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# We, the ... elites? Anti-elitism of governing populist parties in Poland, Greece, and Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines anti-elitist communication of populist actors in power, focusing on Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS), Greece's left-wing SYRIZA, and Ukraine's valence populist Servant of the People (SN). Using semantic text analysis and standardized content analysis, the study compares the parties' anti-elitism on Facebook across four dimensions: sector (political versus non-political), specificity (generic versus specific), scope (national versus transnational), and the newly proposed dimension of temporal orientation (present versus past). The findings show that, despite their incumbent status, PiS, SYRIZA, and SN predominantly targeted political elites at the national level, instead of focusing on non-political and transnational elites, as some literature suggests. All three parties engaged in past-oriented anti-elitism to varying degrees, portraying former ruling elites as responsible for ongoing problems. The study enriches the literature on anti-elitism in power by broadening its geographic scope and incorporating diverse types of populist parties into the analysis.

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## Introduction

Anti-elitism is widely regarded as a necessary and non-compensatory element of populism (Jungkunz, Robert, and Airo 2021). This implies that political actors who do not manifest anti-elitism in their communication cannot be considered populist according to most definitions of the term. While non-populist parties and politicians also engage in anti-elitism to varying degrees, it is the populist actors who do so with greater consistency and intensity (Licht et al. 2025).

Beyond being a defining feature of populism, anti-elitism plays an important role in political communication, as political actors utilize it to compete for the attention of citizens and the media. Research on speaker-audience interaction indicates that anti-elitist rhetoric is among the most effective tools for generating public engagement (Yanchenko and Kleinen-von Königsłow 2024). Given that negativity and conflict are

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central to news selection, the media may amplify anti-elitism in reporting (Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese 2015). Recognizing this dynamic, political actors often strategically employ anti-elitism to enhance their media visibility and influence public discourse.

Anti-elitism also has implications for the functioning of democracy. On the one hand, it provides a tool for diagnosing the flaws of democracy, scrutinizing elected officials, and fostering political agency (Panizza 2005). On the other hand, anti-elitism – potentially fueling anger and reinforcing social and partisan divisions – can transform benign polarization (Stavrakakis 2018) into pernicious polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019). Furthermore, anti-elitist attacks on institutions may contribute to declining trust in the political system and decreasing satisfaction with democracy (Paczeński 2024).

These observations, coupled with the continued rise of populist-led governments worldwide (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2023), underscore the need for a deeper examination of how anti-elitism is constructed discursively – including by populist actors in power. While anti-elitism is naturally expected from political underdogs (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), a paradox emerges when populists assume governmental roles. Can actors pursuing an anti-elitist profile remain truthful to it when they now occupy the position they once criticized? Is anti-elitism in power not a contradiction? Recent research, focusing primarily on right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, has begun to address these questions, showing that anti-elitism in power is, in fact, a widespread phenomenon (Schwörer 2022; Vaughan and Heft 2023). However, many important questions remain open, including the specific characteristics of anti-elitism in power, its primary targets, and its manifestations in contexts beyond those studied so far.

To address these gaps, the present study examines anti-elitism in the Facebook posts of three populist parties in government: the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS), the Greek *Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás – Proodeftikí Simachía* (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance, SYRIZA), and the Ukrainian *Sluha Narodu* (Servant of the People, SN). The goal of the study is to deepen our understanding of how populist actors in government construct and sustain anti-elitism. In pursuing this goal, we contribute to existing research on anti-elitism in power in three ways. First, we shift the focus from Western to Central, Southern, and Eastern European cases, which have so far received less scholarly attention. Second, we examine parties that governed as major coalition partners or held an absolute majority in the parliament, unlike most previous studies that focused on populist actors in junior coalition roles. Third, we analyze anti-elitism in power across different varieties of populist parties, including right-wing PiS, left-wing SYRIZA, and valence populist SN.

Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-method approach, combining semantic text analysis (Aslanidis 2018), standardized content analysis, and interpretative methods to examine anti-elitism across four dimensions: sector (political versus non-political), specificity (generic versus specific), scope (national versus transnational), and the newly proposed dimension of temporal orientation (past versus present).

We demonstrate that even while in power, PiS, SYRIZA, and SN primarily targeted political elites at the national level – a pattern typically associated with opposition rhetoric. This suggests that although populists may strategically adjust their anti-elitism upon entering government, this shift should not be overstated as it does not necessarily alter the primary ‘villains’ in their discourse. Accordingly, the study questions the utility of

the ‘populist elite paradox’ for understanding anti-elitism in power and highlights its inherently constructed nature.

## Populism and power

Earlier literature viewed ‘populism’ and ‘power’ as contradictory notions, with populists seen as successful in opposition but unsustainable in government (Heinisch 2003). Populists were expected to be absorbed by institutions, turning into conventional political actors and abandoning their anti-establishment character. However, recent cases, like Donald Trump in the United States, SYRIZA in Greece, and the overall Latin American experience of populist governance, have challenged this view. As Herkman and Palonen (2024) argue, besides fringe populisms outside or at the end of party systems, mainstream populisms occupying dominant positions have proven possible.

Another strand of literature associates populism in government with authoritarianism: Populists capture the state, attack human rights, and infringe on the rule of law, posing a threat to democratic institutions and the constitutional order (Pappas 2019). While populists can exhibit authoritarian traits and vice versa, authoritarianism is not intrinsic to populism. Overgeneralizing the overlap between populism and authoritarianism risks obscuring the distinctiveness of both concepts.

A third argument is evident in the literature: Populists in government can last and implement policy in close line with their ideology (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). However, the view that populism is an ideology – even a ‘thin’ one (Mudde 2004) – has been contested (Aslanidis 2016). While populism is usually accompanied by an ideology (hence, generating a typology of left and right-wing populism), it maintains its distinct political logic that divides the political space between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. Thus, the conceptual essence of populism lies in the operational criteria of people-centrism and anti-elitism (Laclau 2005), rather than in a coherent ideology or set of policies.

