



COVID-19: A Political Virus? VOX's Populist Discourse in Times of Crisis

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Spain has been one of the hardest hit countries by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this crisis presented a window of opportunity for VOX, as it has for other far right parties, to raise its visibility as opposition force. This paper investigates whether the discourse of VOX has evolved during the pandemic and affected the political dynamics in Spain. This article proposes a new multidimensional strategy to measure the degree of populism in political communications, via quantitative and qualitative content analysis. It dissects the parliamentary speeches of the leader of VOX, Santiago Abascal, in the debates for the approval and extension of the “state of alarm” to fight against COVID-19 between March and June 2020. In order to assess the changes and relative intensity of populist features in Abascal’s parliamentary speeches we compared them with his speech during Pedro Sánchez’s investiture session as the Spanish President of the Government, in January 2020, and VOX’s latest political manifestos—2019 European and Spanish General Elections—, as well as with speeches of the representatives of the five main parties and coalitions during the COVID-19 debates in the Spanish Congress. Our paper shows that populists’ discourses are context-dependent and that their performances are not only shaped by crisis but also constitutive of crisis. The density of populist references in Abascal’s speeches grew steadily during the period analysed. Morality and antagonism overshadowed sovereignty and society as key populist attributes, and the tone of the discourse became increasingly hyperbolic. Moreover, Abascal’s discursive performances had a sort of contagion effect in other parties in the parliamentary sessions studied. People’s Party (*Partido Popular*–PP) leader Pablo Casado chose to follow VOX and harshly criticized the government, meanwhile the discourses of the speakers of Together We Can (*Unidas Podemos*–UP) and Catalan Republican Left (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*–ERC), adopted a demonizing rhetoric against VOX and PP also grounded on a populist logic of articulation. This polarizing dynamic between competing Manichean discourses contributed to reinforce the sense of crisis by adding a political dimension to the already existing health and economic problems.

Keywords: VOX, populism, COVID-19, radical-right, content analysis, Spain

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the worst health crises in recent history and a major challenge for governments around the world, most of which failed to stop the spread of the virus. The efforts to curb this pandemic using social confinement measures reduced civil liberties, eroded social capital and brought about economic insecurity (Fetzer et al., 2020). Although there are already several studies exploring the political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bol et al., 2020; Santana et al., 2020; Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Jungkuntz, 2021), the analysis of the impact of this crisis on the discourse of populist parties and leaders is still in its infancy.¹

This article tries to shed some light on the interaction between populism and crisis by applying a content analysis methodology (Bauer, 2000) to the parliamentary speeches of Santiago Abascal, the leader of the Spanish populist radical right party VOX (Turnbull Dugarte et al., 2020; Rama et al., 2021), during the first wave of the pandemic. The choice of VOX as a case study to test the effect of COVID-19 on the populist message can be explained by two main reasons. First, VOX is a party that has experienced a recent surge in popularity becoming the third largest party in the Spanish Congress of Deputies—with over 15 per cent of the votes—which constitutes a remarkable evolution for a far-right party in the current context (Mudde, 2019). Second, Spain was one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic suffering an excess of 78,724 deaths from March 10, 2020 to January 31, 2021 (MoMo, 2021) and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fall of 11% in 2020 (INE, 2021). Interestingly, the Spanish Government which initially downplayed the dangers of the pandemic allowing a multitude of mass gathering and demonstrations to take place in early March, decided that the rapid growth of the virus required decisive action. Thus, on March 14, 2020 the Spanish Government decreed the “state of alarm” (La Moncloa, 2020) and implemented one of the strictest lockdowns around the world. In this sense, we wanted to analyse whether that critical juncture was seized as an opportunity by VOX to adapt its discourse.

This article proposes a new strategy to measure degrees of populism combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of political communications (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). It compares the density of populist features across five dimensions in which we dissect populism: 1) antagonistic depiction of the polity, 2) moral interpretation of the people, 3) idealised construction of society, 4) popular sovereignty, and 5) reliance on charismatic leadership (Olivas Osuna, 2021). We want to shed light on how crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, shape and are shaped by populist rhetoric. We approach the concept of crisis not only as a moment but also

as a process of transformation (Hay, 1996: 254–255) and investigate if populist discursive performances framing the COVID-19 crisis propagated beyond populist parties (Moffitt, 2015; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021). We systematically analyze two political manifestos and seven parliamentary speeches of VOX as well as ten other speeches corresponding to five different parliamentary groups during the debates that took place to approve the extension of the state of alarm during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and June 2020.

Although we find that the leader of VOX is the politician that employed a more confrontational tone and a higher density of populist allusions, several of the speeches of the other parties also reflected relatively high levels of populism in these debates. Our study indicates that the evolution of the discourses of the leader of VOX impacted the speeches of other parties in parliamentary debates on the COVID-19. While the leader of PP, Pablo Casado, began to imitate the hyperbolic and confrontational rhetoric of VOX against the Government, other speakers took advantage of Abascal's controversial claims to discredit VOX, by relying as well on a populist style. We observe, throughout the parliamentary debates analyzed, a significant increase in the density and tone of discursive allusions based on two of the dimensions of populism—antagonism and morality—, but a low presence of the other three—idealization of society, popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership.

We divide the article in five sections. In the literature review, we briefly outline different conceptualization of populism and why it is important to study this phenomenon against the background of major crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we explain the choice of VOX as a case study. The third section explains the methodology and data used. Then, we discuss the main results issued from the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Finally, we draw some conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POPULISM, CRISES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Disagreements regarding the conceptualization and operationalization of populism have been frequent in this area of study since its inception (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969). While some experts define populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2004), others present it as political strategy employed by personalist leaders to reach or exercise power (Weyland, 2001: 14), or focus on the discursive (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) and performative nature of the phenomenon (Ostiguy, 2009). These different approaches reflect meaningful theoretical discrepancies but are not incompatible. They largely recognize a similar core of populist attributes, such as Manichean interpretation of society, anti-elitism, people-centrism, and moralism (Olivas Osuna, 2021: 5–7). Strategies, discourses, and styles are usually grounded on ideological traits. Populist expressions either reflect beliefs and perceptions of the political leaders that make them or try to connect with the worldview of the people they seek to influence.

However, from an empirical research perspective it is easier to make inferences based on the analysis of discourses or other forms of populist expression, than studying the ideology or

¹Wondreys and Mudde (2021) who analyze the effects of COVID-19 on twenty-seven far-right parties, and the collaborative report edited by Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2021) that compares the strategies of populist parties in sixteen countries are among the few works that study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on populist communication.

political strategies that underpin them. In fact, the differences between “thin-centered ideology” and “discourse” are minor and irrelevant to many research questions (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2018: 1669) and proponents of the ideational approach often use these terms as interchangeable in their comparative work (Hawkins and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2017: 514). Studying populism via the analysis of political communications is relevant, not only because populist discourses can be considered as a reflection of an underlying ideology (Hawkins et al., 2012: 3) but also because they contribute to construct populist ideas (de Vreese et al., 2018: 425).

Although ideational factors are considered key determinants of populist discourses (Hawkins et al., 2019b), we cannot assume a deterministic relationship between the two. Non-populist leaders use sometimes populist rhetoric and populist leaders may display different levels of populism depending on the issue, audience, and specific circumstances. Indeed, populist communication can be construed as a context dependent strategy (Hawkins et al., 2019a; De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021). This idea is compatible with the performative conceptualization of populism as a relational appeal that is more effective in certain social contexts (Ostiguy et al., 2021: 8).

The analysis of populist discourses through great events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can help understand how populist leaders adapt their communicative style to take advantage of changing circumstances. Many studies show that populist movements usually appear within a crisis context (Laclau, 2005: 139, 177; Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 7). For instance, neo-liberal populist leaders in Latin America emerged in response to hyperinflationary crises in the late 1980s (Weyland, 2003) and the more recent Global Financial Crisis propelled many European populist parties (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Populism thrives in periods of political, social and economic crisis because crisis erodes trust on political representative, fuels grievances, and serves as a justification for radical measures (Roberts, 2015; Brubaker, 2020a: 7–8). Disagreements on how to respond to major crises can also contribute to polarize the society and create a fertile ground for protest parties and personalistic leaders who articulate a persuasive solution out of it.

