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**NEW POLITICAL ACTORS AND DISCOURSES IN
EUROPE AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION: POPULISM,
RADICALISM, AND SOVEREIGNISM**

Ph.D. in Comparative Politics

Ph.D. Candidate: Jorge Carlos Ramos González

Advisor: Dr. Iván Llamazares Valduvico

Salamanca, febrero de 2024

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[...] all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.

Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume III.*

This is a thesis by collection of articles. The references of the research articles included are listed below:

Ramos-González, J. (2021). ‘Populismo y soberanía: una aproximación a su relación desde un enfoque teórico-discursivo’. *Azimuth. Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age*, 17, 1, [DOI: 10.1400/284266](https://doi.org/10.1400/284266)

Ramos-González, J. and P. Ortiz. (2022). Radicalism and populism: do they always go hand by hand? A comparative analysis of the radical left and the radical right in Spain, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, [DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2022.2065077](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2065077)

Co-author:

Dr. Pablo Ortiz holds a Ph.D. in social sciences and is a Postdoctoral researcher at Universidad Pablo de Olavide (Seville, Spain)

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Ramos-González, J. (Under review: revise and resubmit). Populism and Contingency: Assessing the Ideological Flexibility of Populism through Sorel’s Theory of Myth, *Journal of Language and Politics*.

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*A los que buscan
aunque no encuentren.*

*A los que avanzan
aunque se pierdan.*

*A los que viven
aunque se mueran.*

Mario Benedetti

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¡Porque fueron somos, porque somos serán!

“Siempre he creído que todo aquello que no eliges es lo que te define: Tu ciudad, tu barrio, tu familia. Son cosas de las que la gente de aquí se enorgullece”

Adiós pequeña, adiós (2007)

Salamanca, febrero de 2024

Introduction

In early 2008, after the first events of the second half of 2007 in the United States, the shadow of an economic earthquake loomed over Europe. The failure of numerous banks and insurance companies in the United States triggered a series of movements that led European states to experience consecutive months of negative economic growth. As a result, world economies plunged into an economic recession on a scale not experienced since the Great Depression of 1929. The economic effects of this recession soon began to be felt in European economies in the years after 2008. However, like a seismic aftershock, the Great Recession of 2008 was accompanied by a socio-political earthquake that disrupted European party systems, which had been largely stable with minor changes since the second half of the 20th century.

In almost all European political systems, albeit with varying intensities, the economic crisis triggered significant political consequences (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Hernández and Kriesi, 2016), particularly in southern Europe (Roux, 2016). The effects of this crisis compounded the dynamics initiated by processes of globalisation (Kriesi *et al.*, 2006; Kriesi *et al.* 2008) and neoliberalisation (Duménil and Levy 2004; Harvey 2007; 2005). These changes undermined the functioning of representative democratic systems, especially concerning the functioning of party systems and their relations with citizens (Mair, 2013). The electoral support for mainstream parties drastically eroded, and attitudes of distrust and political alienation significantly increased. This distrust towards mainstream political parties has been attributed to the weakening of representative linkages between political parties and citizens, as a consequence of the tension between the responsibility and responsiveness of the former: this involved their role as public representatives and their inability to act and shape the new globalised political and social reality (Mair, 2013).

Building upon this argument, the incapacity of mainstream parties to adequately address citizen concerns provided fertile ground for the rise of alternative political actors (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Vries & Hobolt, 2020). These emerging parties sought, through new discourses, to channel the distrust of the citizens. By exploiting issues that established parties had overlooked, these new actors adopted cognitive frameworks such as the dichotomy of the “winners versus losers” of globalisation (Kriesi *et al.* 2008), and the populist “people versus elite” narrative (Mudde, 2004). Through these discursive

strategies, these political actors gained support by addressing claims and aspirations previously neglected by the dominant political parties.

Social science has focused on these political actors in recent decades. From various theoretical and methodological approaches, attempts have been made to decipher numerous aspects related to these actors' ideology, discourse, and organisational characteristics, and the social bases on which they rely. However, despite the significant attention and intellectual effort given by studies on populism, its complexity has yet to be unravelled, resulting in a plurality and heterogeneity of perspectives and interpretations that are far from conclusive. From this state of affairs arises the intellectual concern of this research. This study aims to unravel some hypotheses that have commonly been taken for granted, both in the academic world and in public opinion, about the new populist actors and discourses that have emerged in the wake of the Great Recession.

The central axis that structures these publications is populism. However, this doctoral thesis goes beyond this core, investigating interactions with other political phenomena on the peripheries of the populist phenomenon, such as radicalism and sovereign claims. The collection of publications examined here focuses on studying new political actors who gained prominence in European political systems after the 2008 crisis. To this end, this work employs a variety of methodological approaches to deepen the understanding of a series of phenomena that are often interconnected and overlapping, and which are traversed by a variety of political, social, and economic determinations. The objective, therefore, is to analyse questions related to populism, radicalism, and sovereign claims using different approaches, from their discourse and ideological characteristics to an analysis of the electoral support they have received, passing through the social, political, and economic contexts in which they have unfolded. More specifically, this thesis presents an approach to the new forms of politics that emerged after the economic crisis of 2008 from three different paradigms—theoretical–discursive, qualitative comparative, and quantitative— by incorporating the contributions in three distinct, yet complementary, fields.

