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## Spain: Rising Right-Wing Populism

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## **7. Spain: Rising Right-Wing Populism**

### **7.1 Overview**

The European elections in Spain have never attracted strong interest among the Spanish citizens. The EU election on 26 May 2019 added to this fact the coincidence with local and some regional elections in the country, which clearly focused the political and social networks discourse on the latest. In addition, a comparison between the political and socio-economic scenario in 2014 and 2019 show significant changes.

On the one hand, the political fragmentation increased with the decline of the two majority parties, PSOE and PP. This fact allowed not only a boost of young political parties (Ciudadanos and Podemos) but also an entry of a new player, the far-right party Vox, to the European Parliament. In a few months, this far-right party had achieved its presence in the main political institutions of Spain and Europe, for the first time in decades. Moreover, the EU elections coincided with a new political cycle in Spain, one year after the regain of the Spanish government by the PSOE party.

On the other hand, compared to the 2014 EP elections, the socioeconomic context had started to show the first signs of economic recovery, after a decade of crisis, which had particularly severe consequences in the country. In fact, the 2014 EP election was mostly a referendum on the austerity policies promoted by the European Union, its effects on Spain, and the support of the Spanish political parties (Boix Palop and López García 2014).

In contrast, without the temporary link with the EU policies to face the financial crisis, the EP election in 2019 scarcely focused attention on European issues. And what is more, although the effects of this crisis were already present for most citizens, sensitive topics such as employment, young people, or the economy also achieved low attention. The emergence of a far-right wing party does not contribute to paying special relevance to migration, despite the anti-immigration stance advocated by Vox. The Catalan nationalist parties also failed to put the referendum on self-determination and the imprisonment of independentist leaders at the center of the political debate.

### **7.2 Political Communication in Spain**

Spain belongs to the Polarised Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini 2008) which stresses the high degree of political parallelism or media politicisation. It is visible in the instrumentalization of the private media and a public broadcasting system being under control of parties in power and favouring them (López García 2004). Historically, the late levels of literacy and the lack of proper economic conditions prevented high circulation of newspapers and restricted access to printed press. In fact, Spanish communication historians refer to mass media only when the radio (1924) and particularly television (1956) started broadcasting (Gómez Mompert 1989). Spain has a low reading rate, 64 newspapers for every 1,000 inhabitants (AEDE 2014). Hallin and Mancini (2008) describe the situation of low-circulation rates resulting in the press addressing mostly an educated elite.

While 85 percent of Spanish people consume television and 57 percent radio daily, only 21,7 percent read printed newspapers. The sports newspaper *Marca* and the general information *El País* newspaper are the two most read (AIMC 2020). However, the last one sells fewer than 100.000 copies a day (PR Noticias 2017). Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of eight big multimedia groups: Prisa, Vocento, Unidad Editorial, Atresmedia, Mediaset España, Mediapro, Godó and Prensa Ibérica. Only in the case of the audiovisual sector, two conglomerates – Mediaset and Atresmedia – control most of the audience. Highly problematic is the “cross-concentration of the ownership”, considered as high risk (Masip et al. 2016).

Printed press has held strong political influence, with the comment style and diversity of political tendencies that reflect readers' political attitudes (Hallin and Mancini 2008, p. 91). Despite this tradition, it must be underlined that the current politicisation increased during the years of Spain's transition to democracy starting towards the mid-1970s (Casero-Ripollés 2012, p. 32) when journalists acted in a role of facilitators of democracy reflected in a great closeness with political actors (Barrera 2009). Democratisation not only concerned civic and political rights or freedom of expression but also the media structure in Spain. Thirty-five newspapers (a third of the existing, many of them confiscated), a press agency and 43 radio stations owned by the dictatorship were transferred to the organisation called Medios de Comunicación Social del Estado, sold or liquidated once the democracy was recovered (De Haro 2013).

The levels of journalistic professionalisation did not reach the European standards until recently, with scarce consensus about quality standards and accountability mechanisms (Aznar 1999). In fact, the Spanish Federation of Press Associations (FAPE) did not approve the first self-regulation code until 1993, decades after other European countries, and trade unions and press associations have been relatively powerful until recently. Even though in the last years considerable progress has been achieved, the lack of an independent press council at the state level and the inability for legal sanction of the two equivalent entities – the Council of Information of Catalonia (CIC), and the Commission of Arbitron, Complaints and Ethics, a FAPE section – has also restricted further development and the fostering of new accountability instruments (Palau-Sampio 2020). Professional autonomy has suffered from the constraints of a strong political influence, not directly channelled by political actors (Canel et al. 2000) but as a corporate pressure e.g. by journalistic companies (Casero-Ripollés 2012, pp. 33–34). The political adscription and the lack of journalistic autonomy are clearly perceived by the professionals and the audiences (APM 2011).

Finally, Spain also shows a high level of state interventionism as a media owner, in the case of the public broadcasting media regulator or by issuing licences to manage private radio and TV stations. This has contributed to the creation of larger multimedia communication groups, benefiting from licence concessions, and in parallel clientelistic relationships between them and parties in power. The pro-government politicisation of public media broadcasting has taken place under successive political parties in power (De Miguel and Pozas 2009, p. 47). Scarce exceptions to reverse this situation were the policy reforms introduced during the Zapatero (Socialist) government in 2007, to require a maximum consensus (2/3 of the Spanish Parliament votes) to the appointment of the general director of the state-funded public service company Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE). This decision ended when the Popular Party got back to power in 2012 and modified the law.

The private media system has been exposed to a clientelist relationship, exemplified in the relationship between the Prisa group and the first Socialist Party government, the media belonging to the Telefónica group and the Popular Party in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, or the relationship between the Mediapro group and the Zapatero government (De Miguel and Pozas 2009, p. 47). Even if not with a complete and explicit identification with the political parties, the support was observable in the editorial line of the media being part of the groups.

