



COMMUNICATION OF EUROPEAN POPULIST LEADERS ON *TWITTER*: AGENDA SETTING AND THE “MORE IS LESS” EFFECT

Comunicación de los líderes populistas europeos en *Twitter*: construcción de la agenda y efecto “más es menos”



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Abstract

The populist phenomenon has acquired great relevance during the last decade. The emergence of new populist actors and the consolidation of the use of social media such as *Twitter* are transforming the field of political communication. The objective of this paper is to know the agenda set by the leaders of the main European populist political parties on *Twitter*, as well as the strategy they use and the user interaction achieved. The sample consists of the 2,310 tweets published by the leaders of *Podemos*, the *5 Stelle Movement*, France's *National Front* and *UKIP* during three random time periods. The results show a low degree of thematic fragmentation, the launch of proposals instead of attracting voters, and the existence of a strong negative correlation between the number of published tweets and user interest.

Keywords

Political communication; Populism; Social media; *Twitter*; Agenda-setting; Leadership.

Resumen

El fenómeno populista ha adquirido una gran relevancia durante la última década. El surgimiento de nuevos actores populistas junto con la consolidación del uso de redes sociales como *Twitter* están transformando el campo de la comunicación política. El objetivo de este artículo es conocer la agenda planteada en *Twitter* por los líderes de los principales partidos

Manuscript received on 10-05-2018
Approved on 03-10-2018

políticos populistas europeos, así como la estrategia que emplean y la respuesta obtenida por parte de los usuarios. La muestra está integrada por los 2.310 tweets publicados por los líderes de *Podemos*, el *Movimento 5 Stelle*, el *Frente Nacional* y el *UKIP* durante tres periodos temporales aleatorios. Los resultados plantean un bajo grado de fragmentación temática, el lanzamiento de propuestas frente a la captación de votantes y la existencia de una fuerte correlación negativa entre el número de tweets publicados y el interés de los usuarios.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política; Populismo; Medios sociales; *Twitter*; Agenda-setting; Liderazgo.

Alonso-Muñoz, Laura; Casero-Ripollés, Andreu (2018). "Communication of European populist leaders on *Twitter*: Agenda setting and the 'more is less' effect". *El profesional de la información*, v. 27, n. 6, pp. 1193-1202.

<https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.nov.03>

1. Introduction

Populist parties and leaders are gaining an increasingly prominent role in Western democracies. In the words of **Mudde** (2004, p. 1) we are witnesses of a "populist zeitgeist", the emergence of a new era in which populist political parties have been introduced in numerous European parliaments. The *Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)*, *Party for Freedom (PVV)* in the Netherlands or the *Alternative for Germany (AfD)* achieved the support of more than 20% of the electorate in the last elections. Others, such as *Law and Justice (PiS)* in Poland or the *Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union* in Hungary, even govern in their respective countries. Recently, in the Italian March 2018 elections, *Movimento 5 Stelle* obtained 32.66% of the votes, making it the most voted party.

This increase in support for left-wing and right-wing populist political actors (**Rooduijn**, 2015) is due, amongst other factors, to the increased use of social media (**Mudde**, 2016). Platforms such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* allow them to skip the formalities from conventional media and share their messages much more directly with their audience (**Engesser; Fawzi; Larsson**, 2017). This way, they can set an alternative agenda to that of conventional media (**Enli; Skogerbø**, 2013; **Galán-García**, 2017) and launch functions ranging from informative self-mediation (**Cammaerts**, 2012) to interaction with the public (**Alonso-Muñoz; Marcos-García; Casero-Ripollés**, 2016), aspects that redefine the role played by populist political actors in political communication and their relations with the public and journalists (**Jungherr**, 2014).

Research on the evolution of populism on the Internet and social media at a comparative level is still scarce, and existing research focuses on the analysis of electoral periods (**Van-Kessel; Castelein**, 2016; **Engesser et al.**, 2017; **Ernst; Engesser; Esser**, 2017). Thus, the objective of this article is to analyse how *Twitter* is used by the leaders of four European populist European parties outside electoral periods to analyse their usual communications strategy.