In this study, we approach populism by focusing on *populist agency*, i.e. the ability of populist actors to construct and interpellate political subjectivities – ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (Venizelos 2023). Such an approach is often overlooked against attitudinal or structural perspectives focusing, respectively on the social, economic, and psychological profiles, or the structural reasons that cause populism (Silva, Bruno, and Littvay 2017). As a result, the role of communication in the study of populism is downplayed, which applies especially to its second operational criterion: anti-elitism (Karavasilis 2025).

## ‘The elite’ as an empty signifier

The concept of an empty signifier, referring to a signifier without a fixed meaning, was developed by Laclau (2005) to theorize the construction of ‘the people’ in populist discourse. In this framework, ‘the people’ is not a pre-existing entity but a floating category that unifies diverse societal grievances against a shared adversary – ‘the elite’. This construction occurs through the so-called ‘chain of equivalence’ (Stavarakakis and Katsambekis 2014), where different demands and identities, despite their inherent differences, are linked together through their shared opposition to a common adversary. The ambiguity of the ‘the people’ category allows populist actors to shape its meaning according to their ideological orientation and socio-political context.

Just as ‘the people’ lacks a singular meaning, ‘the elite’ arguably also functions as an empty signifier (De Cleen 2019; Karavasilis 2025). Defining this category in advance risks pre-determining its meaning, imposing artificial boundaries that constrain its applicability for comparative research, and limiting the ability to analyze how elites are constructed in different contexts. To avoid this, we follow the approach of Ege and Springer (2023), who state: ‘We do not define who “the elite” really is. Instead, we pursue the term in different contexts and try to understand better what image critics of the elites have of their adversaries’ (Ege and Springer 2023, 3).

Emphasizing the ‘emptiness’ of the ‘the elite’ category does not imply that the concept is indefinable. Rather, it highlights how its meaning is shaped by context. Depending on the ideological positioning of the populist actor, as well as the regional, political, and historical dynamics of the country in which they operate, ‘the elite’ can take on different connotations.

### **Left- and right-wing populist conceptions of ‘the elite’**

Ostiguy and Casullo argue that the key distinction between left- and right-wing populism lies in how they construct the ‘sociological (nefarious) Other’ (2017, 6). In left-wing populism, ‘the elite’ is primarily associated with groups perceived as exploiting ‘the downtrodden people of this place’ (7), such as ‘the rich’, ‘the oligarchy’, or ‘the 1%’. In contrast, the right-wing populist conception of ‘the elite’ is closely tied to an exclusionary understanding of ‘the people’. By defining ‘the people’ in ethnocultural and nativist terms, right-wing populists portray certain social groups – such as ‘immigrants’, ‘Muslims’, or ‘Mexicans’ (7) – as outsiders who threaten national identity and social cohesion. Since ‘the establishment’, ‘the arrogant intellectuals’, and ‘the progressives’ are seen as enabling and protecting these ‘deviant’ groups, they become primary targets of right-wing populist anti-elitism. In this sense, anti-elitism can be understood as a populist strategy to ‘defend’ ‘the people’ (Staykova, Otova, and Ivanova 2016), with left- and right-wing populisms differing fundamentally in *who* they claim to defend them from. Thus, left-wing populist discourse typically associates ‘the elite’ with economic and institutional actors, such as ‘bankers’, ‘the state’, or ‘the church’, while right-wing populism tends to target cultural and intellectual elites, including ‘academics’, ‘Hollywood’, or ‘the media’.

### **Anti-elitism of populist actors in power**

This section reviews the literature on the anti-elitism of populist actors in power and outlines the research questions guiding our study.

The phenomenon of anti-elitism in power is theoretically intriguing, as it embodies the so-called ‘populist elite paradox’ (Mangset et al. 2019). This paradox occurs when populist actors, known for their campaigning against elites, ascend to power and formally become part of the elite themselves. From a theoretical perspective, this dynamic can be understood within the framework of what De Cleen and Alberto Ruiz Casado (2024, 1009) describe as ‘populism by the privileged’. In such cases, relatively privileged actors, for instance, a ruling party, present themselves as champions of ‘ordinary people’ and – crucially for this discussion – attack ‘the elite’. Empirical studies provide some illustrations of this ‘contradictory’ phenomenon. For instance, Schwörer (2022) shows that Italy’s Lega,

Spain's Podemos, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and New Zealand First not only retained but, in some cases, intensified anti-elitism after transitioning from opposition to government. Vaughan and Heft (2023) also find that right-wing Lega, PiS, and FPÖ upheld their anti-elitism in government. In contrast, Krekó (2021, 242) highlights examples where, according to his analysis, the anti-elitism of populist parties either disappeared entirely (as in the case of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro) or underwent significant transformations (as in the case of Fidesz) upon the parties' ascent to power. Given the limited number of studies and the variations in their findings, a necessary first step is to assess the presence and prevalence of anti-elitism in the communication of the relevant actors. Accordingly, the study's first research question inquires:

**RQ1:** What proportion of Facebook posts from PiS, SYRIZA, and SN contained anti-elitism?

In cases where populist actors maintain their anti-elitism after coming to power, the literature suggests they tend to develop various communication strategies that allow them to uphold an anti-elitist stance without appearing inauthentic or hypocritical to voters (Jungkunz, Robert, and Airo 2021). These strategies can be analyzed along four dimensions of anti-elitist communication: (1) sector, (2) specificity, (3) scope, and (4) temporal orientation.

The term 'anti-elitism sector' (Vaughan and Heft 2023, 87) denotes the social domain of the elite under attack, which can vary across political, economic, cultural, and other sectors (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, 324; Silva, Bruno, and Littvay 2017, 425). When populist parties are in opposition, the ruling political actors are the most obvious targets of anti-elitism (Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 564). However, as Jungkunz, Robert, and Airo (2021, 13) observe, when populists enter government, they often redirect their criticism toward non-political elites, such as academics, bureaucrats, journalists, or business figures. This shift is understood as a strategic adaptation that enables populist actors to sustain their anti-elitist stance while mitigating the contradiction of being part of the elite. From a theoretical perspective, such reframing is possible due to the presence of multiple sociologically graspable 'layers and axes of privilege' (De Cleen and Alberto Ruiz Casado 2024, 1018), which allows for discursive maneuvers resulting in the constructions of different elite types. Populists in power can emphasize one axis of privilege over another, downplaying their own elite status and shifting the focus to other groups. Despite this possibility, populist parties often continue to center their attacks on political elites even after attaining power, as Vaughan and Heft (2023) illustrate with the cases of Lega, PiS, and FPÖ. Thus, concerning the sector of anti-elitism, we ask:

**RQ2:** How did PiS, SYRIZA, and SN navigate the sectoral dimension of anti-elitism, particularly in terms of targeting political and non-political elites?

