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## Populist parties in Western Europe. An analysis of the three core elements of populism

### Abstract

Populism has become a widespread phenomenon across Western Europe, especially after the economic crisis of 2008. However, we can still observe some confusion in the academy and the media about the definition of populism, which has led to a very contested and vague use of the term. This article aims to contribute to the conceptual clarification of populism, analysing its presence in a selection of political parties in four Western European countries, and separating the core elements from those of their host ideologies. In order to reach our goals, we conducted a content analysis of a selection of electoral manifestos of eight political parties: *Podemos*, *Sinn Féin*, United Kingdom Independence Party and Swiss People's Party (populist parties); Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, Labour Party, Conservative Party and Green Liberal Party of Switzerland (non-populist parties from the same countries). Regarding the methodological approach, we ran a classical content analysis and Key Words in Context content analysis. On the one hand, our results confirm that the minimal definition of populism used in this research is consistent to differentiate between populist and non-populist parties. On the other hand, conclusions also show that host ideologies are the main source of divergences between populist parties, especially the presence or absence of nativism.

### Keywords

**Populism, anti-establishment, Western Europe, political parties, content analysis.**

### 1. Introduction

Recent elections in Europe have shown that the presence of political actors portraying the antagonism between the people and the elite is not only rising, but also becoming a widespread phenomenon, even in countries in which populism is deemed to have failed (e.g. Spain). In Southern Europe and Ireland, the threat to the political establishment comes mostly from the radical left (*Podemos*, *Syryza*, *Sinn Féin*, People Before Profit, Left Bloc and Unitary Democratic Coalition) and other ideologically ambiguous parties (Five Star Movement). In Northern and Central Europe this threat comes from the far right (National Front,

United Kingdom Independence Party, Sweden Democrats, Freedom Party of Austria, Alternative for Deutschland, etc.). Despite the ideological differences, these parties coincide in identifying a conflict between the “pure people” and the corrupt elite, determining themselves as the only true representatives of the interests of the people.

This antagonism mentioned has been labelled as populism. However, there is some confusion in the academy around characterising elements of populism and those related to the host ideologies of populist parties. Consequently, we can observe a very contested and vague use of this term. The main reason behind this confusion is that populism has taken very different shapes: from the agrarian revolt of the end of 19th century in the United States to the social movement of *Los Indignados* (The Outraged) in Spain; from personalist leaders on the left such as Hugo Chávez to well organised political parties such as the National Front. Populism has taken the shape of social movements, political parties and political leaders with electoral vehicles; and has appeared from the radical left to the radical right, and others that were beyond the classical ideological spectrum of left and right (Juan Domingo Perón).

In Western Europe, the rise of xenophobia in recent decades, has led such positions with populism to be identified, considering some anti-immigrant parties as populists even when they do not present some of the core and essential elements of populism such as anti-elitism or the radicalization of popular sovereignty. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the normative use of populism in the political and media debate, considering it as a pathological phenomenon of contemporary democracies. This has very often led to any political party or leader displaying demagogic or emotional discourses, or just presenting a challenge to the political consensus (e.g. the Europhobia), being labelled as populists.

Thus, the contribution of this article has to do with the clarification of the concept of populism, the classification of some political parties as populists and non-populists, and the differences between right-wing and left-wing populist parties. Accordingly, this study takes the ideational approach of Cas Mudde (2004) as the theoretical framework. This approach provides a clear definition of populism as a thin-ideology, compatible with other full ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, conservatism, nativism, etc. This allows the essence of the populist appeals to be captured, regardless of their shape, as well as distinguishing between populist and non-populist actors (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Regarding the analysis, two different content analysis proposals have been carried out regarding the examination of right and left-wing populist and non-populist parties’ election manifestos.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The main theoretical assumption about populism is taken from Mudde’s minimal definition of populism as (2004, 2012) “an (thin) ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

Firstly, this definition comes from the ideational approach, which understands populism as a set of ideas and not just a kind of rhetoric or political strategy (Weyland, 2001). According to this, the notion of a “thin-centred ideology” developed by Michael Freeden (1996) in contrast to thick-centred or full ideologies plays a fundamental role. The latter form complex networks of ideas composed by a core and several peripheral concepts that provide comprehensive maps of the entire political world. In contrast, thin-centred ideologies have an identifiable but more restrictive morphology of concepts. Following Mudde’s definition (2004), populism has three core elements: the pure people, the corrupt elite and the general will. The more common criticisms to this approach state that populism has too little intellectual content and an insufficient conceptual structure to be considered

an ideology; and as a reactive movement against the power, it does not have the positive vision or promise of a better future that ideologies have. Canovan (2002) answers these criticisms stating that populism is a “thin-centred” ideology, not a “full” ideology, so it does not try to provide a comprehensive map of the entire political world, but offers its own ideological core concepts related to democracy: popular sovereignty, the people as a unity with a common will and majority rule. These ideological core concepts are combined with those of their host ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.). Finally, Canovan states that populism is not just reactive, but also has a positive vision of the future that lies in the promise of the restoration of the people’s power. Hence, populism is not only considered to be just a kind of rhetoric that expresses closeness to the people and an anti-elitist discourse, but also follows the structure of an ideology providing a diagnosis of the present order (a conflict between people and the powerful and anti-democratic elite); an ideal-typical situation (the government by the sovereign people); and the ways to reach it (by empowering the people to the detriment of the elite’s power).

Secondly, the definition of populism as “thin-ideology” means that populism “is limited in ambition and scope” (Mudde & Rovira, 2012, p.150). That explains why populism is highly dependent on the context and appears in combination with other full-ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, communism, etc., that do provide solutions for all political problems. In other words, populism rarely appears as a pure form but rather as subtypes of populism. In this regard, there is an academic consensus in distinguishing between right and left populist parties as subtypes of populism (March, 2017; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015). In the context of Western Europe, the development of both left and right-wing populism has been closely linked to the process of globalisation (Kriesi, 2014). On the one hand, the loss of national sovereignty in favour of European integration and the mass migration movements are the core programmatic elements of the radical right-wing populist parties. These parties have left behind the connections with Fascism and Nazism, evolving from classic racism to nativism, identified by Mudde (2007) as its core ideological element. Nativism is defined by Mudde (2007) as an ideology that combines nationalism and xenophobia, and claims that states should be defined only by native elements, with all non-native elements (people and ideas) considered as fundamental threats to the nation (e.g. Islam). On the other hand, the radicalisation of capitalism with the consequential loss of state sovereignty in favour of big corporations and international organisations is the core programmatic element of radical left-wing parties. These parties have also tried to find a more respectable profile (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015) by leaving behind the Marxism-Leninism dogmatism. They have embraced the anti-establishment and people-centrism appeals to the detriment of the class struggle discourse and the centralism of the working class as a political subject (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987; Laclau, 2005). Their ideological essence is democratic socialism –or seeking social justice– combined with the values of the 68’s agenda such as feminism, environmentalism, anti-militarism, the protection of minorities’ rights etc. (March, 2008; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015). In comparative terms, right-wing populist parties are more exclusionary and less socio-economic inclined than left-wing populist parties (Mudde and Rovira, 2013). Regarding the degree of populism, Rooduijn and Akkerman (2015) found that left and right positions do not determine how populist political parties are, but their degree of ideological radicalism: i.e. the more (left/right) radical the more populist they are, and vice versa.

