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Trend towards extreme right-wing populism on Twitter. An analysis of the influence on leaders, media and users

Abstract

The advance of populism in Europe and the positioning of this type of politics on the Web are both facts substantiated by scientific research. In this connection, a platform like Twitter serves as a stage for dissemination, interaction, mobilisation and building the personality of influencer/leaders and as a strategic tool for the selection of issues and for propaganda and fake news. The main objective is to know the impact that this communication model has on both digital users and the media, particularly in electoral processes. To this end, a quantitative–qualitative comparative content analysis, which studies the issue frame and the game frame, is performed on the personal Twitter accounts of Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), the leader of Rassemblement National (RN) in France, Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), the leader of Liga Norte (LN) in Italy, and Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), the leader of Vox in Spain. In the context of the European elections held on the 26 May 2019, a sample of 2,187 tweets, user metrics ('likes,' retweets and comments) and their reproduction in the digital newspapers @lemondefr, @repubblica and @el_país are analysed. The initial results evince a strategic use of online tools, with a media and public response that reproduces the populist discourse of the far-right, to the point of making it go viral.

Keywords
Political communication, populism, influencer, European Parliament elections, Twitter, digital press, digital user.

1. Introduction

The world order is currently suffering from the onslaught of a far-reaching populism that, rather than losing support, has gone from strength to strength. The report published by *The Guardian* (2019) on a sample of 40 countries indicates that the number of populist leaders has doubled in the twenty-first century. The last European elections held on 26 July 2019 have confirmed the boom of far-right and radical left-wing populist parties, which won 218 of the 751 seats (28 per cent) in the European Parliament, with a trend towards the governance of the former.

The main reason behind the active presence of populist political parties in European parliaments (Woertz, Slocum, Colomina, Bourekba & Owczarek, 2017) is, on the one hand, the recent major recession that has led to the emergence of left-wing populist parties that are

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prospering in Southern Europe and, on the other, to the refugee crisis that has been the catalyst of their right-wing counterparts and to the transformation of non-populist parties into populist ones (*The Guardian,* 2018).

Moreover, the presence and activity of the main political leaders on Twitter are increasing exponentially and the topics that they address in their tweets are being virally shared by digital users and making it to the home pages of the digital press. The use that politicians like Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), the leader of Rassemblement National (RN) in France, Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), the leader of Liga Norte (LN) in Italy, and Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), the leader of Vox in Spain put Twitter is allowing these influencer/leaders to circumvent the traditional media and to engage their followers in a much more direct fashion (Engesser, Fawzi & Larsson, 2017).

At a moment when extreme right-wing populism is undoubtedly gaining a foothold throughout Europe, the aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the strategies that the most prominent far-right populist leaders in Europe implement on Twitter (van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Engesser *et al.*, 2017; Ernst, Engesser & Esser, 2017), their role as influencers (Montoya & Vandehey, 2009; Pérez Ortega, 2014; Rampersad, 2009) and the effect that they have on the digital press and users (Aruguete, 2017; Sung-Tae & Young-hwan, 2007).

The main aim of this study is to analyse the influence of far-right populist political leaders on the digital users and the media. We study the topics (issue frame), the strategies of the candidate (game frame) and the level of influence and interactivity on Twitter. Additionally, the idea is to analyse the key aspects of their populist discourses in a context in which the attitude of political leaders and their lack of interaction and, by extension, two-way communication with the public are being questioned.

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1. Populist Influence and Rhetoric on Twitter

The political map in Europe is changing after many years of moderate two-party systems. Its populist discourse has enabled the extreme right to create a niche for itself in the media and social networking sites and to obtain unprecedented election results (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2019; Bosch, Brunet & Rosiñol, 2017). Moreover, far-right populist leaders and their parties have become indispensable for constituting parliaments and forming governments.

A previous study of the general elections held in 31 European countries, published in *The Guardian* (2018), confirms the impact that the populist wave has had in the past 20 years, challenging the political establishment throughout the continent. The analysis reveals that the populists tripled in number between 1998 and 2018, winning enough votes for their leaders to occupy government posts in 11 countries.

As to right-wing populist parties in Europe, their strategy involved close cooperation. The then Front National (FN) in France, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the Voorzitter Tweede Kamerfractie Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in Holland united to form a new parliamentary group, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENL), for the purpose of offering electoral support to other like-minded parties. There was a resurgence of the most conservative kind of populism in the general elections held in Western democratic states, thanks to greater social polarisation in the wake of three decades of neoliberalism, the deep-rooted prejudices among some sectors of the population, the refugee crisis in Europe, the explosion of fake news, especially on social media, and a trend towards populism in countries like Russia, Turkey and the United States (Woertz, 2017).

The suitability of Twitter for political communication has been demonstrated in research on members of parliament (Margaretten & Gaber, 2014; Larsson, 2015), politicians (Aharony, 2012), political parties (Adi, Erickson & Lilleker, 2014), interest groups (van-der-Graaf, Otjes

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& Rasmussen, 2015) and institutions (McFarlane & Kaza, 2012). The so-called 'Populism 2.0' (Gerbaudo, 2014) is a strategy now employed by populist leaders to convey their messages and to make them go viral, thus overcoming the difficulties that they come up against when attempting to access the conventional media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Groshek & Engelbert, 2013) controlled by the elites (van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016).