### **7.3 Twitter in Spanish Political Communication**

In Spain, the rise of social media as a major platform for political mobilisation coincided with the anti-austerity movements, following the global financial recession of 2008 (Ceia et al. 2022). During the General Elections of 2011 political leaders started to use Twitter as a campaign tool (Jivkova-Semova et al. 2017).

The number of social media users in 2019 reached 85 percent in Spain. Whatsapp is the most used social media (88%), slightly ahead of Facebook (87%) and a further distance from Youtube (68%) or Instagram (54%), and Twitter (50%). Youtube (76%) and Instagram (70%) are the most popular among 16 to 30 years-olds (IAB 2019). Even if not the most popular, Twitter plays a crucial role in a ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013), being the platform that channels communication among influential segments of the media and political sphere on Twitter. In fact, some research suggests an endogenous relationship between journalists from mainstream media and politicians (Franch and Micó 2021). The interaction between these two groups takes place in and around the main Spanish media, which feeds the echo chamber effect and limits the social media possibilities.

Scholars pointed out that Twitter platform characteristics (immediacy, ease of use or spreading) have influenced its adaptation to political communication (Campos-Domínguez 2017). However, despite its potential to mobilise participation, the real interaction with audiences is low, particularly, the capacity to develop campaigns based on personal issues at the European Union level, which limits its influence (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2020). This fact contrasts with the enormous influence that Twitter achieved at that time in the Spanish context. Nonetheless, Berdón-Prieto et al. (2021) conclude that without majorities (2019-2020) in the Parliament, Twitter became a parallel scenario for discussion, tending to divide instead of seeking consensus.

### **7.4 Spanish Political Parties and Populism**

After the restoration of the democratic regime, Spain has had a parliamentary monarchy as a political system holding national elections every four years. The system to elect the Parliament members is proportional, channelled by means of closed lists of candidates representing the political parties. Political system configuration was since the mid-2010s quite consistent with the following picture: “a democratic regime, with a high level of political decentralization, a multipartite system with consolidated forces, and which electoral competition ranges around two main dimensions: the left and right-wing axe, and the cleavage centre and periphery” (Rama Caamaño 2016, p. 3).

In the above-described scenario, the electoral system – based on the D’Hont formula for more than four decades – has played a main role. According to the researchers, this system has favoured the overrepresentation of large parties rather than smaller ones (Montero and Fernández Esquer 2018)

and a “one of the more fragmented party systems of Europe, a dynamic fuelled by the emergence of regional political forces” (Strömbäck and Luengo 2008, p. 552). In this fragmented party system dominated by two big parties Popular Party (PP) and Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), there has not been much room for the so-called populist parties on a national level, even though there have been some populist politicians on a regional level. However, the 2010s changed this with two new actors, the left-wing party Podemos and the right-wing party Vox as seen in Table 1.

**Table 7.1** Share of the votes (%) per party in national the elections of 21st century

Party	2000	2004	2008	2011	2016*	2019**
Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE)	34,2	42,6	43,9	28,4	33	28,0***
People's Party (PP)	44,5	37,7	39,9	44,6	22,6	20,8
Convergència i Unió Junts per Catalunya (JuntsxCat)	4,2	3,2	3,0	4,2	2,0	2,2
Izquierda Unida-Esquerra Unida / La Izquierda Plural	5,4	5,1	3,8	6,9		
Unidos Podemos / Unidas Podemos					21,1	12,9
Ciudadanos-Partido de la Ciudadanía (C's)					13,1	6,8
Vox					0,2	15,1
Partido Nacionalista Vasco (EAJ-PNV)	1,5	1,6	1,2	1,3	1,2	1,6
Coalición Canaria / Coalición Canaria-Nueva Canarias	1,1	0,9	0,7	0,6	0,3	0,5
Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) / Nós-Candidatura Galega (BNG-NÓS)	1,3	0,8	0,8	0,8	0,2	0,5
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)	0,8	2,5	1,2	1,1	2,6	3,6
Candidatura Unitat Popular- (CUP)						1,0
Eusko Alkartasuna Amaiur Euskal Herria Bildu	0,4	0,3	0,2***	1,4	0,8	1,1
Others	3,2	2,3	2,7	3,2		1,7

Source: Spanish Parliament

\*Elections in December 2015 were repeated in June 2016 because of the lack of agreement to form the government. \*\* Elections of April 2016 were repeated, with the results indicated, in November 2019. \*\*\*The table shows the share of the votes of the political forces in the years that obtained Parliamentary representation, except minority parties (Partido Andalucista, Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds, Chunta Aragonesista, Nafarroa Bai (Na-Bai) Geroa Bai Navarra Suma (NA+), Bloc-Iniciativa-Verds-Equo-C. Compromís, Unión Progreso y Democracia (UPyD), Más País-Equo, Foro de Ciudadanos, Partido Regionalista de Cantabria and Teruel Existe).

The political landscape was stable since the democracy was recovered until the December 2015 Spanish general election which was repeated in June 2016 in the absence of a political agreement on the Government formation. Since then there was an imperfect biparty system – Socialist and Popular Party, alternating in power since 1982 – (Cotarelo and Bobillo 1991) but also political and administrative decentralisation, with an important number of peripheral political forces. In the absence of an overall majority in the Parliament, these nationalist or regional parties have allowed presidential investitures or supported governmental decisions, and also a motion of censure. Because of the characteristics of the decentralised model, it “has been labelled as effective asymmetric federalism, a complex constitutional framework that combines the conception of Spain as a single political nation with the existence of Autonomous Communities” (Strömbäck and Luengo 2008, p. 551).

The June 2016 Spanish general election represented in many senses a turn with reference to the previous decades. On the one hand, the legislative election was held just six months after the previous one due to failed negotiations to form the government. On the other hand, it consolidated the emergence of two new political forces in the Spanish political arena: the left-wing Podemos and the liberal Ciudadanos.

