Populism on the move: analysis of the circulation of the words *populismo(s)* and *populista(s)* on the Twitter accounts of the main political parties and leaders in Spain

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This article focuses on the digital political discourse containing the words *populista(s)*, and *populist(s)* (henceforth, *populis**) in Spain in 2019. We analyse the circulation of *populis** on the Twitter accounts of the main Spanish political parties and leaders. We focus on the circulation of information (López Meri, 2016; Alloing and Vanderbiest, 2018) between arenas of public discussion (Jasper, 2019; Badouard *et al.*, 2016). First, we analyse whether Twitter is used to produce original uses of *populis** or if it rather works as a platform to replicate uses produced in other arenas. Secondly, for the circulated uses, we analyse the sources in which the word was originally employed, as well as the actors whose uses of *populis** were circulated. Our data show (i) that Twitter primarily served for circulating messages from other arenas, and (ii) a strong ideological homophily, with parties and leaders mostly circulating messages produced by likeminded actors.

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Introduction

The objective of this article is to deepen the understanding of circulation between arenas of public discussion (Jasper, 2021) in Spain, as well as the role Twitter[2] and political actors play in the circulation process. In order to do so, we study the circulation of the word *populis**. By *populis**, we refer to the Spanish words *populista(s)* and *populismo(s)* ['populist(s)' and 'populism(s)'].

We focus on the spatiality in which circulation occurs and analyse messages produced during 2019 that contain the word *populis**. Our object of study are the accounts of the five largest political parties in Spain and those of their leaders. We carry out our analysis on a corpus comprising all the tweets containing *populis** produced during 2019 by said accounts.

We first draw a general descriptive map of the data on which we are working [3.1]. Next, we analyse the communication flows containing *populis** in terms of where they were originally produced [3.2 and 3.3]. We then focus on the actors whose uses of *populis** were circulated to Twitter, and we study whether politicians and political parties circulated uses of *populis** to to discuss with their political rivals or if they did so to reinforce what politicians of their own party had previously said [3.4.].

1.　　Circulation of *populis** between arenas

1.1.　　Tackling populism and circulation

We start by clarifying how we conceptualize *populism* and *circulation*. These are not seen as static phenomena but as dynamic, contested, and situated within specific arenas of discourse and power. Populism, despite receiving heightened scholarly and public attention (Hunger & Paxton, 2021), remains a deeply contested concept. While Cas Mudde's influential definition presents populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that frames society as divided between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and prioritizes the *volonté générale* (2004, p. 543), this essentialist understanding, though widely cited, does not exhaust the complexity of the term's usage.

2　This research was conducted before Twitter changed its name to X.

Indeed, much of the literature – particularly from an etic (Hamo *et al.*, 2019), academic perspective – has focused on categorizing political actors or mapping party systems through a populist lens (Ivaldi, 2017; Schwörer, 2021). However, this study aligns with an emerging strand of scholarship that critiques these essentialist and taxonomic approaches and instead treats populism as a discursive and performative construct (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018; Herkman, 2016; Hamo *et al.*, 2019). Following Margaret Canovan (1999), who emphasized populism's dual character – mobilizing both a redemptive and pragmatic face – and Müller's (2016) focus on anti-pluralism and moral exclusion, we focus on the ways in which *populis** is circulated public discourse.

Rather than asking what is populism, we ask: how is *populis** used, by whom, and from where to where does it circulate? This shifts the focus from defining populism to studying its circulation, that is, how the term itself travels, mutates, and accrues meaning across different communicative and institutional contexts. Our analysis thus foregrounds the circulation of *populis** as a signifier rather than a fixed ideology or phenomenon.

Our conceptualization of circulation draws on both classical and contemporary theorists. Following Bourdieu (2002), we understand the movement of ideas as shaped by power relations and field-specific logics. But we also expand this understanding by incorporating work on media flows and digital networks (Mattelart, 2014; Vauchez, 2013), which highlight how messages are not only transmitted but reinterpreted across platforms and publics. Circulation is not mere movement, but it also involves translation, reframing, and strategic deployment. As López Meri (2016) and Alloing & Vanderbiest (2018) suggest, circulation entails the transposition and re-elaboration of discourse, often in response to the specific logics of different arenas.