1.1. Populism in the digital environment

Communication plays a fundamental role in the development and growth of populism (**Jagers; Walgrave**, 2007; **Block; Negrine**, 2017). While the traditional media context makes it difficult to get into the news (**Shoemaker; Vos**, 2009), the digital environment allows the circumvention of the filter of

conventional media that are often hostile to them (**Groshek; Engelbert**, 2013), allowing their messages to reach citizens directly (**Bennet; Manheim**, 2006; **Vaccari; Valeriani**, 2015). Populist politicians capitalise the power and influence of social media in the development of public opinion by disseminating populist ideas, such as attack on the elites or defence of the people (**Engesser et al.**, 2017). **Gerbaudo** (2014) calls this phenomenon Populism 2.0.

Twitter offers great advantages to populist political actors. Its immediate, free-of-charge, easy to use, interactive capacity and virality make *Twitter* an essential tool for the communication strategy of this type of actor, who often have more limited budgets than conventional parties (**Strandberg**, 2008). Precisely, it is the last two characteristics that attract the most the attention of the populists. On the one hand, the fact that *Twitter* offers an unmediated communication allows them to maintain direct contact with the people, the main recipients of their messages, and elude their enemies, the elites, who control the conventional media (**Van-Kessel; Castelein**, 2016).

On the other hand, the viralising capacity of *Twitter* allows its messages to reach a greater number of people quickly and easily (**Bartlett**, 2014; **Elmer**, 2013) and even to be able to access the media agenda more easily (**Casero-Ripollés; Feenstra; Tormey**, 2016). This aspect is very useful for populist political actors given the difficulty they have in disseminating and introducing their own issues and approaches in society. In addition, the fact that social media encourage homophily (**Colleoni; Rozza; Arvidsson**, 2014) allows their messages to have a better and greater reception by their followers, who are more receptive to listening and retransmitting them, generating an echo chamber dynamic (**Jamieson; Cappella**, 2008; **Jacobs; Spierings**, 2016).

Research such as that of **Enli** (2017) has demonstrated that social media has a great impact on the definition of the public agenda, especially for those actors that are not part of the elite. The case of *Podemos* is paradigmatic in this sense. Through the activation of the two-way street mediatization, the party managed to incorporate its proposals into conventional media (**Casero-Ripollés; Feenstra; Tormey**, 2016).

Previous bibliography on the agenda posed by political actors on *Twitter* has focused on electoral campaigns and highlighted the fact that electoral acts and media-related

issues cover a greater number of messages in their communicative strategy (Zugasti; Pérez, 2016; López-Meri; Marcos-García; Casero-Ripollés, 2017). However, some authors warn of the need to study other time periods, since the digital environment favours the so-called permanent campaign (Vergeer; Hermans; Sams, 2013), in which the communication efforts typical of the electoral periods are delayed in time (Vaccari, 2008), with only intensity varying over each period (Strömbäck, 2007).

López-García's research (2016) highlights that new political actors focus more on form than substance, making an intense use of cyber-rhetoric (Stromer-Galley, 2014) with the sole objective of gaining votes. Populist leaders and parties differ mostly according to their ideology. Those on the left such as *Podemos*, focus on the defence of social aspects such as pensions or the rights and freedoms of the people and on criticizing the corruption of the elites (Casero-Ripollés; Sintes-Olivella; Franch, 2017). On the other hand, those on the right choose to criticize immigration, collectives such as refugees or the Muslim culture (Wodak, 2015; Fuchs, 2017), promoting an exclusionary political point of view. In addition, they also question supranational entities such as the *European Union* (Mammone, 2009).