A new opinion leader model has emerged, which has established itself as an interesting marketing tool, whose value resides in that these leaders have learned how to combine their tasks as such with the care and management of their political identity in a space as conducive as social media (Marshall & Redmond, 2016). The figure of the influencer can be understood as a copy of a personal brand (party ideology), which is developed thanks to the opportunities provided by social networking sites (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011).

Marine Le Pen in France (RN), Mateo Salvini in Italy (La Liga) and Santiago Abascal in Spain (Vox), the leaders analysed here, have known how to capitalise on the power and influence that social media have over the formation of public opinion by disseminating populist ideas, including their acerbic criticism of the 'elites' and their defence of the 'people.' They possess the characteristics of the charismatic leader, employing the plain language of ordinary people that conveys a message with a strong ideological and emotional baggage (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). Versus the left-wing populist parties, which tend to focus on the social rights and freedoms of the people or on lambasting the corruption of the elites (Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella & Franch, 2017), their right-wing counterparts reject globalisation, integration and the establishment (Rooduijn, 2015; Mudde, 2016), challenge supranational bodies, such as the European Union (Mammone, 2009), and criticise collectives like immigrants, refugees and Muslims (Wodak, 2015; Fuchs, 2017), thus fostering an exclusionary political vision.

It is a type of communication focusing more on the form than on the substance, with an intensive use of cyberrhetoric (Stromer-Galley, 2014), whose chief purpose is to win votes. One of the most important concepts in research on the media's coverage of politics in general, and during election campaigns in particular, is the framing of politics as a strategic game. Broadly defined, the framing of politics as a strategic game is characterized by a focus on questions related to who is winning and losing, the performances of politicians and parties, and on campaign strategies and tactics. The news media have a strong tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than to focus on political issues (Aalberg, Strömback & de Vreese, 2012).

In this regard, political candidates are converted into the brand identity not only of their own parties, but also of the media and the citizenry. The Web provides them with resources (hashtags, mentions, images, links, videos, memes, etc.) to amplify each tweet and to foster interaction with audiences. However, the lack of or minimal response of political leaders to the 'likes' and comments of digital users and the predominance of a one-way conversation are both remarkable (Mancera Rueda & Helfrich, 2014). They exploit these digital technologies primarily as mechanisms for promoting their own proposals and distributing their own content, applying a propaganda logic based on viral sharing (López-García, 2016; Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Nonetheless, enjoying popularity is not enough for political leaders, since this should be accompanied by the ability to attract the attention of all and sundry (Gladwell, 2000).

2.2. *Populism 2.0. The influence of agendas and two-way communication on the Internet*

The argument that the traditional media have the power to impose their agendas, given the confidence and credibility that they have among the citizenry, is reinforced in political and electoral contexts, thus giving credence to the theory of intermedia agenda-setting (Atwater & Fico, 1986; Reese, 1989; McCombs, 2005; Bouza & Rodríguez, 2017).

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Among the scientific community there is still no consensus on the influence of leaders' discourses and the transfer of issues from the political agenda to its media counterpart. The report published by the Pew Research Center (2010), comparing blog, YouTube and Twitter content with that offered by the media, concluded that the most important stories and issues on social networking sites differed substantially from those appearing in the press. Other studies have confirmed the alignment of political blogs with political press articles (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Reese, 2007; Scott, 2005) appearing, for instance, on Twitter, which verifies the effectiveness of agenda setting in digital media.

The disruptive effect of social media has posed new problems for political communication (Enli, 2017). In short, digital networks foster the creation of closed communities based on homophily (Guerrero-Solé & López-González, 2017).

Another issue has to do with the pervasiveness of fake news whose circulation, thanks to social networking sites, is broader and less restricted, thus causing a greater impact on public opinion (e.g. processes such as Brexit and Trump's election as US President). Likewise, to this repertoire should be added the spread of hate speeches via digital platforms. This relevant problem has given rise to the dilemma between the protection of freedom of speech and the repression of anti-social attitudes (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016; Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014). Populist politicians exploit the powerful influence of social networking sites on public opinion formation to attack the elites, to defend the people or to isolate others on channels such as Twitter (Engesser *et al.*, 2016). In parallel, when the news media reduce their focus on substantive issues and focus on strategies and character traits, it is claimed to undermine political information and engagement and activate political cynicism. This happens because the strategic news frames make politicians' self-interest more salient and depress knowledge on policy positions. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that strategic news frames predispose the audience to attend to and recall strategic rather than substantive information. This happens because strategic game frames distract readers from the substance of the story.