But crisis is not simply a trigger or a facilitating condition for populism, crises are also discursively (re)constructed by populist discontent and blame narratives. Populists spectacularize social, political and economic problems—as well as the failure to address them—to propagate the sense of crisis and turn “the people” against a dangerous “other” (Moffitt, 2015: 210). Therefore, the performances of crises can be construed as central features of the populist phenomenon itself (Moffitt, 2015). These performances are not only staged by populist leaders but also by others who compete with them in the discursive construction of the crisis (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 9; Hay, 1996). Crisis discourses by populist leaders present simplistic solutions on behalf of “the people” while blaming some “nefarious other”. These are far from inconsequential as usually elicit similarly simplistic and confrontational responses from political adversaries (Stavrakakis, 2014). This emerging relationship of mutual antagonism often leads to a culture of political polarization

and becomes part of the process of constitution, or reinforcement, of collective political identities based on emotional appeals and affective investments (Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021: 27–28). Hence the relevance of studying populist discourses within the context of crisis, such as the coronavirus one.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the expression of several populist attitudinal traits, such as distrust in expert advice, skepticism toward elite overprotectiveness, and antipathy against government regulation (Brubaker, 2020a: 10). This crisis has created not only health and economic problems but also serious democratic challenges. In Spain, the COVID-19 crisis has induced greater demands for technocratic authoritarian decision-making strong leadership, willingness to give up individual freedom (Amat et al., 2020), and support for the idea of recentralization of devolved powers (Garmendia and Alfonso, 2020). All these ideas resonate with the discourse of VOX, which is also the party that Spaniards with anti-democratic views are more prone to support (Rama et al., 2021). VOX is, therefore, a party that could take advantage of the changes in public attitudes triggered by this health crisis. Indeed, recent opinion polls² and the results in the regional elections in Catalonia in February 2021 confirm that VOX support is currently experiencing an upward trend. In this paper we try to understand how this party shaped its communications to be able to take advantage of the political conjuncture and whether VOX approach to the crisis impacted the discourses of other parties.

VOX AS A CASE STUDY

Despite the severe impacts of the 2008 Great Recession, Spain remained one of the few European countries without a major populist radical right party (PRRP). However, Spain's exceptionalism (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015) came to an end in December 2018 when VOX gained electoral representation in the regional parliamentary elections of Andalusia, which spurred it onto further electoral successes at the national level in April 2019 general election, when the party obtained more than 10 per cent of the votes and 24 out of 350 seats. The unsuccessful attempts to create a government led to the repetition of the elections. On November 10, 2019, VOX increased in more than 5 percentual points their votes, coming out as the third largest party with 52 seats.

VOX case deserves special attention as it has managed to make its electoral support grow very rapidly in a relatively very short period becoming one of the most successfully far right parties in Western Europe (Mudde, 2019). Economically, the party promotes a focus on market liberalism and reduced state

²See the mean of polls at El Electoral. Encuesta Media (2021) <https://elelectoral.com/encuesta-media/> that estimates that, on March 1, 2021, VOX support is 16.9% (vs 15.1% obtained in the last General Election on November 10, 2019).

intervention, diverging from other PRRPs which can be associated with the so-called welfare chauvinism (Greve, 2019) such as the French *Rassemblement National*, the Hungarian *Jobbik* or the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) (González Cuevas, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). VOX was initially formally presented as a “liberal center-right party” and founded by three former members of the center-right conservative People’s Party [*Partido Popular*] (PP), Alejo Vidal-Quadras, Santiago Abascal and José Antonio Ortega Lara. However, the party gradually moved from a traditional conservative nationalist discourse into more radical positions and displayed often nativist, authoritarian and populist traits as other PRRPs (Mudde, 2010).

VOX defends a traditionalist Christian conception of Spanish society with frequent references to the threat of Islam. For example, in its general election manifesto, VOX proposes to “close fundamentalist mosques and expel imams that spread fundamentalism”, “exclusion of teaching about Islam in public schools” (VOX, 2019: 7) and “setting up an agency to help threatened Christian minorities, imitating a similar initiative in Hungary” (VOX, 2019b: 23). VOX opposes same sex marriage, requests protection for the “natural family”, and pledges to reform abortion laws to make them more stringent (VOX, 2019b: 17–18). VOX also opposes what they call “gender ideology” and feminism (VOX, 2020). and claims that “subsidized radical feminist organizations” should be suppressed (VOX, 2019b: 17). In line with other radical right-wing parties (Ivarsflaten, 2008), VOX displays a clearly anti-immigration rhetoric (Vampa, 2020). For instance, they call for “deportation of illegal immigrants to their countries of origin”, new requirements and barriers for nationality and establishing quotas based on linguistic and cultural criteria (VOX, 2019b: 5–6).

VOX explicitly opposes multiculturalism (VOX, 2019a: 3, 9) constructs narratives that selectively mystify periods of history to redefine what constitutes “the people” and exclude the “other” (Manucci, 2019). For example, the leaders of VOX use the Spanish Reconquista as a symbol to associate Spanish identity to Christianity, and to portray Muslim populations as alien to Spanish culture. VOX also divides society in two blocs: “the living Spain” (*la España viva*) and “the anti-Spain” (*la anti-España*).³ The latter refers left-wing and secessionist parties and is a concept already used by Spanish nationalists in the 30s and by Francoism. VOX uses a selective anti-elitism as it does not usually launch general attacks against economic or political elites but focuses its recriminations on progressive media and left-wing politicians.

Additionally, VOX is characterized by its support for a unitary and centralized Spain where the current Autonomous Communities’ parliaments and governments would be disbanded and all secessionist parties banned (VOX, 2019b: 2–3; González Cuevas, 2019: 2–3). VOX has capitalized on the disproportionate share of media attention received (Olalla

Ubierna et al., 2019) as well as on the unrest generated by the political and social conflict in Catalonia and the discontent of part of the electorate with Spanish decentralized model (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

Finally, it is worth noting that influenced by American radical right (Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama, 2021),⁴ VOX growing electoral success has been accompanied by changes in their agenda and communication style. VOX’s leaders have adopted since 2019 anti-globalist arguments attacking supranational organizations and using conspiracy theories, such as blaming George Soros of orchestrating mass immigration in Europe.⁵ In 2020, the party also used the COVID-19 pandemic to gain visibility and reinforce the antagonistic and moral tone against the Government and most other political parties. VOX organized anti-government protests, both in May and in October 2020, encouraging citizens to use their vehicles and thereby circumvent the lockdown rules.⁶ When the majority of parties attempted to show unity in the fight against the pandemic, they voted against successive extensions for the state of alarm,⁷ called a vote of no confidence against the government and propagated conspiracy theories. For instance, Abascal accused the Spanish government of “euthanizing” thousands of elderly people,⁸ blamed China for creating and propagating virus purposefully,⁹ and insinuated that the World Health Organization (WHO) is manipulated by the Asian superpower.¹⁰

In this crisis context, VOX intensified its anti-European and anti-immigration discourse, which seems to bring them closer to other European PRRPs. For example, in Madrid City Hall, VOX proposed measures to slow down immigration arguing that migrants are more likely to carry coronavirus.¹¹ Although there is plenty of anecdotal evidence suggesting an escalation

⁴The Independent. 11 January 2019. Vox: Who are the Trump-inspired far-right Spanish nationalist party and what do they stand for? <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vox-andalusia-santiago-abascal-spain-steve-bannon-donald-trump-a8723121.html>.

⁵Foreign Policy. 27 april 2019. Make Spain Great Again. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/27/vox-spain-elections-trump-bannon/>

⁶La República. 11 May 2020. “Vox llama a manifestarse el 23 de mayo saltándose las restricciones del estado de alarma” <https://www.republica.com/2020/05/11/vox-llama-a-manifestarse-el-23-de-mayo-saltandose-las-restricciones-del-estado-de-alarma/>; Vozpópuli. 7 October 2020. “Vox llama a manifestarse en coche el próximo lunes contra la ‘incompetencia’ del Gobierno”. https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/vox-manifestacion-fieta_0_1399360820.html

⁷Out of all seven extensions to the state of alarm that the Government had to put to a vote in the Congress, VOX only voted in favor the first time, voting against it the other six times (just like most of the regionalist/independent parties such as ERC, JxCat or Bildu). See: <https://www.diariovasco.com/politica/seis-prorrogas-estado-alarma-20200602144255-ntcr.html>

⁸EL Mundo, 13 april 2020. “Vox acusa al Gobierno de aplicar la eutanasia “por la vía de los hechos” en las residencias de mayores”. <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/04/13/5e944cddfdffdbbd8b45b7.html>

⁹Europapress, 21 October 2020. “Abascal insiste en el “virus chino”: ‘China tiene que pagar’” <https://www.europapress.es/videos/video-abascal-insiste-virus-chino-china-tiene-pagar-20201021122400.html>

¹⁰In his speech for the vote of no confidence, Abascal blamed China for the Coronavirus pandemic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFSxP3rvDOU>

¹¹See: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200929/483757361813/madrid-tumba-propuesta-de-vox-que-vincula-el-virus-con-migrantes-sin-papeles.html>

³EL País. 12 april 2019. Abascal desentierra la “anti-España” para descalificar a la izquierda https://elpais.com/politica/2019/04/26/actualidad/1556295390_562559.html

TABLE 1 | Summary of texts analyzed and density of populist and anti-populist features.

