Caring Ecologies of the New Right and Left: Populist Performances of Care During the Pandemic

Santamaría, Sara García

Article

Caring Ecologies of the New Right and Left: Populist Performances of Care During the Pandemic

Sara García Santamaría

Open University of Catalonia, Spain; sgarciasanta@uoc.edu

Abstract

This article examines leaders' ability to take care of the people during a global pandemic. The article focuses on two populist leaders in Spain: Ada Colau, Barcelona's mayor and a global municipalist referent, and Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Community of Madrid and a referent of the new right in Europe. The analysis is informed by theoretical discussions on care, examining how populists perform micro and macro practices of care(lessness) as reflected on their Instagram accounts. How has a global pandemic affected populists' unspoken role of taking care of "their people"? Do they understand care as an individual or as a collective enterprise that challenges capitalist forms of annihilation? The article takes a feminist approach by challenging traditional male-centric analyses of populism. Methodologically, the article advances our understanding of discursive, visual, and affective approaches to digital storytelling. The data is analyzed through a combination of content analysis, a performative approach to populism and visual rhetorical analysis. The results show important differences in how right- and left-wing populists create their ethos as carers and establish emotional connections with those they care about, performing radical care versus neoliberal carelessness.

Keywords

Ada Colau; care; female populist leaders; Isabel Díaz Ayuso; new left; new right; pandemic; performance; populism; Spain

1. Introduction

This article examines populist leaders' ability to take care of the people during a global pandemic. If populist leaders present themselves as the true representatives of the people they must, performatively at least, care about them. However, it is unclear whether the populist right and left take care of the/its people differently. What are the boundaries of caring deservedness? How is care performed and hierarchized? The article argues that the ethics of care are an interesting way of examining the potential of left-wing populism for countering right-wing neoliberal carelessness.

During the pandemic, we can identify two main relocations of care that bear not just a spatial, but also a political meaning. They are key for understanding how an unequal social distribution of care has taken place. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increase in both care needs and care deficits (Barry & Jennings, 2021). The first

relocation consists of defining the pandemic as a "crisis of care" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a) led by the neoliberal logic of "carelessness" (Daly, 2022). Terms such as "carewashing" (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020) and "coronawashing" (Ricket, 2020) refer to this phenomenon, after decades of structural devaluation of care (Akkan, 2021; Bryant, 2020).

The second relocation of care is twofold: Care has been "coming out" and "locked in." Care has been locked in insomuch it has been commodified and sold by private institutions (Daly, 2022; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018) or kept at home during lockdown, putting greater pressure on families and especially on women (Akkan, 2021; Brückner et al., 2021). However, the pandemic has also been an opportunity for putting feminist approaches to care on the table, contesting its alleged abandonment under neoliberalism (Branicki, 2020; James & Valluvan, 2020). From this standpoint, care has been "coming out" (Fine & Tronto, 2020, p. 302) in public discourse and emerging

through community-led solidarity networks (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020). It is as if care suddenly became socially valuable (Dowling, 2021). One example of this is the "clap for carers," which has advanced interesting collaborative experiences led by a self-organized "caring citizenship" (Sevenhuijsen, 2003).

During the pandemic, a *The New York Times* article suggested that female politicians were more successful at taking care of citizens (Ruiloba-Núñez & Goenaga, 2021; Taub, 2020). Furthermore, previous research has found that perceiving political leaders as caring—something typically identified as a feminine quality—is associated with higher levels of trust (Willis et al., 2021) and authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). This context highlights the importance of understanding the gendered dynamics of leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The analysis focuses on the personal Instagram account of two female leaders that represent the new populist right and left in Spain, one of the countries most affected during the first wave of the virus (The Lancet Public Health, 2020). They are Partido Popular's (PP; People's Party) Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Community of Madrid and a referent of the new right, and Barcelona en Comú's (Barcelona in Common) Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona and global leader of the left-wing municipalist movement. The article provides further insights into how female populist politicians perform their dual normative role, both as populists and as women, of taking care of citizens. However, this is not to say that there is a typically "feminine" style of managing the pandemic. In fact, the data reveals very different ways of performing their care.

Methodologically, the article advances our understanding of discursive, visual, and affective approaches to digital political storytelling. The data is analyzed through a combination of a discursive-performative approach to populism and a visual rhetorical analysis of politicians' Instagram posts during the Covid-19 pandemic. While most analyses of populism focus on how right-wing populism constructs "the other," this article examines how both right- and left-wing populist leaders construct an inclusionary "we" through performances of care. The pandemic is worth examining because it puts care at the center of debates, making the neoliberal logic of care(lessness) more apparent.

2. From Neoliberal Carelessness to a Radical Politics of Care

Affective attachment is at the heart of creating political subjects, whether individual or collective (Slaby & Bens, 2019). In neoliberalism, the ideal subject appears as an "autonomous, entrepreneurial, and endlessly resilient figure" that, by praising individualism, helps dismantle the collective roots of the welfare state (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 12). The term "affective capitalism" (Massumi, 2002, p. 45) refers precisely to the transformation of

emotions into commodities, or "emodities" in contemporary societies (Illouz, 2017, p. 39).