In the context of the European elections held on the 26 July 2019, the leaders of the right-wing populist parties analysed here posted tweets whose subject matter was very similar as regards both the use of tools (hashtags, mentions, images, links, videos, memes, etc.) and their discursive rhetoric (propaganda mechanisms, persuasion and fake news). In France (RN), Italy (LN) and Spain (Vox), these parties do not identify with traditional populisms, but with their so-called 'post-industrial' successors, with no links to fascist ideologies and defending a new agenda (Ignazi, 2006). The criticism of the traditional elites and liberal democracy, xenophobia, the repudiation of immigration, protectionist and nationalist theses and Euroscepticism are some of the key aspects in the political programmes of these populist parties and their leaders, whose tweets mainly revolve around the new migratory waves, their distrust of the EU, the cuts in the welfare state or job insecurity. These messages are reinforced by the charisma and discursive strategies of these leaders, aimed at convincing potential voters (Norris, 2009).

The counter-agenda promoted on social media (Aruguete, 2017; Wallsten, 2007; Meraz, 2011; Sung-Tae & Young-hwan; 2007; Casero-Ripollés, 2017) activates a down-up mechanism, involving the citizenry and civil society, which can condition the media agenda thanks to the impact and reach of messages posted on social networking sites. Opportunities for social and political change thus emerge.

The influence of political leaders on the media and digital users does not guarantee two-way or interactive communication on social media. Several studies performed on the use of social networking sites in election campaigns by political parties and their candidates have highlighted that interactivity is all but absent (Loader & Mercea, 2012). Despite the technological potential of these platforms, both political and media actors are reluctant to foster

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dialogue with the citizenry (Miquel-Segarra, Alonso-Muñoz & Marcos-García, 2017; Kalsnes, Larsson & Enli, 2017; Lozano-Aguiar & García-Orosa, 2017).

In light of the foregoing, this study explores the current context of populism in Europe. Specifically, it attempts to paint a clearer picture of the general profile of far-right populist parties and their leaders in France, Italy and Spain and, on the basis of a content analysis using triangulation, examines their communication strategies on Twitter, the transfer of agendas and the impact that they have on the digital press (@lemondefr, @repubblica, @el_país) and users.

The analysis is based on the following three research questions:

RQ1. To what use did right-wing populist political leaders put Twitter in the context of the last European elections held on 26 May 2019?

RQ2. To what extent did these right-wing populist political leaders reply to the comments of digital users on Twitter, taking into account the opportunities for two-way communication that this social networking site offers?

RQ3. To what extent did the digital press reproduce the issues addressed by these right-wing populist political leaders in their tweets and virally shared by digital users on their home pages?

These premises form the main hypothesis of the research: The success of extreme right-wing populism in Europe responds to the influence and strategies of the leader on Twitter and the effects of political discourse on digital media and users (H1).

3. Methodology

At a political moment identified by Brexit and the influence of Donald Trump's government on the EU, three European countries, France, Italy, and Spain, stage the growth of the most conservative populism; at the front, three leaders: Marine Le Pen (RN), Matteo Salvini (La Liga) and Santiago Abascal (Vox). Parties and candidates prepare for elections to the European Parliament with an antecedent situation that determines the electoral results. In the case of France and in a government context marked by *the crisis of yellow vests*, Rassemblement National (RN) repeats the victory of the 2014 European elections (24%), ahead of La República en Marcha, led by Emmanuel Macron (22%). In Italy, La Liga (34%) prevails in Europe, doubling in votes the Movement 5 Stars (17%), led by Luigi Di Magio. The results were defined by Salvini's immigration policies, under the government of Sergio Mattarella. In Spain, in a scenario provoked by the success of the motion of censure of the PSOE to the government of the Popular Party, Vox, gets for the first-time presence in the European Parliament, after the progress achieved in the Andalusian elections (10%) and general elections (10%)[1].

In this dilemma and with the aim of analyzing the communication strategies of populist leaders, the effect of their discourse on citizens and the projection in the media, a methodology structured in two phases is designed:

3.1. *Variables and techniques of analysis*

Employing a comparative methodology (Wimmer & Dominik, 1996; Piñuel Raigada, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004; Flick, 2004; Callejo, 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the content analysis performed here focused on the sources (candidates, digital users and the media), the facts (issues), the purpose (the aim of the tweets) and the discursive strategies of the political leaders under study as indicators of influence on digital communication (Twitter).

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[1] Vox, created in 2013, has a shorter political trajectory than other parties. This situation could explain the differences in the results obtained in the elections and other aspects such as the profile of followers and the strategies of the leader on Twitter.

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The analysis was based in two phases:
- Quantification by means of the numerical variables (the populist political leaders' tweets), user metrics ('likes,' retweets and comments) and news published (on the home pages of the digital press). The frequency variable, the valence of comments (positive/negative) and the percentage of interaction (the number of @replies) were also analysed.
- Qualification by means of the variables relating to the issue (content), resources employed (hashtags, mentions, images, links, videos, memes, etc.) and the presence or absence of the leaders on the home pages of the digital press.

The sample data was retrieved using the Twitonomy app. While the SPSS Statistics 26 software package was employed for data processing and generating the contingency, frequency and cross tables and graphs. The margin of error, calculated using Scott's pi, reached a confidence level of 0.98.