Building on Jasper's notion of arenas (2021), we treat Twitter, mass media, and parliamentary spaces not simply as containers for discourse, but as structured environments with their own rules, audiences, and stakes. By examining how references to *populis** move across these arenas, we gain insight into the uses of the term. In this way, our theoretical framework provides an analytical lens for understanding the performative and strategic life of *populis** as it circulates through complex and often contested spaces of meaning-making.

It is important to emphasize that this study does not focus on the content or meaning of the word *populis**. Previous research, such as the work by Shchinova (2023) using the same database we draw on,

has shown that the term is predominantly used in a pejorative sense. However, our focus lies in the circulation of the word, not in its semantic content.

Twitter as an arena of public discussion

The notion of arenas has long been examined (Habermas, 1962; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Notions such as "public oppositional space" (Negt, 1979) opened up the question of the public sphere by highlighting that power relations were being hidden. Later on, Dodier (1999) conceptualized arenas as apparatuses governing the conditions of access to speech. From a pragmatist perspective, Cefaï (2016) used it to account for the processes of emergence of public problems and audiences. Other authors used the notion to account for the relationship between structural constraints on actors and their agency (Jasper, 2021) or insisted on its materiality (Mabi & Monnoyer-Smith, 2013).

In all cases, authors consider the multiplicity of arenas where public debate takes place and develop analytical tools to make the notion operationalizable. Following Karlsen and Enjorlas (2016), we highlight the interest of understanding the role different media and arena play in the greater political communicative system.

Since the arena we are mainly interested in is Twitter, we need to sketch a general picture of it. Twitter has been described as a microblogging site (Guerrero-Solé, 2018), as a platform for content sharing (Burgess *et al.*, 2017), and as a digital political arena (Dagoula, 2019). However, it is mostly known insofar as actors linked to politics are particularly active on it. Concerning the use politicians make of Twitter, the social network is seen by some as an opportunity to conduct interactive campaigns with supporters (Usherwood & Wright, 2017). However, the techno-optimistic discourse can be questioned, since technological companies and algorithms (Roginsky & De Cock, 2022), among other elements involved, play an important role in the selection and promotion of some messages over others. Additionally, politicians and parties might use Twitter differently. Some scholars argue that the main function of the platform is to disseminate information regarding events related to political campaigns (Graham *et al.*, 2014). Still, different studies (Grant *et al.*, 2010; Buccoliero *et al.*, 2020) show that politicians might not use the interaction tools provided by the platform and use it instead as a broadcasting medium. In the same way, other scholars studying the Spanish political context argue that politicians

primarily use Twitter to share content related to political campaigns (López-Meri *et al.* 2017).

With all we have said up to this point, the issue we want to raise is twofold. On the one hand, in relation to Twitter and other arenas, we are interested in knowing the direction in which information circulates between arenas and the sources from which *populis** is circulated. This gives us relevant information about a key aspect of this article: the relation between arenas of public discussion in terms of communication flows.

On the other hand, we want to investigate the relationship between the construction of the meaning of *populis** and the political actors implied in its circulation. Specifically, we will focus on observing the authorship of the circulated uses. This will allow us to determine whether the political actors analyzed circulate messages produced by allied politicians or, on the contrary, whether the meaning of *populis** is debated and/or contested through its circulation.

This translates into the following RQs:
• RQ1: *What is the relationship between Twitter and other arenas in terms of circulation of* populis**?*

With RQ1 we seek to explore the role Twitter plays in relation to other arenas. In this sense, we want to know whether Twitter is a producer or a receiver arena. When we speak of a producer arena, we mean that the uses of *populis** were originally produced there. In turn, by original uses of *populis** we mean uses that are produced for the first time in an arena. Therefore, we say that an arena is producer when it generates uses of *populis** that have not circulated from any other arena but have been produced there for the first time.

Conversely, we speak of a receiver arena when it contains uses that have circulated from other arenas. That is, when we find in an arena uses that were originally produced in another arena. Of course, the adjectives receiver and producer are not mutually exclusive. That is, all arenas are both producers and receivers at the same time, but not in the same degree. Therefore, when speaking about producer or receiver arenas, we do so in relative terms.

Linking this to populism, we aim to identify the sources from which Spanish political actors circulate meanings of *populis** on Twitter
• RQ2: *How did Spanish politicians and political parties use Twitter in 2019 to engage with and circulate meanings of* populis**?*

RQ2 first seeks to know whose uses are circulated and what does this tell us about circulation and the construction of *populis**.