This introductory chapter is structured as follows. First, a theoretical review of the state of the literature on the three political phenomena addressed is presented. It provides an overview of the current theoretical approaches and debates on populism, putting into perspective the intersections with radicalism and sovereignty. The second section contains the structure of the doctoral thesis, describing the specific objectives and research

questions of each of the included works, as well as their main contributions. Next, the methodological section discusses and justifies the different analytical tools employed in the analyses. The final section closes the chapter with a reflection on the ensemble of works comprising the research.

Populism, Radicalism, and Sovereignty: The Three Pillars of New Politics in Europe

Does it make sense to continue studying populism today? This question, given the considerable attention that populism has received in the social sciences, particularly in recent decades, might suggest that it is a field of knowledge that has been widely analysed, making it difficult to generate new hypotheses and findings. However, due to the complexity of the phenomenon and, particularly, its incredible rise in European political systems over the last decade, there are still unexplored paths within the studies on populism. These paths relate to the characteristics of new political actors and, fundamentally, to the relationships of populism with other political phenomena such as radicalism or sovereign claims. Commonly, all the new political expressions, such as radicalism and sovereignism, have been rapidly characterised under the catch-all concept of “populism”. Nonetheless, and following Marx’s quote, “all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided” (1959, p. 797).

Thus, this thesis seeks to disentangle the populist phenomenon by going beyond its appearance and inquiring into the interactions and elective affinities with other political manifestations that have emerged in European politics in recent years. The relationship between populism and these manifestations is further developed in the last section of this epigraph. Accordingly, we still need to seek answers to certain questions: How have populist discourses and actors manifested in Europe after the 2008 economic crisis? What is the relationship between populism and the rise of radicalism, both left-wing and right-wing? Are populism and radicalism interchangeable concepts in contemporary politics? How does populism relate to sovereign claims? Are they always intertwined?

While populism was originally thought of as a contemporary phenomenon that arises in the transition from traditional to industrial societies, primarily in Latin America

(Germani, 1966), it was not until the late twentieth century that the first populist political actors began to appear in Europe.

Initially, populism was conceived from a structural–functional approach (Germani 1969), arising from the asynchronous integration of the masses into political spheres devoid of intermediary representative institutions, such as political parties, notable societies, or unions —thus cultivating fertile environments for populace mobilisation under charismatic, emotionally resonant, and highly personalised leadership. Later on, other interpretations moved away from explaining the structural underpinnings of the phenomenon or elaborating on a unique definition of populism, and instead focused on delineating a typology of populist political actors (Canovan, 1981). When the populist phenomenon emerged and gained momentum in Europe, it appeared in association with new actors on the radical right during the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, academia started to focus on populism (Betz, 1994; Taggart, 1995; Betz and Immerfall, 1998). Most recently, academic research has shifted towards re-examining populism through new lenses since the second half of the twentieth century. These new approaches have moved away from structural explanations of populist outbursts or analytical typologies toward ideological and discursive interpretations of this phenomenon. The subsequent sections of this introduction provide an overview of the ongoing debates concerning various theoretical frameworks that elucidate populism and its interaction with the phenomena of radicalism and sovereignism amidst the rise of new political actors after 2008.

The concept of populism in contemporary political science: between thin ideology and theoretical–discursive framework

In recent decades, two approaches have emerged that allow for greater specificity and rigour in the study of populism, from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. These are the ideational approach proposed by Cass Mudde (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), and the discursive–theoretical approach (Howarth *et al.* 2000; Carpentier & de Cleen, 2007; Aslanidis, 2015; de Cleen, 2017; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017) derived from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1987). Both interpretations share what has been termed the “minimal criterion” to define populism: the view of a society divided into two antagonistic poles, “the people” and “the

elite” (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017). However, there are major differences that have important implications when we move into the realm of empirical analysis.

The ideational approach, which is the dominant interpretation today, emphasises the dimension of populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004). Following the morphological approach to ideologies proposed by Michael Freeden (1996, 1998), “thin-centred ideologies” are characterised by distancing themselves from broader ideologies by deliberately shedding concepts, with a small, restricted core of concepts that adhere to other stronger and more traditional ideological contexts, or “thick ideologies”. From this perspective, populism would be a thin-centred ideology whose restricted core consists of the proposition of a society divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic poles whose confrontation is of a moral nature —the virtuous people versus the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). However, this approach lacks a high degree of complexity and comprehensiveness unless it adheres to other thick ideologies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). It is a restricted morphology that would necessarily appear linked to other ideologies, which would explain the multiple forms that populism can take depending on its relation to the concepts of other ideologies. Thus, the “people versus elite” opposition can be presented in a wide range of varieties depending on the ideologies to which it adheres —socialism, liberalism, nationalism, etc.

The ideational approach has been subjected to numerous criticisms from various academics (Aslanidis, 2015; Espejo, 2017; de la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019). Three arguments can be identified in these analyses. The first is in regard to the pretension of this approach to erect populism as an ideology. A contradiction arises in Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s proposal to understand ideology as “a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organisation and purposes of society”, while acknowledging that “by itself populism can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate” (2017, p. 6). This contradiction seems to be overlooked, leaving aside coherence, the most widely accepted element in the literature on ideologies (Gerring, 1997). Secondly, Aslanidis (2015, pp. 3-5) goes further by criticising Freeden’s thin-centred ideology conception and his morphological approach (1996) for lacking a method and explanation to differentiate ideological peripheries and cores, posing problems from a scientific and methodological perspective when analysing populism. Thus, the problems of the ideational approach stem from the gaps in Freeden’s theory, leading to such a loose conceptual stretching that

populism can be identified in very different political actors who are not populist, falling into an essentialist perspective. Finally, another line of criticism is directed at the relevance attributed to morality in the “people versus elite” confrontation from this perspective, when it is often based more on political and socio-economic issues (de la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019, p. 4).