Podemos is often referred to as a left-wing populist party (e.g. Eklundh 2019, Kantola and Lombardo 2019), especially when populism is defined as an appeal to the people and creating a new political subject against the elites (Petithomme 2021). The Podemos party leaders draw on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theories as inspiration and in practice (Chazel and Fernández Vázquez 2020, Errejón and Mouffe 2015), launching the party before the 2014 European Parliament elections as a response to Spain’s political crisis after the economic crisis of 2008, anti-austerity concerns (Calvo and Álvarez 2015) and corruption scandals (Uribe 2017). The roots of the party go to the Indignados, a social movement that rose in 2011 and whose members formed Podemos later (Eklundh 2019, p. 6). They had a speedy start since already in the Spanish general elections of 2015 they became the third largest party after PP and PSOE (see Table 1) (Rodríguez et al. 2016). It aims at doing different kinds of politics than other parties by bringing peoples’ demands of social justice and effective democracy to the center stage (Kantola and Lombardo 2019, Eklundh 2019). These demands echoed from the disappointment in the center-left Socialist Party among predominantly younger voters (Orriols and Cordero 2016) thanks to a skillful media strategy on TV and social networks (Criado 2017). In the EP2014 elections, the charismatic professor-leader Pablo Iglesias as a front man of the party had his face even in the party’s voting ticket.

After decades of the residual presence of radical right parties in Spain (Montero 1987), because of Franco’s legacy, the emergence of Vox and its entry into the regional Andalusian Parliament took place in December 2018. It was the first time since 1979 that a radical-right party got Parliamentary

representation. In the Parliamentary elections of November 2019, Vox already got 15 percent support and 52 elected deputies, which turned it into the third-largest political party in Spain (see Table 1).

In Spain, the Popular Party (PP) – in the past *Coalición Popular* and *Alianza Popular* – absorbed the extreme right-wing voters in the 1980s and carried out for years the stigma of being the keeper of the dictatorship essences, because of the scarce democratic legitimacy and extreme conservatism associated with it (Montero 1987, p. 9). For example, in the 2011 general elections, about 80 percent of the right and extreme-right voters voted for the PP (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). In 2018 there was a change in the political landscape and a more fertile breeding ground for neoconservative movements for four factors.

First, an increasingly polarised and atomised political system (Stroud 2010) was a general process for decades (Fiorina et al. 2005). This was visible in 2015 when the political division and confrontation led to the entry into the Parliament of two new parties (Podemos and Ciudadanos). The polarisation was still higher after years of economic crisis and corruption scandals, a division that forced to repeat elections in June 2016 because of the difficulties to form a government that failed in 2018 after the first successful motion of censure in the Spanish democracy.

The second condition was the avoidance of stigma, linked to decades of extreme right-wing dictatorship. According to Dennison and Mendes (2019), two premises allowed Vox not to be associated with the extremism of radical parties, which traditionally led them to fail. On the one hand, Vox entered the party system as a splinter from the mainstream right party – the party's founder Santiago Abascal was until 2014 a PP member – and the party did not take the ancient extreme right sectors as a reference resulting in less a priori stigmatisation than other PRR parties (Dennison and Mendes 2019, p. 9). On the other hand, the emergence of Vox took place in a climate of dissatisfaction among right-wing voters. PP had been in power for nearly seven years, resulting in numerous policy grievances of social conservatives that dumped PP from the government in June 2018 (Dennison and Mendes 2019).

Thirdly, the populist discourse (Laclau 1985) of Vox, was enabled by an increased salience of issues such as migration, defense of the unity of Spain, traditional family, or opposition to the gender violence law (Gálvez 2018). Even if migration was not an important topic among Spanish people (CIS 2018), it achieved an increase at the end of 2018 in coincidence with migration arrivals. Catalan independence was another issue that rose considerably shortly before the rise in popularity of Vox. Even if the cleavage between state-nationalism and peripheral-nationalism fields are already well represented by the existing parties (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015), the evolution of the situation in Catalonia in a climate of dissatisfaction among right-wing voters favoured Vox.

The fourth influence was a context of institutional legitimacy decline (parties, media) in a disruptive and disconnected public sphere (Bennet and Pfetsch 2018). Vox contributed to emotional and selective exposure (Guess et al. 2018) in WhatsApp groups and Instagram, which contributed to reinforcing the presence of the leader. Moreover, the new digital media – mostly relying on clickbait

and disinformation content – supported Vox leaders and disseminated their ideas, mostly about migration.

The results of the 2019 European election show the decline of the bipartidism represented by PP and PSOE. In a decade, the two major parties lost 30 percent of their support, while the political fragmentation consolidated two new actors, Ciudadanos and Podemos, with more than 10 percent of the votes. Results also allowed the entry of Vox into the European Parliament.

**Table 7.2** Share of the votes (%) per party in EU elections of 21st century

<b>Party</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>
Socialist Party	35,33	43,46	38,78	23	32,84
Popular Party	39,74	41,21	42,12	26,08	20,13
Galeusca-Pueblos de Europa		5,15			
Europa de los Pueblos	2,90	2,45			
Convergència i Unió	4,43				
Coalición Europea	3,20				
Bloque Nacionalista Galego	1,65				
Euskal Herritarrok	1,45				
CEU CEUS			5,1		2,83
AGE				10	
Podemos Podemos-IU				7,97	10,05
Izquierda Unida IU-ICV-EUiA-BA	5,71	4,72	3,71		
CCa-PNC				5,43	
Junts					4,58
Ahora Repúblicas					5,61
UPyD			2,85	6,5	
Edp-V			2,49		
EPDD				4,02	
Ciudadanos				3,17	12,17
ANC-Unidad del Pueblo				2,08	

Primavera Europea				1,92	
Vox				1,57	6,2

Source: European Parliament

### 7.5 Twitter in the EP 2019 Elections

EU elections of 2019 were arranged in Spain on May 26 and the Twitter data was collected during the whole month of May in order to include the last weeks of campaigning and some days after the elections. The data was collected using EU election-related hashtags such as #26M, #Estavezvoto, #UnaEuropaQueUne, and #LaHistoriaLaEscribesTú (for the collection of the data see Chapter 2). However, when studying the data on the EU elections, it is important to note that on the same date, there were also regional and municipal elections in Spain which greatly affected the content and quantity of the data. The Spanish data includes in total 7,786 tweets from 203 different Twitter accounts of all spectrums of political actors. What is notable in the Spanish context is that more than three-quarters of the tweets (77%) were posted by a political party and less than a quarter by politicians (23%). This fact can be influenced by the Spanish electoral system, in which political parties select candidates using blocked and closed lists (Almagro 2018). Thus, it perpetuates the preeminence of the political parties as superstructures over the candidates.