We have divided the actors whose uses were circulated into two categories: 'political actors' and 'others'. The first category applies to institutionalized political actors and includes political leaders and political parties. The second category includes journalists and public-figures. Following Rabadán *et al.* (2016), we hypothesize that the accounts studied amplified the words pronounced by key political leaders. Although this hypothesis may seem predictable, the interest lies in knowing whether *populis** circulates because its meaning is contested and/or debated, or simply because it is part of a message delivered by an allied politician.and thus Twitter is used as a selective broadcasting medium (Jungherr, 2016).

2.   Methodology

2.1.   *Selection of case study and tweets*

Spain in 2019 was marked by political instability, including a failed budget negotiation and Catalan independence tensions. The interest in studying Spain in 2019 lies in the fact that the country held general elections, European elections, and regional elections. Moreover, 2019 marked a shift in national politics with the rise of Vox (far-right), a significant change in Spain's political landscape. Ultimately, Spain's first coalition government since the Second Republic (1931-1936) between PSOE (socialists) and the coalition Unidas Podemos (UP, radical-left) emerged.

After the appearance of Podemos (the main party in the UP coalition) in 2014, populism in Spain had mostly been associated with this party (Osuna, 2021). This was even more the case since key members of Podemos claimed at that time the 'populist' nature of their party, relating the word to Laclau & Mouffe's approach to populism (2015), who conceive it as an expansion of democracy. Due to the absence of far-right populist parties, Spain was consequently seen as an exception within Europe (Alonso & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2015). However, such exception ended with the rise of Vox in 2018[3] and 2019[4], also considered by scholars a populist party (Ferreira, 2019).

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3 In 2018, Vox obtained 12 seats in the Andalusian parliament. This was the first time Vox had representation in a parliament in Spain.

4 In 2019, Vox obtained 24 seats in the *Congreso de los diputados* and was thus for the first time represented at the national level.

This is interesting because, as we will see later in the results section, the two parties that have been labelled as populist in the scientific literature practically did not produce uses of *populis** in our corpus.

As for the political parties selected[5], these are the following: Partido Popular (PP, conservatives), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, socialists), Ciudadanos (Cs, liberals), Vox (VOX, far-right), and Unidas Podemos (UP, radical-left).[6]

For each of the five parties studied, we selected the accounts of the party itself, the president, the secretary-general, and the main spokesperson(s). Regarding the presidents and secretary-generals, we selected them based on the structure of each party.

The accounts we analysed are thus the following:

Party	Socialist (PSOE)	Conservatives (PP)	Liberal (Cs)	Far-right (Vox)	Radical-left (UP)
President	Cristina Narbona	Pablo Casado	Albert Rivera	Santiago Abascal	
Sec.-General	Pedro Sánchez	Teodoro García Egea	José Manuel Villegas	Javier Ortega Smith	Pablo Iglesias Alberto Garzón (IU coordinator)
Spokesperson(s)	Adriana Lastra	Dolors Montserrat José B. de Castro Cayetana Álvarez.de Toledo	Juan Carlos Girauta Inés Arrimadas	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	Irene Montero

Table 1. *Politicians and parties studied*

To address concerns about potential bias from focusing solely on *populis**, we conducted a manual review of all tweets from the selected political actors during the study period. This process ensured that all references to *populis** were identified, minimizing the risk of omitting relevant data.

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5 We have selected the five political parties that received the most votes at the national level.

6 Even though the categorization of the parties may be open to debate, our aim is to allow the reader to get an idea of the ideological positioning of the parties and individuals whose accounts are studied.

2.2.   *Filtering of the tweets*

The data we analysed was obtained through Tweet Binder, a tool for tracking online conversations[7]. We worked on four files, one for each of the words we wanted to track, i.e., *populista(s)* and *populismo(s)*. Each of the files contained all the uses of those words that were made in 2019. Consequently, we had the following number of occurrences: *populismos* (27,513), *populismo* (608,623), *populista* (383,235), and *populistas* (231,510). For each of the tweets, we asked for different information, including the user who had published the tweet, the date of publication, the content of the tweet, a link to the tweet, the number of likes and RTs it received, the language in which it was written, and its location.