Another key characteristic of anti-elitism is its specificity (Schwörer 2022, 473), which refers to whether populist actors target concrete, identifiable elite individuals or groups (politician X, media outlet Y) or direct their criticism at broad, diffuse categories such as 'the system' or 'the media'. A high degree of generic anti-elitism is particularly emblematic of populism, as it reinforces the vagueness of 'the elite' category discussed earlier. As

Jagers and Walgrave (2007, 324) note, 'The more diffuse the anti-elitism – that is, directed against general and universal elite categories [...]—the more fervent and radical it is'. At the same time, both theoretical (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016) and empirical (Schwörer 2022) studies suggest that populist actors in power predominantly target specific elites. This strategy allows them to sustain their anti-elitist rhetoric while avoiding excessively broad critiques that could inadvertently implicate groups they now represent. Failing to distinguish between specific and generic anti-elitism can create analytical challenges. Todosijević, Pavlović, and Komar (2022) show that widely used populist attitude scales conflate genuine anti-elitist sentiment with dissatisfaction toward specific governing parties. Consequently, these scales have reduced predictive power in countries where populist actors are in government (see also Jungkunz, Robert, and Airo 2021). To capture this dimension of anti-elitist discourse, we ask:

**RQ3:** To what extent was the anti-elitism expressed by PiS, SYRIZA, and SN directed at specific elites compared to generic elite categories?

Alongside specificity, the scope of anti-elitism has garnered scholarly attention (Mangset et al. 2019). It pertains to whether populist actors target national elites or extend their attacks to transnational actors, such as political alliances, financial institutions, and international organizations. The literature suggests that populist actors in government often adopt the latter approach, which allows them to sustain the narrative of a sinister out-group by shifting blame from national to transnational elites. For example, Müller (2016, 33) notes that while in power, former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez consistently blamed the United States for any failures of the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Similarly, after gaining power in Hungary, Fidesz reportedly redirected its hostility from national elites to the EU's bureaucratic elite (Mangset et al. 2019, 213). As Vaughan and Heft (2023, 81) argue, the multi-level structure of European politics facilitates this strategy by providing an additional layer of elites that can be held accountable. Therefore, we inquire:

**RQ4:** How did PiS, SYRIZA, and SN frame the scope of their anti-elitism in terms of national and transnational elites?

One aspect of anti-elitism that has not yet been studied extensively is its temporal orientation, as expressed through chronopolitics (Knott 2024). This dimension differentiates between criticisms of current elites, who are blamed for ongoing failures, and past elites – those individuals and groups held responsible for misgovernance before a populist actor assumed power. Chronopolitics, broadly understood, refers to 'how politics is about time, and how [...] time [is] presupposed by politics' (Maier 1987, as cited in Taş 2022, 128). In the context of populism, studies on chronopolitics examine how and with what effects populist actors construct narratives about the past, present, and/or future. For example, one strand of this literature examines how right-wing populists idealize the past to create nostalgia and fuel dissatisfaction with the present (Menke and Wulf 2021). In contrast, left-wing populism is generally viewed as forward-looking, with a greater emphasis on envisioning transformative futures than on reconstructing the past (Casullo, Eklundh, and Knott 2020). In examining anti-elitism in power, attention to temporality can be productive, as it complements the previously discussed dimensions of

sector, specificity, and scope by offering yet another way for populist actors to sustain anti-elitism through redirection. Rather than shifting anti-elitism along axes of privilege (as with sector) or levels of abstraction (as with specificity), this redirection occurs along the temporal axis. Reminders of past elites as sinister figures and portrayals of the time before a populist actor's rise to power as a period of collective trauma serve to bolster populist legitimacy and reinforce their contrast with conventional political actors. To capture the temporal dynamic of anti-elitism, we ask:

**RQ5:** In what ways did PiS, SYRIZA, and SN incorporate temporal references in their anti-elitist rhetoric, particularly in relation to past and present elites?

Lastly, as discussed in the previous section, anti-elitism is not ideologically neutral, if not deliberately styled as such, for example, by valence populist actors (see 'Case background' subsection further). This means that the dimensions of anti-elitism outlined above are likely to be influenced not only by the government status of the studied parties but also by their underlying ideologies. To account for these dynamics, we pose the following research question:

**RQ6:** Which features of anti-elitism exhibited by PiS, SYRIZA, and SN can be attributed to their underlying ideologies or their valence populist profile?

## Research design

### Case selection

To address our research questions, we selected three cases of populist actors in government: PiS in Poland (2015–2023), SYRIZA in Greece (2015–2019), and SN in Ukraine (2019–). The case selection was guided by three criteria. First, while the populism of PiS, SYRIZA, and SN has been studied extensively, there remains a lack of a comparative, in-depth analysis specifically focused on their anti-elitism. To our knowledge, PiS has been included in one comparative study on anti-elitism in power (Vaughan and Heft 2023). Similarly, SYRIZA has been examined in one comparative study on anti-elitism (Licht et al. 2025), though with an emphasis on its prevalence rather than specific characteristics. In the case of SN, several studies have analyzed its populism more broadly (Ash and Shapovalov 2022; Yanchenko and Zulianello 2024), yet none have systematically investigated the party's anti-elitism. Therefore, the selected cases remain underexplored, making them valuable for expanding the empirical scope of research on anti-elitism in power.