One of the ways in which neoliberalism has fostered structural carelessness is through performances of positive affect and appeals to divertissement (Benjamin, 1999). This operates as a logic of substitution by which neoliberalism backgrounds citizens' care needs while highlighting alternative narratives. These "feeling rules of neoliberalism" include confidence, resilience, and positive thinking (Gill & Kanai, 2018). During the pandemic, we know that neoliberal "positivity imperatives" have been intensified and amplified (Gill & Orgad, 2022, p. 44), as seen in calls to be hopeful, grateful, and strong.

Neoliberalism provides not just goods, but also technologies for people to share their emotions. In fact, digital media has been identified as an important feature of contemporary capitalist production and consumption of affect (Paasonen et al., 2015). The idea of a "neoliberal self(ie) gaze" has to do with a way of "seeing and storifying the self on social media as a good neoliberal subject who is appealing, inspiring and entertaining" (Saraswati, 2021, p. 1)—a subject who is experiencing the "right" emotion (Ahmed, 2014, p. 135).

While neoliberalism produces divertissement, right-wing populism has been associated with fostering ressentiment (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). When anger is repressed, it would go on to be transformed into ressentiment. This is not necessarily problematic since people can be angry against a corrupt political system and feel "resented." However, in right-wing populism, this anger is mobilized against an "other" (Dassler, 2016). This has gone as far as blaming the "undeserving" for casualties in times of pandemic. Far-right populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have led resented and exclusionary models of care(lessness; Chatzidakis et al., 2020a). When care is obscured by nationalistic and authoritarian logics and restricted to the deserving "people like us" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 4), it leads to careless and resented communities more prone to support economic and military solutions over social justice (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 16).

Understanding the centrality of care in politics is a starting point for countering right-wing populism and its exclusionary logic (Regelmann & Bartolomé, 2020; Wainwright, 2020). Contemporary conceptualizations of care recognize the material labor or caring, but also the social, emotional, and structural conditions that allow most people to live well (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, pp. 5–6). Politicians' duty of taking care of the people is not straightforward but requires establishing the social, political, and institutional infrastructures that enable us to care for each other (Wojnicka, 2022). Tronto (2013) makes a distinction between three categories of care. The first is "caring for" something or someone and refers to the physical, material act of caring. The second, "caring about," has an emotional focus as it implies that the carer worries about others' wellbeing. The third category,

"caring with," refers to "the care of the common" by the common with the goal of finding a common good (Sluga, 2014, p. 223).

This article borrows the notion of care as a feminist citizenship project from Tronto (1993). A feminist approach to populism is one in which care is recognized as fundamental to human life and substitutes the economy as the main goal of politics (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 19). In this context, care becomes key for constructing an inclusionary "we" (Hamington, 2015; Robinson, 2015). Drawing on Chatzidakis et al. (2020b, pp. 33, 40), this encompasses the notion of a "promiscuous" care that is not only focused on "people like us," but on creating alternative "caring kinships" that challenge current hierarchies of care in capitalist societies.

In its most political sense, radical caring politics refers to the recognition of human vulnerabilities with the goal of improving the health of democracy. From this perspective, caring performances need to be guided by relationships rather than individual acts (Hamington, 2015). This implies caring for each other, even for strangers, even without sharing "essential similarities or belonging as a precondition for emotional and political solidarity" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 197). This radical, egalitarian perspective means caring for, about, and with the "other," something that is key for dismantling both the neoliberal devaluation of care and the exclusionary roots of right-wing populism (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020; Daly, 2022; Hamington, 2015). Summing up, the notion of a "caring democracy" draws from feminist theory and argues that care should be at the center of political life. From a feminist approach, affective communities ought to be constructed around care and love rather than "ressentiment" or neoliberal forms of "divertissement" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 178).

3. Populist Approaches to Care

This article argues that an alignment between left-wing populism and a feminist ethics of care can contribute to the democratization of our societies because the state of democracy depends upon everyday acts of caring (Tronto, 2013). Since care is central to sustaining life, it is important to investigate the power relations that traverse "who is cared for by whom in which ways" (Hasenöhrl, 2021, p. 103). This is because care not only structures social relationships but also constructs collective boundaries of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011, pp. 178, 192–195). Belonging is relevant in the midst of a global pandemic, in which the scarcity of resources has led to establishing political divisions between those deserving and underserving care. In this context, politicians' definition and articulation of care are extremely important and will determine whether it is mobilized as part of an all-inclusive or exclusionary populist appeal.

If we look inwards, populism cohesions its people around inclusive communities of care and feeling (Ylä-Anttila, 2006). However, could right- and left-wing populism have different ways of addressing people's inherent need for care? While all politicians performed as people's carers during the multiple crises prompted by the pandemic (Berrocal et al., 2021), this article is particularly interested in female populist leaders for their dual normative advantage: their (alleged) ability to represent the people as populists (Aiolfi, 2022), and their privileged attributes as female carers. The goal is to explore how female populist leaders performed as advantaged carers during a global pandemic, as some suggest (Taub, 2020), and whether their right- or left-wing inclinations matter in this respect.

