

What is populism anyway? Newspaper representations of populism in Spain and Italy between emptiness and political partisanship

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ABSTRACT

The rise of populism in Europe has been accompanied by increasing use of the term in the media. This has been studied in the European press from the democratic corporatist or liberal media systems, but there is a lack of studies on southern Europe and the polarized pluralist media system. Using a content analysis of newspaper articles, we investigate the journalistic construction of populism in Spain and Italy, two countries belonging to the polarized pluralist media system. Results show that the notion of populism is often negatively connotated but remains quite vague and “empty”. Unlike previous results in northern and western European countries, political partisanship and parallelism play an important role in the use of populism in newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

The debate about populism and its impact on politics and society has been thriving for years, mirroring a rise of populist parties and movements across the world, and an increasing discourse on populism in the news media. While there is a broad range of theories and positions, in the academic world a

consensus has been reached on the main definitions of populism. Dominating the debate are the theories that populism is a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), a political signifier (Laclau 2005), and a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). There is also a certain consensus on how to identify a populist party and the widely cited “PopuList”, developed by a team of academics (Rooduijn et al. 2023), offers an overview of populist, far-right, far-left, and Eurosceptic parties in Europe.

However, while academics are aware of the difficulties of defining populism, and of its often generic, pejorative, and potentially partisan use in the media and public debate (Bale et al. 2011), research on how the news media use the concept of populism is still scarce. Understanding how journalists use this concept is particularly important considering recent indications of a “populist hype” in the news media (Hatakka & Herkman 2022). Some recent research that has been done on this issue has confirmed the widespread pejorative use of the concept, and showed that – at least in Europe – journalists tend to associate populism with the far-right, contributing both to the mainstreaming and the potential trivialization of its ideas (Hatakka & Herkman 2022; Brown & Mondon 2021; Glynos & Mondon 2016). However, most research has focused on countries belonging to the liberal and democratic corporatist models of journalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004) so there is a distinct lack of research on how the news media use the concept of populism in countries belonging to the polarized pluralist (or Mediterranean) model. Moreover, in most of the countries analysed, the main populist forces belong to the far right, and some researchers specifically called for further studies on “countries with prominent left-wing populist actors” (Hatakka & Herkman 2022, p. 1538) and on outlets with different editorial lines and political leanings.

In this study, we combine these two knowledge gaps to make a comparative analysis of a) how newspapers use the concept of populism in Spain and Italy, two countries belonging to the polarized pluralist model of journalism; b) how newspapers construct populism in a country with prominent left-wing populist actors (Spain), and in a country (Italy) with a strong populist party (the Five-Star Movement) which lacks a well-defined political orientation.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We follow a line of research that analyses “populism not as a political ontology (be it stylistic, ideological or discursive) but as a political signifier” (Hatakka & Herkman 2022, p. 1524). While we appreciate the ideational approach and we use categorizations based on it to define the populist parties of our case studies, we believe that, to understand how populism is used and understood by the media, it should be approached as a floating signifier (De Cleen et al., 2018). Populism has become a ubiquitous term, a versatile concept that, because of its contested meaning, can be attributed to a broad range of political actors. Hunger and Paxton (2022) show that this “buzzword” remains largely controversial even in academic debate, and is often conflated with its “host ideologies”, resulting in imprecise applications and a blurring of its meaning. Some literature on anti-populism, moreover, shows how self-proclaimed anti-populists demonize and attempt to marginalize political opponents by labelling them as populists: in these cases, the concept of “populism” functions as an empty signifier with a negative charge (Stavrakakis et al., 2018) that can be attributed to any political opponent (Stavrakakis, 2018). While the ideational approach might be an efficient way to define populism and categorize populist parties and movements, to really understand how the concept is used in society (and, in our specific case, in the news media of the Mediterranean model), we must “shift our attention from populism-as-concept to populism-as-signifier, paving the way for a critical analysis of discourses about populism” (Dean & Maignashca, 2020: 24). That is, we need to understand “the uses of the term ‘populism’ itself: how it is invoked, by whom, and to what purpose and effect” (De Cleen et al., 2018: 651). Considering that populism is such a widespread word in public debates, the study of how social actors use it as a signifier is just as important as the effort to establish an analytically productive concept of populism (de Cleen et al., 2018).

Recent research has argued that the growing presence of populist forces in many countries has led to a widespread use of the term in the public debate. This “populist hype” is often characterized by polarization, a pejorative use of the term, and a trivialized and exaggerated association of the concept

with the far-right (at least in Europe and in other contexts where far-right populist movements have a considerable presence).