The amount of tweets per party affiliation is not in line with the EU election results but what is notable is that regional actors are emphasized. This is not surprising due to concurrent regional and municipal elections. Based on the data, it may be said that Twitter also offers visibility to parties that might not get it otherwise as much as the bigger parties. The most active Twitter account was the party Compromis which is a Valencian electoral coalition that joins progressive nationalists, ecologists, and leftist ideology (see Table 3). The party tweeted from their account during the research period 400 times (5% of all the tweets in the data). The second most active tweeter was the government party PSOE with 363 tweets and the third with 257 tweets Junts per Mataró which is a local group of an electoral alliance Junts per Catalunya (JxCat, Together Catalonia).

However, when we look at the tweeters by party including both politicians and parties, PSOE covers most of the tweets and almost a fourth of all the tweets (24%, 1900 tweets). This is in line with the EU election results where the party won and had 33 percent of the votes and also in the municipal elections where the party got 29 percent of the votes. Behind PSOE come six other parties which all had more or less 10 percent of all the tweets: Ciudadanos (865 tweets, 11%), PP (807 tweets, 10%), Podemos (798 tweets, 10%), JxCat (794 tweets, 10%), Vox (748 tweets, 10%) and Compromis (699 tweets, 9%). This shows how also some smaller parties have tried to get visibility and create mobility on Twitter in order to reinforce the limited presence given by the electoral quotes in the public media or the general attention. This can be seen as an advantage of our research design; as the data was gathered using hashtags and not focusing directly on main political leaders' accounts (cf. Amaral et al. 2016).

Of the personal Twitter accounts many of the politicians from major parties, namely from PSOE and PP, were the most active tweeters. The most active politician on Twitter was MEP

Rodríguez-Piñero from PSOE with 205 tweets. Then came Ciudadanos’ municipal election candidate in Barcelona and opponent of the Catalan independence movement Manuel Valls’ candidate account (204 tweets), the Catalan municipal election candidate Marc Portet Bruguera from JxCat (134 tweets).

**Table 7.3** Top-10 individual tweeters

Ranking	Account owner	Party affiliation	Number of tweets
1.	Compromis	Compromis	400
2.	PSOE	PSOE	363
3.	JuntsperMataro	JxCat	257
4.	PodemosEuskadi_	Podemos	228
5.	PSOEBurgosLocal	PSOE	212
6.	I. Rodríguez-Piñero	PSOE	205
7.	VallsBCN_2019/Manuel Valls	C’s	204
8.	JuntsXCat	JxCat	142
9.	LaRiojaPP	PP	135
10.	Marc Portet Bruguera	JxCat	134

Since some research has found that Twitter was mainly used as a unidirectional channel by Spanish candidates in the 2014 EP elections (Amaral et al. 2016), it is important to focus not only on the number of tweets but on the number of reactions the tweets have received. The tweet that has received the most reactions (including retweets, favourites, and responses) is by Catalanian MP Miriam Nogueras from JxCat. Her tweet has received 8295 reactions to the tweet stating the victory of the party. The second most reacted tweet is by a Catalanian independence activist and MEP Oriol Junqueras from ERC receiving 7404 reactions with a tweet “We have been suspended in Spain but they will not be able to do so in Europe! # 26M A political prisoner entering the European Parliament is the best way to denounce the repression of the Spanish state, it is to put the state in check in front of the whole of Europe!”<sup>1</sup> and the third most reacted is by a Catalan politician Marta Rovira Vergés from ERC receiving 7089 reactions. In fact, six of the most reacted tweets are by Catalonia-related accounts. This shows that the dispute over Catalonia mobilizes users on Twitter, particularly related to the effects of having a voice in the European Parliament to denounce the imprisonment of the nationalist leaders.

<sup>1</sup> “Ens han suspès a Espanya però no ho podran fer a Europa! #26. Un pres polític entrant al Parlament Europeu és la millor manera de denunciar la repressió de l’Estat Espanyol, és posar en escac a l’Estat davant de tota Europa!”

18 of all the 7786 original tweets were retweeted more than a thousand times. When it comes to retweets (Table 4), in addition to Catalonia-related issues also populist parties have created activity on Twitter. Thus, Vox and Podemos are not on the top of the list when looking at the number of tweets but when they tweeted, the tweets were highly circulated and thus gained visibility. This is important in a current hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013). Thus, Vox and Podemos had some tweets in the top-10 of the most retweeted. Yet, half of the top-10 retweeted tweets were generated by accounts related to Catalonian issues which is in line with other observations of the overall data.

