

# Populism and Borders: Tools for Building “the People” and Legitimising Exclusion

**Abstract:** *This paper argues theoretically and illustrates empirically that the border and populism are mutually constitutive concepts. Borders are basic elements in the process of decontestation of “the people” and the construction of exclusion and inclusion narratives, which are at the centre of any successful populist strategy. Meanwhile different dimensions of populism, such as antagonism, morality, idealisation of society, popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership, can be found in the articulation and reproduction of bordering claims and practices. To show the interplay between populism and borders, the electoral manifestos of four radical right populist parties —Vox, Rassemblement National, UKIP and Brexit Party— are quantitatively and qualitatively analysed and compared. The interactions between borders and populism exposed in this paper illustrate that they can be considered not only as objects of analysis, but also as epistemic frameworks to understand each other. Further cross-fertilisation between these interdisciplinary areas of studies is desirable.*

**KEYWORDS:** Populism, borders, radical right, exclusion, immigration

## Introduction

This paper seeks to shed light on the interplay between borders and populism at both a conceptual and an empirical level. It shows that bordering narratives and practices (e.g. Newman 2003; Vaughan-Williams 2009; Kinnvall 2015) are based on and feed into populist discourses and attitudes. Populism is often cited as one of the most prominent challenges to western-style pluralist democracy (Kriesi et al. 2008; Müller 2014). Migration flows, technological changes, and economic transformations linked to globalisation have fuelled public discontent and facilitated the rise of populism (Rodrik 2018). Additionally, shifts in social and cultural values have produced a backlash against governments and other democratic institutions which has been capitalised by populist movements (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Meanwhile, borders are linked to notions of sovereignty and citizenship, and part of domestic and international power struggles. They evolve and overlap (Mezzara and Nielson 2013). Borders are often interpreted as a territorialised manifestation of “boundaries” a term that is used to capture not only political or territorial but also other social and personal divides (Parker and Adler Nissen 2012: 775). By making cultural,

linguistic or ethnic differences more explicit or formal populist leaders contribute to turn those individual boundaries into something closer to a political border. These bordering processes, therefore, help categorise people and create new, or strengthen existing, distinct collective political identities.

These concepts have great scholarly and policy relevance nowadays but with a few exceptions (e.g. De Genova 2018; Kallis 2018a; Lamour 2020) the interdisciplinary literatures on populism and on borders have followed separate ways. This paper problematises the relationship between the two areas of study and shows theoretical and empirical synergies between them. It combines some of the key contributions in the borders literature that can help to understand the populist phenomenon, with insights from the populism literature that suggest the prominence of the concept of border into the populist logic of articulation.

First, the article revisits the notion of border in populism theory and shows that borders and bordering practices are central elements of the populist worldview and its manifestations. Borders taken in a wider sense—not just as a political boundary between two states—are intrinsic part of the logic of inclusion and exclusion that helps to define, and decontest, “the people” as a clearly separate entity and in opposition to “the other”. Populists dichotomise the social by creating internal frontiers and antagonistic equivalential chains which bring together people with different, but comparable, fear, concerns, resentments, and grievances (Laclau 2005a; 2005b: 40-44).

Second, this article argues that borders in practice are, not only constitutive of but, also constituted by populism. Populist features usually underpin bordering discourses and praxis. The article dissects populism into five dimensions —i.e. i) the antagonistic depiction of the “other”, ii) the moralisation of the distinction “us” vs “them”, iii) the idealisation of the past and identity to justify the reinforcement of protective boundaries, iv) the utilisation of the concept of popular sovereignty and a majoritarian logic as means to legitimise borders, and v) the reliance on a strong personalistic leader<sup>1</sup>— and shows how each of these dimensions are used to justify, strengthen or instrumentalise borders in (re)bordering narratives and claims.

Third, to illustrate empirically the interplay between border discourses and dimensions of populism, this paper applies a content analysis methodology (Bauer 2000)

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<sup>1</sup> These five dimensions are based on those in Olivas Osuna (2020).

to the manifestos of a set of European political parties which are often classified as populist radical right parties (PRRPs) (Mudde 2007): the Spanish *Vox*, the French *Rassemblement National* (RN), and the British UKIP and Brexit Party. The analysis of coded segments in these texts indicates that, beyond the obvious differences between these political parties and contexts, there are many common subjacent ideological, discursive and performative elements. Populism theory can serve to explain several steps and elements in the construction of insecurity, threat and fear narratives used to justify policies of inclusion and exclusion by these parties. Bordering discourses are very salient in all these manifestos and there are many intersections between the border and populist references coded.

Finally, the analysis of these manifestos seems to indicate many similarities in how these parties articulate their bordering discourses and construct fears and grievances against the “other” as equivalent. In their discourses they establish not simply a fix binary difference between “the people” and the “other” but they reflect a hierarchical approach to “othering” based on a selective and ambiguous utilisation of borders and exclusion. The populist “us” is sometimes extended and turned into a “meta-us” to incorporate other Europeans which are suggested to share equivalent grievances or threats from same or equivalent “others”.

## Borders in Populism

### *Performing the Border: Identity, Exclusion and Populist Articulation*

What is the role of the border in populist theory? The border, insofar as it is understood as an instrument of power and site of struggle, can be used as a method to study other social phenomena (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 14-19). Political and geographical borders have been historically used as tools of exclusion and separation between “in-groups” —those entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship or community membership—and “out-groups” —those who belong to other communities and could be potentially hostile and threaten the in-groups. The Great Wall of China is probably the most iconic materialisation of the concept of border. In recent years migration and refugee flows caused by military conflicts (e.g. Syria, Libya, Myanmar and South Sudan) and deep economic crises (e.g. Venezuela) seem to have brought the border back to the centre of the political arena (Schain 2019). Enormous walls have been built to keep out-groups at bay for instance between the USA and Mexico, Spain and Morocco or Israel and Egypt.

However, these are not the types of borders we more frequently encounter in our daily lives, as Newman argues:

*“Borders are not confined to the realm of inter-state divisions, nor do they have to be physical and geographical constructs[...] They determine the extent to which we are included, or excluded, from membership in groups [...] the ‘us’ and the ‘here’ being located inside the border while the ‘other’ and the ‘there’ is everything beyond the border”* (Newman 2006: 172)

This paper also adopts an extensive conception of the term border including linguistic, cultural and ethnic boundaries. It suggests that all borders, physical, legal-political or socially constructed, can be used as instruments in the discursive nationalist and populist toolkits. By alluding to borders politicians contribute to reify and reinforce differences between individuals and groups, which they can strategically use for their electoral advantage or to justify certain policies. Moreover, borders go beyond strategy and discourse, they can be performed by take-for-granted everyday acts (Diener and Hagen 2017) and become expressions of banal nationalism (Billig 1985) and populist performance or style (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021).

Populism has a relational social, cultural and political component. It entails a process of creation and recreations of identities, shaped by the relations between “the people” and the leader, as well as their relationships of this dyad with the “nefarious other” (Moffitt 2016: 17-25; Ostiguy 2017: 17). Borders are part of this performative constitution of “the people”. They shape individuals’ conception of the world and may be considered ontologically prior to specific entities (Thompson 2007: 15). Borders play “a constitutive role in the modes of production and organization of political subjectivity” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: xi). For instance, territorialised social formations can be considered as the root of identities as they are based on kinship and social adjacency (Agnew 2008: 178-179). Borders help produce shared understandings of identity and a sense of inclusion, or exclusion. The self-identities of members of a group are grounded in, and thus far validated via, interactions with in-groups and out-groups (Parker & Adler Nissen 2012: 778). Borders are also central to the construction of “imagined communities” underpinning nationhood claims (Anderson 1983) and the romanticised “heartlands” that each populist movement tries to re-enact (Taggart 2002; 2004).

