

Article

Populist Right Parties on TikTok: Spectacularization, Personalization, and Hate Speech

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Abstract

Populist parties use social media as a fundamental element of their online communication strategies. This article aims to identify the strategies of right-wing populist parties and politicians on TikTok by measuring a set of features of their videos: It evaluates the presence of hate speech in these messages and the identification of certain groups as “enemies” of “the people,” and also pays special attention to the differences in engagement according to the presence of hate speech and entertaining or humoristic features. We apply a content analysis to a transnational sample ($N = 293$) of videos posted by the following populist right-wing parties and politicians on TikTok: Vox and Santiago Abascal (Spain), José Antonio Kast (Chile), and the UK Independence Party (UK). Findings show that while Vox and UKIP use TikTok to convey their ideology and values and to target the state as the main enemy of “the common person,” Kast used the same platform to build and project his image of leadership and to broadcast humoristic and entertaining content. Only 19% of the analyzed videos included hate speech elements. Not only was hate speech uncommon; it deterred engagement in terms of the number of comments as well. Contrarily, humour and entertainment favoured engagement. We conclude that TikTok might downplay the most controversial issues of the populist right.

Keywords

Chile; hate speech; political communication; populism; right-wing; social media; Spain; TikTok; UK

Issue

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1. Introduction

Political leaders and parties are increasingly using social media to spread their messages (Estellés & Castellví, 2020). The rise of these platforms has shifted conventional practices in political communication towards politainment (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014). One example in this regard is the growing personalization of politics attributed to the frequent focus of social media (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) on individual politicians instead of political parties (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), as well as the new possibilities for individual political brands provided

by these platforms (Kannasto, 2020). Another example is the increasing use of user-generated content (e.g., internet memes; see Makhortykh & González-Aguilar, 2020) for public mobilization and the spreading of political messages.

An important consequence of the above-mentioned changes is the growing reliance on more emotional formats of political communication, which sometimes enter the realm of hostility and hate speech (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, social media are viewed as one of the key elements behind the ongoing rise of populist movements around the world

(Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Some authors have called these new movements “technopopulist” parties, which in addition to the discursive elements of populism itself cannot be understood without considering their interaction with social media (Bickerton & Accetti, 2018). The success of these parties is attributed to the alignment between emotion-driven communication practices on social media and distinct features of populism such as the emphasis on simple and direct solutions (Hernández-Carr, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), the use of explicit language for disqualifying adversaries and praising leaders (Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2021), the use of aggressive and sometimes vulgar claims (Vázquez-Barrio, 2021), and sensationalist arguments (particularly in the case of populist right parties; see Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2021).

Among the many concerns related to the rise of populist movements, a prominent place is occupied by their frequent use of hostile rhetoric (Prior, 2021). Often, such rhetoric reiterates claims associated with nationalism (Krasteva & Lazaridis, 2016) or, in some cases, even racism and suprematism (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021) to attack or degrade the so-called “enemies of the people.” Consequently, populist communication strategies often involve hate speech—i.e., the attribution of negative characteristics to a given group based on ideology, gender, or race (Piazza, 2020). Such involvement is particularly pronounced on social media, which are commonly employed by populist actors (in particular right-wing ones) to promote radicalization and discriminate against minorities. Social media have already become one of the main venues for such discourses to circulate and spread (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), with significant consequences on public opinion (Cáceres-Zapatero et al., 2022) and contributing to a broad social polarization (Urman & Makhortykh, 2021).

Despite several studies looking at the use of social media platforms by populist right parties and leaders (e.g., Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Finlayson, 2022; Peck, 2022), most of them focus on a small set of platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube. We aim to look beyond the usual set of social media platforms discussed in the context of right populism and examine how populist actors and parties use TikTok. As a relatively new platform, it has become a promising medium for populist movements to spread their message (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social media services around the world (Cervi et al., 2021): Since its birth in 2017, it attracted more than one billion users, 39% of them aged 16 to 24 (Statista, 2023). Even though it shares features similar to other social media, such as Instagram and YouTube, some particularities of TikTok make it especially attractive and unique in the market, namely the short duration of the videos, their vertical format, and the addition of snippets of songs.