Data coding was performed using different types of variables among the options offered by the software package. For the analysis procedure (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff & van Haar, 2013), a typology of variables was created, with exclusive categories for each one. The numerical variables whose sole objective was simple quantification, including the number of related tweets (politicians/digital users) and the subvariables, such as citizen participation (the number of 'likes,' retweets and comments), were classified as scale variables. The categorical variables, with one of more than two possible answers, were also coded as nominal variables, each possible answer being assigned a numerical value (1=a, 2=b, 3=c), corresponding to 'Issue' and 'Message valence.'

In order to identify the issues covered in the tweets posted by the three political leaders, a table with 13 categories divided into two sections was created: the issue frame: issues that the political parties included as proposals in their electoral programmes and the game frame: issues relating to vote-winning (Aalberg, Strömback & de Vreese, 2012; Alonso Muñoz & Casero Ripollés, 2019). This subsequently made it possible to gauge the equivalence between the political agenda and its media counterpart.

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Table 1: Categories created for analysing the issues covered in the tweets.

	Issue	Description	
Issue frame	Economy	Tweets addressing issues such as employment/unemployment, salaries, the public deficit and debt, taxation, entrepreneurship, etc.	
	Social policies	Tweets dealing with pensions, health, education, the welfare state, social justice, equality/inequality (including gender violence), housing,	
	Corruption	Tweets relating to political corruption in the broadest sense of the word.	
	State territorial model	Tweets pertaining to the territorial organisation of the state, including those broaching the subject of the independence of regions such as Catalonia and Scotland, or nationalism.	
	Terrorism	Tweets on terrorism under any of its guises.	
	Immigration	Tweets addressing issues relating to immigration at a national and international level (refugees).	
	Foreign affairs	Tweets referring to the EU and other regions of the world, populist governments and Brexit.	
Game frame	*Horse race and governance frame*	Government strategies and agreements	Tweets on possible current and future agreements between parties and the possibility (or impossibility) of forming governments, including those relating to surveys and polls.
	Politicians as individuals frame	Personal issues	Tweets referring to the private lives of politicians.
	Political strategy frame	Organisation of political events	Tweets relating to the organisation of rallies, interviews and encounters with the citizenry.
	News management frame	Relations with the media	Tweets in which news published in the media is shared.
	No theme	Tweets without any defined topic (acknowledgements, condolences and tributes).	
	Others	Those tweets not falling into any one of the previous categories.	

Source: Own elaboration.

The sample comprised three far-right populist leaders participating in the European elections held on 26 May 2019: Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel), the leader of RN in France, Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi), the leader of LN in Italy, and Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), the leader of Vox in Spain. The criteria employed to select these politicians and their parties were as follows:

(1) The far-right populist parties that obtained better election results than their far-left adversaries in the last European elections.

(2) In the general elections held in their respective countries, they generally won a greater number of votes and seats. La Liga (17.3%), RN (21.4%) and Vox (10.2%).

(3) In the 2019 European elections, they won a substantially greater number of votes than in the previous elections held in 2014. La Liga (34.3%), RN (23.4%) and Vox (6.2%), respectively.

With the aim of comparing the political candidates' Twitter activity in a non-election and election period, the following were chosen: February and March as a non-election period; and May, the month in which the campaign and elections were held. April was not taken into

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consideration because it was when general elections were also held in Spain (on the 28th), a period that was marked by Abascal's tweets and which could skew the research results.

As to the selection of the social networking site, Twitter was chosen because of the advantages that it offers political communication (Campos Dominguez, 2017). Instead of engaging with citizens to exchange points of view and to listen to their ideas, these populist politicians tended to use Twitter to attack their critics, to fight personal battles and to attract the media's attention. This technique was a common denominator in all the cases analysed here.

After identifying a total of 2,187 tweets posted on the personal accounts of the three far-right populist leaders (@MLP_officiel, @matteosalvinimi and @Santi_ABASCAL), the purpose and topic of the 593 tweets most commented on by digital users and with the greatest reverberations in the digital press (@lemondefr, @repubblica and @el_país) were analysed. The criteria employed to select the three digital newspapers (from which 90 home pages were retrieved) were as follows: mainstream digital newspapers whose editorial lines defend different ideological positions. Additionally, they are newspapers that have given continuous coverage to the advance of far-right populist parties in their national and international sections, leaders and opinions pieces (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2019).

Similarly, the metrics ('likes,' retweets and comments) of digital users (3,188,016) were quantified, before selecting the comments and replies of the political leaders, along with those home pages of the press (n=46) on which the issues addressed in the tweets were published, with or without the presence of the leaders.

4. Results: exploratory analysis

4.1. Quantification Phase

From the numerical quantification data, we want to verify the relationship of proportionality between the number of followers, the number of tweets published and the number of metrics (likes, RT and comments) with the capacity of influence and bidirectionality of the leaders.

On a total sample of 2,187 tweets, the metrics reveal Salvini's protagonism. The Italian candidate publishes more tweets (1,512) than Le Pen (529) and Abascal (146). Likewise, he gets more likes (901,750), retweets (425,560) and comments (112,457) than the rest of the leaders. However, he is the politician with the fewest Twitter accounts (1,815), surpassed in the number of followers (1,115,278) by the French candidate (2,270,000).

It is important to clarify that, despite Salvini's high publication rate, not all of them are tweets of their own. Many of them are created with retweets and links to information, images, and videos from the media and other sources (parties and leaders).