Thirdly, Mudde’s definition has also shown its applicability in empirical research (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011, Rooduijn, 2014, Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015, March, 2017). However, we found different interpretations about the combination of the core elements of populism. For instance, the cross-national studies of Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) and Rooduijn and Akkerman (2015), considered the simultaneous presence of people-centrism and anti-elitism to be sufficient to satisfy the ideational definition criteria. This was

answered by the work of Mudde and Rovira (2013) by stating that it is the combination of the three central elements of populism that indicates the presence of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty. More recently, March's case study for the United Kingdom (2017) followed the triple criteria stated by Mudde and Rovira. The latter also considered the principle of popular sovereignty as a substantial and necessary ideological element of populism to the extent that it is the way to reach the ideal typical situation of populism: government by the sovereign people.

In this study, we follow the triple criteria pointed out by Mudde and Rovira (2013) by which the three core elements of populism need to be displayed in order to satisfy the ideational definition criteria. Therefore, our main hypothesis is that the populist parties chosen present the three core elements of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty. In addition, we expect that the selected non-populist parties only present the element of people-centrism combined with the support of specific referendums (e.g. the Brexit referendum), but neither the radicalisation of the popular sovereignty nor the identification of an antagonist relationship between the people and the elite. Finally, we assume that the main differences between right and left populist parties are explained by their host ideologies, more specifically, by the presence or absence of nativism.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to reach the research objectives proposed above, a content analysis of a selection of national election manifestos has been carried, in line with previous studies in this field (March, 2017; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Rooduijn, De Lange & Van der Brug, 2012; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). One of the added values of this strategy is related to the open access status of these documents (they are official and written) giving a well-developed overview of party positions on different issues. They are also reasonably comparable across countries, making them appropriate for cross-national studies (Rooduijn, De Lange & Van der Brug, 2012).

Regarding the sample of the alleged populist parties, it has followed four main criteria: first, this study focuses on significant national political parties of Western European countries; second, political parties characterised by an intense anti-establishment discourse (one of the core elements of populism); third, political parties positioned at the extremes of the left-right ideological scale; and fourth, political parties with parliamentary representation in recent elections.

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey<sup>1</sup> of 2014 has been used to obtain the information of both variables: anti-establishment rhetoric and ideology position. The first variable is presented as a continuum where 0 means a complete absence of anti-establishment rhetoric and 10 means a complete presence. The ideological scale is presented as a continuum where 0 means extreme left and 10 means extreme right.

The selection of the alleged populist parties (Table 1) covers a broad spectrum of them: on the one hand, right-wing parties (SVP and UKIP) and left-wing parties (*Podemos* and *Sinn Féin*); on the other hand, new parties (*Podemos*), parties with marginal parliamentary representation (UKIP), traditional parties with parliamentary representation (*Sinn Féin*) and major parties with both parliamentary and executive representation (SVP). We also have chosen a selection of non-populist ones for each country to get a comparable standard (Table 1). Accordingly, we have also considered the scores in the anti-establishment scale and the ideological position in order to get a wide ideological spectrum: liberal, conservative

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<sup>1</sup> This expert survey estimates party positioning on different policies and ideological issues in a variety of European countries.

and social democratic parties. In total, the analysis has been carried out in eight national election manifestos for 2015–2016 parliament elections.

**Table 1.** Mean values in anti-establishment rhetoric and ideology positions of the political parties included in the analysis

<i>Populist parties</i>	Anti-establishment rhetoric	Ideology position
<i>Podemos</i> (Spain)	10	1.67
<i>Sinn Féin</i> (SF) (Ireland)	8.19	2.13
United Kingdom Independence Party - UKIP- (UK)	9.29	9.14
Swiss People's Party -SVP- (Switzerland)	8.38	8.25
<i>Non-populist parties</i>		
Spanish Socialist Party -PSOE- (Spain)	3	3.8
Labour Party -LAB- (Ireland)	1.5	4.12
Conservative Party -CON- (UK)	2.16	7
Green Liberal Party of Switzerland - GLP- (Switzerland)	3.37	5.25

Regarding the research technique, we have conducted two different content analyses. First, we have carried out the classical content analysis using the sentence as the unit of analysis (total 13,701 sentences). Second, we have run a Key Word in Context (KWC) analysis using the word as the unit of analysis (total 333,381 words). The KWC analysis has two advantages compared with both the classical content analysis and the computer-based content analysis. First, the KWC analysis is much less time-consuming, since the coder only has to decide if the key words selected have the meaning indicated by the codebook, whereas in the classical content analysis, the coder has to read and code all the sentences (or paragraphs) of each manifesto. Second, the KWC does not have the same limits of validity as computer-based content analysis when analysing complex concepts such as populism because it is the coder who decides if the key word has the meaning depending on the context (the sentence).

Accordingly, for both analyses we used the three core elements of populism included in Mudde's definition (2004) for the operationalisation of the concept: 1) anti-elitism; 2) people-centrism; and 3) popular sovereignty. Following Mudde and Rovira (2013), those three elements must be present simultaneously in order to consider the presence of populism: it is the combination of anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty that differentiates populist parties from others that express sporadic anti-establishment appeals, closeness to the people, or that try to radicalise democracy by empowering the people. Those features are understood here as necessary requirements for the presence of populism but not sufficient by themselves.

Therefore, the coding system has followed three categories:

1. Anti-elitism: negative references to a general elite ("the elite") as well as sub-categories ("establishment parties", "the EU bureaucrats", etc.). We do not code negative references to specific parties (e.g. the Labour Party) or specific politicians (e.g. Mariano Rajoy) as anti-elitism. We also include references to practices of corruption, cronyism, etc., as well as criticisms to special interests (lobbies, large corporations, etc.).

2. People-centrism: references to the people, as a whole (“the people”), including references to “the/our nation/country”, “we/us”, “our”, “the working people”, “the average family”, “the society”, etc. We include any reference to the people used as empty signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987).
3. Popular sovereignty: measures to increase the power of the people by mechanisms of direct democracy; general calls to give power to the people; and any proposals promoting empowerment of the people.