The distinct features of TikTok contribute to it facilitating the practice of “casual politicking” (Gekker, 2019),

which is sometimes argued to be a less genuine form of political communication because of its lesser attachment to particular ideologies (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). Such practices are particularly appealing to young users who “play” politics on social media platforms (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). At the same time, it does not fully exclude the possibility of using TikTok as a unidirectional broadcasting tool that relies on its politainment effect (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) to promote biased and sensationalist narratives that can reinforce populist movements (López-Fernández, 2022).

2. Aims, Hypotheses, and Research Questions

We examine the strategies of a transnational sample of populist right-wing parties and politicians on TikTok. Specifically, we analyze accounts from two Spanish-speaking countries (Spain and Chile) and one English-speaking country (the UK). We have chosen a comparative study design due to the lack of such studies on this topic and the importance of comparative analysis to understand the differences and similarities in the tactics of the populist right and how these may differ even within the same platform. We believe that the comparison of different realities allows us to detect the most relevant common features or to transcend the particularities of each case, even if the analysis later reveals tendencies. The accounts chosen for the analysis are part of the official communication apparatus of political parties and leaders.

We decided to analyze populist right-wing parties because, according to Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo (2022), one of the Spanish parties with the most intensive use of TikTok is Vox, a populist right-wing party. For this reason, we thought it convenient to compare its activity with that of other parties from other countries but with similar ideologies to obtain more in-depth results on the topics and, above all, the engagement of their messages on this social network. Moreover, given that populist right-wing parties use social media intensively and quickly instrumentalize online practices for their purposes, research on their activity could be particularly relevant. We focused on Vox (Spain), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and the Partido Republicano de Chile (PLR). The political parties we chose for this study share some common features. The first one is their rise in popularity in recent years. Two of them, Vox and the PLR, were founded less than a decade ago, while UKIP was founded in the 1990s. However, it was not until 2014 that it began to be treated as a “major party” and received increased press attention (Deacon & Wring, 2016). Another common feature is the relationship of these parties with social media as communication tools. All three have boosted their antagonistic and polarizing discourse in social media. In the case of Vox, it has done so through Instagram (Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020) and Facebook (Ballesteros-Herencia & Gómez-García, 2020). In the case of UKIP (Karamanidou & Sahin, 2021)

and PLR (Durán & Rojas, 2021), Twitter stands out as the medium most used for these purposes.

Particularly, this study introduces the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main objectives of the TikTok accounts associated with populist right-wing movements?

RQ2: Which are the most frequent populist features in the content produced by these TikTok accounts?

RQ3: Who do these account target as “enemies of the people”?

RQ4: Do these accounts use hate speech against any minority?

We also expect that, as TikTok is mostly used as an entertainment platform (Anderson, 2020), more humour-oriented messages will achieve a higher number of views, comments, and likes (H1). Similarly, we posit that, as hate speech is one of the main features of populist right communication in social media, such content will also generate greater engagement (H2).

3. Method

We analyzed 293 videos manually collected on 25 August 2022 from the five chosen accounts. For Vox we chose the account of the party and the political leader. For UKIP we chose the account of the political party (the UKIP leader[s] do not have individual accounts). Finally, in the case of PLR we chose the account of José Antonio Kast, founder of the political party and former candidate for the presidency of Chile (the party does not have an official account on TikTok). The number of videos includes all the videos of the analyzed accounts published up to this date. The account with the most videos was that of UKIP, while Santiago Abascal’s account only posted 15 videos (see Table 1).

We divided the content analysis into three parts. The first part focused on the analysis of the video’s characteristics. For this, we relied on the approach proposed by Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) in their study of political communication on Twitter but adapted it to TikTok. We took the following categories from the latter’s study: political achievement management, media

agenda, agenda and mobilization of political actions, participation and mobilization. On the other hand, we decided to combine other categories from the same study to better adapt them to the characteristics and functionality of TikTok (electoral program with ideology and entertainment with humour). The second part of our analysis corresponded to engagement data (views, likes, comments).

