly distributed. These variations reveal distinct modes of news production within the journalistic field (Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978) (Table 7.3).

In 2019, *Métro* stands out with 84.3% of its articles based on AFP or Belga reports, followed by *20 Minutes* and *La DH*. This is not particularly surprising, given that Belga started producing news for *Métro*'s print edition and website in January 2018. In contrast, *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien* make more limited use of agency material, while *Le Soir* records the lowest proportion.

Agence France Presse is the main source used when agency bulletins appear in articles, except in *Métro*, where almost all agency-based items come from the Belgian Belga news service. In *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien*, agency material is often co-signed ('Le Monde avec AFP', 'Le Parisien avec AFP'), and sometimes accompanied by a journalist's name, making it impossible to determine precisely which parts of the text originate from the newsroom and which from the agency. In *La DH*, contrastively, the agency's name appears alone, without attribution to individual journalists. This ambiguity, already noted by Tuchman (1978) in her study of news routines, reflects the hybridisation of production practices between original reporting and repackaged content. Furthermore, the degree of reliance on agency reports may be read as an indicator of editorial autonomy and of the capacity of each outlet to construct its own framing of political categories. If we discard the specific situation of *Métro*, the relative dependence of newspapers such as *20 Minutes* and *La DH* on agency content contrasts sharply with the relative autonomy of *Le Monde* and

Le Soir, where greater resources and professional specialisation allow for more interpretative coverage. This structural divide not only reflects economic inequalities between media types but also shapes the discursive diversity of how *populis** is framed in the press. Although *Le Parisien* and *La DH* both belong to the serious-popular segment, their reliance on news agencies reveals contrasting modes of production. While *Le Parisien* draws on AFP material in 12.8% of its articles, *La DH* relies on agency copy in over one-third (37.8%) of cases. This contrast illustrates different forms of dependence within the same market segment. In France, popular outlets such as *Le Parisien* maintain large newsrooms and a strong tradition of in-house reporting. In Belgium, by contrast, *La DH* operates within a smaller-scale ecosystem in which agency feeds play a central role in ensuring informational flow (Grevisse, 2003). The comparison thus underscores that editorial position alone does not determine autonomy; it is the intersection of resources (around 40 journalists for *La DH*, around 400 for *Le Parisien*, which has local editorial offices throughout the Ile-de-France region), national journalistic culture, and production routines that explains the observed variations.

Beyond production capacity (newsroom size and reliance on wire services), another indicator of editorial range concerns the presence of interpretative formats, such as editorials, columns or 'op-eds' which stands for 'opposite the Editorial page' (i.e., articles authored by external contributors). As we discuss later, these genres are not evenly distributed across the corpus. They are concentrated in *Le Monde*, where these pieces constitute a distinctive and recurrent space for external contributions, and to a lesser extent in *Le Soir*. In *Le Parisien*, such formats appear only sporadically, while they are virtually absent from *La DH*, *Métro*, and *20 Minutes*. This distribution further underscores the hierarchy of authority across media types. As Bourdieu (1996) notes, the ability to publish interpretative commentary is a marker of symbolic capital within the journalistic field: it does not only refer to material resources but also to the authority to define what counts as recognised opinion. Elite outlets such as *Le Monde* and *Le Soir* thus operate as sites of meta-discourse, where *populis** is deployed as a category through which other political developments are interpreted and evaluated. In contrast, popular and free dailies largely confine themselves to descriptive reporting, where *populis** appears as a factual descriptor in event-based coverage. This reinforces the structural asymmetries already observed in the use of agency material and situates *Le Monde* in particular as a central arena for the discursive construction of populism. Thus, differences in editorial autonomy are not only reflected in production routines but also in the configuration of voices that populate the news. Journalistic discourse, by nature, is polyphonic: it integrates a variety of voices – politicians, experts, activists, ordinary citizens, etc. – through reported or quoted speech. This polyphony is part of what Fairclough (1992) describes

as interdiscursivity, a process through which meanings circulate between institutional and social fields. In this sense, what circulates is not so much the word *populis** itself, but the authority to define and use it. The presence or absence of certain actor types (e.g., journalists, politicians, academics, experts, activists) reveals how each outlet constructs the symbolic authority and boundaries of public discourse around *populis**. Examining who speaks – or is granted voice – in these texts therefore provides another lens through which to grasp editorial positioning and the power relations underlying media framings of political concepts.

5 Distribution of voices: who speaks and who is giving voice?

The first step of the analysis consists in identifying the types of social actors who use, or are associated with the use of, the term *populis** within the corpus. The typology presented below has been developed inductively, emerging from the systematic coding of the articles rather than from a pre-defined framework. It reflects the diversity of social actors through which the term circulates in journalistic texts. By tracing these voices, we can observe how authority to define *populis** is distributed across the journalistic field, that is, who is granted authority to name, interpret, or appropriate the term, and under what conditions. The inductive categorisation of actors thus constitutes a preliminary step towards understanding how *populis** functions as a flexible notion whose meaning can circulate across different editorial contexts while being interpreted differently depending on the speaker's position and on the discursive regime of the medium – a dynamic comparable to what Star and Griesemer (1999) describe as boundary objects (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4 Types of actors involved in the discursive construction of *populis**

Type of actors	Operation definition
Journalist	when the term is used solely by the journalist, with no indication that it has been borrowed from another source
Politician	when the term is used by a political figure quoted or interviewed in the article
Activist	when the term is used by a person intervening in the press to defend a cause or position (i.e., member of an association or union representatives, etc.)
Academic	when the term is used by someone who works in a higher education or research institution
Expert	when the term is used by someone whose opinion is sought (e.g., essayist and think tank analyst)
Other	when the term is used by someone not covered by the categories listed above

This classification makes it possible to trace how the term *populis** circulates through different types of speakers and to what extent journalists rely on external sources for its definition or use.

Building on this typology, the following section examines how these different actor types are distributed across the corpus, and how their presence shapes the framing of *populis**. This step moves from the identification of discursive voices to the analysis of their relative weight and function within journalistic texts. The aim is not merely to associate frequencies with the speakers' identities, but to understand how these voices contribute to the construction and stabilisation of meaning around *populis** within specific editorial contexts. As Hall (1978) reminds us, certain actors enjoy greater access to the media and a stronger capacity to define social reality. Mapping the distribution of voices therefore provides a way to uncover these hierarchies of authority and to explore how journalistic discourse mediates between institutionalised and peripheral sources in the production of political categories (Table 7.5).

Across the corpus, journalists account for almost 65% of the identified uses of *populis**, confirming their central role as both mediators and definers of political meaning, and confirming that the label *populis** is primarily produced within journalistic narration rather than through quotation. This predominance reflects what Hall *et al.* (1978) describe as the 'primary definers' function of mainstream journalism: by selecting and framing the voices that populate the news, journalists effectively delimit the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Politicians constitute the second most visible group (16.8%), followed by academics (8.7%) and, to a lesser extent, experts (3.1%) and activists (3.1%). This distribution indicates

Table 7.5 Who is speaking where? Comments from journalists and other contributors in the six media outlets

	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>La DH</i>	<i>Le Parisien</i>	<i>Métro</i>	<i>20 minutes</i>	<i>Total</i>
Journalist	363 (65.2%)	219 (59.2%)	59 (40.7%)	186 (67.6%)	107 (74.8%)	50 (56.8%)	984 (64.9%)
Politician	75 (13.5%)	41 (11.1%)	57 (39.3%)	44 (16%)	25 (17.5%)	13 (14.8%)	255 (16.8%)
Activist	12 (2.2%)	6 (1.6%)	11 (7.6%)	7 (2.5%)	6 (4.2%)	5 (5.7%)	47 (3.1%)
Academic	47 (8.4%)	60 (16.2%)	2 (1.4%)	13 (4.7%)	0	11 (12.5%)	133 (8.7%)
Expert	21 (3.8%)	18 (4.9%)	1 (0.7%)	5 (1.8%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (2.3%)	48 (3.17%)
Other	39(7%)	26 (7%)	15 (10.3%)	20 (7.3%)	4 (2.8%)	7 (8%)	111 (7.3%)

that, while the press remains largely self-referential, it draws selectively on external authorities to legitimise its discourse – mobilising political and academic voices more often than those of civil society. However, these proportions vary markedly across newspaper types. In the free daily *Métro*, journalists dominate, consistent with the reliance on news-agency material and limited editorial autonomy, as discussed earlier. The elite press (*Le Monde*, *Le Soir*) displays a diversified configuration, with a significant presence of academics, experts, and columnists – categories associated with interpretive or reflexive discourse. In *Le Monde*, for example, academics represent 16.2% of references, compared to less than 5% in *Le Parisien*, illustrating the orientation of the newspaper towards intellectual authority and analytical commentary. *La DH* stands out for its unusually high proportion of political voices (39.3%), almost matching the share of journalists (40.7%). Combined with the strong focus of the newspaper on domestic politics and proximity news, this results in a form of political mediation rather than journalistic narration: the journalist becomes a relay of political speech rather than an autonomous producer of meaning. This configuration does not necessarily reflect political dependence, but rather the institutional context in which Belgian journalism operates. Two factors can help explain this pattern. First, *La DH*'s editorial identity is deeply anchored in local and regional news coverage, where political actors are important figures in everyday reporting. The predominance of political speech thus partly stems from this logic of proximity, which values accessible, personified authority and tangible governance (Nielsen, 2015). Second, Belgium's participatory tradition, where political parties remain important mediators of public life (De Winter *et al.*, 2006), creates a media environment in which political voices enjoy structural visibility. However, this does not imply that journalism is subordinate to party structures. Rather, it highlights how, within this system, political actors naturally occupy the role of routine news sources, particularly in outlets such as *La DH*. In this sense, the prominence of political speech reflects not a lack of editorial autonomy, but a different economy of visibility, rooted in both proximity journalism and the institutional architecture of the Belgian public sphere. Consequently, the serious-popular outlets show diverging patterns in France and French-speaking Belgium. All these variations suggest that the distribution of voices correlates closely with the degree of editorial autonomy and symbolic capital within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1996). Elite outlets rely on a plurality of recognised voices to construct meaning, while popular and free newspapers tend to reproduce predefined categorisations through journalistic narration alone – though *La DH* does so through strong political mediation rather than journalistic dominance. These observations must, of course, be related to the term (*populis**) on which the corpus was based, a term that is a priori associated with the political sphere and which may therefore account for the

significant proportion of political actors appearing in newspapers such as *La DH*. Nevertheless, given that the same term is used to extract articles from each newspaper, the difference in the distribution of speech between newspapers remains, and *La DH* stands out from the others in this respect.

If the distribution of voices reveals who is entitled to speak about *populis**, the analysis of how the term is positioned within different spheres of journalistic legitimacy shows how it is stabilised once it enters journalistic discourse. In other words, the question shifts from authorship to qualification: not only who speaks, but within what normative framework their speech is situated – whether within realms of consensus, controversy, or deviance.

6 Distribution of voices and naming: what does it say about the labelling of *populis**?

Hallin's (1986) model conceptualises the media landscape as consisting of three distinct but interconnected spheres, each characterised by different journalistic norms and practices. These spheres do not have fixed geographic or institutional boundaries but rather represent varying degrees of social consensus and controversy surrounding particular issues, events, or actors. The first one is the sphere of consensus in which issues are widely accepted and do not trigger debate. The second one is the sphere of legitimate controversy where multiple viewpoints are considered socially acceptable and worthy of public consideration. The third one is the sphere of deviance which represents the realm of ideas, groups, or positions that journalists consider to be outside the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Here, journalists feel authorised to explicitly condemn or exclude these actors from serious consideration. Hallin uses his model as an interpretative tool to understand how the media position different discourses, not as a quantitative coding grid, and therefore not a coding system requiring inter-coder validation. The operationalisation in this chapter draws on this model but adapts Hallin's analytical framework to our case study since we take the uses of a term as a starting point to explore the media landscape. If the type of data we are working with requires a limited quantification effort, this is only to highlight analytical elements that reveal the editorial positioning of newspapers. The identification of these positions is based on discursive indicators: presence/absence of normative qualifiers, openness to definitional controversy, and tone of the article. The key is that classification requires holistic analysis of these elements together, not just counting individual markers. This is why we worked with a corpus limited to 1,516 articles – all French-language press articles in our corpus, which were analysed in detail. This generally requires tracing the article on the website of the newspaper to retrieve information that is not provided in the database of the TrUMPo project⁵ (section in the newspaper, use of agency press release, etc.). Regarding Hallin's model, in our case, the

sphere of consensus refers to a categorisation of *populis** that appears as self-evident, without the need for clarification, definition, or explanation. Contrary to what it may suggest, 'consensus' does not mean that *populis** as a phenomenon, ideology, or action is itself consensual: it only means that the use of the term is consensual. Therefore, it is not because the term *populis** feeds into the sphere of consensus that the term *populis** is not used with negative connotations; the previous chapters of this book, as well as the literature on the subject (see Bailly *et al.*, 2025), clearly show that the term is generally used in a derogatory manner. However, affiliation to the sphere of consensus indicates that the term functions as a descriptive, naturalised category requiring no justification or interrogation (e.g., 'the populist leader'; 'The two political leaders are close, both having adopted a populist stance during their respective election campaigns'; 'the Italian politician with populist rhetoric' etc.). Conversely, as indicated by the terminology itself, the sphere of deviance carries a normative judgement, a moral evaluation of an idea, an action, or a person. Deviance indicates transgression, and therefore what is not acceptable. Deviance is sometimes indicated by the use of a qualifier added to the term to clarify its meaning (e.g., 'the populist autocrat'; 'authoritarian populism'), but it can also be implicit, or even conveyed by the tone of an article that is generally accusatory and concerned, referring to the direct danger that populism and populist pose to democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law. In doing so, the term refers to the unacceptable (e.g., 'neo-fascists, national populists'; 'The crisis of the 1930s and the populist reactions of that period must not be forgotten. We saw the damage it did to our democracies'; 'Populists are riding high more than ever. They are no longer nibbling away at our democracies, they are devouring them, mouths wide open'). Lastly, the sphere of legitimate controversy⁶ is that of argument and discussion about the notion itself, or more simply and prosaically, the attempt to clarify it. While doing so, its meaning is open to (re)negotiation in terms of its ins and outs (e.g., 'the category of populism is very broad here – perhaps too broad'; 'this version of populism'; 'Piketty is right to be wary of this catch-all notion of 'populism', etc.).

Hallin's model is broad and indicative, but not a precise measurement tool. In this sense, the three spheres represent theoretical poles (weberian 'ideal types' in a certain respect). Most articles contain gradations, ambiguities, and mixed signals. The article⁷ below, published in *Le Monde* (on 21 April 2019), is a perfect illustration of this:

Rubrique internationale – Ukraine

Benoît Vitkine (envoyé spécial)

Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelensky remporte la présidentielle, le pays fait un saut dans l'inconnu (...)

Ce populisme est d'un type nouveau : un populisme « sympa », proeuropéen, qui ne cherche pas le clivage mais le rassemblement d'une Ukraine aux identités morcelées.

International section – Ukraine

Benoît Vitkine (special correspondent)

Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelensky wins the presidential election, the country takes a leap into the unknown (...)

This populism is of a new kind: a 'friendly', pro-European populism that seeks not to divide but to unite a Ukraine with fragmented identities.

This example reveals that the same use of the term can simultaneously activate all three spheres: the term is used without definition and without distancing quotation marks, as if its referent were obvious. The term operates on the assumption of shared understanding: both journalist and reader are presumed to know what populism means (sphere of consensus). Yet using the adjective 'friendly' in quotation marks here signals that populism is not necessarily always 'friendly', opening the possibility of 'unfriendly' and hateful populism (sphere of deviance). But precisely by qualifying it, it suggests that, without doing so explicitly, the journalist reopens the meaning (sphere of controversy) as there may be different forms of populism, and that some may be more legitimate than others.

Furthermore, Table 7.2 shows that the term could be used several times per article, particularly in *Le Monde* and *Le Soir*, where articles are generally longer (Carpenter, 2007; Ringoot, 2014). Importantly, different aspects within a single article can occupy different spheres simultaneously. As an example, one can consider an article from the newspaper *Métro* (published on 20 November 2019) which is indicated as coming from Belga, the Belgian press agency:

*Le Polonais Donald Tusk élu à la tête du PPE avec 93% des suffrages
Le PPE reste la formation la plus importante du Parlement européen,
mais il veut se remettre en selle après les dernières élections en mai.
Celles-ci ont montré une érosion des deux grands partis traditionnels,
PPE et sociaux-démocrates, au profit des Libéraux, des Verts ou de
l'extrême droite et des populistes.*

*« En aucun cas, nous ne pouvons abandonner la sphère de la sécurité
et de l'ordre aux populistes politiques, aux manipulateurs et aux auto-
crates qui font croire aux gens que la liberté n'est pas compatible avec
la sécurité », a martelé M. Tusk à Zagreb.*

Poland's Donald Tusk elected head of the EPP with 93% of the vote
The EPP remains the largest group in the European Parliament, but it wants to get back on track after the last elections in May. These elections showed an erosion of the two traditional major parties, the EPP

and the Social Democrats, in favour of the Liberals, the Greens, the far right and the *populists*.

'Under no circumstances can we abandon the sphere of security and order to political *populists*, manipulators and autocrats who make people believe that freedom is not compatible with security,' Mr Tusk insisted in Zagreb.

While the journalist refers to populists alongside other political groups in the European Parliament, such as the Liberals, Greens, and the far right, Donald Tusk, a (liberal centre right) politician, presents them as a threat that must be combated.

These examples illustrate that journalists actively negotiate the boundaries of the different media sphere (consensus, controversy, deviance). Their work consists indeed partly of moving and maintaining ideas, actions, and actors within those spheres. While an attempt has been made to categorise the uses of terms into different spheres to facilitate analysis, these above examples serve to remind us of the heuristic (rather than normative) nature of the analytical model, which therefore calls for the quantified aspects discussed below to be treated with great caution. However, examining the distribution of *populis** across the spheres of consensus, deviance, and controversy (Hallin, 1986) serves less to reveal the normative dimension of media discourse than to emphasise that in the vast majority of articles, the meaning of the term is taken for granted, it typically carries a moralising, judgemental and critical tone, and it is rarely questioned, challenged, or debated – even though it describes events that are not necessarily identical (Table 7.6).

Table 7.6 Distribution of articles mentioning *populis** across media spheres (Hallin, 1986) by newspaper

	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>La DH</i>	<i>Le Parisien</i>	<i>Métro</i>	<i>20 minutes</i>	Total
Consensus	448 (84.1%)	274 (77.2%)	125 (88.%)	249 (93,3%)	130 (94.9%)	74 (90.2%)	1300 (85,8%)
Deviance	73 (13.7%)	46 (13%)	17 (12%)	14 (5,2%)	7 (5.1%)	7 (8.5%)	164 (10.8%)
Controversy	12 (2.3%)	35 (9.9%)	0	4 (1.5%)	0	1 (1.2%)	52 (3.4%)
Total	533	355	142	267	137	82	1516

Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of coded articles within each newspaper that are assigned to a given sphere of legitimacy (Hallin, 1986). The count is based on article-level classification rather than on the total number of occurrences of *populis**. Each article was assigned to a dominant sphere of legitimacy, even when several occurrences were present or when different discursive registers coexisted. Column totals are aligned with the number articles reported in Table 7.2, which may lead to slight variations due to rounding.

Across the corpus, the overwhelming predominance of the sphere of consensus suggests that *populis** operates in journalistic discourse primarily as a taken-for-granted descriptive label, rather than as a contested or debated concept. Once again, this does not mean that the phenomenon is endorsed as such, but rather that the term is supposed to categorise a phenomenon that has the same meaning for everyone, even though it encompasses elements of very different natures. Thus, the term is most often employed as a commonsensical category – something that ‘goes without saying’ – and only marginally as an object of definitional reflection (3.4% of occurrences falling into the sphere of controversy). Meanwhile, only 10.8% belong to the sphere of deviance, where *populis** carries a normative charge, marking actors or ideas as outside legitimate politics. This low proportion of deviance, combined with the overwhelming dominance of consensus, suggests that populism seems to refer to modes of action or political positioning that are now part of the current political system. Given the relatively comparable figures across newspapers, it is ultimately difficult to see how they reflect editorial hierarchies and professional routines. If free dailies, *Métro* and *20 minutes*, display a greater share of consensus, the other newspapers are not far behind. The difference lies, however, in the sphere of deviance, which is most widely represented in the elite newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Soir*, but also in the popular newspaper *La DH*, where politicians are more present than elsewhere, as shown in Table 7.5, and account for nearly 40% of all the identified uses of *populis** in the newspaper. In this newspaper, *La DH*, the term is never questioned. Conversely, in outlets such as *Le Monde* and *Le Soir* the term *populis** is most debated, albeit very rarely: in less than 10% of *Le Monde* articles, in less than 3% in *Le Soir* articles. In this respect, *Le Monde* stands apart from the other outlets, as it is the one that may allow contestation or reinterpretation. Conversely, when journalistic routines are dominated by agency material and short factual items, the term *populis** circulates as an already-institutionalised category. Through repetition, circulation, and institutional endorsement, it achieves the status of journalistic doxa since the term *populis** no longer needs to be explained or justified: it functions as an implicit principle of vision and division (Bourdieu, 1979; 1997), a way of seeing politics that structures perception while concealing its own arbitrariness through what Bourdieu terms misrecognition – the process by which socially constructed classifications come to appear as natural descriptions of reality.