**Table 7.4** The 10 most retweeted tweets

Ranking	Account owner	Number of followers	Original tweet sent (date)	Party affiliation	Number of retweets
1.	Oriol Junqueras	582642	24 May 2019	ERC	2171
2.	Carles Puigdemont	757433	22 May 2019	JxCat	1891
3.	Jordi Cuixart	176837	24 May 2019	Not classified	1854
4.	VOX	258865	8 May 2019	VOX	1823
5.	Marta Rovira Vergés	215983	10 May 2019	ERC	1807
6.	Miriam Nogueras	73520	26 May 2019	JxCat	1682
7.	VOX	258865	11 May 2019	VOX	1651
8.	Albert Rivera	1135010	15 May 2019	Ciudadanos	1586
9.	Inés Arrimadas	508759	15 May 2019	Ciudadanos	1477
10.	M. Eugenia R. Palop	13276	11 May 2019	Podemos	1380

## 7.6 Themes in the EP 2019 Twitter Election Campaigns

For a deeper analysis of tweet content, a word frequency analysis was made to all 7786 sample tweets. The most common words, such as verbs like ‘to be’ or ‘to have’ and pronouns like ‘and’ were removed from the sample to focus on actual words of political communication, as well as the prepositions or articles. In total, there were 129.373 words used in a dataset sieved out from the tweets. The analysis focused on the 1000 most commonly used words of different political parties. Both automated and manual categorization were used to find the topics and themes repeated in the tweets. The words were clustered into the themes, and the popularity of the themes was ranked

(Table 5). For example, lemmatization had already combined different typing versions of EU elections, but words linked to voting and other EP election practices were put under the same theme manually.

The fact that the EU elections in Spain coincided on 26 May 2019 with local and regional elections in the country – in 12 of the 17 regions – had a significant influence on it. This has notably influenced the focus of the Twitter conversation, drawing more attention to local politics than to European issues or debates. In order to analyse this question, the references to the European Union have been compared with those related to local issues. On one side, we proceeded by isolating those terms appealing to the European Union (Europe and derivative words, UE, UE election), institutions (EU commission, EU parliament), or policies and themes directly related (Erasmus, euro, PAC, Brexit) or hashtags explicitly mentioning the EU election. On the other side, we identified references to Spain (including the country, regions, or cities) and the national, local, or regional institutions and political representatives at this stage (Mayor, Municipality, Councillor, Regional ministry). In all cases, mentions to the Spanish questions were by far the largest. However, there are some interesting differences to note.

PSOE party was the most active in referring to European (4,35%) concerns, but contrary to the other six political parties considered, it presented a smaller gap in percentage values with the Spanish mentions (7,6%). Unlike it, the mentions from PP and Vox parties to the Spanish terms multiplied by twelve those related to the European. The case of the PP is particularly relevant. Despite its strong Europeanist convictions, it is the second that paid the least attention to the EU elections, without even publishing a hashtag referring to this event. This fact can be explained by its willingness to concentrate on local and regional elections almost a year after the motion of censure that brought down the Mariano Rajoy government. Ciudadanos and Podemos made, in percentage terms, similar mentions, whereas the two Catalan nationalist parties showed major differences. While JxCat was the second party referencing the EU subjects, ERC ranked in the last position. This responds to the particular situation of the JxCat leader Carles Puigdemont who resides in Belgium to avoid the incarceration ordered by the Spanish judiciary.

The own party references and representatives were, together with the encouragement to citizens, two of the most important mentions, which is not surprising in a political campaign. However, some

**Table 7.5** Share of themes (%) and their ranking per political party in word frequency analysis (N=107.054)\*

Themes	PSOE		PP		Vox		Podemos		Ciudadanos		JXCat		ERC	
	Share (%)	R **	Share (%)	R	Share (%)	R	Share (%)	R	Share (%)	R	Share (%)	R	Share (%)	R
<i>Europe</i>	4,35	4	0,68	8	1,03	6	1,67	5	1,62	6	2,44	4	0,87	6
<i>Own Party</i>	7,82	2	7,41	2	13,90	2	5,91	3	8,47	3	11,18	1	6,20	3
<i>Other parties</i>	1,27	6	1,78	6	1,41	4	1,36	6	2,86	4	0,49	7	0,38	8
<i>Encouragements</i>	12,62	1	14,02	1	16,6	1	9,05	1	12,4	1	7,95	3	14,0	1
<i>Spain and local references</i>	7,60	3	9,5	3	12,78	3	8,66	2	9,00	2	8,66	2	7,71	2
<i>Media</i>	1,02	7	2,25	4	0,90	7	1,19	7	1,72	5	0,84	6	1,06	5
<i>Human rights &amp; welfare</i>	2,7	5	1,80	5	1,28	5	2,90	4	1,62	7	0,87	5	1,48	4
<i>Young people</i>	0,16	11	0,19	10	0,09	10	0,13	11	0,02	11	0,01	11	0,19	10
<i>Environment</i>	0,30	10	0,07	11	0,01	11	0,58	8	0,26	9	0,02	10	0,47	7
<i>Employment</i>	0,396	9	0,66	9	0,18	9	0,38	9	0,23	10	0,03	8	0,25	9
<i>Economy</i>	0,42	8	0,90	7	0,38	8	0,35	10	0,54	8	0,28	9	0,14	11

\*Non-classified 12.402, Compromís Party 11312, Pacma Party 1.414. All words together 132.182. R\*\*= Rank.

differences between parties should be noted. Vox is the most active party in self-references (13,9%) and in encouragements (16,6%), followed in this second case by PP, ERC and Ciudadanos. Unlike it, Podemos concentrated the shortest self-promotion references (12,8%).

Mentions to competitors are part of the electoral campaigns. Even if lower than self-references, allusions to political opponents, parties, or political tendencies (ie., independentists, nationalists, extreme right, “sanchismo” [to refer to Pedro Sánchez policies]), not all seven political parties performed equally. Ciudadanos did the most extensive use of this strategy (2,86%) and consistently with the local focus of the campaign the most cited political opponent was Ada Colau, leader of Barcelona en Comú (linked to Unidas Podemos) and main candidate for mayor of Barcelona. The Popular Party (1,78%) and Vox party (1,41%) also stressed this point, with relevant attention to their main opponent, PSOE, and its leader Pedro Sánchez.