Excluding the “other” is another way to reinforce the “self” and preserve identity. Like nationalists, populists often rely on a post-modern logic of inclusion and exclusion, according to which symbolic boundaries and belonging to the in-group are grounded on specific notions of “national culture” which are socially constructed and reconstructed (Lochocki 2018: 23). Borders are part of the logic of “cultural differentialism” and preservation of a distinctive identity common among populist movements (Bornschieer 2010: 422-423; Ritzer and Yagatich 2016: 112-113).

Denigration of out-groups is a psychological mechanism to maintain an image of self-integrity (Steele et al. 1993: 885). In particular, the “othering” of migrants is used to reinforce the self by numerous populist and nationalist groups (Wodak 2015; Fielder and Catalano 2018). Individuals may selectively choose evidence that exacerbates intergroup differences to portray the out-group as inferior (Hamilton and Trolie 1986) and encourage in-group favouritism (Reed II and Aquino 2003: 1271). Similar processes operate at a group level. Demonising, scapegoating, and even dehumanising the “other” are practices rooted in religious morality often adopted by populist leaders (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 7-8). Hence, populism can be considered moralistic rather than programmatic (Wiles 1969: 167). As Mouffe argues, “[f]ar from having disappeared, frontiers between us and them are constantly drawn, but nowadays they are drawn in moral categories” (Mouffe 2005: 58).

Populists not only antagonise the morally inferior “others” but they also try to exclude them altogether (Müller 2016: 4). Borders are tools that can be used to change the *status quo* and reshape society and popular sovereignty. Populists often argue that the underserving and corrupt minorities —“the elite”, “the caste”, “the colonisers”, “the immigrants”—, do not really belong to the *demos* or the “heartland” and, therefore, the “true” or “authentic” people must fight to achieve plenitude and “have their country back” (Panizza 2005: 3-4, 2017: 409-411). The dissonance between the “empirical people”, and the virtuous “ideal people”, where sovereignty “should” reside, pushes populists to create boundaries and request the extraction of part of the people from within the people (Lefort 1988; Müller 2014). Thus, the populist logic leads sometimes to the dehumanisation of the “other” and becomes a justification for authoritarianism in the process of extrication of the ideal people from its empirical form, which implies the suppression of internal enemies and out-groups (Laclau 2005a: 170; Arato 2013: 167).

*Borders and chains of equivalence*

The discursive approach to populism, to a great extent based on the ideas originally formulated by Ernesto Laclau and developed by the so-called Essex School of Discourse theory (Townshend 2003), deserves special attention when analysing the role of borders in populism. Unlike the proponents of the ideational or ideological approach who argue that populism is a “thin” or “thin-centred” ideology (e.g. Mudde 2004, Stanley 2008), Laclau suggests a displacement of conceptualisation from the contents to the form and focus on how discourses are constructed (Laclau 2005a; 2005b: 44). “Discourse” in a Laclauian sense is not restricted to words and ideas but represents all “systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers” (Howarth and Stavrakakis: 2002: 3-4). This implies considering leaders or parties as populist not because they have a specific ideology, but because they show a particular “logic of articulation” of social, political or ideological content, whatever those specific contents are (Laclau 2005b: 33-34; De Cleen 2017:345-347).

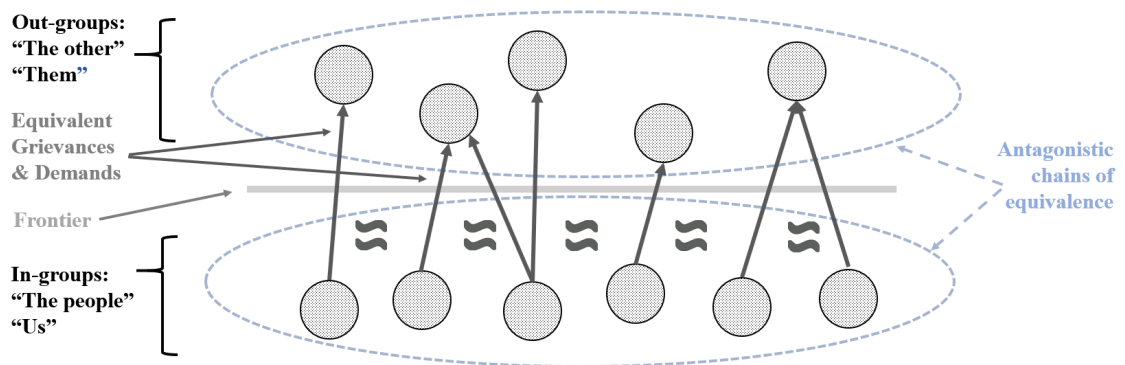
“The people”, as understood by populists, do not encompass the entirety of the population. Theirs is an idealisation of *a* people rather than an attempt to depict *the* (empirical) people (MacRae cited by Berlin 1968: 172). Indeed, populist discourses aim to construct and decontest a certain “people” through a process which entails two intertwined conditions: i) the dichotomisation of the social space through the definition of an internal frontier which separates individuals, and ii) and the creation of a chain of equivalential demands (Laclau 2005a: 18-19, 74, 83; Laclau 2005b: 38). On the one hand, this process requires application of a “logic of difference” with the discursive construction of an enemy of the people who is placed on the other side of the frontier (Laclau 2005b: 39-40). On the other hand, populist discourses also follow a “logic of equivalence” and unify “the people” by presenting their individual demands, fears and grievances against the social “other” as similar. This is achieved by the discursive creation of “empty signifiers”<sup>2</sup>, which do not have clearly defined “signifieds”. They are vague and malleable symbols or conceptualisations of universal ideals, which have a homogenising function in a highly heterogeneous reality.

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<sup>2</sup> Laclau also refers to the term “floating signifier” which is an expression of the ambiguity and certain instability inherent to frontiers. This is a term which he considers to largely overlap with the concept of “empty signifier” in practice but which analytically stands on its own (Laclau 2005b: 43).

These “chains of equivalence” cut across different social sectors and particular interests and help construct “the people” as the union of those who oppose the elites or other type of social “other” and struggle against different, but equivalent, forms of subordination or exploitation. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: xviii-xix, Laclau 2005b: 38, 44-46, Mouffe 2005: 69). These equivalential chains are tools of mutual recognition and inclusion because they create links within the members of the group, “the people”. But at the same time, they contribute to a process of “othering” and exclusion, through the dichotomisation of the social around an internal frontier or boundary. Thus, “the people” and the “other” become political constructs constituted through antagonistic chains of equivalence (Figure 1). In other words, antagonism becomes a mode of identification (Panizza 2005: 3)

**Figure 1:** Chains of Equivalence



Source: Author’s own elaboration

However, this is a complex and unstable dialectic. The internal borders on which populism is grounded can be subverted by breaking the links of the chain of equivalent demands or by disrupting the internal frontier through competing equivalential re-articulations. The political dynamics of populism require these internal frontiers to be constantly reproduced. Thus, populist strategies are often based on creating or re-drawing political frontiers (Laclau 2005b: 41-46). Borders become to a great extent context specific or ambiguous in populist argumentation (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020). The border becomes a discursive resource for populist leaders who can pick and choose the one that suits best their interests and agendas (Wodak 2015; Palonen 2016; Lamour and Varga 2020).

In sum, borders are used in a multiplicity of populist discursive articulatory practices. The academic literature attributes to borders an important role in underpinning several of

the dimensions of the populist construct. They contribute to establish an antagonistic distinction between “the people” and the “other”. These borders are usually turned into moral divides by populists who seek to delegitimise and exclude certain groups. Borders are also tools in the construction of an idealised society based on emotional and ahistorical interpretations of the past that the populist projects aspire to revive. Consequently, borders also impact their interpretation of who is part of the demos and where popular sovereignty lies. Finally, borders are instrumentalised by populist leaders to gather support and advance their political agendas.

