

Article

Twitting Against the Enemy: Populist Radical Right Parties Discourse Against the (Political) “Other”

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Abstract

There is a common agreement in considering populism as a Manichean worldview that oversimplifies and polarizes political options reducing them to a symbolical struggle between an “us” and a “them.” “Us” is embodied by “the people,” equated with “good,” and “them” is identified by political “Others,” often embodied by “the elites” who are depicted as inherently “evil.” Naturally, the nature and composition of the people and the elite vary according to both ideology and political opportunities. This article examines the discursive construction of political opponents in two populist radical right parties: Lega in Italy and Vox in Spain. Based on the analysis of a selection of tweets by the two party leaders, Santiago Abascal and Matteo Salvini, this study applies clause-based semantic text analysis to detect the main discursive representations of political opponents. The article concludes that Salvini focuses all the attention on the left, while Abascal, although predominantly identifying the left as the main enemy, also targets pro-independence parties. The discursive construction of the “enemy” is based on two main strategies: demonization, the framing of opponents as “enemies of the people” who, along with dangerous “Others” such as immigrants, conspire against the “people” and are blamed for everything that is “wrong” in society; secondly, character assassination of individual politicians through personal attacks, which aim to undermine their reputation and deflect attention from the real issues towards their personal traits and actions.

Keywords

character assassination; demonization; Italy; Lega; political discourse; populism; populist radical right; social media; Spain; Twitter; Vox

Issue

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1. Introduction

Populist radical right (PRR) parties are on the rise in Western Europe (Zulianello, 2020). Their emergence and electoral success have generated considerable scholarly research (Ostiguy et al., 2020) that has dug into their distinctive elements (Hawkins et al., 2012).

In particular, there is wide agreement on considering populism as a Manichean worldview that oversimplifies and polarizes political options reducing them to a symbolical struggle between an “us” and a “them” (Mudde

& Kaltwasser, 2017). Accordingly, the populist construction of both “the people” and its “Others” has been the focus of comprehensive literature (Betz, 2017). PRR parties’ xenophobic and anti-immigration stances have been deeply scrutinized (Cervi et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, studies have so far devoted little attention to showing how these parties discursively address their political opponents (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Although this aspect has been tangentially touched on by previous works (Capdevila et al., 2022; Cervi & Carrillo-Andrade, 2019; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021),

mainly focusing on the anti-elitist aspect of populism (March, 2017), very few studies have dedicated exclusive attention to the construction of political opponents (Berti & Loner, 2021).

Therefore, this article aims to make an empirical contribution to the current debate about PPR parties disclosing how political opponents are constructed in the discourse of contemporary PPR parties. To do so, we study the discourse of two PPR parties in Southern Europe: Lega in Italy and Vox in Spain. After providing an overview of PPR parties and their discourse and the role social media plays in their communication, the article applies clause-based semantic text analysis (CBSTA) to a dataset of tweets by the two party leaders, Matteo Salvini and Santiago Abascal, concluding that both politicians identify the main political opponent as “the left” who are stigmatized through the use of two main rhetorical devices: demonization and character assassination.

2. Populism

While populism is one of the trendiest research topics in contemporary literature (Ekström et al., 2018), it is also one of the most contested concepts in the field of political science (Kefford et al., 2022).

Most literature single out the existence of three main conceptual approaches to studying populism (Kaltwasser et al., 2017): the ideational approach, the political-strategic approach, and the sociocultural or communicative/performative approach.

Arguably, the dominant approach today is the ideational approach, defining populism as a “thin-centered” ideology that considers society to be ultimately divided into two antagonistic and homogenous groups—“the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”—and that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This conception suggests that populism does not offer a complete worldview and fails to exhibit the degree of consistency, depth, and scope of other fully developed, “thick” ideologies such as socialism and liberalism.

This approach entails the main benefit of disclosing why populist parties are so varied and flexible regarding their programs, organization, and leadership and provides the possibility to connect the supply and demand sides of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 10).

The political-strategic approach, mainly represented by Weyland (2001, p. 14), states that populism can be defined as a “political strategy through which personalistic leaders seek or exercise government power based on direct, un-mediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly un-organized followers.”

The third strand gathers different approaches which, taken together, provide the conceptual tools for broadly making sense of populism as a particular mode of political communication (Moffitt, 2016).

Mostly following Laclau’s (2005) seminal work on political logic, but also Wodak’s (2015) historical

approach to critical discourse analysis, discursive scholars have suggested shifting the focus of analysis away from ideologies to concentrate on how discourses are constructed. Populism is, therefore, viewed as a discourse that seeks to confront “the people” against “the elite,” and studies examine the ways in which this construction takes place and how these signifiers play out to simplify the world’s complexities (Stavrakakis et al., 2018) and trigger emotional reactions (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022).

