# Populism and the Media

Università di Trieste, 3/12/2021

Luca Manucci

# What we are going to talk about

❑ What is populism

❑ What explains the success of populism: demand and supply

❑ Populism & the media

❑ An example from Spain and Portugal

# Defining populism

- Mudde (2004): Populist parties emphasize the moral distinction between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' while glorifying 'popular sovereignty'. Populism in a thin ideology that can be combined with any other full ideology (e.g. communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism…).

- Valence populism (Zulianello 2020): populist parties that lack a clear positional character in ideological terms, but they are not centrist. They place an emphasis on non-positional issues which, in addition to populism itself, are the core feature of their ideational profile (fight against corruption, morality in political life, democratic reform, transparency...).

# Success of Populism

- Increasingly successful in national and European elections

- Populist parties now occupy around 1/3 of the seats available in the European Parliament (Zulianello & Larsen 2021)

- No longer just in opposition but also in power (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Spain…)

- What is growing, in particular, is the success of populist radical right parties (populism + nativism + authoritarianism)
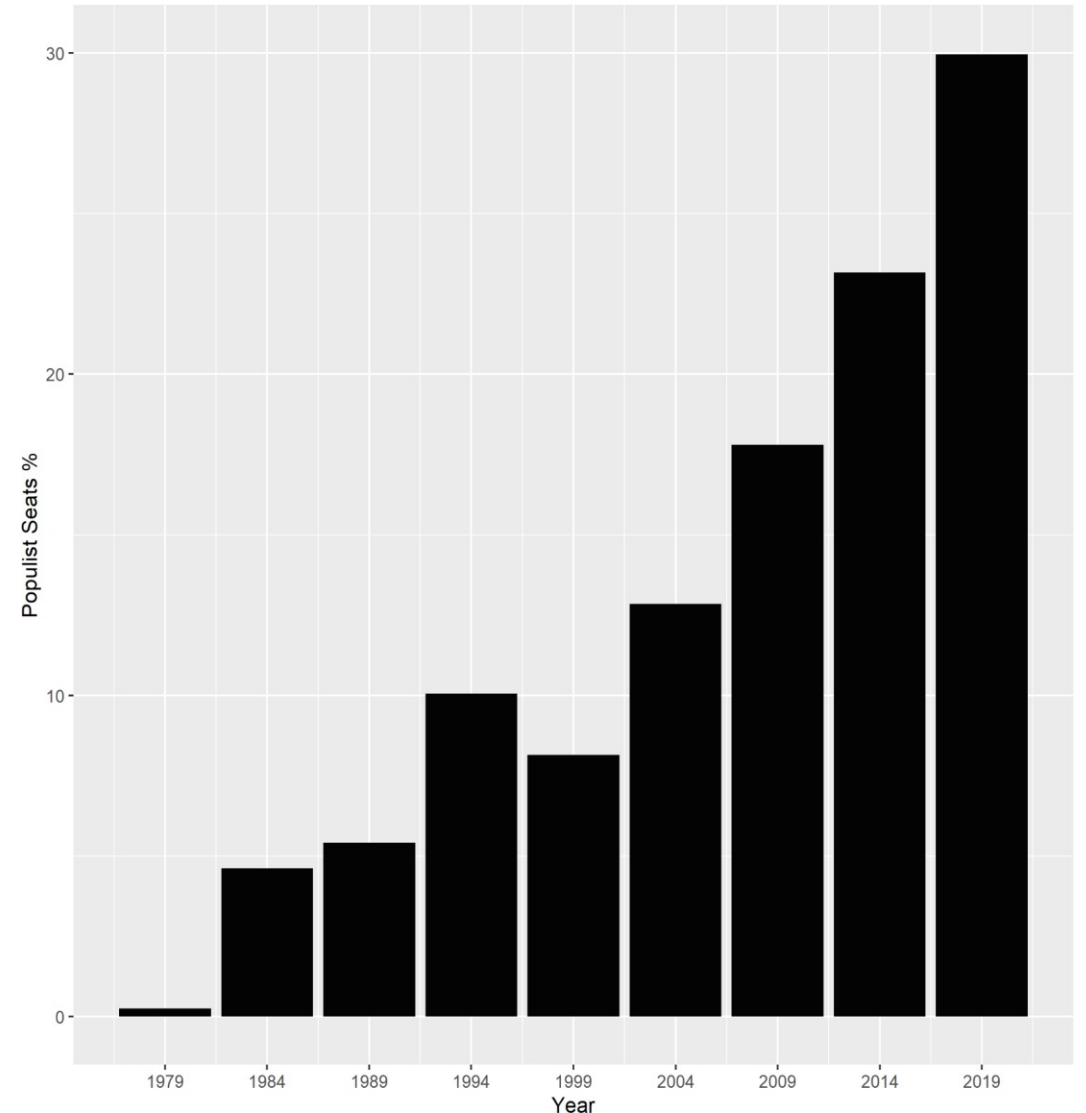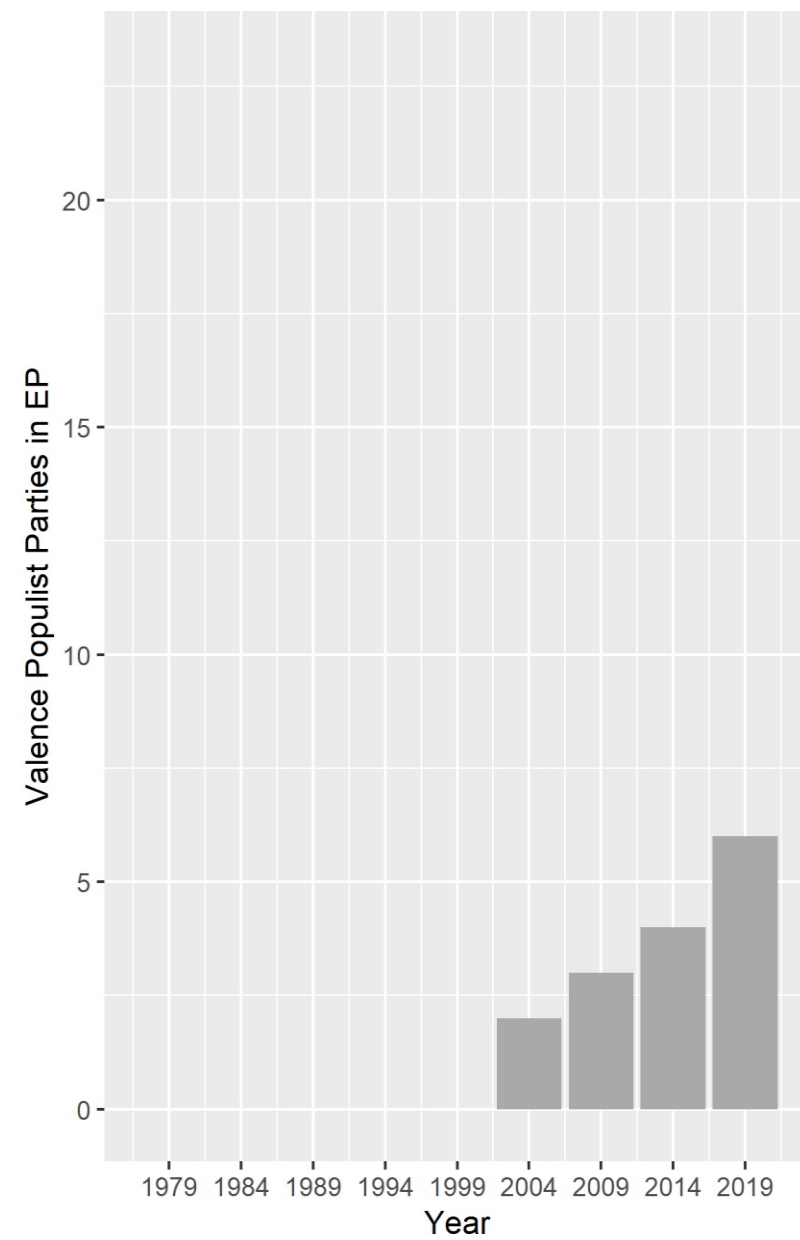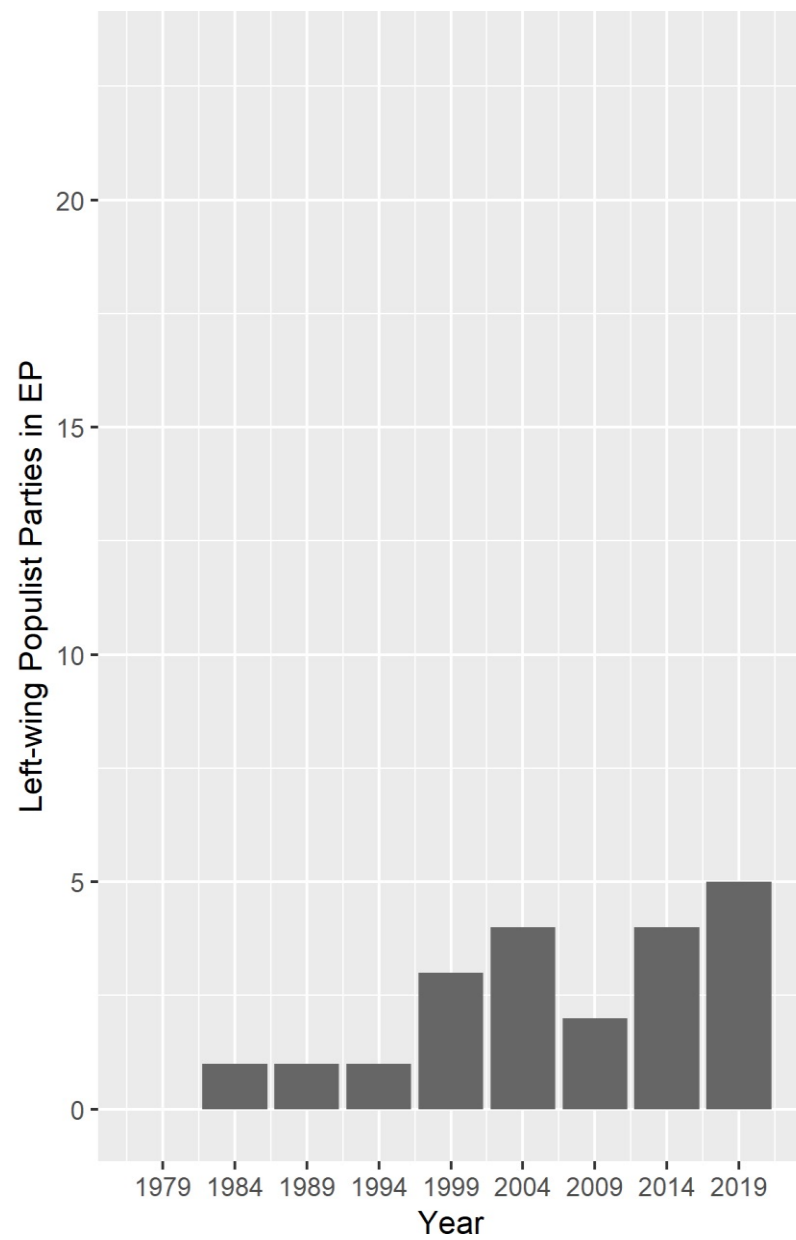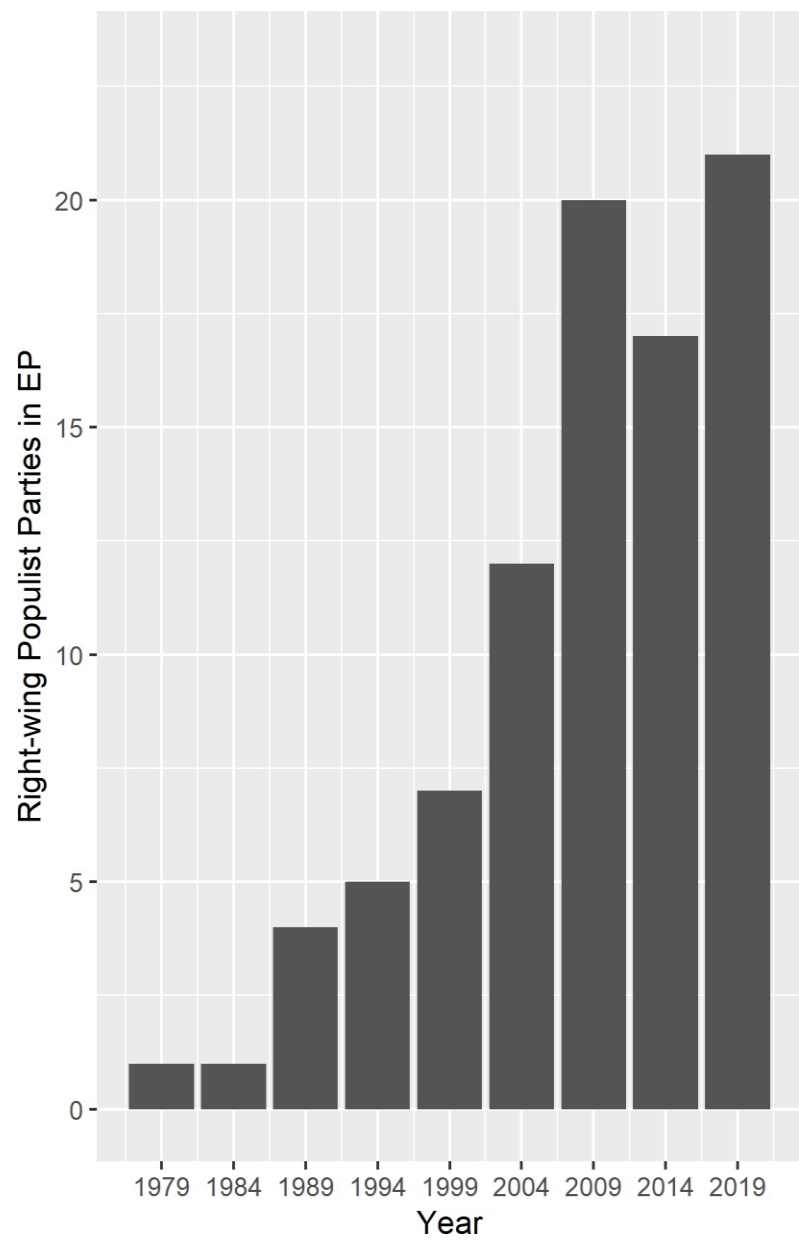
# Understanding the Success of Populism

