Are Scottish and Catalan independence movements populist? Developing a new framework to compare populism

Abstract

Despite the increasing media and academic attention to populism, discrepancies in how to conceptualise and operationalise it have hindered cumulative progress in the literature. This paper provides a twofold contribution to the study of populism: a new methodology and new cases beyond those typically analysed. First, it develops theoretically a new comparative framework for the study of populism based on the examination and synthesis of the contributions of the most influential authors in the field. It classifies populist features in written (and oral) discourse into five dimensions: depiction of the polity, morality, construction of society, sovereignty and leadership. This framework is used here to analyse the ‘supply side’ of populism, and in particular the populist traits in the discourse of political parties. However, the dimensions identified can easily serve as basis for understanding the presence of populist attitudes and beliefs in the public too.

Second, this article compares the cases of Scottish and Catalan pro-independence movements from the point of view of the type and intensity of populist features in their public communications. The paper measures and contrasts the salience of each of the five abovementioned dimensions in political manifestos, speeches and written communications from 2014 and 2017. Here the two cases serve as a test for the methodology proposed as well as a reminder that there is a need to expand the analysis of populism to secessionism movements. The findings presented indicate that the Scottish and Catalan nationalist parties, although may not fall within the usual left-wing and right-wing categorisations of populist movements, display abundant populist features in their communications. Most importantly, it serves to illustrate how populism and nationalism, although deeply intertwined, remain distinct concepts and empirical realities. Although nationalist projects are sometimes articulated following a populist discourse or logic they do not necessarily need to do so. This article shows that despite sharing extremely similar goals Scottish and Catalan pro-independence movements exhibit clear discrepancies in the tone and nature of their political communications when analysed from a populism lenses. Catalan nationalist parties and leaders display a much higher frequency of populist features and a much more passionate style. Not all nationalist movement are populist or at the very least they do not need to exhibit populist features in a similar fashion or degree.

Keywords

Populism, nationalism, secessionism, methodology, content analysis, political communications, discourses, Scotland, Catalonia
Introduction

Populism has become a permanent feature or shadow of modern representative democracies (Canovan 1999: 16, Müller 2016: 102), and as such it deserves a close attention. Populism is a multifaceted concept which attempts to capture a complex and evolving reality. Although the 1990s marked the beginning of a fast-growing trend in political science studies on the topic, the utilisation of the term ‘populism’ can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 2-3).

The scarcity of systematic empirical studies on populism is recognised as an important problem in the literature (Moffit 2016: 21-22). Partially the problem is linked to the disputed nature of the concept and the discrepancies between scholarly approaches. Today, while some studies consider populism an ideology (e.g. Stanley 2008, Mudde 2017), others define it as political strategy employed by some charismatic leaders to reach or exercise power (e.g. Weyland 2001: 14, Betz 2002: 198; Pappas 2012: 2) or focus on the discursive (e.g. Laclau 2005a, Jagers & Walgrave 2007) or performative nature of the phenomenon (e.g. Moffit 2016, Ostiguy 2017). In fact, the disagreement on whether the concept of populism is restricted to an ideology or it incorporates the utilisation of certain discursive features to manipulate an audience, can be traced back several decades (Berlin 1968, Ionescu & Gellner 1969). Although from the point of view of social scientific research these different approaches are not mutually exclusive (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016: 9), each of the conceptions of populism have different theoretical implications, notably whether populism is to be considered a discreet or a continuous variable (Aslanidis 2016: 92-93).

The methodology introduced in the first part of this paper aims at paving the way to further cumulative quantitative and qualitative comparative work on populist movements. Although the approach adopted here is compatible, to a great extent, with that of the authors who understand populism as a ‘thin ideology’ (Mudde 2007, Stanley 2008), it does not operationalise populism as a discrete variable (a party is populist or not). This analysis shows that parties or political leaders may display populist features in different degrees in their actions and communications (Aslanidis 2016: 92, Moffit 2016: 154) and does not attempt to set a threshold to classify a movement or individuals as populist. Drawing on literature, it establishes a set of dimensions and criteria against which political communication texts are going to be analysed in order to measure and distinguish populist and non-populist features. It dissects populism into five dimensions: antagonistic depiction of the polity, morality, idealised construction of society, sovereignty claims, and leadership. Establishing causal inferences and analysing determinants or consequences of populism (e.g., Lochocki 2017, Guiso et al. 2018) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, this new comparative framework could be used to capture not only supply but also demand side populism (Mudde 2007, Guiso et al. 2017) and generate data which could be analysed statistically and correlated with a variety of dependent and independent variables.