Other authors have centered their analysis on the non-verbal and stylistic aspects of the phenomenon. Ostiguy (2009, 2017), the main proponent of the socio-cultural or performative approach, for instance, argues that populism should be seen as the “flaunting of the low” in politics, paying attention to language, body language, gestures, and ways of dressing. In line with this approach, Moffitt (2016) defined populism as a distinct “political style,” a particular repertoire of mediated performance that includes the appeal to “the people” versus “the elite,” “bad manners” as well as the performance of crisis.

We contend, together with Ekström et al. (2018) and Kefford et al. (2022), among others, that the above-mentioned approaches, especially the ideational and the discursive-performative approach, are not mutually exclusive; thus, there is “room for synergic and cumulative work” (Olivas, 2021, p. 834).

First, as Ostiguy (2017, p. 74) points out, there are clear connections between the “believe in” and the “act as,” that is to say, between the ideological and the communicative/performative aspects of populism. In other words, although diverse definitions may differ on which requirements or sets of criteria to use, all these approaches coincide on a conceptual core of basic attributes associated with populism and its manifestations, such as the Manichean interpretation of politics, anti-elitism, and an idealized conception of the people.

Second, and most importantly, granting that populist ideas, as with any other ideas, need to be communicated to reach the audience and achieve the communicator’s goals, disclosing the communicative tools used for spreading them should be just central (De Vreese et al., 2018) or at least a needed complement to the scrutiny of populist ideas. This growing recognition of the centrality of discourse has led many proponents of the ideational approach to use the term “discourse” and “ideology” interchangeably (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 514).

Ergo, aligning with De Vreese et al. (2018), we combine Mudde’s (2004) ideology-centered and Hawkins’ (2010) discourse-centered understanding of populism, considering populism as a discursive manifestation of a thin-centered ideology. Accordingly, in our analysis, we will not only focus on disclosing the “set of basic assumptions about the world” contained in the populist message but on “the language that unwittingly expresses them” (Hawkins et al., 2012, p. 3). Conceiving populism as an ideology articulated discursively by political actors and, as such, an expression of political communication not

only allows bridging political science and communication studies' literature but also grants the chance to deepen the understanding of populism, expanding the analysis to take into consideration broader communicative and performative repertoires.

3. Populist Radical Right Parties and Their Discourse

According to Mudde's (2007) influential definition, three main features characterize the PRR party family: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism.

Populism has been defined in the previous section. However, it is important to stress that, as previously explained, due to the thinness of populist ideology, populist actors combine populism with one or more other ideologies, so-called "host ideologies" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 21). While left-wing populists often incorporate some form of socialism into their ideology, nationalism, particularly in its exclusionary, nativist form, is the most common addition for right-wing populists.

Nativism is the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) threaten homogeneous nation-states (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Under a nativist notion of citizenship, populists' characteristic appeal to the people becomes an appeal to "our people," the "pure" people (Betz, 2017). Accordingly, PRR parties distinguish "the people" from the "Others," aliens who do not belong to "us" and are consequently considered enemies, accused of conspiring—together or with the direct or indirect help of the elite—against the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Exactly as for the elites, the selection of whom to identify as "Other" depends on the contextual discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Muis, 2009); however, a vast strand of literature has shown that in recent decades most right-wing populists in Western Europe have capitalized on the growing concerns on immigration, activating people's grievances against immigrants (Cervi & Tejedor, 2021; Betz, 2017) and ethnic minorities, (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020).

Authoritarianism (the belief in the value of obeying and valuing authority, granted that it is their own) requires the government to have a significant moral weight in citizens' freedoms and rights (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), favoring strict order and severe punishment for violations (Mudde, 2007). This characteristic perfectly matches another key feature of populism: anti-pluralism (Galston, 2017). Pluralism emphasizes the inevitability and desirability of differences in society, calling for institutions that protect minority rights and differences in the pursuit of a majority will. Thus, those who adhere to pluralism are normally inclined to think of popular sovereignty as a dynamic and open-ended process. Populism, on its side, treats it as the fixed, reified, and unified will of the people (Espejo, 2011), craving moral clarity. Therefore, whereas pluralism sees political relations as essentially those of cooperation and dialogue,

populism sees a naturally antagonistic world, rejecting any form of difference (Mudde, 2007).

The label "radical," finally, refers to both the outspoken position at the far end of the political spectrum on issues related to immigration and ethnic diversity and the disruption of political norms, emerging from the rejection of pluralism.

This disruption becomes particularly evident observing populist leaders' discourses, positioned clearly on the "low" end of Ostiguy's (2009) low-high continuum, triggered through the continuous appeal to common sense and enacted using "bad manners" (Winberg, 2017). The frequent use of vulgar language, aimed at pulling away from the lexicon of mainstream politicians (Berti & Loner, 2021), in particular, has been considered a key element in fostering the perception of authenticity (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2017), strengthening a sense of closeness to "the people" (Ostiguy et al., 2020), and generating hostility towards the elites.