Second, prior studies on the anti-elitism of populist actors in power have mainly focused on cases where these actors were *junior* partners in a coalition government (e.g. Schwörer 2022 (except for M5S); Vaughan and Heft 2023 (except for PiS); Poyet and Raunio 2021). This is an important nuance, as coalition dynamics may confound the analysis of a party's political communication. For instance, the rhetoric of populist actors in coalitions can be constrained by the need to compromise to ensure government stability (Schwörer 2022, 470). The three cases selected for this study differ in this regard: PiS won an outright majority in the Polish Sejm in the 2015 election and led the United

Right coalition as its dominant force, SN formed a mono-majority in the Ukrainian parliament in 2019, and SYRIZA governed in coalition with the radical right party Independent Greeks (ANEL) but as the clear majority partner, holding 145 out of 300 parliamentary seats. Therefore, the selected cases allow us to examine how populist actors articulate anti-elitism when they hold significant governing power and autonomy.

Lastly, by focusing on PiS, SYRIZA, and SN, the study adopts a most different systems design, enabling us to identify which characteristics of anti-elitism in power remain consistent across these otherwise different cases. While all three parties are widely considered populist, occupied the positions of power, and were examined at comparable stages of their governance tenure (see the 'Data' section), they represent distinct varieties of populism (right-wing, left-wing, and valence) and operated within different political and media environments. By comparing these cases, we aim to disentangle context-specific influences from broader patterns in how populist actors sustain and adapt their anti-elitism once in power.

### ***Case background***

At this point, we will briefly introduce the selected populist parties, starting with Poland's PiS. Founded in 2001 after the establishment of the conservative and liberal Civic Platform (PO), PiS quickly gained traction. In the 2001 parliamentary elections, the party received 10% of the vote, deploying a platform that emphasized anti-corruption and anti-establishment themes (Lipiński 2016). Over time, these themes became intertwined with nativism, cultural conservatism, and close ties to the Catholic Church, turning PiS into a typical right-wing populist party. PiS first was in power from 2005 to 2007, then spent eight years in opposition. Before the 2015 elections, PiS advocated for redistributive policies, reacted to the migration crisis with nativism, and promised extensive reforms aimed at addressing social inequalities. Victorious in the 2015 elections, PiS formed a majority government and began implementing its reformist agenda, often at the expense of the established rule of law, and parliamentary procedures (Stępińska, Lipiński, and Adamczewska 2019).

SYRIZA emerged in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, which profoundly impacted the socio-political sphere in Greece. Echoing popular discontent with austerity, corruption, nepotism, and a general sense of non-representation, the radical left party led by Alexis Tsipras promised to put 'the people' at the forefront of political decision-making (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In this way, the previously marginal coalition of the left was transformed into a contender for power. It was the main opposition party in 2012 and took power in 2015 with a mandate to reverse neoliberal austerity and implement a social welfare program. Yet, by capitulating to the demands of the 'Troika' of European institutions – the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund – soon after entering government, SYRIZA retreated from its core promises. Institutionalization affected the party's discourse, revealing moderation and incorporation (Venizelos and Markou 2024). However, this is not to be equated with the dissolution of SYRIZA's antagonistic communication in government. SYRIZA's discourse reinvented itself in creative ways, amalgamating populist and technocratic elements, as well as anti-elitist and institutionalist dynamics (Venizelos 2023).

SN, led by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, is widely recognized as a populist party (Ash and Shapovalov 2022; Yanchenko and Zulianello 2024). In its first electoral appearance in July 2019, SN achieved an unprecedented mono-majority in the Ukrainian parliament and has remained the governing party since. Some researchers classify SN as a valence populist party during its initial governing phase (Yanchenko and Zulianello 2024). Since our study focuses on this period, we align with this classification and provide a concise introduction to the concept of valence populism.

Valence populism is characterized by two key features: (1) the absence of a thick ideological element and (2) a strong emphasis on non-positional issues such as ‘the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform, and moral integrity’ (Zulianello and Gahner Larsen 2024, 191). The first characteristic results in valence populist parties having blurred or inconsistent positions along the economic and socio-cultural dimensions of politics, preventing them from being meaningfully classified as either left- or right-wing actors (Zulianello 2020). The second characteristic – the focus on non-positional issues – allows valence populists to appeal to a broad electorate, as themes like transparency and moral integrity tend to unite rather than divide voters. Valence populist parties are particularly prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe, where ideological fluidity and weak programmatic structures – partly a legacy of the communist era – have fostered a political environment conducive to non-positional competition. SN fits this pattern, as reflected in its 2020 manifesto, which states: ‘We are neither “right” nor “left” ... We strive to build a country where peace, order, and prosperity will reign – and not some utopias or ideological myths’ (Yanchenko and Zulianello 2024, 273).

It is important to acknowledge that the political and institutional contexts of the selected cases also have the potential to shape their anti-elitism. PiS, operating in a highly polarized party system with a dominant opposition force, may be more inclined to direct its anti-elitism at national political elites, particularly opposition politicians and institutions perceived as obstructing its governance. SYRIZA, having risen to power in the aftermath of an economic crisis and facing significant external constraints, could exhibit a more transnational orientation in its anti-elitism, particularly targeting international financial institutions and political actors associated with austerity measures. SN, as a party with no prior political record and an ideologically fluid profile, might adopt broader forms of anti-elitism, positioning itself against the entire political establishment. These contextual factors will be taken into account in the analysis of the study results.

## Data

Social media have become a favored communication tool among populist actors (Ernst et al. 2019). To analyze the anti-elitism of PiS, SYRIZA, and SN, we focus on their

**Table 1.** Overview of the collected Facebook data by party.

Party	Party type	Date of election/ coalition agreement	The first sampling date	The last sampling date	<i>n</i> posts in the period	<i>n</i> external links in the period
PiS	right-wing	25.10.2015	01.11.2015	30.04.2016	301	152
SYRIZA	left-wing	23.09.2015	23.10.2015	28.04.2016	380	331
SN	valence	21.07.2019	01.09.2019	29.02.2020	619	82

communication on Facebook, one of the most popular sources of political information in Poland, Greece, and Ukraine during the study timeframes (Internews Ukraine 2019; Newman, Levy, and Kleis Nielsen 2015).