In a “mediatized context” (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), the mentions of media have a particular interest and are used mostly as a self-promotional tool (Marcos-García et al. 2021). It was not surprising that the word ‘interview’ was ranked in position 41 among the Spanish data term frequency, with 248 mentions. Since during the electoral campaigns the media pay particular attention to political parties and their representatives, politicians also contribute to the attention by disseminating or announcing media appearances, which reinforces the complementarity in a hybrid communicative context. The public television broadcast TVE and Cadena Ser radio were the most mentioned media by PSOE and PP, while Podemos cited Basque country media (the regional PSB ETB and the *Egin* newspaper) or the Valencian PSB À Punt. Unlike it, Vox referred to media in which the editorial line clearly coincides with its political orientation, as is the case of the radio station esradio or the Intereconomía media group.

The political adscription influences the interest shown by the economic evolution during the election campaign. In this sense, PP led the conversation linked to this topic, followed by Ciudadanos and PSOE. Although its importance, the mentions of economy, agriculture, trade, or industry ranged from 0,9 percent (PP) and 0,14 percent (ERC). The two independentist parties brought the lower attention to it, while their conversation focused on topics linked to independency and its political agenda (republic, self-determination, freedom for political prisoners [in reference to the political leaders imprisoned for organising the citizen consultation on independence]). By taking as a reference point, JxCat doubled the mentions devoted to the economical topic (0,28%) by referring to independence issues (0,53%). In the case of ERC, there is a growing dichotomy: the political agenda on independence (1,56%) multiplied by eleven the attention to the economy (0,14%). For the other five political parties analysed, references to the political agenda of the independentist parties are residual and those terms such as “independentist” and “pro-independence” are used to refer to the political rivals and classified as other parties, which also include their candidates and representatives.

According to the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2019), in May 2019 unemployment was the main problem for 43,7 percent of Spanish people. However, none of the political parties reached 1 percent of their mentions to issues related (jobs, employment, unemployment, workers). The PP was the most preminent (0,66%), followed by PSOE and

Podemos. Even if the young Spanish people faced in May 2019 the second highest level of unemployment, this population segment did not even reach 0,2 percent of mentions. In fact, for the seven political parties considered, it was the last or the penultimate topic from the eleven ranked.

This research tried to identify whether issues linked to equality, human rights, and welfare were among the most debated by the political candidates. A manual categorization of topics related to health, education, justice, or feminism showed uneven relevance depending on their ideology. The progressive parties Podemos and PSOE were the most sensitive to these topics, followed by PP.

Despite the fact that Spain is one of the main European entrances of migration and the exponential growth of an extreme right party such as Vox, this theme did not play a special role in the political parties' Twitter conversation. In fact, the first mention in all the Spanish data term frequency appears in position 1.250 (as Migration). Environmental issues (identified by terms such as climate change, sustainability, or ecology) also received minor attention, led by Podemos, with a scarce 0,58 percent of the mentions. It should be recalled that the coalition Unidas Podemos also includes Los Verdes (The Green)-Equo.

### **7.7 Topic Modelling of the EP 2019 Tweets**

The topic modelling confirms the results indicated in the previous section, stressing that encouraging messages and self-references concentrated most of the conversations. It also enables us to map the timeline of the campaign debates by the timings of trending topics. The scarce political debate on the main social topics is reflected on election day. The three most prominent topics refer generically to the particular day, emphasizing the coincidence of the three elections (Super Sunday, European election, Local election, May election) and the action to vote. Two of the topics highlighted the results of the vote counting, including citizen participation, political parties' achievements, and comparison of results with previous polls and forecasts. Votes accounting allows mentions to winners and losers and references to the political parties' evolution (PSOE, Podemos, Bildu, PNV), particularly in relation to the local and regional elections. Likewise, the two topics deal with the official start of the electoral campaign on 9 May, and the final on 24 May (the day before the election is declared for reflection). On the final day stressed topics encourage and express gratitude to campaign teams and appreciation for the citizens' confidence and support. Both the election and the following day it is remarkable to note the mentions of the governance agreements, particularly involving three political parties: PSOE, PP, and Ciudadanos. These data evidence the request made by the Socialist Party to avoid local or regional government agreements with Vox, with mentions to present a united front against extreme right extremism.

According to the topic modelling results, only four of the topics analysed are consistently related to programmatic issues. The timeline shows that these contents are mainly concentrated on the last days of the campaign. During the second week of the campaign, especially from Wednesday 22 to Friday 24 May, the discussion on environmental issues (planet, ecologists, climate change, sustainability, rural habitat or animals), social issues (retirement pension, redistribution of wealth, taxes, health, education, housing or mobility), young people and vulnerable sectors (LGTBQ) gain

presence. The revindication of the public sector is stressed, as well as the idea of justice, equality of rights, freedom, feminism, or diversity. However, they are far from reaching trending topic levels. Results of the topical relationality are consistent with previous frame research dealing with election campaigns in Spain, which shows that strategy and game frames dominated the official discourse of the political parties' websites, whereas they bring scarce attention to programmatic and prognostic frames (Palau-Sampio et al. 2017).

Vocabulary linked to rights and public services is clearly linked to the left-wing parties Podemos and PSOE. It is expressed by the mentions of health, education, and social services issues but also by political and human rights (democracy, justice, liberties, equality), equality, and respect for diversity. This is in line with the general political discourse of Podemos (Petithomme 2021). The key pro-Europe topics are mentioned by the PSOE accounts and employ hashtags encouraging to support "The Europe that we want".

From a perspective of Laclaudian theory, the data reveals that the references to "us" and "ours", mainly expressed through verbal conjugation, are linked to two political parties: Podemos and Ciudadanos. In the first case, the plural first person is not only part of the identity but also a political strategy that emphasises the idea of 'we can' – inspired by the former president of the USA Barack Obama. Following it, the electoral slogans played with the idea of "us" (we want, we do, we won). Ciudadanos also includes the appeal to "us" and the main slogan of the campaign was "Let's go". In the case of the right-wing populist Vox, the focus on the national references prevails over the first-person appeals.