Last but not least, as noted by Meny and Surel (2002, p. 17), "populism advocates the power of the people, yet it relies on the seduction by a charismatic leader." A recurrent populist trope, in fact, also entails the representation of a salvific leader who is at the same time a "man of the street," that is to say, "one of us" and the savior, the "champion of the people" (Bracciale & Martella, 2017).

4. Populist Radical Right Parties and Social Media

The effectiveness of PRR parties' communication would be incomprehensible without considering the impact of new technologies. Social media disintermediation provides direct communication with citizens, allowing populists to circumvent the journalistic gatekeepers that are often hostile to them (Groshek & Engelbert, 2012). In this way, they can capitalize, not only on the generalized mistrust in traditional politics but also the mistrust towards mainstream media (Fawzi, 2019), presenting themselves as authentic, thus closer to the "people."

In addition, social media's attention economy makes them the arena par excellence of emotionality (Hameleers et al., 2017). This feature inherently runs counter to the key traits of establishment politics, perfectly matching with populists' discursive dynamics (Gerbaudo, 2018), which spread a fragmented ideology (Engesser et al., 2016) characterized by emotional elements (Hameleers et al., 2017) and a simplified dichotomous vision of the world. Especially in right-wing populism (Hameleers, 2020), the use of anger and fear exacerbates the distance and antagonism between the people and the elites or between the people and such outgroups as migrants (Cervi, 2020a).

As such, populist messages entail a high potential for virality that allows them to acquire news value (Wodak, 2015); in other words, "the more provocative the message, the more traditional media might be compelled to turn it into news" (Berti & Loner, 2021, p. 5).

5. Methods

5.1. Selection of the Cases

Understanding the comparative method as a method for identifying and explaining similarities and differences between cases using common concepts, we compare *per genus et differentiam* (Sartori, 2005) two parties that belong to the same party family and share common features but operate within divergent political contexts.

Both Vox and Lega exemplify radical right-wing populism (Zulianello, 2020) and can be considered critical case studies in their social media communication. Lega, in particular Salvini's personal massive use of social media (Cervi, 2020b), has been identified as the core element of both the construction of his political and mediated persona (Bobba, 2018) and his electoral success (Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019). The effective use of social networks has also been found to be key to Vox's mobilization strategy (Barrio et al., 2021, p. 246) and success (Capdevila et al., 2022).

In addition, the two countries share a similar fascist past. However, while Italy has been widely recognized as "the promised land of populism" (Tarchi, 2015, p. 1), Spain is witnessing a new—and, for many analysts, unexpected—rise of this form of politics (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021).

Last but not least, during the analyzed time frame, Vox was in the opposition and Spain was ruled by a left-wing coalition (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021), while Lega, despite disagreeing on many points, formally supported the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi (Garzia & Karremans, 2021). Therefore, we can expect that the two parties might show similar discursive strategies but also some contextual differences concerning both their political and discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

5.2. Data Collection and Annotation

Scientific literature has shown that Twitter is largely used by political elites for agenda-building purposes (Parmelee, 2013), especially by populist actors (Jacobs & Spierings, 2018). Accordingly, our empirical analysis is based on a Twitter dataset.

Recognizing the centrality of leaders in PRR parties (Meny & Surel, 2002), the official Twitter accounts of the two party leaders were selected for the analysis. Tweets published by the party leaders, Matteo Salvini and Santiago Abascal, were downloaded using the Twitter API from January to August 2022, excluding retweets. The total number of tweets collected was 1,901 for Salvini and 1,698 for Abascal. After downloading all the tweets, only those mentioning political opponents were selected.

Understanding that in the center of politics lies the competition for political power—intended as the ability to shape and control the content and direction of public policy (Stoppino, 2001)—by political opponents,

we understand all those groups that compete in the respective electoral arena. Accordingly, political opponents were defined as political parties/groups officially recognized as being part of the electoral process that can support candidates for elections on a regular basis (Sartori, 2005). In addition, individual politicians competing in the same arena were also considered political opponents, acknowledging the growing personalization of politics (Garzia, 2011). Therefore, to be included in the sample, tweets had to mention Italian or Spanish political parties or individual politicians.

Due to the relatively small *n*, tweets were analyzed manually. First, we isolated all the tweets containing parties' names and personal names of politicians operating in each country.

In a second round, acknowledging that discursive practices happen within specific sociocultural contexts that require a deep understanding of both the textual and contextual facts (Ekström et al., 2018) and in affordance to the driven context that might embed latent messages, the rest of the tweets were analyzed through content analysis, in order to guarantee that all the tweets referring to parties and politicians using other wordings (nicknames, metaphors, indirect reference to current news, etc.) would be properly included in the sample.