The second part of this article operationalises this populism framework in a comparison of political communications of Catalan and Scottish nationalist movements. This paper assumes that the political texts analysed are medium of expressions of populist ideas and discourses. It conducts a content analysis (Bauer 2000) of the political manifestos, speeches and press articles by the main pro-
independence parties and coalitions in Scotland (SNP) and Catalonia (ERC, Junts pel Si, Junts per Catalunya) and its leaders (Nicola Sturgeon, Alex Salmond, John Swinney, Artur Mas, Carles Puigdemont, Oriol Junqueras). A coding frame, based on the theoretical categorisation developed in the first part of the article, helps interrogate these documents and allows counting the number of references to different types of populist and non-populist features in each of them. As texts are of variable length, the number of references is divided by the total number of words in each of them. Moreover, due to its different nature manifestos and short texts (speeches and articles) are analysed separately.

Catalonia and Scotland have been chosen as case studies, due to their relevance of the in the present context, and because have been rarely analysed from a populism point of view. Most current studies on populism focus on either right-wing or left-wing populist movements in the Americas or Europe, including Eurosceptic right-wing parties (Mudde 2007, Wodak et al 2013, Lochocki 2017), American nationalism (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016), personalistic Latin American populisms (de la Torre 2010; Philip and Panizza 2013) and Southern European left-wing populism (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2013; Ramiro and Gómez 2017). With the exception of the study of the far-right Lega Nord (McDonnell 2006, Zaslove 2011) and Vlaams Blok (Jagers & Walgrave 2007), little attention has been paid to the analysis of pro-independence movements from a populism angle.

The frequency of populist features observed in the speeches and written communications of Catalan pro-independence parties is considerably higher than that observed in equivalent SNP documents. Not only the degree, but also the nature of populism varies. This work helps reject the hypothesis that all nationalist movements are populist or use similarly populist discourses.

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Reconciling different approaches to populism
Dimensions and features of populism
Antagonistic depiction of the polity
Moral interpretation of political actors
Absence of limits to popular sovereignty
Reliance on charismatic leadership

Methodology

Table 2: Long texts analysed

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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Per 1000 words</th>
<th>Total Populist Features</th>
<th>Per 1000 words</th>
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<td>Manifesto</td>
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<td>01/09/2015</td>
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<td>Manifesto</td>
<td>Esquerra Republicana</td>
<td>05/12/2017</td>
<td>27,962</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Word count</td>
<td>Total Anti-Populist features</td>
<td>Per 1000 words</td>
<td>Total Populist features</td>
<td>Per 1000 words</td>
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<td>Juntos Hacemos el Camino</td>
<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Artur Mas</td>
<td>18/05/2015</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Artur Mas et al.</td>
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<td>1,074</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discurs d'Oriol Junqueras en l'acte d'inici de campanya electoral</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Oriol Junqueras</td>
<td>11/09/2015</td>
<td>2,632</td>
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<td>Spain’s leadership vacuum is damaging Catalonia and Europe – it has to end</td>
<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Carles Puigdemont</td>
<td>01/03/2016</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Que gane el diálogo, que las urnas decidan</td>
<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Carles Puigdemont and Oriol Junqueras</td>
<td>22/03/2017</td>
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<td>Spain’s attempt to block Catalonia’s referendum is a violation of our basic rights</td>
<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Carles Puigdemont</td>
<td>21/09/2017</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.79</td>
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<td>‘That’s all folks’</td>
<td>Press Article</td>
<td>Artur Mas</td>
<td>30/09/2017</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Catalonia Will Not Retreat</td>
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<td>01/11/2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>This is not just about Catalonia. This is about democracy itself</td>
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<td>Carles Puigdemont</td>
<td>06/11/2017</td>
<td>996</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
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<td>Sonriendo, perseverando y con unidad de acción</td>
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<td>1,179</td>
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<td>We can’t trust Madrid to oversee Catalonia’s election — the EU must step in</td>
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<td>Oriol Junqueras</td>
<td>03/12/2017</td>
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<td>Speech</td>
<td>Alex Salmond</td>
<td>05/03/2014</td>
<td>4,522</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Alex Salmond</td>
<td>19/09/2014</td>
<td>814</td>
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<td>Speech</td>
<td>Nicola Sturgeon</td>
<td>15/10/2015</td>
<td>2,038</td>
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<td>Nicola Sturgeon</td>
<td>13/03/2017</td>
<td>2,272</td>
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<td>Nicola Sturgeon</td>
<td>30/05/2017</td>
<td>3,237</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s statement</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Nicola Sturgeon</td>
<td>05/09/2017</td>
<td>6147</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Swinney’s speech at the SNP conference</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>John Swinney</td>
<td>08/10/2017</td>
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<td>Speech</td>
<td>Nicola Sturgeon</td>
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<td>5,065</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comparative analysis**

**Figure 1:** Populist references per 1,000 words and dates of publication

**Figure 2:** Manifestos: populist references per 1,000 words (all texts included)
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Concluding remarks
This paper has compared the salience of several widely agreed populist attributes in the political communications of Catalan and Scottish pro-independence nationalist parties and leaders. The first part of the article has outlined the state of the populist literature and suggested that to overcome the ontological disputes which have hindered cumulative progress in this field, it may be worth shifting the focus to identifying and analysing the specific attributes or properties common to populist movements and leading conceptualisations of populism (Gerring 1999: 357-358, Bonikowski and Gidron 2016:10). Then it has theoretically developed a comparative framework to measure the intensity of populist features in texts and communications based on five dimensions: depiction of the polity, morality, construction of society, sovereignty, and leadership. It has also presented some of the interconnections between populist features across these dimensions which contribute to create an inner logic (Müller 2016:10). Thus, the approach adopted in this paper means moving away from a dichotomous consideration of movements as populists or not, onto a type of research which focuses on the attributes of political discourses and populist frames, acknowledging the existence of degrees in populism.