## Populism in Borders

Whereas the previous section showed the crucial role of borders in populism as key elements in process of creation and re-creation of social, cultural and political identities, this one shifts the attention to the opposite relationship; i.e. the salience of populist attributes in the articulation and reproduction of bordering claims and practices. Many of the current and historical justifications for the creation and reinforcement of borders are grounded on populist logic. Each of the dimensions of the populism can be linked to different bordering examples:

Firstly, the antagonistic Manichean interpretation of reality underpins the descriptions of migrants as an existential threat and their labelling as exploitative “enemies”, “invaders” or “parasites” in order to legitimise securitisation of borders (Hogan and Haltinner 2015; Kinnval 2015; Schain 2019: 18). Populist arguments are not only used to antagonise “internal outsiders” operating “within the polity” but also to “external outsiders” such as the European Union, American Imperialism, the global capital, and of course, political and economic refugees (Brubaker 2020: 54-58). Policies proposing new borders and even walls by right-wing movements are based on the creation of scapegoats and fear to legitimise exclusion (Wodak 2015: 2-6). Patrolling the external borders or enforcing internal immigration control are presented as means to reinforce security and shield citizens against them. Populist antagonism is also reflected in re-bordering claims based in anti-establishment and anti-global-elite discourses which alert over alleged institutional failure and threats to nations’ distinct identities (Kinnval 2015: 519; Mudde 2007). Eurosceptic discourses in Europe are examples of this.

Secondly, the moral interpretation of actors which is a key feature of populism (Mudde 2004:543; Laclau 2005b: 4; Arato 2013: 156) and also central to bordering



practices. There is often a moral dichotomisation of society between “honorable patriots” who defend the border and the “traitors” or “internal enemies” who oppose bordering policies (Kinnval 2015: 523). Migrants are also morally delegitimised and accused of ill-intention or causing damage to society on purpose. This process of “moralisation of the bordering” implies the application of a moral hierarchy and use narratives of deservingness to justify and rationalise exclusion (Vollmer 2017: 4). The moral distinction, which sometimes comes accompanied by a dehumanising rhetoric, helps rationalise why some human beings in a society are excluded from the enjoyment of certain public services and basic human rights (Rheindorf and Wodak 2017). Not only the proponents of bordering see themselves in a higher moral ground, but they also establish moral distinctions between different groups of migrants. Moral judgments on the degree of deservingness are often used to justify enforcement measures targeting specific groups (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014: 426; Abt et al. 2021). The consideration of “legal” and “illegal”, “deserving” and “undeserving” may impact the allocation of resources and rights among them (Cowley 2005: 154).

Thirdly, the romanticised construction of society and its past grounded on homogeneity and exclusion (Jagers & Walgrave 2007: 323) is another of the typical attributes of populism which can be customarily observed in bordering arguments. Anti-pluralist descriptions of “the people”, focusing on fixed collective identities and nationhood, help reinforce discourses about cultural and economic threats by migrants. Borders are often presented as “natural” or “irreversible” (Mostov 2008: 42). Homogenising, differentiating, and classifying discourses are parts of the processes of (re)drawing boundaries to separate some groups and unite others (Verdery 1993: 38). The modification of political borders is usually preceded by changes in symbolic boundaries within communities to recover or reconstruct an idealised past. Certain cultural markers are promoted while others are eliminated. National mythologies and victimhood narratives help strengthen antagonistic and moral superiority justifications of the bordering. More worrisome is that the political subjects considered “illegitimate” are excluded or expelled to fit a certain nationalist or populist conception of the society (Mostov 2008: 41-42, 68).

Arguments about cultural compatibility and ethnic-based distinctions of superiority and inferiority have been historically used as discriminatory criteria in border related policies, such as national origins quota systems (Zolberg 1989: 411). Similarly, the

artificial selective emphasis on difference vis-à-vis certain out-groups and the homogenisation of past social heritages among in-groups was a central element in the formation of new states in post-colonial Asia, Africa and Latin America. These processes were accompanied in some countries with the formation of certain internal “ethnic hierarchies” which in many cases ended up in armed conflict and refugee crises (Zolberg 1989: 417-423). Irredentist, secessionist and nativist movements, still today, use populist discourses to construct idealised heartlands and nations in order to rally support. The violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia provides a good example of how cultural, religious and ethnic differences are instrumentalised in bordering practices with dramatic consequences (Mostov 2008).

Fourthly, bordering policies come usually accompanied with references to popular sovereignty and claims about the “will of the people” that are another important attribute of populism (Mudde 2004: 543; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2020: 210). Borders are constantly instrumentalised in “sovereignty games.” These “games” try to shape how power is distributed between supranational, national and regional organisations and/or the scope in which such power can be exercised (Gammeltoft-Hannsen and Adler Nissen 2008). For instance, the resistance to the process of European integration is usually justified on the ground of sovereignty and empowerment of the people. Moreover, border control is presented as the essence of sovereignty (Hollifield 1992: 6-10). Policing the border finds a strong normative justification in the defence of territorial sovereignty which underpins liberal and democratic claims to popular rule (Agnew 2008: 186). Populist frames become very handy to convey the appropriateness of reinforcing and policing borders. The consideration of the “other” as a morally corrupt or inferior antagonist is used to disseminate narratives about interest-based threats –i.e. security and economic threats–, and identity-based threats –threats to culture, traditional lifestyles, democracy or to other forms of domestic government (Hogan and Haltinner 2015: 528).

Furthermore, the redrawing of borders often seeks to match politico-administrative and ethno-linguistic national boundaries (Kefale 2010). This is a process that involves the renegotiation of identity and reconstruction of *demos*. Expansionist and secessionist political claims challenge existing, and construct new, conceptions of “the people” (Mostov 2008: 34). The dichotomous logic of inclusion-exclusion applied is often at odds with the overlapping of identities and polities. Referendums and mass mobilisations, which can be associated to a populist understanding of politics (Jacobs et al. 2018,

Mohrenberg et al. 2019), are often key tools in the process of redrawing of borders. Self-determination and minority rights arguments are used selectively (Mostov 2008: 11). The conceptions of popular sovereignty used as justification for many bordering practices presents majoritarian overtones which can clash with the principle of separation of powers, lead to bypassing minority rights (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2012: 18-22, 205-222) and to a potential tyranny of the majority (Stavrakakis 2005: 239).

Lastly, bordering practices are often proposed by political leaders who portray themselves as guardians of the nation, or the people, and use inflammatory speeches to exacerbate fears and sense of national pride (Mostov 2008: 10-11, 32). These are usually charismatic and personalist leaders who use a populist style and claim to be able to discern and articulate the “will of the people” (Kriesi 2014: 363; Müller 2016: 32-38, Moffit 2016). Competing ethno-nationalist leaders can simultaneously play the role of the arrogant majority and an exploited minority, depending on the context of reference (Mostov 2008: 68). These leaders may act as messianic and transcendental saviours of the people and end up superseding the authority of the usual representative political institutions (Finchelstein 2017: xxxvi, 183).

## Data collection and methodology

Discourses are not mere ideas or words but systems of meaningful practices constitutive of identities (Howarth and Stavrakakis: 2000: 3-4). The relation between political actors and the world is mediated or constructed by language, in the form of talk and texts. To illustrate the interaction between populism and borders, this paper applies classical content analysis (Bauer 2000; Hawkins 2009) to a set of electoral manifestos of radical right populist parties –i.e. *Vox*, *Rassemblement National* (“National Rally”)(RN), United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party (Table 1). These were the latest manifestos available for these parties at the time the empirical analysis was launched, in June 2020. This analysis is exploratory in nature and rather than providing a comprehensive picture of the interaction of these two areas, it seeks to test the methodology and identify certain hypothesis worth pursuing in future research.