The methodology implemented was created by the Populism Team to compile the Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al., 2019): Each tweet was double-coded in its original language by two authors who did not share their work with each other until it had been completed. Discrepancies were subjected to a reconciliation session to adjust criteria. The final Cohen's kappa inter-rater agreement was 0.97, showing nearly perfect agreement among the coders.

5.3. Data Analysis

After analyzing whom the two leaders identify as their political opponents, our main aim is to disclose the construction of actors. Accordingly, we consider Twitter's texts as narrative texts that tell a story made of actors. Narratives are the core mechanism of constructing reality at the sociocognitive level: According to Mayer (2014, pp. 66–71), by "translating experience into the code of story—with plot, and character, and meaning," it allows the incomprehensible to be transformed into something meaningful.

Accordingly, Franzosi's (2010) model of CBSTA was implemented. This model starts from the premise that any story, in any language, can be analyzed, taking into account the structural categories subject–verb–object (Aslanidis, 2018). Concretely, thus, CBSTA consists of extracting triplets formed by the elementary syntactic components of language: subject–verb–object. Triplets allow one to deconstruct and reconstruct a narrative into clusters (Popping & Roberts, 2014), allowing one to code not only the signifiers but their structure in a statement, unveiling the actions of political subjects, the objects

of those actions along with their positive and negative affect, and the combination between these elements (Aslanidis, 2018).

CBSTA, therefore, allows both quantitative and qualitative analysis: The quantitative dataset, composed of the retrieved triplets, shows word co-occurrences and can be analyzed by qualitatively observing the attributes of the actors and their actions, along with epithets and adjectives (Franzosi, 2010).

Textual analysis is widely recognized as one of the best techniques developed to measure the rhetoric of politicians (Hawkins et al., 2012); CBSTA, in particular, as suggested by Aslanidis (2018), and proven by different studies (Cervi, 2020b; Cervi et al., 2021), appears to be a particularly fitting instrument for measuring populist discourse.

Only written text was considered: All multimedia content (videos, images) was excluded from the sample. For each main actor, we selected the characteristic semantic triplets to establish the lexical universes built around each of the aforementioned actors. Consequently, we qualitatively observed adjectives, verbs, and objects to establish relationships between actors and consequently draw the frameworks of reference.

6. Results

6.1. Selection of the Opponents

The total number of tweets collected for Salvini is 1,901, of which more than half (956) contain mention of political opponents. As for Abascal, the result is even more overwhelming: 56% of the tweets contain mention of the political opponents.

Thus, it is possible to state that, coherently with the populist dichotomous vision of the world, most of the tweets are dedicated to attacking the adversary.

It is also interesting to note that there is very little difference in the percentage, showing that although Lega in the analyzed timeframe formally supported the government, while Vox was in opposition, their behavior does not seem to change.

As per the selection of whom to target, Figure 1 shows that the majority of the references refer to individuals. In the case of Salvini, out of 956 tweets containing mention of political opponents, 587 contain personalized references; Abascal calls out individual politicians 800 times out of a total of 951 tweets.

In other words, both leaders personify their “enemies” (Garzia, 2011) by choosing specific individuals as targets. While Salvini mostly refers to the politicians by their names, Abascal tends to use nicknames or references to their political position (The Minister, etc.). In addition, it is possible to observe how official party names are less frequent, being the “Other” category most recurrent. In this category, we have collected all the mentions of political parties that do not contain their official names; rather, they are roughly or derogatorily identified by their ideological positioning: The Communist, *Los Progres* (ironic epithet to mock leftwing leaning individuals), etc.

Unsurprisingly, Salvini’s tweets entirely refer to the left (100%). The only party mentioned is Partito Democratico, and the most recurrent definition is “the Left,” defined by other adjectives that will be analyzed in the next session. This is due to the Italian party system being divided into two main blocks, the center-left led by Partito Democratico and the center-right, the coalition to which Lega belongs (Zulianello, 2020).

On the other hand, the Spanish political system is more complex since its multiparty system (Gray, 2020) is crossed by the traditional right–left axis and multiple territorial axes. Accordingly, Vox confronts both the left, mainly represented by the Socialist Party and