**Demand side**

- Economic Hardship

- Low Welfare Protection

- Immigration Flows and Their Salience

- Socio-Demographic factors

**Supply side**

- Democratic Performance

- High Levels of Corruption

- Ideological Convergence

- Proportional Electoral System

- Mediatization of Politics

# Mediatization of Politics

Mediatization refers to a process of convergence between media-logic and political-logic.

1) The media become more and more marketized, commercial media organizations have an interest in adjusting their content to the interests of the public in order to attract advertisers (thus privileging populist actors).
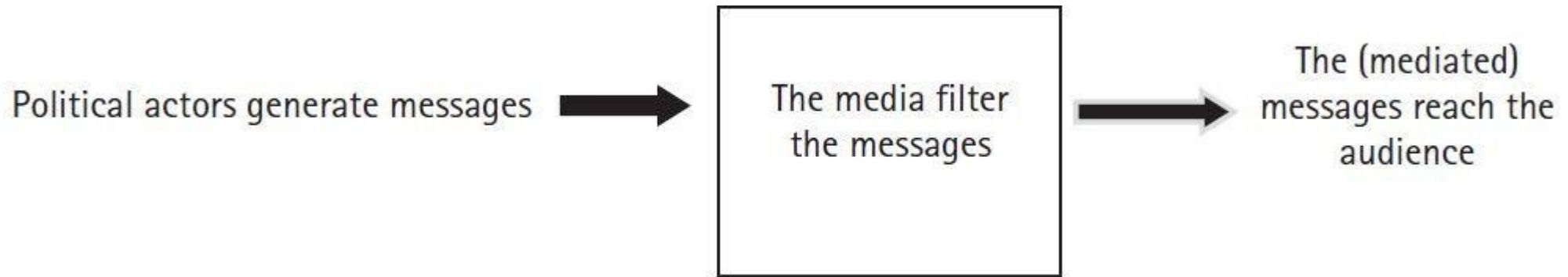
2) Political actors —in order to gain visibility and attract voters— need to strategically adapt to the logic followed by the media. This process is also called self-mediatization.

# Affinity Between Media & Populism

- The **commercial logic** driving tabloid newspapers and television channels is considered to be a key trigger for the ambitions of populist actors seeking media exposure.

- Indeed, populist discourses are considered to fit the media-logic by providing **controversial** and newsworthy content!