Finally, we divided the third part of our analysis into two phases. First, we focused on the populist traits mentioned in several academic studies, such as the “construction of the leader” (Gurov & Zankina, 2013; Schmidt, 2022; Weyland, 2001), references to “the people” (De Cleen, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021; Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020), and the mention of the “enemies” of their movement, such as the state, political parties, or the media (Block & Negrine, 2017; Campos-Herrera & Umpierrez de Reguero, 2019; Wojczewski, 2020). On the other hand, we inquired whether the videos contained any hate speech. To this end, we added categories on vulnerable groups such as women (misogyny), migrants (racism and xenophobia), and the LGBT community (queerphobia).

Two of the three authors of the article coded the videos. We did the encoding of the videos in a non-exclusive way so that the same video could contain several characteristics. For this purpose, we elaborated the first pretest in which 70% of the coded categories reached Krippendorff’s Alpha above 0.68. After that, we discussed some categories (participation and mobilization, enemies, racism/xenophobia) to refine details about their definitions and characteristics. Finally, we elaborated a second pretest in which 100% of the categories reached a Krippendorff’s Alpha above 0.68.

3.1. Data Analysis

We used a Pearson’s chi-squared association test to identify particular differences in the uses of TikTok by each account. This test compares the observed frequency of some variables—in this case, the presence of certain message features and the number of videos posted by each TikTok account—to a probabilistic expected distribution where the sum of messages including one given characteristic is directly proportional to each TikTok account according to the number of videos published in each one of them (see Table 3). Thus, the test allows us to identify whether the number of videos for a specific

Table 1. Videos analyzed per account.

TikTok account	First post	Country	Political party	No. of videos
@vox_espana	2020	Spain	Vox	73
@santiabascal_	2022	Spain	Vox	15
@joseantoniokast	2021	Chile	PLR	84
@ukindependenceparty	2021	UK	UKIP	121

account is higher or lower than expected. The results of the comparison are summarized using the *p*-value, which can be roughly interpreted as the probability that such a distribution might occur if the null hypothesis is true (e.g., a *p*-value of .05 suggests that such a distribution might occur 5% of the time if the null hypothesis is true).

We also used a non-parametric test (Mann-Whitney U test) to compare the effect of hate speech and entertainment/humour in the engagement, given that the distribution of views, likes, and comments did not follow a normal pattern (*p* < .001 according to Shapiro-Wilk test for each value). This test, similarly to the chi-square test, provides a *p*-value that can be interpreted as the chance that the differences identified between the compared groups (in our case, the videos that included the considered feature or not) can be a product of mere chance. We follow the traditional threshold of significance of *p* equal or below to .05.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of Video Characteristics

Most of the analyzed videos addressed ideological and programmatic issues of the respective parties. The most common populist characteristics of the videos were references to enemies and leader construction. The more regularly identified enemy of the people was the state. Hate speech was relatively uncommon; videos promoting racist and xenophobic discourses were the most frequent in this category, but overall remained scarce. There were only a few videos expressing hatred towards other minorities (see Table 2).

Table 3 offers the disaggregated results for each category and provides a column for the theoretically expected percentage of messages within each category (see Section 3). Results were considered significant if *p* < .001.

Thus, we found that Kast's videos were particularly focused on projecting his leadership ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 208, p > .001$) and to provide entertainment and humorous content ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 244, p > .001$).

UKIP showed the highest presence of calls to participation ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 62.2, p > .001$) and mentions to external enemies ($\chi^2(3, N = 86.8) = 244, p > .001$). Such enemies were identified mainly as the state ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 49.6, p > .001$). The British party also was significantly associated with hate speech ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 47.9, p > .001$) which took the form of racist and xenophobic messages ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 46.7, p > .001$).

Programmatic and ideological content was especially associated with the Vox account ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 64.9, p > .001$). This also happened with mentions to "the people" ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 66.2, p > .001$). Vox also showed a tendency to denounce other parties as enemies of the "real" will of the people ($\chi^2(3, N = 293) = 25, p > .001$).