In this article, populism is seen as discursive-performative, a hybrid and fluid mode of self-representation that expresses itself through discourse, but also incorporates the populist praxis (Ostiguy et al., 2021). By taking a performative approach, this project questions populism as an "either-or phenomenon" reserved for politicians we perceive as being populist (Bennet et al., 2020; Boulianne et al., 2020). Therefore, populism is used as an analytical tool that identifies leaders' performative oscillation between different versions of their political self, rather than a set of defining characteristics of a leader or a party.

In the literature, it is common to define populism around two elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. In Laclau's (1977, p. 167) words, what transforms discursive appeals to the people into populism is "the people/power contradiction." The "performative turn" in populism highlights a third phenomenon (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021, p. 49): the centrality of the populist leaders in constructing themselves as the true representatives of the people. The result is what Casullo (2021, p. 77) calls "the triad of populist representation": the performative representation of the leader, their people, and their enemy. Depending on their position in the ideological spectrum, leaders can construct the "us" of populism as a homogeneous and exclusionary group, as in right-wing populism, or as a heterogeneous and inclusionary one, as in left-wing populism.

Sluga (2014) understands politics as the care for the common. From this point of view, left-wing populism and its investment in the common good would have a normative advantage in taking care of the people. Therefore, caretaking and togetherness are important elements that, theoretically at least, would differentiate a type of leftist, inclusionary populism that is aligned with a feminist ethics of care (Regelmann & Bartolomé, 2020; Wainwright, 2020).

Most studies have worried about the exclusionary nature of right-wing populism, often looking for "pure" forms in male, western, right-wing heads of state, overlooking other possible combinations. This follows a general trend by which the threats of right-wing populism are extended to all its variants (Gandesha, 2018; García Agustín, 2021; Tushnet, 2018). The consequence has been a gap in knowledge and a lack of understanding of how progressive populist leaders operate,

and their potential for countering neoliberal carelessness (Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020). This has taken several scholars to call for a feminist scholarship that contributes to the study of populism beyond its exclusionary performances (Eklundh, 2020; Maiguashca, 2019; Mouffe, 2018).

4. Methodology

This article offers an ethnography of the digital storytelling practices that politicians use for producing their authentic selves in a way that brings them closer to the people in a fight against a shared enemy, the Covid-19 virus. The article focuses on the pandemic, which becomes a "critical discursive moment" that guides the structure of the case study (Carvalho, 2008). The timeframe includes the first four Covid waves in Spain, which develop over a period of roughly a year. The first wave, being the most important one, is studied in its full length: from March 11, when the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, until June 21, 2020, when lockdowns were eased in Spain. For the other three waves, the researcher takes two weeks before and after their highest peak, in terms of cases per day (El Español, 2022). The resulting periods go from October 21 to November 18, 2020 (second wave); from January 12, 2020, to January 9, 2021 (third wave); and from April 13 to May 11, 2021 (fourth wave). These peaks are relevant because care is expected to emerge as central in politicians' posts.

The research takes a purposive and actor-oriented sampling aimed at exploring other populisms, that is, populism beyond the male, right-wing, head-of-state. In doing so, it focuses on a comparative case study of the Instagram account of two female politicians representing the new populist right and left in Spain. Isabel Díaz Ayuso (@isabeldiazayuso) is the president of the Madrid region and a relatively new face in the traditional PP. Ayuso is both a popular and a populist leader closer to the far-right Vox than she is to the more institutionalist PP (Kennedy & Cutts, 2022; Turnbull-Dugarte & Rama, 2021; Wheeler, 2020; Wilkinson, 2021). For instance, the news portal *Politico* (2022), which includes her in the top 28 most influential politicians worldwide, defines her as inheriting Donald Trump's populist rhetoric. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Ada Colau (@adacolau) is the leader of Barcelona in Common and the mayor of Barcelona. She has an activist background as the visible face of the anti-eviction movement that gained visibility in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and has been a pioneer of the populist left in Europe (Portapan et al., 2020; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020) and the global municipalist movement (García Agustín, 2020).

The coding unit of the analysis is the Instagram post, independent of how many pictures or videos it contains. The sample includes 89 posts for Isabel Díaz Ayuso and 63 for Ada Colau. All posts have been analyzed following a three-step method. First, the pictures,

videos, and accompanying captions have been manually coded on Atlas.ti, following Dursun et al.'s (2021) qualitative content analysis: identifying the sensitizing topics that stemmed from the literature and structuring them according to leaders' performances of populism and caretaking. The content analysis served for selecting relevant posts, which have been qualitatively analyzed following a discourse performative analysis and visual rhetorical interpretation. This approach has proved useful in the analysis of populism as performance in recent research (García Santamaría, 2021; Gleason & Hansen, 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Salojärvi, 2019).