In all these cases, concrete proposals are relegated to the background and give way to frame based on political strategy and power struggles (Strömbäck; Dimitrova, 2006; Strömbäck; Aalberg, 2008). The aim is to gain as many votes as possible, something that authors such as Patterson (1993) or Berganza-Conde (2008) have related to political disaffection and cynicism towards the political class, an aspect that is exploited by populist parties and leaders. (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). This would explain the fact that users respond better to content that refers to criticism (Lee; Xu, 2018), humour (Marcos-García; Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2017) or politainment (Mazzoleni; Sfondini, 2009).

2. Method

The main objective of this research is to identify the *Twitter* use of the leaders of the main European populist parties. Specifically, it seeks to recognise:

- O1. The thematic agenda posed by these actors in their *Twitter* profile.
- O2. The strategy used by the populist leaders in terms of sharing of programmatic proposals (*issue frame*) or obtaining votes (*game frame*).
- O3. The interest attained by *Twitter* messages launched by populist leaders through retweets and favourites.

To achieve our objective, the technique of quantitative content analysis is used, which makes it possible to understand the structure and the components that form the messages (Igartua-Perosanz, 2006). The sample of this research consists of the leaders of four European populist political formations. In particular, we analyse the *Twitter* profiles of:

- Pablo Iglesias (*Podemos*, Spain),
- Beppe Grillo (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, Italy),
- Marine Le Pen (*National Front*, France), and
- Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall (*UKIP*, United Kingdom).

It should be noted that both Grillo, since September 2017, and Nuttall, since June 2017, have left the leadership of their respective parties. For the selection of the sample, two criteria were considered:

- the ideological axis, which highlights communication differences between left-wing and right-wing political actors. Iglesias and Grillo are left-wing political actor actors, while Le Pen, Farage and Nuttall are right-wing political actors;
- the old/new axis, taking into account the trajectory of the political formations they belong to. *Podemos* and *M5S* are political parties of recent creation as they are 4 and 9 years old respectively. For its part, the *Front National* (founded in 1972) and the *UKIP* (1993) have a much more extensive time trajectory.

This article seeks to know the usual communicative strategy of populist political leaders, avoiding exceptional periods. Therefore, the analysis has excluded the electoral campaigns considering that they can alter the routine use of *Twitter* by these political actors. Hence, three random time periods are analysed: May and November 2016 and March 2017. However, it is necessary to clarify that the context in which the sample is framed is conditioned by the Brexit referendum and by the repetition of the elections in Spain. In this research, only the individual tweets and responses have been considered, but not the retweets, because these only serve to redistribute information published by other users (Larsson, 2015), and are not useful for achieving the objectives defined in this research. This includes the study of a total of 2,310 messages. The sample was captured using *Twitonomy* and the analysis was carried out using the statistical package *SPSS* (v.24)

“Viralisation of messages does not depend solely on the volume of tweets published by populist leaders”

Table 1 shows the analysis protocol used in this research, in which 19 categories have been defined for the study of the thematic agenda.

3. Results

3.1. The agenda of populist leaders on *Twitter*

The analysis of the thematic agenda posted by the four populist leaders on *Twitter* allows us to identify a variety of interesting empirical evidence.

Firstly, it is observed how Grillo, Farage and Nuttall present a very compact agenda, in which more than half of the messages published cover two topics, while Iglesias and Le Pen pose a much more fragmented agenda in which they highlight especially four subjects (Table 2).

Pablo Iglesias is especially inclined to share messages about culture and sport (20.5%), two fundamental aspects in his life. The leader of *Podemos* often shares recommendations about books, series or movies and even sometimes discusses them with some users. Media appearances (12.3%) and