On the other hand, Santiago Abascal is the candidate with the fewest tweets (146) and the fewest followers (241,000) although he manages to attract the attention of the user, with more likes (695,764) and retweets (307,603) than Marine Le Pen.

The metrics reveal a high response rate of e-users, nothing equivalent to that generally exercised by candidates. In this line, it is key to know which functions and factors the level of political influence are related.

The first question is to differentiate the value of likes as opposed to retweets and comments. Retweet favors the diffusion of the message. To calculate the viralization capacity of the message, a formula is designed that assigns a double value to the retweets received as opposed to the ones I like, given that when a retweet is received, the content of the original tweet appears on the timeline of the person who publishes it and the diffusion increases, which is not the case with the like (Carrasco Polaino *et al.*, 2018). The final formula is to add the retweets multiplied by 2 and the likes, all divided by the number of original tweets published.

Diffusion capacity = (SUM RT*2+SUM LIKES) / SUM TWEETS

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Table 2: Twitter message viralization capability.

Marine Le Pen	529	206,701	413, 402	423,365	836,767	1,581.79
Matteo Salvini	1,512	425,560	851,120	901,750	1,752,870	1.159.30
Santiago Abascal	146	307,603	615,206	695,764	1,310,970	8.979.24

Source: Own elaboration.

Data reveal that messages with greatest diffusion capacity (8,979) are those corresponding to Santiago Abascal, leader of Vox. The so-called "more is less" effect is produced since previous studies have shown that users do not prioritize the amount in the communicative activity of populist political leaders in this digital platform (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2019).

The comments are metrics that allow users to assess positively or negatively the messages, use resources (e.g., hashtags, mentions, images, emoticons, videos, links, tags ...), make proposals or criticize the attitude of politicians. They are brands that favor interaction and bi-directionality, typical of Twitter. However, the data confirm the one-way and disproportionate response of the leader with respect to the activity of followers. The most significant case is represented by Salvini, who, despite being the one who tweets the most and having the maximum number of comments (112,457), with positive valence (92.5%), generates a minimum level of response (0.01%), focused on responding to other parties and the media, ahead of audiences. The response of Le Pen (59,027) and Abascal (55,699) is also minimal (0.02) if we compare it with the activity of users.

In addition to the lack of interaction, the data show a high percentage of positive comments in favor of the published messages, which evidences the existence of fans communities around the figure of the populist candidate.

Metric values are not sufficient to demonstrate the leader's ability to influence so-called digital prosumers. In addition to the quantification of data, there is a qualitative analysis of the issues and the reaction it produces in users and in the media. These aspects are therefore linked to the second phase of the study.

4.2. *Qualification Phase*

Table 3: Distribution of tweets of populist leaders according to their theme (%).

	Candidates			Global Statistical Values			
	Marine Le Pen	Matteo Salvini	Santiago Abascal	Average	Median	Minimum	Maximun
Economy	8.2	8.3	10.5	9.000	8.300	8.2	10.5
Inmigration	**19.5**	**24.6**	**20.8**	21.633	20.800	19.5	24.6
Terrorism	**15.5**	5.6	0.0	7.033	5.600	0.0	15.5
Foreign Affairs	**22.1**	**20.1**	**14.9**	19.033	20.100	14.9	22.1
Corruption	0.6	1.3	2.2	1.367	1.300	0.6	2.2
Social Policies	1.2	8.2	3.9	4.433	3.900	1.2	8.2
State Territorial Model	11.2	**11.5**	**25.9**	16.200	11.500	11.2	25.9
Government Strategies and Agreements	**12.5**	**14.1**	**14.5**	13.700	14.100	12.5	14.5
Personal Issues	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.133	0.000	0.0	0.4
Organisation of Political Events	1.4	0.3	0.0	0.567	0.300	0.0	1.4
Relations with the Media	5.3	5.1	4.8	5.067	5.100	4.8	5.3
No Theme	0.5	0	1.1	0.533	0.500	0.0	1.1
Others	1.6	0.2	1.3	1.033	1.300	0.2	1.6

Source: Own elaboration. Note: Percentages in bold indicate the most published topics on Twitter.

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4.2.1. Political Agenda. What are populist leaders talking about on Twitter?

The data from the scientific analysis show empirical results that respond to the premises of the research.

Firstly, the analysis shows the ideological homogeneity that characterizes the political agenda of extreme right-wing populism. Foreign affairs, immigration, terrorism, and the territorial model achieve significant values. The percentages indicate what politicians talk about on Twitter, where they focus their attention and what issues they ignore.

Marine Le Pen, from a Eurosceptic perspective, focuses her attention on foreign affairs (22.1%), questioning the management of the EU and revitalizing the idea of what it calls "economic patriotism." In a discourse marked by inclusion/exclusion and criticism of President Emmanuel Macron's migration policies, he dedicates many of his tweets to the issue of immigration (19.5%), links them to economic problems and alludes to the fact that the improvements must be for the French people and not for "the others." Unlike the other candidates, the leader of RN promotes the issue of terrorism (15.5%), given the background surrounding the most recent history in France and promotes the regeneration of transnational alliances with other countries where populist extremism reigns.