The main advantage of combining a discourse performative analysis and visual rhetorical interpretation is that populist performances are analyzed in terms of discourse, but also the aesthetic elements and affective states that emerge from the posts as a whole (Aiolfi, 2022; Kurylo, 2020). The researcher has chosen two visual rhetoric elements: the ethos and the pathos. The ethos analyzes politicians' self-performances as carers: (a) caring actors and their position (who they are and how they perform care) and (b) their construction of care (who and what deserves being cared for). Through their discursive-performative constructions of the ethos, politicians attempt to present themselves as true representatives of the people (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021). Then, the pathos allows for conducting a "reading for affect," taking emotions as the glue that performatively brings the leader and the people together in populism (Ahmed, 2014). "If there is a social entity *feeling* the same way, this is framed as a connection much deeper than any attachment based on rational *thought*," conclude Berg et al. (2019, p. 52). How are the "we" and the "other" emotionalized in leaders' performances and with which sociopolitical implications?

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Neoliberal Carelessness Versus Caring Together

This section examines how Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Ada Colau perform their ethos as carers on their official Instagram account. The centrality of the leader in performative approaches to populism means that we need to shed light on how their identity as carers is communicated in times of pandemic. While both leaders perform as carers, the data reveals that Ayuso's performances align with the ethos of a good neoliberal subject, and are notably different from Colau's performances as a fierce carer.

Ayuso's neoliberal self(ie) gaze (Saraswati, 2021) is performed by posting hashtags such as #instadaily and #picoftheday, which highlight the importance of presenting the self-as-entertainment, disconnected from the pandemic (April 17, 2021). Her selfies contribute to the embodiment of a neoliberal self(ie) gaze. Figure 1 reveals a stylish Ayuso clapping from a balcony, while the blurry background erases any trace of other possible neighbors

Figure 1. Díaz Ayuso clapping from a hotel room after testing positive for Covid-19 on April 19, 2020.

around. Clapping to the rhythm of Depeche Mode, she enjoys a beautiful sky with a rainbow and optimistically adds: "[The rainbow] is a sign. The recovery starts" (April 19, 2020).

In Ada Colau's feed, there are a few instances of selfies. An important one, for the impact it triggered, features Colau joking around: "*Miracolo!* [in Italian]. *Un ratito sola en mi habitación*" (Miracle! One moment alone in my room). Barefoot, lying in bed, she takes a selfie with the help of a mirror and shares a very intimate moment. Smiling spontaneously, this post looks rather innocent (Figure 2). However, it conveys an important complicity with all working parents: the luxury of having a moment of rest.

What this post unchained was a long series of attacks on social media against Colau's persona, who was accused of being frivolous in times of pandemic and

was mocked for acting like a teenager taking a selfie for her Tinder account. To this, she replied with a long post, sharing a close-up picture with natural lighting illuminating her incipient wrinkles. First and foremost, Colau positions herself as an authentic persona. #Nofilters, she writes in one post (June 14, 2020); "no makeup, or styling, or anything," she adds (November 16, 2020). Therefore, sharing selfies is disconnected from reproductions of an appealing and inspiring "self(ie)" gaze.

In stark difference, Ayuso performs herself as a celebrity, taking a central role through close-ups and posing surrounded by others, even going to schools to sign autographs. Visually, she is present, but care is absent. She is present on the streets, and in sites of care, posing often with medical workers. In fact, more than a third of the posts during the first wave features an Ayuso surrounded by health workers, visiting hospitals,

Figure 2. Colau lying in bed on May 23, 2020.

or dedicating a minute of silence to the victims. It looks as if her presence in sites of care was to make up for her institutional carelessness. Even apparently collectivistic initiatives, such as the daily "minute of silence" outside Madrid's city hall, become a "minute of fame" she uses for posing as a star, surrounded by her fans (April 21, 2020). This minute of silence can be seen as an instance of neoliberal carewashing, posing in a caring position for the picture without mobilizing the institutional channels that give support to the many medical and socioeconomic victims of the pandemic.

The centrality of Ayuso's persona can be part of a carewashing strategy: performing care while acting carelessly. Something unexpected is that, as months went by, she went from a complete medicalization of the crisis, posing with medical workers and praising their work (Figure 3), even clapping for carers every day at 8 p.m., to blaming them for the quick spread of Covid-19 in Madrid during its highest peak (Mateo, 2021).

Ada Colau's self-representation is less personalized, but more intimate. Care is present, yet Ada Colau is nowhere to be seen in the picture. "Let's reorganize society in order to put life and care at the center," she claims (April 7, 2020). However, during the first wave, there are no pictures of Colau at hospitals or posing with health workers. Colau does not position herself at the center of caring performances but leaves the prominence to carers themselves.