The variety of adjectives that can be attached to the term *populis**, especially in the newspapers *Le Soir* and *Le Monde*, while suggesting that there are different types of *populis**, does not give further explanation, and therefore does not open up the debate on the multiple interpretations of the term, nor does it facilitate its understanding. ‘High-tech populism’, ‘populism 2.0’, ‘low-end populism’, ‘easy populism’, ‘penal populism’, ‘aggressive populism’, ‘artistic

populism', 'green populism', 'cheap populism', 'scientific populism', 'alarmist populism', 'positive populism', 'instant populism', and 'cultural populism', these are some of the adjectives attached to the term, alongside the more common 'right-wing *populis**' and, to a lesser extent, 'left-wing *populis**' not to mention the occasional 'authoritarian *populis**' and 'xenophobic *populis**'. Adjectives typically serve to specify and narrow the meaning of a term. Here, however, the diversity of qualifiers attached to *populis** shows that the term covers a wide range of different phenomena. Each adjective attempts to delineate a particular form – ideological (left/right), geographical (European/American), evaluative (good/bad), specific type (penal/high-tech) – but their accumulation reveals that there is no shared understanding of what populism fundamentally is. This constant need for qualification limits the analytical utility of the term: the term becomes the vehicle for a multitude of meanings, which gives it very limited heuristic value as it becomes vague and imprecise. But in doing so, the term seems to become a convenient way of talking about what is wrong with the world, since it usually carries a stigma: it is used to describe individuals, phenomena, or ideas that do not seem to meet with the approval of those who use it, whether journalists or other types of actors who express themselves in the six newspapers. Therefore, even when multiple voices are mobilised, they rarely destabilise the category itself. Whether they are politicians, journalists, activists, academics, or experts, when given space, they rarely contest the validity of the label but rather refine its scope and, through repetition, anchor it within a shared doxa that structures political intelligibility. This is what we can see in the following section, which focuses on the specific case of 'op-eds' and columns and their associated authors.

7 The op-eds: spaces for negotiating the term *populis** or echo chambers of journalistic doxa?

Only three outlets – *Le Monde*, *Le Soir*, and *Le Parisien* – structurally open their pages to external contributors through opinion formats such as 'tribunes' in French newspapers and 'cartes blanches' in French-speaking Belgian newspapers. These sections have different names but refer to a common idea: to offer a space for expression from 'public officials, academics, experts, advocates, and other forms of public intellectuals to articulate diverse opinions on salient issues' (Day & Golan, 2005: 61). In addition, columns ('chroniques') are spaces for journalists of the newsroom or regular contributors who can 'give their point of view or interpretation of events'.⁸ These spaces, meant to foster pluralism, function in practice as controlled extensions of the journalistic field, where access to speech is filtered through symbolic hierarchies (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 1991). The distinction between 'tribune' or 'carte blanche' on one side and 'chronique' on the other is crucial. The first ones operate as an interface

genre, opening journalism to actors whose recognition comes from outside the newsroom – academics, intellectuals, politicians, or activists. It is an interstitial space (Pinto, 2002; Sapiro, 2009) where intellectual authority is redefined through media visibility, producing a form of heteronomous expertise. The ‘chronique’, by contrast, is a professional genre internal to journalism, closer to the editorial. Written by staff or regular contributors, it reflects the newsroom’s voice while allowing for a personalised tone (Neveu, 2009; Rieffel, 2022). The ‘chroniqueur’ thus stands between journalist and essayist – an insider whose authority derives from style and moral framing rather than field autonomy (Bourdieu, 1996) (Table 7.7).

These distributions reveal three differentiated configurations. In *Le Soir*, interpretive authority is more internalised through columns (‘chronique’): 77.4% of opinion pieces are ‘chroniques’, while 22.6% are ‘cartes blanches’. In *Le Monde*, it’s the other way around: 70.4% of opinion pieces are ‘tribunes’ while 29.6% are ‘chroniques’.

Let us now turn our attention to the authors of these different types of opinion pieces (Table 7.8).

Table 7.7 Number and proportion of opinion pieces and columns in each newspaper

	<i>‘Tribune’ / ‘Carte blanche’</i> <i>(opinion piece)</i>	<i>‘Chronique’</i> <i>(column)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Le Soir	12 (2.25%)	41 (7.69%)	53 (9.94%)
Le Monde	57 (16.06%)	24 (6.76%)	81 (22.82%)
Le Parisien	8 (3%)	0	9 (3%)
Total	77 (5.08%)	65 (4.29%)	142 (9.37%)

Note: The percentage corresponds to the proportion of opinion pieces from external contributors (the so-called ‘tribune’, ‘carte blanche’) and columns (‘chronique’) in relation to the total number of articles per media outlet and then across the entire corpus.

Table 7.8 Distribution of types of actors when it comes to opinions pieces (‘tribunes’ and ‘cartes blanches’)

	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>Le Parisien</i>
Journalist	3 (5.3%)	2 (16.7%)	0
Politician	5 (8.8%)	4 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)
Activist	4 (7%)	1 (8.3%)	2 (22.2%)
Academic	23 (40.4%)	1 (8.3%)	0
Expert	8 (14%)	1 (8.3%)	0
Other	14 (24.6%)	3 (25%)	5 (55.6%)

Note: The percentage corresponds to proportion of each type of actor who wrote an opinion piece in each outlet.

Le Monde stands out because, compared with the other two other newspapers, the presence of politicians is secondary. On the contrary, academics are much more prominent, as well as experts. Among the 'other' category, we find mostly people from the cultural sector. The 'tribune' functions here as a space of mutual legitimation: the newspaper borrows intellectual prestige from its contributors, while offering them public visibility in return. In doing so, the process sustains what Pinto (2002) calls a 'middle intellectual culture' – which is not the case in *Le Soir* and *Le Parisien*. In *Le Parisien*, tribunes are written by politicians but also by activists. Amongst the other category, there is an architect, a doctor, and two businessmen. One third of 'cartes blanches' in *Le Soir* are signed by politicians, but journalists are also quite well represented. Amongst the 'other' category, there are two people from the arts and culture sector, and a solicitor.

Concerning *Le Soir* and *Le Monde*, which are the only two newspapers in our corpus to offer this section, we can now focus on the specific case of the column ('chronique') (Table 7.9).

In *Le Soir*, a small set of recurring columnists account for most uses of *populis** in this corpus: these regular contributors show a particular propensity to mobilise the term. Although it happens that some of them are academics, it should nevertheless be noted that they are either retired or may have teaching responsibilities at university, sometimes even publishing books identified as research books, but nevertheless remaining on the periphery of the academic world.⁹ Columns are never signed by politicians.

Like in the remainder of the corpus, the sphere of consensus prevails in opinion pieces, which means that in these articles, the term *populis** is generally applied to the analysis of phenomena without being discussed or debated or even rigorously defined as shown in Table 7.10. The term appears to encompass very different elements that are neither specified nor qualified – but always within tightly delimited boundaries of reasonableness. Nevertheless, the opinion pages ('tribunes') of *Le Monde* remain the place where distribution between spheres is most

Table 7.9 Distribution of types of actors when it comes to columns

	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>
Journalist	20 (83.3%)	29 (70.7%)
Politician	0	0
Activist	0	1 (2.4%)
Academic	4 (16.7%)	11 (26.8%)
Expert	0	0
Other	0	0

Note: The percentage corresponds to proportion of each type of actor who wrote an opinion piece in each outlet.

Table 7.10 Distribution of opinion genres, author type, and use of *populis** across Hallin's spheres (1986) in the three newspapers

	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Dominant authors</i>	<i>Sphere of discourse</i>
Le Monde	'Tribune'	Academics, experts	Consensus: 52.6% Deviance: 26.3% Controversy: 21.1%
	'Chronique'	Journalists	Consensus: 75% Deviance: 12.5% Controversy: 12.5%
Le Soir	'Carte blanche'	Politicians, activists	Consensus: 83.3% Deviance: 16.7% Controversy: 0
	'Chronique'	Journalists, columnists	Consensus: 70.7% Deviance: 19.5% Controversy: 9.8%
Le Parisien	'Tribune'	Activists, politicians	Consensus: 87.5% Deviance: 0 Controversy: 12.5%

uneven: consensus is the lowest in relation to the corpus, and nearly a quarter of the articles in this section represents spaces for discussion of the term (e.g., 'We can speak of "populism" because of the fragmented, heterogeneous nature of the sectors of society that have joined forces to ensure the political hegemony of these governments'; 'It is a very short and poor analysis that reduces the 'yellow vests' to populism, populism to elitism, and elitism to the ENA' etc.). Although the term is more often stable (accepted meaning) than debated, it nevertheless serves as a tool for intellectual debates on democratic, political, but also economic issues. It is in this section that several economists write and 'economic populism' is commented on. One may claim that the consensus is productive as the mention of the term *populis** allows for discussions and serves as a basis for analysing democratic and economic challenges. In *Le Soir*, which is dominated by the sphere of consensus, 'cartes blanches' never define the term; they presuppose its meaning. *Populis** functions as a moralised diagnostic, a shorthand for democratic malaise or political excess (e.g., 'a gap into which populists, specialists in the culture of fear and amalgamation, are infiltrating'; 'a populist, a so-called strongman who fantasises about the great return of American hegemony'; 'eradicating the prejudices and fears that are relentlessly exploited by populist demagoguery', etc.). The absence of conceptual discussion naturalises the category while reaffirming journalistic norms of rationality and moderation. In *Le Parisien* as well, the term circulates as a taken-for-granted label which can be used, for example, by an architect to discuss the development of Greater Paris,

who concludes that 'beauty will win over populism'. It is also used by the president of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) who mentions 'the populist camp, which regardless of its origins and affiliations, cannot tolerate (...) the CESE'. Yet one exception, such as the piece produced by the green politician Michèle Rivasi, challenges this closure by problematising the very opposition between 'progressives' and 'populists'. These rare acts of reflexivity do not overturn the dominant classification, but they show that the category is sometimes strategically negotiated.

Taken together, these contrasts reveal a hierarchy of interpretive autonomy within the journalistic field. With nearly a quarter of its articles being opinion pieces, *Le Monde* stabilises meaning through intellectual authority while tolerating limited reflexivity. In *Le Soir*, on the other hand, it is the journalists' and regular contributors' choice to comment on the state of the world, which is a cause for concern and disapproval, as the use of the term *populis** suggests. *Le Parisien* reproduces a similar framing with signatories positioned outside the journalistic field. Despite their structural differences, all three newspapers participate in the same process, transforming *populis** into a category whose effectiveness lies less in analytical precision than in its ability to organise one's insights into the world. In that sense, these texts contribute less to expanding interpretive complexity than to reaffirming the classificatory order of the journalistic field.

A related interpretive space appears in the book sections of *Le Monde* and, more marginally, *Le Soir*. In *Le Monde*, the *Monde des livres* supplement extends the boundaries of opinion journalism into the cultural field.

Rubrique : Le Monde des Livres

Publié le 28 novembre 2019

Par Serge Audier

Au nom du peuple! « Le Populisme en Europe centrale et orientale », de Roman Krakovsky

Le populisme est de retour. L'historien Roman Krakovsky en retrace les origines et les transformations depuis le XIXe siècle. (...) Aujourd'hui encore, la Russie mais aussi l'Europe centrale et orientale continuent d'apparaître comme les laboratoires d'idéologies et d'expériences politiques dites populistes. Cependant, la rémanence de cette catégorie traduit-elle de réelles continuités, ou s'agit-il d'un mot fourre-tout occultant des différences majeures? (...) On le voit, la catégorie de populisme est ici très large – peut-être trop. En tout cas, avertit Roman Krakovsky, alors que l'Europe occidentale connaît elle aussi une crise de confiance et une perte d'influence, on s'illusionnerait à croire qu'elle est immunisée contre le triomphe de cette version-là du populisme, identitaire et autoritaire.

Section: The World of Books

Published on 28 November 2019

By Serge Audier

In the name of the people! ‘Populism in Central and Eastern Europe’ by Roman Krakovsky

Populism is back. Historian Roman Krakovsky traces its origins and transformations since the 19th century. (...) Even today, Russia and Central and Eastern Europe continue to appear as laboratories for so-called populist ideologies and political experiments. However, does the persistence of this category reflect real continuities, or is it a catch-all term that obscures major differences? (...) As we can see, the category of populism is very broad here – perhaps too broad. In any case, Roman Krakovsky warns that, with Western Europe also experiencing a crisis of confidence and a loss of influence, it would be illusory to believe that it is immune to the triumph of this version of populism, which is identity-based and authoritarian. (...)

This text is interesting in that it is certainly the one that goes the furthest in our entire corpus in questioning the term through the presentation and analysis of a book by a historian. Yet when books about *populis** are mentioned, or at least books with *populis** in their title, the category is not discussed as much, or even not at all. In this sense, the *Monde des livres* reproduces the same mechanisms of symbolic legitimation observed in the opinion pages. It consolidates the position of *Le Monde* as a central broker of cultural and intellectual authority, seamlessly linking the fields of journalism, academia, and literature. *Le Soir* also features occasional book reviews or essays that touch on *populis**, but these remain exceptional and lack the structural visibility of *Le Monde*’s literary supplement. In any case, what appears as reflexive commentary ultimately reinforces the validity of *populis** as a classificatory category. Beyond the internal dynamics of the press, this phenomenon points to a broader structural configuration that characterises contemporary knowledge production around political categories. As Stampnitzky (2011) argues in her study of terrorism, certain objects of knowledge evolve within ‘interstitial fields of knowledge production’, located at the crossroads of academia, the media, and the state. Within these hybrid spaces, expertise is marked by weak autonomy and porous boundaries, which render concepts vulnerable to politicisation. Like terrorism, *populis** inhabits such an interstitial zone: it circulates between scholarly, journalistic, and political discourses, with each sphere drawing authority from the others. The result is an unstable epistemic regime in which the category is simultaneously ubiquitous and indeterminate – an instrument of classification more than a concept of analysis. As Sedgwick (2010) demonstrates for ‘radicalisation’, such terms

gain currency precisely through their semantic malleability: their ubiquity suggests consensus while concealing the fact that different actors define them according to fundamentally incompatible criteria.

The following section examines how this dynamic extends beyond professional journalism, when 'others' – artists, athletes, and public personalities – appropriate the term and circulate it beyond the political arena.

8 When 'others' speak: from political category to moral commonplace

Although numerically marginal, the 'other' category of speakers – composed of artists, athletes, businessmen, and sometimes lay people – offers crucial insight into the circulation of *populis** beyond the boundaries of strictly speaking political or journalistic discourse. When these figures employ the term, they sometimes detach it from its original analytical and political referents. *Populis** no longer designates a specific ideological configuration or movement; it becomes a flexible moral label used to condemn excess, emotion, or demagoguery in the broadest sense. In this way, the word can absorb heterogeneous meanings depending on who speaks and in what context. In the cultural field, *populis** operates as a moral warning. In an AFP dispatch reproduced in several outlets about the Cannes Film Festival, filmmaker Luc Dardenne condemned what he saw as 'the rise of populism in Europe', presenting it as a threat to democratic values and artistic freedom. Similarly, novelist Mario Vargas Llosa declared that 'populism is destroying democracy', framing the term as the antonym of reasoned debate. In an opinion piece published in *Le Monde*, the former director of the library of the Pompidou centre criticises France's Pass culture (a scheme set up by the French government to give young people aged between 15 and 20 access to cultural activities), describing it as a form of 'cultural populism'. This shift, from 'political populism' to 'cultural populism', illustrates what Bourdieu (1979) calls the moralisation of distinction: the hierarchies of taste and cultural recognition are reasserted through a language borrowed from political commentary. A writer, defending the filmmaker Roman Polanski against boycotts, warns that

new leagues of virtue claim to be correcting a patriarchal and racist society by force. But beware: if citizens' actions mirror those of non-democratic countries, the mistrust and conspiracy theories that fuel populism will prevail – and we would become a totalitarian country.

In *Le Soir*, a musician launching a new album is quoted: 'Today, with populists, we are not blind but blinded'. In the corpus, *populis** is sometimes mobilised in relation to television and entertainment, further extending its

semantic range (e.g., ‘Marlène Schiappa denounces a form of populism in Elise Lucet’s [television] programmes’). Across these examples, *populis** becomes a versatile moral label used to condemn excess, vulgarity, or irrationality in domains far removed from electoral politics. Thus, in *La DH*, the French comedian, Stéphane Guillon talks about nowadays television in the following terms: ‘There is a whole range of fake happenings, fake buzz, Poujadists, and populists that I find despicable. And who sometimes even set themselves up as courts and judge people who are not even there to defend themselves’. A similar logic applies to the sports sphere, where *populis** serves as a label of disqualification. When the footballer Antoine Griezmann denounces ‘populist attacks’ in a media commentary, the term does not refer to an ideology but to a tone – to emotional excess, unfair criticism, or ‘demagogic’ rhetoric. In *Le Soir*, the ‘others’ category also includes athletes and coaches from football and rugby who use the term in this sense, applying it to internal conflicts in their field. Free dailies reproduce a Belga dispatch quoting Pope Francis, who, when asked about ‘populism’ responds in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, that it is ‘the same discourse [as nationalism]’ and added, ‘Populism leads us to sovereignism; suffixes ending in *-ism* never do any good’. In *Le Parisien*, ordinary citizens also adopt the term in local contexts. Commenting on a municipal safety initiative in Clamart (financial assistance to install a home alarm system), one resident describes the measure as ‘extremely populist’: ‘There are much more important things to do before funding this – like schools or social housing’. In this everyday use, *populis** has become shorthand for opportunism or misplaced priorities. While negative valence of the term persists, its ubiquitous and uncontested deployment has transformed it into an obvious and naturalised category. This represents a shift to consensus in Hallin’s sense: the term has become part of the shared, uncontested repertoire – a routinised political and moral criticism. This consensual status produces what we may call consensual stigmatisation without exclusion: everyone seems to agree that *populis** is bad and uses the term to criticise opponents, but this very consensus empties it of any specific meaning and does not exclude anyone from legitimate political participation. The term is so normalised that it represents a form of exhaustion through overuse: not that it ceases to function, but it loses analytical specificity. The label becomes so commonplace, so unquestioned in its deployment, that it can no longer do the political work of exclusion – though it continues to operate as routine moral disapproval. Once institutionalised within journalistic doxa, *populis** acquires symbolic currency that allows it to circulate well beyond the professional or academic arenas. The entry of non-political actors into the discursive field reveals not only

the permeability of the media space but also the extent to which *populis** may have become part of everyday moral vocabulary. What was once an analytical category now functions as a shorthand for social critique or indignation.

9 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how *populis** is stabilised across French and French-speaking Belgian newspapers through the structural and professional logics of journalism. Elite newspapers, characterised by longer, more analytical articles, tend to rely on the term with more elaborate interpretations of contemporary political phenomena. Conversely, the reliance on wire service copy by free dailies produces highly standardised use where *populis** functions primarily as a label. The popular press occupies an intermediary position, though it does not produce a uniform model – significant differences emerge between France and French-speaking Belgium, suggesting that national political contexts are reflected in this intermediate level of journalism. These formal differences extend to the polyphonic structure of discourse: while journalists dominate across all press types, elite newspapers distinguish themselves by allocating more space to external voices – particularly experts and academics through op-ed sections. These variations correspond to differentiated positions within the journalistic field, reflecting distinct combinations of symbolic and economic capital: elite press outlets, possessing higher symbolic capital but also greater economic resources, can afford the temporal and material resources required for analytical depth and polyphonic orchestration; free dailies, operating under economic constraints that prioritise volume and rapid circulation, resort to the standardised formulations provided by wire services. The popular press, positioned between these poles, reveals its hybrid nature – torn between economic imperatives and aspirations to journalistic authority. The differences between outlets are less about ideological stance than about degrees of reflexivity: the more interpretative the journalistic form, the greater the likelihood of encountering debate or definitional nuance.

Yet these significant formal differences mask a remarkable convergence in how the term *populis** is deployed across the spheres of media discourse. Regardless of press type, the use overwhelmingly falls within the sphere of consensus. Controversy – where one might expect democratic debate about the meaning of *populis** – is rare, confined primarily to elite newspapers where it remains marginal. Most strikingly, we observe no significant difference between French-speaking Belgian and French newspapers, despite Belgium's unique institutional framework: 'the cordon sanitaire'. This legally codified exclusion of the extreme right-wing from legitimate debate – a formal institutionalisation of what is conceptualised in this

chapter as the sphere of deviance – might reasonably be expected to produce distinct patterns in how French-speaking Belgian journalists deploy related political categories, including *populis**. The absence of such differentiation is not without raising questions and leads to interpretations based on the analysis conducted in this chapter. First, the ‘cordon sanitaire’ targets the extreme right specifically, while *populis** functions as a more extensive and ambiguous category – sufficiently polysemic to adapt across contexts and resistant to formal codification. *Populis**, lacking institutional definition, escapes regulatory apparatus even while potentially designating the same actors. Second, this reveals sophisticated journalistic boundary work: journalists distribute degrees of legitimacy among those who remain within debate rather than simply excluding some entirely. *Populis** serves this regulatory function, establishing internal hierarchy within media discourse: it functions as a mobile boundary marker that signals disapproval without excluding actors from the debate. Thus, *populis** functions less as a binary marker of exclusion (in/out of the acceptable) than as an instrument for hierarchising political legitimacies within the acceptable political spectrum. This suggests that Hallin’s tripartite model – consensus, controversy, deviance – while heuristically powerful, may insufficiently capture the gradations and nuances of journalistic legitimation practices.