Table 1 summarizes the data collected. For each party, we collected all posts from their official Facebook pages during the first six months of their tenure in government. We excluded posts from the initial month following either an election victory or the formation of a governing coalition to allow for the transition phase. The focus on the first six months was influenced by the case of SN. Approximately half a year into their government, SN faced the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered political dynamics in Ukraine. This was soon followed by the full-scale Russian invasion, which had an even more profound impact on the Ukrainian political system. To ensure comparability across all cases – capturing them at a similar stage in governance and without the influence of major crisis events – we concentrate on the first six months post-election.

The Facebook posts of PiS, SYRIZA, and SN were retrieved via the CrowdTangle API. We also gathered all external links shared by these parties on their Facebook pages during the specified period. The linked materials predominantly consisted of interviews with party members and messages from the parties' official websites. The dataset, which includes 1,300 posts and 565 linked materials, is available in the OSF repository.<sup>1</sup>

## Method

Our analysis comprised three steps: (1) an examination of Facebook posts and associated linked materials to identify instances of anti-elitism; (2) transformation of statements exhibiting anti-elitism into semantic triplets (Aslanidis 2018); (3) deductive coding of these triplets according to categories corresponding to the study's research questions. We elaborate on these steps below.

In the first step, the authors – each a native speaker of the language relevant to one of the cases – identified instances of anti-elitism in the parties' Facebook posts and any linked materials. To determine cases of anti-elitism, we relied on a codebook by Ernst, Engesser, and Esser (2017, 258), which operationalizes anti-elitism as the discourse that includes one or more of the following elements: (1) discrediting of elites, (2) blaming of elites, and (3) detachment of elites from the people. Any statement in the Facebook posts or linked materials that exhibited one or more of these elements was categorized as containing anti-elitism. A post was considered to contain anti-elitism if such a statement appeared either within the post itself or within any linked material. To ensure the reliability of this step, the authors independently coded a 10% subset of the corpus (excluding external links), which was automatically translated from the source languages into English using DeepL. The intercoder agreement score was satisfactory at Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.81$ .

The second step involved converting statements identified as anti-elitist in the previous step into semantic triplets (Aslanidis 2018). Semantic triplets represent sets of clauses that include a subject, a verb, and optionally an object. Their structured format enables a consistent capture of the essential components of populist communication, including anti-elitism. For instance, in the statement 'corrupt politicians betrayed their voters', the subject ('corrupt politicians') identifies the target of the anti-elitist attack, while the verb and object explain its context – what was done (betrayal)

and to whom (the voters). When converting anti-elitist statements into semantic triplets, we adhered to the guidelines proposed by Aslanidis (2018). After constructing semantic triplets, they were manually translated into English and associated with the respective Facebook posts, making it common for a single post to feature multiple triplets. The dataset comprising all identified triplets ( $n = 541$ ) is available in the OSF repository.<sup>2</sup>

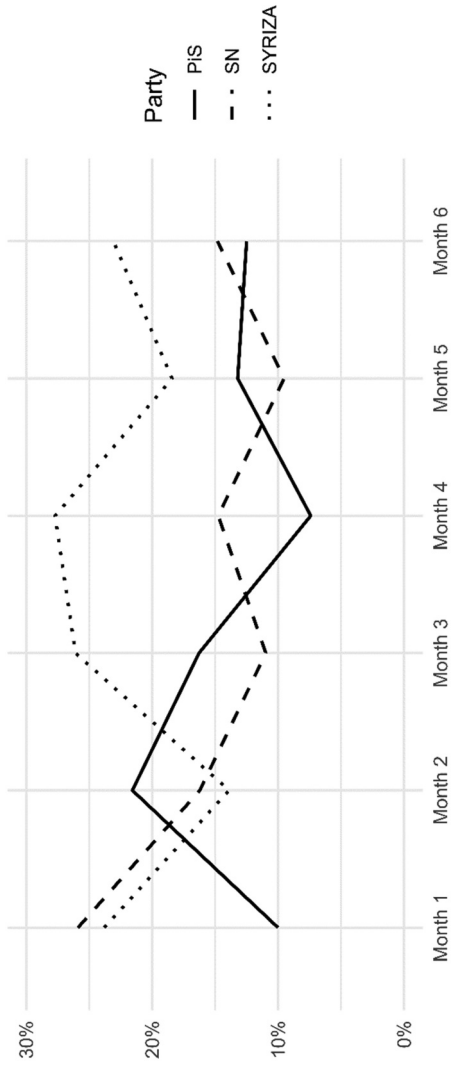
The final analysis step involved deductive coding of the translated semantic triplets to examine the specific features of anti-elitism. The target of anti-elitism was coded by categorizing attacked actors into political, non-political, or unclear. Political actors included government officials and politicians at all levels, while non-political actors encompassed entities from the financial, intellectual, media, and other sectors. The 'unclear' category was applied when it was not possible to reliably classify targets as either political or non-political, for example, terms like 'the few' or 'the powerful'. For coding specificity, we differentiated between specific and non-specific targets. Entities referred to by their function rather than name were classified as non-specific (e.g. 'politicians', 'deputies', 'big business'). Conversely, specific attacks were noted when individual names or identifiable entities were mentioned. The scope of anti-elitism was captured using a binary classification: national versus transnational targets. When non-specific attacks lacked explicit transnational references, a national context was assumed. For temporal orientation, references to the past were coded when made salient by populist actors. This included attacks targeting past elite actors or their actions, as well as statements that framed certain actors as representatives of past politics (e.g. 'The old system fights against our new faction').

To ensure reliability, the three authors independently coded a random 10% subset of the triplet corpus across four categories. The levels of agreement, measured by Krippendorff's alpha, were as follows: sector ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), specificity ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), scope ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), temporal orientation ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ). For a more detailed version of the codebook, see Table A1 of the supplementary material.