- For example: colloquial and emotional language, controversial content, black and white rhetoric, dramatization, spectacularization, personalization…



TATVRA · DEL · SELFIE · MMXIX

# Populist Communication

Political actors generate messages ➡️ The media filter the messages ➡️ The (mediated) messages reach the audience

'Classic model' of populism communication. In this model, the are only three elements:
- The populist actor(s)
- The media
- The public

# Mediatization of Politics

Political actors generate media-friendly messages

Media actors influence the agenda of political actors and the content of their messages

This generates messages which are a trade-off between the logic of the two types of actors involved (e.g. Infotainment)

The audience receives "understandable" and "interesting" messages
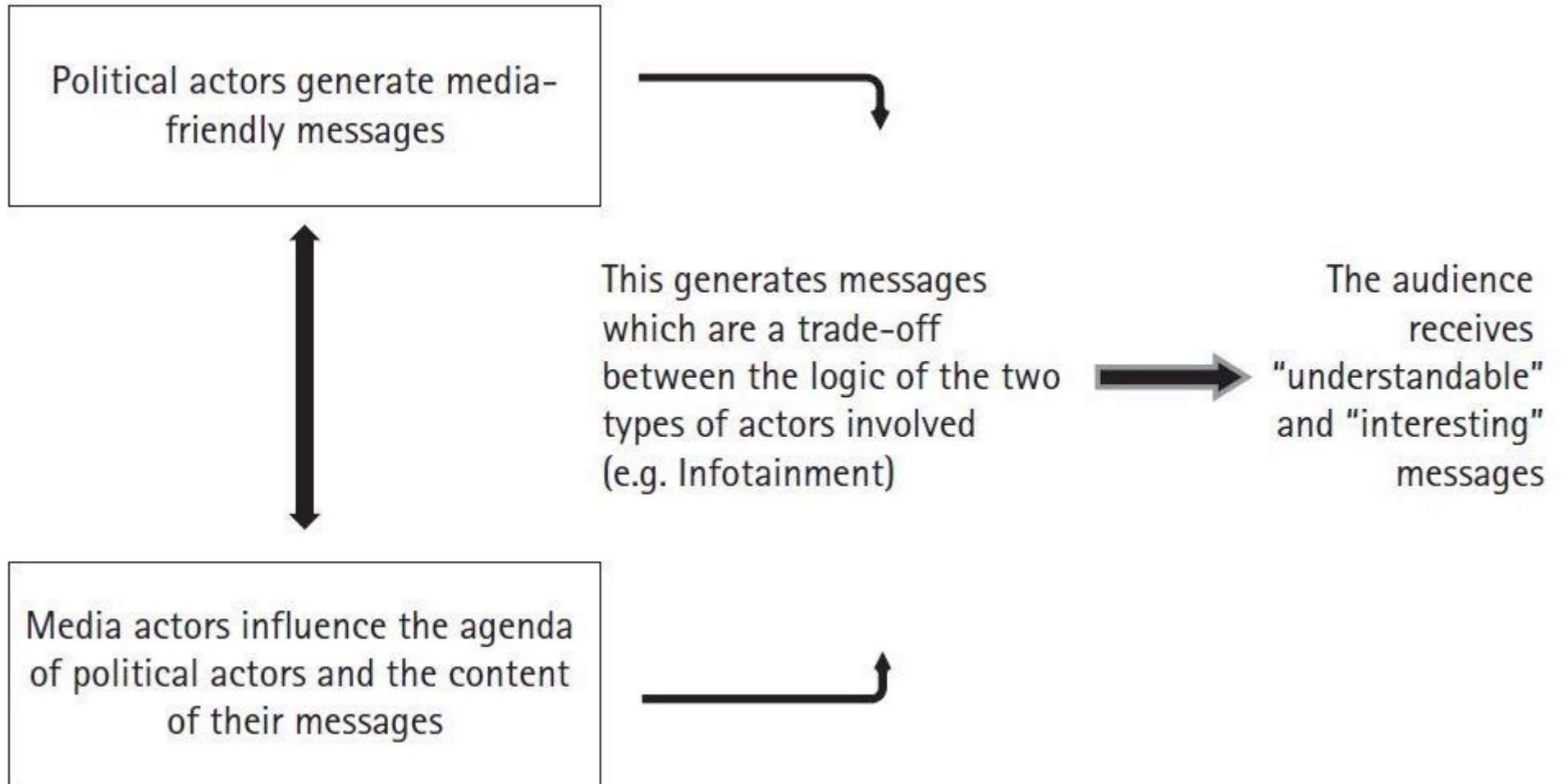
# Social Media & Populism

Political parties and leaders can now establish a direct link with the electorates, bypassing the traditional role of the media (gatekeeping) and broadcasting their own content…



Matteo Renzi @matteorenzi

I due concetti non sono in contraddizione (investimenti e riforme dico). Con noi la spesa non è aumentata ma è restata rivista, grazie al lavoro di Yoram Gutgeld and co. Qualche governo italiano ha fatto più investimenti dei nostri in R&D, scuola, impresa? #MatteoRisponde