**Table 1:** Party manifestos analysed

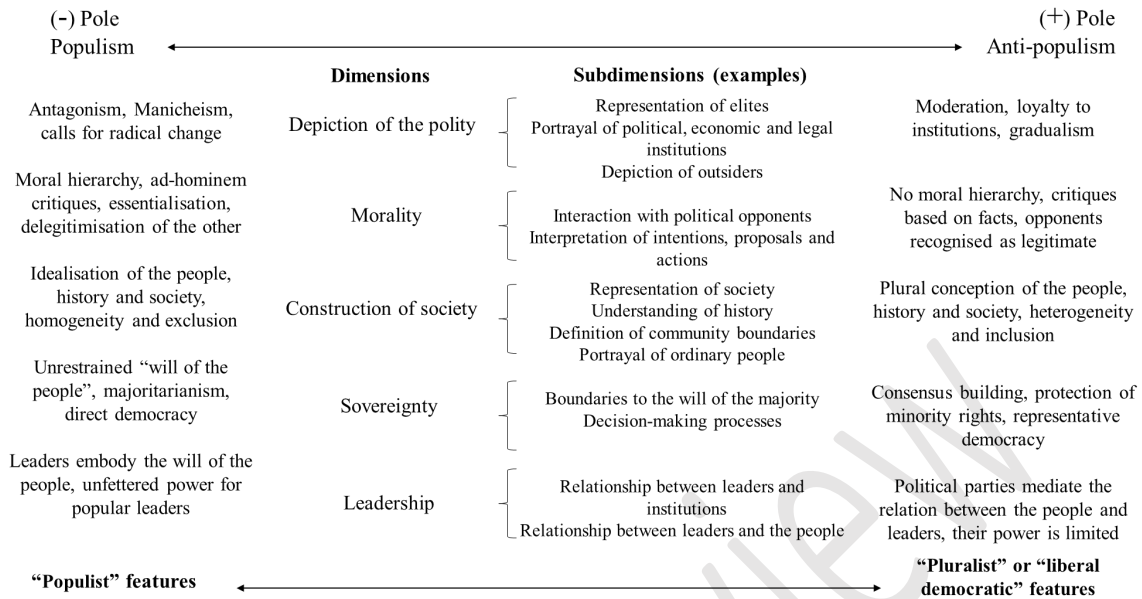
<b>Party</b>	<b>Document</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Word count</b>
Vox	“100 medidas para la España Viva”	Nov 2019	3,504
Vox	“Programa electoral para las elecciones europeas 2019”	May 2019	8,123
UKIP	“Manifiesto for Brexit and Beyond”	Nov 2019	13,542
Brexit Party	“Contract with the People”	Nov 2019	1,966
Rassemblement National, RN	“144 Engagements Présidentiels”	Apr 2017	5,563

This paper assumes that populism is a conceptual continuum between negative (“populist”) and positive (“anti-populist”) poles (Goetz 2006: 27-35) (Figure 2). It records populist and anti-populist features according to five dimensions: i) antagonistic depiction of the polity, ii) morality, iii) idealised construction of society, iv) sovereignty, and v) leadership (Table 2).<sup>3</sup> In line with recent empirical studies on the supply (e.g. Storz and Bernauer 2018; Bernhard and Kriesi 2019; Norris 2020; Meijers and Zaslove 2020) and demand sides of populism (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018; Castanho Silva et al. 2018), this article shows populism is a matter of degree, not simply a binary categorisation.<sup>4</sup> It outlines how different parties display varying levels of populism in their manifestos by comparing the density of populist references in each of the abovementioned dimensions (number of references per thousand words).

<sup>3</sup> These dimensions are justified theoretically in Olivas Osuna (2020). The identification and refinement of dimensions combined a deductive process of examination of the most influential texts on populism, with an inductive process based on a content analysis of political communications of several parties. These dimensions are set primarily at the content plane and try to capture “what” is said or thought. Alternative dimensions and angles to populism, such as demagoguery, opportunism, persuasiveness, communication channels and articulation style (Kazin 1998; Ostiguy 2017) pertain to the expression plane and focus on “how” populist content is conveyed, while others —e.g. mobilisation strategies, crisis of trust and representation (Canovan 1999; Weyland 2001)— give analytical priority to socio-political contexts and structural legacies.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that there are also some influential studies that classify parties as either – populist or non-populist (Rooduijn et al. 2019).

**Figure 2:** Five-dimensional framework with examples of dimensions and typical populist and anti-populist features



Source: Olivas Osuna (2020)

**Table 2:** Description of populist and anti-populist features

	Populist features	Anti-populist features
Depiction of the polity	Dual and antagonistic description of polity: “us” vs “them”, “the people” vs “the elite” or “the other” (migrants, minorities, intellectuals, etc.). Rejection of political, legal and/or economic establishment. Claims for radical change. Confrontational tone, militaristic terms.	Complex and nuanced (non-antagonistic) depiction of the polity. Endorsement or approval of political, legal and economic establishment. Claims for gradual change. References to working together with political opponents and reaching agreements.
Morality	Moral interpretation of actors. Moral distinction and hierarchy (superiority and inferiority). Claims against the legitimacy of the other actors. Victimisation/blame discourses. <i>Ad-hominem</i> critiques and negative emotions. References to ill-intentioned, unfair or immoral behaviour or political opponents.	Political actors are not classified according to their moral standing. The legitimacy of political opponents and their ideas is acknowledged. Critiques not focused on the proponent’s personal attributes or motives but on their actions or policy proposals (usually backed on empirical evidence).
Construction of society	Idealisation of society. Anti-pluralist depiction of ‘the people’ focused on identity, nationhood and/or ahistorical ‘heartland’. References to unity and singularity, hyperbolic descriptions. Emphasis on difference with ‘the other’ and in-group homogeneity. Exclusionary claims. Emotional language.	Complex and nuanced depiction of society and history. Pluralist portrayal of the people. References to diversity of views and interests. Utilisation of empirical data to back claims. Emphasis on commonalities with ‘the other’ and in-group heterogeneity. Recognition of a common space. Inclusive claims
Sovereignty	Absence of limits to popular sovereignty. Majoritarian logic. The ‘will of the people’ is expected to prevail over laws, minority rights and institutions. Preference for direct democracy tools. Praise of referendums, public consultations and mass mobilisations.	Popular sovereignty limited by laws and formal rights. Emphasis on representative democratic tools. Complexity in decision-making is acknowledged. References the protection of minority rights and interests and to institutional and legal checks on the will of the majority.
Leadership	Leaders voice ‘the will of the people’ and represent their interests. Non-mediated relation with the people. Leaders are described as more important than political parties. Focus on the actions, decisions and ideas of leaders. Idealisation of their achievements. Charisma takes precedence over expertise.	Leaders’ relations with people is mediated by institutions. Political parties represent people’s interests. Parties and other institutions are expected to control and be heard by political leaders. Focus on the actions, decisions and ideas of political parties and institutions, not simply those of individuals.