Document	Date	Author	Word count	Anti-populist coded segments	Per 1,000 words	Populist coded segments	Per 1,000 words
Manifesto	May 2019	VOX	8,123	15	1.85	62	7.63
Manifesto	Nov 2019	VOX	3,504	3	0.86	30	8.56
Speech	January 4, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	5,043	0	0.00	101	20.03
Speech	March 25, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	3,283	5	1.52	44	13.40
Speech	April 9, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	3,574	3	0.84	50	13.99
Speech	April 22, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	3,638	4	1.09	62	17.04
Speech	May 6, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	4,203	5	1.19	76	18.08
Speech	May 20, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	3,969	0	0.00	87	21.92
Speech	June 3, 2020	Abascal (VOX)	3,931	2	0.50	103	26.20
Speech	March 25, 2020	Casado (PP)	4,007	22	5.49	26	6.49
Speech	June 3, 2020	Casado (PP)	3,678	1	0.27	75	20.40
Speech	March 25, 2020	Bal (Cs)	2,364	7	2.97	6	2.54
Speech	June 3, 2020	Muñoz (Cs)	3,286	19	5.78	9	2.73
Speech	March 25, 2020	Sánchez (PSOE)	7,506	42	5.59	5	0.66
Speech	June 3, 2020	Sánchez (PSOE)	18,542	65	3.50	32	1.73
Speech	March 25, 2020	Romero (UP)	1,081	2	1.86	13	12.03
Speech	June 3, 2020	Asens (UP)	3,400	3	0.88	36	10.59
Speech	March 25, 2020	Rufián (ERC)	2,575	2	0.68	14	5.44
Speech	June 3, 2020	Rufián (ERC)	2,679	0	0.00	48	17.93

of VOX' populist rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic (Magre et al., 2021), in this paper we systematically analyze Abascal's speeches in parliamentary sessions debating the extension of the state of alarm to provide a more rigorous comparative account of this evolution.

METHODOLOGY

This paper follows the suggestion made by de Vreese et al. (2018) to approach the study populism as a communication phenomenon and tries to test whether context shapes populists' claims and discursive style by analysing parliamentary speeches of the leader of VOX, Santiago Abascal, and the potential spill-over effects on other Spanish parties. The relation between political actors and the world is mediated or constructed by language, in the form of speech and texts. Through the analysis of political communications populist ideologies and discourses may be identified empirically (Kriesi, 2014: 364). The use of content analysis is not new to the study of populism (e.g., Hawkins, 2009; Koopmans and Muis, 2009; Aslanidis, 2018; Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019). This methodology intends to produce quantifiable evidence about a set of categories by a systematic analysis of a set of texts (Krippendorff, 1980: 21; Weber, 1985: 9; Bryman 2016: 284).

As we seek to understand the characteristics and evolution of populist communication during the COVID-19 crisis, we analyze all the interventions of the leader of VOX, Santiago Abascal, in the Spanish Congress debates concerning the six successive extensions of the "state of alarm" declared by the Royal Decree 463/2020 of March 14. These debates took place

every two weeks in plenary sessions from March 25 to June 3, 2020 (see **Table 1**). These sessions were selected given their public relevance and their focus on the topic of the pandemic governance.¹² We retrieved the transcripts of Abascal's interventions from the official website of the Spanish Congress of Deputies¹³. In this paper we test if the health and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the discourse of VOX and other populist and non-populist parties in the Spain.

To identify changes vis-à-vis previous periods, we also examine, using the same content analysis methodology, the two previous electoral manifestos of VOX, May 2019 for European Parliament Elections (VOX, 2019a) and Spanish Election in November 2019 (VOX, 2019b), as well as Abascal's parliamentary speech during Pedro Sánchez investiture session in January 2020.¹⁴ Additionally, we compare the degrees of populism of his speeches with those of the other main five parliamentary groups—Spanish Socialist Workers' Party [*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*] (PSOE), People's Party [*Partido Popular*] (PP), Together We Can [*Unidas Podemos*] (UP) and Citizens [*Ciudadanos*] (Cs), and Catalan Republican Left [*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*] (ERC)—during the first COVID-19 debate, on March 25, 2020, and on the last one, on June 3, 2020. The analysis of the speeches of other populists—UP

¹²Although we refer in our analysis two six speeches, each of them includes two interventions, as speakers have the right to respond to comments.

¹³Congreso de los Diputados (2020), Intervenciones. <https://www.congreso.es/web/guest/busqueda-de-intervenciones>

¹⁴The investiture session in Spanish politics is very significant as political leaders usually reflect the type of opposition are going to adopt and the policy issues, they consider a priority.

TABLE 2 | Summary of populist and anti-populist features coded.

	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.).	Complex and nuanced (non-antagonistic) depiction of the polity. Endorsement or approval of political, legal and economic establishment. Claims for gradual change.
Morality	Rejection of political, legal and/or economic establishment. Claims for radical change. Confrontational tone, militaristic terms. 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.	References to working together with political opponents and reaching agreements. 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.	Popular sovereignty limited by laws and formal rights. Emphasis on representative democratic tools. Complexity in decision-making is acknowledged.
Leadership	Preference for direct democracy tools. Praise of referendums, public consultations, and mass mobilisations. 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.	References the protection of minority rights and interests and to institutional and legal checks on the will of the majority. 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 (2021).

and ERC—and non-populist parties—PSOE, Cs, PP—¹⁵ serves to contextualize the degree and nature of the discourse of the leader of VOX. Moreover, this choice responds to the call for studying in parallel not only populist discourses but also the discourses against these parties elicited as a reaction (Stavrakakis et al., 2018, Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021: 27). By including other parties in our research, we can also understand better the relational component of populism (Ostiguy, 2017) and how competing performances of crisis may diverge or converge. Thus, firstly, we undertake a basic content analysis to provide a systematic quantitative description of the communications selected (Drisko and Maschi, 2016: 1) and establish comparisons of the evolution of the discourses of VOX and the other political parties during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. We use MAXQDA software to assist our coding work, given that it facilitates navigating the coded segments, analysing intersections of codes, and generating visual representations with analytical value. Then, we carry out a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004) on the coded text to better understand the recurrent themes and tones. We include some quotes and figures to support our arguments.¹⁶

This paper follows the coding framework and methodology suggested for the study of populism by Olivas Osuna (2021) that

dissects this phenomenon in the following five dimensions (see also Table 2):

- (1) **Antagonism:** the antithetical depiction of “the people” vs. “the other” is a core feature in most conceptualizations of populism (Laclau, 2005). Political opponents are usually turned into enemies (Panizza 2005). Populism is considered as a sort of reaction or negativism against the political and economic elites. Sometimes this Manichean distinction opposes the “ordinary people” to foreigners, migrants, ethnic or religious groups (Canovan, 1981: 294; Bonikowski, 2017: 184–185). Populist movements tend to favor swift action and radical change, adopting strong anti-status quo and anti-establishment rhetoric (Panizza, 2005: 3–4; Moffit, 2016: 45).
- (2) **Morality:** populism entails a moral or normative interpretation of society, usually “the virtuous people” are opposed to “the corrupt elite”, “deviants” or “undeserving others” (Mudde, 2004: 543; Brubaker, 2020b: 54). Populist movements tend to establish a moral hierarchy among political players, claiming a higher moral ground and delegitimizing political opponents (Tanguieff, 1984: 118). *Ad hominem* arguments aiming to arouse prejudice, pity, or anger to undermine the legitimacy of political opponents are very common. Those who oppose the ideas of populist are often vilified or treated as traitors to the people (Müller, 2017: 593).
- (3) **Idealization of society:** populist tend to rely on an ahistorical and anti-pluralist idealization of society, to

¹⁵According to the Global Party Survey the scores in Populist Rhetoric for these parties are the following: VOX: 9.16; ERC: 7.53; UP: 7.29; CS: 3.7; PP: three; PSOE: 2.5 (Norris, 2020).