Antonio Furno @antolo · 26 ago 2019
In risposta a @matteorenzi
Questa ricetta non ha funzionato. Abbiamo già avuto la flessibilità durante il suo governo. Servono investimenti in ricerca e sviluppo, scuola e università. Servono liberalizzazioni e meno spesa inefficiente. Sono investimenti sul lungo periodo, non serve aumentare spesa.
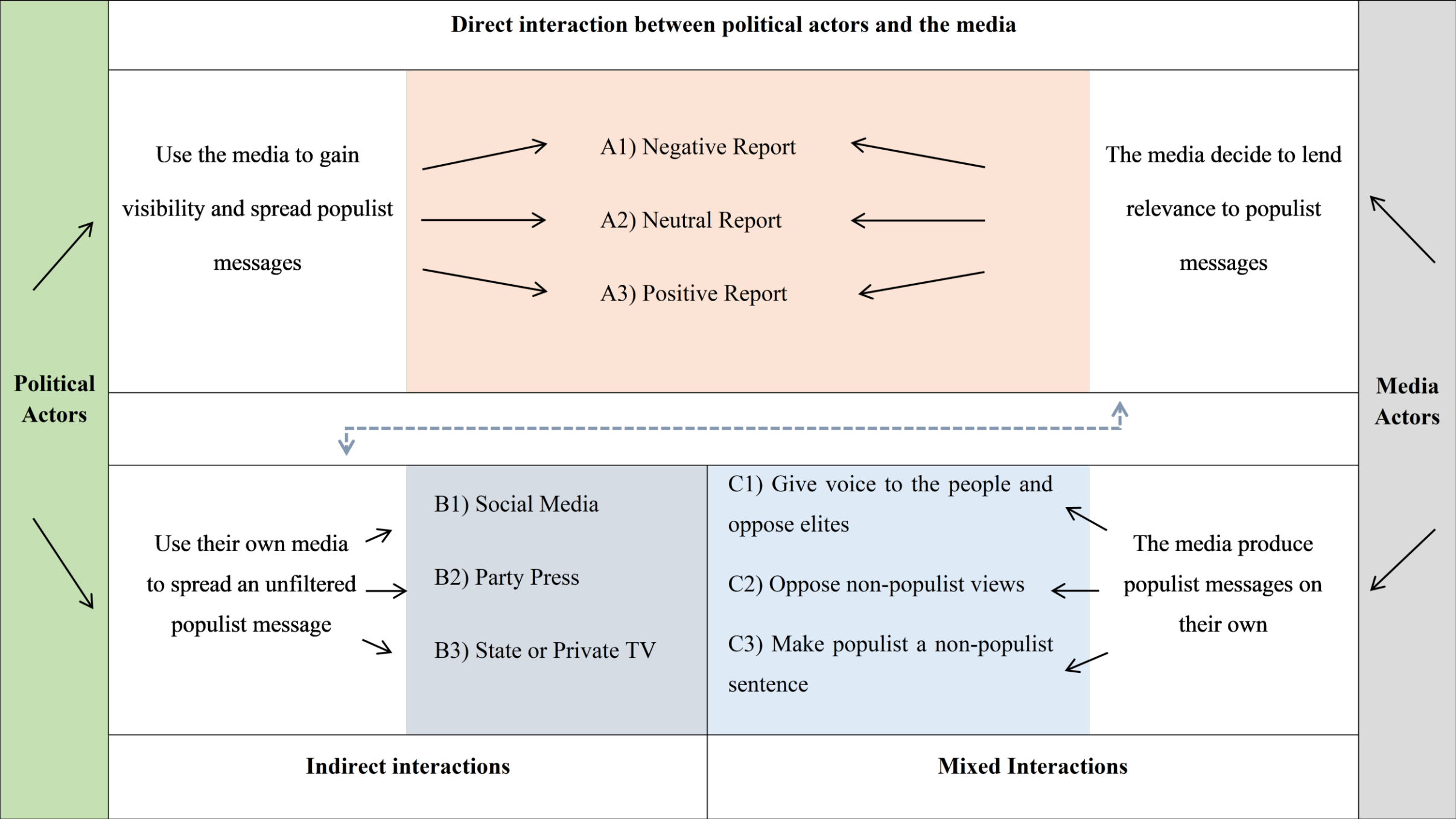
12:23 PM · 26 ago 2019 · Twitter Web App

91 Retweet    6 Tweet di citazione    354 Mi piace



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump    Follow

The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials?