To filter the tweets of the accounts in which we were interested, we carried out a manual search for each account in each of the four files, using the public username linked to the account. For example, for the account of the party Podemos, whose public username is 'Podemos', we conducted four searches, one for each of the four keywords. We repeated this for the 23 accounts that we studied, and the result was a new file containing 625 tweets (including RT and quoted tweets) distributed as shown in Table 2. Data cleaning involved removing duplicates and irrelevant tweets that did not pertain to political discourse. We conducted data cleaning manually reviewing all the tweets we have worked with.

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7 As a proprietary platform, Tweet Binder operates as a "black box", meaning that the specific algorithms and mechanisms it uses to retrieve tweets are not transparent. Additionally, reliance on the Twitter API poses inherent limitations, such as rate limits, access restrictions, and potential biases in the data retrieved (e.g., exclusions of deleted or private tweets). These factors can impact the completeness and representativeness of the dataset, potentially influencing the results and their interpretation. While TweetBinder offers valuable insights, these constraints must be acknowledged as inherent to its use.

Name	Role	Account	No. of tweets
PSOE	Party	@PSOE	20
Cristina Narbona	President	@CristinaNarbona	0
Pedro Sánchez	Secretary-General	@SanchezCastejon	3
Adriana Lastra	Spokesperson	@Adrilastra	0
			TOTAL: 23
PP	Party	@Populares	45
Pablo Casado	President	@pablocasado_	27
Teodoro García Egea	Secretary-General	@TeoGarciaEgea	6
Dolors Montserrat	Spokesperson	@DolorsMM	0
José Bermúdez de Castro	Spokesperson	-	0
Cayetána Álvarez de Toledo	Spokesperson	@cayetanaAT	1
			TOTAL: 79
Ciudadanos	Party	@CiudadanosCs	440
Albert Rivera	President	@Albert_Rivera	26
José Manuel Villegas	Secretary-General	@CiudadanoVille	9
Juan Carlos Girauta	Spokesperson	@GirautaOficial	6
Inés Arrimadas	Spokesperson	@InesArrimadas	31
			TOTAL: 512
Podemos	Party	@Podemos	0
Izquierda Unida	Party	@IzquierdaUnida	0
Pablo Iglesias	Secretary-General	@PabloIglesias	0
Alberto Garzón	Federal coordinator	@agarzon	6
Irene Montero	Spokesperson	@IreneMontero	0
			TOTAL: 6
Vox	Party	@vox_es	2
Santiago Abascal	President	@Santi_Abascal	0
Javier Ortega Smith	Secretary-General	@Ortega_smith	1
Ivan E. de los Monteros	Spokesperson	@ivanedlm	2
			TOTAL: 5
			TOTAL TWEETS: 625

Table 2. *Number of tweets per account after conducting keyword search*

In Table 2, we have not accounted for which variable of the keyword *populis** was used for two reasons. On one hand, as shown by Shchinova (2024), the uses of *populis** carry similar connotations (mostly pejorative) regardless of the specific variable of the word. On the other hand, what interests us in this article is not the exact meanings of *populis** or the frequency of use of each variable, but rather the arena from which they circulate, the proportion of circulated versus non-circulated uses, and the actors whose uses are being circulated.

We have paid particular attention to paraphrasing and implicit references, recognizing that discourse circulation often involves adaptation rather than verbatim repetition. For instance, a tweet that rephrased a political leader's statement from a parliamentary session, without direct quotation, was classified as circulated, as it was also the

case of a tweet quoting a statement made at a party rally that was also being covered by the media.

3.   Results

3.1.   Publication date of the tweets

The tweets we analysed were published during 2019 (Figure 1). There is a strong peak in May – coinciding with the European elections and the Spanish regional and local elections – and three other peaks: one in January (when the general budget of the State was being debated), and two others in June and December (while a government was being formed). We thus observe a strong link between the Spanish political rhythm in 2019 and the number of tweets containing *populis** published by the main political parties and leaders.
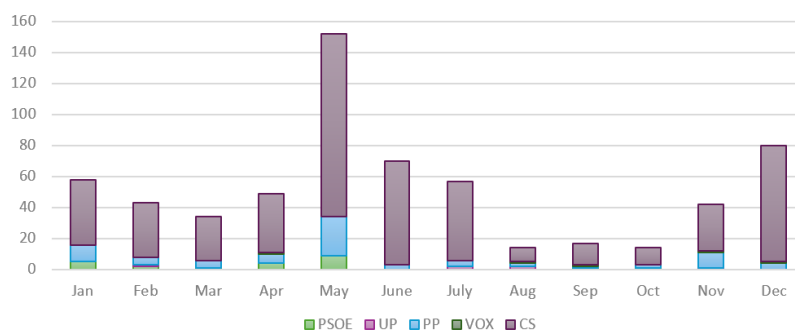