In Barcelona, care during the Covid-19 crisis takes a social and collective focus. In the first post addressing the pandemic, Colau wonders "what does it mean to take care of ourselves" (March 12, 2020). She concludes that care "is a collective rather than an individual problem" (March 12, 2020). Her definition of care is extended beyond medicalized narratives and beyond the family unit. She asks citizens "to help each other with empathy" (March 12, 2020) and advocates for reinforcing social services so "nobody, absolutely nobody" is forgotten (March 15, 2020). Colau's clapping for carers is also performed through macro and inclusionary lenses. When Colau asks for people to clap for carers, she tells

them to make it more extensive: to clap not only for medical workers, but also for private carers, vulnerable families, cleaning professionals, or supermarket workers (March 15, 2020). These instances construct a performance of fierce care that is inclusionary, putting people's lives at the center (April 7, 2020).

In contrast, Ayuso's performances of care follow a micro and personalized approach. Taking the context into account, her caring practices also reveal an exclusionary nature. Not only because she blames migrants for spreading the virus (Viejo & Mateo, 2020), but excludes whole parts of society from caring rights. This is the case of the elderly people in care homes, which were allegedly not allowed to go to hospitals in case of contagion, and vulnerable children whose health was neglected by the regional government (Caballero, 2020; Caballero & Galaup, 2022).

All in all, both populist leaders perform starkly different positions as they perform instances of caring about the people. Ayuso constructs the self through a personalized and exclusionary performance. The people are constructed as spectators to be entertained while she takes the lead in the fight against the enemy; the virus at first, and the policies of the left-wing government later on. On the other hand, Colau positions herself in an expansionary and horizontal coalition with the people in a fight against a shared enemy, the virus, but also neoliberal carelessness.

5.2. Care as Freedom and Pride

The following lines analyze how Ayuso and Colau operationalize care and, in doing so, normalize and problematize certain approaches with meaningful sociopolitical consequences. This reveals what politicians care for, and how they politicize care as they establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion from it.

Isabel Díaz Ayuso's definition of care has a medical and economic focus and is both individualistic and personalized. The president of the Madrid region announced that she had Covid-19 on March 16, 2020.

Figure 3. Díaz Ayuso surrounded by medical workers while visiting a provisional hospital on April 11, 2020.

In a short video, she explained that everyone is responsible for their own care and that of their close ones: "Take care of your people and protect yourself" (March 16, 2020). This individualistic response is in line with neoliberal support of hard-working and autonomous citizens. On her Instagram account, Ayuso conveys individualistic care(lessness) through appeals to freedom, while Ada Colau constructs care through the inclusionary lenses of pride.

Both freedom and pride become the "emotional glue" able to sediment their closeness to citizens (Ahmed, 2014, p. 135). One way in which freedom is endorsed is through Ayuso's love for dogs. In the early days of the lockdown, Ayuso posted a picture petting a cute little dog on the street (May 9, 2020): "dangerous dog," she joked. Petting other people's dogs in a time in which it is not sure if they can transmit Covid-19 is her way of claiming her individual freedom.

Throughout the different waves, Ayuso changes radically from a pro-lockdown attitude to calling citizens to free themselves from it. While the first month of lockdown she uses the hashtags #stayhome and #Istayhome in every other post, by mid-April she had stopped using them altogether (April 1, 2020). Defying governmental restrictions, she stated that between "communism or freedom," she sides with the latter (Turnbull-Dugarte & Rama, 2021). Ayuso will become an ambassador of freedom in the wake of the 2021 regional elections, defying the status quo by becoming "the patron saint of bars" (POLITICO, 2022), as shown in Figure 4. "The freedom to drink beer in Madrid has triumphed," Ignacio Escolar, *elDiario*'s editor, declared (Hedgecoe, 2021). The objects of her care become lifestyle and the economy. These performances are a dual defiance to the central government, on the one hand, and to scientific recommendations, on the other, performing a kind of rebelliousness through epistemological populism that rejects both authority and expert advice.

While Ayuso defines freedom within the limits of consumeristic forms of leisure, Colau's notion of freedom is a non-consumeristic one: being able to enjoy the public space, starting from one's neighborhood. Here, freedom is freed from the neoliberal logics of carelessness. Colau's performances of freedom are always linked to caring about nature and about the city. As she conveys in a post: "Air, movement, freedom" (April 26, 2020).

In Barcelona, freedom is something leaders can contribute to through policies that improve people's reappropriation of the public space. Colau's goal is to "reverse the distribution of urban space between vehicles and people" by building "superblocks," full areas closed to traffic so community life can flourish (November 11, 2020). In fact, freedom is performed as something that can only be achieved through activism: "We will stand up, once again, in order to be free," she sings in "The Commons Rap" (Figure 5).

In the face of Ayuso's freedom, Ada Colau appropriates the inclusivity of the LGBTI+ movement as part of her own identity, and that of Barcelona. Rainbows are everywhere. Colau often uses the rainbow emoji in her posts and in public buildings and even embodies the movement, often wearing it in her mask (Figure 6). The co-option of LGBTI+ inclusivity reaches its peak in 2021 when she starts using the hashtag #orgulldeciutat (or #citypride) as Barcelona's brand. Through this metaphor, the mayor highlights Barcelona's inclusionary nature: "Our diversity is our city's pride" (July 26, 2021). She performs as a proud leader that needs to take care of an all-inclusionary city.