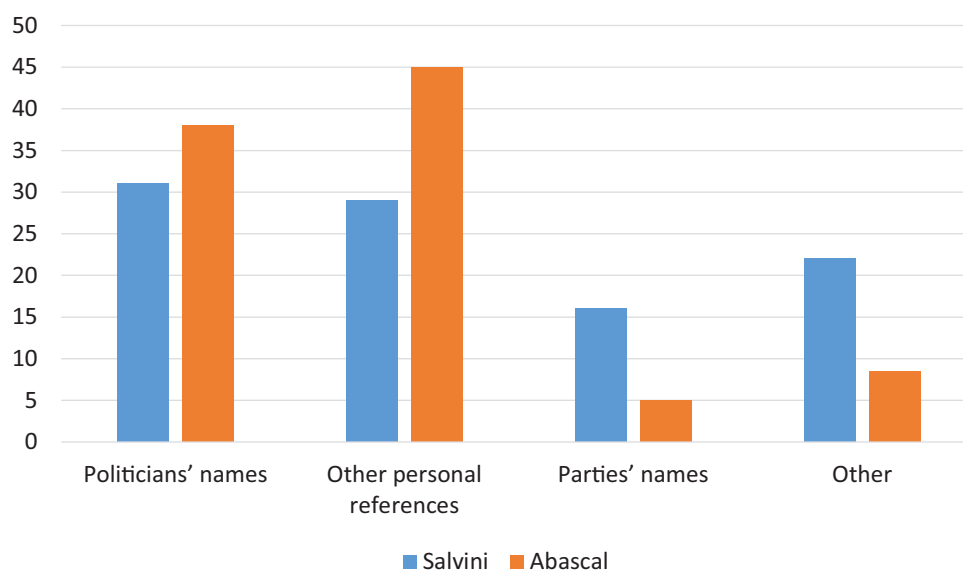


Figure 1. Distribution of the retrieved tweets.

Unidas Podemos (governing in coalition by the time of this research), and the center-right party, Partido Popular in the traditional axis, together with regionalists/separatist parties on the territorial axis (Fernández-García & Valencia Sáiz, 2022). However, Abascal refers to the Socialist Party and its partner in government, Unidas Podemos, in 82% of the tweets that mention political opponents, clearly defining them as the main opponent. In the rest of the tweets, he targets independentist parties (11%), and only 3,7% of the tweets mention the Popular Party. Both these actors are more frequently framed as “allies” of the left rather than subjects of the tweet. A residual 0,3% is dedicated to other parties (mainly regionalist parties from other areas of Spain). As per the general references, exactly as in Salvini’s case, the most recurrent definition is “the Left,” followed by mentions of Catalan independence parties.

6.2. Construction of the “Enemy”: Demonization

As previously mentioned, both Salvini and Abascal mainly refer to political opponents as “the Left.”

Table 1 displays the semantic triplets defining the left, illustrating the construction of the enemy. Salvini mainly refers to the left as “these” but also as “communists” and “them,” stressing out the typical populist dynamic of the “us vs. them.” Similarly, Abascal identifies the political opponent with “the Left,” but he also describes the opponent as autarchy, dictatorship, or “the Government” since, as previously mentioned, the

Spanish government is made up of the Socialist Party and Unidas Podemos.

In both cases, the opponents show no positive quality and are represented as incapable, shameless, and guilty. In the case of Salvini, the accent is placed on their distance from “normal people” about whom they have no knowledge. The Left is accordingly identified as “radical chic.” The term, coined in the 1970s by American journalist Tom Wolfe to satirize composer Leonard Bernstein for hosting a fundraising party for the Black Panthers, aims at lampooning upper-class individuals who endorse leftist radicalism merely to garner prestige rather than to affirm genuine political convictions (Colantone et al., 2022).

To stress this distance from the “real world,” they are also portrayed as lacking common sense, living on another planet (“live on planet Mars”), or with words openly referring to madness, specifically *fuori* (from “*fuori di testa*,” literally out of their mind, a colloquial word to say that someone has lost his head). In addition, “the Left” is portrayed as only interested in “keeping their chairs” (*poltrone*), that is to say, holding their position of power without really caring for the will or interests of the people.

Abascal, on his side, also underlines the elitist aspect of the ruling class and their distance from “normal people” by using the expression *progres*. However, he openly refers to the left-wing parties ruling the country as criminals identifying with a dictatorship. Figure 2, for instance, displays how the Spanish government is identified as a criminal “gang.”

Table 1. Semantic triplets defining “the Left.”

Variable	Salvini	Abascal
Subject	The Left	The Left
Definitions	The Left, them, these, the communists	The Left, the autarchy, the dictatorship, the government
Positive adjectives	—	—
Negative adjectives	Inept, useless, crazy, irresponsible, shameless, guilty, <i>fuori</i> , incompetent, radical chic, <i>buonisti</i> , live on planet Mars	Criminal, dictatorial, shameless, irresponsible, guilty, <i>progre</i>
Positive actions	Like, defend, love, show tenderness	Empathize, defend
Object	Immigrants, illegals, <i>poltrone</i>	Immigrants
Negative actions	Have no clue, do not care	Do not care, are unable, hate, betray, attack
Object	The people, normal people, Italians	Spaniards, citizens



Santiago Abascal 🇪🇸 @Santi_ABASCAL · 13 jul.

España necesita un gobierno al servicio de los españoles, no una banda al servicio de agendas personales, globalistas o separatistas.

#AgendaEspañaDEN

...

Figure 2. Santiago Abascal’s Tweet. Note: “Spain needs a government which serves the people, not a gang who serves personal, global, or independentist interests.”