Figure 1. *Tweets published with* populis* *per month (2019)*

There are, however, slight differences between parties. On the one hand, we observe that Cs was the party that used *populis** most during the government formation periods. On the other hand, PSOE and PP produced a higher number of tweets in January, during the debates on the budget, and in May, when both the Spanish local and regional elections and the European elections were held. As we have mentioned above, both UP and Vox stand out for the extremely low number of uses they produced.

3.2.   *Circulated vs original uses of* populis* *on Twitter*

To answer RQ1, we focus on the source of the uses of *populis** of our corpus. We differentiate between:

• Original use: tweets that introduced *populis** in a novel context, without referencing prior statements or content made by other individuals who used the word or alluded to it.

• Circulated use: tweets that echoed, paraphrased, or directly quoted previous uses of *populis** made by other actors.

That is, we differentiate between those produced in Twitter (including RT and quoted tweets)[8], as it can be seen in Images 3 and 4; and those that were produced in other arenas (e.g.: parliaments, other social media, press articles, and so on) and then circulated (via text, video or image) to Twitter, as it can be seen in Images 1 and 2

Image 1. *Use circulated from a Cs event to Twitter*

Image 2. *Circulated use by PP account*

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8   This implies that we are focusing on inter-arena circulation (i.e.: circulation between different arenas and Twitter), and not in intra-arena circulation (i.e.: circulation within Twitter).

Image 3. *Original use by Iván E. de los Monteros (VOX)*
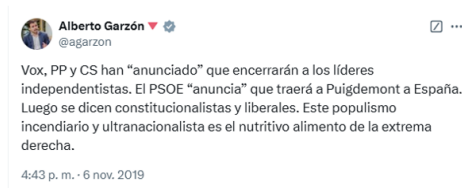

Image 4. *Original use by Alberto Garzón (UP)*

In Image 1, the Cs account circulates a use made by a politician from their party at a Cs rally. We see the word 'populism' in the video's subtitles and in the text of the tweet. In Image 2, the PP account circulates a use made by Pablo Casado in another arena, providing the link towards the intervention in which their leader pronounced the word. In image 3, Iván E. de los Monteros makes an original use of *populis**, and in Image 4 Alberto Garzón (UP) makes an original use of *populis** to refer to the PP and Cs.

In all cases we focus on the traceable elements of the message that allow us to determine whether the use we observe in the tweets originated in another arena or not. Nonetheless – and this represents a limitation of this work – we are aware that, at the level of meaning, connotations are collectively constructed, and their circulation extends beyond a series of traceable elements.

As Table 3 shows, different trends can be observed concerning the source of the uses.

	Original	Circulated
Cs	148	352
PSOE	2	21
UP	5	1
Vox	4	1
PP	13	62

Table 3. *Original and circulated uses of* populis* *per party*

First, circulated uses of *populis** are far higher in number than original uses. This is due to the uses circulated by the parties' main accounts, which tend to circulate uses of *populis**, while political leaders show both circulated and original uses. For example, in Cs, the party account produced 346 tweets with circulated uses, while its leaders produced 16 uses. The same trend can be observed for PP and PSOE. By contrast, the main account of UP (radical-left) did not post any tweets containing *populis**, nor did the account of their most prominent leader, Pablo Iglesias (UP). As for Vox, their main account produced 2 tweets with *populis**, while their leader did not produce any.

As surprising as UP and Vox's lack of uses might at first seem, it is nonetheless comprehensible given that these two parties were constantly accused of being populists by the other political groups. According to Hamo *et al.*, *populis** conveys a pejorative connotation and "is almost entirely used for the pejorative evaluation of statements, arguments, political positions or actions" (2019, p. 4). In the same vein, Herkman indicated in the conclusions of his study on the use of *populis** in Nordic countries that *populis** is "mainly constructed within negative framings". (2016, p. 157). It is relevant in this sense to recall Lakoff's words: "when we negate a frame, we evoke the frame." (2014, p. 3). Therefore, since *populis** has mostly negative connotations, it is not surprising that those on whom it is applied tend to reject it or simply choose to omit that word in their public discourse.