Despite these criticisms, the ideational approach has made significant advances in the study of populism from a comparative perspective. In this sense, the most substantial advances have been the developments in the analysis of populist discourses through the holistic grading methodology (Hawkins, 2009; Hawkins *et al.*, 2019) and the measurement of populist attitudes among the citizenry (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014). These innovative methodological proposals have been very positive and fruitful in the quantitative study of populism in political systems, both at the supply-side and demand-side levels. Moreover, they have added value to the comparative analysis between different political and party systems (Lisi *et al.*, 2019; Marcos-Marne *et al.*, 2022). However, these methodological approaches lack explanatory tools for understanding the different populist discourses qualitatively, nor can they shed light on the ideological differences between these discourses, the different types of articulations of the concepts of “the people” and “the elite”, or the various intersections with other recent political phenomena such as the radicalism and sovereignty of these new political actors.

On the other hand, the theoretical–discursive approach has emerged in recent years as an alternative to the ideational approach. This interpretation of populism, derived from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s political theory (1987), and particularly from the former’s subsequent works (Laclau, 2005, 2006), has recently been developed and applied to populist actor studies by numerous scholars interested in populist discourses and their relations to other phenomena such as nationalism or the new populist discourses of the radical left and right (de Cleen, 2019; de Cleen *et al.*, 2018; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

The theoretical–discursive interpretation emphasises the political logics that constitute political actors, which are only “the result of an articulation of social practices”. Thus, discursive articulations are placed at the centre of the definition, understanding that populist actors

“[are] not populist because in its politics or ideology, it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are” (Laclau 2005, p. 33).

This interpretation assumes the primacy of the political (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1987) over other structuralist explanations that link the emergence of populism to strong socio-economic and socio-cultural changes (Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). In this way, political discourses are conceived as practices through which the identities of political subjects are constructed, shifting the focus from sociological categories to the political logic underlying them, that is, to the construction of political identities (de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 5). As a result, populism is not only a strategy used by a political actor to appeal to “the people”, with the aim of represent it against “the elite”, but it is also the political and contingent construction of these two subject positions, as well as the antagonistic relationship that mediates between both categories. This approach deconstructs essentialist and determinist conceptions that understand populism as a mere reference to “the people”, which has a pre-established meaning prior to discursive articulations.

Furthermore, the discursive approach allows for differentiation between different types of populism depending on the various ways in which the “people versus elite” frame can be articulated. It also allows for observing how populism connects with other political phenomena. However, this approach has been criticised for its limitations regarding methodology and the tools of analysis provided (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 10). In general, criticisms have been directed at conceptual imprecision and insufficient empirical applicability (de Cleen, 2019, p. 20). Other criticisms have emphasised the difficulty of distinguishing the discursive from the non-discursive in Laclau’s work, and the instrumental and operational gap regarding power in assuming the realm of radical contingency. The openness of the social does not explain why some social and political actors have a greater capacity to create new articulations, underscoring the lack of an instrumental and operational analysis methodology (Montessori, 2011, p. 173). However, these aspects have been complemented in recent years by numerous academics (van Brussel *et al.*, 2019; de Cleen *et al.*, 2018; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Howarth *et al.*, 2000; Stavrakakis, 2017; Montessori, 2011). The methodological section of this introductory chapter contains a detailed explanation of this analytical tool.

The rise of populist discourses, which, following a “minimal criterion of populism” (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017), offer a representation of society divided into two antagonistically opposed social groups —“the people” and “the elite”— has been accompanied by two phenomena that, while not entirely new, have recently emerged strongly in European political systems. These discourses have been articulated mainly by so-called radical political actors, firstly, and the advocacy for a recovery of sovereignty, secondly.

When populism meets radicalism and sovereigntism: an overview of their intersections

From SYRIZA in Greece or Podemos in Spain to Rassemblement National in France or UKIP in the UK, populist discourses have been articulated over the last decade from different ideological positions, but with several common features. They all articulate a claim for the recovery of some form of sovereignty that is considered usurped by an elite, both national and international. These three phenomena —populism, radicalism, and sovereigntism— seem to be at the centre of the new politics in Europe after the Great Recession of 2008. However, similar to the concept of populism, these two adjacent concepts are also elusive and controversial.

Firstly, radicalism can be understood as the desire for profound social or political change. Considering the etymology of the word “radical”, which is derived from the Latin “radicalis” (related to the root), these are changes that transform existing political systems fundamentally, rather than merely reforming them. Thus, the new actors who emerged in the wake of the economic crisis have been labelled as radicals due to their different pretensions of political change. Yet, when talking about radicalism in political parties, it is relevant to make a distinction between radical political parties and extremist political parties. Consequently, based on studies on right-wing radicalism and left-wing radicalism elaborated in recent years (Betz, 1994; Damiani, 2016, 2020; March, 2012; Mudde, 2007), it is possible to differentiate between radical parties that criticise existing political systems by trying to transform them through the use of their democratic and institutional mechanisms and extremist parties that openly advocate against liberal democratic systems and try to overthrow them using non-institutional methods. As a result, both left-wing and right-wing radical parties expose postulates that confront some elements of liberal democracies without being anti-democratic.