¹⁶The MAXQDA file with the codes and coded segments is publicly available for replication purpose at Harvard database: doi: 10.7910/DVN/LCEAZP

construct a somewhat homogenous collective identity (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004). Differences between in-groups are downplayed and differences with out-groups exacerbated in populist discourses. The dissonance between the “ideal people” and the “actual people” in a society makes often populist to request the extraction or exclusion of part of the people (Müller, 2014).

- (4) **Popular sovereignty:** the populist conception of sovereignty suggests that the “will of the people” or the “will of the majority” should not be bounded by legal or political institutions, and that the people should have an unmediated relationship with the government (Shils, 1956: 98–104). This majoritarian interpretation derives of the suspicion that institutions and laws have been designed by the elites. It also resonates with a preference for direct democracy tools such as referendums, popular assemblies, and mass mobilizations.
- (5) **Personalistic leadership:** Populist movements often emerge when charismatic leaders mobilise and receive support from a large and uninstitutionalized mass of people (Weyland, 2001: 4–18). These leaders are capable of discerning and articulating the “will of the people” (Kriesi, 2014: 363, Müller, 2016: 32–38). Thus, populist often consider than the relationship of the leader and their supporters does not need to be mediated by parties, parliaments, or other institutions.

Departing from a classical categorization stance (Sartori, 1970) this study does not consider any of the above dimensions as necessary conditions. Following an approach closer to Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” and Lakoff’s “radial structure” (Lakoff, 1987: 16–20, 83–84; Collier and Mahon, 1993: 848–850), we assume that not all populists need to share all defining attributes of populism. Dimensions may appear in different degrees depending on the specific communication and wider political context, as well as depending on the type of populist movement. It is worth noting that in this paper we do not intend to classify parties or discourses as “populists” or “non-populists” as that would entail setting thresholds and minimal necessary conditions. When we refer to populist parties, we do it based on previous classifications. As other recent empirical studies on the supply side (e.g., Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019; Meijers and Zaslove, 2020; Norris, 2020), this article treats populism in a continuous manner. The core metric used in the quantitative analysis is the density of populist references in each of the abovementioned dimensions (number of references per 1,000 words).

We code not only the populist references encountered in the transcriptions of the speeches and manifestos but also the “anti-populist” features encountered in the texts. These act as “negative poles” (Goetz, 2006: 27–35) and provide additional elements for comparison. The anti-populist category indicate a “pluralist” or “liberal democratic” stance.¹⁷ Sentences were analyzed and

allocated to the corresponding populist and anti-populist codes, using several of them when appropriate. Other codes informed by the literature on populism, such as references to disinformation, religion, territorial issues, anti-gender views, traditional values, punitiveness, state intervention, and economic liberalism, were also recorded to provide a richer picture of the recurrent ideas used in the articulation of VOX’ discourses.

RESULTS

The results of our analysis show how VOX’s discourse is modulated and evolved during the first wave of the pandemic (**Figure 1**). We observe significant changes *vis-à-vis* VOX’s 2019 political manifestos in terms of mix of populist discursive attributes. The idealized depiction of society loses relevance, whereas the moral and antagonistic dimensions largely increase their salience. These were already the two dominant dimensions in the January investiture speech (see second bar chart, first row, in **Figure 1**) but during the pandemic the populist references to society are reduced and the moral component increased further. Another interesting aspect is that anti-populist features, which were scarce but present in the political manifestos, disappeared in Abascal’s parliamentary interventions. Although we acknowledge that additional research is required to establish to what extent the discrepancies in salience of populist dimensions between manifestos and parliamentary speeches are the result of the specific communication context and medium—written declaration of intentions vs oral parliamentary debate—, or the effect of the crisis, these results corroborate the idea that populist discourses are context-dependent (Ekström et al., 2018; De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021). The lower density of populist features in manifestos can be linked to the nature and length of the document. Meanwhile, parliamentary interventions are time limited and often politicians adopt a very direct style in which they engage in a confrontational rhetoric to undermine the credibility of their political adversaries, rather than trying to elaborate on specific proposals about the organization of society or decision-making.¹⁸

Another relevant feature is the almost complete absence of references to populist sovereignty and leadership. While for other PRRPs such as the Brexit Party, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and *Rassemblement National* (RN—former National Front) popular sovereignty is a core component of their discourse (Olivas Osuna, 2020), in the case of VOX this is not a very relevant feature. The lack of references to personalistic leadership is not a surprise as usually manifestos in Spain focus on policy proposals and the party leader is in theory only the first in a list of many candidates.¹⁹ Similarly, parliamentary speeches are in

¹⁷Please note that in the literature anti-populism is sometimes used with a different connotation, i.e., the recriminatory attitudes against populism (e.g., Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021).

¹⁸Olivas Osuna (2019) demonstrates that the density of populist references is considerably higher in short communications, such as press articles written by populist leaders and short speeches, than in political manifestos.

¹⁹We have also found a scarcity to references to the personalistic leadership in the analysis of the political manifestos of other PRRPs (Olivas Osuna, 2020) and in those of Scottish National Party and Catalan pro-independence parties (Olivas Osuna, 2019).

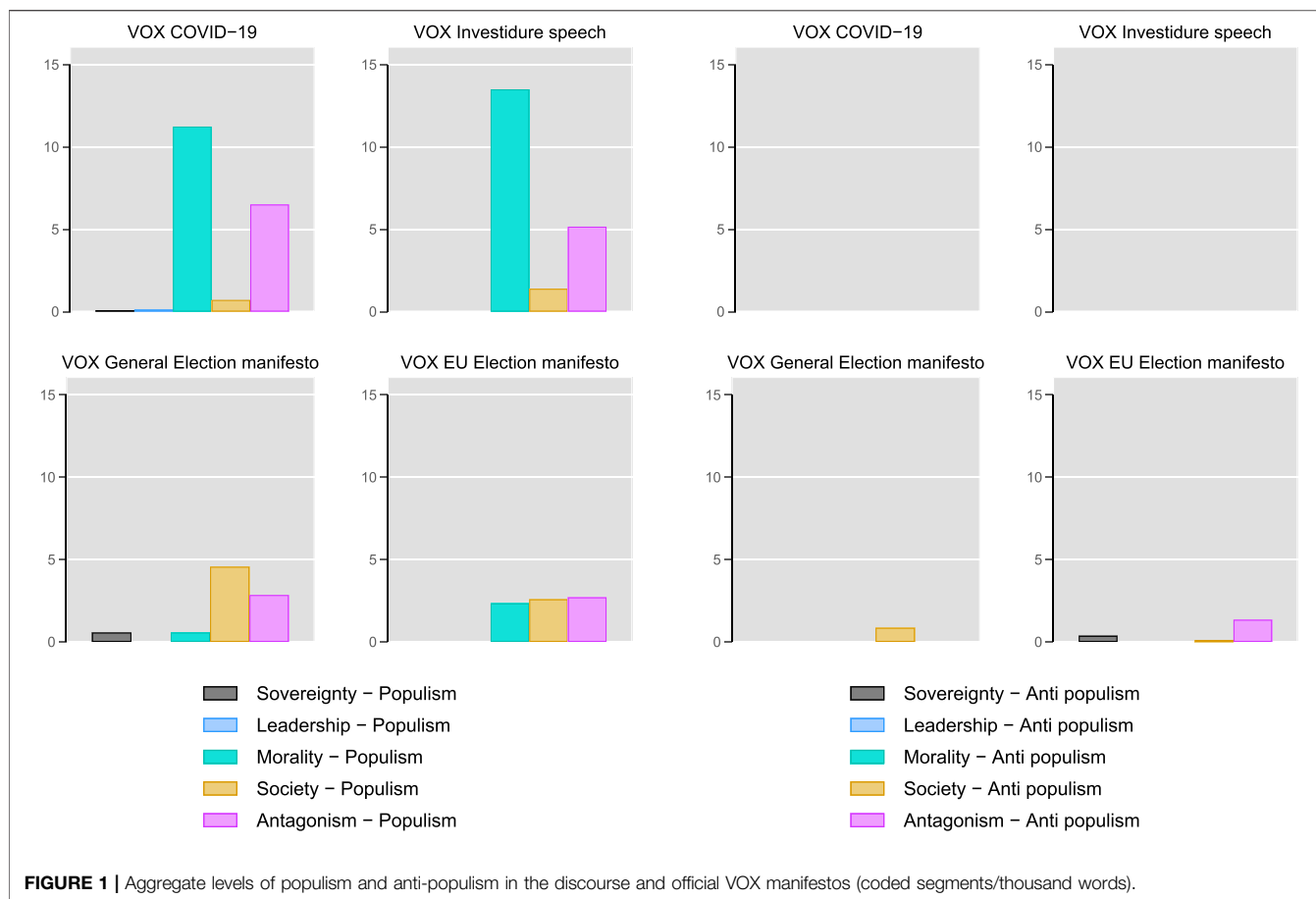


FIGURE 1 | Aggregate levels of populism and anti-populism in the discourse and official VOX manifestos (coded segments/thousand words).

theory focused on a specific topic, and leaders rarely speak about themselves. More than emphasizing their own qualities they often try to undermine those of their political opponents.