Several studies confirm a widespread aura of negativity attached to media populism by the news. A study by Bale et al. (2011) on UK print media shows that populism is usually described negatively, rarely defined, and used to label a broad range of individuals, parties, and policies, often in a politicized way (left-leaning outlets attributing populism to the right, and vice versa). Overall, this study finds that the term populism is used inconsistently and generally pejoratively. Another study on the media coverage of the 2016 general elections in Australia and the US similarly concludes that the label of populism was used by journalists to identify and at the same time dismiss and delegitimize a range of political actors, from Donald Trump in the US to smaller political parties in Australia (Brookes 2018). A study on the Nordic press (Herkman 2016) confirms the common pejorative use of populism and its broad range of meanings. Brown and Mondon (2021) pointed out that the UK newspaper *The Guardian* regards populism as containing the ideological elements of nativism, xenophobia, and the rejection of migrants. Similarly, a recent study (Hatakka & Herkman 2022) comparing six countries (Finland, Sweden, US, UK, Netherlands, and Turkey) concludes that populism has been used in the pejorative sense over the years, but that recently it has been perceived by the media less in terms of its stylistic and communicative elements and more in terms of ideology, which is mostly identified as far right populist. Another study focuses on discourses of populism in opinion-based journalism in France, Greece, Sweden, and the UK, and draws similar conclusions: in the four countries (including Greece, where populism is mainly associated with the left) populism is consistently “represented as an increasingly threatening, dangerous, uncontrollable force” (Thornborrow et al. 2021, p. 8), leading the authors to conclude that the term is anchored in negative frames that dominate across countries. While research has already identified several recurring features in the media representations of populism, little attention has been paid to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) polarized pluralist model of journalism. Except for Thornborrow et al. (2021) (who use Greece as a case study to analyse the metaphorical construction of populism), research has not yet focused on countries belonging to the

Mediterranean model, as pointed out recently by Hatakka and Herkman (2022) who called for further research on the topic. The Mediterranean model is characterized by the low circulation of newspapers, the weak professionalization of journalism, external pluralism, a commentary-oriented style, and a high degree of political parallelism. This is due not only to the direct influence of politics on public broadcasting but also to the widespread partisanship of several private media, which are sometimes owned by individuals or companies with strong political or financial interests. The substantial differences between the polarized pluralist model and the other two models (both characterized by the high circulation newspapers, the strong professionalization of journalism, a relatively high degree of independence, and weaker political parallelism) raise question about whether there might be differences in how populism is constructed and used by newspapers across these models.

To answer these questions, we analyse how the concept of populism is used in the media in two countries belonging to the polarized pluralist model: Spain and Italy. These two countries were also chosen to fill a second gap in this stream of research: namely, the need to analyse countries with strong populist forces that do not lean towards the far right (Hatakka & Herkman 2022). Spain and Italy are interesting case studies: Spain has prominent left-wing populist parties (in particular, Podemos) as well as a strong far-right populist party (VOX); Italy has several prominent right-wing populist parties (i.e. Forza Italia; Brothers of Italy; the League), as well as a political party (the Five Star Movement) that lacks a clear political orientation, thus making it a very particular and interesting target of research.¹ Before going on to describe the two case studies, it is important to highlight our research questions. Our general aim is to expand existing research about how the news media use the concept of populism, by offering new insights into countries with diverse populist forces, as well as newspapers with different editorial lines and political leanings. Thus, our research questions are:

¹ We have translated the names of those parties that are often translated in the international academic literature, while we have kept the original names when they are not.

RQ1: How is populism constructed and used in the news media in two countries belonging to the polarized pluralist model of journalism?

RQ2: Are there major differences in the construction of populism in news media with different editorial lines and political orientations?

RQ3: Is there a degree of politicization of the concept of populism in a journalistic model characterized by weak professionalization and high political parallelism?

RQ4: What are the similarities and differences between the use of the concept of populism in the polarized pluralist model, and in other models of journalism?

To answer the first three questions, we use a dataset constructed from Italian and Spanish newspaper articles; to answer the fourth question, we compare our results with previous research investigating similar issues. We shall now go on to describe our case studies and the features of their political landscape and news media system.

SPAIN AND ITALY: DIFFERENT POPULISMS, AND A POLARIZED PLURALIST MEDIA SYSTEM

Spain's 2019 national elections involved two major populist forces. On the one hand, Podemos, a far-left party, was characterized by "an encouragement of social policies, a reinforcement of the fight against political corruption and an increase of direct democracy" (Pavia et al. 2016, p. 69) and by an anti-elitist approach. Podemos was created in 2014 to politically articulate the discontent expressed by citizens in the *Indignados* movement. Its founders were influenced by the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as by their personal experiences with Latin-American populist governments (Olivas Osuna 2021). On the other hand, VOX is a far-right party ideologically centred on nationalism, nativism, xenophobia, and the values of law and order (Ferreira 2019). It was founded in

2013, emerging when the Popular Party split in opposition to its supposed shift to the centre. Both VOX and Podemos are considered Eurosceptic (see Rooduijn et al. 2023), and they both obtained significant results in the 2019 national elections (15.21% VOX, and 9.91% Podemos²).