Source: Olivas Osuna (2020)

In addition to the 10 codes associated to populism (5 for populist and 5 for anti-populist features), 18 “borders” codes were created based on a preliminary analysis of the literature and then refined inductively during the coding of these manifestos<sup>5</sup>: references to immigration, establish / strengthen borders, migrants damage economy, migrants use / abuse of public services, deportation, critiques to supranational authorities, country or citizens first, economic protectionism, other portrayed as suspect, integration of the other, externalised borders, barriers to citizenship or residence, exclusionary-discriminatory policies, securitisation, language as inclusion-exclusion tool, protecting/recovering sovereignty, culture/identity protection, and references to territorial integrity. Sentences were recorded using MAXQDA software as indicators of populist, anti-populist and/or borders features. Codes are not mutually exclusive so one sentence could be simultaneously assigned to various populism and borders codes. In addition to counting and comparing the relative density of each code and the intersections among them, segments were also analysed qualitatively to better understand the role of populist tropes in the construction of bordering arguments, and *vice versa*.<sup>6</sup>

## Analysis

Given that the length of the documents varies significantly, rather than analysing the total number of segments coded, this paper compares the density of codes –i.e. number of segments coded per 1,000 words. The analysis of the party manifestos shows that the relative levels of populism are higher in the manifestos of Brexit Party<sup>7</sup> and RN than in those of the UKIP and Vox (Figure 3). The density of anti-populist references is comparatively extremely low. Aside for Vox EU elections manifesto, with 15 anti-populist references (total anti-populist 1.84 references / 1,000 words) anti-populist

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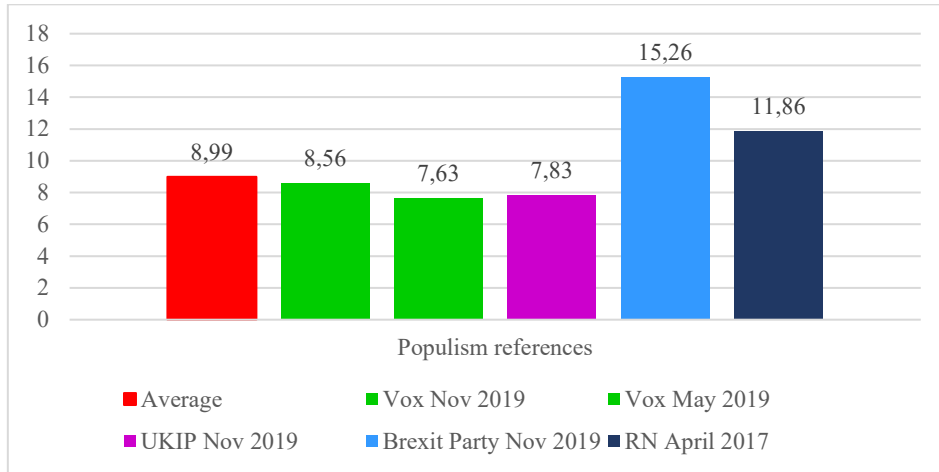
<sup>5</sup> During the coding process certain codes were introduced and others merged. The set of codes presented here can be subject of further refinement and adaptation to different specific contexts and research goal. These codes are not mutually exclusive, and some can be considered, to certain extent, sub-categories of other codes. The use of codes which could be placed in different rungs of the ladder of abstraction was decided given the exploratory / inductive nature of this coding exercise. By recording a variety of codes, from more general (e.g. immigration) to more specific (e.g. deportation) we increase the likelihood of capturing meaningful interactions with populism codes.

<sup>6</sup> The MAXQDA containing the documents analysed and the segments coded is already available publicly at Harvard Dataverse. However for the sake of anonymity an alternative link to such file is included here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JjDvv7TwVcZ0eGhTlcGxKlEbwtqNVkD6/view?usp=sharing>

<sup>7</sup> The Brexit Party manifesto Contract with the People is significantly shorter than the others which may contribute to the higher density of references.

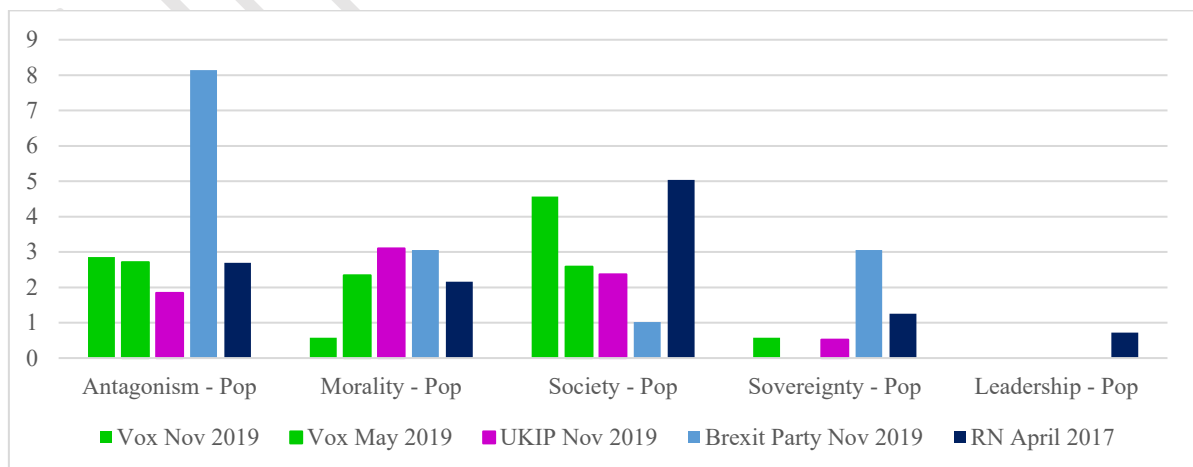
references in the other documents are anecdotal –RN: 0.9 anti-populist 1.84 references / 1,000 words; Vox Spanish Elections: 0.86; Brexit Party: 0.5; UKIP: 0.3).

**Figure 3:** Total populist references per 1,000 words



A more fine-grained analysis of the composition of these populist features shows a significant variation in the relative salience each of the populist dimensions across manifestos. The reliance on a personalist leader is almost completely absent in all of them, which is not surprising in this type of formal political communications which are supposed to reflect the party position on policies. Antagonism is the more salient populist attribute in the Brexit Party manifesto. The populist idealisation of society is the most prominent attribute found in RN and Vox documents, whereas morality references are more common in the UKIP one (Figure 4).

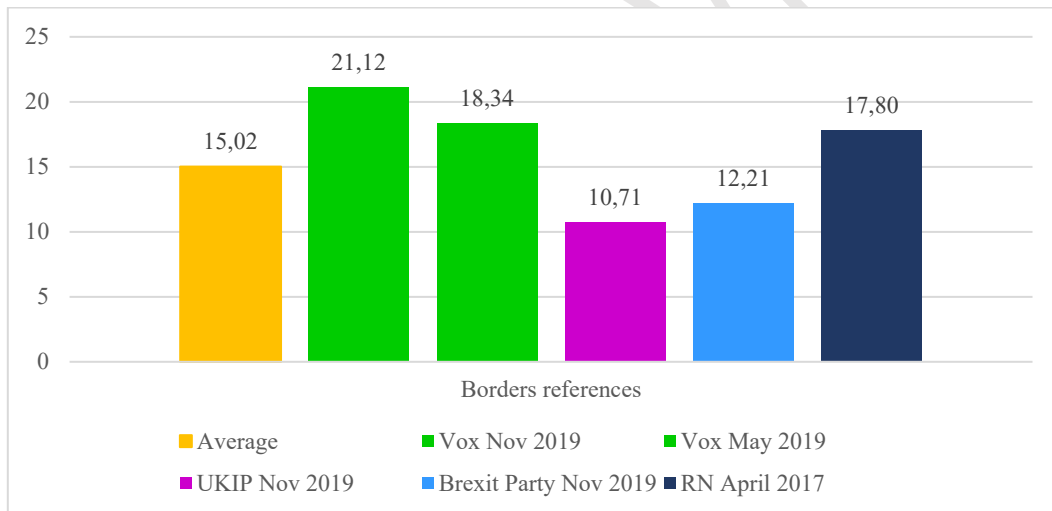
**Figure 4:** Populist references per dimension (references per 1,000 words)



Regarding references to borders, the manifestos of Vox and RN show a significant higher density than those of the UKIP and Brexit Party, which are usually considered

issue parties with a central bordering strategy, i.e. getting the UK leave the EU (Figure 4). References to immigration are the most frequent in all manifestos, which is not unexpected as some of the other codes are usually associated to specific discourses on migrants. In the bordering discourse of RN references to exclusionary/discriminatory policies and to economic protectionism are very salient. The Brexit Party document emphasises the idea of protecting and recovering Britain’s sovereignty and the need of prioritising national interests over those of the EU. Exclusionary policies and protection of British sovereignty are the most common references in the UKIP manifesto. Finally, whereas the Vox EU elections manifesto gives more salience to securitisation, protecting sovereignty and the critique of supranational institutions, the Vox Spanish elections manifesto emphasises identity and culture protection as well as some discriminatory policies (Table 3).