In the first analysis, each sentence was coded as 0 (absence), 1 (anti-elitism), 2 (people-centrism) or 3 (popular sovereignty). Eventually, we calculated the percentage of total sentences for each category per manifesto. In the second analysis, we designed three dictionaries of key words (see Appendix 1) for each category: anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty. These words were selected based on theoretical reasons (Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Schedler, 1996) and taking into consideration other similar empirical studies (March, 2017; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). It is important to note that the words selected do not mean populism by themselves; it is the whole sentence that gives meaning to it. For example, the word “we” was coded as people-centrism only when it is used to express belonging to the people (e.g. “if we left the EU...”). For each word, a similar instruction was indicated in the codebook. As in the first analysis, we calculated the percentage of each dictionary per manifesto.

Regarding the different lengths of the manifestos examined, we have followed the research strategy of Rooduijn, De Lange and Van der Brug (2014) by which the sentences and words of longer manifestos have more weight (e.g. the PSOE’s manifesto) than the sentences and words of shorter manifestos (e.g. the GLP’s manifesto). The reason behind this decision is that long and detailed manifestos are expected to contain less populism than short and concise manifestos (Rooduijn, De Lange & Van der Brug, 2014: 567). Therefore, we have calculated the mean length of the eight manifestos (number of sentences for the first analysis and number of words –without appendixes– for the second) and their Z scores<sup>2</sup>. Then, we assigned a different weight to the total sentences and key words of each manifesto based on the Z score obtained for each one<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, for measuring the validity and reliability of the analyses, we conducted three different tests. First, we measured the concurrent validity of the two different analyses. The concurrent validity compares how two or more different methods measure the same phenomenon (Alonso, Volkens & Gómez, 2012). Consequently, we have compared the results of the two different analyses by means of a correlation (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). The results indicate that the scores of the two analyses are very concurrent: the Pearson’s *r* of the total results was 0.994\*\* (significant at  $p < 0.01$ ); 0.967\*\* for anti-elitism; 0.989\*\* for people-centrism; and 0.881\*\* for popular sovereignty. Second, we conducted two different reliability tests: one, to measure the stability of the results of the main coder (test-retest reliability) and another, to measure the reliability between two different coders (test-test reliability). We applied the tests on 5% of the sample and measured the degree of concordance by means a Cohen’s kappa coefficient. Results showed satisfactory levels of reliability for the classical content analysis (0.893\*\*\* for the *test-retest* and 0.724\*\*\* for *test-test*) and high levels of reliability for the KWC analysis (0.941\*\*\* for the *test-retest* and 0.826\*\*\* *test-test*).

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<sup>2</sup> The Z score is a measure of how many standard deviations from the average of the population a data point is.

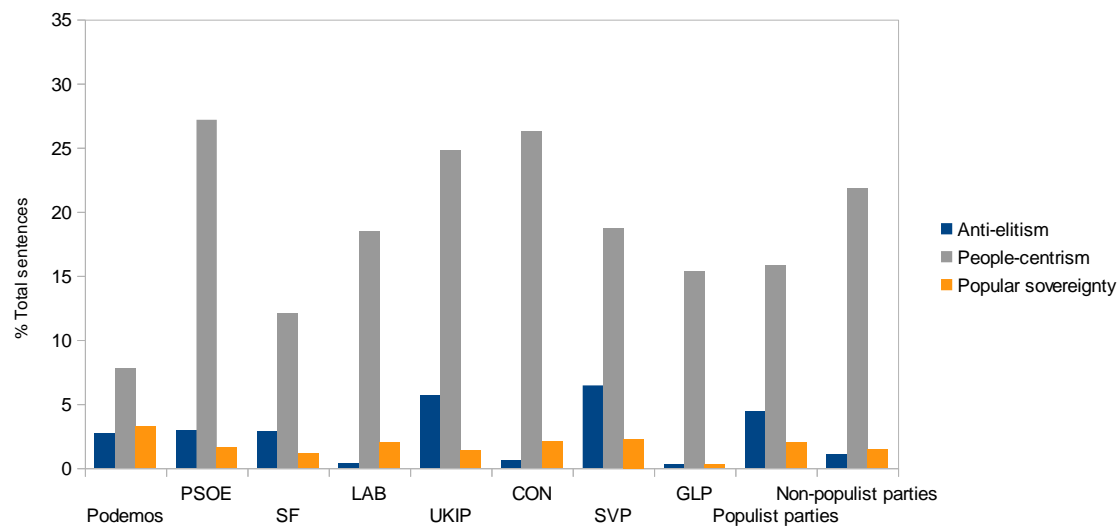
<sup>3</sup> For the manifestos with a Z score between 1 and 2, we gave a weight of 1.3; for the manifestos with a Z score of 2 or larger, we gave a weight of 1.5; for the manifestos with a Z score between -1 and -2, we gave a weight of 0.7; and for the manifestos with a Z score -2 or lower, we gave a weight of 0.5.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Populist parties vs. Non-populist parties

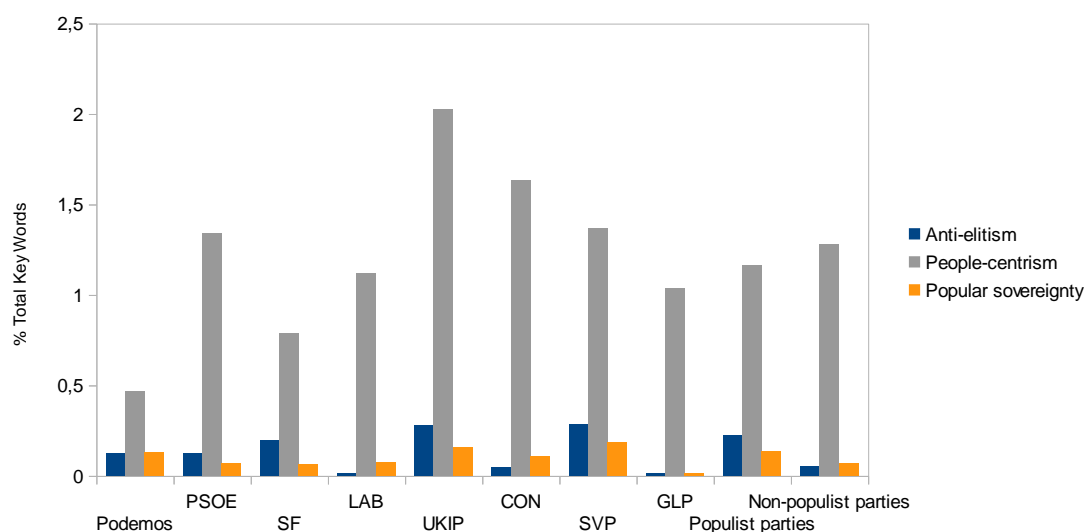
Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the two content analyses for populist and non-populist parties. Since our main theoretical assumption is that the three core elements of populism need to be present simultaneously in order to classify a political party as populist, the results are presented distinguishing those three components: anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty.