At the time of the 2022 national elections, the Italian political panorama was characterized by the presence of four major populist forces. Three of them were right-wing, ranging from the centre-right of Forza Italia to the far right of the League and Brothers of Italy. The fourth, the Five Star Movement, is a populist party initially labelled as hybrid and post-ideological (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2015), and subsequently described as eclectic, given its inconsistent positioning in the left-right spectrum both on economic policies and issues such as migration (Mosca & Tronconi 2019). While in their first government experience in a coalition with the League (2018-2019), they pursued right-wing policies on migration and left-wing policies on the economy (they introduced an unemployment subsidy known as the "citizens' income"), they subsequently participated in a government with mainly left-wing allies, and in the broad-coalition government led by Mario Draghi. Since then, they have shifted towards the centre-left, but their lack of clear positioning and their polyvalent politics persist, making them an interesting case of populism in Europe. On the other hand, the League and Brothers of Italy belong to the populist far right, their ideological core being based on nationalism, hostility to migration, and Euroscepticism (Donà 2022). Finally, Forza Italia can be classified as centre-right populism, lacking the nationalist and Eurosceptic traits of the other two Italian far-right parties. Italy's political environment at the time of the 2022 national elections was therefore characterized by the presence of three different types of populism. The right-wing coalition won the elections, with Brothers of Italy obtaining substantially more votes than the League and Forza Italia, while the Five Star Movement obtained over 15% of the votes (Garzia 2022).

Both countries belong to the polarized pluralist media system (Hallin & Mancini 2004) and, according to some recent research, have done for the last two decades (e.g., Albaek et al. 2014; Brogi & Carlini

² <https://infoelectoral.interior.gob.es/opencms/es/elecciones-celebradas/resultados-electorales/> (accessed on 13 April 2023).

2020). The Spanish media system is highly partisan, and newspapers tend to adopt politically oriented editorial stances aimed at selected audiences (Baumgartner & Bonafont 2015). The Italian media system has increased its market concentration, while continuing to show features of high political partisanship and political parallelism: for example, politics has a substantial influence on public broadcasting, and leading political actors own major tv channels (Brogi & Carlini 2020).

The analysis of how journalists use the concept of populism in these two countries is, therefore, ideal, as it allows us to fill two gaps: one in our understanding of the polarized pluralist model, and the other in our understanding of the contexts in which there are important left-wing populist forces (Spain), or populist forces of unclear political orientation (Italy).

METHODOLOGY

In line with previous research (Bale et al. 2011; Thornborrow et al. 2021; Hatakka & Herkman 2022), we conducted our study on newspapers. We analysed the media coverage on two recent national elections (10 November 2019 in Spain; 25 September 2022 in Italy), focusing on a period of one month before the elections, and one week after. We chose to focus on election periods as populism is often more discussed close to elections (Bale et al., 2011: 116, 120), so we could study its relation to domestic politics and the emergence of potential partisan coverage. While this choice has some limitations (e.g. limited coverage of international politics), we considered it the best option to investigate this particular topic in the polarized pluralist model of journalism. We chose to focus on individual elections, as this is a comparative study of newspapers in a polarized-pluralist context, rather than an analysis of the coverage of populism over time.

To determine whether the concept of populism has been politicized, and what forms of parallelism there may be between newspapers and political forces, we chose a sample of three newspapers from each country with different editorial stances and political leanings. For Spain, we chose *El País* (liberal and centre-left), *elDiario.es* (left-wing, progressive), and *La Razón* (right-wing, conservative). For Italy, we chose *Il Corriere della Sera* (liberal, centre), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (close to the ideas of the Five Star

Movement, see Saccà & Belmonte 2021), and *Il Giornale* (right-wing, conservative). These are some of the most circulated newspapers and they can be used to explore the use of populism in news outlets with different editorial lines and political preferences.

Using the database Factiva, we downloaded all articles containing the root “populis*” in all its possible variations (in the original languages). Rather than using the full article as a unit of analysis (which would have forced us to use only articles on populism), we focused on single sentences mentioning populism. This allowed us to analyse how populism is used as a concept in a variety of articles on a variety of issues. Whenever the single sentence was not sufficient to understand the full use of the concept of populism, we added the preceding or the subsequent sentence, or both. The final sample consisted of 455 articles (253 for Spain, 202 for Italy), and a total of 588 units of analysis (345 for Spain, 243 for Italy). Table 1 summarizes these numbers for each newspaper.