Taking these arguments into account, a minimal operational definition of radicalism emphasises the critique of current democratic systems and aspirations for the transformation of the political order using existing democratic norms and institutions. However, radical parties on the left and right will try to steer these transformations in different directions: advancing liberal democracy towards greater pluralism and more inclusive and direct citizen participation beyond the traditional channels of liberal representation in the first case (Mouffe, 1993), or questioning liberal democratic principles with a more restrictive and authoritarian perspective in the second (Mudde, 2007).

Secondly, sovereignty has commonly been linked to the expression of popular will, which involves exercising political power over a delimited territory and which is expressed through mechanisms of representative democracy (Basile *et al.*, 2019; Basile & Mazzoleni, 2019). This phenomenon is strongly connected to the emergence of modern nation-states, which have seen their sovereign capacity weakened due to the emergence of supranational institutions since the 1980s and 1990s with the onset of globalisation (Sassen 1996; Harvey 2005; 2007; Grimm, 2015). The process of European integration provides a clear example of this tension between state sovereignty and the emergence of new decision-making centres (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Marks *et al.*, 2006).

Therefore, the territorial basis upon which the modern conception of sovereignty was founded has been dispersed as a consequence of the processes of deterritorialisation that took place at the end of the 20th century. This has generated tensions between political phenomena that remain rooted in national borders and supranational decision-making spheres, giving rise to new social cleavages (Kriesi, 1998; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). The political agency of nation-states, as well as the citizens' ability to demand accountability and political responsibility, has weakened, leading to increased disillusionment and mistrust towards both supranational structures and national political elites (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2019).

This scenario paved the way for the emergence of new political actors who capitalised on this social discontent, primarily through the articulation of populist discourses. The cognitive framework of these new actors is to portray the processes of integration and deterritorialisation of power as the usurpation of popular sovereignty by an elite, whether at the national or international level. These discourses advocated for the restoration and reterritorialisation of the sovereign powers of the nation-state, aiming to

regain the capacity for action and decision-making on economic, territorial, and cultural matters (Kallis, 2018). Thus, through confrontation with political elites, these new political actors articulate in their discourses the demand to reclaim sovereignty usurped from its true owner, the people (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi, 2022). In recent decades, these discourses have politicised the feelings of those segments of society most adversely affected by globalisation (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008), who, on the one hand, perceive their living conditions to be threatened and, at the same time, experience political powerlessness due to the lack of collective action tools to hold the new supranational political institutions accountable.

Consequently, these three political manifestations —populism, radicalism, and sovereignty— have dominated European politics in the first two decades of the 21st century, especially in the new socio-political context that opened up in Europe after the Great Recession of 2008. Traces of them can be found in the emergence of new social and political actors in Southern Europe and in the Brexit process in the UK. Although these political phenomena have recently captured the attention of social scientists, the interactions between them have remained insufficiently analysed. In the analysis of these interactions in new political actors and discourses, this doctoral thesis identifies a gap in the literature on populism. The articles that make up this doctoral thesis address the connections between the three phenomena outlined above from different perspectives. These research works, moreover, engage in debate with other fields within political science such as political theory, discourse analysis, and public opinion studies.

Research structure

The research works that comprise this doctoral thesis aim to conduct a detailed and thorough study of the new political discourses and actors that emerged in Western European political systems starting in 2008. The studies included in this thesis pay special attention to the ideological characteristics of populist discourses, as well as the contexts in which they originated or the electoral support they received. Additionally, various factors and processes closely related to the new populist political actors, such as radical discourses or claims for sovereignty recovery, are examined.

The articles adopt a clear comparative perspective in two directions. Firstly, the focus of this research on the actors and political discourses belonging to different party

families, both from the radical right and the radical left. This comparative exercise sheds light on several issues of great interest: the differences and similarities in the articulation of discourses on the “people” and their implications; the various political meanings that the concept of “sovereignty” can take on; the plurality of attitudes and political preferences of their electorates; and the diversity of political and economic factors that can explain their electoral performance. Secondly, the research covers different Western European countries, which allowed for the identification of common patterns among different national contexts with diverse political, cultural, and social characteristics.

Although the central focus of the research is populism, these articles address several specific research objectives and questions, providing novel interpretations of the populist phenomenon of these new European political actors from different fields of political science. The following lines outline these specific points in each of the articles while providing an overview of the methods and contributions they provide to the discipline. This information is summarised in **Table 1**.

The first article (Ramos-González, 2021), entitled “*Populismo y soberanía: una aproximación a su relación desde un enfoque teórico-discursivo*”, is published in the journal *Azimuth: Philosophical Coordinates in the Modern and Contemporary Age*. The work provides a theoretical approach to the origins of the rise of populist discourses and sovereignty claims. By reviewing secondary sources on the processes of globalisation and neoliberalisation, the study explores the link between the results of these processes in terms of transnationalising sovereignty towards supranational institutions and the emergence of populist discourses as a tool to demand the recovery of sovereignty. Additionally, it discusses a practical analytical tool to capture the ideological aspects of these discourses. By presenting a Discourse-Theoretical Analysis (DTA), it proposes a detailed study of political discourses that allows for the identification of the different senses in which sovereignty claims can be articulated. These two aspects serve as the theoretical and methodological basis for subsequent articles.