Both politicians, therefore, implement the strategy of demonizing their political opponents. The concept of demonization resonates with what Sabatier et al. (1987) identified as the “devil shift,” the tendency for people to exaggerate the power and maliciousness of political opponents. In its original conception, the devil shift appears unintentional, but the narrative policy framework (Katz, 2018) has widely shown how it corresponds to an intentional strategy to build a villain figure.

Recognizing that human beings make sense of themselves by defining themselves and rhetorically constructing binaries implies that the role administered to the “Other” sets meaningful boundaries (Thurlow, 2010, p. 227). Demonization can be defined as a process through which a source promotes “a symbolic construction of reality created under the conceptual simplification protagonist–antagonist” (Civita et al., 2020, p. 2), in which the ideas of the sender are exposed as correct and justified, while the demonized group is accused of going against the common interest, dissociating them of an equitable moral nature to the “us” (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015). Accordingly, the demonization of the opponent provides the opportunity to represent the people as victims (Maronitis, 2021).

Previous studies (Michener et al., 2021) have shown that the perceived remoteness of those in high-status positions in the eye of the lower social strata fosters what Lamont (2018) calls the “recognition gap,” causing feelings of alienation, exclusion, discontent, and resentment. The political opponents are accordingly represented as a danger to the people (those who suffer from their incapacity, lack of interest, etc.) and coherently, with PRR parties’ nativist ideology, only represented as showing compassion or positive attitudes only toward the immigrants.

In addition, by stressing that “the Left” is persecuting, obsessed by, or insulting them, both leaders can also present themselves as victims, creating a further bond with “the people.” Victimhood here should be understood as a performative action taking place on a public stage in which actors create and project performances of their life experiences, anxieties, and motives tailored to audiences (Maronitis, 2021).

Thus, acknowledging that the hero–villain narratives are “ethically constitutive” stories which “have special capacities to inspire senses of normative worth” (Smith,

2003, p. 59), the protagonist, that is to say, the hero, generally attracts empathy, affinity, and positive feelings, because the qualities assigned to the character resonate emotionally with the audience (Homolar, 2022).

In other words, highlighting that “the Left” accuse or insult them, both Salvini and Abascal can straighten their position of “champion of the people” (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Figure 3 displays a perfect example of this dynamic: According to Salvini, a “desperate left exploit a murder to accuse Salvini, his party, and therefore Italians of being racist.”

As previously anticipated, coherently with the different settings of the Spanish political system, Abascal also identifies independence movements, especially in Catalonia, as political opponents. Although statistically, the mentions of these parties are not as meaningful as the references to the left, it is worth analyzing them since, for Vox, the unity of Spain is as central as their positioning on the left–right continuum (Fernández-García & Valencia Sáiz, 2022; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021).

Parties asking for Catalanian independence are demonized following the same discursive pattern previously illustrated (see Table 2). In particular, they are defined as *separatistas* (those who want to break away from Spain) or openly as “those who want to break Spain” and called out as a mafia or terrorists and, as such, framed as a danger to the homeland. Interestingly, they are never called by their official name but only with derogatory epitomes, somehow discursively underlining their illegitimacy.

On the other hand, the Popular Party, Spain’s main center-right party, is not only less frequently mentioned, but also its discursive treatment is completely different. Table 2 illustrates how, while independentists are demonized, the Popular Party is treated like a legitimate political competitor and framed as weak or incapable while also being granted positive qualities when it agrees with or supports Vox’s political stances.

This difference, on the one hand, stresses the party’s intrinsic anti-pluralism (Galston, 2017), showing an open rejection of worldviews that differ from theirs. On the other hand, it highlights an opportunist change of tone when dealing with a party with which Vox has formed—and might form—different alliances and coalitions in regional and local government (Barrio et al., 2021).



Una sinistra disperata usa da giorni un povero ragazzo ucciso da un criminale per accusare di razzismo me, la Lega e milioni di italiani. Squallidi. Una preghiera per chi non c'è più, l'impegno a riportare sicurezza in tutte le nostre città.

Figure 3. Matteo Salvini’s Tweet. Note: “A desperate left uses a poor guy murdered to accuse me, Lega, and millions of Italian of racism. Shameless.”

Table 2. Semantic triplets defining the Catalanian independentist parties and the Popular Party.

Variable	Catalonian independentist parties	Popular Party
Definitions	<i>Separatistas</i> , those who want to break Spain	<i>“El PP”</i>
Positive adjectives	—	Show good intentions
Negative adjectives	Criminal, dangerous, threat, enemies of Spain, mafia, terrorist	Weak, unable, irresponsible, guilty
Positive actions	—	Have understood
Object	—	VOX, Spaniards
Negative actions	Hate, want to break, destroy	Cannot or are not able to, lack the capacity
Object	Spain	Spaniards, citizens

6.3. Character Assassination

As displayed in Table 3, Abascal personalized attacks unsurprisingly mainly focus on Pedro Sanchez, Spanish prime minister and leader of the PSOE. In the case of Salvini, the most recurrent names are not members of the government but politicians from the left, particularly, Calenda and Letta.