It is also important to note that populist features often appeared combined. Antagonism and morality references tend to intersect, especially in parliamentary speeches, as very often Abascal used a confrontational and moral tone to criticize political opponents. For instance, he states “[...] in this political threat we cannot forget the usual traitors: the Catalan separatists, who have even celebrated the epidemic (in Madrid) with miserable jokes” (March 25, 2020), and “this is the difference between this deputy (Abascal) and your Government, that I am going to remain loyal to my oath to Spain, to the Constitution, to the parliamentary monarchy and to the fundamental liberties that the Government intends to crush” (April 22, 2020). Abascal alludes to ill-intention of his adversaries and places them on a lower rung of a moral hierarchy he establishes. **Figures 2, 3** are visual representations of the intersection of the coded segments in the texts,—i.e., sentences allocated to more than one populist or anti-populist dimensions (in parenthesis the total number of coded segments, the thickness of lines is proportional to the frequency of intersections).

On the other hand, **Figure 4** shows the evolution of the density (number of references per 1,000 words) of populist (left-hand

graph) and anti-populist (right-hand graph) features during the six debates for the extension of the state of alarm. Both moralist and antagonistic features, upward.

But not only the frequency of populist references soared, also the tone and allusions became increasingly hyperbolic and belligerent. For instance:

“Mr. Sánchez, you can’t disguise this: tens of thousands of dead Spaniards due to sectarianism and criminal negligence by this Government and millions of Spaniards ruined ...” (Abascal, June 3, 2020) ²⁰

“... We know where your Government stands, [...], forging new agreements with all of Spain’s enemies ... , of course: with ETA, with the Basque Nationalist Party and with Republican Left of Catalonia, with those who have only ever been concerned, are and will be concerned by Spain going down in flames and who have taken advantage of this epidemic to advance their goals of destruction and division of Spain” (Abascal, June 3, 2020)

²⁰Congress Sessions Report, http://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-25-C1.PDF

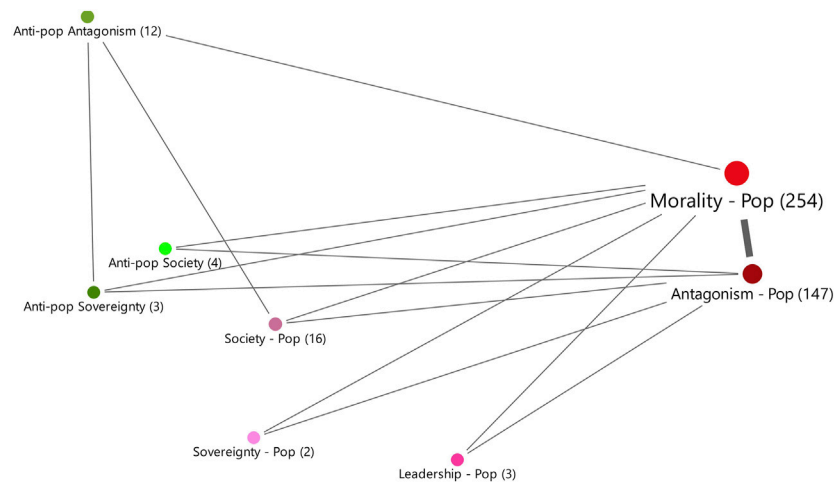


FIGURE 2 | Intersection of codes in Abascal's parliamentary speeches on the COVID19 state of alarm sessions.

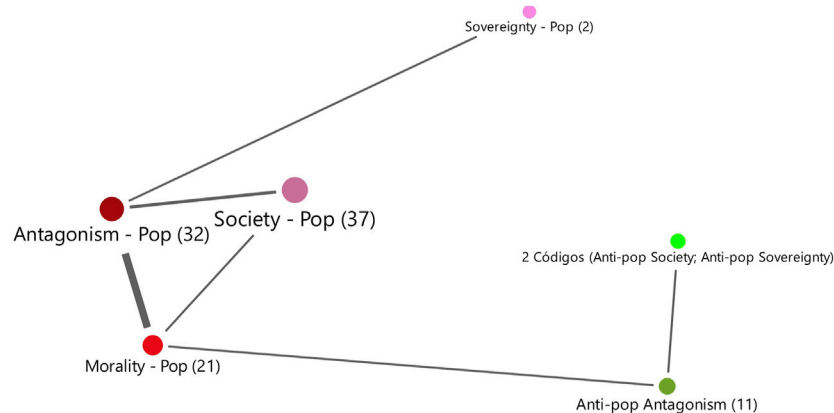


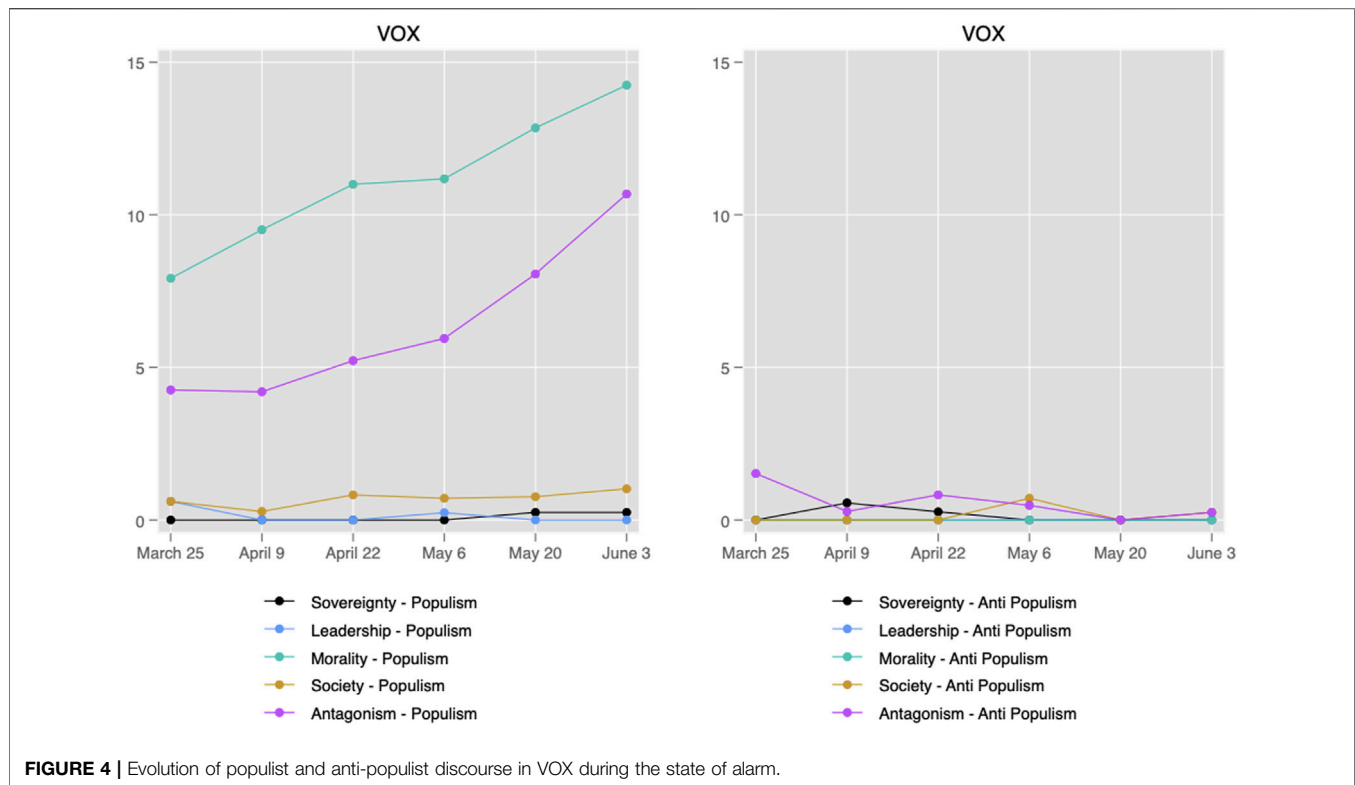
FIGURE 3 | Intersection of codes in VOX' political manifestos for 2019 European and Spanish General Elections.