**Figure 1.** Classical content analysis: percentage of populist sentences per manifesto (Analysis1)



N (total sentences per manifesto): Podemos: 2090; PSOE: 4423; SF: 1094; LAB: 1664; UKIP: 1268; CON: 1465; SVP: 1459; GLP: 238

**Figure 2.** Key Words in Context Analysis: percentage of key words per manifesto (Analysis2)

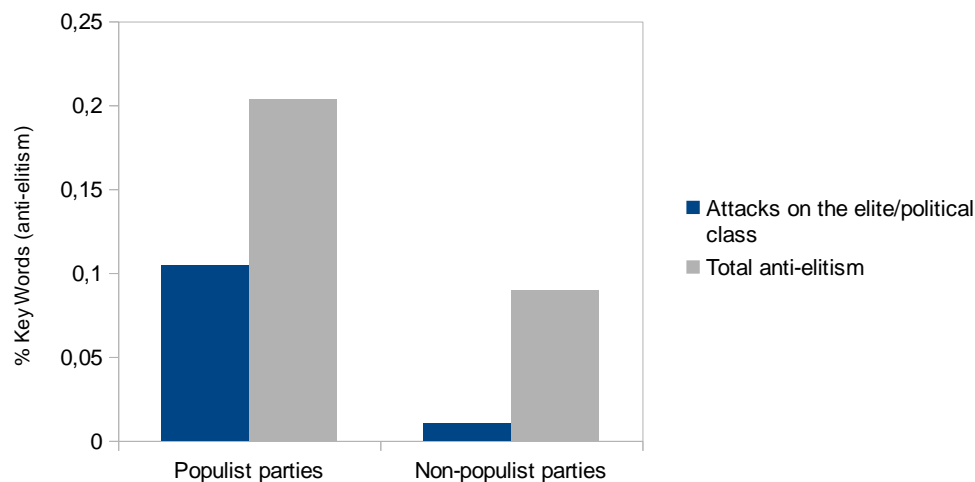


N (total words per manifesto): *Podemos*: 53772; *PSOE*: 128108; *SF*: 22278; *LAB*: 37492; *UKIP*: 27867; *CON*: 30893; *SVP*: 28645; *GLP*: 4326

First, the results show that non-populist parties present higher scores in people-centrism (21.8% of the sentences) than the alleged populist parties of the sample (15.8%) whereas populist parties show higher scores in anti-elitism (4.4%) and popular sovereignty (2%) than non-populist parties (1% and 1.5% respectively). Focusing on individual political parties, the low scores in people-centrism of the two left-wing populist parties of the sample (*Podemos*, 8% and *Sinn Féin*, 12%), are particularly striking in contrast with the high scores found in the PSOE (27.2%) and the CON (26.3%). The highest scores of anti-elitism were found in the SVP (6.4%) and the UKIP (5.7%) whereas the lowest scores were found in the GLP (0.3%) and the LAB (0.4%). Finally, the highest scores in popular sovereignty were found in *Podemos* (3.3%) and the SVP (2.3%) whereas the lowest were found in the GLP (0.3%).

Second, besides the quantitative differences between the alleged populist and non-populist parties we also found fundamental qualitative differences in the Analysis of Key Words in Context.

**Figure 3.** Anti-elitism (% Key Words per manifesto)



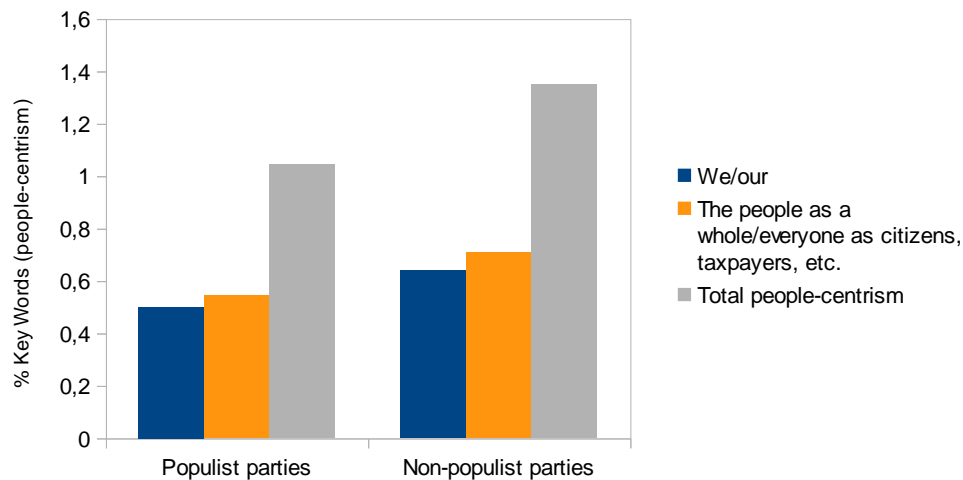
N (total words): Populist parties' manifestos: 132562; Non-populist parties' manifestos: 200819

Figure 3 shows the presence of anti-elitism in the populist and non-populist parties of the sample. As we can observe, besides the quantitative differences –the anti-elitism is higher in populist parties– there is an important qualitative difference between populist parties and non-populist parties with regard to their anti-elitism appeals. While attacks on the elite and political class are more than half of the total anti-elitist key words of populist parties (51.5%), they are residual in the case of non-populist parties (11.5%). In the case of non-populist parties, the anti-elitism is mainly characterised by complaints and proposals against political corruption, monopolies, oligopolies, etc. (68.2%) followed by different statements about special interests groups such as large corporations, lobbies, the wealthiest, etc. (20.3%). In this regard, it is important to note that the PSOE shows the highest score in anti-elitism (2.9%) among the non-populist parties, and even higher than *Podemos* (2.7%). But this pattern is only because the PSOE includes a wide range of anti-corruption proposals in its manifesto: 58.5% of the key words coded as anti-elitism in the manifesto of PSOE were about political corruption, in contrast to the 19.4% of *Podemos*. In the other non-populist parties, anti-elitism barely exists either quantitatively, or qualitatively. On the one hand, the Conservative Party refers to the European Union as



Brussels –which is intended to express remoteness and non-belonging to the EU– to call for the return of power to Britain as well as a few measures to maintain the taxes for the richest in Britain. On the other hand, the Labour Party only refers to the austerity plan imposed by the Troika. Finally, the GLP only refers once to their policies shall be in everyone’s interests rather than in the interests of special groups if they are against “the common good” (p. 2). In contrast, the anti-elitism of populist parties clearly identifies a conflict between the interests of the powerful elite and the interests of the people. This will be analysed in depth in the next epigraph.