The attacks against Sanchez, Calenda, and Letta, respectively, do not consist of argument-based political criticisms but, through aggressive tones, irony, mockery, and insult (Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018), they focus on individual traits and behaviors. Their aim, in other

words, is not to engage in a political debate with the opponent but rather to undermine the opponent’s reputation (Berti & Loner, 2021).

These political figures are targeted as individuals using their alleged personal flaws (such as ignorance or stupidity) or characteristics (being posh, aloof, or distant) and mocked in their personal style (such as wearing or not wearing a tie, as illustrated in Figure 4).

These kinds of attacks can be defined as “character assassination,” that is to say, “a deliberate and sustained effort to damage the reputation or credibility of an individual” (Samoilenko et al., 2016, p. 115) that works similarly to argumentum ad hominem (Wodak, 2015).

Table 3. Semantic triplets of the main political enemies.

Variable	Salvini	Abascal
Subject	Calenda, Letta	Pedro Sanchez
Definitions	These, Enrico (for Letta), Renzi’s friend (for Calenda)	Swindler, hustler, dictator (<i>el autócrata</i>)
Positive adjectives	—	—
Negative adjectives	Ignorant, <i>Bocciati</i> , goes to the beach with a tie (for Calenda), posh, stupid, obsessed (by Salvini)	Dangerous, ignorant, useless, stupid, dictator, shameless, far (from reality and from the people), do not wear a tie
Positive actions	Like, defend, love, show tenderness	—
Object	Immigrants, illegals	—
Negative actions	Have no clue, do not care, are dangerous, hate, attack, has an obsession	Ruin, damage, betray, hate
Objects	Home, Italy, Italians, people, us, me	People, working class, Spain, Spaniards, our homeland



No es que no tenga corbata. Es que no tiene vergüenza
quien trata de ocultar la inflación que arruina a los
españoles con debates estúpidos

Figure 4. Santiago Abascal’s Tweet. Note: “Not only does he not wear a tie. The problem is that he is shameless.”

Character assassination directed toward individuals is often not focused on political and professional actions but rather on the target's personality and behavior and can include insults, defamation, and irony (Samoilenko et al., 2016).

Interestingly, following this dynamic, the most recurrent characters after the previously mentioned are two women who seem to have been chosen based more on their symbolic meaning than on their position. As illustrated in Table 4, Salvini mainly points out Laura Boldrini, president of the Chamber of Deputies, between 2013 and 2018, as having no institutional mandate in 2022, and Abascal focuses on Irene Montero, Minister of Equality since 2020.

The harsh attacks against Laura Boldrini are a leit-motif of Salvinian rhetoric (Cervi, 2020b). The reason why Boldrini seems to be the perfect personification of "the enemy" is that she is represented as the archetypal example of the above-mentioned "radical chic." Such individuals, politicians, and intellectuals of the left are believed to "earn a lot of money," "have no clue about the real problems of people," and actually "not care about the people," being in favor of immigrants. Boldrini is accused of being a *buonista*, meaning a "do-gooder," a neologism for those who carry out unnecessary acts

of kindness which transforms a positive attribute, goodness, into an insult.

The background of this word, from a historical perspective, comes from the term "pietism," used by the Fascist regime, after 1938, against those who positioned themselves in favor of Jews who were being harassed by racial laws. Here, too, a virtue (piety or compassion) became distorted into a vice, a source of weakness (Cervi, 2020b). Accordingly, she is made fun of by portraying her as out of her mind and obsessed with Salvini, calling her "this" (seminal to "she," someone who does not deserve to be called by their name or title), and by identifying her by reference to her physical appearance as "tiger eyes" (see Figure 5).

Similarly to Boldrini, Irene Montero is depicted as a sort of "source of every evil," but if Salvini embodies in Boldrini the "immigrant loving elite," Abascal identifies in Montero the perfect representation of the "feminazi" (Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2022).

Exactly as in the previous case, she is mostly defined as "that lady/person" (again, someone who does not deserve to be called by her name or title), mocked as "*la marquesa de Galapagar*," referring to her being Pablo Iglesias' partner, and described as a danger for Spaniards (see Figure 6).

Table 4. Semantic triplets for Boldrini and Montero.