**Figure 5:** Total populist references per 1,000 words



**Table 3:** Distribution of borders codes in each of the Manifestos analysed.

	All manifestos	Vox Nov 2019	Vox May 2019	UKIP	Brexit Party	RN
Immigration	23%	23%	22%	28%	21%	16%
Exclusionary-discriminatory policies	13%	15%	6%	18%	8%	15%
Protecting or recovering sovereignty	10%	5%	12%	8%	21%	9%
Culture/identity protection	8%	16%	10%	6%	0%	4%
Critique of supranational authorities	7%	4%	11%	7%	13%	4%
Securitisation	7%	7%	13%	2%	13%	3%
Economic protectionism	5%	3%	2%	2%	8%	15%
Country or citizens first	5%	3%	0%	8%	17%	6%



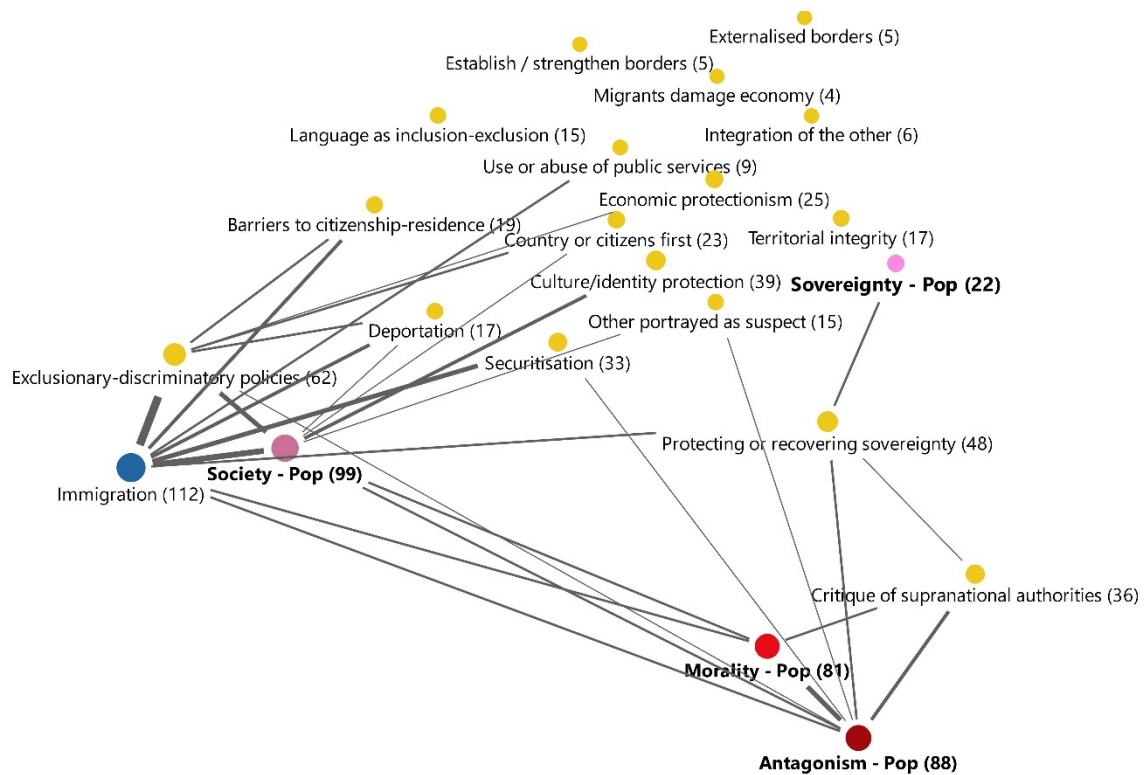
Barriers to citizenship-residence	4%	4%	1%	6%	0%	7%
Deportation	3%	3%	5%	1%	0%	5%
Territorial integrity	3%	3%	9%	0%	0%	2%
Other portrayed as suspect	3%	3%	2%	3%	0%	6%
Language as inclusion-exclusion	3%	7%	2%	2%	0%	4%
Use or abuse of public services	2%	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%
Integration issues	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Establish / strengthen borders	1%	3%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Externalised borders	1%	1%	3%	0%	0%	0%
Migrants damage economy	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	1%
<b>Borders references total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Next, having mapped the relative intensity of each of the populist dimensions and different border arguments, this paper shows both types of codes appear intertwined. A myriad of intersections between populist and borders were found: 97 between the Society-pop codes and borders codes, 60 in the case Antagonism-pop codes, 38 for Morality-pop and 8 between Sovereignty-pop borders references (Table 4). Figure 6 presents a visualisation of the populism and borders codes and shows that broadly three clusters of codes emerge from these manifestos. Antagonism and morality appear associated to each other and closely connected to references to supranational authorities. Society-pop appears closely connected to immigration and references to discriminatory or exclusionary measures, as well as to mentions to culture and identity protection. Sovereignty-pop is connected to the recovering or protecting sovereignty code.

**Table 4:** Most frequent code intersections (5 or more intersections)

Populist references	References to borders	Number of intersections
Society - Pop	Immigration	26
Society - Pop	Exclusionary-discriminatory policies	21
Antagonism - Pop	Critique of supranational authorities	17
Society - Pop	Culture/identity protection	13
Morality - Pop	Critique of supranational authorities	10
Antagonism - Pop	Protecting or recovering sovereignty	10
Morality - Pop	Immigration	7
Antagonism - Pop	Immigration	7
Sovereignty - Pop	Protecting or recovering sovereignty	6
Society - Pop	Deportation	5
Antagonism - Pop	Securitisation	5
Antagonism - Pop	Exclusionary-discriminatory policies	5
Society - Pop	Other portrayed as suspect	5
Antagonism - Pop	Other portrayed as suspect	5
Society - Pop	Country or citizens first	5

**Figure 6:** Map of code intersections. In parenthesis the total number of codes. Lines capture intersections with a minimal frequency of 5



A qualitative analysis of the segments coded for both populist and borders references serves to illustrate some common constructions across radical right parties in their articulation of border and populist claims:

The populist idealised conception of a somewhat homogeneous society that these parties try to convey is underpinned by policy proposals which aim to exclude or discriminate individuals either based on political or cultural boundaries. Nationality and religion are used to define the ideal society in these “othering” discourses. For instance, Vox proposes the “deportation of illegal immigrants” and of migrants who are lawfully in the territory but have committed serious crimes or repeated minor offences. RN proposes barriers naturalisation of foreigners and the eliminate double nationality treaties with non-European countries. They also recommend the automatic deportation of migrants who have committed crimes or are connected to Islamic fundamentalism. Both parties propose the ban and closure of mosques associated to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. UKIP suggests to “re-institute the British nationality requirement” for all civil servants and other obstacles to the obtention of British

citizenship. Vox also proposes incentives to companies that hire Spanish workers, while RN wants to prioritise employment for French people.