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Il Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale	Total
Articles	80	94	79	91	52	59	455
Units of analysis	123	115	107	105	63	75	588

Table 1 - Research sample (articles and units of analysis)

As part of the content analysis methodology, we read the articles several times, and constructed a codebook (Appendix 1) with categories from the academic literature and the new categories that emerged after these initial readings. The codebook was constructed during several meetings in which potential codes and coding issues were discussed. In particular, following Bale et al. (2011) and Hatakka and Herkman (2022), we coded the main topic, the political actors associated with populism, the use of the term as a noun or adjective, its use in a quote or not, its normative evaluation, and its use in news or opinion pieces. We also added some categories that were relevant to our analysis of the Mediterranean model, by coding whether populism was attributed to a specific political orientation or to specific ideological elements. Finally, we added a “Notes” section to the coding, so that free notes could be added to point out specific features of each unit of analysis. Once the

codebook had been completed, we tested it on a subsample of 60 units, calculating intercoder reliability (three independent coders) for those categories which had a limited number of options. The results were satisfactory (Krippendorff's Alpha between 0.964 and 0.718; percent agreement between 97.8% and 85.6% - see Appendix 2). Intercoder reliability was calculated with the software ReCal3 (Freelon, 2010). Subsequently, we coded the full sample, sharing the material in such a way that it was coded by native or fluent speakers. If doubts emerged, they were discussed by the coders and a decision was taken.

We present the results using qualitative extracts from the articles when necessary to further elaborate on ideas and concepts. Translations are by the authors (see Appendix 3 for the originals).

RESULTS

General overview

Tables 2 to 5 show an overview of how the concept of populism is used in the media analysed. Populism is used mainly in the coverage of politics, with a few differences between countries and outlets. Two Spanish newspapers (*El País* and *elDiario.es*) refer to populism more often in relation to international politics than national or local politics. This difference, however, can be partially explained by the fact that during the period of analysis of the Spanish sample, there were elections in foreign countries with leading populist forces (in particular, Poland and Tunisia), which attracted media coverage. Interestingly, however, the right-wing newspaper *La Razón* was an exception in the Spanish sample, using the category of populism mainly in relation to national politics (44.9% of the units); at the same time, the Italian right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale* referred to populism in international politics comparatively less (9.3%) than the other Italian outlets. A minority of references to populism, moreover, were in articles on "economy" or "culture and entertainment": these articles tended to relate populism to the world of politics. For instance, an article by *El País* presented a theatre show which drew parallelisms between Richard III and "populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair

Bolsonaro, and Boris Johnson” (*El País*, 10 October 2019). The concept of populism was only rarely used in articles about other topics.

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Culture and entertainment	7 (5.7%)	3 (2.6%)	14 (13.1%)	12 (11.4%)	4 (6.3%)	7 (9.3%)
Economy	13 (10.6%)	0	13 (12.1%)	4 (3.8%)	2 (3.2%)	0
International politics	68 (55.3%)	57 (49.6%)	30 (28%)	22 (21%)	10 (15.9%)	7 (9.3%)
National/local politics	31 (25.2%)	55 (47.8%)	48 (44.9%)	66 (62.9%)	47 (74.6%)	61 (81.3%)
Other	4 (3.3%)	0	2 (1.9%)	1 (1%)	0	0

Table 2 – Topics

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
News	52 (42.3%)	86 (74.8%)	35 (32.7%)	29 (27.6%)	20 (31.7%)	40 (53.3%)
Opinion	71 (57.7%)	29 (25.2%)	72 (67.3%)	76 (72.4%)	43 (68.3%)	35 (46.7%)

Table 3 - News or opinion

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Not quote	94 (76.4%)	65 (56.5%)	86 (80.4%)	64 (61%)	41 (65.1%)	53 (70.7%)
Quote	29 (23.6%)	50 (43.5%)	21 (19.6%)	41 (39%)	22 (34.9%)	22 (29.3%)

Table 4 - Indicates if the reference to populism is made in a direct quote or not.

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Adjective	51 (41.5%)	67 (58.3%)	55 (51.4%)	46 (43.8%)	23 (36.5%)	34 (44.7%)
Noun	72 (58.5%)	48 (41.7%)	52 (48.6%)	59 (56.2%)	40 (63.5%)	42 (55.3%)

Table 5 - Is *populis** declined as an adjective or noun?

The analysis also indicates that the concept of populism was mainly used in opinion articles, with a ratio of roughly 2:1 in all newspapers, except for *elDiario.es* and *Il Giornale*. These exceptions could

be explained by *elDiario.es*' abundant use of news agencies' reports, and by the style of *Il Giornale*, where the journalist's opinion is often embedded in the news articles (although this is not an exclusive feature of this outlet, as it is rather common in the commentary-oriented Mediterranean model of journalism). The dominance of the use of populism in opinion pieces, in countries where partisan, polarized, and opinion-based journalism prevails, suggests a high chance of a politicized, partisan representation of populism. It should also be noted that, in all outlets, the concept of populism mainly appears in the journalist's words, rather than in quotes, suggesting that journalists do not simply report the term as used by their sources, but rather make broad use of the concept themselves, constructing it in the particular ways we will see in the sections below. Finally, in line with what is reported by Hatakka and Herkman (2021: 1534), the noun form dominates in Italy, but there is no cross-country consistency, as Spanish newspapers use the concept in both the noun and adjectival forms (Table 5).

Populism: Good, or bad? Left, or right?