The second article (Ramos-González, 2022), published in the *Journal of Political Ideologies* under the title “Radicalism and Populism: Do They Always Go Hand in Hand? A Comparative Ideological Analysis of the Radical Left and the Radical Right in Spain”, is a practical application of the methodology presented in the previous article. The main objective of this work is to unravel the relationship between populism and radicalism, commonly used interchangeably as if they were political synonyms. The article focuses

on the case of Spain, where two phenomena of new radical political actors have emerged in the last decade and have consequently been labelled “populist” (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2019; Gould, 2019; Kioupiolis, 2016; Zulianello, 2019a), but of different ideological orientations. Thus, the research focuses on the political discourses of Unidas Podemos and VOX during the opening and closing campaign rallies. The underlying question of this research is whether these two concepts, populism and radicalism, always appear together and are interchangeable, or if, on the contrary, their relationship is more complex and needs to be examined in detail. The main contribution of this work is to show that there is no perfect overlap between these concepts, although there is an elective affinity, while also cautioning against the indiscriminate use of populism as a catch-all category.

The third article (Ramos-González, 2024), “All Roads Lead to Rome? Analyzing the Electoral Performance of Populist Radical Left Parties in Europe (2008-2018): A Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis”, is published in the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. This empirical research represents a novel application of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis methodology (fsQCA) to the study of populist radical left parties. While numerous studies have employed these techniques in the study of political parties, they have remained confined to anti-establishment or populist parties in general (Fernández-García & Luengo, 2019; van Kessel, 2015; Zulianello, 2019a, 2019b), or the family of the radical right (Ortiz *et al.*, 2022). Thus, this work aims to fill a gap in the literature in two ways: firstly, by applying the QCA methodology to a family of parties not studied using this technique, and secondly, by studying a hitherto little-studied area of the radical left, namely the socio-political contexts in which these parties have obtained important electoral results. The article aims to test theories suggesting that left-wing populism is associated with poor economic situations. Therefore, the article investigates which factors, both economic and political or a combination thereof (Gómez and Ramiro, 2023), can explain the electoral success of these parties. The results indicate that the electoral performance of radical left populist parties cannot be explained solely through the causal mechanism of bad economic situations, highlighting the importance of political factors.

The fourth article, currently under review in the *Journal of Language and Politics*, is titled “Populism and Contingency: Assessing the Ideological Flexibility of Populism through Sorel’s Theory of Myth”. This research provides a novel interpretation of the

ideological flexibility of populism. By reviewing the political theory of Laclau and Mouffe while considering George Sorel's theory of myth, this article addresses the multifaceted nature of populism by placing the concept of contingency at the centre of the debate. This interpretation considers the concept of people as a signifier that condenses the social heterogeneity of modern societies, just like the myths in Sorelian theory. As a result, it allows for the division of society into two antagonistic social blocs: "the people" versus "the elite". This theoretical nuance is presented as a contribution to addressing one of the most elusive phenomena of populist theory: the existence of discourses of both the radical left and the radical right. Likewise, these findings may assist in the study of the relationship between populism and nationalism following Sorel's connections with nationalism and fascism, as well as the analysis of populist political actors difficult to place in the traditional left–right scheme.

Lastly, the fifth article, "Populist Attitudes and Vote for the Radical Right: A Comparative Analysis of Five West European Countries", also under review in the *European Politics and Society* journal, comparatively examines the presence of populist attitudes and the policy preferences of the electoral bases of radical right parties in five European countries: Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, and Germany. Through the implementation of a multinomial logistic regression analysis, this research aims to analyse the role that populist attitudes play in support of radical right parties, as well as other ideological and programmatic elements such as nativism, authoritarianism, and economic redistribution. For this purpose, we used original survey data obtained during the research project "Populism, Political Preferences and Political Representation: Changes in Party Systems after the Great Recession", under which this doctoral thesis was developed, and previous data collected during the project "Economic crisis, social change, and new political actors". These datasets have been made available to the scientific community on Harvard Dataverse (Plaza-Colodro *et al.* 2021; Ramos-González *et al.*, 2024). The results reveal that different types of radical right can be identified in terms of their electoral support, and that competition with the traditional conservative right is equally diverse in terms of attitudes and political preferences.

These last two papers, although unpublished at the time of submission of this thesis, have undergone an initial evaluation and are being considered for possible publication after a process of revision and resubmission to two international academic journals. The decision to include them in this compendium is motivated by the

contributions that these studies make to the field of study by complementing the research with new perspectives on the populist phenomenon, both from a discursive–ideological approach and from an empirical and statistical approach. Both works have been evaluated in academic forums such as the Ph.D. Masterclass on Discourse Theoretical Approaches to Politics, Society, Communication, and Media, which took place at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 22 March 2023, and the XV Congreso Español de Ciencia Política y de la Administración, held in Girona between 7 and 9 September 2022¹.