4.2. Analysis of Video Engagement

Among the TikTok accounts analyzed, Kast's account generated the highest engagement in terms of the average number of views and comments. On the other hand, the Vox account was ranked as the one with the most likes (see Table 4).

We observed that hate speech played no significant effect on views (*p* = .379) or likes (*p* = .849), but it

Table 2. Frequencies and percentage proportion of video characteristics.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Program and ideology	143	48.81
Enemies of "the people"	128	41.30
"The people"	75	25.60
The state	85	29.01
Leader construction	118	40.27
Political parties	36	12.29
Entertainment/humour	97	33.11
Hate speech	59	19.11
Media agenda	17	5.80
Management of political achievements	9	3.07
Agenda and organization of political actions	8	2.73
Racism and xenophobia	47	16.04
Media	7	2.39
Misogyny	6	2.05
Participation and mobilization	54	18.43
Queerphobia	6	2.05

Table 3. Disaggregated frequencies, percentages per account, and expected percentage of each video feature by account.

	Jose Antonio Kast (PLR)			UKIP			Vox			Santiago Abascal (Vox)		
	<i>n</i>	%	expected	<i>n</i>	%	expected	<i>n</i>	%	expected	<i>n</i>	%	expected
			%			%			%			
Agenda and organization of political actions	2	2.38	1.92	0	0.00	3.99	6	8.22	1.45	0	0.00	2.73
Program and ideology	11	13.10	34.44	78	64.46	71.51	41	56.16	25.99	13	86.67	48.80
Management of political achievements	1	1.19	2.17	1	0.83	4.50	6	8.22	1.64	1	6.67	3.07
Media agenda	1	1.19	4.09	6	4.96	8.49	8	10.96	3.10	2	13.33	5.80
Participation and mobilization	2	2.38	13.02	48	39.67	26.98	4	5.48	9.86	0	0.00	18.40
Entertainment/humour	84	100.00	23.35	0	0.00	48.52	12	16.44	17.67	1	6.67	33.13
Leader humour	84	100.00	28.39	0	0.00	58.93	26	35.62	21.46	8	53.33	40.27
“The people”	0	0.00	18.06	29	23.97	37.51	35	47.95	13.65	11	73.33	25.60
Enemies of “the people”	0	0.00	29.15	77	63.64	60.50	36	49.32	21.97	8	53.33	41.27
The state	0	0.00	20.50	53	43.80	42.47	26	35.62	15.48	6	40.00	29.00
Political parties	0	0.00	8.65	18	14.88	18.03	18	24.66	6.55	0	0.00	12.27
Media	0	0.00	1.69	1	0.83	3.50	5	6.85	1.27	1	6.67	2.39
Hate speech	0	0.00	13.52	45	37.19	27.95	9	12.33	10.22	2	13.33	19.13
Racism and xenophobia	0	0.00	11.34	40	33.06	23.47	5	6.85	8.54	2	13.33	16.07
Misogyny	0	0.00	1.44	1	0.83	3.00	5	6.85	1.09	0	0.00	2.05
Queerphobia	0	0.00	1.44	4	3.31	3.00	2	2.74	1.09	0	0.00	2.05

did SO in the case of comments ($p = .001$). Yet we observed that comments were more common on videos that did not express hate speech (*avg.* = 851, *median* = 68, *SD* = 1720) than on those that did (*avg.* = 53.8, *median* = 27, *SD* = 58.5).

We also applied the Mann-Whitney U test for the effect of humoristic and entertaining content and we found values close to the highest threshold of signifi-

cance in the number of views ($p = .005$), likes ($p = .036$), and comments ($p < .001$). Humoristic videos reached higher engagement (see Table 5).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed the TikTok videos published by populist right parties and politicians. Our findings

Table 4. Mean engagement per TikTok account.

	Views		Likes		Comments	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
José Antonio Kast	755,077	1,120.000	1,040	2490	2,162	2,388
Santiago Abascal	1,422	1,027	357	161	14.0	7.40
UKIP	2,303	2,276	115	123	32.4	41.4
Vox	999	2,439	2,422	2713	357	617

Table 5. Comparison of engagement data by the presence of humoristic or entertaining features.