Sharing Le Pen's Euroscepticism, Matteo Salvini bets on an anti-European strategy, with strategies against foreign policy (20.1%) based on immigration problems, to which he devotes the maximum attention of his speech (23.6%). As Interior Minister, he proposes to the Italian government the approval of the well-known Salvini Decree that hardens asylum conditions and facilitates the expulsion of immigrants. In his Twitter messages, he changes the focus of insecurity in Italy and devotes more than 250 tweets of his own to immigration, ahead of issues related to the mafia and corruption (1.3%).
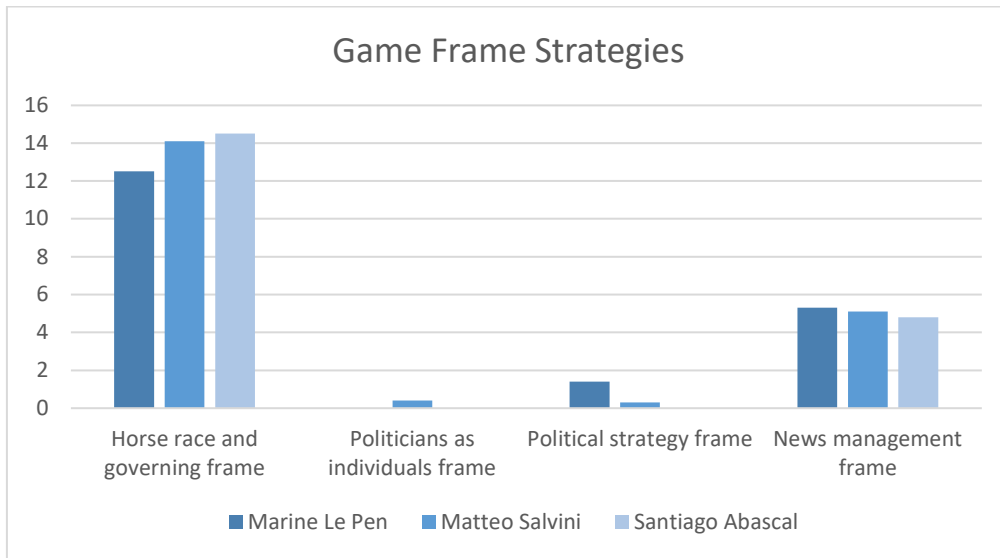
Its position on issues related to the territorial model is also considerable (11.5%), defending the increase in the autonomy of the regions. In contrast to the generality of populist parties on the extreme right, opposed to budget investment in social policy, the Salvini strategy highlights the importance of the economy (8.3%) and social welfare (8.2%), linked to the "danger" represented by immigration for Italy.

Santiago Abascal also reproduces the thematic uniformity of populists. Nevertheless, ahead of immigration (20.8%) and foreign affairs (14.9%), Vox's leader reached maximum levels in his publications on the state model (25.9%), in a Spanish context marked by the conflict of the Independence of Catalonia and the Government strategies and agreements (17.5%), in which his party has been the key to the governability of right-wing policies. A characteristic feature of Abascal's communication is the approach to issues from the point of view of national sovereignty and the unity of Spain, even in the context of elections to the European Parliament.

Secondly, and according to the division of functions of the political agenda, the results show the priority of the issue frame over the game frame. The average number of topics published in the political program (72.7%) was higher than that reached by the three leaders in those matters aimed at obtaining the vote in the elections (19.4.%). Populist politicians, faithful to party ideology, construct a discourse centered on proposals for improving the economic problems affecting the population and the causes that provoke them (government and EU management, an asylum for refugees, corruption or terrorism).

When they make use of the game frame, they focus on the Government strategies and agreements (the horse race and governing frame), to which they resort in order to achieve parliamentary or governmental presence.

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Table 4: Distribution of messages according to game frame (%).

Source: Own elaboration.

Matteo Salvini, a leader with the highest rates of popularity on Twitter, stands out for his attack strategies, marked by negative personalization (16.2%) against parties and candidates from his own country (including the coalition government of which he forms part), against European leaders and against representatives of the EU. Le Pen stands out for strategic actions (14.5%) against President Macron, his main rival and threatens the EU with the call for a referendum to remove France from the Union. For his part, Santiago Abascal launches messages focused on the Government strategies and agreements (14.5%) as a springboard to intervene in government action.

Finally, to review the value (0%) reached by Le Pen and Abascal in the item personal issues (Politicians as an individual frame), which shows the refusal of some politicians to talk about personal matters, as a formula to attract the attention of voters.

One aspect that does not go unnoticed is the leader relation with the media (News management frame). They criticize the diffusion of news against populist politics and its leaders.

The profile of strategist-influencer, capable of combining the theme (79.6%) with the strategies (19.9%) is represented by Salvini. However, Mari Le Pen is the leader who uses the most Twitter resources (59 hashtags, 23 mentions, 13 links, 20 videos and 42 images) compared to Salvini (40 hashtags, 17 mentions, 40 links, 19, videos and 28 images) or Abascal (4 hashtags, 2 mentions, 1 link, 3 videos and 4 images).