Table 1. Description of the articles

Title	Journal	Current Status	Methodology
Populismo y soberanía: una aproximación a su relación desde un enfoque teórico-discursivo	Azimuth. Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age	Published DOI: 10.1400/284266	Theoretical review
Radicalism and Populism: Do They Always Go Hand by Hand? A Comparative Ideological Analysis of the Radical Left and the Radical Right in Spain	Journal of Political Ideologies	Published DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2022.2065077	Discourse Theoretical Analysis (DTA)
All roads lead to Rome? Analysing the electoral performance of populist radical left parties in Europe (2008-2018): a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis	Journal of Contemporary European Studies	Published DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2024.2311205	Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA)
Populism and Contingency: Assessing the Ideological Flexibility of Populism through Sorel's Theory of Myth	Journal of Language and Politics	Under review (revise and resubmit)	Discourse Theoretical Analysis (DTA)
Populist Attitudes and Vote for the Radical Right. A Comparative Analysis of Five West European Countries	European Politics and Society	Under review (revise and resubmit)	Statistical Analysis

¹ Other contributions not included in this compendium, which also delve into these research topics, were published during this doctoral research period (Ramos-González 2020; Ortiz and Ramos-González, 2021; Llamazares and Ramos-González 2022).

The doctoral thesis presented below is the result of the work carried out under the funding of the Ministry of Science and Innovation (PRE2019-08734), in the project “Populism, Political Preferences and Political Representation: changes in Party Systems after the Great Recession” (PGC2018-098207-B-I00). Within this project, and as part of the research presented, five databases on populist attitudes and political preferences were developed. These databases have recently been published on Harvard Dataverse (Ramos-González *et al.*, 2024). Thanks to this funding and the work carried out over four years in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Salamanca, a compendium of three articles published in internationally renowned social science and philosophy journals and two articles currently under review, which have received a positive initial evaluation, is presented (*Journal of Political Ideologies*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *Azimuth: Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Ages*, *Journal of Language and Politics*, and *European Politics and Society*).

Methodology

This research is mainly framed within the field of comparative politics. However, in methodological terms, this thesis presents a variety of methods that allow for a better approach to the phenomena analysed, as well as a better understanding of them. The research works address populism from three different approaches: theoretical–discursive, qualitative–comparative, and quantitative. Due to this fact, an exposition of the methodologies and data used in each of the studies was required. The following lines give an account of these methodological tools. In addition to the theoretical review, the main methodological tools used are Discourse-Theoretical Analysis (DTA), Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), and multilevel statistical analysis.

Firstly, the Discourse-Theoretical Analysis is mainly based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1987), and Laclau’s theory (1997; 2005; 2006). However, due to the methodological shortcomings of this approach outlined in the theoretical framework of this introductory chapter, new techniques have recently been developed that have given this tool a greater degree of systematicity (Howarth *et al.*, 2000; van Brussel *et al.*, 2019; de Cleen, 2019; de Cleen *et al.*, 2018; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2017).

The central propositions of this methodology for the political discourse analysis are outlined in the following lines.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1987, pp. 105-107), discourse is a practice that establishes a relationship between “elements” in such a way that their identity is modified as a result of their articulation. Thus, a discourse is made up of different “elements” which, when articulated in a discourse, transform their meaning and become “moments” of a structured totality that is the discourse. These “elements” may refer to different social positions or demands existing in society which, due to their articulation, become part of a new structure of meaning or a “chain of equivalences”. What gives them this equivalence within a totality of meaning is their common opposition to a constitutive outside (Laclau, 2005, pp. 69-70). Thus, the minimal units of analysis are the social demands that are part of a discourse, which, in opposition to an outside, achieve a relation of equivalence between them (Laclau, 2005, 72-74). However, this interpretation presupposes that there must be elements that agglutinate this social heterogeneity and imbue it with a stable, but not fixed, unity. It is here that the notion of a “nodal point” appears, as a privileged element whose connotations or meanings fix the meaning of the discursive totality (Laclau, 2005, 77). A clear example of these nodal points is the signifier “people”.

Therefore, Discourse analysis focuses on empirically investigating the social practices that constitute social reality (Howarth *et al.*, 2000, p. 3). By analysing how a heterogeneity of social demands can be articulated under a discursive totality, and the nodal points that agglutinate this heterogeneity, Discourse Theoretical Analysis (DTA) presents a novel and powerful tool for studying how new political actors have articulated populist discourses in Europe. In this way, this tool allows us to analyse not only the specificities of populist discourses, but also other types of discourses and how they can be represented as being intertwined.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is the second tool that was employed. Proposed by Charles Ragin (1987; 2008), this analysis is a recent and novel methodology that has emerged in the social sciences in recent years and is in full development (Oana & Schneider, 2021; Rihoux & Ragin, 2020; Schneider & Wagemann, 2010, 2012). The concept of QCA refers to both an epistemological approach and a set of techniques for empirical analysis. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a methodological approach used in social science research to analyse the relationships between different

variables qualitatively, rather than quantitatively. It is particularly useful for studying complex phenomena where multiple causal factors interact to produce outcomes. This qualitative-case approach is based on the epistemological principles of “equifinality” and “causal asymmetry”. On the one hand, equifinality highlights the possibility of different combinations of conditions leading to the same outcome (Mello, 2021; Ragin, 2008, p. 65). On the other hand, causal asymmetry means “that the explanation of the non-occurrence of the outcome cannot be automatically derived from the explanation of the occurrence of the outcome”, in contrast to statistical techniques (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012, p. 6).