Similarly, culture/identity protection references are a common method to define who belongs, and who does not, to their ideal (populist) community. These parties portray a model of society founded on traditional, often Christian, values. Some of the arguments they use are not directly related to borders, such as the claims by RN, Vox and UKIP in defence of traditional families and fertility policies, and the explicit opposition of UKIP and Vox to abortion, gender reassignment and what they call “gender ideology”. However, these parties also show their ideal society threatened by out-groups with explicit and implicit references to Islam and Islamism, which is associated in these manifestos to radicalism, violence and low respect for some democratic rights. For instance, Vox proposes “promotion of European values, uniquely embodied in Christian civilisation”, the “exclusion of Islam education from public schools” and to follow Hungary footsteps and create a government agency for the protection of “endangered Christian minorities”. They also want to stop the existing policies for the promotion of ethnic and linguistic minorities. UKIP claims to repeal the 2010 Equality Act which protects Black and Asian minorities and they consider discriminating against white people. Moreover, UKIP declare that they “will promote a unifying British culture” and Christian schools in the UK. Meanwhile, RN declare that they will “defend the national identity, values and traditions of the French civilisation”. These claims and policy proposals are grounded on (and fuel) existing prejudices and promote a sense of threat and grievance that can be instrumentalise in unifying and “othering” processes.

Antagonism against supranational and international organisations also emerges as a recurrent theme in these manifestos. For instance, Vox promises to abandon any supranational and international organisation with interests conflicting to those of Spain, and criticises a “Europe that asphyxiate political freedom and cultural wealth of its member-states”; meanwhile UKIP claims that they will abolish “all of the EU-inspired legislation that binds us to EU legal institutions”; Brexit Party promises that there will be “no more years of wrangling with Brussels, no further entanglement with the EU’s controlling political institutions”. This antagonism is sometimes also combined with a moral delegitimisation of supranational institutions. Brexit party accuses the EU of being undemocratic and Vox of abusing its competences. RN does not explicitly accuse international organisations but suggests that the EU has undermined freedom and

sovereignty. The critique to supranational authorities can be interpreted as an attempt to enhance national borders.

Moreover, references to sovereignty are rarely made from a pluralist interpretation of the term. These parties do not seem to recognise the logic of shared sovereignty in the EU. They suggest that their countries need to recover a lost sovereignty and regain control over their futures, which they claim to be now in the hands of global elites who do not care about the real interest of the people. For example, UKIP claims that they will “fully restore the UK’s former status as an independent, self-governing, sovereign state”, Brexit Party requests a “Clean-Break Brexit” take control of “laws, borders, money, fishing and defence”; and RN proposes a referendum for EU membership “to regain our freedom and control over our destiny by restoring their sovereignty to the French people”.

Morality is also used to justify exclusion and prejudices against “the other”, who could be either migrants or the elites that defend migration. For instance, UKIP warns against the “systematic and industrialised sexual abuse of under-age and vulnerable young girls by majority-Pakistani grooming and rape gangs”, and Vox insinuates that there are NGOs that collaborate with “illegal immigration mafias”. RN suggests that those who defend globalisation want to destroy the great economic and social balances, by abolishing economic and physical borders to increase immigration and reduce cohesion among the French people. The Brexit Party accuses the political establishment of conspiring “to frustrate democracy over Brexit”.

There are some disparities across these manifestos that can be linked either to programmatic differences –e.g. economic protectionism and interventionism is much more prominent in RN than in UKIP, which seems to favour a more liberal economic stance– or to the specific country context –e.g. Brexit Party’s manifesto is very short and focuses almost exclusively on the EU exit, while the manifestos of Vox puts great emphasis in territorial integrity due to the secessionist challenge in Catalonia. However, a common logic of articulation of populist and bordering practices can be elicited from the analysis of these party manifestos which helps as illustration of several of the arguments made in the earlier theory sections.

This exploratory analysis resonates with the findings of previous studies highlighting the similarities in othering discourses across populist radical right parties (e.g. Wodak 2015; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Kallis 2018b). In the texts analysed, borders play a

prominent role in constructing antagonistic relationships against some corrupt or ill-intentioned “others” which can be either international elites, (mainly poor) migrants, or “deviant in-groups” who support out-groups in eroding political, economic or cultural boundaries. In their attempt to re-enact their ideal heartland and recover a purportedly lost popular sovereignty, these parties suggest to (re)establish political borders between states as well as to reinforce internal legal, economic, or cultural frontiers. They propose securitisation and policing supposedly to reduce migration flows. They also recommend laws to discriminate or exclude foreigners from becoming citizens, residents or from using public services based on negative moral considerations and on the assumption that some migrants are suspect of damaging the traditional ways of life and upsetting societal balances. Moreover, these parties want to reduce or stop altogether the participation in cross-border initiatives, treaties and supranational organisations, that they interpret as hindering national sovereignty.

Finally, the similarities found in the bordering policy proposals of these parties, are relevant and could be framed within a wider process of discursive alignment between radical right populist parties in Europe. The manifestos of Vox allude to proposals from Hungary and the Visegrád group. This potential convergence both at the level of populist articulation and bordering is a hypothesis which deserves further scholarly attention. It is worth noting that although these three European countries have been historically rivals, and they still maintain some ongoing border disputes –e.g. Gibraltar, Calais, fishery rights– these radical right parties do not give a high priority in their othering discourses to the citizens of each other. They construct supranational elites, Muslims and non-western European migrants and refugees as their main out-groups they antagonise.<sup>8</sup> To a large extent these parties recognise each other and the people they represent as subject to an equivalent sort of exploitation and external threats.

Although these parties claim a partial or total withdrawal from Europe, they do not portray their European neighbours as an enemy or a full-fledge “other”. They seem to

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<sup>8</sup> The Brexit Party manifesto does not refer to Islam or Islamists, however, several of its high-profile members have been accused of making anti-Islam comments <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/20/leader-of-pro-brexit-party-catherine-blaklock-resigns-over-anti-islam-messages> . These groups often also portray left-wing as internal enemies or traitors for enabling immigration or radical Islam. For instance in France RN brought to the fore the term *islamo-gauchisme* (“Islamism-leftism”): <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/4/6/french-right-focuses-on-radical-muslims>