Ultimately, the term *populis** emerges from this analysis as a privileged site for observing this boundary work. Its polysemy, its presence across national contexts, its use by diverse voices (journalists, politicians, experts, etc.), its application across the political spectrum, and its predominantly consensus-based use all mark it as a key instrument through which journalists exercise classificatory power. The term operates in ways comparable to what Becker (1963) termed a ‘master status’, that is, an identity marker that functions less as a rigorous description of specific political strategies than as an identification of actors, ideas, and phenomenon who morally transgress political norms. The invocation of *populis** by artists, athletes, or citizens (condemning cultural productions, sports commentary, etc.) exemplifies this shift from a political to a moral register. *Populis** is no longer primarily a concept describing a political phenomenon, but a word signalling shared moral disapproval within public discourse. What appears as objective description (e.g., ‘this actor is populist’) operates as a symbolic imposition: a category carrying normative weight while presenting itself as simple observation. The predominantly consensus-sphere placement across all press types and both national contexts demonstrates the success of this imposition: the category circulates as if its meaning and negative valence were self-evident, requiring neither specification nor justification. This exemplifies the transformation from what might have originated as an analytical concept into a folk category of ordinary

language, no longer requiring scholarly specification yet consistently serving to mark boundaries between legitimate and suspect political positions. Hallin's spheres model proves invaluable for rendering visible processes that operate most effectively by remaining invisible. The consensus sphere emerges as the zone where misrecognition is most complete, where arbitrary classifications are experienced as natural descriptions. By revealing where categories circulate within media discourse, the model highlights processes of naturalisation that might otherwise escape scrutiny. While this analysis focuses on published discourse and its structural patterns, avoiding inter-coder interpretation, its heuristic value lies in revealing structural tendencies rather than exhaustive semantics. Future research could complement this approach through newsroom ethnographies, by examining how these classificatory logics are produced in practice, or through audience reception studies, by exploring how they are received and potentially contested across different publics.

Notes

- 1 Symbolic power is 'the power to constitute the given through utterance, to make people see and believe, to confirm or transform their view of the world and, thereby, their actions in the world, and thus the world itself (...) What gives power to slogans (...) is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of the person who utters them, a belief that does not belong to the words themselves' (Bourdieu, 1977: 410).
- 2 The adjective 'doxic' refers in Bourdieu's work to the term *doxa*, 'designating a set of shared assumptions (without necessarily knowing that they are assumptions), a common sense specific to each field' (Costey, 2004).
- 3 Authority designates the capacity to impose classifications that structure perception and judgement without being perceived as acts of power.
- 4 Eighteen agency reports are identical between at least two newspapers (1 in 4 newspapers: *Le Monde*, *Le Soir*, *Métro*, *20 minutes*; 1 in 3 newspapers: *20 minutes*, *Le Monde*, *Métro*; 16 appear in 2 newspapers): they mainly cover European politics (Italy, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, European elections).
- 5 This research is part of the ARC project 20/25-109 'Discourse, populism and democracy – Tracking the uses of 'populism' in media and political discourse' (TrUMPo), funded by the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.
- 6 This refers to 'evidence' in the coding grid.
- 7 Translation from French to English is by the author, with the use of AI tools.
- 8 Source: article retrieved from *Le Monde*: 'Tribune, édito, chronique... comment faire la différence' (18 January 2018), https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2018/01/18/fiche-decodex-tribune-edito-chronique-comment-faire-la-difference_5243426_4355770.html
- 9 This suggests that their symbolic capital is built within the field of journalism rather than within the academic field.

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8 Circulating without circulation? Analysis of the uses of ‘populism’ in French and Spanish parliaments, mass media, and social media

Sandrine Roginsky and Raül Nuevo Gascó

1 Introduction

Analyses of populism, both the phenomenon itself and discourse about it, routinely invoke metaphors of spatial diffusion and temporal acceleration. Populism is described as experiencing a global rise (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Moffitt, 2016), as sweeping across nations and continents in successive waves (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), or as exhibiting contagion effects whereby the success of populist actors in one context emboldens similar movements elsewhere (Rooduijn & Tijske, 2017; Van Kessel, 2015; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume). This epidemiological framing constructs populism as a traveling phenomenon that moves, spreads, and crosses boundaries. Journalistic discourse amplifies these spatial metaphors, routinely depicting populism as a ‘tide’, ‘plague’, and ‘wave’, threatening democratic stability (Kramer, 2014; Moffitt, 2016; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2014). Yet while the metaphor of circulation pervades both scholarly and journalistic accounts of populism, the actual processes through which the term *populis** itself circulates – how it moves between different discursive spaces, how it is appropriated and transformed by different actors, how its meanings stabilise or shift across contexts – remain curiously under-examined.

This chapter takes circulation as an empirical and analytical object, not merely as a rhetorical device for describing geographical expansion of populism. Yet by doing so one immediately confronts oneself to conceptual challenges that are discussed in the first part of the chapter. Rioufreyt usefully reminds us that

circulation cannot be considered a concept, let alone a paradigm, but rather a notion whose use requires some caution. In other words, its fruitfulness stems more from the shift in analytical perspective and the questions it raises than from the answers it is supposed to provide.

(2025: 57)

We see that circulation does not designate a fluid and harmonious process, but a set of socially situated practices involving actors, material infrastructures, institutional mediations, and definitional struggles. Understanding circulation as socially organised practice requires specifying where it occurs. Circulation does not unfold in undifferentiated space but through concrete institutional settings characterised by specific professional logics, selection principles, and structural constraints. Social scientists have proposed various conceptualisations of these discursive spaces that will be examined in this chapter, starting with the concept of ‘arena’, to explore our two case studies: France and Spain, investigating how *populis** is mobilised in Parliament, mass media, and social media (specifically Twitter) in each case, what this reveals about circulation and how the specificities of each arena shape its modalities. Considering these empirical elements, we focus on what they tell us, or do not tell us, about circulation and where circulation happens (or not), by showing the heuristic dimension but also the limitations of an analysis based on the uses of a word such as *populis**.

2 How, where, and between what? Forms and spaces of circulation

The fact that *populis** circulates appears self-evident: the term crosses academic publications,¹ newspapers articles, parliamentary debates, everyday conversations, etc. Yet this very obviousness – the taken-for-granted assumption that such a word naturally ‘spread’ or ‘diffuse’ – obscures the complex social processes that enable, structure, and constrain circulation. However, it has been established since the earliest anthropological research (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1925) that circulation is not spontaneous diffusion but a complex social process. Objects, ideas, and practices do not simply ‘flow’ between spaces, they are actively transported, transformed, and renegotiated through socially organised exchange systems. Sociology extended this anthropological understanding by theorising how ideas circulate between intellectual fields and national contexts. Here, ‘ideas’ encompasses a variety of cognitive and normative elements used to construct frameworks of thought: values, norms, representations, beliefs, criteria for judgement, patterns of interpretation, forms of justification, etc. (Delpuech, 2023). The circulation of ideas is not a neutral diffusion, but a socially structured process shaped by power relations, institutional positions, and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2002). In political science, Jobard *et al.* (2020) further specify these mechanisms by developing the concept of ‘passeurs’ to capture multi-positioned actors who translate norms and policies across institutional boundaries. Indeed, circulations involve complex configurations of actors and chains of mediation, in which different types of transmitters are involved (Delpuech, 2023). These intermediary

actors are characterised by their multi-positionality at the interface of different social and national worlds. They always play an active role in interpreting, instrumentalising, and transforming the ideas they take up (Delpeuch, 2023). In communication studies, Yves Jeanneret emphasises how circulation does not refer to the neutral transmission of ‘cultural beings’ (these may be forms, models, genres, ideas but also cultural content such as texts, images, etc.) but to the ‘processes that enable the sharing, transformation and appropriation of objects and knowledge within a heterogeneous social space’ (2014: 14).

All these approaches emphasise that circulation requires work – of translation, adaptation, legitimisation – performed by positioned actors with specific resources and interests. In this sense, circulation cannot be confused with virality which, in contrast, implies rapid and exponential replication with minimal transformation (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Viral spread occurs ‘when many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period, within and beyond their networks, resulting in sharp acceleration’ (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013: 16). Unlike circulation, virality privileges speed over transformation, replication over translation, and appears spontaneous rather than socially organised. Conversely, thinking in terms of circulation should help us reducing circulation dynamics to a linear and traceable chain. Vauchez (2013) argues that (1) circulation often operate through diffuse convergence (multiple actors independently adopting similar practices or classifications without direct contact, yet producing a shared reality through structural homologies or participation in common reference spaces), (2) circulation is never mere replication but always involves translation, adaptation and contestation by positioned actors with their own stakes, and (3) spaces are constituted through circulation.

If, as Vauchez argues, spaces are constituted through circulation rather than existing as self-contained containers, this generates a crucial analytical question: how should we conceptualise these spaces where *populis** is mobilised?

Different theoretical traditions offer distinct answers. While the notion of arena is widely employed to designate sites where issues are publicly articulated and confronted, its conceptualisation varies significantly across traditions. In interactionist sociology, particularly in the work of Anselm Strauss (1978), arenas are conceived as situated and processual spaces of negotiation. In constructivist sociology of public problems, Gusfield (1981) introduced ‘public arenas’ as sites where social problems are defined, dramatised, and contested. He showed how social problems do not exist objectively ‘out there’ but are constructed through processes of categorisation, attribution of responsibility, and claims-making in public arenas. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) systematised this into an ecological

mode in ‘The rise and fall of social problems: a public arenas model’. Their framework theorises structural constraints, that is, arenas as spaces with limited carrying capacity (only finite problems can gain attention simultaneously) and selection principles (implicit criteria determining which problems achieve visibility) and emphasises competition: social problems vie for scarce attention in differentiated arenas (mass media, government institutions, etc.). In French pragmatist sociology, Cefaï (1996, 2016) developed the concept of ‘public arena’, emphasising their dynamic emergence around problematic situations. Rather than stable structures, arenas appear, evolve, and dissolve as collective inquiry unfolds. This approach, influenced by Dewey (1927/2010) and attentive to deliberative processes, bears significant affinities with Habermas’s (1962/1978) concept of public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) – though Habermas theorises a singular space oriented towards rational consensus, while Cefaï acknowledges multiple, overlapping arenas. François Bastien and Érik Neveu also consider that the public sphere in contemporary societies is akin to a ‘mosaic’ of arenas (Bastien & Neveu, 1999), a fragmented public sphere made up of a multiplicity of public arenas, characterised by different actors, stakes, and rhetorics. In this view, public arenas are understood as spaces of visibility where issues are publicly articulated and debated. In the sociology of social movements, Jasper (2021) conceptualises arenas as co-constituted with the players operating within them, defined by rules, available resources, and relevant audiences, emphasising contestation over both substantive issues and arena rules themselves. Jasper argues that one of the main characteristics of an arena is that ‘we can see [it] rather than having to construct it in our minds and on our pages’ (Jasper, 2021: 253). These traditions differ in emphasis – construction vs. deliberation vs. strategy – but share core intuitions: differentiated spaces structure what discourse gains visibility through competitive or selective processes.

We draw primarily on Hilgartner and Bosk’s framework for its analytical (rather than normative) stance and attention to structural constraints (carrying capacity, selection principles). This framework proves productive for grasping how certain mobilisations of *populis** emerge into public visibility and for comparing the differential capacity of various spaces (parliaments, media outlets, social media platforms), as it explores how different arenas filter, amplify, or marginalise uses of the term, revealing arena-specific selection logics. However, the arena framework primarily addresses competition for attention within bounded spaces rather than the relational positioning of actors or the mechanisms through which convergence emerges across spaces. In such formulations, arenas designate spaces of issue articulation and competition for attention, but they do not systematically theorise the social relations, power asymmetries, and dependencies that structure interactions between actors. By contrast, fields (Bourdieu,

1992, 1996) conceptualise spaces as networks of relationally structured positions defined by struggles over field-specific forms of capital. What matters is not spatial location but the structure of actors' positions. In this chapter, this framework sheds light on the ways in which structural homologies between national fields can generate convergent classifications without explicit circulation: similarly positioned actors in analogously structured fields independently produce similar position-taking moves.

These conceptualisations are not mutually exclusive but address different dimensions of the empirical phenomenon. For analysing how *populis** circulates, we require a framework capable of capturing: (1) material and institutional differentiation between spaces (what arenas illuminate), (2) relational positioning and power asymmetries structuring actors' classificatory practices (what the field highlight), and (3) processes of convergence without explicit attribution (what Vauchez's critique of linearity and Bourdieu's concept of structural homology explain). Rather than privileging one conceptualisation, we approach our empirical cases – parliamentary debates, mass media production, Twitter exchanges – as materially differentiated sites where actors positioned in overlapping fields engage in communicative practices that both reflect and constitute these spaces. We use arena as our primary organising concept for describing these sites empirically, while drawing on field theory to explain the positional logics driving classificatory strategies and the structural homologies generating transnational convergence without bilateral circulation. The limitations of these approaches are also discussed, while examining how these elements shed light on the data analysed in the two case studies. First, we present the elements relating to the data and the methodology that has been used for our analysis.

3 A case study approach: from France to Spain, between media, parliaments, and social media

We refer to the previous chapters of this book for a more comprehensive presentation of the research approach covered in this chapter. We here limit ourselves to two countries, France and Spain, exploring three arenas of public discussion, thus gaining access to the discourse produced in 2019 by different actors in (i) parliaments, (ii) mass media, and (iii) social media.

The parliamentary corpus is composed of two datasets, one for each case study. The Spanish Parliamentary dataset contains all uses of *populis** made by Members of Parliament in the Congreso de los Diputados during the year 2019, while the French one contains the uses of *populis** made in the Assemblée Nationale the same year. In both Parliaments, all official documents are screened, which has been possible as these materials are all publicly available. The total amount of occurrences of *populis** obtained is 110 for the Spanish lower house and 161 for the French lower house, as we see in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Number of uses of *populis** in the Congreso de los Diputados (Spain) and in the Assemblée Nationale (France)

Case study	Congreso de los Diputados (ESP)	Assemblée Nationale (FR)
Number of uses of <i>populis</i> * (N = 271)	110	161

Given that the number of occurrences of *populis** found is relatively low (110 for the Spanish case and 167 for the French case), we do not need to apply any additional filters to the corpus. That is, in these two corpora we have worked with all the occurrences that we have found.

The mass media corpus is also composed of two datasets, one for each case study. In both cases, articles where the word *populis** appears are downloaded from four websites: a so-called ‘established’ newspaper (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011), a ‘serious-popular’ newspaper (Sparks, 2000), a ‘freedaily’ and a state-funded media outlet. The Spanish mass media dataset contains all uses of *populis** made in the online version of four Spanish newspapers during 2019: *El País*, *El Español*, *20 Minutos*, and one public service media (RTVE). The French one contains the uses of *populis** made in the online version of three French newspapers, during the same year: *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, *20 minutes*, and one public service media (*France Info*). RTVE operates as a state-owned broadcaster with a mandate to provide pluralistic, independent, and culturally inclusive information across television, radio, and digital platforms, while *France Info* functions as a continuous public news service with an emphasis on immediacy, reliability, and public interest journalism. Within the Spanish and French mass media corpora, the number of occurrences is too high to carry out an in-depth qualitative analysis (there was initially 887 articles in the French mass media corpus and 935 articles in the Spanish mass media corpus). Therefore, we select a random sample of occurrences proportional to the original total number of occurrences observed in the four online outlets. The aim is to have at least 500 exploitable occurrences, so a higher number of articles have been pre-selected, considering that technical difficulties would probably arise (e.g., duplicated articles or missing information) that would necessitate deleting some of them. Given that we are working with samples for press and Twitter data, we know that the results cannot be exhaustive, but we believe they shed light on the issues raised in this chapter.

The number of occurrences of the mass media arena after filtering is, as we can see in Table 8.2.

Finally, the Twitter corpus comprises all the tweets containing *populis** in French and in Spanish in 2019. The tweets are compiled with the help of Tweet Binder. We carry out several filtering processes to only

Table 8.2 Number of occurrences per newspaper

<i>Online outlet</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of outlet</i>	<i>Occurrences after filtering (n = 537)</i>
Le Monde	France	Established	198
Le Parisien	France	Serious-popular	143
20 minutes	France	Free of charge	40
France Info	France	State-funded	156
El País	Spain	Established	306
El Español	Spain	Serious-popular	164
20 minutos	Spain	Free of charge	32
RTVE	Spain	State-funded	19

Table 8.3 Twitter occurrences before and after filtering

<i>Word</i>	<i>Occurrences before filtering</i>	<i>Occurrences after filtering</i>
Populismo (SP)	557,731	353
Populismos (SP)	27,543	30
Populista (SP)	383,570	355
Populistas (SP)	229,289	146
		Total tweets SP: 738
		Total occurrences SP: 884
Populisme (FR)	190,269	568
Populismes (FR)	6,580	33
Populiste (FR)	44,453	171
Populistes (FR)	4,353	145
		Total tweets FR: 849
		Total occurrences FR: 917

keep the tweets that are related to Spain and France. In addition, since the original number of tweets exceeds one million, we conduct a series of filters to ensure the feasibility of the analysis, as well as the validity of the data. As with the mass media corpus, the Twitter corpus filtering process is explained in depth in the methodological chapter of this book (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume). After these filtering processes, the total number of tweets obtained is 849 for the French case and 738 for the Spanish case. In Table 8.3, we can see the total numbers of occurrences before and after the filtering process.

With all of the above in mind, we can now compile the data from the different arenas we work with, as we do in Table 8.4.

All these occurrences were coded following a coding guide with more than 60 categories (see Hambye *et al.*, Chapter 3 in this volume). Coding, in Holsti's words, is 'the process by which data are systematically

Table 8.4 Total occurrences per arena in France and Spain

<i>Case study</i>	<i>Arena</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>
Spain	Parliamentary	110
Spain	Mass media	521
Spain	Twitter	738
France	Parliamentary	161
France	Mass media	537
France	Twitter	849
		Total: 2,917

transformed and aggregated into units that allow a precise description of the relevant characteristics of the content' (Holsti, quoted in Popping, 2015: 31).² Two key categories structured the analysis:

(1) 'Source DR Type' identifies the arena where a use of *populis** was originally produced. The corpus could be filtered by selecting parliament, mass media, social media, others, or not known. For example, selecting 'mass media' displays only uses originally produced in mass media that are now cited elsewhere.

(2) 'Author reported speech ID' identifies, for attributed uses, who originally pronounced or wrote *populis**. Filtering by actor type (politician, journalist, expert, etc.) enables analysis of which actors' uses achieve circulation.

These categories can be cross-referenced. For instance, to find uses circulated from mass media and attributed to politicians, both filters are selected simultaneously. For specific analyses, two search strategies are combined. To identify French parliamentary references to Spain, we conduct a twofold search, by keyword (e.g., in the French corpus, terms searched included *Espagn** – capturing Espagne, espagnol, etc., 'Sánchez', Spanish party names – PSOE, Podemos, UP, PP, Ciudadanos, 'Madrid', 'Catal*', etc.) and manually (occurrences are reviewed individually to identify references to keywords that may have been missed). This dual approach ensures comprehensive identification of transnational references.

4 Empirical patterns of *populis** mobilisation and attribution across arenas

This section presents the empirical findings from our analysis of 2,916 occurrences of *populis** across three differentiated arenas (parliamentary, media, Twitter) in two national contexts (France, Spain) during 2019. The analysis describes patterns of attribution and non-attribution, intra-arena and inter-arena circulation, and transnational references. Intra-arena circulation refers to the explicit attribution of a use of *populis** that has been produced in the same arena but by a different actor/outlet (e.g., a Member

of Parliament quotes another Member of Parliament). Inter-arena circulation refers to the explicit attribution of a use of *populis** that has been produced in another arena (e.g., an article in *Le Monde* quotes a member of Parliament who has used the term *populis** in the Parliament). Results are organised by arena to facilitate cross-national comparison. Theoretical interpretation of these patterns follows in the discussion section.

4.1 *Populis** in Parliaments: overwhelmingly non-attributed uses

The French parliamentary corpus contains uses of *populis** made in 2019 within the Assemblée Nationale, including plenary debates, committee debates, legislative documents, and questions to the government. It presents 161 occurrences of *populis** produced by 92 politicians from 17 different parties. The overwhelming majority of these uses (145 occurrences, representing 90% of the total) constitutes original uses, that is, instances where Members of Parliament employ *populis** without attributing the term to external sources such as academic authorities, media outlets, or political actors outside the hemicycle. Only 16 occurrences (10%) involve traceable borrowing, and nearly all of these (15 cases) occur within the same parliamentary session, with MPs quoting or responding to colleagues during ongoing debate. A single case references an earlier parliamentary session. An additional observation reinforces this pattern of minimal engagement with *populis** as a debated concept: in 115 of the 161 parliamentary sessions where the term appears, it is mentioned only once. This suggests that *populis** functions more as an available classificatory weapon deployed in passing than as a term generating sustained definitional contestation within parliamentary debate.