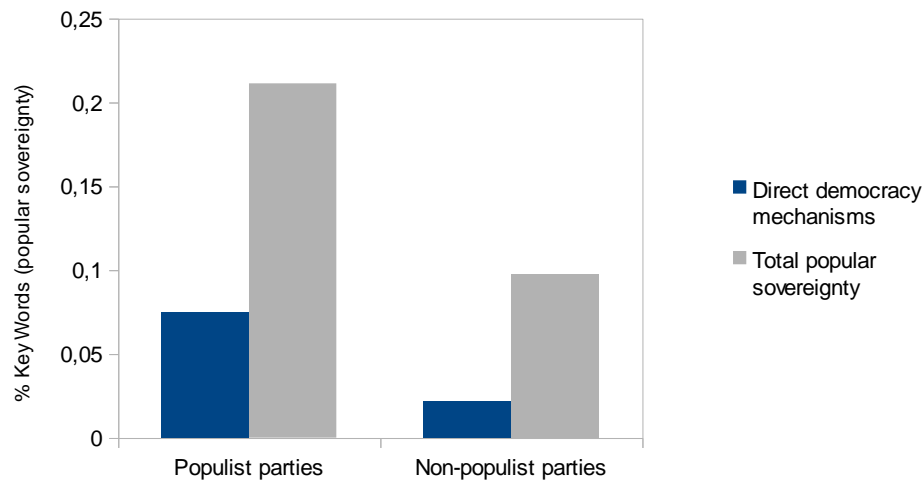
**Figure 4.** People-centrism (% Key Words per manifesto)



N (total words): Populist parties' manifestos: 132562; Non-populist parties' manifestos: 200819

Figure 4 shows the presence of people-centrism in populist and non-populist parties. As we can observe, there is a visible quantitative difference by which the people-centrism is higher in non-populist parties' manifestos than in those of populist parties. However, the distribution of the key words that refer to the people as a whole on the one hand, and the key words that express belonging to the people (we/our) on the other, are quite similar (53% and 47% respectively of the total key words coded as people-centrism in both groups). The high presence of people-centrism in non-populist parties were also found by March (2017) in the British case. March labels this people-centrism in non-populist parties as “demoticism” (2017: 290) and interprets its use as a consequence of their condition of catch-all parties by which they show closeness to the people and belonging to them. In qualitative terms, the main difference in the people-centrism of populist and non-populist parties, is the division the formers generate between “they/them/their” (the corrupt elite) and “we/us/our” (the people to which they belong).

**Figure 5.** Popular sovereignty (% Key Words per manifesto)



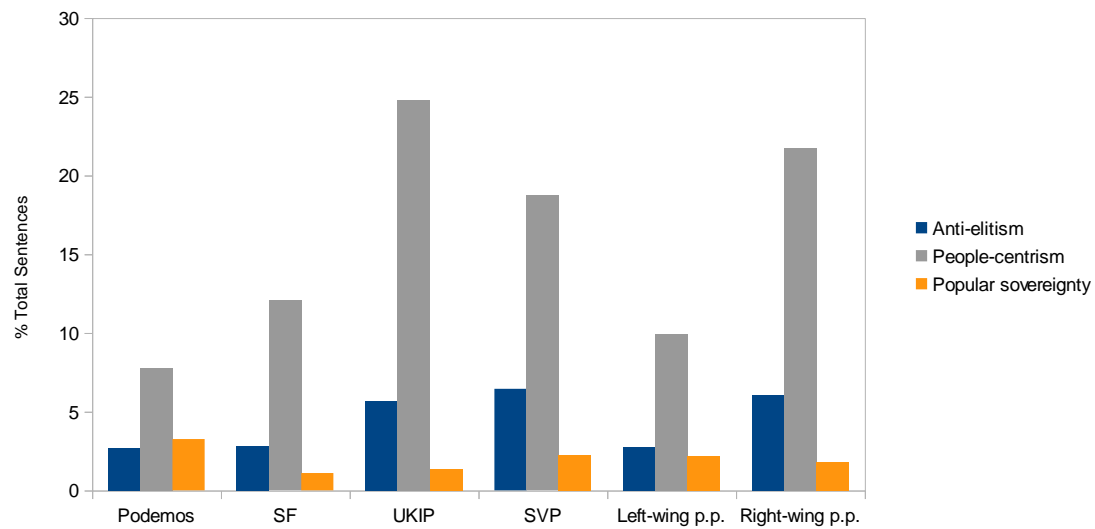
N (total words): Populist parties' manifestos: 132562; Non-populist parties' manifestos: 200819

Figure 5 shows the presence of popular sovereignty in populist and non-populist parties. As we can observe, the populist parties not only present a higher score in popular sovereignty but also in the proposals of direct democracy mechanisms (35.4% of the key words coded as popular sovereignty) than non-populist parties (22.1%). In this regard, the cases of the Conservative Party and Labour Party increase the average of words coded as popular sovereignty for non-populist parties. Both parties showed their support for holding different referendums, such as the Brexit referendum in the case of the Conservative Party and the referendum to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Irish Constitution in the case of the Labour Party. The GLP only supported the semi-direct democracy system in Switzerland once, but it does not propose increasing the use of these mechanisms of direct democracy nor does it propose specific initiatives or referendums. Finally, PSOE does not support the promotion of any referendum –not even the referendum of the independence of Catalonia or the so-called “right to decide”-. All the words coded as popular sovereignty in the PSOE's manifesto were about different ways of political participation for citizens, combining, as they say, representative democracy with another more participative, but none related to increasing the use or the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy. In contrast, the populist parties not only support holding different referendums but they also call for the introduction or the widespread use of different direct democracy mechanisms such as the power of revocation (UKIP and *Podemos*), popular initiatives, etc. Populist parties also state that the people are the Supreme authority of the system (SVP), the boss (UKIP) and call for the return of power to the people (*Podemos*).

#### 4.2. Right-wing populist parties vs. Left-wing populist parties

Figure 6 shows the scores in the three core elements of populism for populist parties. As we can observe, both left-wing populist parties in the sample show the lowest levels of people-centrism (9.9%) and anti-elitism (2.8%), not of popular sovereignty, where *Podemos* shows the highest score of the total sample (3.3%). In contrast, both right-wing populist parties show the highest level of people-centrism (21.7%) and anti-elitism (6.1%). The aggregate scores of populism state that both right-wing populist parties (30%) are more populists than the left-wing populist parties in the sample (15%). By political party, the UKIP shows the highest value of populism (31.8%), followed by the SVP (27.4%), SF (15.9%) and *Podemos* (13.7%). In the following sections, we will analyse the qualitative differences between them

**Figure 6.** Left-right wing populist parties: percentage of sentences per manifesto (Analysis1)



N (total sentences per manifesto): *Podemos*: 2090; SF: 1094; UKIP: 1268; SVP: 1459

#### 4.2.1. Anti-elitism

The four political parties analysed show anti-elitist appeals in their electoral manifestos: they identify a conflict between the people and the elite. In terms of which elite they target (Table 2), the four parties share the anti-political-establishment appeals: they consider the political class to be too powerful, anti-own people and corrupt (Schedler, 1996; Mudde, 1996). They also denounce practices of corruption, cronyism and collusion by mainstream political parties, especially in the case of *Podemos* and *Sinn Féin*. In this sense, UKIP also says: “politics in Britain has become a cartel” (p. 56). They identify themselves as the only parties that really represent the interests of the people in contrast with the others, which put the interests of foreign and liberal elite (UKIP and SVP) or big corporations and bankers (*Podemos* and SF) above those of the people.