Table 6 indicates that populism carries a widespread negative connotation, which dominates in both countries and across all media outlets. Positive connotations are rare. This is consistent with other studies that also show a predominance of negative connotations (Bale et al. 2011; Thornborrow et al. 2021; Hatakka & Herkman 2022). However, a notable number of references to populism are not connotated positively or negatively, but lack a precise evaluation. In our interpretation, this finding should be considered jointly with what emerges from Table 7: namely, that references to populism are mostly not linked to any particular political orientation and remain rather unspecified. For instance, "The season of populism and anti-politics has changed protagonists and extras, and given rise to new formations and movements that have often turned out to be mere meteors" (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 19 September 2022); "[...] With populist movements proliferating, this economist delves into the reasons and offers solutions." (*El País*, 13 October 2019).

Moreover, as is evident from Tables 8, 9, and 10 (discussed in the next section), there are few and often scattered references to specific political parties, political actors, and ideological elements. As will be seen, while some patterns emerge, the numbers are rather low. Altogether, these data indicate an “emptiness” or vagueness of the concept of populism.

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Positive Evaluation	0	0	2 (1.9%)	0	3 (4.8%)	2 (2.7%)
Negative Evaluation	85 (69.1%)	76 (66.1%)	77 (72%)	90 (85.7%)	50 (79.4%)	49 (65.3%)
Neutral Evaluation	38 (30.9%)	39 (33.9%)	28 (26.2%)	15 (14.3%)	10 (15.9%)	24 (32%)

Table 6 - Evaluation of populism

	El País	elDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
No political orientation mentioned	89 (75.4%)	56 (48.7%)	37 (34.6%)	65 (61.9%)	40 (63.5%)	36 (48%)
Left	4 (3.3%)	16 (13.9%)	35 (32.8%)	9 (8.6%)	4 (6.3%)	19 (25.3%)
Right	27 (22%)	42 (36.5%)	30 (28%)	30 (28.6%)	19 (30.2%)	19 (25.3%)
Left and Right	3 (2.4%)	1 (0.9%)	5 (4.7%)	1 (1%)	0	1 (1.3%)

Table 7 - Link between populist features and specific political orientations

When a political orientation is attributed to populism, however, patterns emerge. Firstly, in line with previous research (e.g., Hatakka & Herkman 2022), populism is mainly linked to the right. This connection is so strong that even newspapers with a right-wing orientation often talk about right-wing populism (despite the widespread negative connotation of the term). Nevertheless, the two right-wing newspapers associate populism with the left more than the other outlets: for example, *La Razón* makes more references to left-wing populism than to right-wing populism, and *Il Giornale* makes the same number of references to both political orientations. This points to the partisan use of the concept, which is linked to the political parallelism of some newspapers (as well as its right-wing editorial line, *Il Giornale* is historically linked to the right-wing populist leader Silvio Berlusconi). Mentions of left-wing populism in the two right-wing newspapers are often characterized by negative

evaluations. For instance, *La Razón* (16 November 2019) claims that “[Pedro Sánchez] is capable of saying in the media that the Socialist Party would never agree with populism because it only brings poverty, ration cards, lack of democracy and Bolivarian republics, and the next day, agree with them with absolute impudence and cynicism”; *Il Giornale* (22 September 2022) describes the Democratic Party as being “[...] too inclined to the left, in pursuit of the increasingly blatant populism of the Five Star Movement”. In both cases, the strategy is to attack left-wing non-populist parties by associating them with populist parties (Podemos and the Five Star Movement) described as left-wing extremists. This reinforces the hypothesis of the partisan use of the term “populism”, as it shows that the “populist” label often works as a form of delegitimization, for both the right and the left, depending on the editorial lines of newspapers.

Who are the populists? Parties, politicians, ideological elements

Tables 8 and 9 show the most common parties and political figures labelled by newspapers as "populist" (or considered to have populist traits). These tables are separated by country, as the most mentioned political actors differ in the two countries and articles often focus on national politics. The tables include only those parties/politicians mentioned more than once in at least one newspaper or mentioned in all the newspapers of the country considered. While we also coded non-political individuals labelled as populists, we eventually decided not to use this data, as the individuals were mentioned very rarely, so this category is irrelevant to our analysis. Table 10 highlights the most common ideological elements attached to populism by newspapers: in this case, both countries are presented in the same table, as there was considerable overlap. We have used only those ideological elements that appear a minimum of three times in at least one newspaper.