## Findings

### *Anti-elitism presence and prevalence (RQ1)*

Throughout the study period, all three analyzed parties employed anti-elitist rhetoric on Facebook. On average, SYRIZA exhibited the highest proportion of anti-elitist posts (22.2%), followed by SN (15.4%) and PiS (13.5%). As Figure 1 shows, the intensity of anti-elitism fluctuated considerably over time, with PiS reaching the lowest recorded level at 7% and SYRIZA the highest at nearly 28%. No uniform trend emerged across countries, such as a systematic decline in anti-elitism as these parties became more established in government. SN stood out as an exception, displaying markedly higher levels of anti-elitism in the first month compared to the subsequent period. This decline likely reflects an initial carryover of anti-elitist rhetoric from SN's electoral campaign, which diminished as the party settled into power and shifted toward a governing role within the Ukrainian political system.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of Facebook posts containing anti-elitism by party and month.

**Table 2.** Features of anti-elitism by PiS, SYRIZA, and SN on their Facebook pages.

	PiS <i>n</i> = 131 %	SYRIZA <i>n</i> = 163 %	SN <i>n</i> = 247 %
<b>Sector</b>			
Political	71 <sup>a, b</sup>	61.3 <sup>a</sup>	74.1 <sup>b</sup>
Non-political	19.8 <sup>a</sup>	17.8 <sup>a</sup>	15.8 <sup>a</sup>
Unclear	9.2 <sup>a</sup>	20.9 <sup>b</sup>	10.1 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Specificity</b>			
Generic	52.7 <sup>a</sup>	44.8 <sup>a</sup>	84.6 <sup>b</sup>
Specific	47.3 <sup>a</sup>	55.2 <sup>a</sup>	15.4 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Scope</b>			
National	94.7 <sup>a</sup>	81 <sup>c</sup>	99.6 <sup>b</sup>
Transnational	5.3 <sup>a</sup>	19 <sup>c</sup>	0.4 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Temporal orientation</b>			
Present	55 <sup>a</sup>	74.8 <sup>b</sup>	54.7 <sup>a</sup>
Past	45 <sup>a</sup>	25.2 <sup>b</sup>	45.3 <sup>a</sup>

Different superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the political parties under study, as determined by Z-tests with Bonferroni-adjusted p-values. For statistical tests of within-party differences, refer to Table A2 in the supplementary material.

### **Anti-elitism sector (RQ2)**

Discursive attacks on political elites were significantly more common than attacks on non-political elites. Across the six-month analysis period, the share of anti-elitism directed at non-political elites remained relatively low, ranging from an average of 16% for SN to 20% for PiS (see Table 2).

When analyzing semantic triplets classified as attacks against political elites, it becomes evident that all three parties predominantly targeted political opposition – PO for PiS, New Democracy for SYRIZA, and generic ‘other politicians’ for SN due to the absence of one dominant opposition force.

The focus on non-political elite targets varied by case. PiS frequently criticized the judicial system, including the Constitutional Tribunal along with its president and judges. This was a legitimization strategy of the larger project to introduce institutional changes that would prevent the judiciary scrutiny of the political decisions and reforms implemented by PiS. As the Constitutional Tribunal played a crucial role in blocking the illiberal steps during the short-lived PiS government of 2005–2007, after the 2015 elections, PiS decided to effectively capture the institution to dismantle the checks of arbitrary power.

In contrast, SYRIZA and SN primarily targeted economic elites within non-political anti-elitism. Consistent with its left-wing ideology, SYRIZA attacked financial elites such as ‘creditors’ and ‘neoliberal circles’. SN, in turn, targeted ‘oligarchs’ and ‘big business’, referring to individuals and entities who amassed disproportionate wealth and power through unregulated privatization following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite their diversity, references to non-political elites accounted for only a minor portion of the anti-elitist attacks across the cases.

### ***Anti-elitism specificity (RQ3)***

PiS and SYRIZA directed an approximately equal number of attacks at specific and non-specific elites. In contrast, SN demonstrated a preference for non-specific anti-elitism, with generic elite categories being targeted significantly more often than specific elites.

Since the Polish party system has been characterized by strong polarization between PiS and PO, criticism targeting PO, as well as personal attacks on its leader Donald Tusk, have become a hallmark of PiS's discourse. Besides, during the period under scrutiny, marked by the first attempts to capture the Constitutional Tribunal, there were numerous specific, negative references to this institution and its president, Andrzej Rzepliński. Notably, the context of political polarization rendered all generic references to 'the opposition' or 'the judges' self-evident and thus immediately associated with the PO and Constitutional Tribunal, respectively.

SYRIZA's discourse showed a balanced attack between specific and non-specific elites. The strategy of naming specific individuals (e.g. '[the leader of the opposition] Kyriakos Mitsotakis' or '[the former prime-minister] Antonis Samaras') was used to evoke the collective memory of 'the people' about past scandals and ways of political and economic management that resulted in negative social, political and economic outcomes. In turn, employing generic references allowed for indirect and latent meanings to activate political emotions and identities.

The case of SN is particularly notable due to the high prevalence of non-specific anti-elitism targeting broad categories such as 'politicians', 'deputies', and 'the state'. SN's preference for non-specific elites can be explained by its status as a political newcomer. Unlike PiS and SYRIZA, which had prior experience in opposition or even in government, SN was founded in the same year it came to power. Without a long-standing political identity, SN could position itself against the entire political system rather than individual actors, reinforcing its outsider image through broad, undifferentiated anti-elitism.

### ***Anti-elitism scope (RQ4)***

In the analyzed period, the studied parties primarily targeted national elites. SYRIZA was the only case where transnational elites received some attention, accounting for about one-fifth of its anti-elitist attacks. In contrast, PiS and SN made almost no references to transnational elites.

At the outset of its tenure, PiS prioritized deep institutional reforms in the judiciary, public media, and civil service. The party needed to discursively justify its policy decisions, particularly those that breached legal boundaries. Consequently, during the sampled period, the primary focus of criticism was the Constitutional Tribunal, its president, and judges – all domestic actors. The Tribunal was portrayed as a 'politicized body', with its President Rzepliński demeaned as lacking 'honor and decency'. Another key domestic target was PO, PiS's main political rival. Rarely, transnational elites were mentioned in the context of PO's efforts to internationalize the domestic conflict, challenging PiS before European institutions.