The Spanish parliamentary corpus contains 110 occurrences produced by 61 politicians from 12 parties, exhibiting patterns strikingly similar to France. Original uses represent an even higher proportion, with 105 occurrences (95% of the total). Only five occurrences show traceable references to prior uses of the term: three point to different parliamentary debates, one to the same debate, and one to an external arena (although the specific origin cannot be determined).

The convergence between French and Spanish parliamentary spaces is remarkable. Both exhibit non-attributed uses in most cases, and both demonstrate that when intra-parliamentary attribution occurs, it concentrates in immediate dialogue rather than sustained engagement across debates. In France, 15 out of 16 traceable references happen within the same session; in Spain, only 1 out of 5 occurs within the same debate. This temporal clustering suggests that parliamentary circulation of *populis** operates through immediate interpellations and responses rather than accumulative reference to prior parliamentary discourse.

4.2 *Populis* in French and Spanish mass media: endogenous production within the journalistic arena*

After selecting a random sample of occurrences proportional to the original total number of occurrences observed in the four online outlets, the French mass media corpus contains 537 occurrences of *populis**. The overwhelming majority (425, or 79%) constitutes original uses, that is, instances where *populis** is produced within the article itself without attribution to external sources. Among the 112 (21%) attributed uses, 57 (11% of total corpus) involve self-citation where outlets reference their own earlier articles, 15 (3%) represent intra-arena circulation where one outlet cites another outlet, and 38 (7%) constitute inter-arena circulation attributed to parliamentary discourse (9), Twitter (6), or other spaces beyond our three focal arenas (23). An additional three cases cannot be definitively attributed (Figure 8.1).

The Spanish mass media corpus contains 521 occurrences. Original uses represent 362 cases (69% of the corpus), that is, instances where *populis** is produced within the article itself. Among the 159 attributed uses, the pattern differs markedly from France: 21 cases (4% of total corpus) involve self-citation; 20 cases (4%) represent intra-arena circulation from other mass media outlets (15 identified, 5 unidentified); and crucially, 75 cases (14%) constitute inter-arena circulation. This inter-arena category breaks down as such: two attributed to parliamentary debates, five attributed to social media, and 68 attributed to other arenas, the latter consisting overwhelmingly of politicians (60 out of 68 cases, or 88%)

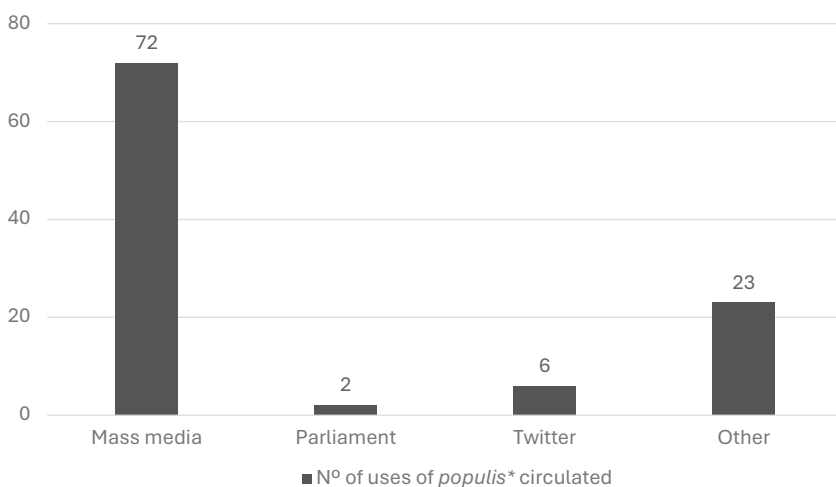


Figure 8.1 Breakdown of attributed uses by arena in French mass media

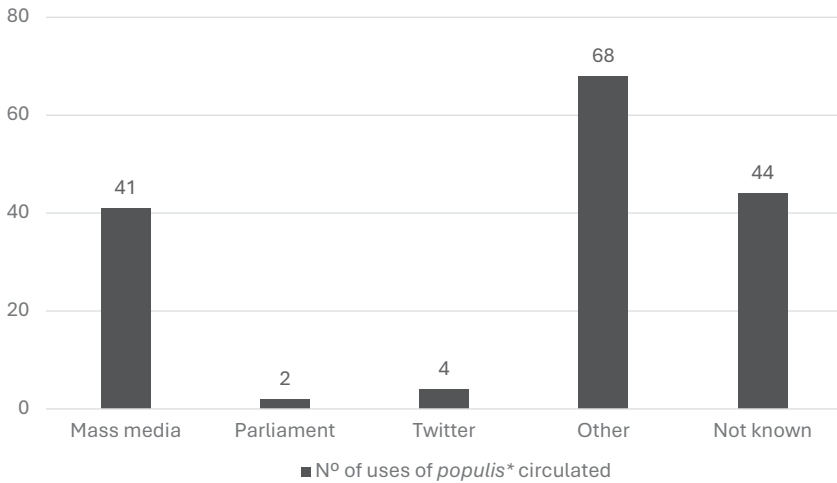


Figure 8.2 Breakdown of attributed uses by arena in Spanish mass media

speaking at extra-parliamentary events such as rallies, press conferences, and party congresses. An additional 43 cases (8%) could not be definitively attributed (Figure 8.2).

Therefore, French mass media shows much higher self-citation (11% vs. 4%), Spanish mass media shows more inter-arena attribution (14% vs. 7%), and Spanish data have more unknown attributions (8% vs. 1%), reflecting methodological challenges.

4.3 *Populis* on Twitter: linguistic homophily and inter-arena circulation*

The French Twitter corpus (849 occurrences) contains 662 original uses (78%) and 187 attributed uses (22%). As shown in Figure 8.3, the breakdown of these 187 attributed uses reveals a significant pattern: 142 cases (76% of attributed uses) consist of retweets from Twitter itself, plus one reference to another social media platform, YouTube; 40 are attributed uses citing 29 different outlets representing diverse positions: left-wing and right-wing, national and international, state-funded and private media. No single outlet dominates this circulation: the maximum frequency for any outlet is four citations. Only one use is attributed to the Parliament, mediated through a parliamentary information account rather than direct MP engagement with the platform.

The Spanish Twitter corpus (738 occurrences) contains 692 original uses (94%) and 46 attributed uses (6%). A methodological note is essential here: retweets could not have been compiled during data extraction within the Spanish corpus, unlike the French corpus where retweet capture has been

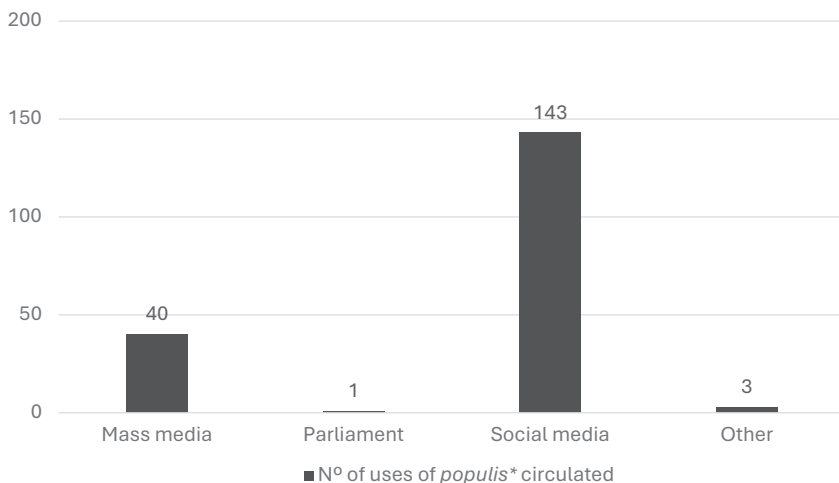


Figure 8.3 Sources of the uses circulated to Twitter (France)

possible. This technical constraint significantly affects endogenous Twitter reference counts but does not invalidate findings regarding inter-arena circulation. Among the 46 attributed uses, only one case is a quoted tweet, reflecting the methodological limitation. Forty cases are attributing uses, citing 27 different outlets. Four outlets appear multiple times: *El País* (7 cases), *ABC* (3 cases), *Clarín* (3 cases), and *The Clinic* (2 cases). The remaining 23 outlets contribute one use each, mirroring the French pattern of heterogeneous press sources. On top of that, four tweets cite different types of sources: a Catholic institution web page, a talk on innovation and democracy, a book by Pope Francis, and a book download site.

4.4 Transnational convergence but no visible circulation

Neither the Assemblée Nationale corpus nor the Congreso de los Diputados corpus contains a single instance of *populis** where Spanish parliament is attributed as production arenas in French discourse, or vice versa. The French parliamentary corpus contains only two occurrences referencing Spain alongside *populis**, but neither attribute Spanish arenas as where the use has been produced. French MPs invoke Spain as a comparative reference to legitimise domestic political positions, not to incorporate discourse produced in Spanish parliament, media, or social media: no Spanish politician is quoted, no Spanish parliamentary debate referenced, no Spanish media outlet cited. The Spanish parliamentary corpus contains zero references to France in conjunction with *populis**, not a single mention of French political leaders, parties, or developments. Parliamentary discourse on *populis** remains nationally bounded.

Mass media show more transnational reference than Parliaments, but attributed uses identifying foreign arenas as production sites remain minimal. The French press corpus contains six occurrences referencing Spain alongside *populis** concentrated temporally during Spain's 2019 electoral campaigns, particularly the negotiations of the June governmental formation. Analysis of these six cases reveals three distinct patterns of mobilisation: (1) In four cases, *populis** is applied to the party Vox and its leader Santiago Abascal, but none attribute Spanish arenas as production sites of the term *populis**. Instead, French journalists classify the party Vox as populist through comparison with French far-right formations, constructing Vox as the Spanish equivalent of the Rassemblement National; (2) In one case, French expert analyses Spain but without referencing sources from the country; (3) In two cases, Manuel Valls, the former French Prime Minister who has run for the election of the mayor of Barcelona in 2019 with Ciudadanos support, mentions in French press the 'populist and separatist people' his party is fighting. These represent the only cases where discourse connected to Spanish political contexts circulates into French press, given that Manuel Valls occupies a unique multi-positioned status: he was Prime Minister in France and mayoral candidate in Spain, literally embodying an overlap between French and Spanish political fields.

The Spanish press corpus shows more frequent reference to France: 26 references to France and 23 to Emmanuel Macron (its President), often appearing in the same articles. As in French discourse about Spanish populism, Spanish uses of *populis** regarding France lack consistency: the term is applied to both 'La France Insoumise' (the far left) and 'Rassemblement National' (the far right). Analysis reveals two patterns: six articles contain uses produced in Spanish arenas by French social actors (in interviews with Spanish media) and uses where French arenas are attributed as production sites of the term *populis**. The majority (20 articles) features Spanish social actors referencing France to make arguments about Spanish domestic politics. The typical logic runs as follows: if Macron defeated Rassemblement national, Sánchez could defeat Vox. France functions as comparative strategic reference. Thus, the asymmetry between Spanish press referencing France (26) and French press referencing Spain (6) does not indicate greater circulation in one direction. Rather, both patterns serve primarily comparative argumentative functions within domestic political debates.

Twitter spaces exhibit the most complete transnational separation. The French Twitter corpus contains only two occurrences mentioning Spain alongside *populis**, and neither refers to Spanish arenas as production sites of *populis**, nor are they produced by Spanish social actors. The Spanish Twitter corpus shows even more complete separation: zero occurrences link *populis** to France or French actors. This absence is particularly striking given that both corpora contain numerous references to other countries, such as Italy or Hungary, and to EU-level political actors. The transnational dimension thus

operates primarily through references to these external cases. Despite the methodological difference affecting retweets counts, a key convergence emerges when examining inter-arena circulation: French Twitter shows 44 attributed uses citing sources outside social media (43 coming from mass media, 1 from Parliament), while Spanish Twitter shows 44 such uses (40 mass media and 4 other arenas). This comparable volume suggests that similar patterns of inter-arena circulation operate in both countries, independent of the retweet capture issue. Both show attributed uses citing mass media from multiple heterogeneous outlets rather than concentration in a few dominant sources. Both countries exhibit zero or minimal uses attributed to Parliament arena (one French case via institutional account, zero Spanish case).

5 What the data reveal and what they challenge: rethinking circulation, arenas, and the naturalisation of classificatory categories

Our analysis of 2,916 occurrences of *populis** across Parliaments, mass media, and Twitter in France and Spain reveals three interesting patterns:

- 1 overwhelming non-attribution: 90–95% of parliamentary uses, 69–79% of mass media use, and 78–94% of Twitter uses constitute ‘original’ occurrences without explicit attribution to external sources;
- 2 remarkable transnational convergence in the absence of mutual reference: French and Spanish actors mobilise *populis** in strikingly similar way without referencing each other;
- 3 minimal media citation of parliamentary discourse: mass media rarely attribute *populis** to parliamentary debates. Only nine French press uses (out of 537) and two Spanish press uses (out of 521) explicitly refer to parliamentary discourse. In contrast, politicians speaking at extra-parliamentary events, such as rallies, press conferences, party congresses, achieve far greater mass media attribution: 60 out of 68 Spanish ‘other arenas’ cases consist of such performances.

These patterns problematise three concepts central to our analytical framework: circulation (what does rare explicit transposition mean?), arenas (do spatial metaphors capture what we observe?), and the unit of analysis (can a single word reveal circulation processes?). We address each question in what follows.

5.1 *Different arenas, different countries, similar uses of populis*: is this circulation?*

A functionalist understanding of circulation – what Carey (1989) phrases as the ‘transmission view’ – conceptualises communication as linear movement:

Actor A produces a message, Actor B receives and retransmits it, Actor C adopts it.³ Circulation becomes visible through traceable chains of attribution. Applied to *populis**, this view would expect academics to define the term, journalists to cite these definitions, politicians to adopt journalistic framings, parliamentary discourse to reference media coverage. Our data show no such chains. Parliamentary discourse does not refer to any external sources; mass media self-citation dominates over inter-arena attribution; transnational circulation is virtually absent. If circulation requires traceable transposition with visible attribution, then *populis** barely circulates. Yet this conclusion seems absurd given the empirical reality: *populis** demonstrably functions as a widely available classificatory category across differentiated spaces and national contexts. French and Spanish MPs both use it as if its meaning were self-evident to delegitimise opponents. Journalists across outlets deploy it without defining it.

Carey's alternative 'ritual view' offers conceptual resources for understanding this paradox. Rather than transmission of information, communication constitutes production and maintenance of a shared cultural world. Applied to our case *populis** circulates not primarily through explicit transposition but through convergent mobilisation. When French and Spanish actors independently deploy *populis** in structurally similar ways without citing each other, it signals that *populis** functions as a self-evident classificatory resource requiring no justification through citation of authorities. This is a form of circulation – circulation of classificatory schemes, of taken-for-granted understandings, of ways of perceiving and dividing the political world. The convergence itself shows that something has circulated, even if no traceable chains can be observed – suggesting that the term has been incorporated into what Bourdieu calls 'categories of unthought thought' (2002: 7). When MPs, journalists, Twitter users mobilise *populis** without citing any source, they treat it as a naturalised category of political judgement – part of the shared doxa that structures perception and discourse without being consciously recognised:

a body of evidence shared by all which ensures, within the confines of a social universe, a fundamental consensus on the meaning of the world, a set of tacitly accepted commonplaces (in the broad sense) which make confrontation, dialogue and even conflict possible.

(Bourdieu, 1997: 151)

As Bourdieu argues, texts circulate without their context; in our data, the absence of context through non-attribution indicates successful incorporation into the doxa of the field to which actors belong. When actors occupying similar positions in structurally homologous fields face similar opponents, they independently generate similar classifications through analogous position-taking logics. This generates convergence without coordination – what appears

as ‘non-circulation’ in transmission frameworks becomes expected pattern in field-theoretical analysis. The rarity of explicit attribution does not indicate absence of circulation but rather reveals how *populis** circulates: through progressive naturalisation rather than conscious transposition. This has methodological implications: searching for citation chains will systematically underestimate circulation of doxic categories, that is, a set of shared assumptions (without necessarily knowing that they are assumptions), in other words a common sense specific to each field to which actors belong. This raises a deeper question: if circulation does not happen through explicit transposition, how does convergent understanding emerge?

The answer requires specifying where actors are positioned, and how these positions are articulated across national contexts. However, this consideration immediately confronts us to a conceptual problem: positioned where? In what? Speaking simply of ‘Parliament’ or ‘mass media’ risks black boxing the very mechanisms we need to theorise, but speaking of ‘arenas’ suggests bounded spatial containers. Speaking of ‘fields’ suggests relationally structured spaces. The convergence puzzle thus forces us to ask the following question: what conceptual tools allow us to understand how similarly positioned actors in different national contexts generate similar classifications without explicit coordination? This is not merely a terminological preference, as different concepts highlight different mechanisms.

5.2 *Conceptualising the ‘where’ of discourse: arenas, fields, spaces, or something else?*

Our empirical findings expose a fundamental tension in how we conceptualise where discourse is produced and how convergence emerges across contexts. We refer to ‘arena’ as an organising concept, but the patterns observed in the data repeatedly exceed what arena as a concept can explain. This section systematically examines what different conceptualisations capture and what they miss out. We adopt ‘arena’ (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) as analytical framework for pragmatic reasons: it offers concrete, observable referents while acknowledging that these sites (Parliaments, social media platform, mass media) have specific characteristics: carrying capacity (limited space for issues), selection principles (criteria for what gains visibility), and competitive dynamics (multiple actors/issues vying for attention). The framework proves productive for certain empirical observations:

- 1 Differential carrying capacity is observable: parliamentary corpora contain 110–161 occurrences while Twitter contains 738–849 and mass media contains 521–537. This is not trivial: some sites can accommodate more discourse than others, structuring what volume of debate is possible.

- 2 Material features structure circulation patterns: Twitter's retweet button can facilitate intra-platform propagation (142 out of 187 French circulated uses), parliamentary synchronous format concentrates circulation in immediate exchanges (15 out of 16 French cases), and press archival persistence enables self-citation (57 French cases) versus parliamentary ephemerality (1 earlier session citation). However, our methodology does not allow us to assess how material constraints structure the content or framing of *populis** uses themselves.
- 3 Selection dynamics are real: the findings show that only one French parliamentary statement achieves mass media attribution while 60 Spanish extra-parliamentary politician statements reveal that something operates to select certain discourse for circulation while excluding other discourse.

However, three core findings resist arena-theoretical explanation. First, why is it that 90–95% of parliamentary uses do not identify external sources? An arena approach may help us observe that parliamentary rules do not require citation of external authorities, but this describes a permission (MPs can avoid citation) not an explanation (why they do systematically avoid it). The pattern requires an understanding of what MPs gain by non-attribution – and this points towards field logic rather than arena constraint. The concept of arena lacks mechanisms for explaining similarity across spatially separated arenas without transposition between them. The framework can describe that Parliament in France and Parliament in Spain are structurally similar institutions, but it does not explain why actors within these Parliaments independently generate similar classifications. Similarly, such a perspective does not explain what makes discourse newsworthy (why does this specific extra-parliamentary political performance appear in the press, for example, and not parliamentary speeches) or how actors strategically produce discourse optimised for different selection logics. Indeed, arenas are defined spatially (parliament as physical/institutional location), treating actors of these arenas as relatively undifferentiated participants competing for attention within bounded space. This obscures the fact that actors' practices are structured by their relational positions within fields of power that transcend spatial boundaries. We can consider the speeches produced by two MPs in the French or the Spanish hemicycle: a backbench opposition member and the Prime Minister. Arena framework treats them as participating in the same competitive space (parliamentary arena) with the same carrying capacity and selection principles. Yet their uses of *populis** reflect radically different positionalities: the Prime Minister speaks with governmental authority, addressing both parliamentary colleagues and broader publics, with media amplification quite likely. The backbench MP addresses colleagues with minimal

expectation of external circulation. Their differential circulation potential does not stem from arena. Similarly, *Le Monde* or *El País* vs. *20 minutes* or *20 Minutos* both produce content we classify as ‘mass media’ but they occupy profoundly different positions in journalistic field: *Le Monde* and *El País* at the autonomous pole (maximising peer recognition, editorial independence), *20 minutes* and *20 Minutos* at the heteronomous pole (maximising audience reach, commercial viability). Their citations reflect field positioning more than shared ‘mass media arena’ membership. In the same token, why do specific extra-parliamentary political performances achieve mass media attribution more readily than parliamentary speeches? Hilgarner & Bosk (1988) may invoke different ‘selection principles’ operating in mass media arena, but what are those principles, and why do they favour extra-parliamentary political performances over formal institutional discourse?

Field theory (Bourdieu, 1992; 1996) offers conceptual resources that arena theory lacks. Indeed, it shows how positions structure practices independently of spatial location. A centrist establishment politician in France occupies a homologous position to a centrist establishment politician in Spain: both face challenges from the far-left and the far-right, both defend EU integration against Eurosceptic pressures, and both legitimise their centrism by delegitimising the ‘extremes’. This positional homology generates similar classificatory strategies (deploying *populis** against both flanks) without requiring bilateral communication. The convergence emerges from structural analogy between fields, not from circulation between spatially bounded arenas. Moreover, when Bourdieu reflects on the international circulation of ideas, he notes that texts circulate detached from the field of production that gave them meaning. They carry with them neither the struggles in which they are produced, nor the position of their author, nor the political, intellectual, or institutional issues that permeate them. According to Bourdieu, they are read based on the categories of the field of reception, not the field of origin. This line of reasoning explains why it is not surprising to find relatively few source attributions in our corpus. What circulates is not so much what an author/source says but what one can make them say. In other words, circulation is neither neutral nor transparent and therefore cannot be approached solely by researching source attributions in the use of a term. It is indeed not a faithful transfer or automatic dissemination. Why does Manuel Valls uniquely achieve transnational circulation while other actors do not? Not because he ‘bridges arenas’ (spatial metaphor), but because he holds political capital in both French and Spanish political fields (relational concept): he does not move between bounded spaces, he simultaneously occupies positions in overlapping fields.