Party/Movement	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Democratic Party	5	0	6
Brothers of Italy	1	1	1
League	5	1	2

	12	3	17
Political figure	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Giuseppe Conte	5	8	17
Matteo Salvini	6	2	3
Giorgia Meloni	6	3	4
Silvio Berlusconi	2	0	1
Beppe Grillo	2	0	0
<i>Marine Le Pen (France)</i>	3	0	0
<i>Viktor Orbán (Hungary)</i>	2	0	0
<i>Donald Trump (USA)</i>	2	0	0
<i>Jean-Luc Melenchon (France)</i>	0	2	0
<i>Vladimir Putin (Russia)</i>	2	0	0

Table 8 - Political parties/movements and political figures mentioned in the Italian sample (foreign ones are in italics)

Party/Movement	El País	ElDiario.es	La Razón
Vox	9	9	11
Unidas Podemos (coalition)	2	0	5
Podemos	0	3	5
Mas Pais	0	2	1
Ciudadanos	1	1	1
PSOE	0	0	3
<i>Law and Justice (Poland)</i>	7	1	2
<i>Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Poland)</i>	0	8	0
<i>People's Party (Canada)</i>	0	2	0
<i>SVP (Switzerland)</i>	2	0	0
<i>AfD (Germany)</i>	0	0	3
<i>Qalb Tunis (Tunisia)</i>	1	4	0
Political figure	El País	ElDiario.es	La Razón
Pablo Iglesias	1	3	6
Santiago Abascal	0	2	3
Pedro Sánchez	2	2	8
Íñigo Errejón	0	2	1
<i>Alberto Fernández (Argentina)</i>	0	0	4
<i>Evo Morales (Bolivia)</i>	0	1	5
<i>Donald Trump (USA)</i>	11	7	4
<i>Jaroslav Kaczynski (Poland)</i>	2	0	2
<i>Matteo Salvini (Italy)</i>	2	1	3
<i>Christina Kirchner (Argentina)</i>	0	1	3

<i>Boris Johnson (UK)</i>	4	0	4
<i>Nigel Farage (UK)</i>	0	0	2
<i>Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil)</i>	3	0	3
<i>Marine Le Pen (France)</i>	3	0	2
<i>Nicolas Maduro (Venezuela)</i>	0	0	2
<i>Justin Trudeau (Canada)</i>	2	0	0
<i>Jean-Luc Melenchon</i>	2	0	0
<i>Nabil Karoui (Tunisia)</i>	1	17	0
<i>Janus Korwin-Mikke (Poland)</i>	0	3	0
<i>Maxime Bernier (Canada)</i>	0	2	0
<i>Chi Hyun Chung (Bolivia)</i>	0	2	0

Table 9 - Political parties/movements and political figures mentioned in the Spanish sample (foreign ones are in italic).

A first glance at the data shows a relatively low association of populism to specific political parties and politicians. In fact, the numbers are so low that quantitative comparisons are nearly impossible. This confirms that populism is often used by newspapers as an “empty” concept, a generic indicator of a political area that is not well-defined.

However, when focusing on more qualitative aspects of the content, the data also indicate a certain degree of politicization of populism in the newspapers of both countries. In Italy, for instance, the focus is clearly on national political actors. The “populists” identified by the Italian outlets are generally considered populists by the academic literature, suggesting that they are “correctly” identified. The only exception in the Italian case is the centre-left Democratic Party, which does not fit the definition of “populist” but is, however, the second party most associated with populism by the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*. This indicates quite a strong partisan use of the term, with the apparent aim of delegitimizing a non-populist party. For instance, the Democratic Party is described as torn apart “between supporters of the populist drift in alliance with the *grillini* [members of the Five Star Movement], and the reformist resistance” (*Il Giornale*, 26 September 2022). Moreover, while both *Il Giornale* and *Il Corriere della Sera* often associate populism with the Five Star Movement, this is not true for *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. Giuseppe Conte, leader of the Five Star Movement, is associated with populism mostly by *Il Giornale*, but also sometimes by other outlets, including *Il Fatto Quotidiano*.

Il Fatto Quotidiano (usually considered closer to the Five Star Movement than other newspapers) associates Giuseppe Conte with populism more frequently than other political leaders. Given the widespread negativity attributed to populism, this would suggest a lack of political partisanship. But what is striking is that many articles by *Il Fatto Quotidiano* associate Conte with (negatively connotated) populism, but then immediately dissociate themselves from this point of view by using irony or by putting the term between inverted commas. For instance, in two articles (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 5 September 2022; 3 October 2022), the journalist quotes pieces from other newspapers that associate populism with Conte or the Five-Star Movement, and subsequently ironizes over this use of the term, implying that it has been misused. In another article, the writer claims that the “*reddito di cittadinanza*” (“citizens’ income”, introduced by the Five-Star Movement in 2019) is mislabelled as populist by other media:

The very fact that the reddito di cittadinanza has leapt to the fore [of public debate] demonstrates that the need for state intervention is now explicit both among entrepreneurs, who make continuous requests for reimbursements, bonuses and super-bonuses, and among the [members of the] underclass who claim they have a right to survive thanks to various citizens’ incomes, pensions, and emergency incomes. In the first case, journalists speak of the farsightedness of rulers; in the second case, they speak of “populism”, using a word that they now use to indicate everything they don’t like. (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 30 September 2022).