We have seen how leaders' definition of the virus goes hand in hand with their responses to the crisis. In Madrid, Ayuso's shifting blame from the virus

Figure 4. Díaz Ayuso holding a bottle with the flag of Spain and a picture of herself in the label on April 15, 2021.
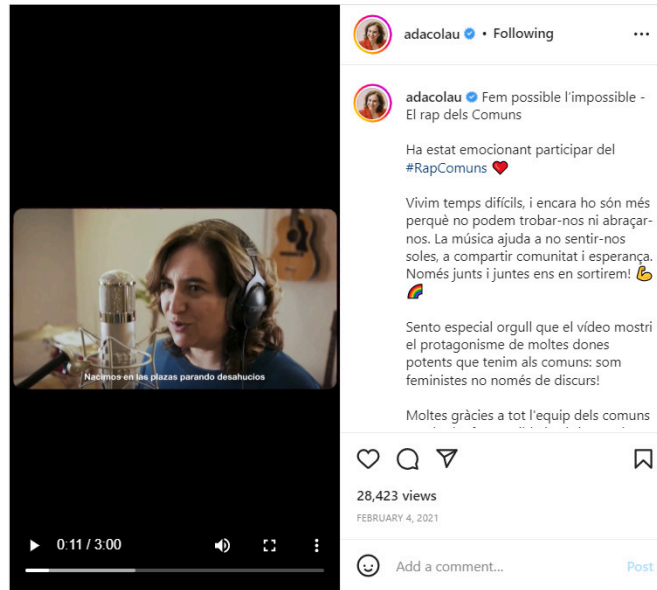
Figure 5. Colau singing "The Commons Rap" on February 4, 2021.

to governmental restrictions leads to an understanding of care in neoliberal terms. Taking care of the people appears as protecting their rights: their right to leisure and to consumption. While performing a populist opposition towards the status quo, she defies the left-wing coalition and expert advice but still sides with big corporations and economic interests. However, in Colau's Barcelona, caring for the people is understood as people's right to (community) life, to a sustainable planet, and to the public space. Her construction of a "free" people is traversed by a logic of radical care by which the leader helps citizens free themselves from economic interests.

5.3. Discursive-Affective Performances of Care

This last section examines the construction of affect as a bonding glue that positions the leader and the people "feeling the same way," performing a populist "we"

(Berg et al., 2019, p. 52). The analysis of pathos unveils how discursive-affective practices connect a collective entity composed of the leader and its people during the pandemic.

A quick look at their Instagram posts reveals that both leaders perform themselves as caring during the pandemic. However, a thorough analysis unveils very different performances of care. Following Sluga's (2014) conceptual differentiation between "caring for," "caring about," and "caring with," Ada Colau seems to lead the way in caring performances. Both Colau and Ayuso "care for" the people, something intrinsically related to their duty of attending to citizens' needs in times of crisis. The bigger difference appears in the other categories: "caring about" the people and personally worrying about their wellbeing, and "caring with" the people by jointly designing common caring projects. The content analysis reveals additional data. Colau performs caring "about" the people in over 80% of the posts, while she cares
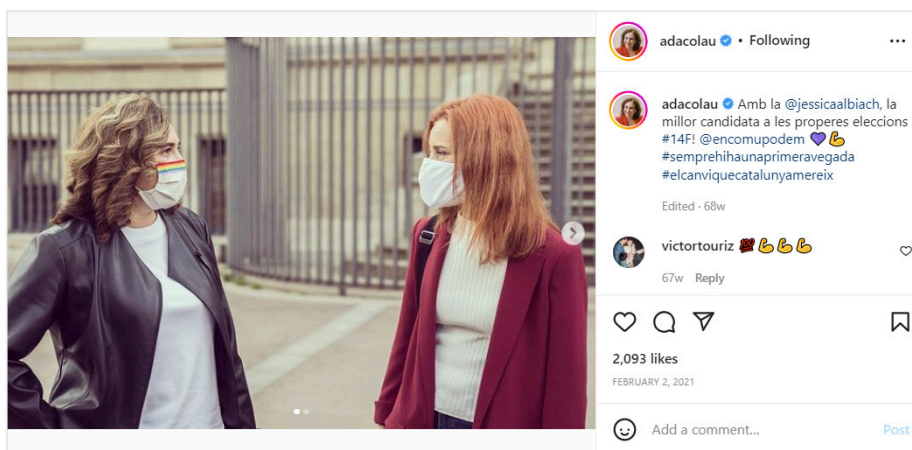

Figure 6. Colau wearing a mask with the LGBIT+ flag on February 2, 2021.

"with" them in one-third. For her, projects are "only possible with the people, for the people, altogether" (February 4, 2021). This is far from the 20% of the posts in which Ayuso performatively cares "about" the people, and only 2% caring "with" them.