While SYRIZA primarily focused on targeting national elites, the party launched a greater number of attacks against transnational elites compared to the other two cases. Common themes included criticism of the European Union (for the alleged

mismanagement of the refugee crisis), the Troika (for imposing austerity measures), the IMF (for 'making unreasonable demands'), and Germany (for 'being self-centered'). This rhetoric aligned with SYRIZA's left-wing ideological stance. In the case of SN, attacks on transnational elites were virtually absent from the party's Facebook discourse during the study period.

### ***Temporal orientation of anti-elitism (RQ5)***

The analysis shows that SYRIZA and SN targeted present elites significantly more often than past elites. In contrast, PiS exhibited no significant difference in its focus on present versus past elites.

In Poland, PiS targeted not only the current actions of the PO and the Constitutional Tribunal but also their past decisions that allegedly contributed to the current societal problems. The retrospective communication was employed to provide historical context for the conflict over the Tribunal and to highlight a series of actions that led to the PO's loss of power. Occasionally, PiS also referred to the broader narrative of Poland's political transformations being driven by the interests of the pre-1989 communist elite. For instance, in one post, PiS accused PO of aiming to 'maintain post-communism', while in another, it claimed that the 'post-Solidarity power elite was aware that it could not afford to reckon with the communist past'.

In the Greek case, SYRIZA argued that the parties that had governed the country before them – and, in the party's view, had mismanaged the 2008 economic crisis – still wielded significant influence. Although these parties were no longer in power, SYRIZA claimed they continued to exert control through networks, corrupt practices, and the so-called 'deep state'. This continuity in SYRIZA's rhetoric enabled the party to connect ongoing issues, such as the consequences of austerity measures, to the actions and decisions of the previous elites.

For SN's communication, attacks against past elites also played a strategic role. At one level, SN criticized past actions of political actors with statements like, 'Deputies violated voting procedures 1,270 times in 2018'. More importantly, though, SN used past-oriented labels such as 'former authorities' or 'old politicians' to discursively establish itself as a new (distinct) political force. In this context, the term 'old' did not refer to the age or tenure of the 'former authorities' but rather to the 'old ways' in which they purportedly continued to engage in politics.

### ***The ideology factor (RQ6)***

While most of PiS's anti-elitist rhetoric centered on broad accusations against PO and the Constitutional Tribunal, some statements reflected the party's right-wing ideology. PiS framed its political opponents as betraying national interests in favor of foreign actors, including Germany, various lobbies, and Western politicians, thereby threatening Polish sovereignty. The party's discourse also revealed a nativist core, portraying migration as a security risk that the previous government had ignored when agreeing to the European Commission's refugee relocation scheme. Euroscepticism was evident in PiS's emphasis on national sovereignty over EU influence and its critique of liberal democratic constitutionalism, with judges depicted as politicized elites disconnected from ordinary citizens

and obstructive to PiS's reforms. Lastly, PiS accused the PO and the judiciary of perpetuating the post-communist system, a major fault line in Poland's left-right political divide.

In SYRIZA's discourse, elites were often defined in economic terms, fitting within a left-wing framework, with entities like 'the IMF' and 'the Troika' being important targets. When SYRIZA invoked 'Germany' or 'the Netherlands', it did so not in nationalist terms but in political and economic terms, criticizing these stronger states for allegedly exerting pressure on weaker ones. The focus was on popular sovereignty, not national sovereignty, reflecting the inclusionary nationalism observed in Southern European and Latin American leftist movements. When SYRIZA attacked 'Europe' and its 'bureaucracy', it avoided the Eurosceptic rhetoric typical of right-wing populists, instead debating the alleged EU shortcomings including democratic deficit and lack of solidarity. Moreover, SYRIZA's discourse did not attack 'the judiciary' or other entities in ways that would suggest a threat to the constitutional order, as is common in right-wing or illiberal populisms.

For SN, the valence populist profile complicates making specific assumptions about the characteristics of its anti-elitism. However, the party's notable emphasis on non-specific elites may provide a starting point for further investigation. Valence populist parties, which avoid strong positions on divisive issues, tend to criticize political actors broadly – focusing on general failings like a lack of moral standards or corruption – rather than targeting ideologies or policy positions, as doing so would often require taking a clear (opposite) stance. As a result, a valence populist actor is expected to lean towards non-specific anti-elitism, in contrast to the more ideologically defined left- and right-wing populisms. Our data supports this assumption, with SN targeting non-specific elites significantly more often than either PiS or SYRIZA.

## Discussion

Given that populism is rooted in the perception of politics as a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite', a question arises: How do populist actors in government – the de facto political elite – articulate and legitimize their anti-elitism? To investigate this, we compared the anti-elitist communication of Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), Greece's SYRIZA, and Ukraine's Servant of the People (SN) while in power. The analysis of the parties' communication on Facebook over the first six months of their tenure in government revealed that they did not abandon anti-elitist rhetoric, thus confirming findings from previous studies on Western European cases (Schwörer 2022; Vaughan and Heft 2023). This suggests that populist actors in power are largely untroubled by the so-called 'populist elite paradox' (Mangset et al. 2019) and view anti-elitism as an important strategic asset, particularly when it comes to communication on social media.

Our analysis further shows that the characteristics of anti-elitism in power should not be taken at face value but critically assessed in relation to specific actors and time frames. While some literature suggests that populist actors shift their anti-elitism from political to non-political targets upon entering government (Jungkunz, Robert, and Airo 2021; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014), our analysis shows that PiS, SYRIZA, and SN mainly targeted political actors in the study period. Notably, in all three cases, the political *opposition* was the primary target of anti-elitism, challenging the notion that 'for those in power [. . .], directing criticism towards the opposition is no viable strategy due to

their lack of decision-making power' (Vaughan and Heft 2023, 81). This finding suggests that populist parties in power do not necessarily see their 'new status' as an obstacle to continuing anti-elitist attacks on political actors. Once they have discursively constructed specific opponents – typically former governing parties – as elites, they can sustain this narrative even while holding office. Therefore, future research should not only examine whether the characteristics of anti-elitism change after populist parties enter government, but also whether such shifts – if they occur – alter the primary targets of anti-elitist communication.