4.2.2. Media agenda. Conflict as an approach

Knowing the influence of European leaders' discourse in newspapers is part of the research process. The press selected for the study is fed by the issues that populist politicians publish most intensely on Twitter and that cause most attraction among network users. To verify with empirical data the projection of these contents in the home pages of the newspapers (@lemonde, @repubblica, and @el_país), the variables of thematic (issue frame) and strategy (game frame) that reach greater heights in the political agenda are selected. In the same line, a total of 90 home pages of each newspaper are checked to see how many of them reproduce these topics as main or secondary news (with or without the presence of the candidate) and the valence (positive or negative) that the newspaper assigns to the topics.

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Table 5: Home pages issues (%) and valence (+,-). The blocks analyzed correspond to Foreign affairs, Immigration, Terrorism, State Territorial Model and Economy (issue frame) together with Government strategies and Agreements and Relations with the media (game frame).

	Media						Global Statistical Values				
	Le Monde	Valence (+/-)	República	Valence (+/-)	El País	Valence (+/-)	**Global Media**	Average	Median	Min.	Max.
Economy	3.1	2.5/0.6	1.9	1/0.9	3.1	2.7/0.4	8,1	2.700	3.100	1.9	3.1
Inmigration	24.7	1.8/22.9	33.1	4/29.1	21.9	3.8/18.1	**79,7**	26.567	24.700	21.9	33.1
Terrorism	23.5	1.7/21.8	0.4	0/0.4	0.2	0/0.2		8.033	0.400	0.2	23.5
Foreign affairs	26.8	14.1/12.7	22.9	2.5/20.4	17.7	1.4/16.3	**67,4**	22.467	22.900	17.7	26.8
State Territorial Model	1.1	0.1/1	21.3	2.1/19.2	32.3	5.8/26.5	54,7	18.233	21.300	1.1	32.3
Government strategies and agreements	20.5	1.2/19.3	19.8	2.5/17.3	23.5	2.4/21.1	**63,8**	21.267	20.500	19.8	23.5
Relations with the media	0.1	0/0.1	0.1	0/0.1	1	0/1	1,2	0.400	0.100	0.1	1.0
Others	0.1	0/0.1	0.3	0/0.3	0.2	0/0.2	0,6	0.200	0.200	0.1	0.3

Source: Own elaboration. Note: Percentages in bold indicate the topics that have occupied the most space on home pages and the global statistical values.

The data obtained show the equivalence of topics published on Twitter and in the press. During the sample period, the three media publish a total of 46 home pages, *Le Monde* (13), *La Reppublica* (21) and *El País* (12), in which the selected issues appear as first or second news.

The global quantification of the three newspapers confirms that the topics of immigration (79,7%), foreign affairs (67,4%) and Government strategies and agreements (63,8%) were the most published during the period analyzed.

The French newspaper devotes special attention to Foreign affairs (26.8%), Immigration (24.7%) and Terrorism (23.5%), which are also the blocks that Le Pen has promoted on the Net. It measures the subjects that on the home pages relate the figure of the leader with the event dealt with. In general, most of the issues that go up to the home pages are coded with negative valence, (78.5) showing the newspaper's position before Le Pen's speech. Headlines such as *Le bilan indigent du RN au Parlament européen* (May, 15th) *or Europe: l'extrema droite au Coeur de la campagne* (May, 21st) focussed on the European elections, open the home pages.

La Repubblica brings to the home pages the topics most published by Salvini on Twitter, highlighting the space dedicated to Immigration (33.1%), which becomes the star topic, followed by Foreign Affairs (22.9%) and State Territorial Model (21.3%). Another of the blocks with a home page presence refers to the Government strategies and agreements (19.8%), centered on the conflict with its government partners. It is significant the informative treatment of this newspaper, which, with the exception of some information on the economy, related to the lowering of taxes, assigns negative valence (87.7) to all the blocks linked to the candidate of La Liga. Headlines such as *Sorpresa Salvini perde voti* (May, 19th), about the electoral campaign or *Salvini, ochhio a la ruspa* (May, 11th), with the presence of the leader in the foreground, with a work helmet, next to an excavator, open the home page.

Finally, *El País* highlights the theme Territorial Model (32.3%), which has also marked Abascal's speech on Twitter. The situation of political confrontation (independence, nationalism, unity, national sovereignty) that Spain is experiencing at the moment marks the headlines, starring Vox and its leader. In addition, a percentage of relevant space is dedicated

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to the issue of political agreements (23.5%), in which Vox and its leader have played a leading role, without neglecting the issue of Immigration (21.9%). The negative valence (83.8%) that marks the home page information related to populism is also a feature in the Spanish newspaper. Headlines such as *La derecha escenifica su unidad ante decenas de miles de manifestantes* (February 11th) related to the opposition to independence in Catalonia or *La UE se enfrenta al reto de la ultraderecha y los euroescépticos* (May, 28th), on the advance of populism in Europe, open the home page, both without including images.

In addition to the most tweeted blocks projected on the home page, the three media analysed also include subjects less disseminated by the leaders, such as Social policies (education, health, gender violence, abortion, euthanasia) or political corruption, which the press deals with from a critical approach to management and populist discourse.