7:38 AM - 9 May 2018

**Political Actors**

**Direct interaction between political actors and the media**

Use the media to gain visibility and spread populist messages

A1) Negative Report

A2) Neutral Report

A3) Positive Report

The media decide to lend relevance to populist messages

Use their own media to spread an unfiltered populist message

B1) Social Media

B2) Party Press

B3) State or Private TV

C1) Give voice to the people and oppose elites

C2) Oppose non-populist views

C3) Make populist a non-populist sentence

The media produce populist messages on their own

**Indirect interactions**

**Mixed Interactions**

**Media Actors**

# A Vicious Circle…

- Which are the effects of populist messages diffused by the media? Are they a  threat for the quality of democracy? Do they produce a demand for more populist messages?

- Populist discourses are considered as satisfying the audience's taste by giving space to **conflict, drama, triviality, and negativity**. In turn, these elements foster political alienation, cynicism and disillusionment.

- Cynicism and disillusionment contribute to create a **fertile ground** for the messages of populist outsiders.

- The public cynicism of particular media outlets and certain campaigns against political corruption, government misdeeds and controversial policies, may be held responsible for the diffusion of political discontent and even anti-political attitudes among the citizenry. (Mazzoleni, 2008)

# The Guardian

- In 2018, *The Guardian* launched 'The new populism', a series of articles on populism.

- Brown & Mondon (2021) claim that *The Guardian* created a populist **hype** which in turn facilitated a process of **legitimisation**.

- 1) "We have witnessed a move towards accepting the diagnosis offered by the far right not only as inevitable but in fact democratic." (See the interview with Hillary Clinton: 'Europe must curb immigration to stop right-wing populists').

- 2) *Euphemisation and trivialisation*: racist, nativist, or far right are described through the less stigmatising 'populism', thus blurring their meaning.

- 3) *Amplification*: certain movements, actors, and ideas are given disproportionate coverage at the expense of others.

# An Example from Spain and Portugal

- Since the return to democracy in the mid-1970s, populist radical right (**PRR**) parties always failed to gain representation in Spain and Portugal. Until 2018-2019, when Vox and Chega 'ended' the **Iberian exceptionalism**.

- PRR parties are characterized by:

❖ **Populism** → pure people Vs corrupt elites

❖ **Nativism** → natives Vs migrants

❖ **Authoritarianism** → law and order

# Two Populist Radical Right Parties in Iberia

## VOX

PRR party founded in 2013 by Santiago Abascal, former PP member. Against migrants, feminism, separatism.

## Chega

PRR party founded in 2019 by André Ventura, former PSD member. Against migrants, feminism, the 'establishment'.

# Who votes for PRR parties in Spain and Portugal?

- Does the electorate of Vox and Chega correspond to the classic electorate of PRR parties across Europe?

- To answer this, we formulate 4 hypotheses based on the vast literature on voting behavior and PRR parties.

❖ **H1)** Young, religious men from rural areas and with low education

❖ **H2)** Politically dissatisfied

❖ **H3)** Economic and/or cultural "losers of globalization"