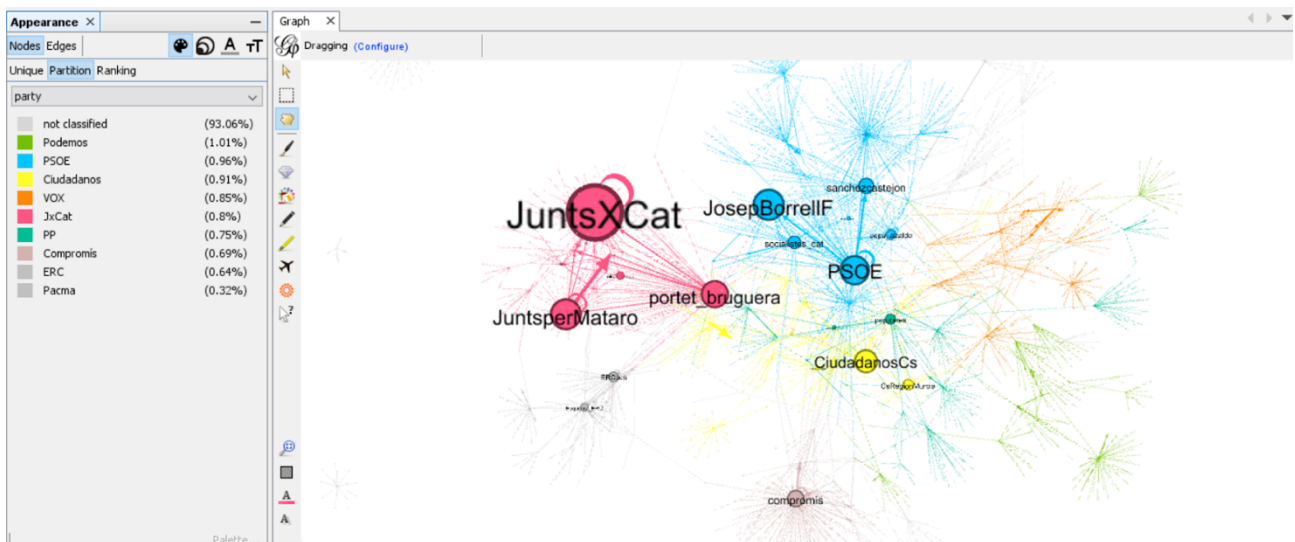
## **7.8 Twitter Networks in the EP 2019 Elections**

Network analysis of the betweenness centrality of Twitter users was performed to show which Twitter accounts serve as nodes through which most information is passed. This way these nodes are the most important in a network and without them, the network would collapse, i.e. it shows in quantity how many times a node functions as the shortest path between two other nodes by tweeting, re-tweeting, or mentioning (Brandes 2001).

The data shows that the most followed users in general were not necessarily the most important nodes in the network analysis data. For example, the most followed political actor Podemos' leader Pablo Iglesias with more than 2 million followers, and the leader of Ciudadanos Albert Rivera with more than one million followers were ranked low by their betweenness centrality. Despite the huge amount of followers, they were not active tweeters or did not frequently use the hashtags collected and thus, did not have many tweets in our data. Yet, one of Albert Rivera's tweets was among the top retweeted (Table 4). Then again, PM Pedro Sanchez (PSOE) was the fourth-followed tweeter in our data with more than a million followers and also one of the top individual tweeters (Table 3), and simultaneously, he was ranked 8th by betweenness centrality. Other influential PSOE politicians were a long-standing politician, ex-minister, current high representative of the EU and ranked 2nd by betweenness centrality Josep Borrell – also one of the top individual tweeters and hugely followed politicians with about 73 000 followers – and a former professional basketball

player and local politician José Vicente “Pepu” Hernández who ran for mayor of Madrid (over 7300 followers in his candidate account) and was ranked 12th by betweenness centrality.

**Figure 7.1** Top-10 network on Twitter during the EU elections



When we look at party accounts, Podemos had the most followers (almost 1,4 million) and PP the second most (more than 710.000 followers), and PSOE the third most (almost 700.000 followers). Yet, in network analysis Podemos seems quite scattered and does not reach the top nodes and PP – the second largest party – is ranked only 11th by betweenness centrality. PSOE – one of the most active tweeters in the data – however, is an influential actor in the Twittersphere and ranks 4th by betweenness centrality. Thus, creating an important cluster of nodes by accounts related to PSOE and its politicians (PSOE, JosepBorrellF, sanchezcastejon, socialistes\_cat). Yet, it should be noted that a large number of tweets does not automatically mean far-reaching influence on Twitter as a local actor Compromis demonstrates. Compromis sent the most tweets (400), which have circulated in its own bubble and the account ranks 7th by betweenness centrality.

In the Spanish data, network analysis continues to show the fact discussed already in previous sections that the Catalan politicians and parties did not only create the most reactions to their tweets but all three, Junts per Catalunya, Junts per Mataró, and Portet Bruguera, were in the top-5 in the data. Thus, Junts per Mataró (about 2400 followers) and Portet Bruguera (more than 5200 followers) are bigger influencers on Twitter than their number of followers suggests. Yet, it seems that their objective to raise conversation on Catalanian issues has succeeded only within their own bubble.

The third important party in the network analysis is Ciudadanos, mainly its institutional Twitter account of the party (almost 53 000 followers) and the Murcia section of the party (over 6500 followers) forming the nodes.

Vox's national party account had about 260,000 followers but neither the party nor its politicians rank in the top-10 in network analysis. Yet, what can be seen in the data is that the party managed to gain many new followers during the election campaign. For example, the party's national account received about 7000 new followers between May 2 and May 30, resulting in a 2,7 percent increase.