In short, the brand of political conflict and information on issues that have generated social controversy are the common denominator of the home page in all three headings.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The influence of populist leaders on Twitter and their projection on users and media are the object of the study. The results are structured in order to research questions and focus on two fundamental axes: a thematic and political strategy.

The first question is how selected politicians use Twitter (PI1).

The candidates publish more tweets related to the issue frame (thematic approach) than to the game frame (political and electoral strategies). At the thematic level, the data show that populist leaders concentrate their attention on four blocks: Foreign Affairs, Immigration, Terrorism, and State Territorial Model, treated from the ideological position that defines their policy. Euroscepticism, the defense of the "people" and national sovereignty are coded in its messages. Other issues such as Social Policies, Corruption or the Economy are dealt with from the perspective of criticism of the management of governments and other parties.

At the strategic level, the issues focused on attacks on the adversary and on electoral agreements, in which they have been protagonists of alliances with conservative parties to guarantee the formation of governments.

Other strategic aspects such as talking about their personal lives or organizing events related to the electoral campaign, aimed at attracting the attention of voters, are not referents of their messages. On the other hand, there is a generalized attitude of rejection of the media, given the information they publish on populist policies.

As for the use of the tools provided by Twitter (hashtags, links, mentions, tags, videos, images), Salvini stands out from the rest of the profiles. In addition to its own tweets, it generates other messages supported by retweets and links to information about interventions in the media or in political events, which explains the higher number of tweets published (1512) compared to Le Pen (529) and Abascal (146).

Linked to the use of Twitter, a second question, related to the unidirectionality of the message of populist politicians and the lack of response to users, arises.

Faced with the active participation of Twitter audiences, the number of likes, RTs and comments, and the inclination of followers to spread the leader's message and make it viral, politicians stand out for their lack of interaction with the public. The quantity of published messages is not directly proportional to the quality and attention they show to users, a behavior that is also repeated in electoral periods. The common strategy is defined by a high level of publication and limited response. Salvini's case is the most representative. With a massive publication of tweets and a unique discourse, marked by populist ideology, he achieves superior metrics to the rest of the candidates. The exception is Abascal, which publishes fewer tweets and concentrates attention on the State Territorial Model, an issue of citizen concern as a result of the independence conflict in Catalonia. In this case, the "less is

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more" effect is produced, as the candidate manages to multiply the level of dissemination on the net.

In any case, the data link the influence of the leader to the combination of issue frame and game frame, added to a strategic and adequate use of the tools facilitated by Twitter and the leader's capacity to attract the attention of the social audience, either through the selection of themes or through confrontation with governments, parties and the media.

A third question is related to the influence of these issues in the press (PI3).

The results demonstrate the equivalence and projection of the themes-strength that the leaders have disseminated on the Network and that, in turn, have achieved greater impact among users (likes, RT and comments).

Newspapers bring to the home page, as main or secondary news, the blocks to which politicians have allocated more tweets (Foreign Policy, Immigration, Terrorism, and State Territorial Model). Other issues such as Corruption or Social Policies, less dealt with by politicians on Twitter, have media coverage. The selection of news on the cover responds to messages and attitudes of populist leaders that have generated social controversy and may attract the attention of readers. As a general rule, the selected newspapers treat information from a conflict perspective, criticize populist discourse and mark the leader's proposals with negative valence.

The main conclusions of the study are:

The presence in European parliaments of populist forces is a fact to which are added favorable electoral results and real options for governance.

In the framework of the elections to the European Parliament, the advance of extreme right-wing populism is analyzed on the basis of the strategies of politicians such as Le Pen (RN), Salvini (La Liga) and Abascal (Vox).

The communication of these leaders on Twitter is characterized by an ideological discourse, with themes that reinforce the principles of populism. Euroscepticism, criticism of EU management, rejection of migration policies, the threat of terrorism or the questioning of the territorial model in their respective countries are the issues most dealt with in their tweets (issue frame), those that generate the most metrics (likes, RT and comments) and those that have the greatest presence on the home pages (@lemonde, @repubblica and @el_país).

The ability of politicians to influence the public and the media is linked to the use of communication strategies (game frame) that include criticism of other parties and the policy of pacts, aimed at attracting attention and winning the vote of voters. In addition, there is an adequate use of Twitter tools that favor the diffusion of the message. However, the level of influence is inversely proportional to the rate of interaction between politicians and users. Politicians do not respond to an active audience, which follows the leader, indicates his speech as a favorite, comments on it and makes it viral. These common values are intensified in the case of Salvini, who manages to combine theme and strategy and achieve superior metrics with a unidirectional discourse.

Newspapers boost politicians' messages on their home pages from a conflict perspective. They reproduce the topics most tweeted by the candidate, most followed and commented on, and which arouse the most controversy in public opinion. The feedback from the political agenda, although the populist discourse is characterised by negative valence in the populist discourse, means an attitude that leads to confrontation between the parties.

In short, the activity of users and media on Twitter is determined by the power of a unique discourse, centered on the ideology, the conflict and the influencer leader.

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