Furthermore, field autonomy explains non-attribution. Parliamentary discourse's 90–95% non-attribution reflects that political field operates according to relative autonomy logic: the field's stakes (legislative influence, governmental power, party positioning) make it advantageous to appear autonomous from external pressures. Non-attribution is a strategic position-maintenance, not an arena-specific norm. Conversely, extra-parliamentary political performances (rallies, press conferences) achieve mass media attribution more readily than parliamentary speeches because politicians strategically produce discourse in sites where political capital readily converts into journalistic capital (Davis & Seymour, 2014; Desru-maux & Nollet, 2021). Parliamentary speeches, optimised for parliamentary stakes (persuading colleagues, demonstrating party loyalty), do not convert readily into journalistic value. This does not only show that circulation patterns differ, but why different field logics structure what discourse is produced and what circulates.

However, field theory also reveals limitations to the explanations of our findings. While it offers powerful tools to explain positional homologies and strategic uses of classifications, it remains less equipped to analyse how material, temporal, and genre-specific constraints shape communicative practices themselves. Parliamentary procedures (timed interventions, formal turn-taking, delayed official transcription) structure what can be said and how discourse can circulate, independently of actors' positions within the political field. Genre differences further matter: parliamentary debate (oral, dialogic, institutionally constrained), mass media articles (written, editorially mediated, periodically published), and tweets (character-limited, platform-curated, digitally inscribed) constitute distinct forms of communicative action, each with specific affordances and temporalities.

To address these dimensions, Nick Couldry's practice-oriented approach offers a useful complement to both arena-based and field-theoretical perspectives. Rather than conceptualising communication primarily as the transmission of texts across bounded spaces, Couldry invites us to focus on communicative practices: socially organised, materially mediated ways of producing and reproducing meaning in everyday action (Couldry, 2004; 2012). This shift does not replace the analysis of fields or arenas, but reorients attention towards the formats, routines, infrastructures, and temporal rhythms through which communication operates. From this perspective, parliamentary discourse can be approached as a specific set of communicative practices, shaped not only by actors' positions within the political field, but also by institutional formats (timed oral interventions, synchronous exchange), material arrangements (the hemicycle, official transcription), and temporal logics (session-bound debate). These features structurally favour immediate interpellation over archival citation: MPs respond to arguments just uttered rather than referencing external or prior

sources. The near-absence of explicit attribution in parliamentary uses of *populis** thus reflects not a failure of circulation, but a property of the communicative practice itself. This helps us to explain why parliamentary discourse converts poorly into journalistic discourse. Journalistic practices privilege events, statements, and performances that fit news values, production routines, and editorial temporalities (Gans, 1979; Neveu, 2001; Schudson, 2003). Politicians who stage press conferences, rallies, or media appearances engage in communicative practices explicitly oriented towards journalistic mediation, whereas parliamentary debate remains primarily optimised for intra-field interaction. What circulates, then, is not discourse conceived as a transferable object moving between arenas, but performances of communicative practices that are more or less compatible with the conditions of uptake in other practices. This perspective also clarifies why the circulation of *populis** does not require explicit attribution. Its circulation operates through the routinised repetition of a classificatory scheme embedded in stabilised communicative practices across politics, journalism, and platform-based commentary. Convergence across French and Spanish contexts can thus be understood not only as the effect of structural homologies between political fields, but also as the alignment of similar communicative practices operating under comparable institutional and media conditions.

The contrast between parliamentary and Twitter practices further illustrates this point. Parliamentary uses of *populis** cluster temporally within single sessions (15 of 16 French intra-parliamentary citations occur in immediate dialogic exchange), whereas Twitter enables rapid propagation across dispersed networks through platform-specific mechanisms (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). The retweet function materially integrates attribution into the act of re-sharing: retweeting simultaneously marks a source and retransmits the content. This explains why a large majority of attributed uses on Twitter remains internal to the platform. Differences in attribution patterns reflect not merely different arenas or field logics, but fundamentally different communicative practices. Seen through this lens, *populis** functions less as an idea travelling between spaces than as a classificatory resource that operates smoothly within widely shared communicative practices. Its availability stems from its compatibility with parliamentary rhetoric, journalistic framing, and platform-based political commentary. The prevalence of the term, in this sense, reflects less circulation as such than the stabilisation and reiteration within and across practices.

Rather than choosing arena, field or practice-based approach, our findings call for an integrated perspective: actors occupy positions within relationally structured fields while operating in materially differentiated institutional arenas, and they enact these positions through routinised communicative

practices. A politician who tweets does not simply ‘participate in Twitter arena’ (spatial container) or ‘occupy position in the political field’ (abstract relationality). Instead, they occupy a position in the political field (established/challenger, government/opposition, left/right) that explains why they employ *populis** – and against whom – while engaging in specific communicative practices enabled and constrained by material infrastructure (Twitter’s platform architecture, character limits, retweet mechanism, algorithmic visibility). Similarly, a journalist from *Le Monde* or *El Pais* who produces an article occupies a position at the autonomous pole of the journalistic field which structures citation norms and organisational constraints (editorial hierarchies, publication rhythms, article genres, etc.). What circulates then is not simply a term moving between arenas, but a classificatory schema enacted through practices that are field-structured, arena-situated, and materially mediated.

5.3 *Back to populis*: what does a word make visible and what does it conceal?*

As Stuart Hall reminds us, ‘the question of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. Who has the power, in what channels, to circulate which meanings to whom?’ (1997: 14). Taking *populis** as an analytical entry point therefore does not merely raise a methodological issue, but a conceptual one: it invites us to examine how a classificatory term becomes available, legitimate, and effective across different spaces of discourse, without requiring justification or attribution. Our choice to track *populis** as a unit of analysis shapes what becomes visible. This approach enables systematic quantification: we can count 2,916 occurrences, calculate 10–31% attribution rates, map arena distributions (46% French parliamentary vs. 12% Spanish), and find no cross-reference between French and Spanish uses. This method also captures where the word appears (in Parliaments, mass media, and Twitter) and how (by MPs against parties identified as extreme left or extreme right, in press commentaries, etc.) This convergence in patterns of uses (who mobilises the term against whom, where, and how) indicates that *populis** performs comparable classificatory work across contexts. This points to circulation not as the movement through attribution, but as the routinisation of a category within communicative practices.

The word circulates insofar as it can be mobilised across heterogeneous sites without explanation, contestation, or reference to an authoritative source. In this sense, circulation appears not as discursive travel but as practical incorporation: *populis** becomes part of what actors can say without having to say why. Such an approach, if it is not cross-referenced with others (who is speaking, with what authority, in what context, etc.),

cannot however reveal what emerges from this convergence and how this convergence emerges. Our understanding of these processes requires moving beyond word distribution to analyse production contexts (editorial decision-making, platform algorithms, strategic communication calculations, etc.). In other words, focusing on a single word risks underestimating forms of circulation that operate beyond lexical repetition. However, this limitation helps us to specify what kind of circulation we are observing: not the diffusion of attributed discourses, but a similar type of uses of *populis**, as a form of condensed political judgement. Its circulation does not depend on citation, explanation, or cross-arena transmission, but on its capacity to function as a shared shorthand for political (dis)qualification. In short, analysing circulation through the trajectories of a single word does not tell us everything, but it tells us something crucial: how a category circulates not through explicit transposition between actors or arenas, but through its routinised availability as a taken-for-granted classificatory resource which no longer needs to be explicitly cited, justified, or attributed.

6 Conclusion

The most theoretically consequential finding of this chapter is that French and Spanish uses of *populis** converge substantially without observable bilateral circulation. This apparent paradox – similarity without transposition – dissolves when we recognise that circulation operates through two distinct modes, only one of which leaves attributive traces in our data, that is, explicit circulation, captured through attribution coding, that accounts for 10–31% of uses depending on arena. These are moments when actors explicitly identify the source of the use of *populis**. It requires authentication through reference to an authoritative source. However, the vast majority of uses appears without attribution. This non-attributed circulation cannot be explained through bilateral transposition between France and Spain. Instead, it reflects what we may call doxic circulation: the incorporation of *populis** into the taken-for-granted categories of political judgement that structure perception across both national fields.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (2002) analysis of international circulation, we can understand this convergence as resulting from structural homologies rather than direct exchange. French journalists do not need to read Spanish newspapers, and Spanish parliamentarians do not need to cite French debates, for them to use *populis** in similar ways. The convergence results from what Bourdieu describes as the application of analogous 'categories of perception and appreciation' (2002: 5) to structurally similar political configurations. Actors occupying homologous positions, engaging with homologous challenges, within homologous field structures, develop homologous

classificatory practices, even in mutual ignorance. Our study of the circulation of *populis** thus reveals less about the movement of a word than the conditions under which political judgement becomes self-evident. What circulates most effectively is not the discourse that is cited, but classifications that no longer need to be. This chapter has indeed deliberately adopted a narrow analytical entry point: the so-called circulation of a single word, and because *populis** is treated as a minimal unit, its routinised availability across arenas becomes visible. What our data reveal is not the diffusion of an argument, nor the transmission of a doctrine, but the stabilisation of a classificatory shortcut.

*Populis** circulates most effectively where it no longer needs to be explained, cited, or defended. Its power lies less in what it says than in what it allows actors to do: disqualify, align, and position themselves within political struggles. Bringing together arena-based approaches, field theory, and a practice-based perspective inspired by Couldry (2004; 2012), this chapter suggests that circulation should not be reduced to a movement across spaces. Circulation also operates through the alignment of practices across structurally homologous contexts. Parliamentary speech, journalistic commentary, and platform-based interaction constitute distinct communicative practices, but each provides conditions under which *populis** can function as a taken-for-granted category of political judgement. More broadly, analysing the circulation of *populis** invites a shift in how we conceptualise political communication. Rather than analysing the ways in which ideas can travel, it encourages us to examine how certain ways of seeing the political world become ordinary, legitimate, and effective. In this sense, what circulates most powerfully is not discourse that is exchanged, but classifications that are enacted: repeatedly, routinely, and often without being named as such.

However, such a narrow analytical entry point inevitably entails limitations. Tracking *populis** does not allow us to reconstruct the full genealogy of meanings, nor the strategic deliberations through which actors decide when and how to deploy the category. Complementary methods – interviews with political actors and journalists, ethnographic observation of editorial meetings and parliamentary debates, analysis of training materials, and professional socialisation – would highlight the micro-processes through which classificatory categories become internalised and routinised. This would go beyond our initial three-arena design (Parliament, mass media, Twitter) that leaves out other potentially significant uses of *populis**: academic discourse, think tank publications, talk shows, campaign materials, and party manifestos. A more comprehensive mapping of circulation across the full ecology of political communication spaces would likely reveal additional patterns invisible in our data. In the same vein, it would be beneficial to go beyond a synchronic analysis of 2019 data, as

our current analysis cannot trace the historical trajectory through which *populis** achieved its current status as a taken-for-granted political judgement. A diachronic study tracking uses across decades could reveal when and through what processes the term has moved across field boundaries, and whether earlier periods show different attribution patterns suggesting a gradual doxification process. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, and those discussed throughout, this chapter may have initiated debate on the uses of the term *populis** by different categories of actors and in different contexts, highlighting blind spots and focus points for future research.

Notes

- 1 Mudde notes that ‘since the 1980s, the rise of the so-called ‘populist parties’ have given rise to thousands of books, articles, columns and editorials’ (2004: 541). Philippe Aldrin speaks of ‘publishing frenzy’ (2024: 13). He adds: ‘the disturbing and apparently contagious nature of the phenomenon seems to justify its now being taken up by a very wide range of scientific disciplines’ (2025: 15). A quick search on Google Scholar in December 2025 reveals the following academic output figures on Google Scholar: in English, 790.000 publications with ‘populist’ and 634.000 publications with ‘populism’; in French, nearly 50.000 with ‘populisme’ and 50.000 references with ‘populiste’; in Spanish 118.000 publications with ‘populismo’ and 56.200 with ‘populista’.
- 2 The coding process, as well as the guide upon which it was made, are detailed in the methodological chapter of this book.
- 3 This is reminiscent of Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) model.

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9 The populist problem

On the uses of ‘populism’ in public discourse

Coline Rondiat

1 Introduction

In contemporary public discourse, the word ‘populism’ and its derivatives (hereafter *populis**) have become pervasive, spanning academic scholarship, media commentary, and political communication. Within political science, populism has turned into a prolific site of conceptual and theoretical production. Since the early 2000s, expansive literature has emerged attempting to define the term, differentiate its variants, analyse its discursive and organisational mechanisms, and to assess its implications for democratic politics. Yet this theoretical accumulation has not led to conceptual stability. On the contrary, it has amplified methodological divergence and deepened normative disagreement. This is partly inherent to the object of study: populism is not only treated as an analytical category but also relates to underlying debates about the nature of democracy itself. As such, disagreements over what populism is tend to mirror disagreements over what democracy ought to be. The problem becomes more acute when the term shifts from scholarly debate into everyday political and journalistic use. In public discourse, ‘populism’ is rarely defined. It is employed as if its meaning were self-evident, yet its referents are sufficiently malleable to encompass a wide range of phenomena: exclusionary right-wing nationalism, egalitarian left-wing redistribution, charismatic leadership, anti-elite rhetoric, policy heterodoxy, or even a style marked by emotionality, vulgarity, or excess. This semantic elasticity accounts for the expansive use of the term, but it also poses a challenge for democratic reasoning. Since ‘populism’ collapses heterogeneous political phenomena into a single object of disapproval, it becomes possible to reject ‘populism’ without articulating what is being condemned, which norm is said to be violated, or why that violation is problematic.

The analysis below explores the ways in which populism is problematised in contemporary public discourse, with particular attention to the normative assumptions underpinning such critiques. It aims to uncover both the explicit and tacit rationales used to justify negative assessments

of populism, and to evaluate the extent to which these are articulated in relation to democratic ideals. More specifically, it explores whether populism is framed as incompatible with foundational democratic principles – such as popular sovereignty, pluralism, and the rule of law – or whether it is cast in a diffuse, normatively indeterminate light. The focus, therefore, lies on the prevailing conceptualisations of populism and the negative valence they carry, with the goal of inferring what these representations imply, indirectly, about the contested meaning of democracy itself.

The argument unfolds in three stages. First, the chapter offers an overview of the main conceptualisations of populism in literature. Second, it analyses how *populis** functions as a negative operator in public discourse, often unanchored from explicit criteria. Third, it offers a typology of journalistic uses, distinguishing patterns based on their referential specificity and the degree to which they articulate – rather than merely imply – their normative commitments. Finally, the chapter concludes that the ‘populist problem’ is not only about the phenomenon itself, but also about the democratic costs of a vocabulary that blurs the line between legitimate contestation and genuine anti-democratic threat.

2 A concept in tension

Populism has emerged as a central category of analysis in contemporary political science, giving rise to a vast and still expanding scholarship – particularly since the early 2000s – devoted to defining the concept, tracing its empirical manifestations, and assessing its normative implications (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2016). Yet rather than resulting in conceptual clarity, this proliferation of research has often intensified theoretical ambiguity. The field remains marked by profound conceptual divides, reflecting competing visions of politics and democracy itself.

Over time, at least four major approaches to populism have emerged, each rooted in distinct assumptions about its nature and, by extension, about how it should be analysed. These frameworks reflect competing ontologies of the political as well as divergent views on the relationship between leaders, citizens, and democratic institutions. Among them, the ideational or ideological approach has emerged as the dominant paradigm within political science. It defines populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ that can be affixed to more comprehensive ideological formations such as nationalism, socialism, or neoliberalism (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). From this perspective, populism is structured around three key components: a moralised antagonism between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’; the elevation of popular sovereignty as the source of legitimate authority; and the assertion that politics should enact the general will of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This conceptualisation does not treat populism as a deviation from democratic norms,

but rather as a coherent interpretive framework through which political actors construe the world, which has given rise to cross-national comparisons (Norris, 2020). However, critics caution that this model may risk essentialising a fluid and context-sensitive phenomenon by reducing it to a static moral opposition between two camps: the pure people versus the corrupt elite (Aslanidis, 2015; Katsambekis, 2020).

In contrast, the discursive-performative tradition rejects the idea that populism can be reduced to a fixed set of ideas. Drawing on Laclau (2005), it conceives populism as a logic of articulation or a way of doing politics, in which antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' is discursively constructed. On this view, populism is not an ideology per se but a modality of political practice through which collective identities are formed and contested. Central to this framework is the performative nature of discourse: leaders, movements, and publics enact 'the people' through language, symbols, and affects. Scholars such as Ostiguy (2017) and Moffitt (2016) have extended this view by exploring the stylistic and aesthetic dimensions of populist performance, bridging discourse theory, and political communication. This approach captures the contingent and dynamic nature of populism, yet its high level of theoretical abstraction complicates empirical application: it remains difficult to specify clear criteria for identifying what constitutes 'populist discourse' in practice.

The stylistic approach takes the expressive turn further, treating populism as a recognisable *political style* rather than a discursive logic or ideological system (Moffitt & Tormey 2014). This approach foregrounds the embodied, affective, and mediated dimensions of political communication – its dramaturgy of crisis, appeal to authenticity, and deliberate transgression of elite norms. Populism, in this sense, manifests not only through words but through tone, gesture, and performance, through recurring performative patterns: appeals to the people versus the elite, the deliberate violation of elite norms, and the moralisation of political conflict. This perspective expands the study of populism towards its affective and mediated dimensions but also risks conceptual overstretch: almost any disruptive or charismatic form of communication could be labelled 'populist'.

The strategic approach, by contrast, defines populism less as an idea or discourse than as a mode of political mobilisation (Weyland, 2001, 2020; Barr, 2009). From this perspective, populism is characterised by a distinctive style of leadership and organisation that hinges on the construction of a direct, unmediated relationship between a charismatic leader and a largely undifferentiated mass of followers. Emphasis is placed on the strategic pursuit of power, plebiscitarian linkages, and the marginalisation – or active erosion – of intermediary institutions such as parties and parliaments. This framework offers valuable insight into how populist actors navigate institutional constraints and electoral competition. However, it

has been criticised for assuming that leaders can simply bring about outcomes through sheer will, and for paying too little attention to the symbols, emotions, or moral claims that make populist messages stick.

A consistent thread runs through these conceptualisations of populism: it is said to structure politics through a fundamental antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. This dichotomy rests on the claim that elites, by virtue of their separation from the people, are inherently unfit to represent them – thus legitimising the call for their replacement by ‘authentic’ representatives who are themselves of the people. If populism exists as a distinctive conception of society and politics, its core lies in the essentialist construction of ‘the people’ as a unified, morally pure collective whose interests and will are presumed to be self-evident. This essentialism makes it plausible to assert that certain actors can legitimately ‘incarnate’ the people, reinforcing the affinity of populism with nationalism, insofar as both rely on imaginaries of organic unity and exclusionary boundaries. Other attributes commonly associated with populism – such as its rhetorical style, its emphasis on charismatic leadership, or its authoritarian tendencies – may be interpreted as secondary effects, or derivatives, of this foundational premise.

Although sharing this common core, the development of a multiplicity of approaches have contributed to a situation in which ‘populism’ is invoked to describe an increasingly heterogeneous array of political phenomena: far-right and radical left parties (Borriello & Brack, 2019), charismatic leadership (Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019), protest movements (Aslanidis, 2017), electoral strategies (Weyland, 2001), anti-elite rhetoric (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and appeals to popular sovereignty (Canovan, 1999), among others. While some scholars defend this conceptual expansiveness as a necessary reflection of the empirical complexity of populism (Panizza, 2005), it also raises pressing concerns about the comparative validity of the category. From an ideological or attitudinal standpoint, one may reasonably ask what justifies classifying public figures as diverse as Donald Trump (Kellner, 2022), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Marlière, 2019; Zicman de Barros & Aiolfi, 2025), Beppe Grillo (Pirro, 2018), Tom Van Grieken (Lambrechts & De Cleen, 2024), Pablo Iglesias (Zarzalejos, 2016), or even Bernie Sanders (Staufer, 2021) under the same conceptual label – without diluting the term to the point that it could plausibly apply to political actors who are *not* generally considered populist (Baloge & Hubé, 2024).

This problem has led to a deeper methodological critique. Scholars (e.g., Chollet, 2023; Collovald, 2004; Tarragoni, 2019) have drawn attention to the theoretical impasses generated by cumulative and inductive definitional strategies, particularly those aimed at producing general typologies. A central objection concerns the circular logic underlying much of this work: scholars begin with high-profile cases already assumed to be ‘populist’,

extract recurring traits from these cases, and then use those traits to retroactively define populism – without interrogating the criteria by which the initial sample has been constituted. This methodological reflexivity is often absent, resulting in a form of conceptual circularity whereby ‘populism’ becomes defined not through theoretically grounded parameters, but through the prior social or media recognition of certain emblematic figures. In the absence of clearly demarcated boundaries, the concept is thus continually adjusted to accommodate the cases it is meant to explain, thereby eroding its analytical coherence and explanatory power.