Table 1. Categories used for the analysis of tweet topics

| | Topics | Description | |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Issue frame | Economy | Employment, unemployment, salaries, deficit, public spending, debt, crisis, taxes, entrepreneurship, contracts, self-employment, etc. | |
| | Social policy | Pensions, health, education, welfare state, social justice, equality/inequality (includes gender violence), housing, immigration, birth, etc. | |
| | Culture and sports | Cultural industries (cinema, literature, art, conventional media, social media, etc.) and sports. | |
| | Science, technology and environment | R+D+i, infrastructure of the Network (fibre optic, ADSL, WiFi...), pollution, fauna and flora protection or climate change. | |
| | Infrastructures | Transport services (railways, airports) and infrastructure such as roads. | |
| | Corruption | Political corruption in a broad sense. | |
| | Democratic regeneration | Democratic aspects that need to be renewed/eliminated, such as changes in electoral law, ending the establishment and other privileges of the political class, etc. | |
| | Territorial model of the State | Territorial organisation of the State. Independence of territories such as Catalonia or Scotland and nationalism. | |
| | Terrorism | Terrorism in all its forms. | |
| | Immigration | Immigration nationally and internationally (refugees). | |
| | Foreign affairs | European Union or other parts of the world; Brexit. | |
| | Defence | Army, military spending, national security, etc. | |
| | Justice | Judicial processes, changes in legislation, prisons, convictions, etc. | |
| Game frame | Horse race and governing frame | Strategy and government pacts | Intent to build a certain type of government, or possible (/impossible) future government pacts. Surveys and polls. |
| | Politicians as individuals frame | Personal topics | Personal life of political actors. |
| | Political strategy frame | Organisation of political events | Organisation of political events such as meetings, public meetings, etc. |
| | News management frame | Relationship with the media | Information about the appearance of a politician in the media. |
| | No topic | Expressions of courtesy such as acknowledgments, condolences or ephemerides. | |
| | Other | Unclassifiable in the previous categories. | |

information on possible pacts with other political groups (15.2%), such as with *Izquierda Unida*, with those who joined in coalition in May 2016, which is one of the periods analysed.

Beppe Grillo focuses his communication strategy on *Twitter* in criticising the cases of corruption (15.7%) of those accused in the government of Matteo Renzi, and in proposing democratic improvements (38%) such as the suppression of politicians’ jurisdictional privileges (in some countries like in Spain, some citizens can only be judged by the Supreme Court), the suppression of the privileges of the elite or the promotion of direct democracy.

The leader of the *National Front*, Marine Le Pen, proposes a communicative strategy based on the defence of small trade, employment and French industry (16.4%) and a proposal of improvements in health and the rights of the disabled (11.4%). Her speech focuses on a dynamic of inclusion-exclusion with respect to immigration, making an allegation of what she calls “economic patriotism” and alluding to the fact that improvements must be for the French people and not for the others. Foreign affairs (14.1%), with a clear disapproval of the European Union (EU), and criticism of the actions of her political rivals (11.7%) like Emmanuel Macron or François Fillon, also have a prominent role (Table 2).

Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall concentrate their communicative efforts on just a couple of topics. Among those, foreign affairs particularly stand out: 66.8% and 37.8% respectively. Thus, they focus mainly on the defence of Brexit as the only possible way to “regain control” of the United Kingdom and “lost democracy” over the years. Farage is also concerned about international alliances after Brexit (13.3%), while Nuttall prefers to share his appearances in debates and interviews (28.9%).

“The ideological axis decisively conditions the thematic agenda of populist actors on *Twitter*”

Secondly, the importance that right-wing leaders place on immigration, terrorism and foreign affairs (Table 2) is prominent. In all three cases, the references to these topics fulfil a critical function. With regard to immigration and terrorism, the criticism is especially focused on the Muslim culture, which they accuse of “not wanting to integrate into society” and clearly link with illegality (image 1). Farage also relates refugees with the increase in terrorism in Europe. Immigrants are considered the external enemy to