Despite the negative references to political parties, they are not anti-party parties (Poguntke, 1996; Mudde, 1996): they do not reject the intermediary and representative function of political parties as institutions but reject the labour of specific political parties (e.g. “the old parties”). Neither do they reject the idea of political representation, but representation by the wrong people (the elite). In general, the parties analysed also accept the main political institutions of their countries (e.g. the Parliament). However, we found some anti-institutional tone in their appeals, especially in the case of the SVP: this party states that the federal institutions (Federal Council overall) are putting the interests of the EU and foreigners above those of the Swiss people and undermining the fundamental pillars of the country (independence, neutrality, direct democracy and federalism). In addition to this, the SVP also shows an anti-state discourse (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995), denouncing an excessive interference of the state in citizens’ lives. This “anti-state” position can be explained by its host ideology, the neoliberal conservatism, which demands a “minimal state” to preserve only national security and free market. *Podemos* also shows some anti-institutional tone in its diagnosis. They state in the introduction of the 2015 election manifesto: “we know and feel that the majority of people are tired of seeing the institutions

defending the interests of the powerful while they remain indifferent to the people's problems<sup>4</sup>" (p. 11).

Regarding the differences between the left and right-wing parties included in the analysis, we see in Table 2 that only right-wing parties show a discourse against foreign elite, cultural and media elite. The main targets of these attacks are the "bureaucrats of Brussels", foreign courts and judges and the "metropolitan liberal elites". These attacks are related to their nativist positions and their idea of a strictly ordered society. On the one hand, both parties consider that foreign judges and the current interpretation of human rights are undermining the sovereignty and independence of their countries in order to execute hard court sentences and deport foreign criminals, among other issues. On the other hand, the metropolitan liberal elite is attacked for discouraging patriotism, as the UKIP says: "We are told [by the metropolitan liberal elite] we should be ashamed of our past; that we must apologise for it. Hints are dropped that wanting to celebrate Britishness' is an act that touches on extremism" (p. 61). Both right-wing parties also identify some ideologies as dangerous for the people, such as the multiculturalism which "has led to an alarming fragmentation of their societies" (UKIP, p. 61) and the "green fundamentalism" supported by politicians and the media (SVP, p. 74). Finally, the SVP also has a hard discourse against the "state media organs" and the "culture bureaucrats". The Swiss party considers that any state intervention in the media as well as in culture promotion reduces independence and increases the risk of "cronyism and wheeling and dealing" (p. 87).

The main aspect where both right-wing parties of the sample differ, is in the criticism of economic elites. On the one hand, the SVP does not identify any privileged situation of bankers, big corporations or multinational companies. On the contrary, the SVP even call for supporting large companies and banks in Switzerland. On the other -and even though the UKIP is also considered a neoliberal party- the 2015 election manifesto of UKIP identifies some conflicts between large companies and small companies, and it calls for the introduction of redistribution measures from large companies to small ones, e.g. in the agricultural sector (p. 47). This party is also very critical of large companies that have taken advantage of the free market of the European Union to avoid paying taxes in the UK. Regarding left-wing parties, *Sinn Féin* shows the hardest attacks on economic powers. The Irish party identifies a "golden circle" in which politicians and bankers use the system to pursue their own interests against those of the "ordinary people" (p. 32). Both left-wing parties call for a modification of the current tax systems that benefit the richest to the detriment of the poorest as well as other aspects of the economic system that threat the economic sovereignty of the people. This is better explained by their host ideologies (socialism and some aspects of anti-capitalism in *Podemos*) than by their populist condition.

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<sup>4</sup> Self-translation (*Podemos* 2015: 11)

**Table 2.** Targets of anti-elitist discourse

	SVP 2015	UKIP 2015	PODEMOS 2015	SF 2016
UNDERTEMINED ELITE	Self-satisfied elites in political, business, society and the media	Too few people Pan-European bureaucratic elite	The shamelessness of a few The powerful	Their friends at the top A circle of wealthy and well connected, seemingly teftlon elites
POLITICAL ELITE	Political elite Political class Politicians The lefties All other parties Bern Federal institutions The state Special interests: asylum industry and integration industry	Europhile political class Politicians Establishment parties The other main parties The old parties Special interests: the pro-EU lobby	The corrupted The institutions The political parties	Government parties The Golden Circle
FOREIGN ELITE	Brussels bureaucracy/bureaucrats EU culture bureaucracy/bureaucrats Foreign courts and judges	The interfering EU A failing super-state (EU) Foreign judges EU bureaucrats Brussels		
ECONOMIC ELITE		Multi-national corporations Wealthy landowners and investors Big businesses Large companies	Large energy corporations Multinational groups Big fortunes Large companies	The Golden Circle The wealthiest The rich Bankers and their friends Corporate interests
CULTURAL AND MEDIA ELITE	Culture bureaucracy State culture The media State media organs The SRG corporation Left-wing intellectuals	The liberal metropolitan elite The 'chattering classes'		
IDEOLOGIES	International egalitarianism Multiculturalism Left-wing redistribution Paternalism of the state Green fundamentalism The current interpretation of Human Rights doctrine	Political correctness The 'green' agenda Multiculturalism		

#### 4.2.2. People-centrism

The main differences between left and right-wing parties regarding people-centrism come from the absence or presence of nativism in their host ideologies. Both right-wing parties analysed refer to a culturally defined people in contrast to the more economic and inclusive conception of the people of the left-wing parties. The former promote a unifying national culture, open to anyone who wishes to identify and respect the values of the nation: for them “this is genuine inclusiveness” (UKIP, p. 61). For the SVP, these values have their roots in Western Christian culture (p. 90) from which individual freedom comes and consequently, the development of democracy (p. 91). Both parties identify multiculturalism as dangerous for the unity of the nation and the preservation of the values of their countries. Right-wing parties also combine the cultural definition of people with a conception of the people “as sovereign”, considering them as the “Supreme authority” of the system (SVP, p. 47). In this regard, the European Union –and also the process of centralization in the case of SVP– is the main threat to the sovereignty rights of the people. This conception of “the people as sovereign” is also shared by the left-wing parties of the analysis although they express it more in economic terms. For both *Sinn Féin* and *Podemos*, some economic agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership threatens “our sovereignty, our democracy, our economy and our Welfare State” (*Podemos*, p. 221). In the case of *Sinn Féin*, the defence of “the people as sovereign” is also related to the unity of the Irish nation. In this sense, *Sinn Féin* includes many references to the preservation of the culture and language of Ireland but unlike the UKIP and SVP, it shows a more inclusive conception of the nation.