"I believe that Mr Iglesias wishes a civil war, [...], I believe that in his vanity and fanaticism is capable of provoking a tragedy in Spain, but we are not going to fall into his provocations." (Abascal, June 3, 2020)

Beyond attempts to undermine the political opponents, there are very few references to specific aspects of COVID-19 pandemic. The strict lockdown measures imposed by the government and supported by the majority of parties are referred to as a "mass house arrest" (April 22, 2020). Abascal argues that the "state of alarm" has been turned into a "state of exception without limitation but suspension of fundamental rights and liberties" (May 6, 2020). He accuses the government of trying "to destroy the opposition, political pluralism and fundamental rights, such as the right of reunion" (May 6, 2020) with the pandemic policies. Abascal requests the resignation of the Government for what he calls a "criminal management which has brought economic ruin to millions of Spaniards and death to thousands" (May 20, 2020).

Our findings suggest that VOX sensed the opportunity that the pandemic presented and launched a fierce attack against the Spanish government adopting a rhetoric of an anti-establishment party (Magre et al., 2021).

The accusations against the Government of spreading misinformation and hiding the facts were constant throughout the pandemic period, as well as a noticeable change vis-à-vis Abascal's discourse during Pedro Sánchez investiture session in January 2020 and the political manifestos of 2019. For example, Abascal states: "we will not get out of this (referring to the crisis) with the propaganda techniques of Mr. Maduro (Venezuelan President) or the wisecracks of unscrupulous spin doctors" (March 25, 2020); "the hoax Government has sent us today its speakers, Mrs. Lastra, Mr. Echenique, and later Mr. Sánchez, to spread fake news and lies" (April 9, 2020), and that the Government is "hiding health information to the Spanish people" (June 3, 2020). References to disinformation appear intertwined with populist features. Some of the other common themes in previous VOX communications, such as nationalist



references, territorial issues, religion, and critiques to gender discourses, although present in COVID-19 speeches, they lose salience. The theme of immigration disappears in the parliamentary speeches analyzed, despite being a core theme in their manifestos. However, this does not mean that migration was completely removed from VOX's agenda as migrants were later linked to the pandemic by other leaders of the party.²¹ **Figure 5** maps the codes Abascal's speeches on the pandemic debates, based on proximity in the text (one paragraph distance).

Polarization can be instrumentalized in the process of construction or reconstruction of a popular identity (Mazzolini, 2021: 107). With transgressive crisis performances and generic attacks based on moral considerations more than on specific examples of mismanagement of the pandemic, Abascal may have sought to delegitimize his political opponents and promote a process of popular identification based on a logic of equivalence (Ostiguy et al., 2021: 2; Laclau, 2005). This means trying to develop a sense of unity among voters who share different, but perceived as equivalent, grievances and negative sentiments against the Government and the parties that support it. Although some of these frustrations are originated by the COVID-19 crisis itself, Abascal reinforces discontent by bundling

them with other political and social issues. Thus, crisis and citizens' grievances become co-constructed thanks to the mediation of populist discourses (De Cleen et al., 2021: 158). Polarization may be considered here a key element in the strategy that tries to generate and capitalize on negative partisanship, i.e., a process of political identification based on the antipathies toward certain parties (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

Finally, we also analyze the speeches of the other five biggest parliamentary groups PSOE, PP, UP, ERC, and Cs on the first, March 25, 2020, and last debate on the state of alarm, June 3, 2020, to contextualize the level of populism of VOX and detect possible spill-over effects on the discursive performance of other leaders.²² The density of populist and anti-populist features varies significantly across parties. **Figure 6** displays the aggregate levels of populism in their speakers' speeches in the first and last debate in the Congress of Deputies regarding the state of alarm. In this very same line, **Figure 7** disaggregates populism into its dimensions. Both figures show significant changes in the levels of populism in the interventions of several other parties.

First, the speeches of PSOE and Cs contain a comparatively very low density of populist references and a high level of anti-populist features (mostly antagonism and sovereignty anti-populism) in both sessions. Pedro Sánchez interventions were

²¹For instance, 20 minutos. 24 June 2020. "Vox acusa a las ONG que rescatan a los inmigrantes de 'matar a los españoles a base de infecciones': <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4303068/0/vox-acusa-ong-inmigrantes-matar-espanoles-a-base-infecciones/>

²²It is worth noting that none of the parties voted against the first extension in March but VOX, PP and ERC voted against the last one proposed by the Government in June.

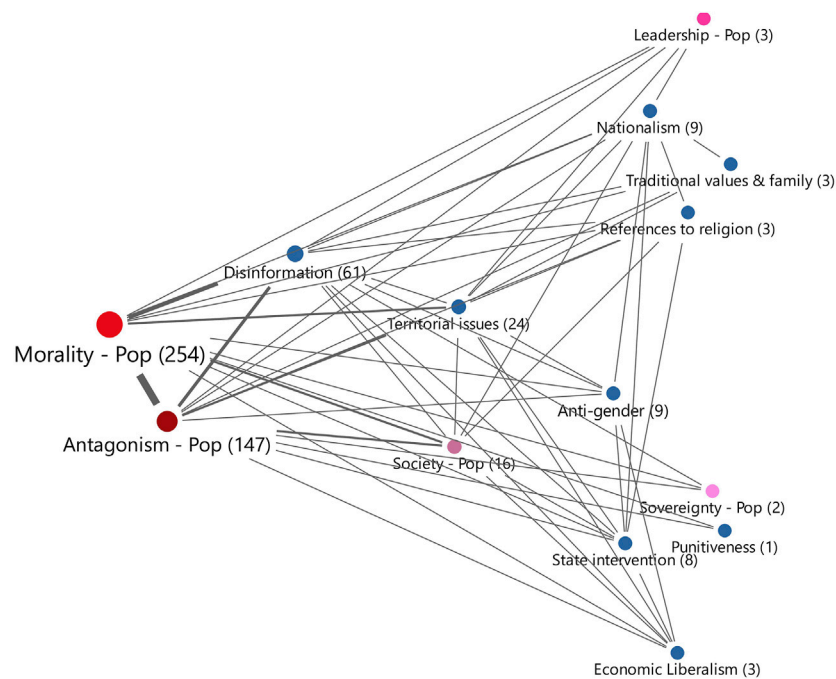


FIGURE 5 | Intersection of codes in Abascal's parliamentary speeches on COVID19 state of alarm sessions.