Table 2. Distribution of tweets by populist leaders according to their topic (%)

| | Pablo Iglesias | Beppe Grillo | Marine Le Pen | Nigel Farage | Paul Nuttall |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| Economy | 3.6 | 8.0 | 16.4 | 1.9 | 6.7 |
| Social policy | 9.6 | 3.3 | 11.4 | 0.0 | 2.2 |
| Culture and sports | 20.5 | 5.0 | 4.2 | 1.4 | 0.0 |
| Science, technology and environment | 2.1 | 4.0 | 1.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Infrastructures | 0.0 | 2.3 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.0 |
| Corruption | 6.1 | 15.7 | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Democratic regeneration | 3.8 | 38.0 | 2.3 | 0.9 | 2.2 |
| Territorial model of the State | 0.4 | 0.3 | 8.0 | 1.4 | 2.2 |
| Terrorism | 0.7 | 0.3 | 2.0 | 0.5 | 8.9 |
| Immigration | 1.4 | 0.0 | 7.2 | 6.2 | 0.0 |
| Foreign affairs | 3.2 | 6.3 | 14.1 | 66.8 | 37.8 |
| Defence | 0.7 | 0.0 | 4.4 | 0.5 | 0.0 |
| Justice | 2.3 | 0.7 | 1.5 | 0.5 | 2.2 |
| Strategy and government pacts | 15.2 | 5.0 | 11.7 | 13.3 | 2.2 |
| Organisation of political events | 3.6 | 8.0 | 6.0 | 0.9 | 2.2 |
| Personal topics | 2.7 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.0 |
| Relationship with the media | 12.3 | 0.7 | 3.9 | 1.9 | 28.9 |
| No topic | 7.5 | 0.3 | 2.3 | 0.9 | 4.4 |
| Others | 4.3 | 1.3 | 2.8 | 1.4 | 0.0 |

be fought, thus activating the friend/foe distinction proposed by **Schmitt** (1927, 2005). When they talk about foreign affairs, purposes are diversified and divided between the criticism of the EU and the joy of the victory of Donald Trump in the American elections. It is especially relevant that Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall place special emphasis on the need to hold a referendum so that the people can decide if they want to continue or leave the EU. This promise of direct democracy is inherent to the anti-system challenges of populism and is what really distinguishes them from non-democratic extremist forms (**Mammone**, 2009).

Populist leaders suggest an agenda based on a thematic approach, leaving the most strategic aspects in the background

Thirdly, it is remarkable that despite not being immersed in any official campaign period, the messages referring to strategy and government pacts have important weight in the profiles analysed (Table 2), especially in those of Iglesias (15.2%), Le Pen (11.7%) and Farage (13.3%). The three leaders use this type of tweet to defend their political parties, advancing themselves as the only viable option for change and improvement of their countries, as well as to criticise the political objectives of their opponents. These data reaffirm the idea of the increasingly remarkable existence of a permanent campaign, in which the frontiers between the time before and after the official campaign periods are blurred and dilate over time (**Strömbäck**, 2007).



Image 1. Tweets about immigration
Source: *Twitter*

Table 3. Distribution of messages based on the *issue frame* and the *game frame* (%)

| | | Pablo Iglesias | Beppe Grillo | Marine Le Pen | Nigel Farage | Paul Nuttall |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>Issue frame</i> | | 54.4 | 83.9 | 73.1 | 80.7 | 62.2 |
| <i>Game frame</i> | Horse race and governing frame | 15.2 | 5.0 | 11.7 | 13.3 | 2.2 |
| | Politicians as individuals frame | 2.7 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.0 |
| | Political strategy frame | 3.6 | 8.0 | 6.0 | 0.9 | 2.2 |
| | News management frame | 12.3 | 0.7 | 3.9 | 1.9 | 28.9 |
| | Total | 33.8 | 14.4 | 21.6 | 17.0 | 33.3 |
| No topic | | 7.5 | 0.3 | 2.3 | 0.9 | 4.4 |
| Others | | 4.3 | 1.3 | 2.8 | 1.4 | 0.0 |
| Total | | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

3.2. Program vs. strategy: what do users prefer?

The data show how, with the exception of Pablo Iglesias who presents more adjusted results, the rest of the candidates clearly chose to prioritise the thematic approach (Table 3). That is, to present to the public concrete programmatic proposals that improve the future of their respective countries. The populist leaders focus more on exposing and discussing the current problems of the society in which they live and propose solutions and measures to be adopted instead of strategic aspects, whose sole purpose is to obtain votes. Therefore, they are committed to promoting a much more informative approach in which to provide their electorate with information about their electoral program so that they can decide which option to choose when the next elections take place.