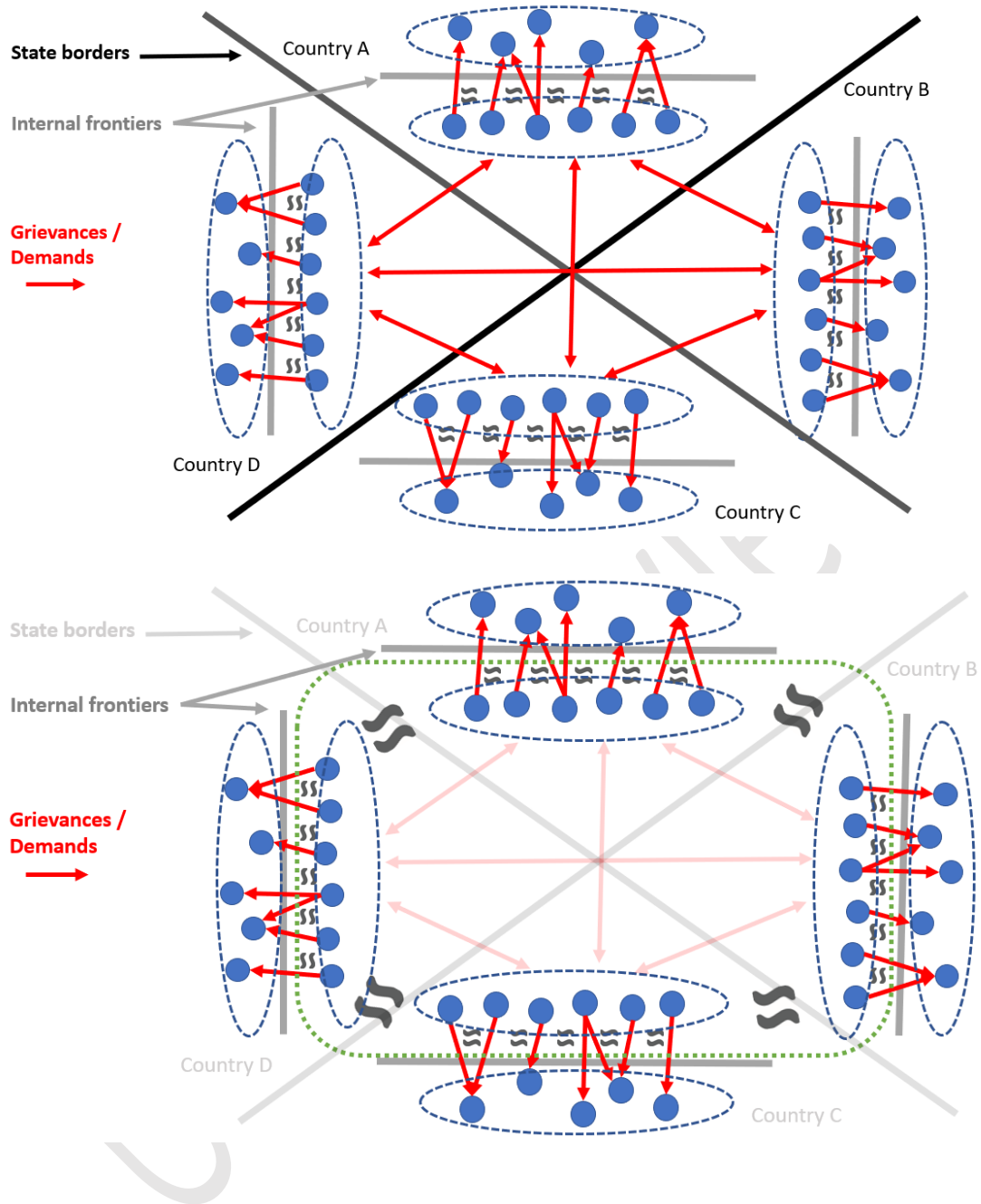
recognise as equivalent the grievances denounced by other radical right parties in Europe and construct a sort second level “us” or “the people”. This is particularly evident in the case of European Elections manifesto of Vox that seems to extend the “us”, the “in-group” to the rest of Europe and construct an idealised “European Civilisation” grounded in traditional Christian values, which is threatened by some common external (and internal) enemies. RN clearly establish a distinction between other European and non-European, for instance when proposing to eliminate double nationality agreement with non-European countries. When referring to expelling “illegal immigrants” or excluding them from certain services these parties are also implicitly acknowledging a difference between migrants according to their origin, given that EU citizens’ legal right to stay in EU countries.

Therefore, this suggests that populist parties may adopt a flexible strategy and can emphasise or underplay state and supra-state borders creating a sort of hierarchical othering and a “meta-us” based on an equivalential logic and the selective blurring of differences with some foreign groups (Figure 7).<sup>9</sup> This is in line with Lamour’s (2020) argument on the existence of a “meta-populism” in the Italian-Swiss border based on chains of equivalence to reduce regional and national disparities, and construct an antagonism between a transregional people (“us”) and common distant enemies (“clandestine workers and Muslims”)(Lamour 2020: 3). The variable, selective or context-specific utilisation of borders and grievances by populist leaders and parties may also be construed as part of the strategy of “calculated ambivalence” typical of right-wing populism (Wodak 2015: 46-47). In this case, ambiguity about certain borders serve as unifying discourse and a means to establish an additional “us” that encompasses allied right-wing movements across state borders (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020). The construction of this “meta-us” may help normalising exclusionary policies and provide legitimacy for these movements.

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that Donald Trump former advisor, Steve Bannon founded an organisation in Brussels to try to organise radical right parties in Europe  
[https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_bannon\\_sets\\_his\\_eyes\\_on\\_spain/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_bannon_sets_his_eyes_on_spain/)

**Figure 7:** Ambiguity and selective use and blurring of borders in othering processes.



Although further research is needed to confirm the hypotheses above, the exploratory analysis in this paper suggests that the usually assumed binary or dichotomous interpretation of the polity between “us”, (“the people”) and “them” (“the corrupt other”) central to populism (Mudde 2004: 543; Laclau 2005b: 39) may require to be reconsidered as a more complex hierarchical distinction or relationship. In addition to create or enhance borders, populist leaders can blur existing ones as means to strategically create new narratives of equivalence and layers of identity and otherness.

## Conclusions

This paper has tried to show theoretically and empirically that borders are constituted by and constitutive of populist discourses. Borders play a prominent role in the populist logic of articulations. Populism has an important relational component as it implies a process of (re)creation of political identities via an established antagonism between “the virtuous people” and “the nefarious other”. Borders shape shared understandings of the self and the community and are central elements in this performative constitution of the people. Borders are tools of exclusion and used to categorise individuals along territory, linguistic, religious or biological traits. Identities are generated and validated via interactions with in-groups and out-groups which are separated by political, physical or socio-cultural borders.

Borders are particularly relevant in the discursive interpretation of populism. As Laclau argued, the dichotomisation of the social space through the definition of an internal frontier which separates individuals, and the creation of chains of equivalential demands or grievances are the bases of populist articulation. Populists seek to bring equivalential homogeneity to a heterogenous reality. A shared antagonism across a border becomes the unifying feature that serves to decontest a certain notion of “the people.” Borders not only contribute to establish an antagonistic and moral distinction between “the people” and the “other” and but also become tools in the construction of populist heartlands, and in (re)interpretations of the sovereign *demos*.

But the relationship between borders and populism is bidirectional, so after showing the salience of the border in populism theory, this paper has argued that populism underpins the articulation and reproduction of bordering practices and claims. It has shown that different dimensions or attributes of populism –i.e. antagonism, morality, idealised construction of society, popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership– are customarily used to justify (re)bordering policies. Populist tropes and rhetoric become common tools for those who seek to create new, or modify and strengthen existing, borders.

Finally, the exploratory comparative quantitative and qualitative analysis of the political manifestos of four European radical right populist parties: Vox, UKIP, Brexit Party and RN, has served to confirm how populist and borders allusion are interwoven. Borders are key instruments in the construction of antagonistic relationships against



(poor) migrants, international elites and “deviant” in-groups. Although they reflect some discrepancies in terms of policy priorities and relative intensity of populist dimensions, all these parties propose to reinforce political and cultural frontiers and a series of discriminatory and exclusionary policies against those who do not belong to their somewhat homogeneous conception of ideal society.

These populist parties seem to establish a hierarchy in their othering discourses and to mutually recognise as each other as subjects of similar fears and grievances. The selective blurring of boundaries depending on the context, allows them to recreate a sort of “meta-us” and establish a common front with other groups in different countries that share equivalent perceived threats. This ambiguity can be considered part of a calculated strategy to normalise and legitimise their bordering exclusionary policies against other out-groups or in-groups.

In sum, this paper justifies theoretically and illustrates empirically the complex interdependence relationship between borders and populism. At the same time, it suggests important synergies between these two interdisciplinary fields of study worth exploring further in future research. The border can be used as a method to study populism and *vice versa*.

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Under review