The framework and methodology introduced in the first part of the paper has been tested through a systematic content analysis of 25 documents (including six political manifestos) of the Catalan and Scottish most prominent nationalist parties between 2014 and 2017. The results presented in the second part of the paper have

Figure 3: Short texts: populist references per 1,000 words (all texts included)
demonstrated striking divergences in the intensity and nature of the populist features across the two movements. The number of populist references identified in Catalan documents dwarves those in Scottish ones, 269% in political manifestos and 534% in short texts. In all dimensions and in both types of communications, Catalan nationalists display a higher density of populist features and a significantly more passionate and confrontational style. The SNP emphasises more the social agenda in its manifestos and speeches while identity related issues are less prominent than in Catalan leaders’ communications.

The texts analysed display a sort of ‘targeted anti-elitism’, a selective negative depiction of ‘an elite’ not of ‘the elite’. Criticisms are directed to the Madrid and Westminster elites but not to the regional ones. Both independence movement emphasise constantly moral superiority vis-à-vis other political actors. Although this is the most relevant populist feature of SNP, the intensity and frequency of moralistic claims are still far lower than in Catalan nationalist discourse. SNP moral references and critiques are almost exclusively directed to the Conservative Party, ‘the Tories’ or ‘the Tory government’, while Catalan nationalists, in addition to criticise the conservative central government, often express negative moral judgments about ‘Spain’ or the ‘Spanish State’ as a whole.

Similarly, popular sovereignty and majoritarianism are attributes of the discourses of both movements. But in both cases the majoritarian logic is applied only within Catalonia or Scotland. A simple majority of Catalans or Scots may overrule constitutional arrangements and initiate an independence process, but decisions made by the majority of Spanish or British citizens do not need to be similarly accepted. Catalan and Scottish nationalists consider themselves as a separate ‘demos’. Their depictions of society, especially in the Catalan case, try to justify and legitimise the extrication of the Catalan demos from the Spanish one by emphasising all differences and omitting similarities with the rest of Spain. Since it is claimed that they are a different ‘people’ and a distinct ‘demos’, sovereignty and self-determination are not to be acquired as the result of a negotiated process of political independence but already presumed from the beginning.

The weak reliance on a personalistic leader unveiled in the analysis is not completely uncommon in populist movements. Charismatic leaders and direct communications between them and ‘the people’ can be considered features facilitating rather than defining populism (Mudde 2004: 545). At least in the case of Catalonia, it would be worth analysing more recent texts since the figure of Carles Puigdemont has acquired centrality in the discourses of part of the pro-independence movement after the 2017 elections.

It is beyond its scope of this paper to provide an overall assessment of the level of populism of these movements. The weighting of the different attributes elicited from populism theory would be certainly controversial and the study has focused on written communications, without analysing actions and other performative and ideological traits. To classify any, or both, of these parties as ‘populist’ based on this methodology an agreed a threshold or benchmark would be necessary. Non-text materials, including visual and performative elements, could complement the findings of this analysis (Moffit 2016). For those favouring an ideological approach, the analysis of the
interpretative context may be necessary to discern whether the discursive features identified here are expressions of a belief or immanent logic or simply rhetoric devices (Gill 2000: 175-176). By narrowing down the meaning of some statements in the text into pre-selected categories, this paper may be also missing some ideological and discursive functions of the text. Moreover, further research would be needed to capture the ‘demand side’ of populism and assess to what extent Catalan and Scottish nationalist voters display similar populist features in their attitudes and beliefs. Similarly, the comparison with other populist movements may shed light on the relative degree of populism of the two secession movements studied here.

However, this comparative deconstruction of political discourses demonstrates that these movements, despite sharing a similar nationalist ideology, the goal of self-determination, and considering each other as allies and sources of mutual inspiration, diverge widely when analysed through the lens of populism. Comparatively speaking the political communications of Catalan nationalists are much more populist than those of SNP. This article suggests that nationalism does not have to be always associated with populism, or at least not in a similar degree.

Finally, this article has illustrated that the analysis of the presence and centrality of populist attributes in the communications of political movements help generate datasets that may be of used in a variety of quantitative and qualitative populism studies and thus contribute to build bridges across the ontological divide.

References


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