These results show two differentiated uses of Twitter. On the one hand, the parties' accounts primarily used Twitter to circulate messages from other arenas. On the other hand, politicians produced a significant number of original uses on Twitter, thus avoiding the platform being just a receiver arena.

3.3.   *Arenas from which* populis* *circulated to Twitter*

We have divided arenas into four categories: parliamentary (hemicycle), mass media (press, radio, TV), other arenas (events, meetings, and so on), and unknown (unidentifiable source).
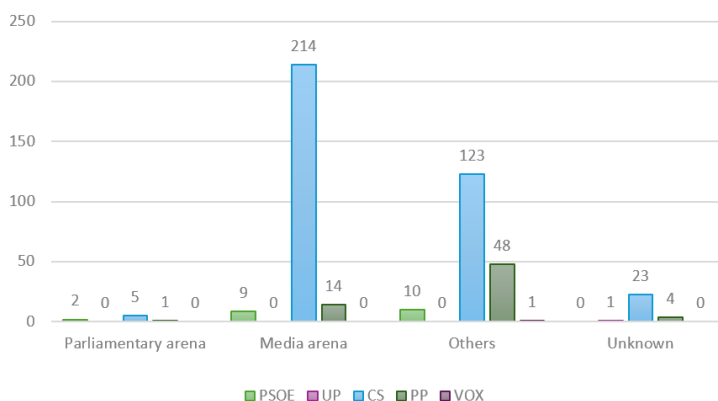

Figure 2. *Arenas from which uses of* populis* *were circulated to Twitter*

As can be seen in Figure 2, Cs tended to circulate messages containing *populis** from the media arena. Oppositely, the PP favoured other sources and the socialists mostly circulated messages from the media and other arenas. A closer look at the data will determine the preferred sources from which *populis** arrives on Twitter.

PSOE favoured the media arena (9 cases), including newspapers (La Vanguardia), TV channels (La Sexta, TVE), radio stations (Onda Cero, RNE, Cadena SER), and statements to the press. They also circulated uses of *populis** from their own website and public events. As for the hemicycles, we only found two uses circulated from the Catalan and the European Parliament.

We observe a different dynamic for the uses circulated by PP. The party account preferred to circulate uses of *populis** produced in party rallies (24 cases). We see the same tendency in Pablo Casado's tweets, with 14 out of 15 circulated uses coming from such events, and in García Egea's account (4 out of 5). Regarding other sources, we find 14 uses circulated from the media arena (TV channels: TV3, La Sexta, 24h TVE; radio stations: Cadena SER, Radio Inter, Onda Madrid, Onda Cero; newspapers: La Razon; and statements to the press), as well as uses circulated from websites and promotional videos.

Finally, Cs mostly circulated uses from the mass media arena, with up to 214 examples circulated from more than twenty different TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, and statements to the press. Only three uses were directly circulated from the hemicycle. This is of particular interest since it questions the boundaries of the parliamentary arena. Indeed, as Chibois (2014) pointed out, some parliamentary spaces or moments actually work as extensions of the Chambers, favouring the exchange of information between politicians and journalists. In our case, the press conferences scheduled after parliamentary debates played that role. Cs deputies grasped those opportunities to express their point of view on what had previously been debated and subsequently used them to circulate such messages to other arenas, namely Twitter.

These results highlight three important points. First, as far as the circulation of *populis** is concerned, it shows that the relationship between the parliamentary arena and Twitter in terms of circulation is limited. In this sense, although *populis** is a word that political actors use in various ways depending on their political and communicative strategy (Shchinova, 2023), the isolated character of the parliamentary arena hinders circulation to it and from it. Second, concerning the mass media arena, we observe that there is no direct relationship between the ideological affinity of the sources from which uses of *populis** are circulated and the actors that circulate such uses. It is true that some media outlets have a clear ideological leaning (the TV channel La Sexta has a mostly left-leaning audience, while the radio station La COPE leans conservative). However, there is no direct relationship between that affinity and the circulation of the accounts studied. In other words, we find right-wing politicians amplifying messages from left-leaning outlets and left-wing politicians doing the same with conservative media, just to name two examples. What matters is that the accounts, when it comes to circulated uses, decide for themselves which messages they want to circulate and which ones they don't, regardless of the source. Third, the results show that Twitter enables politicians to circulate messages produced in spaces such as party rallies and allows them to select which messages to share with their followers on Twitter.