One of the ways in which Colau performs care is by caring "with" the people, altogether. Modulating her voice and smiling, she asks children to write and share a diary with her, expressing how they are feeling (March 30, 2020). The creation of an intimate, special relationship with kids is reinforced by the performance of a direct connection with them. The relational side of caring "with" vulnerable people allows Colau to perform her relationship with children through love, solidarity, and togetherness.

Barcelona's mayor performs herself in a caring affective-discursive position "about" and "with" the people. For Colau, caring means validating people's vulnerability by sharing her own personal experiences. Colau recognizes her vulnerability insomuch she is a mother taking care of two children during lockdown, leading to some stressful situations. One of her first posts in March is about her family, who had "a small crisis" and decided to organize a meeting (March 18, 2020). She situates this meeting between the #clapforcarers at 8 p.m., and the #potbanging against monarchy corruption at 9 p.m. This post illustrates how emotions serve as an excuse for linking her personal life to her public duties, which inevitably connect with activism. Personal micro-caring is linked, therefore, to macrostructural types of caring with and about society, strengthening the quality of life and democracy (April 7, 2020).

Ayuso never reveals her vulnerability, even when involved in public scandals. Her performances of a neoliberal affective-discursive position go hand in hand with displays of "positive affects" (Saraswati, 2021, p. 6), performing a good neoliberal subject that is funny and endlessly resilient. This is true in the midst of a polemics she unraveled for feeding vulnerable kids with fast food from big chains. Far from feeling ashamed, she posted a meme of herself posing as a McDonald's worker, reading the

menu out loud. "Let's see: This is wonderful," she wrote, making fun of herself (Figure 7).

Both Ada Colau and Isabel Díaz Ayuso share positive quotes, such as "patience and carry on" (Isabel Díaz Ayuso, April 5, 2020) or "everything is gonna be alright" (Ada Colau, April 8, 2020). However, there is an important nuance that separates Ayuso's neoliberal from Colau's caring position: In Colau's feed, positivity is always performed as linked to activism. It conveys not only empty catchy images or sayings but goes hand in hand with calls for collective action, peace, anti-racism, environmentalism, or feminism. Sharing her emotional states, such as vulnerability or anger against the system, helps Colau appear more authentic and far from the fakery of the political pose. Therefore, Colau's affective connection with the people is key for challenging right-wing populism and its intertwining with neoliberal carelessness, such as Ayuso's self-centered self(ie) gaze.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how two female populist leaders, Madrid's President Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau, have performatively taken care of the people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of their Instagram posts has examined "the triad of populist representation" (Casullo, 2021, p. 77): the leaders' online self-performances and the way these constitute a collective bonding with the people as opposed to a shared enemy.

While female politicians have been praised for their management of the crisis worldwide (Taub, 2020), the data shows that Ayuso and Colau's ideological alignment with the new right and left produces very different performances of care(lessness). On the one hand, by taking a neoliberal subject position, Ayuso appeals to individualistic and exclusionary practices of care. By performing as a good neoliberal subject, she followed a self(ie) gaze that puts her persona at the center. Personalization hides both carewashing and coronawashing strategies, since taking pictures in sites of care contrasts with
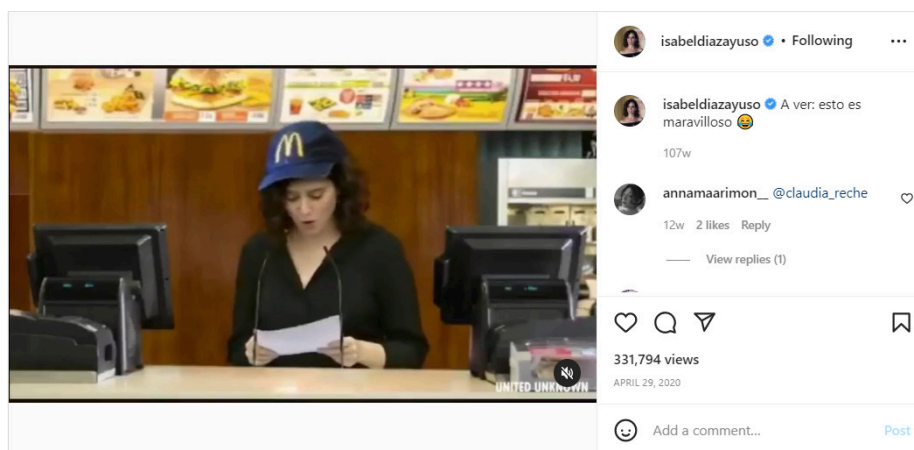
Figure 7. Meme of Díaz Ayuso as a McDonald's employee on April 29, 2020.

her institutional carelessness. Furthermore, by prioritizing humor, consumerism, and freedom over responsibility, Ayuso's performances are incorporated into neoliberal circuits of divertissement and entertainment. These "positivity imperatives" foster people's disconnection from societal caring needs, rather than acting upon them (Gill & Orgad, 2022).