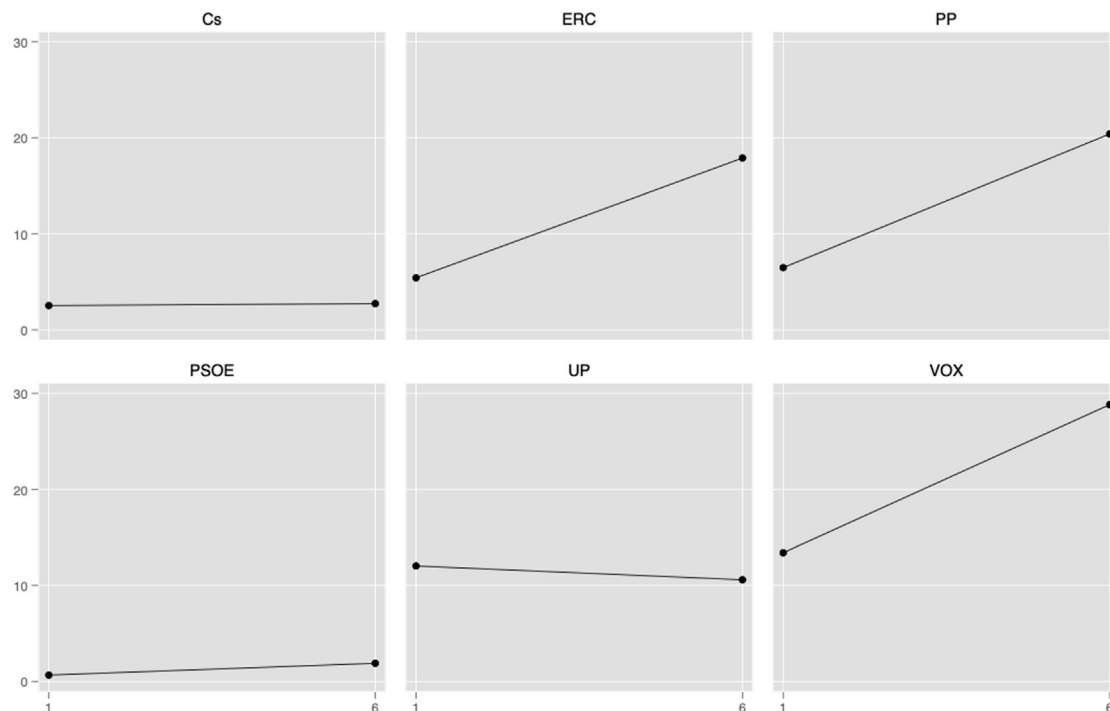
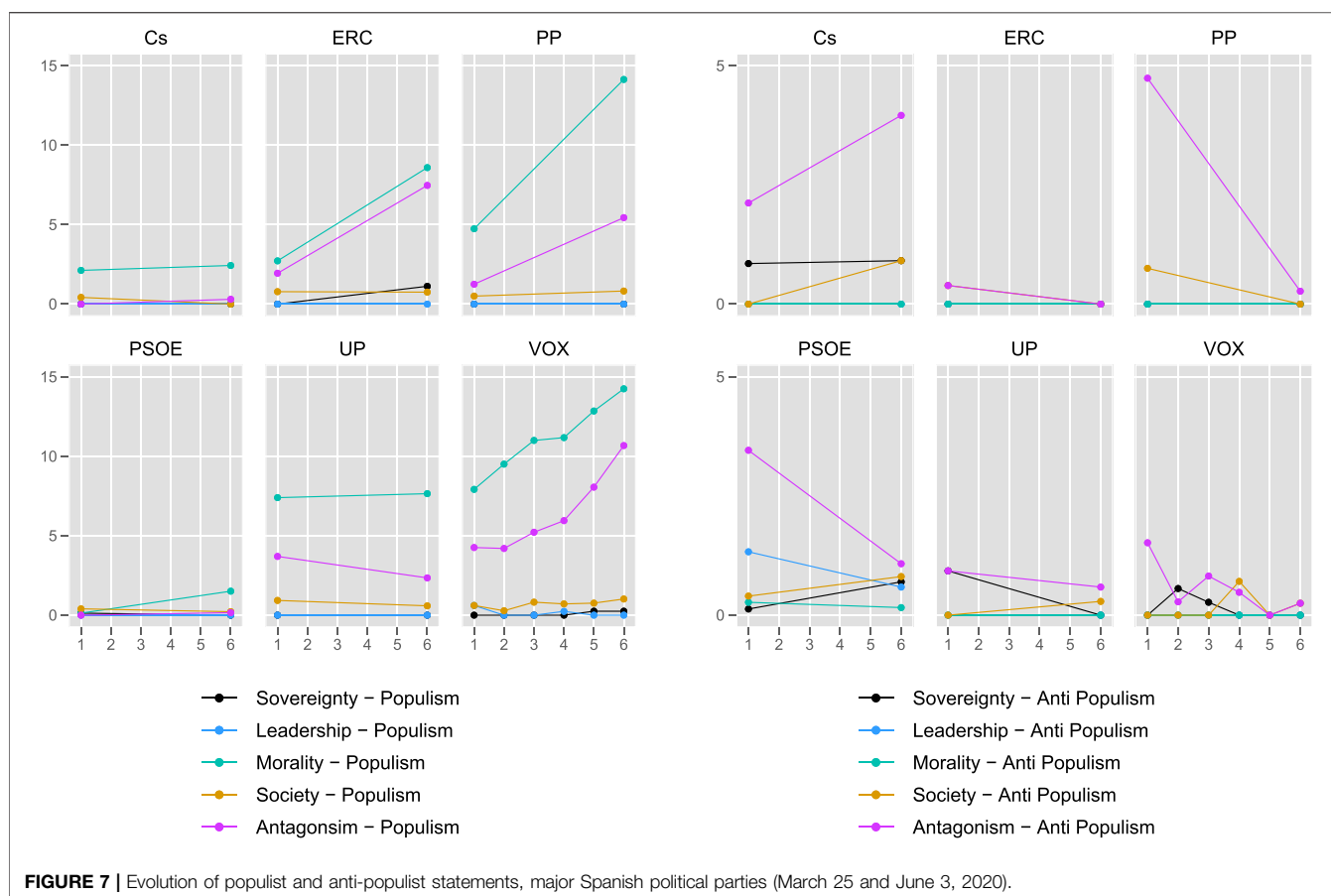


FIGURE 6 | Aggregate levels of populism during the lockdown (March 25 and June 3, 2020).

long and most of them were focused on summarizing and justifying the policies that his government was adopting. Nonetheless, in his June speech Sánchez also directs several

moral attacks against Abascal and Casado in response to the hard critiques from both leaders. The speakers of Cs, Edmundo Bal and María Muñoz, expressed the will to collaborate with the



Government during the crisis and help implementing the necessary reforms. As Sánchez, they make references to dialogue and consensus building and the important role of national and international institutions and laws. Bal's speech on June 3, 2020 contains a higher density of anti-populist features than that of Muñoz in March. In this regard, the evolution of Cs speeches is unique as all other parties display the opposite trend. However, we cannot conclude that this responds to a party communication strategy or simply to different communicative styles between the two speakers.

Second, UP, despite being part of the government coalition which had managed to secure great parliamentary support for the extension of the state of alarm uses in both sessions a relatively high level of populist references, the speakers of UP, Santiago Romero and Jaume Asens, accuse the previous PP government of undermining public services and thus increasing the pandemic damage in Spain. Asens refers to these policies as "radical right suicidal policies" and claims that VOX and PP are suggesting that the Civil Guard and the Army should make a coup d'état against the Government. He also accuses VOX of propagating hatred and PP of ties with Francoism. Although the density of populist references is overall lower in Asens' speech the tone is more belligerent than that of Romero. This more aggressive stance could be also connected with the intensification of the populist discourses of VOX and PP throughout the state of alarm period or, as suggested above, to different discursive styles between the

two speakers of the coalition, who, in addition, belong to different political parties (Asens belongs to UP Catalan brand, En Comú Podem, and Romero belongs to United Left).

Third, during the session of the first extension in March, ERC's speaker, Gabriel Rufián, displayed a very low degree of populism and devoted most of his speech to an agricultural policy which had been discussed the same day. However, during the last extension session in June, he significantly increased the number of antagonistic and moral references. Rufián directly criticizes Abascal's speech and suggests that despite having reached agreements with the left-wing government during the state of alarm, "Ciudadanos is VOX in phase 1" (June 3, 2020). Moreover, in a Manichean fashion he ends up equating the right-wing political forces with fascism and the left-wing parties with anti-fascism.

Finally, PP's leader, Pablo Casado displays the most significant change in discourse between the first and last state of alarm session. Anti-populist features fall sharply, and populist ones increase dramatically. Although it is not possible to establish a causal link, there are some similarities between the discourses of Abascal and Casado on June 3, 2020. Casado questions the legitimacy of Pedro Sánchez, arguing that he is the President with less popular support in history of democracy and that he relies on the support of ultra-left and secessionist groups. He accuses Sánchez of purposefully polarizing Spain and of "unstitching the Transition harmony", "endangering national unity", abusing public institutions for his political benefit, and being the less democratic and more radical

of the governments of the Spanish democracy. Casado also claims that Sánchez conceals the real number of COVID-19 casualties to hide his incompetence and that he is undermining the economy amid the crisis. Despite the strong moral criticisms and antagonistic stance in his speech, Casado's style is significantly less hyperbolic and coarse than that of Abascal. Casado's more confrontational and populist discourse may be interpreted as an attempt to assert his role as opposition leader. The initial moderate and supportive stance of PP and Cs was utilized by VOX to stand out and try to capitalize on the discontent of the people with lockdown measures and health crisis.

Our analysis shows that Abascal's discursive style, matches increasingly the characterization of populism by scholars in the performative tradition, such as Ostiguy and Moffitt.²³ The communication strategy of the leader of VOX resonates with (Moffitt, 2015: 198–208) model of populist performances of crisis. Abascal identified the Government's failure to deal with the pandemic and elevated the crisis by connecting it with a wider moral interpretative framework, that also helped him depict the Government as antagonistic to the Spanish people. He dramatized his interventions aware that media would contribute to propagate his inflammatory statements.²⁴ Abascal also offered simple solutions to complex problems and presented himself as a strong leader. He organized a vote of no confidence and put himself forward as candidate to replace Sánchez as President of the Spanish Government. During the vote of no confidence, on October 21, 2020, he continued to perform the crisis with a similarly hyperbolic style by claiming, for instance, that Sánchez' government was “the worst Government in the last eighty years” —which suggests that it was worse than Francoist governments—and a “communist popular front in alliance with separatists and terrorists”, in other words “a Mafia” (Congreso de Diputados, 2020).²⁵

Other leaders of VOX have also embraced an aggressive performative style, distancing themselves from what is politically correct emulating former United States President, Donald Trump, and other international populist figures. For example, during the vote of no confidence, VOX deputy spokesperson, Ignacio Garriga, referred to “electoral fraud”, accused the ruling coalition of “participating in a coup”, of totalitarian ideology, of “criminal management” of the crisis. He also used this speech to accuse “illegal immigrants” of attacking, intimidating and stealing.²⁶

Overall, the radicalization of VOX seems to have significantly influenced the discourses of PP, that chose to follow the radical

right party stance in harshly criticising the government, as well as the discourses of UP and ERC that reacted by also adopting a confrontational and moral tone against both, VOX and PP. Even Sánchez, whose discourse had a low density of populist features, included several antagonistic and moral recriminations to the right-wing leaders. For instance, he claims, “there is a difference between who fights against the virus and who uses the virus in bad faith to do partisan politics, like Partido Popular and ultra-right VOX are doing” (June 3, 2020).