The definitional impasse surrounding populism ultimately opens onto a more fundamental question: what vision of democracy does populism presuppose and promote? Despite all their differences, most accounts converge on a common concern: a shared preoccupation with popular sovereignty and its proper mediation. At its core, populism advances a vision of democracy as the unmediated expression of the people’s will. By defending a radical form of popular sovereignty, populism is not inherently opposed to democracy and can even be seen as an attempt to deepen it. This view resonates with foundational democratic ideals of equality and sovereignty, giving populism a strong normative appeal. It can even appear as a democratic corrective: by amplifying excluded voices and exposing elite insulation, populism may reinvigorate responsiveness and broaden participation (Canovan, 1999; Panizza, 2005). From this perspective, populism serves as a reminder that democracy ultimately rests on popular sovereignty and the inclusion of neglected demands (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Yet the very same emphasis on a direct and unmediated relationship between the people and power is often what raises concern. Critics argue that such immediacy risks bypassing the institutional and deliberative dimensions that sustain pluralist democracy, making populism appear, paradoxically, as both a democratic impulse and a democratic threat. However, this same understanding departs sharply from liberal traditions that define democracy through procedures, institutional checks, and pluralist contestation (Urbinati, 2019), but most importantly it is at odds with the main assumptions that justify the liberal democratic procedures and institutions. The clash can be expressed as one between majoritarian and pluralist models of democracy, or between input legitimacy, rooted in immediate responsiveness to citizens, and throughput legitimacy, grounded in procedures, deliberation, and institutional safeguards (Scharpf, 1972, Schmidt & Wood, 2019).

Once populism is defined as an antagonistic appeal to the people, it is most often cast as corrosive to democracy, for several recurring reasons. Scholars often begin with its tendency to concentrate power in the figure of a leader. Populism is frequently linked to personalistic and plebiscitary forms of rule, where authority rests less on institutions than on the direct

bond between leader and people (Weyland, 2024; Rosanvallon, 2021; Taggart, 1995). Such concentration is deemed democratically problematic because it weakens collective accountability and makes political representation dependent on charisma rather than institutionalised procedures. Once power is personalised in this way, intermediary bodies such as parliaments, courts, and independent media are easily recast as obstacles to the people's will. This, in turn, raises concerns about the erosion of checks and balances, judicial independence, and parliamentary oversight (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Muller, 2016).

Beyond the institutional dimension, critics underline the consequences of the logic of populism for political pluralism. By claiming to embody the people as a homogeneous whole, populist actors deny legitimacy to alternative voices, casting opponents not merely as rivals but as enemies of the community. This delegitimises opposition parties, stigmatises minorities, and undermines the coexistence of identities, interests, and perspectives that liberal theory views as essential to democracy (Arditi, 2007). In practice, opposition parties can be branded 'anti-people', journalists portrayed as conspirators against democracy, or civil society groups accused of being foreign agents. Accordingly, populism threatens the coexistence of multiple parties, interests, and identities within a competitive framework (Manin, 1997). This exclusivist logic also shapes policymaking. By appealing to the immediacy of the people's will, populist leaders are accused of privileging responsiveness over responsibility, sacrificing deliberation, expertise, and compromise to short-term satisfaction (Urbinati, 2019). Policies are often framed as direct enactments of popular sovereignty, justified less through evidence or negotiation than through claims of fidelity to 'the people'. Critics argue that this orientation encourages performative gestures – symbolic measures that resonate emotionally but fail to address complex structural problems (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The result can be governance that is volatile, majoritarian, and prone to abrupt shifts, undermining the continuity and predictability on which democratic accountability depends.

Yet the issue at stake goes far beyond stability or good governance. The separation of powers, the rule of law, constitutional rights, and deliberative institutions do not merely ensure order or prevent excess; they are what make the exercise of popular sovereignty meaningful and legitimate. Their purpose is to protect the general interest against the contingencies of partisan or short-term interests, including those of a temporary majority. From this perspective, the problem with populism, understood both as a form of demagoguery that follows the immediate preferences of a majority and as a belief that a few elected representatives can fully embody the will of the people, is that it tends to conflate the general interest with the momentary expression of majority will. Democratic elections confer authority, but they do not guarantee that this authority will serve the collective good (Cassani &

Tomini, 2020), especially in societies marked by temporal and social heterogeneity. The liberal-democratic institutions that populists often dismiss are thus not obstacles to popular sovereignty but one of its most robust safeguards: they ensure that the power derived from the people remains oriented towards the people as a whole, across time and differences. In this light, the democratic problem of populism lies not in its disruptive or anti-elitist tone, as critics sometimes suggest, but in its reduction of the people's sovereignty to an unmediated, homogeneous, and potentially exclusionary majority. Ironically, it is precisely the procedural and institutional constraints that populism rejects which make it possible to honour the democratic ideal it claims to defend.

3 Populism in public discourse

These insights show that the category of ‘populism’ points to a genuine and important democratic issue, namely, the tension between political pluralism and the institutional and procedural arrangements that are meant to secure it. In this sense, it may still retain analytical value in political science. This added value, however, is less evident in public discourse. In political and media arenas, *populis** is so loosely and inconsistently employed that one might reasonably conclude that the category is ultimately dispensable. Discourse analytical work has long documented this semantic instability and has tried to reconstruct what, if anything, the term denotes in practice (e.g., Kranert, 2020, Rovamo & Sakki, 2024; Shchinova, 2024). The conclusion is consistent: meanings remain heterogeneous; they are shifting, and they are only weakly anchored to scholarly definitions. In public discourse, *populis** is overwhelmingly used in negative evaluations, routinely bundled with terms such as ‘rise’, ‘nationalism’, ‘extremism’, or ‘threat’, and stretched to cover phenomena as diverse as racism, ultra nationalism, antagonistic rhetoric, or demagoguery (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021). It is often invoked to discuss diffuse dangers to liberal democracy rather than to describe a clearly delimited ideological family (Goyvaerts *et al.*, 2024). Citizens' understandings are even more fragmented: survey and interview research on social representations suggests that many respondents struggle to define the term and variously equate it with ‘being popular’ or ‘speaking for the people’, treat it as a positive democratic force linked to community and equality, or condemn it as manipulation, extremism, and demagoguery. Only a minority spontaneously invoke the people versus elite opposition that structures most academic definitions (Ntotsikas & Chrysoschoou, 2025, Rovamo & Sakki, 2024).

This polysemy helps to explain the expansive reach of the term. Because ‘populism’ can be made to mean many different things all at once, it is readily attached to a wide range of actors, styles, and policies that share

little beyond presumed mass appeal. It is also rarely defined *in situ*, a vagueness that encourages its use as a political buzzword or journalistic shortcut rather than as a precise analytical label (Bale *et al.*, 2010, Hatakka & Herkman, 2022). The same indeterminacy also underpins its use as a delegitimising device: by labelling an actor, movement, or agenda ‘populist’, speakers can discredit it through association alone, without having to specify what is being criticised or why (see De Cleen *et al.*, 2018; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume). In doing so, it is used to perform boundary-making work: to name, and thereby morally sort, forms of dissent that unsettle prevailing understandings of democratic normality. The effect is to smuggle in normative assumptions under the guise of description, making contestable conceptions of democratic norms and values appear self-evident. The delegitimising force of *populis** thus typically rests on unexamined premises: its pejorative charge is treated as obvious, while the grounds of its purported problematic character – and their relation to the normative commitments of democratic theory – remain under-specified and obscure.

This sheds light on the reason why ideologically disparate figures can all be labelled ‘populist’: because they are perceived as violating *a norm*. Invoking populism thus functions as a mechanism of moral regulation that sorts actors into hierarchies of democratic legitimacy, contrasting the responsible with the reckless, the rational with the emotional, the mature with the impulsive, and in so doing enacts a consequential exclusion by delineating who may speak as a guardian of the democratic order and who should be dismissed as a threat. Each accusation reinforces an ideal of ‘good’ democracy, imagined as moderate, technocratic, restrained, against a ‘bad’ democracy cast as passionate or excessive, so that what appears as a neutral defence of democratic principles should be better understood as the affirmation of a *particular model* of democracy.

Some scholars contend that this model rests on a profoundly elitist, even anti-democratic, vision. Their argument is that the practices most frequently denounced as ‘populist’ – appealing to the people, criticising elites, challenging political institutions – are themselves constitutive of the history and development of democracy. Through this lens, anti-populist discourse appears as a contemporary variant of classic anti-democratic rhetoric, rooted in fear of the masses, suspicion of universal suffrage, and the valorisation of an order grounded in competence, moderation, and expertise (Chollet, 2023: 15–17). In doing so, it subtly reinforces an elitist conception of representative democracy while presenting itself as a defence of democratic norms. There would be, in this sense, a structural homology between the rejection of populism and the tacit preservation of a liberal consensus that is portrayed as natural and beyond contestation. The critical thesis advanced by anti-anti-populist scholars constitutes

an important intervention: it exposes the normative operations that may underpin uses of the term populism and shows how such uses may serve to delegitimise contestation under the guise of defending democracy. Yet the polemical force that gives this thesis its critical edge also risks narrowing its analytical reach.

Following this line of reasoning, populism emerges as a normative category that should be treated with caution, given its imposition of a specific – and deeply debatable – conception of democracy. Yet the tendency to construct a systematic equivalence between anti-populist and anti-democratic discourse risks a significant overgeneralisation. Such a framing collapses in a complex discursive landscape, in which the uses, targets, and effects of the label *populis** vary considerably. This simplification creates a form of reverse symmetry: just as dominant deployments of the term often reduce democratic critique to democratic threat, radical critiques of anti-populism may treat any invocation of *populis** as a merely strategic tool of elite exclusion. In both cases, what disappears is the political and discursive heterogeneity that characterises how the term applies to the real world.

Rather than foreclosing the issue, the debate over populism can be reframed in empirical terms: what normative assumptions underpin the various uses of *populis**? Are the grounds on which it is problematised clearly articulated – either normatively or empirically? Do these grounds stem from principles broadly shared within democratic theory, or are they rooted in a particular, and potentially partial, model of democracy? Do they express a commitment to pluralism and a rejection of direct, unmediated claims to represent ‘the people’ – which might justify continued use of the term – or do they instead reflect an attempt to distinguish elite-sanctioned political actors from those deemed ‘disruptive’ (in which case the category becomes analytically suspect)? When the negative valence of populism is merely asserted rather than substantiated – that is, when its illegitimacy is presumed rather than argued – there is a risk of embedding contestable democratic assumptions within ostensibly neutral discourse. Such tendencies warrant closer scrutiny. They invite not only a reassessment of how populism is defined, but also a deeper inquiry into the democratic imaginaries that structure its uses in public discourse.

4 Why is populism a problem? Insights from media outlets

In the following, the analysis seeks to clarify why and how populism is presented as problematic in contemporary public discourse. The aim is to identify the explicit and implicit reasons invoked to justify negative evaluations of populism and to assess the extent to which these reasons are framed in relation to democratic norms. More specifically, the section seeks to explore whether populism is criticised because it is construed as incompatible with core liberal-democratic principles such as popular

sovereignty, pluralism, or the rule of law, or whether it is primarily problematised in a more diffuse and normatively under-specified manner. The focus is therefore on the conceptions of populism and the negative valence attached to it, with a view to inferring what these conceptions suggest, indirectly, about democracy itself.

From this perspective, media discourse constitutes a particularly relevant site of inquiry. Journalists are, at least in principle, expected to justify criticism by appealing to publicly acceptable reasons – for instance, by presenting populism as democratically harmful or objectively dangerous. Political actors, by contrast, can denounce populism from a strategic or partisan standpoint without necessarily implying that it is problematic in itself. In recent years, media uses of ‘populism’ have surged. A dataset containing all the articles where *populis** occurs in several leading European newspapers during the year 2019 illustrates this prominence: De Standaard (Dutch-speaking Belgium) refers to *populis** 509 times, Le Soir (French-speaking Belgium) 984 times, Le Monde (France) 784 times, and El País (Spain) 1,639 times. In concrete terms, this means that the term appears, on average, at least once a day in these newspapers, and in some cases up to four times a day. The observations developed in what follows draw on an in-depth examination of a sample of 100 randomly selected occurrences from this dataset. The aim is therefore not to offer an exhaustive and systematic analysis of the corpus, but rather to use the data to illustrate the diversity of explicit and implicit normative backgrounds underlying the uses of *populis** in the press. Different recurring types of use of *populis** are distinguished, defined by how these normative backgrounds come to the surface and by the features that differentiate them. Four analytically distinct types of use can be identified: referential uses, evaluative and indeterminate uses, normative uses, and hierarchising uses.

4.1 *Referential uses*

First, in some instances, *populis** is used mainly to refer to a specific and identifiable reality (most often a person or a party). For instance, in examples (1) and (2), respectively, from Le Monde and Le Soir, the Italian government (led by the League and the Five Stars Movement) and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are identified as ‘populist’:

- (1) *La France a rappelé son ambassadeur à Rome, jeudi 7 février, afin de protester contre les provocations du gouvernement populiste au pouvoir à Rome.*

France recalled its ambassador to Rome on Thursday, February 7, in protest against the provocations of the populist government in power in Rome.

(*Le Monde*, 08 February 2019)

- (2) *Une manière d'accélérer le départ de Viktor Orbán? S'il a le sentiment que le Hongrois « veut rester au PPE », [Manfred Weber] estime que « ce qui est aujourd'hui sur la table ne suffit pas » et qu'il allait faire en sorte de rencontrer le leader populiste à Budapest.*

A way to speed up Viktor Orbán's departure? While he senses that the Hungarian leader "wants to remain in the EPP", [Manfred Weber] believes that "what is currently on the table is not enough" and said he would make sure to meet the populist leader in Budapest.

(*Le Soir*, 10 March 2019)

Such uses appear in statements whose function is mainly descriptive. They may reflect taken-for-granted background assumptions in journalistic or political discourse, but do not always convey an explicit evaluative intent. Admittedly, for regular readers of *Le Monde* or *Le Soir*, the association of populism with the Italian government led by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini or with the much-contested figure Viktor Orbán may be enough to make it a negative term. However, it cannot be said that populism is presented here as something particularly problematic. It may appear to be one characteristic among others, which in this case applies to the Italian government and to Orbán.

It should also be noted that the meaning of the term remains vague, so that little can be said about what counts as a 'populist' or as 'populism'. Such uses of *populis** thus appear as part of a sedimented association rather than a carefully weighed judgement: it does not rest on any explicit definitional criteria, but on the reiterated association of certain figures, here Salvini and Orbán, and 'populism' – an association that may draw on nationalist discourse, illiberal policies, or a particular style of rule, but because these connections are not made explicit, such uses of 'populist' cannot be treated as carrying a normative dimension. Therefore, even though *populis** is likely to carry a negative valence for the authors and readers of the articles, these uses do not clearly construct populism as a problem. They reflect an established journalistic routine more than an active effort to draw a normative boundary between populism and democracy, or any other valued principle or political position.

4.2 *Evaluative and indeterminate uses*

The second type concerns cases that resemble the previous one, but in which the meaning of *populis** is even vaguer, if not entirely opaque, and no clear referential function is at work, as in examples (3) and (4). Here, the negative charge that the term carries is more pronounced, yet it often remains implicit: populism is depicted as a threat that ‘rises’ and to which one must respond.

- (3) *La COP25, qui débute ce lundi à Madrid, sera-t-elle celle du déclic tant attendu? Elle intervient en tout cas dans un drôle de climat planétaire, entre montée des populismes, pour participer à la construction de cette Europe ouverte, cette Europe de partage où il fait encore bon vivre. Jusqu’à quand?*

Will COP25, which begins this Monday in Madrid, be the long-awaited turning point? In any case, it comes at a strange time for the planet, with the rise of populism, to help build an open Europe, a Europe of sharing where life is still good. But for how long?

(*Le Parisien*, 01 December 2019)

- (4) *Devant la montée des populismes et face à la perspective de voir le Parlement de l’Union européenne envahi par des formations euroseptiques après les élections du 26 mai, Bernard-Henri Lévy a décidé de prendre son bâton de pèlerin. Du 5 mars au 20 mai, il va interpréter, seul sur scène, dans 25 capitales et grandes villes européennes, une pièce qu’il a écrite pour l’occasion, Looking for Europe.*

In response to the rise of populism and the prospect of the European Union Parliament being overrun by Eurosceptic parties after the May 26 elections, Bernard-Henri Lévy has decided to take up his pilgrim’s staff. From March 5 to May 20, he will be performing, alone onstage, in 25 European capitals and major cities, a play he has written for the occasion: Looking for Europe.

(*Le Soir*, 25 January 2019)

In both examples, *populis** functions primarily as a contextual label. It situates the event discussed in this chapter within a broader political climate and invokes ‘populism’ as a highly abstract, indeterminate phenomenon. What remains unclear is the concrete reality to which the term is meant to refer, namely, which actors, ideas, practices, or developments are actually being named. Describing the meaning of populism as opaque is not to suggest that the term is meaningless. On the contrary, it is expected to

be intelligible to the intended readership because it activates a reservoir of presumed shared knowledge about what is generally called 'populist'. Yet this presumed knowledge is precisely what makes the reference so unstable. Given the diversity of actors, movements, and styles of politics commonly labelled 'populist', the term can only point to a loosely bounded and internally heterogeneous set of realities, leaving the reader to fill in the content from context, habit, or prior associations. Example (4) offers a partial cue by mentioning 'Eurosceptic parties', which may guide the reader towards one possible referent. At the same time, the co-occurrence of both expressions suggests that they are not simply interchangeable. If 'Eurosceptic parties' already captures the relevant actors, the additional mention of 'populism' is likely to add an evaluative frame rather than a precise designation, signalling a broader syndrome or threat beyond Euroscepticism alone. In this sense, the term does not so much identify as it insinuates, anchoring the event in a familiar narrative while keeping its referent(s) open.

Despite this ambiguity, the negative charge that the term is carrying is more clearly marked here than in examples (1) and (2). It is treated as self-evident and largely taken for granted, even when it remains implicit: populism is portrayed as a threat that 'rises' and to which one must respond, rather than as a merely descriptive label for specific individuals or groups. In other words, 'populism' is presented as problematic in itself, yet the grounds for that problematisation remain unspecified. There are few cues in example (4), and none in example (3), that would clarify the normative background that makes this phenomenon worrisome, or that would indicate which values, principles, or political goods are presumed to be at stake.

4.3 Normative uses

A third category includes uses in which the association between *populis** and democratically problematic phenomena is relatively clear and grounded in identifiable normative assumptions. In examples (5) and (6), Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are linked to populism and are also portrayed as dangerous or politically troubling figures in the articles from which the excerpts are selected. What is distinctive here is that the reasons why populism is viewed negatively, and implicitly treated as a threat to democracy, are explicitly spelled out rather than merely assumed. In both cases, these reasons relate to what appears to constitute a core feature of the populism problem discussed above: the claim, or pretension, that certain political actors can directly embody 'the authentic people' and give voice to its supposedly unified essence. In this configuration, *populis** operates less as a loose journalistic label and more as an analytical category with a relatively

precise, explicitly articulated meaning, especially in example (6), which presents this mechanism as the ‘hallmark of populism’.

- (5) *Le leader populiste a promis d'établir une "relation directe" avec son peuple et compte bien se passer des intermédiaires pour gouverner.*

The populist leader [Trump] has promised to establish a “direct relationship” with his people and intends to govern without intermediaries.

(*Le Parisien*, 01 January 2019)

- (6) *Ce n'est pas seulement la fierté de Westminster et la réputation du Royaume-Uni comme bastion de la démocratie représentative qui sont en jeu dans ce nouveau coup d'éclat de Boris Johnson. Car que vise celui-ci, au fond, dans cette démarche? Il cherche à exacerber la polarisation au sein de l'opinion britannique, que la question du Brexit a douloureusement divisée depuis trois ans, et à jouer le peuple contre le Parlement. C'est le propre du populisme.*

It is not only Westminster's pride and the UK's reputation as a bastion of representative democracy that are at stake in this latest stunt by Boris Johnson. What is he really aiming for with this move? He is seeking to exacerbate the polarization within British public opinion, which has been painfully divided over the issue of Brexit for the past three years, and to play the people off against Parliament. This is the hallmark of populism.

(*Le Monde*, 9 August 2019)

Similarly, examples (7) and (8) explicitly highlight the association between populism and phenomena commonly described as democracy eroding, through links with fascism and demagoguery. Across these four instances, the meaning of *populis** is therefore specified, which produces a contrast with the two previous categories: by tying populism to anti-democratic ideas or practices, the excerpts delineate the reasons why populism may be treated as a threat to democracy.

- (7) *Een maand lang reizen Rudi Vranckx en Yassine Atari langs de nieuwe populistische breuklijn in Europa, op zoek naar de jongeren die de Unie van morgen zullen vormgeven. De volgende haltes? Rome, waar Yassine een dag doorbrengt met een fascistische jongerengroepering en Macerata, waar Rudi Vranckx ontdekt hoe Italië in een gewelddadige spiraal belandt.*

For a month, Rudi Vranckx and Yassine Atari travel along the new populist fault line in Europe, looking for the young people who will shape the Union of tomorrow. The next stops? Rome, where Yassine spends a day with a fascist youth group, and Macerata, where Rudi Vranckx discovers how Italy has slipped into a violent spiral.