3.4.   *Actors whose uses were circulated*

To answer RQ2, we checked the authorship of the messages that were circulated to Twitter. As we can see in Figure 3, almost every use

circulated was made by politicians belonging to the same party as the account producing the tweet.
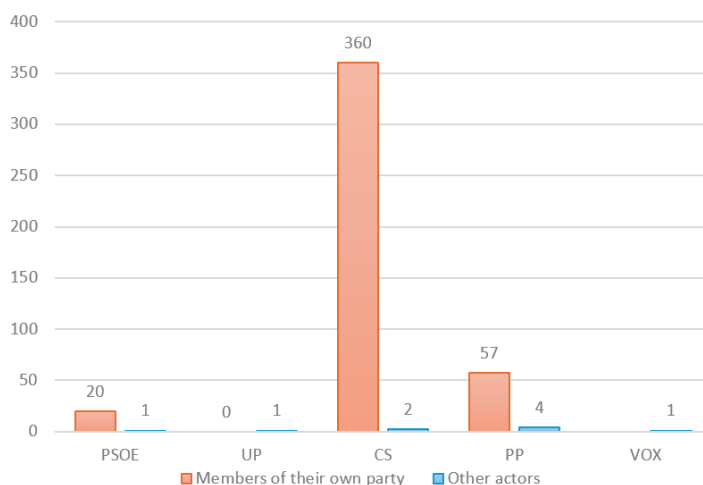

Figure 3. *Type of actors whose uses of* populis* *were circulated to Twitter*

However, Vox and UP circulated one use each, both originally produced by leaders of groups other than theirs. This is interesting since it shows that uses of *populis** are not always circulated to endorse or promote words uttered by party colleagues, but also to attack political opponents. Precisely, Alberto Garzón (UP) circulated a use made by the leader of the liberals, and Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (Vox) shared a use made by a conservative politician, in both cases for criticizing the politician having pronounced the original use.

As for the rest of the parties, they all follow the same tendency, namely circulating uses of *populis** pronounced by their leaders in other arenas at specific political moments. This corroborates our hypothesis based on the study conducted by Rabadán *et al.* (2016) that the accounts studied would be used to amplify not only the words of key political leaders of a given party, but also those of other prominent political figures.

For example, during the debate on the general budget of the State, the accounts linked to PSOE (socialists) circulated messages from Maria Jesús Montero (Minister of Finance), Carmen Calvo (Minister of the Presidency), and Dolores Delgado (Minister of Justice), while during the European election period (April and May), they circulated uses made by Josep Borrell and Iratxe García, both socialist candidates

to the European Parliament. Cs (liberals) party and leader accounts replicated messages produced by 32 liberal politicians, but messages by Albert Rivera and Inés Arrimadas were most frequent, with 55 circulated uses for Rivera and 89 for Arrimadas. Finally, accounts linked to PP (conservatives) circulated 57 (out of 61) uses made by 13 conservative leaders, with Pablo Casado particularly prominent (28 uses), representing half of all cases.

This intra-party circulation shows that Twitter is used strategically as a loudspeaker to amplify allied politicians' words at opportune moments. It also shows a direct relationship between the politicians' hierarchical position within the party and the impact of their words on accounts associated with the party.

In terms of the role Twitter plays in fostering discussion on the meaning of *populis**, our data suggest that the circulation to the platform – as far as our corpus is concerned – does not contribute to such debate. On the contrary, our data show that actors almost exclusively circulate messages that had originally been produced by like-minded colleagues, and that debates comparing differing opinions on the topic were non-existent.

Conclusions and discussion

Our results show that Twitter draws a non-negligible part of its content from other arenas and thus supports the idea that it is doubtful whether we can nowadays properly understand how media function if we study them separately (Miller *et al.*, 2016). However, the relationship between Twitter and other arenas must not be seen as a relationship of dependence, but rather as a symbiotic relationship – in the sense that both elements "can benefit from each other because they need one another" (Brants *et al.*, 2010, p. 28).