Regarding the scope of anti-elitism, PiS and SN almost exclusively targeted national elites, while SYRIZA, in line with its left-wing profile, occasionally criticized international actors, though such attacks accounted for less than 20% of its anti-elitism. This underscores the importance of considering the time frame when analyzing anti-elitist communication. The amount of transnational anti-elitism in SYRIZA's communication would have likely been much higher if the analysis had covered the period *before* the party's shift to a pro-austerity stance (see Venizelos 2023). Likewise, Vaughan and Heft (2023) found that populist parties in government prioritized transnational elites over national ones, but their study focused on the 2019 European Parliament election campaign, where EU institutions were a natural target – unlike in our cases, where national politics remained the main arena of conflict. A country's institutional embeddedness in international organizations also influences the scope of anti-elitism. In Ukraine, for example, where SN almost exclusively targeted national elites, the multi-level structure of European politics, cited as facilitating transnational anti-elitism (Vaughan and Heft 2023), does not apply, as the country is not an EU member. Thus, while transnational anti-elitism can be a strategic resource for some populist actors, it is not a universal feature of anti-elitist communication in power. Understanding when and why populist actors invoke transnational elites as adversaries provides deeper insights into how they shape their domestic legitimacy and influence public perceptions of international affairs.

With respect to specificity, our findings reveal a notably high proportion of non-specific anti-elitism—60% on average. This contrasts with Vaughan and Heft's (2023) estimate of around 10% and Schwörer's (2022) study, where generic anti-elitism was nearly absent, except in the case of Italy's M5S, known for its broad anti-establishment discourse. However, our analysis also suggests that the theoretical classification of anti-elitism into generic and specific may be less clear in practice. Labels like 'oligarchs' or 'politicians of the past' may formally qualify as generic, yet in specific political contexts, they often evoke clear associations with particular individuals or groups. Conversely, references to figures such as George Soros or Bill Gates, while seemingly specific, often function as symbols of a broader elite rather than individual targets, making them conceptually closer to non-specific anti-elitism. These nuances highlight the need for future research to examine how audiences perceive and interpret what scholars theorize as generic and specific anti-elitism.

Drawing on the literature on the chronopolitics of populism (Knott 2024; Taş 2022), our study proposed temporal orientation as an additional dimension of anti-elitist communication. The findings indicate that targeting past elites was a notable strategy across all examined parties, serving to justify governance challenges and reinforce the narrative that structural obstacles inherited from 'previous elites' hinder immediate progress. Notably, SYRIZA directed the fewest attacks at past elites among the parties analyzed,

supporting the theoretical claim that left-wing populism is more forward-looking and less concerned with the past than other variants of populism (Casullo, Eklundh, and Knott 2020). Overall, past-oriented anti-elitism was more common than attacks on non-political or transnational elites, despite the latter strategies receiving more attention in the literature. The chronopolitical dimension of anti-elitism warrants further investigation, as it may reveal significant differences between oppositional and governmental populist discourse. We speculate that while in opposition, populist actors primarily focus on the incumbent's shortcomings, shifting their critique toward past elites after assuming power.

Lastly, our findings highlight that the ideological orientation of populist actors in power shapes both the targets and characteristics of their anti-elitism (Ostiguy and Esperanza Casullo 2017). PiS's right-wing profile was reflected in its portrayal of elites as threats to national sovereignty. SYRIZA, in line with its left-wing orientation, often framed elites in economic terms, targeting financial institutions and neoliberal actors. SN's non-specific anti-elitism aligned with its valence populist profile (Yanchenko and Zulianello 2024), as broad, vague elite references allowed it to sustain an anti-establishment image without committing to ideological confrontations. These variations underscore the need to examine anti-elitism in government across different populist party types rather than focusing predominantly on right-wing populism, as much of the existing research has done.

More broadly, the study demonstrates that anti-elitism is best understood as a discursive strategy: it is flexible and adaptable to different conditions, employed by a variety of actors, and serves diverse purposes (Licht et al. 2025). While previous research has emphasized the differences between anti-elitism in opposition and government (Schwörer 2022; Vaughan and Heft 2023), this study shows that anti-elitism in power itself is also far from uniform. Rather, it is shaped by a range of factors, including parties' ideological profiles, national political contexts, parliamentary configurations, and the extent of a country's embeddedness in international institutions. These dimensions should be systematically incorporated into future research to better capture the complexity and variability of anti-elitist discourse.

Consistent with the ambiguous and multifaceted role of anti-elitism in democracy (Paczeński 2024), this study further shows that anti-elitism in power fulfills various functions, including constructing outsider identities, justifying policy agendas, and delegitimizing political opponents. While anti-elitism plays a vital role in democratic contestation (Panizza 2005), its discursive deployment by governing actors warrants particular scrutiny because the nature and quality of its outcomes are not guaranteed. For example, anti-elitist rhetoric that takes the form of targeted attacks on key institutions, such as the judiciary, may signal attempts to breach democratic norms. However, anti-elitism in power can also serve as a tool for elite scrutiny – for instance, when used to hold powerful transnational actors, such as digital platforms, accountable.

Lastly, although this study focused specifically on populist *parties*, anti-elitist discourse extends beyond this particular group (Ege and Springer 2023). Anti-elitism can be articulated by an array of actors exceeding the realm of politics in the strict sense (e.g. religious leaders, media influencers, journalists, citizens). The approaches employed here can therefore inform the analysis of anti-elitism across a wider range of actors and contribute to the broader study of conflict and negativity in political communication, both of which are increasingly consolidated in contemporary societies.

## Notes

1. [https://osf.io/67wg4/?view\\_only=8cac15505b0f4d7e850ecbb2a3254688](https://osf.io/67wg4/?view_only=8cac15505b0f4d7e850ecbb2a3254688).
2. Ibid.

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