(VRT, 07 April 2019)

- (8) [López Obrador] *Abandera las promesas de construir una democracia social avanzada. Su práctica política está teñida de populismo y la verbosidad de que hace gala linda en ocasiones con la demagogia. Pero no es un advenedizo al poder ni un revolucionario al uso.*

[López Obrador] proudly proclaims his promise to build an advanced social democracy. His political practices are tinged with populism, and his verbosity sometimes borders on demagoguery. But he is neither a newcomer to power nor a revolutionary in the usual sense of the term.

(*El País*, 10 May 2019)

Unlike examples (5) and (6), examples (7) and (8) do not clearly distinguish 'populism' from neighbouring labels such as racism, fascism, or demagoguery. In example (7), the narrative moves seamlessly from 'populist fault line' to a 'fascist youth group' and to 'a spiral of violence', without specifying what, exactly, makes the phenomenon populist rather than simply fascist, radical-right, or violent-extremist. In example (8), 'populism' appears as a tonal qualifier alongside 'demagoguery'. Yet this example does not indicate the distinctive mechanism that would justify treating populism as analytically separable from a broader critique of rhetorical style. Importantly, these under-specified uses seem more frequent than the clearer, contrastive ones exemplified in (5) and (6). The analytical added value of the label thus becomes difficult to defend when it merely shadows more determinate categories. If the empirical referent is a fascist organisation, why is populism the headline concept rather than fascism, or the far right, or authoritarian nationalism? If the criticism concerns rhetorical excess, why does one refer to populism rather than to demagoguery, majoritarianism, or personalistic leadership? One may suggest that 'populism' functions as a container term, gathering heterogeneous worries under a single negative sign while leaving the criteria for inclusion implicit. Rather than isolating a specific logic of political representation, a characteristic related to institutions, or a distinct justificatory repertoire, the term risks operating as shorthand for 'politics perceived as dangerous'. Even when accompanied by concrete traits, it can remain conceptually loose, and its explanatory relevance therefore remains debatable.

4.4 Hierarchising uses

The last set of uses treats *populis** as a term representing a critique directed at individuals, measures, or ideas, like in examples (5)–(8). However, this critique is here not grounded in identifiable normative principles. Instead, the label is used following subjective and contestable criteria. Rather than marking a boundary between what is democratically acceptable and what violates democratic standards, these uses tend to rank actors and attitudes as desirable or undesirable from the author's standpoint. Example (9) illustrates this trend. Here, 'populism' is effectively equated with criticism of the European Union (EU), or even with arguments supporting the exit from the European Union. As previously discussed, the term is not clearly defined. Yet it is unmistakably framed as a problem: it is associated with the rejection of EU politics and opposed to 'europhilia'. The implication is that contesting EU policies is itself a sign of populism and, by extension, a mark of illegitimacy.

- (9) *Si le rétablissement des droits de douane - venait à compromettre les exportations agricoles? Sur qui se porterait la colère? Londres? Dublin? Bruxelles? " L'exception irlandaise, son indéfectible europhilie, l'apparente imperméabilité de l'île au populisme, ont de solides racines mais aussi des limites. Même s'ils ne sont aucunement tentés par une sortie de l'UE, entre 20% et 30% des Irlandais critiquent la politique de l'UE. Et beaucoup, surtout des jeunes qui n'ont pas connu les violences du passé*

If the reintroduction of customs duties were to end up jeopardizing agricultural exports, who would people's anger be directed at? London? Dublin? Brussels? Ireland's 'exceptional' status, its unwavering Europhilia, and the island's apparent immunity to populism have deep roots, but also limits. Even though they are in no way tempted by leaving the EU, between 20% and 30% of Irish people criticize the EU's policies. And many, especially young people who have not experienced the violence of the past

(*Le Monde*, 17 May 2019)

In example (10), 'populism' is equated with a desire to break with prevailing economic policy orthodoxies. Once again, the term functions less as an analytical descriptor than as a delegitimising label: it frames a proposed reorientation of economic policy as 'populist', which may lead one to perceive such a policy as being inherently suspect or unacceptable. The excerpt makes this clear by presenting 'the rise of populism' as a source of anxiety for wealthy individuals considering relocating to the United Kingdom, and

by identifying Jeremy Corbyn as the archetypal threat, precisely because he proposes renationalising railways and introducing a maximum wage. In this configuration, 'populism' becomes a shorthand for redistributive or interventionist policy proposals, with the negative evaluation taken for granted rather than argued for.

- (10) *Le Brexit inquiète mais, pour le moment, il n'affecterait pas ce segment du luxe très haut de gamme. Les fortunes qui souhaitent s'installer outre-Manche craignent plutôt l'inconstance des politiques économiques et la montée du populisme. Leur bête noire, c'est Jeremy Corbyn, le leader de l'opposition travailliste, qui promet, s'il arrive au 10 Downing Street, de renationaliser les chemins de fer et d'instaurer un salaire maximum.*

Brexit is a cause for concern, but for now it does not appear to be affecting this segment of ultra high end luxury. Wealthy individuals who want to move to the UK are more worried about the inconsistency of economic policies and the rise of populism. Their bête noire is Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour opposition leader, who promises that if he makes it to 10 Downing Street, he will renationalize the railways and introduce a maximum wage.

(Le Monde, 15 August 2019)

Example (11) suggests that this tendency to associate populism with negative traits on the basis of highly subjective criteria can go beyond strictly political dimensions of discourse. In some cases, *populis** is mobilised to discredit personal behaviour or expression that arguably fall closer to matters of taste, decorum, or cultural judgement than to anything that can be meaningfully condemned through a category that is often presented as analytically grounded or scientifically robust.

- (11) *Cette année-là, une femme d'entreprise blonde fait rire les téléspectateurs par son parler franc, transgressif, vulgaire, qui change de la langue de bois dans les émissions politiques. On la prend pour un clown. Mais ce populisme va, au fil des épisodes, faire des émules et cette femme devenue Premier ministre n'hésitera pas à faire disparaître et regrouper dans les camps ceux qu'elle juge inadéquats.*

That year, a blonde businesswoman made viewers laugh with her frank, transgressive, vulgar language, which was a change from the political doublespeak heard on political programs. She was taken for a clown. But as the episodes progressed, her populism caught on,

and this woman, who had become prime minister, did not hesitate to remove and gather into camps those she deemed unsuitable.

(*France Info*, 25 August 2019)

In example (11), ‘populism’ is first anchored in a communicative style: ‘frank, transgressive, vulgar’ speech, contrasted with the coded restraint of conventional political language (‘political doublespeak’). The opposition is primarily aesthetic and moral, not explicitly democratic. The protagonist’s appeal is described through the registers of entertainment and shock value, she ‘made viewers laugh’, she was seen as a ‘clown’, and her persona is defined by a deliberate breach of respectable political performance. ‘Populism’, at this stage, designates a mode of address that rejects established rhetorical conventions in favour of an abrasive, ostensibly authentic style. The excerpt then introduces an authoritarian turn, namely, the decision to ‘remove and gather into camps those she deemed unsuitable’, and retrospectively folds this development back into the earlier stylistic description. A continuum is implied: vulgar outspokenness ‘catches on’, produces imitators, and ultimately culminates in overtly anti-democratic practices. Yet the label ‘populism’ is attached to the moment, whereas the primary issue encompasses one’s tone, persona, and media resonance, rather than the violation of basic rights. In this configuration, ‘populism’ functions as an early warning attached to a particular form of visibility and appeal: bluntness, spectacle, and popular attraction that bypass established norms of civility and respectability. The danger is framed not only as authoritarian measures, but as the public’s readiness to embrace a figure who first breaks with conventional standards of political propriety. In this sense, ‘populism’ becomes a compressed signifier, combining stylistic deviance with mass appeal and an insinuated trajectory towards authoritarianism.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In the last example, the use of *populis** does not rest on any coherent normative understanding of democracy, but on unexamined preferences about demeanour, respectability, and the proper tone of public life. More generally, in these hierarchising uses, *populis**, as a category of analysis in the political sphere, registers less a principled concern for democracy than a preference for certain specific and ideologically marked political values or orientations (e.g., pro-European, pro-capitalist, pro-globalisation) – which are presented as obviously more legitimate than others – or a personal or aesthetic discomfort with a certain style of politics. ‘Populism’ becomes a code for what is perceived as illegitimate policies, bad taste, or excessive emotion, rather than a category that tracks violations of specific democratic norms. Because such uses coexist with more substantive ones, the cumulative effect is to stretch the meaning of populism to cover an

ever-wider range of actors and practices. Egalitarian demands for participation, nationalist projects of exclusion, critiques of technocracy, transgressions of institutional decorum, and openly authoritarian agendas can all be folded into the same category. Yet what appears as a classificatory problem is in fact a normative one: a vocabulary that erases the moral distinction between those who seek to deepen democracy and those who seek to erode it. The semantic flexibility that has helped to make the term ubiquitous now undermines capacity for discernment in democracy. This collapse can be observed along two main lines.

On the one hand, the label populism blurs the line between democratic contestation and anti-democratic disruption. A democratic order worthy of the name must remain open to critique, transformation, and even rupture. As the literature on democratic theory emphasises, the democratic space is defined by its constitutive indeterminacy (Lefort, 1988): who speaks for 'the people', and what counts as legitimate representation, cannot be finally settled. Movements that demand equality, participation, or a redistribution of voice express this openness; they are manifestations of democratic vitality, not pathologies. When such movements are grouped together with xenophobic or authoritarian forces under the same heading, a crucial normative distinction disappears; between those who claim to know who the 'demos' is and what it wants and those who accept that the limits, interests, and demands of the 'demos' are always open to debate. In doing so, the discourse deprives citizens of the conceptual tools needed for moral judgement. Democratic legitimacy depends on the ability to distinguish between voice and violence, critique and negation, contestation and destruction. A vocabulary that erases these distinctions does not protect democracy; it disarms it.

On the other hand, the discursive conflation of heterogeneous phenomena benefits those most hostile to democratic principles, and it does so partly because the anti-populist gesture often presupposes a boundary that is neither clear nor politically neutral. When populism is used loosely, and when it quietly tracks the commentator's own sense of what counts as legitimate politics, it sustains the presupposition that media and governing elites set the terms of acceptable opinion, confusing partisan preferences with a shared, transpartisan democratic frame. This posture does not merely establish the limits of legitimacy, it can also deepen mistrust towards representatives and institutions and thereby nourish the very dynamics it claims to contain. In this context, reappropriation becomes easy: if *populis** names whatever sits outside the approved frame, then an actor can embrace the label as proof of authenticity and proximity to 'ordinary people'. J.D. Vance's formula makes the inversion explicit, 'If being a populist means being on the side of working people ... I'm proud of it'.¹ By doing so, the negative moral charge of populism is

flipped. Anti-democratic actors present themselves as victims of an elitist orthodoxy, turning condemnation into legitimacy. The same vagueness that allows liberal democracies to stigmatise dissent simultaneously enables their illiberal challengers to claim the mantle of truth-telling. The discursive weapon is therefore a double-edged sword. Pierre Poilievre's viral exchange works similarly, when he repeatedly blames a journalist for taking a 'populist pathway' with a simple question, 'What does that mean?',² forcing the accuser to reveal how unstable and contestable the category is.

The problem with 'populism', then, cannot be reduced to empirical vagueness. Indeterminacy is precisely what enables its strategic and performative uses: to disqualify or to legitimise, depending on who speaks and in what context. A term that can stigmatise conflictual politics today and be reappropriated as moral authenticity tomorrow cannot serve as a reliable criterion for democratic evaluation. If democracy rests, as some argue (Urbinati, 2019), on a fragile balance between suspicion and trust, it requires concepts that sustain rather than dissolve that tension. The current use of populism destabilises this balance: it either casts all deviation from centrist norms as dangerous or renders genuine threats indistinguishable from legitimate critique. In both cases, normative reasoning gives way to affective impressions, with tone and emotional resonance taking precedence over substance and principle.

This does not mean, however, that populism, as a concept, is useless, or that all of its uses are problematic. As shown, it can be employed in a meaningful way to designate a contestable understanding of the relationship between 'the people' and those who hold power and claim, or are expected, to embody them. Moreover, the analysis indicates that not all uses of populism are equivalent, nor do they invariably serve to discredit political orientations deemed subjectively undesirable. Yet most uses of this category remain highly vague and rely on normative backgrounds that are left implicit, thereby reinforcing the difficulties identified here. The aim, therefore, is not necessarily to discard the category of populism, but rather to use it in a precise and rigorous manner.

Notes

- 1 <https://x.com/BullMooseProj/status/1829219535842406640>, accessed on 28 January 2026.
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnEj7WLsWbk&t=124s> (2:00), accessed on 28 January 2026.

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10 Conclusion

The uses of ‘populism’ and democratic dynamics

Jessy Bailly and Min Reuchamps

1 Introduction

What do the uses of ‘populism’ tell us about democracy in general and democratic dynamics in particular? This edited volume has been devoted to the study of the uses of the word *populism* and its derivatives (henceforth *populis**) in contemporary democracies. In the wake of the research project ‘Discourse, populism and democracy. Tracking the uses of populism in media and political discourse’ (TrUMPo) conducted at UCLouvain (Belgium), the chapters of this book have focused on different angles and different arenas that political and media discourses significantly rely on the terms *populis**. Above all, our chapters have shown that these uses are to be carefully studied. The idea at the core of this research is not only to count the number of the occurrences and to identify specific groups or individuals qualified (or not) as populists. Our aim is to analyse from an interdisciplinary perspective the uses of the term *populis** in the public debate. In doing so, the scientific ambition is to make sense of a contested concept (Gallie, 1955), namely, populism (Kaltwasser, 2018), to explore another contested concept, namely, democracy (Gagnon, 2018; Skaaning, 2021).

Many actors refer to democracy in the public debate, yet not everyone views it in the same way: some see it as a liberal-representative imaginary, others defend epistocratic, participatory, direct or even anarchist approach of democracy (Breugh & Dupuis-Déri, 2009). Social conceptions of democracy also exist (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016; Townshend, 2009). In fact, as it was posited from the beginning of this book, the way the word and the concept of *populism* are defined, used and circulated, is directly related to competing conceptions of the way political actors should behave in general and act as representatives of the people in particular. This reflects democratic conceptions, in a context of a deep democratic malaise worldwide (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Norris, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2013). Since the literature on the use of *populis** has suggested that such terms are often employed negatively by those

who use it – be they journalists, academics, politicians or lay citizens – we can examine how these actors associate *populis** with a political imaginary they view as incompatible with democracy, or not. Accordingly, we should also question whether these criticisms of *populis** support the defence of a specific democratic conception by way of contrast.

The aim of this concluding chapter is to take stock of the findings as well as the avenues for future research proposed in each contribution to capture how democratic conceptions resonate and are articulated with the uses of *populis**. To do so, we first need to look at the extensive literature seeking to study populism and democracy. On this basis, this concluding chapter can open new grounds for investigation in the study of this intricate relationship between the uses of the term *populis** and democratic dynamics at three levels, micro, meso and macro, that form the core of contemporary democracies.

Considering the surge in academic research on populism (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021), providing a comprehensive overview of all studies examining the relationship between populism and democracy is a daunting task. We insist here on two types of scholarship: the first one reveals how academics themselves conceive of the relationship between populism and democracy; the second one examines how non-academic actors, such as the media or political figures, use *populis**.

1.1 *Academic uses of *populis** and its relation to democracy*

The minimal definition of populism – highlighted by the discursive approach to populism (for a synthesis, see Aiolfi, 2022) – asserts that populism can be defined as a discourse in which the speaker appeals to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; see also March, 2017: 283 for a critical review of this reductionist view of populism based on people-centrism). However, the appeal to the people is common in democratic regimes (Borriello *et al.*, 2023), which are built on the central idea that the people is sovereign. To that extent, following Laclau's (2005) definition of populism, people-centrism is a necessary but insufficient condition:

we only have populism if there is a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and the precondition of the emergence of such a subject is, as we have seen, the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps.

(Laclau, 2005: 43)

In Laclau's terms, these two camps consist of: the camp of 'popular subjectivity' (the people as an empty signifier), which unites various groups in an 'anti-institutional' stance against a second camp, referring to a common enemy (e.g., 'the oligarchy' or 'the Establishment').

Yet one may ask: how do academics depict populism normatively in relation to democracy? Although perspectives are diverse (Goyvaerts, 2021), most academics tend to view it negatively: populism is seen as a risk to democracy. On this aspect, Weyland's 'anti-populist definition of populism' (Vergara, 2020: 232) is eloquent. It associates populism with personalistic plebiscitary leadership: 'Populism rests on the supreme predominance of a personal leader who is unconstrained by rules and organizations and who makes decisions with unquestionable discretion as he sees fit' (Weyland, 2024: 20). In the same vein, Rosanvallon (2021) argues that populism is a form of Bonapartism, with a plebiscitary (and authoritarian) practice of power; meanwhile, Taggart (1995: 40) sees two important organisational characteristics among populist parties: 'they are very centralised, and they set great store in the leadership which is both personalised and charismatic' (Taggart, 1995: 40). Other authors associate populism with a form of democratic illness (see Abts & Rummens, 2007). Finally, most authors contrast populism with pluralism (for an overview and a criticism of this association, see Borriello *et al.*, 2023), the latter being an important condition for democracy (Manin, 1997).

The existence of a clear academic 'anti-populism' stance (studied by Chollet, 2023; Jäger, 2016; see also Stavrakakis, 2014) influences how politicians and the media discuss populism (see the following section), due to the interconnect-edness of academic, media, and political spheres (Goyvaerts, 2021; Zicmann de Barros *et al.*, 2022; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). However, some strands of the scholarship examine the relationship between populism and democracy from different theoretical and normative premises, including work that treats populism as not inherently anti-democratic. Rather, it is understood in opposition to the liberal aspect of democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1670; Pauwels, 2014: 2).

Prior to the examination of these authors' arguments, it is essential to define what liberal democracy is because often populism is defined in opposition such liberal conception of democracy. Drawing on Ferrín and Kriesi (2016), liberal democracy refers to a conception of what democracy should be, encompassing the following elements: equality before the law, checks and balances, media pluralism, press freedom, protection of minority rights, and economic liberalism/market economy. One can also refer to regular and free elections with genuine and open multi-candidate competition. One can additionally include the representative mandate (Manin, 1997). The latter can be defined as a mandate in which the representatives are elected by the represented, and in which the representatives can carry out their mandate independently, without the possibility of impeachment between elections. We can thus refer to a liberal-*representative* conception of democracy. This conception is the dominant approach in contemporary Western democracies (Ferrín &

Kriesi, 2016) even though other forms of democratic conceptions coexist: for instance, direct democracy, which sets the decision-making power in the hands of the citizens (Lupia & Matsusaka, 2004) or deliberative democracy, which emphasises the need to go beyond the aggregation of votes with the establishment of decision-making procedures that rely on deliberation (Reuchamps & Suiter, 2017). What's more, some authors call for a maximalist democracy, which legitimises both a role for citizens in decision-making through referendums and a strong state intervention in the economy (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016), whereas others would opt for a minimalist approach, that is ensuring a representative government and the rule of law, which is sometimes referred to as a stealth democracy (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

Returning to the literature on populism and democracy, several authors define populism in opposition to the liberal-representative conception of democracy. This can be illustrated by the following quotation: 'populism is primarily directed against representative forms of democratic decision-making that supposedly disregard the general will of the people' (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020: 40). In the same way, Pappas suggests that populism is 'democratic illiberalism' as it is:

fundamentally inimical to basic precepts of postwar liberal democracy, which demand (aa) preventing the tyranny of majority; (bb) promoting social plurality; (cc) protecting checks and balances by elevating them above individual interest; and (dd) advocating the rationality of ends rather than the morality of means.

(2019: 33)

1.2 *Media hype and media uses of populism**

The works on the uses of *populism** do not usually directly address how political or media actors discuss populism in relation to a specific democratic conception. To some extent, Hatakka & Herkman (2022) can be perceived as an exception: they ask whether the uses of *populism** are conceived as positive or negative for democracy, yet they do not explicitly treat democracy itself as an object of competing imaginaries. Such studies are, nonetheless, useful for mapping the associations attached to populism. Existing research shows that positive discourses on populism are rare, and that when positive usages occur, they tend to be dated (Brown & Mondon, 2021; Elmgren, 2022; Jäger, 2016; Zicmann de Barros *et al.*, 2022; see also Hatakka & Herkman (2022) for a more systemic analysis of the reduction of positive uses of *populism** in comparison to negative ones, and Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023 who conduct a study on parliaments).

Scholarship on the uses of *populis** in the media include various cases: the UK (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Brown & Mondon, 2021; Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Demata *et al.*, 2020; Kranert, 2020), Belgium (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020), France (Borriello, 2022), Italy (Degano & Sicurella, 2019), Germany (Kranert, 2020), Spain (Santiago-Guervós, 2015), Brazil (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Zicman de Barros *et al.*, 2022); Israel (Hamo *et al.*, 2018), European Nordic countries (Herkman, 2016), and the United States and Australia (Brookes, 2018). From a comparative perspective, Hatakka and Herkman (2022) notably conduct a study of newspapers in Finland, Sweden, the United States, the UK, the Netherlands, and Turkey by adopting a diachronic approach (2000–2018).