The absence or presence of nativism in their host ideologies is also identifiable in the sub-groups to which their measures are directed: whereas right-wing parties state the principle of national priority (“the British/Swiss people first”), left-wing parties not only disagree with this principle but include ethnic minorities, refugees and immigrants as vulnerable collectives that need special protection from the state, especially in the case of *Podemos*. Both left-wing parties endorse activities to combat racism and any discrimination based on cultural, ethnic or national reasons. *Podemos* even proposes extending political rights to foreign residents, such as the active suffrage and the formation of political parties (p. 214).

By analysing the targets of each party, it is also possible to distinguish other features of their host ideologies. On the one hand, we can identify the conservatism that characterises both right-wing parties in contrast with the liberal attitudes of left-wing parties, especially in the case of *Podemos*. The latter have incorporated the sub-groups that are distinctive of “new left” movements such as women, the LGTB collective and ethnic minorities. For both left-wing parties, these sub-groups are considered vulnerable and marginalised whereas they do not appear as special collectives in the manifestos of right-wing parties in the sample. On the other hand, the neoliberalism of the SVP is highly visible if we identify the sub-groups to which their policies are addressed. Besides the appeals to general groups such as families, citizens, etc., the main targets of the SVP are small and medium sized businesses as well as entrepreneurs, considered to be “the real ‘social workers’ in our country” (p.23). It does not address working people (they rarely refer to employees) or particularly vulnerable groups. Surprisingly, this contrasts with the manifesto of UKIP, a political party also considered to be neoliberal. Its manifesto sometimes refers to the rights of the British working people as well as to vulnerable collectives such as disabled people, veterans and “the most vulnerable people in our society”. Both parties do refer to farmers and in the case of the UKIP, British fishermen as well. They consider these sub-groups to have the vital function of “safeguarding and maintaining the basis of production, as well as producing healthy foods near to where they are sold” (SVP, p. 63). Regarding the left-wing

parties analysed, we found that neither of these identify themselves as a workers' party, claim the existence of a working class or a proletariat in society. They of course address the workers' rights but as we showed above, they have a more pluralist vision of society including the collectives of the New Left (women, LGTB, ethnic minorities, etc.). It is important to note that workers have not been completely replaced by those collectives, but the discourse of class struggle and anti-capitalism is completely absent. The working class has also been displaced by references to a homogeneous people: citizens, people, families, etc.

Finally, references to the virtues of the people, is a common feature of populism. In this sense, right-wing parties' manifestos show more people-centrism than left-wing parties' manifestos. Both right-wing parties show many positive allusions to their nations ("Britain is great", UKIP: p. 5) and people, highlighting how welcoming and hard-working they are. *Podemos* expresses its people-centrism putting the people as the central actor within the system: "we can do it because we have the most powerful ally: the people" (p. 11) whereas *Sinn Féin* highlights the values of the Ireland Republic ("built on the foundations of civil and religious liberty, social justice and equality for all citizens", p. 4).

**Table 3.** Targets of the people-centrism discourse

	SVP 2015	UKIP 2015	PODEMOS 2015	SF 2016
HOMOGENEOUS PEOPLE	The people as Supreme authority People as taxpayers People as everyone: citizens, voters	The British people People as taxpayers People as everyone: voters, citizens The nation: proud Britain, our nation... Families	People as everyone: the people, citizens	People as everyone: the people of Ireland, citizens, the average family, etc.
MAIN TARGETS	Small and medium- sized enterprises Entrepreneur Companies Farmers	Small businesses Farmers and fisherman School community: students, teachers, parents... Pensioners and veterans People in vulnerable situation: disabled people, old people, children with special needs, etc.	Workers Vulnerable groups: women, people with disabilities, poor people, vulnerable families (single parent, poor families...), immigrants Marginalised minority groups: LGTB collective, immigrants, refugees Academic community: researchers, students	Workers Farmers and fishermen Vulnerable groups: women, old people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities Marginalised minority groups: LGTB collective, immigrants, refugees School community: students, teachers, parents

#### 4.2.3. Popular sovereignty

All the parties included in the analysis coincide in proposing the introduction or an increase in direct democracy mechanisms to rebalance the power in favour of the people. There are no differences between the right-wing and left-wing parties of the sample regarding the plebiscitary linkages between politics and the people.

We found general calls for empowerment of the people, as UKIP states: “Rebalance power from large corporations and big government institutions and put it back into the hands of the people of this country” (p. 3). The SVP also advocates direct democracy using anti-establishment appeals. This party claims in favour of this system arguing that it is the only one that “prevents politicians from making decisions over the heads of citizens” (p. 8), presenting itself as the only true defender of direct democracy in Switzerland. For the SVP, the Swiss people are the “the supreme authority” (p. 47) and their general will expressed by any mechanism of direct democracy cannot be undermined by any institution or the law. The other three parties do not call for the introduction of a direct democracy system as a substitution of the representative one, but they call for the introduction and generalisation of the main mechanisms of direct democracy. They support holding specific referendums (e.g. the referendum for the independence of Catalonia and the Brexit referendum), the compulsory use of referendums on specific issues (e.g. the participation of armed forces in international conflicts in the case of *Podemos*) as well as the promotion of the use of referendums (e.g. the UKIP proposes to hold a national referendum every two years on the issues of greatest importance to the British public) and popular initiatives (e.g. the introduction of the popular veto initiative). *Podemos* and UKIP also call for the introduction of the “right of recall” by which, the people would have the power to request the anticipation of elections if the government does not comply with the electoral program (*Podemos*) as well as the revocation of public offices (UKIP, *Podemos*). For *Podemos*, the “election manifesto is a contract with the people”<sup>5</sup> (p. 10) and they commit to fulfil it during the whole term. On the contrary, the people will be able to use their power of revocation to get them out of the institutions. Finally, *Sinn Féin* is the least favourable to plebiscitary politics of the populist parties analysed. It calls for holding many specific referendums (for the Irish unity, to reduce the voting age and extend voting rights to citizens in the North and to the Diaspora, to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment, etc.) and promises to restore the economic and political sovereignty of the people but does not propose the generalisation of the use of referendums nor the introduction of other different mechanisms of direct democracy.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of the research was to analyse the presence (or absence) of populism in a selection of alleged populist and non-populist parties in Western Europe, the main features of this political phenomenon, and the differences and similarities between right-wing and left-wing populist parties. In order to reach our goals, we conducted two different content analyses in election manifestos for parliamentary elections held between 2015 and 2016. The concept of populism was operationalized as a combination of anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). In order to identify populist parties from other actors that occasionally show closeness to the people, we followed Mudde and Rovira (2013), who state that the simultaneous presence of those three core elements is a necessary condition.