Examples such as these are common in this outlet’s articles, and they are particularly interesting for several reasons: firstly, they show a degree of partisanship in the use of the term populism, as the newspaper contests the attribution of populist features to Giuseppe Conte and the Five Star Movement; secondly, this discursive construction of populism indicates that its negative connotation is hard to reverse, and the strategy chosen by *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, instead, is to claim that the

“populist” label is misused; thirdly, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* acknowledges that the label of “populist” can be used discretionarily to label and delegitimize political actors. Thus, the analysis of this outlet confirms both the strength of the negative connotation attributed to populism, and its partisan use by some news media.

The Spanish case presents similar results: all the Spanish outlets associate populism to VOX in most cases, confirming the widespread association between populism and the far right. However, while *El País* and *eDiario.es* tend to focus on right-wing politicians and parties, *La Razón* often associates populism with the left, in particular the far-left party Podemos, the far-left coalition Unidas Podemos, and the PSOE (the non-populist Spanish Socialist Party), and the leaders Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE). Moreover, *La Razón* mentions more than once several leaders of the populist left in South America (Alberto Fernandez and Christina Kirchner in Argentina; Evo Morales in Bolivia; Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela). While the number of mentions should be taken with a grain of salt, given their overall very low frequency, they point to differences in associating populism to specific political figures. However, the table also suggests a scattered and generic attribution of populism, reinforced for instance by *eDiario.es* focusing broadly (and for no particular reason, except the upcoming election) on Tunisian candidate Nabil Karoui, usually defined as “populist” without further explanation.

	El País	eDiario.es	La Razón	Corriere della Sera	Il Fatto Quotidiano	Il Giornale
Authoritarianism/illiberalism	13	4	1	5	3	0
Xenophobia/anti-immigration	2	3	4	2	3	1
Fascism/right-wing extremism	13	10	2	3	3	2
Communism/left-wing extremism	1	2	11	1	0	2
Extremism (generic)	1	1	3	3	0	0
Socialism/statism/welfarism	3	2	3	6	1	4
Euroscepticism	6	2	2	3	1	0
Nationalism/sovereignism	16	11	15	18	8	5
Conservatism	0	3	2	1	0	2
Demagogy/anti-politics	9	9	2	3	1	4
Protest/anti-globalism	2	0	2	1	0	0
Ecologism	0	0	0	0	0	4
Regionalism/Independentism (including Catalan)	4	7	9	0	0	0

Table 10 - Ideological elements attached to populism.

As for the ideological elements attached to “thin-centred” populism, nationalism is the most present across all outlets (suggesting once again an association between populism and the far-right). While research on populism in Europe has shown that many populist parties currently belong to the far-right of the political spectrum (including VOX in Spain, and the Brothers of Italy and the League in Italy), and that they sometimes pose a threat to liberal democracy, the association between populism and authoritarianism or illiberalism is mentioned relatively rarely in the media. If it is mentioned, it is mainly by the liberal newspapers *El País* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, and to a lesser extent by *elDiario.es* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. It is only mentioned once by the right-wing *La Razón*, and never by *Il Giornale*. The association between populism and the extreme right in Spain works along similar lines: while the association is made 13 and 10 times by *El País* and *elDiario.es*, it is nearly absent from *La Razón* which, on various occasions, associates populism with the extreme left. Again, while this suggests a qualitatively partisan perspective on populism, these low numbers lead us to conclude that populism remains largely “empty”. Other ideological elements which are often linked to populism in the academic literature (e.g., Euroscepticism, conservatism, anti-globalism, extremism) appear very rarely in newspapers. In terms of ideological content, the concept of populism appears to remain rather empty in newspapers.

When there is an association between populism and ideological elements, however, qualitative data suggests that it has potential partisan uses. This is the case, for instance, of “demagogy/anti-politics”: these ideological traits are often attributed by *elDiario.es* to VOX (e.g. “VOX is an anti-system party, demagogic and populist [...]” [*elDiario.es*, 15 November 2019]; “José Luis Martínez, deputy of Ciudadanos for Murcia in the last legislature, has indicated that VOX’s contribution to the Diputación Permanente is ‘populism, demagogy and the show of rudeness’” [*elDiario.es*, 22 October 2019]), and on occasion by *Il Giornale* to refer (implicitly or explicitly) to the Five Star Movement (e.g. “This electorate, which came from the Five-Star Movement, [...] is a populist, anti-system magma that

expects a revolution from the government of Italy" [*Il Giornale*, 28 September 2022]). Regionalist and independentist ideological elements are absent in Italy, but present in Spain, where they are used, for instance, by *La Razón* to attack the far left and the Catalan independentists. *La Razón* talks about Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as "[...] subjected to the coercion and blackmail of the separatists and the Stalinists of populism" (*La Razón*, 12 November 2019), and claims: "[...] we will not stop insisting on the matter, an alternative to the conjunction of the populist extreme left with separatism is possible [...]" (*La Razón*, 16 November 2019). The other two newspapers use a more neutral tone, and *elDiario.es* focuses not only on Catalan independentism but also on other regionalisms in Spain. This suggests that, in an exercise of political parallelism based on Spanish nationalism, *La Razón* and Spanish right-wing parties associate Catalan independentism with (far-left) populism to criticize both.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In our analysis, we have encountered a complex and entangled construction of the concept of populism in newspapers. However, two defining features of the use of populism in the Spanish and Italian press can be identified: emptiness, and political partisanship. Looking on populism as a political signifier, we found that it is not always filled with specific content; rather it is associated with particular political actors, ideologies, or even a normative evaluation. Populism often appears as a generic and vague term.