	Humor/Entertainment	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Views	No	1,879	789.0	2,387	170.5
	Yes	653,929	687.5	1,070.000	108,528
Likes	No	889	138.0	1,885	134.6
	Yes	1,124	79.9	2,498	254
Comments	No	115	26.0	328	23.4
	Yes	1,951	961.0	2,306	234

highlight several points that can advance the current understanding of the complex relationship between populist parties and social media, in particular concerning the platforms that emerged in the last few years, knowing from other studies that social media give populist actors the freedom to articulate their ideology (Engesser et al., 2017) and that they sometimes use these platforms as a communication alternative to the “elite-captured” media (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020).

Our first point refers to the type of messages populist right-wing parties broadcast through TikTok. Some (Vox and UKIP) use TikTok to convey their ideology and values, while others (PLR) focus on promoting the leader’s image. This deduction is mainly because PLR’s account focuses on the individual while VoX and UKIP’s accounts focus on the political party. At the same time, there are significant differences even within ideology-focused communication. While UKIP focused on attracting voters and affiliates, Vox focused on exposing its proposals, criticizing its opponents, and extolling its leaders. In this case, UKIP’s practices within the platform respond to the party’s scarce social and political presence in the UK. Its presence on TikTok leads us to think that the party is looking to target other affiliates. While Vox, as a consolidated party, uses TikTok as one more of its digital tools to communicate and disseminate its agenda.

Our second point relates to the differences in the use of populist claims. While Vox and UKIP reiterate in TikTok the classic populist discourse focusing on enemies (e.g., the state) and arguing that they are the true representatives of the people, PLR content does not include these features and focuses on entertainment and humour. The main populist characteristic of PLR videos is the emphasis on a single leader. In the case of Vox, our findings are in accord with other studies focused on social media such as Instagram (Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020) or Twitter (Cepeda-García de León et al., 2022), where the party enhances this classic populist discourse feature of seeking blame either internally or externally.

Our third point is that the TikTok content we analyzed does not necessarily promote incivility and hate speech to the degree it could be expected from populist right content. Out of the three examined parties, UKIP used hate speech the most, usually in the form of xenophobic and racist claims. This observation raises a question

about whether TikTok actually attenuates the populist right discourse. In this case, TikTok becomes not only a political communication tool but also a strategy to downplay the most controversial issues of populist right for the platform’s audience ideology.

Our fourth point links to user engagement with the analyzed videos. It is important to mention that previous studies have found that issues related to politics (at least in the Spanish case) encourage user participation (Segado-Boj et al., 2022). From video engagement analysis, we can conclude that the success of Kast’s account (PLR) may be due to two reasons: First, Kast became very famous in Chile after being named presidential candidate; second, the PLR account exploits the features of TikTok better than the other two. Based on our analysis, we also conclude that the presence of hate speech does not have a determining effect on the videos getting more views or more likes. However, this could also be due to the TikTok algorithm that downgrades these videos to prevent them from becoming viral, following the principle of “visibility moderation” (Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

It is also important to point out some limitations of our analysis. First, it is necessary to mention that the comparison by the presence of humour and entertainment in the videos could be biased. The only one who uses these resources is José Antonio Kast (PLR), and this account is the most popular, i.e., the one with the largest number of followers and the highest number of video views. Secondly, our article only analyzes a sample of right-wing populist parties and politicians. At the same time, it would also be essential to analyze left-wing populism for future studies to determine differences and similarities (if any) between populisms. Third, we did not consider particular possibilities offered by TikTok (e.g., filters or music) in our analysis nor did we analyze its specifically visual aspects. The use of these elements may be an important factor in generating greater engagement with the videos. It should be considered in future studies. Finally, we could mention that the sample is not uniform. The most convenient would have been to analyze three accounts of political parties and three accounts of political leaders. However, we could consider that TikTok is a platform still in a growth phase as a political communication tool, so several parties do not yet have a profile on this social network. Such is the case of PLR, where

the only verified account is that of José Antonio Kast, but there is no verified profile for the entire political party.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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