Concerning our RQ1, the results of our study are consistent with Miller *et al.*'s (2016) argument about the impossibility of understanding social media as isolated entities. That is, there is a systemic interdependence between Twitter and mass media. We have seen that Twitter was mostly employed to circulate uses of *populis** that had previously been made in other arenas. Twitter thus acted primarily as a receiver arena and its main role was to replicate information produced in other arenas. However, while official accounts were systematically used to circulate messages from other arenas, those of their political leaders produced more original uses than circulated ones.

Regarding the arenas from which uses of *populis** were circulated to Twitter, there are different points that should be highlighted. First, the mass media arena is the main driver of information to Twitter. Second, we find a diversity of sources within the mass media arena in terms of their type (i.e., radio, TV, newspapers, statements to the press). That is, messages containing *populis** that circulated were not selected according to the source in which they were produced. Furthermore, we have observed that the accounts studied circulated the uses of *populis** they wanted. In this sense, we see that politicians and political parties can circulate the meanings of *populis** they want, without needing the intermediation of other actors.

To this we add that the relationship between Twitter and the parliamentary arena is diffuse, in the sense that the uses of *populis** that circulate to Twitter from the political chambers studied are scarce. This does not mean that the parliamentary arena should be tackled as an opaque space, but rather that its boundaries go beyond the hemicycle and that circulation mostly occurs in spaces situated outside the main chamber, as commented in point 3.3.

Concerning RQ2 and the authorship of the uses circulated to Twitter, we found that both party and leader accounts were extensively used to replicate uses made by own-party members, which confirms our hypothesis. This reinforces the idea that communication flows are polarized along ideological lines and that like-minded actors circulate messages produced by like-minded people in other arenas (Papacharissi, 2015). Regarding the circulation of *populis**, this implies that the word does not circulate to debate it with political rivals, but rather its circulation responds to strategic reasons, as noted by Shchinova (2023).

Beyond answering the RQs, the results reveal some interesting points. First, this study shows that focusing on the non-academic uses of *populis** can provide relevant information As Shchinova (2023) points out, *populis** is not only used as a buzzword but also in a strategic manner. The limited use of the term by Vox and UP, as well as its constant use and circulation by Cs and, to a lesser extent, by PSOE and PP, point in this direction. These observations are interesting not only for the word populis but also offer research insights for studying the circulation of other words whose meanings vary depending on who uses them or spreads them, as is the case with words like terrorism, freedom, or feminism. Nonetheless, our way of tackling circulation (which focuses on a snapshot rather than the evolutionary process of the meaning of *populis**) entails some limitations. By analysing the

term within a fixed timeframe (2019), the study cannot account for how circulation influences collective meaning-making, an element we consider of utmost importance. Additionally, the emphasis on spatial arenas, while effective for understanding the communicative system's connections, overlooks the critical role of actors – particularly organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1981) – who are key in shaping and spreading ideas within specific social groups.

We previously mentioned that it is interesting to observe that parties labelled as populist avoid using the term. We believe that this absence is comprehensible, since parties targeted by a pejorative label will try to avoid evoking a frame that harms them (Lakoff, 2014). That is, both UP and Vox would seek to avoid using or debating about a word that evokes frames detrimental to themselves. In the case of UP, even though party members – intellectuals and professors who had studied the theory of Laclau & Mouffe (2015) – openly discussed populism in the early years, they quickly stopped doing so, possibly for the reasons just mentioned.

In the case of Ciudadanos, we observe the opposite. That is, we see a constant use of *populis**. Although we did not conduct analysis of its meaning – since it was not within the scope of the article – we noticed the systematic use of the expression "populists and nationalists" in accounts associated with Cs. These words are used to refer, respectively, to UP and to Spain's nationalist parties. In this sense, we argue that those words play a delegitimizing function against those parties that oppose the centralist and liberal vision of Spain proposed by Cs (García-Lupato *et al.*, 2020). This implies a second major limitation of this paper, which arises from centring the analysis on the word *populis** itself, since it sacrifices analytical depth by missing key dimensions of circulation. For instance, studying specific events, actors' strategies, or the virality of particular uses of *populis** over time could provide richer insights about its circulation. Additionally, restricting the analysis to predefined arenas, such as parliamentary spaces, risks oversimplifying the boundaries between arenas, where media logics and spatial overlaps often blur distinctions. Future research should consider event-based approaches or theoretical frameworks, like Bourdieu's (2002) fields, to better capture the complexity of the issue.

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