In other cases, however, populism is actually used as a floating signifier (De Cleen et al., 2018). Journalists use the concept of populism more often in opinion pieces than in news pieces (with the only exception of *elDiario.es* and *Il Giornale*, the latter having quite a balanced presence of the concept in both types of articles), and outside direct quotes, which points to an informed use of the concept. Populism appears to be firmly anchored to political issues, as well as to negative normative evaluations; it is also anchored quite firmly (although not exclusively) to right-wing and far-right parties and ideologies. This confirms previous research conducted in the liberal and democratic corporatist models of journalism (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Bale et al., 2011), and points in the

direction of the conclusions drawn by Thornborrow et al. (2021: 8), who claim that rather than “floating”, populism “appears to be very firmly anchored in common negative frames” across European countries.

However, populism’s “floating” nature appears more clearly in a third factor that emerged from our analysis: namely, political partisanship, which is characteristic of the polarized pluralist model. For instance, we notice how right-wing newspapers attempt to introduce “counter-hegemonic” associations of populism with the left in general, and centre-left parties such as the Socialist Party (Spain) and the Democratic Party (Italy) in particular. By anchoring the concept of populism to a negative frame, its association with left-wing parties seems to seek to delegitimize the “opponent” and reveals a partisan use of the term. This partisan use of populism is mainly evident in qualitative aspects of the texts. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, for example, makes use of irony to contest the negatively connotated association of populism with the Five Star Movement and its leader, Giuseppe Conte. We notice that ideologies such as illiberalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing extremism are scarcely used in association with populism by *La Razón* and *Il Giornale*, while populism is sometimes associated with left-wing extremism and, in the case of Spain, Catalan independentism. With its widespread negative connotation, populism is used by partisan media not only to label and delegitimize political actors with different political ideas (as pointed out by Stavrakakis, 2018) but also to engage in battles to re-signify populism and attribute it to specific political actors to restore their legitimacy, as in the case of *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and the Five Star Movement. A comparison between our research and existing literature suggests that these features are more evident in the polarized pluralist model, and in news outlets characterised by a certain degree of political partisanship.

To sum up, this research extends our understanding of how the press conceptualizes and uses populism. The generally negative tone associated with populism is confirmed, as well as the fact that populism is rarely defined in the press (Bale et al. 2011). This combination of negativity and vagueness has been linked to populism being used by the press to delegitimize a broad range of political actors (Bale et al. 2011). In the journalistic culture of the polarized pluralist model of Spain and Italy, the

partisan media, rather than acting as the watchdog of power, exploit this delegitimizing use of the concept of populism to attack political “opponents”. The negative connotation of populism appears to be so strong that outlets that hold a positive view of some populist forces tend to attack the label rather than attempt to reframe populism positively.

This combination of emptiness and political partisanship may have significant consequences. For instance, Brown and Mondon (2021) pointed out that, since media have agenda setting and framing power, the abuse of an empty concept can distract from more important issues or labels; if a concept is bent to partisan interests, moreover, it can become confusing and eventually lose any analytic or explanatory power it might have. “Populist hype”, as practised in the media, appears to be more a matter of quantity than of quality: as a public discourse develops, the vague, generic, and partisan overuse of a concept may lead to trivialization (Brown & Mondon, 2021) and the weaponization of the concept itself. The boundaries of populism are blurred by the vagueness and confusion that surround it: its emptiness is never really filled, its meaning is never really anchored, and it ends up being a meaningless, albeit delegitimizing, label.

Our research has some limitations, that might be addressed by future research. In particular, we have focused on two electoral periods in different years: this might affect our results, and further research could look at how populism is constructed in daily news outside of election times, as well as across years. It would also be interesting to investigate if domestic populism is constructed differently from populism abroad. Moreover, while we tried to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, further research could focus (for instance, through critical discourse analysis) on the nuances of how populism is constructed in journalistic texts. Further research should also look at the use of populism in the populist press and in the far-right alternative media that have emerged around the world in recent years, to check whether political partisanship and political parallelism with populist forces can lead to particular uses of the concept even in the liberal and democratic corporatist model. Research based on interviews, focus groups, and surveys could also investigate how journalists individually understand

populism, why they tend to use it negatively or vaguely, and how some of them politicize the concept to fit the editorial line or political agenda of their media outlets.

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