At its core, QCA, whether crisp or fuzzy, is based on set theory and Boolean algebra (Ragin 1987). It treats cases as combinations of attributes or conditions, and outcomes as states resulting from combinations of these conditions. The fuzzy-set version (fsQCA), which was employed in this research, extends this framework by allowing for degrees of membership, recognising that real-world phenomena often exist along a continuum rather than in strict categories (Ragin 2008). This theoretical flexibility allows researchers to capture the complexity and nuance of social phenomena that cannot be adequately represented by simple binary distinctions. When we speak of the fuzzy-set version of a QCA, we enter into a nuanced understanding in which variables are not simply binary —present or absent— as in the crisp set (csQCA), but are rather characterised by degrees of set membership, allowing for a more nuanced representation of reality.

In practice, fuzzy-set QCA involves several key steps. First, researchers identify relevant conditions based on theory or previous research. Next, these conditions are operationalised and evaluated in terms of their degree of fuzzy-set membership. This may involve assigning scores or degrees of membership based on qualitative judgments or empirical data. The cases are then ranked according to their combinations of conditions, and a Truth Table is created that captures all possible configurations. This Truth Table is analysed using Boolean minimisation techniques to identify combinations of conditions associated with the outcome. Finally, the results are interpreted in the light of theoretical expectations and contextual factors, allowing researchers to identify patterns and draw meaningful conclusions about the relationship between conditions and outcomes.

Overall, fuzzy-set QCA offers a powerful methodological approach for the study of complex social phenomena. By combining elements of set theory, Boolean algebra,

and fuzzy logic, it provides a flexible framework that can be adapted to the complexity and nuance of real-world phenomena. Its theoretical, epistemological, and practical principles emphasise the importance of context and causal complexity in social science, providing researchers with a valuable tool for exploring the multifaceted relationships between conditions and outcomes.

The last methodological approach adopted is multivariate statistical analysis. Specifically, the fifth article employs Multinomial Logistic Regression (MLR), a statistical technique used to analyse the relationships between multiple categorical outcomes and a set of predictor variables. It is often implemented in social science research to model choices or decisions in which individuals can choose between several options. MLR is based on the principles of probability theory and the multinomial distribution (Greene, 2008). It assumes that the probability of each possible outcome is influenced by a set of predictor variables. In the social sciences, these predictor variables usually represent characteristics of individuals, groups, or contexts that are hypothesised to influence the decision-making process (Long, 1997). From an epistemological perspective, MLR aligns with a positivist approach to social science research, emphasising the empirical testing of hypotheses and the search for generalisable patterns or relationships (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994). By quantitatively analysing data on individual decisions or choices, MLR allows researchers to assess the relative importance of different factors in shaping outcomes.

When employing MLR, researchers identify a set of categorical outcome variables and possible predictor variables based on theory or previous research (Agresti, 2002). The MLR model is then specified by estimating the parameters that describe the relationships between the predictor variables and the probabilities of each outcome category (Agresti, 2007). Model estimation usually involves maximum likelihood estimation techniques (Greene, 2008). Finally, the results are interpreted in terms of estimated coefficients, odds ratios, and statistical significance, allowing researchers to conclude which factors influence decision-making behaviour.

The practical utility of MLR lies in its ability to handle categorical outcome variables with more than two categories, which makes it suitable for analysing a wide range of social science phenomena, such as electoral behaviour (Long and Freese, 2006). MLR is, thus, a valuable tool for understanding the complex dynamics of decision-making processes in social contexts. In summary, multinomial logistic regression offers

social scientists a methodologically sound approach to analyse categorical outcome variables with multiple categories.

Conclusions

This collection of articles addresses a topic that, although widely discussed and analysed in social sciences in recent decades, remains an elusive and complex political phenomenon. Additionally, the interactions between populism and other political manifestations, such as radicalism or sovereignty, have not been sufficiently analysed. The relationship among the three concepts constitutes the focus of this research, which considers the new political actors and discourses that have emerged in European politics since the economic crisis of 2008. In this sense, the main contribution of this thesis is to link the three political manifestations through a variety of methodological approaches in a comparative perspective that allows for a detailed analysis of them. Thus, this dissertation highlights the importance of going beyond studies of populism to examine the role of other political manifestations related to it in the new political actors and discourses. These research works represent innovative contributions to the study of populism from different perspectives.

In the first place, on the theoretical–discursive level, these articles demonstrate the specificity of populist discourses in interpreting the political, social, and economic changes brought about by globalisation and the transnationalisation of sovereignty. Several relevant conclusions can be drawn from the articles analysing populist discourses. Firstly, the research work assessing the relationship between populism and sovereignty highlights the role that sovereignty claims play in populist discourses. Considering the political changes that accompanied neoliberalisation, this article explains how the new political actors interpreted this new socio-economic context as a confrontation between certain elites —political, economic, and cultural— and the political subject of “the people”. In doing so, these political actors sought to mobilise the sectors of the population most dissatisfied with the functioning of mainstream parties and representative democracy, due to the feeling of powerlessness caused by the impossibility of demanding accountability and responsibility from the new transnational institutions.