Firstly, the results showed that the four declared populist parties undoubtedly present the three core elements of populism in their manifestos, whereas the non-populist parties only partially show the combination of two of the three elements: in the case of PSOE, we found a combination of people-centrism with some degree of anti-elitism (focused on political corruption); the Conservative Party and Labour Party show the combination of people-centrism with the support of specific referendums; and the GLP, the combination of people-centrism with a vague defence of a semi-direct democracy system in Switzerland. We also found important qualitative differences between the mentioned populist parties and

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<sup>5</sup> Self-translation (*Podemos* 2015: 10).



the non-populist parties. One, we did not find the identification of a conflict between the elite and the people in non-populist parties, only some attacks to Brussels (Conservatives), the Troika (Labours) and references to political corruption and the existence of special interests groups (PSOE); Two, populist parties use the division “they” vs. “we” to express the antagonism between the people and the elite, whereas non-populist parties only use it to express closeness and belonging to the people as a consequence of their “catch-all parties” condition (March, 2017). Three, populist parties are prone to radicalise the expression of the general will by introducing or increasing the use of direct democracy mechanisms whereas non-populist parties (Conservative Party and Labour Party) only show support for specific referendums.

Secondly, the analysis of populist parties revealed that they coincide in identifying a conflict between the powerful elite (the elite in general and the political elite in particular) and “the common people”. They consider themselves to be the only true representatives of the interests of the people whereas mainstream parties put their own interests above those of the people. With regard to the people, this category occupies a central role as a supreme authority of the system in their manifestos, calling to empower them through mechanisms of direct democracy. Only *Sinn Féin* does not propose the inclusion of more mechanisms of direct democracy in the Irish political system, although it does support holding many specific referendums and restoring popular and economic sovereignty.

Regarding the differences between populist parties, we agree with the results of March’s study (2017) which states that host ideologies are the main source of differences between them. In our research, we found that the ideological element that best discriminates between populist parties is the presence or absence of nativism. As Mudde (2007) pointed out, nativism is the ideological core of radical right-wing populist parties. This is where the exclusionary definition of the people of right-wing populism comes from, as well as a central focus on preserving the nation (culturally defined), in contrast to the inclusionary conception of the people of left-wing populism. But nativism is not only expressed in their conception of the people but also in the subcategories of the elite they attack. Both right-wing populist parties concentrate their attacks on foreign elites and liberal intellectuals for promoting European integration and multiculturalism, whereas the left-wing populist parties focus their attacks on economic powers for threatening the sovereignty of states and the people.

We also found other ideological features that explain some differences between the populist parties of the sample. However, the results of this study, as well as recent developments of right-wing populist parties, indicate that nativism is still the best ideological element when explaining the differences between right and left-wing populist parties. On the one hand, the democratic socialism of left-wing populist parties and the economic liberalism of the right would be useful to explain divergences between populist parties. However, we found that not only the left-wing populist parties in the sample are attacking the economic powers and claiming some redistribution measures, but the UKIP are too. This is not really a surprising finding to the extent that other right-wing populist parties are moving from neoliberal positions to the so-called welfare chauvinism (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Mudde & Rovira, 2012). Moreover, some right-wing parties (e.g. National Front) are combining the economic positions of left-wing parties (e.g. economic redistribution) with nativism (e.g. they claim the welfare state protection should benefit only native citizens). On the other hand, the differences between left-wing and right-wing populist parties were also explained by the conservatism of the latter and the liberal attitudes of the former. However, some right-wing populist parties (e.g. the Dutch Party for Freedom) are combining the liberal attitudes towards different social lifestyles with nativism: they identify the non-native elements of European culture (especially Islam) as dangerous for these different lifestyles (e.g. the freedom and protection from discrimination

of LGTB collective and gender equality). Hence, even in the latter transformation of right-wing populist parties –that are blurring the classic boundaries between the left and right-wing parties– nativism is still present.

To conclude, our results have contributed to confirm that populist parties are characterised by the identification of a conflict between the elite's interests (the elite in general, and the political elite in particular) and those of the people; the central role of the people as a political subject (to the detriment of others, such as the working class); and the radicalisation of the principle of popular sovereignty (especially, by means of the generalisation of referendums). These elements entangle a minimal definition of populism valuable to differentiate between populist and non-populist parties. However, we also found that the people-centrism is highly present in non-populist parties, suggesting that is the combination of anti-elitism and the radicalization of popular sovereignty the element that really discriminates between populist and non-populist parties. Finally, the results confirm that the host ideologies are the main source of differences between left and right-wing populist parties, especially the presence or absence of nativism.

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## **Appendix 1. Key Words in Context - Dictionaries**

### **1. Anti-elitism**

*English version:*

Elite; (political)class; experts; powerful; institutions; parties; politicians; establishment; bureaucrats; London/Dublin/Bern; Brussels; Luxembourg; Strasbourg; Frankfurt; Troika; they; their; bank\*; intellectuals; media; interests; corporations; corporate; lobb\*; rich\*; wealth\*; fortunes; multinational\*; corrupt\*; cronyism; cartel; clientelis\*; collude; collusion; coercion; politicized; golden; impunity; interf\*; monopo\*; oligopo\*; opacity; opaque; handshake\*; politically; pressures; privilege; secre\*; dishonest; shame\*; sham; unscrupulous; unelected; unaccountable; hypocrisy; enemi\*; undemocratic

*Spanish version:*

Eilte; clase(política); expertos; poderosos; instituciones; partidos; políticos; burócratas; casta; Madrid; Bruselas; Luxemburgo; Estrasburgo; Frankfurt; Troika; ellos; sus; banqueros; bancos; medios; intelectuales; intereses; corporaciones; corporativos; lobb\*; ricos; fortunas;

patrimonios; multinacionales; corrup\*; amiguismo\*; cartel; clientel\*; coerci\*; despolitiza\*; politiza\*; giratorias; impun\*; interf\*; monopo\*; oligopo\*; opac\*; oro; partidario\*; partidista\*; políticamente; presiones; privileg\*; secreto\*; injerencia\*; caradura\*; deshonesto\*; enemig\*; vergüenza; antidemocrático\*

## **2. People-centrism**

*English version:*

People; society; communit\*; populatio; public; majority; nation; country; Ireland/Switzerland/Britain; everyone; everybody; electors; voters; families; Irish/Swiss/Briton/British; we; our; pride.

*Spanish version:*

Pueblo; gente; sociedad; comunidad\*; población; público; mayoría; ciudadanía; nación; país; España; todos; ciudadanos; contribuyentes; electores; votantes; familias; personas; españoles; nosotros; nostr\*; \*emos; \*amos; \*ímos; \*omos; orgullo.

## **3. People sovereignty**

*English version:*

Consult\*; decide; initiative\*; referendum; revocation; veto; (direct)democracy; control; say; participat\*; petition; boss; will; sovereign\*; suprem\*; power; empower\*

*Spanish version:*

Consulta\*; decidir; iniciativa\*; referéndum; refrend\*; revocatori\*; revocación; veto; democracia(directa); control; decir; participa\*; petición; jefe; voluntad; soberan\*; suprem\*; poder; empodera\*.