“Twitter does not promote a high fragmentation of the political agenda”

In general, when referring to the aspects related to the *game frame*, the criticism towards the strategy of other parties and political leaders (*horse race* and *governing frame*) predominates. In this type of messages they use negative personalisation (López-Meri; Marcos-García; Casero-Ripollés, 2017) to weaken the proposals of their rivals, as well as the pacts and alliances that they have promised to develop. It is also interesting to observe how despite the fact that social media allow humanisation, the publication of intimate messages is really limited, since except for Iglesias (2.7%), the rest of the leaders present values equal or very close to zero. The leader of *Podemos* does consider it useful to share with users their attributes and personal characteristics as a way to capture votes and differentiate themselves from the rest of the candidates, appealing to the most sentimental part of the public with the aim of humanising their figure.

However, the interests of the public differ from those posed by populist leaders on *Twitter*. The results (Table 4) show that the attention of the users, measured in terms of retweets and favourites, is inversely correlated with the number of messages published. That is, the greater the number of messages published by populist political leaders, the less the impact on the public through *Twitter*.

This generates a “more is less” effect in terms of dissemination of the populist political message in this social media. This is detected by the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.973$), which has very high values between the number of retweets and favourites obtained for each message and the number of tweets published. This data reinforces the evidence that users do not prioritise the amount in the communicative activity of populist political leaders in this digital platform.

Table 4 shows the average of retweets (RT) and favourites (FAV) obtained by each tweet depending on the topic, as well as the average RT and FAV of the total number of messages published. In general, users prefer to interact with leaders through FAV than RT. In addition, significant differences are observed depending on the topics.

Table 4. Average RT and FAV according to the topic of the messages

| | Media RT/ tweet | Media FAV/tweet |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Economy | 397.07 | 550.60 |
| Social politics | 478.47 | 605.32 |
| Culture and sports | 468.39 | 675.81 |
| Science, technology and environment | 553.28 | 860.70 |
| Infrastructures | 168.50 | 249.75 |
| Corruption | 522.39 | 536.16 |
| Democratic regeneration | 389.23 | 502.98 |
| Territorial model of the State | 396.92 | 618.73 |
| Terrorism | 510.82 | 835.85 |
| Immigration | 491.84 | 639.91 |
| Foreign affairs | 796.29 | 1,271.01 |
| Defence | 448.14 | 639.35 |
| Justice | 1,263.97 | 1,397.37 |
| Strategy and government pacts | 687.15 | 920.57 |
| Organisation of political events | 387.88 | 594.48 |
| Personal topics | 580.32 | 1,022.47 |
| Relationship with the media | 590.27 | 784.47 |
| No topic | 621.71 | 940.76 |
| Others | 562.15 | 894.03 |
| Total | 556.91 | 790.53 |

The impact analysis of the agenda built on *Twitter* by populist leaders shows that there are between seven and eight topics that manage to attract the attention of users above the average. Issues related to justice, including judicial processes, changes in the penal and civil codes, or crime, are the ones that receive the greatest number of retweets and favourites (Table 4). Although the number of messages included in this category obtains low values in the leaders’ agenda, they lead to a high impact, in quantitative terms, among users. Particularly noteworthy is a tweet written by Pablo Iglesias in which he criticises the harsh sentence imposed by the Audiencia Nacional on Cassandra Vera for publishing thirteen tweets in a joking tone mocking the death of Carrero Blanco by *ETA*. The message, in which the leader of Podemos criticises that justice is more restrictive now than 40 years ago, got 7,533 RT and 5,734 FAV (image 2).

Messages about foreign affairs, such as Brexit or the US elections held in 2016, also attract the attention of *Twitter* users in a remarkable way (Table 4). One of the tweets with the highest number of FAV (24,088) of all the periods analysed is precisely one in which Nigel Farage shares a photograph with the elected Donald Trump in front of an ostentatious golden door in a casual attitude (image 2). The *UKIP* leader shows his gratitude for having been able to share his time with the businessman and praises his qualities as the future president of the United States.