In this context, where nation-states have seen their sovereign powers diminished, new radical political actors have adopted the populist cognitive framework to interpret

this new reality. By pitting the people as a homogeneous and sovereign collective against an elite, these new actors have articulated a plurality of meanings for the concepts of “people” and “sovereignty”, focusing on economic, political, or cultural issues. By simplifying the political and economic process of neoliberalisation just as a subtraction by a privileged minority, these discourses display a direct articulation between populist discourses and sovereignty claims. Therefore, this study demonstrates the elective affinity between the two concepts, revealing the central role that sovereignty plays in contemporary populist discourses. Consequently, the results of this research lead to the argument that populism today is inconceivable without demands for taking back sovereignty, whether in its economic, political, or cultural articulation.

Secondly, the article analysing the interactions between populism and radicalism interrogates the mechanistic associations between both concepts, which leads to the labelling of all radical political expressions as populist. While populist discourses have been predominantly espoused by political actors characterised as radical, the link between populism and radicalism, which is far from mechanical, presents relevant nuances. For example, numerous political actors who were quickly labelled as populists upon their emergence have exhibited discursive logics that employ ultranationalist tenets. This research shed light on the complex relationship between these political manifestations, pointing out that there is not a perfect overlap between both concepts and calling for a more nuanced research agenda into how populist discourse interacts with other political phenomena. Consequently, this article draws attention to the pitfalls of using "populism" as a catch-all concept by not paying sufficient consideration to the specificities of other ideological and discursive expressions.

Finally, the article addressing the ideological flexibility of populism presents a novel contribution by identifying a theoretical nuance in populist theory. Considering political myth theory, this work helps to understand how populist discourses can play out various ideological meanings. By analysing the different articulations of the myth of “the people” in opposing political discourses, the research illustrates how the same conception of a “homogeneous and sovereign people” can take on different meanings depending on how this articulation responds to society's contingent need for meaning. The existence of this realm of contingency, therefore, makes the ideological flexibility of populism possible. This contribution not only clarifies one of the most controversial and complex topics in populist theory, but it also provides tools for the analysis of the interactions

between populism and nationalism by taking into consideration the role that Sorelian myth theory —due to Sorel’s strong influence on nationalism and fascism— plays in Lalcau’s populist theory.

In second place, by turning to the empirical domain, this research provides important insights on two levels. First, from a qualitative approach, it highlights the contextual factors that favour the success of a group of these new political actors, such as left-wing populist parties. The results illustrate that there is no necessary condition to explain the electoral performance of Populist Radical Left Parties (PRLPs), which counters the mechanical link between poor economic conditions and the success of populist actors. These findings reveal some relevant conclusions, both cross-country and intra-country. On the one hand, south European PRLPs have always performed well in contexts of poor socio-economic conditions —particularly in Spain and Greece— but in combination with political factors. On the other hand, central European PRLPs did well in both bad and good economic times. Furthermore, the article shows the importance of political conditions for the electoral performance of PRLPs in Germany and the Netherlands, where political factors alone favour left-populist electoral results. Accordingly, this research offers a detailed analysis of the electoral performance of PRLPs by focusing on economic and political contexts, underlining that their combinations respond to temporal, geographic, and conjunctural patterns.

Second, it examines the political preferences and attitudes of the electorates of radical right actors from a quantitative perspective. The success of these parties has been linked to the activation of populist attitudes in the electorate. However, despite the electoral success of these parties being attributed to populism, the real importance of populist attitudes was not comparatively significant. Consequently, this article represents an innovative contribution to the study of the radical right and points out that populist attitudes are a significant predictor of voting for the radical right. However, we cannot attribute their electoral success just to populism, as the presence of other ideological and programmatic elements, such as nationalism and nativism, plays a fundamental role. Although populist attitudes are present in all the cases analysed, with the exception of Italy, the radical right electorate differs in relation to the other ideological and programmatic elements according to national contexts. Thus, significant differences can be found between the French case, where the Rassemblement National electorate has positive attitudes towards economic redistribution and exhibits more leftist positions than

its centre-right competitor, and the Spanish and German cases, where VOX and Alternative für Deutschland voters are more right-wing than their centre-right competitor.

Accordingly, this dissertation makes an important contribution to the literature on populism. Although the results of each publication have a specific scope and conclusions, they share the goal of studying the new forms that European politics has taken since 2008. Consequently, this thesis concludes that the political phenomenon of the new political actors and discourses that emerged in the heat of the 2008 crisis was constituted by a diversity of ideological and discursive elements that elude the simplistic use of the concept of “populism” to address them. In turn, it also underlines the variety of economic and political contexts that can favour the emergence of these political actors, as well as the importance of populist attitudes in their electoral success, without losing sight of the significance of other ideological and programmatic elements in explaining it.

Thus, this research specifies the discursive and ideological characteristics of this phenomenon, revealing the importance of other political manifestations within it and how they relate to populism, as well as new insights into the electoral contexts and bases on which the success of these actors rests. In doing that, this research work lays the foundations for future studies on the characteristics and dynamics of populism, particularly among the new political actors that have emerged in Europe in recent years. It also paves the way for other crucial questions to be addressed related to these political actors, such as the changes in the socio-economic conditions of the electoral bases of these parties, both on the left and on the radical right, which constitutes future lines of research that will precede this doctoral thesis. In this regard, the transformations in the electorate of the radical populist left parties in relation to the traditional radical left, which seem to have moved towards social sectors with high levels of cultural capital and low levels of economic capital, represent, for example, a development in future research agenda, as well as the new discursive and ideological articulations of these actors.

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