This “action-reaction” dynamic gradually increased the overall level of populist references in the parliamentary debates. Although VOX, a populist party, led the utilization of a polarizing rhetoric in the COVID-19 pandemic context in Spain, other populist and non-populist parties also embraced an antagonistic discursive logic. As our analysis shows, the reactions and recriminations against populist leaders can paradoxically contribute to make more pervasive the populist frames and articulations (Stavrakakis, 2014: 508–512; Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2018: 1684). The denigration and stigmatization of populist leaders help reify the Manichean division of the polity and creates an opportunity for the instrumentalization of the narratives of victimhood and humiliation to affectively anchor other populist claims (Gerodimos, 2015; Homolar and Löffmann, 2021).

Moreover, the discursive changes revealed in this study seem to corroborate that communication styles are context-dependent (Ekström et al., 2018; De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis, initially pushed most parties to adopt a conciliatory tone. However, Abascal saw the opportunity to make VOX stand out and spectacularize the crisis by adopting an aggressive register. This shift in communication style then triggered a sort of contagion effect in other parties, that also modified theirs to confront and/or imitate Abascal. Further research is necessary to investigate whether the populist rhetoric was sustained throughout the entire pandemic²⁷ and to what extent polarized discursive performances of political leaders are the cause of the very high levels of affective polarization in the Spanish society (Gidron et al., 2020: 23) and whether VOX manages to benefit electorally from them.

CONCLUSION

VOX is a young populist radical right party that has shown in the last few years great capacity to adapt its discourse to surrounding events, such as the political conflict in Catalonia and the COVID-19 pandemic. VOX has transitioned from a traditionally conservative discourse to a more aggressive populist one, with many similarities with other radical right discourses in the United States and Europe. Santiago Abascal and other VOX leaders adopt now a coarse and uninhibited style in their communications. Their narratives oppose multiculturalism and immigration and display frequent criticism against Islam. They advocate for a centralized Spain without regional governments and

²³For instance, Ostiguy (2009; 2017) defines populism as the “flaunting of the low” and alludes to an antagonistic, uninhibited and coarse style adopted by populist leaders (Ostiguy, 2009; 2017: 73–74, 79), and Moffitt defines populism as “a political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat” (Moffitt, 2016: 45).

²⁴Many of Abascal controversial statements during these sessions were later reflected in Spanish major newspapers, TVs and radio channels.

²⁵Santiago Abascal's speech on 21 October 2020 for the vote of no confidence. VOX Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pckbJrOq4QA>

²⁶Speech by Ignacio Garriga “VOX Grupo parlamentario” in VOX official website: https://www.voxespana.es/grupo_parlamentario/actividad-parlamentaria/discursos-integro-ignacio-garriga-presentacion-esta-mocion-censura-ya-hemos-ganado-solo-pierde-quien-no-tiene-convicciones-20201021

²⁷It is worth noting that during the vote of no confidence session in the Congress, Casado changed again his discourse and focused his criticisms on the threat of Abascal and populism to democracy.

impact on its discourses and, in general terms, on the Spanish parliamentary debates.

The purpose of the article was not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ideology and policy proposals of VOX, but to assess whether the COVID-19 crisis had a substantial impact on its discourses and on Spanish parliamentary debates. This study has explored empirically some theoretical arguments, such as whether populist discourses are context dependent (Hawkins et al., 2019a; De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021), the mutually constitutive relationship between populism and crisis (Moffitt 2015), and the propagation effect that populist performances have in non-populist parties (Stavrakakis, 2014). To this end, we have conducted quantitative and qualitative content analysis of two political manifestos and seventeen parliamentary speeches using a new multidimensional comparative framework for the study of populism (Olivas Osuna, 2021).

Our analysis suggests that the pandemic was seized by VOX as a window of opportunity to adopt a highly antagonistic and moral rhetoric to attempt to discredit the Government, gain visibility, and harvest political support from dissatisfied citizens. We show that Abascal consistently intensified the populist tone throughout the six parliamentary debates on the extension of the state of alarm between March and June 2020. Some of the usual themes in the manifestos of VOX—such as calls for popular sovereignty, exclusionary idealization of Spain, territorial issues, religion, and critiques to gender discourses—lost weight and were replaced by direct attacks to the government. This discursive shift away from some of the core ideas that VOX customarily emphasizes in its communications indicates that not only ideology but also context and strategy inform populist discourses.

Abascal speeches tried to shape the interpretation of the crisis in a Manichean fashion. The leader of VOX did not devote much attention to the complexity of the situation, or the specific measures taken in the fight against COVID-19, but largely attempted to delegitimize his political opponents by accusing them of disinformation and having hidden motives, such as eroding the unity of Spain and trying to establish a communist authoritarian regime. The use of bad manners and the dramatization of the political crisis, with hyperbolic and moralizing recriminations, fits with a populist polarizing strategy that seeks to posit “the people” against ruling coalition, and capitalize on discontent and negative partisanship.

Abascal’s discursive performance seems to have influenced not only other leaders of VOX, who relied on hyperbolic accusations to political opponents and conspiracy-based logic during the rest of the pandemic, but also the speakers of several other (populist and non-populist) parties. The leader of PP, Casado, drastically modified his discourse between the first and last COVID-19 debate. Anti-populist features were abandoned and replaced by abundant populist antagonism and morality features. Although the style of Casado was not as emotional and aggressive as that of Abascal, the density of populist references displayed was also very high and several of the critiques were similar to those made by the leader of VOX. The speakers of ERC and UP, parties who usually utilize populist allusions in their communications, took advantage of the excessive claims by Abascal to caricaturize and delegitimize VOX as well as the other right-leaning parties

such as PP and Cs. Even Sánchez, who kept an institutional somewhat neutral tone during most of the speeches analyzed, used several antagonistic and moralistic arguments against VOX and PP.

Our exploratory analysis suggests two mechanisms explaining the propagation of the populist rhetoric in the Spanish Congress. On the one hand, by hardening the attacks to the government, populist parties may try to differentiate themselves from other political forces and obtain more media attention, following a sort of populist outbidding strategy. The newly acquired disproportionate visibility may turn into increased support from disenchanted citizens. The exaggeration and perpetuation of the crisis become important instruments in the populist toolkit. Other parties, such as PP in this case, may choose to also adopt a populist rhetoric to avoid losing voters to more radical parties, such as VOX. The recent regional elections in Catalonia—in February 2021—, where PP adopted a moderate stance but was largely beaten by VOX, may illustrate that maintaining a pluralist discourse in the context of crisis and polarization can be electorally damaging in the short-term.

On the other hand, parties from the other side of the political spectrum, may also enter in a populist confrontation dynamic with the party who escalated first. Once a party breaks implicit conventions on what is acceptable to say in a parliament other parties may follow. In the case of parliamentary debates concerning the extension of the state of alarm in Spain, party speakers engaged in aggressive attacks onto each other with hyperbolic accusations such as suggesting that some parties were “euthanizing” part of the population, calling for a military coup d’état, wishing a civil war, or being fascists. The crossing of dialectic red lines in parliament could be later reflected in a more aggressive tone and further polarization in the public sphere.

Although a wider comparative analysis would be required to confirm the magnitude and impact of the process of intensification of populist rhetoric in the Spanish parliament during the COVID-19 pandemic, our findings support the argument that crisis can stimulate populism but also that populists, via their communicative performances, construct or reinforce crisis (Moffitt 2015). Similarly, our study has shown that other parties react to these performances by also engaging in blame attribution and moral condemnation contributing, therefore, to normalize populist articulation and to propagate or escalate the sense of crisis (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 13).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LCEAZP>.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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