Right-wing populists give priority to issues such as immigration, which are presented in terms of inclusion-exclusion

4. Conclusions

The results obtained allow us to detect several original contributions regarding the construction of the agenda on *Twitter* by populist leaders. In the first place, despite the fact that this platform encourages self-mediation processes (Cammaerts, 2012), it does not encourage high fragmentation of the political agenda. With the exception of Pablo Iglesias and Marine Le Pen, the rest of the candidates present a very compact and concentrated agenda around two issues. As such, the digital environment does not encourage greater diversification and dispersion of the populist political message.

The second contribution refers to the importance that right-wing populist leaders attach to issues related to immigration, terrorism and foreign affairs, while in the profiles of left-wing populist leaders their presence is relatively low, as previous research had already detected (Casero-Ripollés; Sintés-Olivella; Franch, 2017). On the contrary, they are more inclined to comment on matters related to social policies, corruption or democratic regeneration. Thus, the ideological axis decisively conditions the thematic agenda of populist actors on *Twitter*. The broad range of issues related to immigration, terrorism and foreign affairs is carried out in terms of inclusion-exclusion of groups, fostering antagonism between us and them, immigrants, who are pre-

sented negatively and even linked explicitly with the rise of terrorism in Europe. Using an anti-immigration rhetoric, they seek to defend the pure people and differentiate them from the others, who do not want to adapt to the society that welcomes them and who do not assume their culture or their values (Wodak, 2015). The negative discourse is reinforced by the presence of messages that highlight the need to hold a referendum so that the people can decide if they want to continue in the European Union and allow immigrants to enter or leave and restrict their access. The promises of direct democracy are what really differentiate populist actors from undemocratic forms of political participation (Mammone, 2009).

The third contribution demonstrates that populist leaders,



Image 2. Subjects addressed by the leaders that are of most interest to the public
Source: *Twitter*

although they are better known for their forms than for their contributions, propose an agenda based on the thematic approach (issue frame). They prioritise concrete programmatic proposals to improve the problems of society, delegating aspects of more strategic character into second place, something that does not match what was previously detected in the literature (López-García, 2016). However, it would be interesting to study whether they maintain this strategy during elections or modify it and opt to prioritise the *game frame* approach, and with it the rhetoric of *Twitter* itself (Stromer-Galley, 2014).

Fourth, the data obtained reveals a significant presence of issues related to government treaties. This is especially meaningful given that none of the periods studied refers to official campaign periods. With the use of this strategy, which usually occurs after elections are held (Strömbäck, 2007), populist leaders seek to present themselves to the public as valid political options capable of governing and, therefore, to be considered for future elections.

Left-wing populists stand for proposals on social policies or democratic regeneration

The fifth contribution refers to the presence of a dissonance between the agenda of populist leaders on *Twitter* and the interests of users. The issues that exploit the populist political agenda are not those that get more attention from the public. The interest of the public is focused on those messages that prioritise the spectacularisation of politics or that use resources such as irony or humour. The use of this type of resource allows a greater connection and understanding between a leader and his voters (Enli; Skogerbø, 2013).

Finally, in sixth place, it has been identified that when populist leaders follow a similar communicative strategy on *Twitter*, the number of RT and FAV they get for each message is inversely proportional to the number of messages disclosed. That means, the interest of the public decreases when the number of published tweets increases and vice versa. It therefore generates a “more is less” effect in terms of dissemination of the populist political message. Users do not reward the number of messages posted. In this context, viralisation does not depend solely on the volume of messages published, but on other factors related mainly to the content of the message. This set of contributions implies new ways of understanding the dynamics of construction of the political agenda on *Twitter* by populist leaders in non-electoral periods in the European context.

5. Support

This article is part of the research project CSO2017-88620-P, financed by the *Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades* (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities) of the *Government of Spain*.

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