These studies concur that the media uses of *populis** in the media often carry a pejorative connotation (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Boriello, 2022; Brookes, 2018; Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020; Kranert, 2020; Hamo *et al.*, 2018; Hatakka, 2016; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Zicman de Barros *et al.*, 2022). In the UK, for instance, Bale *et al.* (2011) found that political opponents (the Tories for left-leaning newspapers, the Labour Party for more conservative newspapers) might be labelled as populists because of the stance they adopt to discuss particular issues in media outlets, a trend that is thus not confined to traditionally populist figures or parties. Kranert (2020), whose study compares the use of *populis** in the German and the British press between 2012 and 2017, highlights that *populis** is often used as a means to discredit those it is attributed to. He suggests that *populis** is used in the media as a 'stigma term' (2020: 49). When investigating media content in Israel, Hamo *et al.* (2018) refer to the use of populism as an 'accusatory device' (2018: 7).

More specifically, the existing scholarship indicates that the use of *populis** in the media is associated with a growing phenomenon: an omnipotent and threatening force or disease (Borriello, 2022; Demata *et al.*, 2020; Hamo *et al.*, 2018; Zicman de Barros *et al.*, 2022) intertwined with elements of nativism/xenophobia (Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015); it is also associated with demagoguery/empty rhetoric (Borriello, 2022; Demata *et al.*, 2020; Herkman, 2016; Santiago-Guervós, 2015), nationalism (Borriello, 2022; Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Demata *et al.*, 2020; Elmgren, 2018; Herkman, 2016; Kranert, 2020), euroscepticism (Borriello, 2022; Degano & Cicurella, 2019; Demata *et al.*, 2020), emotions (Borriello, 2022; Demata *et al.*, 2020), manipulation/irrationality (Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023; Santiago-Guervós, 2015), extremism (Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015; Zicman de Barros *et al.*, 2022) or corruption (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023). Moreover, populism is widely described as a threat to democracy (Borriello, 2022; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Santiago-Guervós, 2015), as mentioned by Brookes: '[forms of populisms are a] threat to democratic politics and

established systems because of their unwillingness to follow conventions about what is it appropriate to do [...] in the sphere of formal politics' (2018: 1264).

Ultimately, research indicates that populism is employed in conflicting ways, described at times as a 'lack of substance' (Hamo *et al.*, 2018:4) or referring to very heterogeneous elements (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Brookes, 2018; Herkmann, 2016; Zicman de Barros *et al.*, 2022). Goyvaerts & De Cleen even claim that 'what makes a political act populist is not always clear' (2020: 90), Brown & Mondon argue that the media content highlights 'careless and uncritical use of the term or concept' (2021: 292). Other scholars talk about the 'ubiquitous character of the words 'populis*' in the[ir] corpus' (Ronderos & Glynos, 2023: 633). Conversely, Hatakka & Herkman (2022) demonstrate that a significant use of *populis** in the media is associated with topics dominated by the far-right (see also Krantert, 2020: 49), and to a much lesser extent, with topics associated with populism (anti-capitalism and/or opposition to economic globalisation).

1.3 *Populis* as a politician strategy for disqualification*

Beyond the literature on the uses of *populis** in the media, studies examining its use by political actors are more limited. Some studies focus on how Western European parliamentarians use *populis**: in England (Casiraghi, 2021; Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023), in Belgium and France (Bailly *et al.*, 2025a), in Spain (Bailly *et al.*, 2025b; Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023), as well as in Germany and Italy (Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023).

Casiraghi & Bordignon's (2023) study of the use of *populis** in parliaments in Spain, Italy, the UK and Germany between 2010 and 2020 shows that *populis** is used very negatively, with a 'rhetorical flexibility of populism as a conceptual weapon to contest competitors' policy preferences' (2023: 185). To them, *populis** is used to describe those who defend interventionist economic positions, or autonomism in Spain; in Germany, it refers to anti-migrant positions, and in the UK to anti-Europeanism. Their study shows that the left-wing is more often targeted by the term than the far right that are targeted (2023: 190). This finding can be contrasted with the existing scholarship on the use of *populis** in the media. This is confirmed in the Spanish case treated by Bailly *et al.* (2025b), where Podemos is much more frequently designated as populist than are other political forces. Bailly *et al.* (2025a) work at the level of Belgian, French and Spanish parliaments and highlight a transversal trend: it is primarily the centre-right and right-wing parliamentarians who use populism to discredit the discourse of their political opponents.

This is also true of political discourse on Twitter: in the Spanish context, Shchinova (2023) demonstrates that right-wing and centre-right politicians are the most active in using Twitter to discredit their political opponents. These (centre)right-wing politicians speak of populism to

discredit others. Through 'its negative connotation', *populis** is used 'to delegitimise an opponent or to self-legitimise by positioning oneself against populism' (Shchinova, 2023: 867). Last but not least, Schwörer (2021) examines the meaning of populism in social media communications among politicians from six Western European countries. The findings emphasise that *populis** is used overall as a means to discredit political opponents. Interestingly, this study also shows that mainstream parties tend to use it more negatively compared with parties associated with populism (far-right politicians in Italy and Spain). In these discourses, populism is portrayed as antithetical to the values of liberal democracy, pluralism, freedom, and the rule of law. It is associated with simplistic rhetoric, opportunism, incompetence, superficial solutions, and demagoguery. These findings are further refined by Schwörer and Fernández-García (2021) in their analysis of the tweets by centre-right and centre-left politicians across ten Western European countries. In these tweets, right-wing populist groups are characterised as closely aligned with Nazism, fascism and extremism.

Comparing the literature on the uses of *populis** by the media and by politicians, we find that both stigmatise populism negatively, associating it with a threat to the maintenance of the political status quo (liberal-representative democracy). Most of the works cited above focus on case studies that can be considered as liberal democracies. In these studies, populism is considered as a challenge by both well-established media (following the work of Gitlin, 1972; Mazzoleni, 2003: 16) and by parliamentarians, who are wary of political projects that challenge or modify a strictly parliamentary democracy (Dupuis-Déri, 2013).

This literature on the use of *populis** in political and media discourses reveals that *populis** is spoken of negatively. However, a limited number of journalists and politicians openly and explicitly self-identify as anti-populist. Since actors who have publicly self-identified as populists are also rare, actors who have explicitly self-identified as anti-populists (i.e., in opposition to populism) are also rare (with exceptions like the Italian Sardines movement: Hamdaoui, 2022a, or the Brazilian media outlet *Veja*: Ronderos & Glynos, 2023). Anti-populism is generally more 'accommodative' than 'adversarial' (see Hamdaoui, 2022b). This attitude of 'accommodative anti-populism' (rather than adversarial anti-populism) has been highlighted among political actors (Hamdaoui, 2022b) and in media (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). In sum, both concepts of populism and democracy are contested, and this is the reason why public discourse should be studied as an integral entity.

2 Populism and democratic dynamics

From this brief overview, it can be argued that the literature on populism in general is alive and kicking. In particular, the previous section has sought to sketch the contours of this bulk of research on populism and

democracy. The chapters of this edited volume contribute to this ongoing research endeavour with a specific focus, as explained in the first introductory chapter of this book (see Aulit *et al.* in this volume), on the uses of *populis** and the ways in which the analysis of such uses can foster an understanding of democratic dynamics in the public debate. This complex articulation takes place at three levels: micro at the individual-actor level, meso at the group-arena level, and macro at the system level.

2.1 *Micro democratic dynamics*

In order to make sense of the uses of *populis** at the micro level, that is, the level of each individual actor, a specific methodological approach has to be designed, in an interdisciplinary fashion, that has been the starting point of this research. This approach is described in detail in a trio of chapters that open this edited volume. The second chapter (see De Cock *et al.* in this volume) explains the building of such a multilingual multi-genre corpus for interdisciplinary research, focusing on data selection, collection techniques and ethical considerations. This corpus has offered a rich and diverse empirical material that has been instrumental to study the micro democratic dynamics, but also the meso and macro democratic dynamics to which we will turn in the following sections.

To capture the micro democratic dynamics, an annotation system is developed and presented in the third chapter (see Hambye *et al.* in this volume). This annotation system is needed and used for the interdisciplinary analysis of the ‘sociopolitical keyword’ *populism* and, in this perspective, it combines analytical categories from linguistics, media studies and political science. Three main sets of analytical criteria (or variables) structure the annotation system: contextual information, meaning of *populism* and function of *populism*. While the former can account for the analysis of any sociopolitical keyword, the latter two have been developed by taking into account the specificity of *populis**.

The analysis of the variables tapping into the *meaning* of populism is a first approach to the micro democratic dynamics. ‘Object’ is the first of these variables. It may refer to a person, a policy, or even an event or social phenomenon, such as social networks blamed for ‘fuelling populism’. Each specific ‘object’ is classified into one out of four broader categories: a specific individual figure, a clearly defined group, a group that is not clearly identifiable, or actions or facts. Complementary to the ‘object’, the main ‘conception’ at the heart of the conception of *populis** is coded on a list deductively drawn from the literature on populism (among others, Mudde, 2004, Stavrakakis, 2014, Urbinati, 2019), and inductively coded from a sample of data during the development of the annotation scheme: ‘demagoguery’, ‘anti-system/anti-elite’, ‘nationalism/sovereignty/nativism/

racism', 'extremism/radicalism', 'conservatism/traditionalism', 'popular' (in the sense of popularity), 'lies/dishonesty', 'autocracy', and 'based on popular sovereignty'. In addition to this 'conception' variable, the 'value' seeks to capture, when possible, whether a negative, neutral or positive value is associated with the notion of populism through the use of *populis**.

In example (1) extracted from the second chapter, the term *populistas* ('populists'), as 'object' to a political group, refers specifically to Podemos party, which is not the same as the ones designated by the other two terms, *nacionalistas* ('nationalists') and *independentistas* ('independence supporters'). The 'conception' is twofold in this example where *populistas* can be associated with the notions of 'demagoguery' and 'popular'. A negative 'value' can be inferred from this message because of the association of *populis** with a person or a group that is clearly presented negatively from the speaker's point of view, in this case Podemos.

- (1) *En definitiva, la estrategia seguida por el Gobierno socialista, apoyado por populistas, nacionalistas e independentistas, y que en un sector regulado como el energético posee una importancia capital porque es el encargado de determinar el marco en el que se debe operar, no ha hecho sino muy complicado que Endesa apueste por llevar a cabo la inversión.*

In short, the strategy pursued by the socialist government, supported by populists, nationalists, and independentists, and that in a regulated sector such as energy is of paramount importance because it [the government] is responsible for determining the framework in which the sector must operate, has only made it very difficult for Endesa to commit to the investment.

(Oral statement by Dolors Montserrat Montserrat, PP deputy in the Spanish Parliament, 03 July 2019)

In addition to the *meaning*, the identification of the *function* of the uses of *populis** complements the understanding of micro democratic dynamics. It relies on two variables. On the one hand, we identify the general 'purpose' of the statement containing *populis** along five main categories: 'descriptive', 'critical', 'denial', 'legitimisation by opposition' and 'legitimation by association'. On the other hand, the second variable that helps to define the function of *populis** refers to the person or group that may be 'targeted' or attacked by the message containing the keyword. Example (1) shows a 'critical' function, where it is Pedro Sanchez's socialist government that is being attacked by the message, although the government itself is not labelled 'populist'. The use of such an annotation system provides a more complex understanding of the reasons why the concept of populism

is mobilised in sociopolitical discourse, and hence it helps us to capture micro democratic dynamics.

Such analyses presuppose that the coding framework can be applied consistently, across coders and across the multilingual, multi-genre corpus. To ensure the reliability and reproducibility of this annotation system, it has been tested and validated via a strict protocol detailed in the fourth chapter (see Rondiat *et al.* in this volume). In this chapter, the authors also develop a broader reflection on the meaning and appropriate uses of inter-coder reliability in interpretive research.

2.2 *Meso democratic dynamics*

Our methodological approach can reveal the interpretation of individual actor dynamics and interactions. In addition, the multilingual multi-genre corpus that has been collected and coded offers a direct way to capture meso democratic dynamics, which take place at the group and arena level. Indeed, the corpus comprises discourse produced by several groups and in different arenas, allowing meaningful comparisons at the meso level of democratic dynamics. In fact, the use of *populist** functions as a stigmatising label, a disqualification or sometimes even an insult: it is not only used by speakers to delegitimise a specific act, attitude or person, but also to designate and disqualify a party or a group more generally as populist, which reveals a more meso, more structural tendency.

The fifth chapter (see Aulit and Shchinova in this volume) analyses the uses of *populis** in Spanish parliamentary debates and politicians' tweets from the five main political parties which prevailed in 2019 (PSOE, PP, UP, Ciudadanos and Vox). The findings are twofold. On the one hand, the unequal uses of *populis** across parties are confirmed: the parties responsible (the Ciudadanos and Partido Popular) for most uses in parliament and on Twitter are the same, pointing to seemingly no difference across arenas. On the other hand, despite these similarities between arenas, different strategies are at play: an argumentative-critical strategy in parliamentary debate, and a self-legitimation strategy which allows the party to present itself on Twitter as an alternative to the targeted opponent.

The analysis of speakers' communicative goals in different interactional contexts is at the heart of the sixth chapter (see Aulit *et al.* in this volume) that proposes a multi-layered and complexified linguistic approach to the analysis of discourse on *populism*. To capture meso democratic dynamics, the chapter shows that one also has to look at pragmatic mitigation and intensification, metaphors, agentivity and argumentation. Example (2) extracted from the fifth chapter illustrates the argumentative pattern

of the use of *populis** in the interaction between two political actors, one from the government and one from the parliamentary opposition.

- (2) *Verwijt ons dus niet dat wij op dat vlak niets doen. Verklaar ook niet publiekelijk dat er straffeloosheid is. Dat is immers niet waar. Het ging hier niet om een recidivist. Het was de eerste keer. Hij heeft tweeënhalf jaar van de uitgesproken zes jaar effectief uitgezeten en is een jaar via een enkelband van zijn vrijheid beroofd. Voor de minste fout die hij nog zal maken, gaat hij opnieuw de gevangenis in. Wees over het dossier dus niet te populistisch.*

So don't accuse us of doing nothing on that front. Also, don't publicly declare impunity. After all, that is not true. This was not a repeat offender. It was the first time. He effectively served two-and-a-half years of the pronounced six years and was deprived of liberty for a year via an ankle bracelet. For the slightest mistake he will make again, he will go to jail. So don't be too populist about the case.

[Koen Geens, CD&V, 10 January 2019, Belgian Chamber of Representatives]

The use of *populis** has a dual effect: it serves to delegitimise political opponents while simultaneously reinforcing the speaker's own legitimacy. In example (2), the term is used defensively to undermine the credibility of prior criticism and thus to restore the speaker's legitimacy and as a consequence the government's legitimacy as a whole.

To further explore whether meso variables matter, the seventh chapter (see Roginsky in this volume) compares the uses of *populis** in six newspapers in France and French-speaking Belgium: elite newspapers, popular press and free dailies. One can observe significant formal differences across press types in article length, analytical depth and openness to external voices are observed. However, the use of *populis** overwhelmingly falls within the sphere of 'consensus' across outlets. In fact, the term 'populism' functions as taken-for-granted common sense rather than as an object of debate. The use of this term has achieved the status of journalistic doxa, which is a naturalised classificatory scheme that structures political perception while concealing its arbitrariness. This doxa reveals how journalistic classification constitutes rather than merely describes political reality. This is a striking finding concerning our common understanding of meso democratic dynamics. One may expect democratic debates about the meaning of *populis** to support controversy. Yet controversy is rare, confined primarily to elite newspapers where it remains marginal.

The eighth chapter (see Roginsky and Nuevo Gascó in this volume) goes one step further in the exploration of the meso democratic dynamics by analysing the circulation of the uses of *populis** in French and Spanish

parliaments, mass media and social media. The findings reveal that there is no circulation *per se* between arenas or national contexts (i.e., an idea or debate explicitly moving from one place to another). However, we can observe a striking convergence in the uses of *populis** (i.e., these uses are substantially similar in different places) without observable bilateral circulation. In fact, circulation operates through two distinct modes, only one of which (explicit circulation) leaves traces in the data, captured through attribution coding when there is an explicit reference to another context, which accounts for 10–31% of uses depending on arena. The most frequent circulation is implicit and corresponds to a *doxic* circulation: the incorporation of *populis** into the taken-for-granted categories of political judgement structures the perception of democratic dynamics across different arenas and contexts.

2.3 *Macro democratic dynamics*

The exploration of the micro and meso democratic dynamics yields similar conclusions: the uses of the term *populis** are so frequent and diverse that they could be seen as insignificant. Yet populism works most effectively where and when it no longer needs to be explained, cited or even defended. Its power lies less in what it means than in what it allows actors to do: disqualify, align and position themselves within political struggles in contemporary democracies. This is why the use of *populis** also influences macro democratic dynamics.

The final empirical chapter of this book (see Rondiat in this volume) tackles the ‘populist problem’, which is not only about empirical vagueness, but also about what it allows to problematise. More precisely, this chapter shows how populism is questioned in contemporary democracies via the media and above all what this questioning implies about contested democratic ideals. The last example presented in the ninth chapter is reproduced here as example (3):

- (3) *Cette année-là, une femme d'entreprise blonde fait rire les téléspectateurs par son parler franc, transgressif, vulgaire, qui change de la langue de bois dans les émissions politiques. On la prend pour un clown. Mais ce populisme va, au fil des épisodes, faire des émules et cette femme devenue Premier ministre n'hésitera pas à faire disparaître et regrouper dans les camps ceux qu'elle juge inadéquats.*

That year, a blonde businesswoman made viewers laugh with her frank, transgressive, vulgar language, which was a change from the political doublespeak heard on political programs. She was taken for a clown. But as the episodes progressed, her populism caught on,

and this woman, who had become prime minister, did not hesitate to remove and gather into camps those she deemed unsuitable.

(*France Info*, 25 August 2019)

This quote from a French mainstream media starts with a direct communicative tone, far from any political consideration. In the build-up, populism makes its way in and is suddenly accompanied by a seemingly authoritarian turn that shapes and shakes the foundations of democracy. It is striking to see how the use of this particular word gives a politically profound tone to this message and resonates at the level of the macro democratic dynamics.

For sure and for long, academic literature has identified disqualifying themes regarding why populism is detrimental to democracy. First, populism has often been linked to a nativist and anti-immigrant discourse. Researchers have identified a conflation between populism and nationalism/nativism (Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023; Degano & Sicurella, 2019; Hunger & Paxton, 2022; Kranert, 2020; Santiago-Guervós, 2015; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017), that is, the defence of ethnically pure people against the threat posed by cultural minorities. Also, populism is associated with a disregard for the rule of law (Kriesi, 2014; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mudde, 2023; Taggart & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016), as populism 'exalts majoritarianism at the expense of the rule of law' (Pappas, 2019: 58). A third disqualifying theme is that populism refers to euro-sceptical stances or discourse (Canovan, 1999; Diez-Medrano, 2003; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Some authors associate populism with the practice of referendums (a fundamental component of a populist democratic conception), arguing that this threatens representative democracy, and the primacy of elections (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Barr, 2009; Breaugh & Dupuis-Déri, 2009; Hamdaoui, 2022a; Mény & Surel, 2000; Rosanvallon, 2021). A last pejorative association with populism links it to positions and discourses that challenge the market economy (Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023: 180; Elmgren, 2022: 332; Pappas, 2019: 241; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023: 626; Rosanvallon, 2021).

Strikingly, in our empirical data, the vast majority of uses of *populis** in the three countries do not express an explicit criticism of populism nor portray populism as a threat to democracy – or rather do not specify in which way(s) populism is a threat to and for democracy. We have not found in our corpus many instances of these disqualifying themes that the literature has identified hitherto. It is not that the term *populis** is not used – quite the contrary – but it is the variety of uses that is striking. Our findings indicate that a form of 'banalisation' prevails, to some extent, in the corpus. This trend is

particularly strong in the media, which are described as expressing a banal anti-populism (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020) or as accommodative (see Hamdaoui, 2022b). This finding is another clear example of the trivialisation of populism in the media (Brown & Mondon, 2021). Indeed, we can only identify very few cases where the use of *populis** in the media conveys an explicit expression of the democratic threat that populism supposedly poses, along with the reasons for this perspective. It is known that the media (at least those in our sample) tend to defend democracy in its representative liberal form (e.g., mainstream medias: Gitlin, 1972; Mazzoleni, 2003); however, this does not come through in the ways in which they use the term populism. There is clearly a gap between how academics associate populism with majority views (anti-rule of law), populism with nativism, and populism with the practice of referendums, and the reality perceived in our mediatic data. This takes us far away from the representation of populism defended by Weyland (2024), who argues that populism characterises a personalised-authoritarian leadership style, an anti-market economy stance and a pro-referendum position.

3 Conclusion

What can we infer from this bulk of empirical research considering democratic dynamics? Our data do not provide strong evidence to assert that speakers are ardent defenders of democracy in its liberal-representative form, when they talk about populism. Our data may, to some extent, be unsatisfactory in this respect. However, we can insist on two main findings: most speakers do not express distrust but rather indifference towards populism, which has become a routinised element of language, rarely associated with explicit threats. Some political actors' uses of populism show that members of certain political parties (especially centre-right and right) use populism to defend their liberal positions on democracy. This illustrates the reason why, following our initial intuition, this book did not seek to offer a definitive definition of *populis** but rather analyse, in an interdisciplinary perspective, its uses in discourses and discuss their implications for democratic dynamics.

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