Overall, the network analysis shows little interaction between the parties since most of the activity is among fellow party members. This is also noted in other research (Plotkowiak and Stanoevska-Slabeva 2013) and also in Spain in previous elections in 2015 and 2016, Baviera (2018) found that retweeting and mention networks were highly clustered. Moreover, other studies have confirmed the tendency of strong polarization and segregation of political groups in Spanish Twitter during the 2015 and 2016 elections (Guerrero-Solé 2018). Yet with one difference, in Baviera's (2018) research Podemos was specifically clustered but in our 2019 EP data, it was not and did not even reach the top nodes in betweenness centrality. This may be due to a finding that Podemos interacts with many users who are not actual party members (Guerrero-Solé 2018).

It was also expected to see Podemos close to PSOE based on previous work (Baviera 2018) but in our data, this is not clearly visible. Also, PP has this element in its network in our data. In Baviera's (2018) study PP had a closer connection to Cs which may be somewhat visible also in our data. Vox has many different smaller nodes but they are mainly connected to other nodes of the party. Even though there were some signs that the popularity of Vox on Twitter increased during the campaign, it may be assumed that Vox also used other social media platforms such as Instagram where the party had in April 2019 about 240.000 followers, the most of all the parties (El Español 2019), and the party's leader Abascal was the most followed Spanish politician in Instagram (Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo 2020).

## **7.9 Conclusion**

By empirical analysis of the Twitter data collected during the 2019 EU elections in Spain, the aim of this study was to focus on a) the mainstreaming of populist political actors themselves, and b) the adoption of populist logic by other political actors. The research questions were: What particular topics and themes did different political actors distributed on Twitter during the 2019 EU elections, how various topics and actors were linked to each other, and how did our results of Twitter analysis look in relation to other analyses of particular political actors and their developments in the country?

Traditionally, EU elections have been thought of as "second-order" elections compared to the national ones (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015) and even though there have been some national variations in this over the years, also the previous EU elections in Spain in 2014 proved that Europe was not in the focus of the discussion (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015). In the 2019 elections, this trend was even increased by the overlapping effect of local and regional elections. This fact diminished the attention to the European issues, which ranked all political parties in middle positions among the eleven themes identified by the word frequency analysis. Also, many of the most important actors on Twittersphere were local or regional politicians. Further, when compared with the share of Spanish and local references, the results were little representative in percentage terms, which evidences the low profile of the European election for the majority of political parties. Only PSOE showed a stronger European conviction which was also visible in the number of tweets,

while PP focused on the local and regional campaign, after having lost the Spanish Government one year before. Their references to the EU election even lay below the Vox Party figures.

Vox party demonstrates traits of fringe populism by contesting hegemonic discourses and focusing on 'us' building by self-referencing and constructing 'us' in a nationalistic context. Thus, Vox ranks the highest in the three main indicators considered: the encouragement to their followers to vote, the self-references, and the national and local references. These categories represent 43 percent of the data collected from this party during the 2019 EU elections in Spain. The 'us' and 'ours' mentions, nonetheless, were more relevant in the two other parties recently created, Podemos and Ciudadanos. By contrast, Vox appealed to Spanish identification as a main resource. Encouragements were emphasised by all political parties in the first position, except in the case of JXCat. Likewise, the references to the own party and candidates took a primary place, even though the percentage differs among the parties.

Some political parties and politicians may use other media than Twitter or other keywords and hashtags to communicate about issues since their presence does not correspond to their popularity in the elections, especially in the case of PP, Podemos, and Vox. The case of the PP may be explained by their focus on regional and municipal elections rather than European Parliamentary elections. Podemos and Vox are not among the top-10 individual tweeters. However, both benefited from Twitter to gain visibility (Parmelee and Bichard 2011), as both had some tweets in the top-10 of the most retweeted. Yet, there are some signs that at least Vox also focused on other social media platforms – particularly Instagram – even though they gained slight popularity on Twitter during the campaign period.

The three conservative parties, particularly Ciudadanos and PP, ranked higher in mentions of other political forces, which shows signs of confrontation among the political parties mainly focused on national politics. At the time of the EU election, the absence of an agreement led to the calling of a new General Election in Spain. This is visible in our results as Podemos may have wanted to show coalition party potential instead of challenging and confronting other parties. This is also in line with Petithomme's (2021) analysis where Podemos applied populism as a discourse mainly during the emerging stage 2014-2015 and after that it has showed coalition potential in local and national governments (Petithomme 2021).

Unlike the previous decades, the emergence of new political parties such as Ciudadanos, Podemos, and Vox, fragmented the polarised political system (Hallin and Mancini 2008) since the mid-2010s. In fact, the political, economic, and social situation of the country does not reflect the topics discussed on Twitter. Employment and young people were among the less important themes, even if the unemployment of this age group is among the highest in the EU. Even the economy was present only in 0,5 percent for Ciudadanos and PP.

When comparing the 2019 EP elections to the previous 2014 EU elections, there are some differences. According to Cordero and Montero's (2015) study of the 2014 elections Catalanian independence was one of the main issues and Europe was not one of the top things to debate about. However, the first feature is only visible in our analysis in relation to the two nationalist parties, ERC and JuntsXCat, while the reference to the political agenda on independence is residual among the other political parties. In addition, in our data, the Spanish political Twittersphere is not as polarized and clustered as in the previous national and EU elections. Yet, JuntsXCat and PSOE were still strongly forming their own bubbles.

According to the EP election data, the Spanish political system shows a clear example of fringe populism represented by Vox. However, the stage of competing populism has not reached in Spain, as the emergence of this far-right party has coincided with the Podemos party's evolution to a more institutionalized role. In the years to come, it will be interesting to observe whether the populist claims of Vox and the growth of electoral support will push the PP discourse toward mainstream populism, as has been the case with the PP leader of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, during the 2021 regional electoral campaign (Wilkinson 2021).

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