❖ **H4)** With an 'unhealthy media diet' (tabloids, Facebook…)
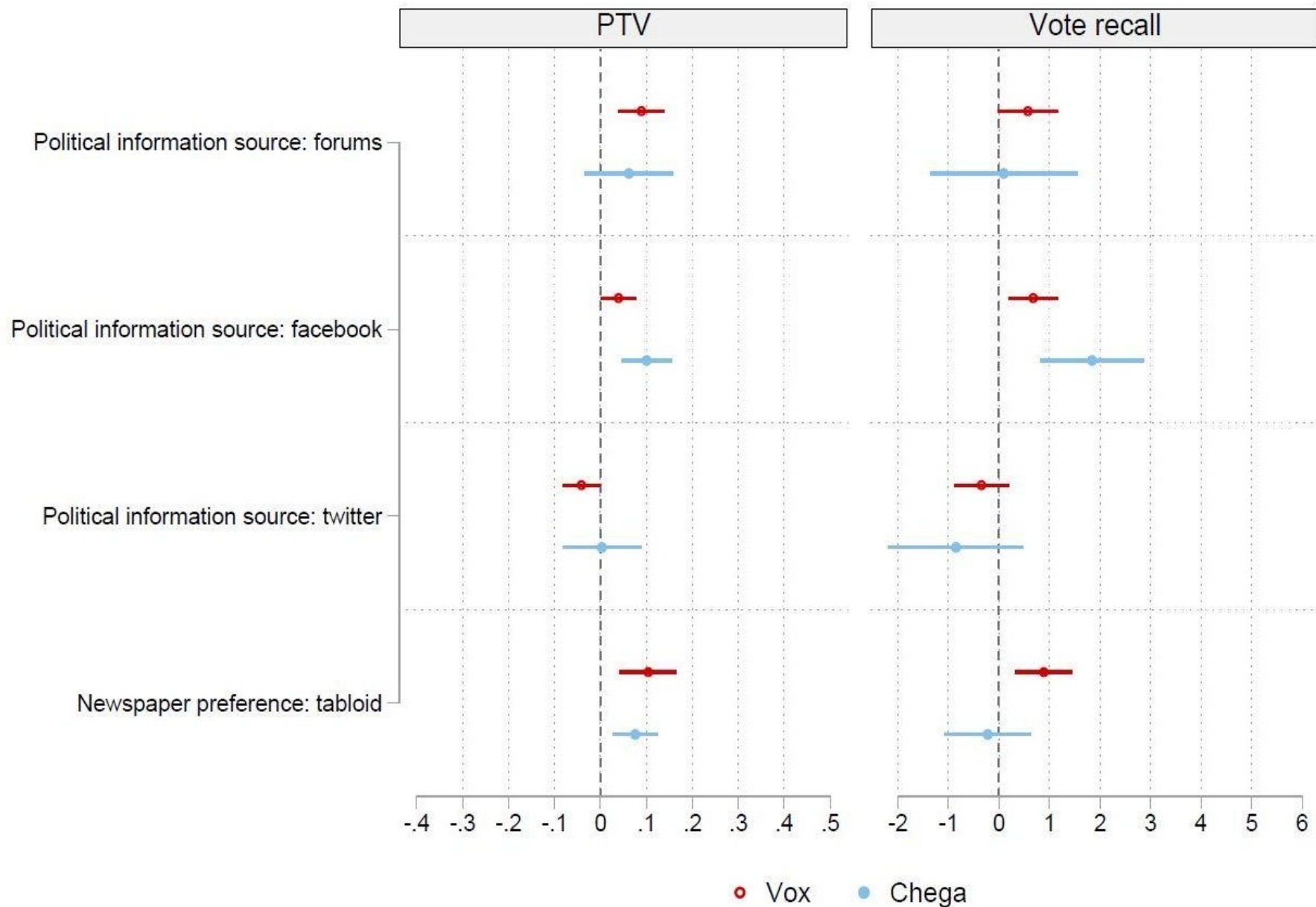
1)Using Facebook and (in the case of VOX) internet forums as a source of political information increases the probabilities to vote for a PRR Party.

2) The opposite is true for Twitter.

3)Reading tabloids rather than other newspapers also increases significantly the likelihood to support and vote for both Chega and VOX.

# Conclusions

1) Populism: both from politicians and media, importance of the interactions!

2)We need more studies on the characteristics of populist messages (colloquial and emotional language, dramatization, personalization...).

3)We need to better understand the implications and effects of the mediatization of politics

4)Is the role of the media both the source of demand and supply of populism?

# Grazie per l'attenzione

❖ *Blog*

**POP – Political Observer on Populism**

https://populismobserver.com/

❖ *Twitter*

**@POP_TweetsOnPop**

https://twitter.com/POP_TweetsOnPop

# Resources

- Brown, K. & A. Mondon (2021) "Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian's Coverage of Populism as a Case Study." *Politics*, 41(3):279–95. Link

- Heyne, L. & L. Manucci (2021) "A new Iberian exceptionalism? Comparing the populist radical right electorate in Portugal and Spain", *Political Research Exchange*, 3:1, DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2021.1989985. Link

- Manucci, L. (2017) "Populism and the Media." In K. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 467–488. Link

- Manucci, L. (2021) "Forty years of populism in the European Parliament." *População e Sociedade*, 35, 25-42. Link

- Mazzoleni, G. 2008. "Populism and the Media." in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 49–64 . Link

- Mudde, C. (2004) "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition,* 39(4): 541–563. Link

- Zulianello, M. (2020) "Varieties of populist parties and party systems in Europe." *Government and Opposition* 55 (2), 327–347. Link

- Zulianello, M. & Larsen, E.G. (2020) "Populist parties in European Parliament elections: A new dataset on left, right and valence populism from 1979 to 2019." *Electoral Studies*, 71, Link.