Variable	Salvini	Abascal
Subject	Laura Boldrini	Irene Montero
Definitions	Tiger eyes, lady, this	<i>La marquesa de Galapagar</i> , that lady, that person
Positive adjectives	—	—
Negative adjectives	<i>Buonista</i> , live on another planet, hopeless, obsessed (by Salvini)	Criminal, dangerous, ignorant, crazy, feminazi, threat (to our sons)
Positive actions	Like, defend, love, show tenderness	Empathize, defend
Object	Immigrants, illegals	Immigrants, rapists
Negative actions	Have no clue, do not care, hate, attack, has an obsession	Damage, harm, endanger, watch TV series, hate, fear, insult, accuse
Objects	Home, Italy, Italians, people, us, me	Spain, Spaniards, our homeland, us, Vox, the people



Non sentivate la mancanza di occhi-di-tigre-Boldrini?

Figure 5. Matteo Salvini's Tweet. Note: "Didn't you miss tiger-eyed Boldrini?"



Es un escándalo internacional que a esta hora esta persona siga siendo ministra. Es una amenaza directa a nuestros hijos.

Figure 6. Santiago Abascal's Tweet. Note: "It's an international scandal that this person is still the minister. She is a threat to our children."

7. Conclusions

Our study has focused on two similar parties, Lega and Vox, operating in divergent political contexts. Our findings, on the one hand, show that, despite the differences, both parties identify the left as the main opponent. Because of the structure of the party system, these findings are not surprising in the Italian case. In fact, although in the analyzed time frame Lega formally supported the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi (Garzia & Karremans, 2021), Italian political competition is always based on the confrontation of the center-right versus the center-left block (Zulianello, 2020).

In the case of Vox, it is interesting to note that despite the unity of Spain being as central to the party as the right–left continuum (Barrio et al., 2021), for Abascal, the left epitomizes the political enemy.

In both cases, the discursive construction of “the Left” is based on two main strategies: demonization, the framing of opponents as “enemies of the people” who, along with dangerous “Others” such as immigrants, conspire against the “people” and are blamed for everything that is “wrong” in society; and character assassination of individual politicians through personal attacks, which aim to undermine their reputation and deflect attention from the real issues towards their personal traits and actions.

The demonization of political opponents, deprived of any positive qualities and emotionally blamed (Hameleers et al., 2017) for all the “evil,” allows populist leaders to capitalize on the anger of those groups who perceive that their lives have been ignored, marginalized, or negatively affected by the actions of politicians (Horwitz, 2018). In this way, the subsequent victimization of the “people” offers populist leaders the chance to establish a powerful bond.

In other words, this discursive dynamic appears very similar to that identified by other studies (Carr & Haynes, 2015; Cervi et al., 2020) regarding the framing of immigrants as the “Others”: Both dynamics consist of blaming the othered “Other” (Williams, 2010) through emotional appeal, avoiding any rational discussion and capitalizing on citizens’ discontent.

In addition, in the specific case of Abascal, another political opponent is targeted, although its presence is less relevant from a quantitative perspective: independentist parties. These parties are not even dignified by being called by their official names; rather, they are referred to as *separatistas* or enemies of Spain and framed as a danger to the homeland. In the same vein, it is interesting to observe that these parties are more mentioned and called out as allies of the government rather than being the subject of tweets. On the other side, the Popular Party, which represents the main center-right option, is hardly ever mentioned, but when it is, it is treated as a legitimate political competitor.

As seen, therefore, while Salvini’s populist dichotomous vision of the world is accompanied by a political sys-

tem whose structure allows him to identify one political enemy to be blamed for everything, Abascal, who mainly focuses on the left (identified with the government), also has to deal with independentists, that are framed as enemies of the nation and with the Popular Party, positioned on the right side of the political spectrum and potentially representing a possible ally, is regarded as a legitimate competitor.

In addition, we have observed how these emotional attacks are mostly personalized. Personalization, besides being a central feature of much contemporary political communication (Garzia, 2011), is a key element of populism, which tends to construct charismatic leaders who claim to be the only authentic representatives of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

In this sense, social media constitute a breeding ground for personalized politics: Communication can be filtered, re-framed, and re-contextualized, allowing populists to directly reach their audience (Groshek & Engelbert, 2012) and showcase their authenticity (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2017) and closeness to the people.

Thus, character assassination becomes the ideal discursive strategy to fully exploit social media affordances to strengthen populist communication (Berti & Loner, 2021), focusing on opponents’ personal lives and qualities, that is to say, on their personae, to undermine their reputation. In the same way, personalizing the “enemy” strengthen the “us vs. them” dichotomy that characterizes populist discourse.

Choosing a target that symbolically embodies all the “wrong” in society and attacking them through the use of mockery, insults, or impoliteness not only allows populists to distance themselves from establishment politics, characterized by moderation and issue-based arguments (Gerbaudo, 2018) but fosters polarization that has been proven to benefit them (Schulze et al., 2020).

In conclusion, our study has shed some light on PRR parties’ discursive construction of the political “Other.” Nonetheless, our results are inherently limited to the cases under analysis. Accordingly, future studies should extend the universe to prove if there is a common pattern outside Southern Europe.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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