On the other hand, Colau has performed radical care for, about, and with the people that puts life at the center of politics. The mayor of Barcelona constructs herself as a "promiscuously" caring politician who embraces an inclusionary approach to care as a guiding principle for democracy (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b). This is done by coopting LGBTI+ inclusionary motives, exposing her vulnerability, her anger against the system, and her commitment to activism, and leading collaborative projects with the citizenry.

The article has argued that analyzing populism through a feminist logic of care is important for unveiling neoliberal and far-right exclusionary carelessness but also for understanding if/how left-wing populism can become a democratizing force. This analysis is of great importance during a health emergency crisis since the scarcity of public resources has obliged politicians to establish hierarchies of care.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

Aiolfi, T. (2022). Populism as a transgressive style. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *2*(1), Article ksac006.

Akkan, B. (2021). Global pandemic and the veiled crisis of care in Turkey: Politics of social reproduction and masculinist restoration. *Historical Social Research*, *46*(4), 31–49.

Barry, U., & Jennings, C. (2021). *Gender equality: Economic value of care from the perspective of the applicable EU funds*. Think Tank.

Benjamin, W. (1999). *The arcades project*. Belknap Press.

Bennett, S., Lipiński, A., Stępińska, A., Abadi, D., & Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. (2020). *Populist communication on social media* (Research Report). Centre for Social Sciences; Centre of Excellence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Berg, A. L., von Scheve, C., Ural, N. Y., & Walter-Jochum, R. (2019). Reading for affect: A methodological proposal for analyzing affective dynamics in discourse. In A. Kahl. (Ed.), *Analyzing affective societies: Methods and methodologies* (pp. 45–62). Routledge.

Berrocal, M., Kranert, M., Attolino, P., Santos, J. A. B., Santamaria, S. G., Henaku, N., Koffi, A. D. L., Marziani, C., Mažeikienė, V., Pérez, D. O., Rajandran, K., & Salamurović, A. (2021). Constructing collective identi-

ties and solidarity in premiers' early speeches on Covid-19: A global perspective. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *8*(1), Article 128. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00805-x

Boulianne, S., Koc-Michalska, K., & Bimber, B. (2020). Right-wing populism, social media and echo chambers. *New Media and Society*, *22*(4), 683–699.

Branicki, L. J. (2020). Covid-19: Ethics of care and feminist crisis management. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *27*(5), 872–883.

Brückner, M., Čajić, S., & Bauhardt, C. (2021). Reflection: Food as pleasure or pressure? The care politics of the pandemic. *Food and Foodways*, *29*(3), 289–298.

Bryant, L. (2020). Politics of care in the early years in Australia since the pandemic. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *10*(4), 395–400.

Caballero, F. (2020, April 29). Ayuso defiende los menús de Telepizza para niños vulnerables en Madrid: "Yo juraría que a la mayoría les encantan" [Ayuso defends the Telepizza menus for vulnerable kids in Madrid: "I would swear that most of them love it"]. *elDiario*. https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/ultima-hora-coronavirus-mundo-espana_6_1108630_1044702.html

Caballero, F., & Galaup, L. (2022, January 29). Protocolos bajo sospecha en Madrid: La juez indaga sobre la orden de no derivar ancianos de residencias a hospitals [Protocols under suspicion in Madrid: The judge investigates the order of not sending the elderly in care homes to hospitals]. *elDiario*. https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/protocolos-sospecha-madrid-juez-indaga-orden-no-derivar-ancianos-residencias-hospitales_1_8698913.html

Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) discourse and society. *Journalism Studies*, *9*(2), 161–177.

Casullo, M. E. (2021). Populism as synecdochal representation: Understanding the transgressive bodily performance of South American presidents. In P. Ostiguy, F. Panizza, & B. Moffitt (Eds.), *Populism in global perspective: A performative and discursive approach* (pp. 75–95). Routledge.

Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Littler, J., Rottenberg, C., & Segal, L. (2020a). From carewashing to radical care: The discursive explosions of care during Covid-19. *Feminist Media Studies*, *20*(6), 889–895.

Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Littler, J., Rottenberg, C., & Segal, L. (2020b). *The care manifesto. The politics of interdependence*. Verso.

Chatzidakis, A., & Segal, L. (2020). *From corporate carewashing to genuine care? The coronavirus crisis forces us to reconsider the business of business*. Open Democracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/corporate-carewashing-genuine-care

Daly, M. (2022). Covid-19, social policy and care: A complex set of processes and outcomes. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *6*, Article 808239. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.808239

Dassler, T. (2016). *From care ethics to care politics: Toward a political notion of care* [Master thesis, The Arctic University of Norway]. UiT Munin. https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/9351/thesis.pdf?sequence=2

Dowling, E. (2021). Caring in times of a global pandemic: Introduction. *Historical Social Research*, *46*(4), 7–30.

Dursun, A., Kettner, V., & Sauer, B. (2021). Corona, care, and political masculinity: Gender-critical perspectives on governing the Covid-19 pandemic in Austria. *Historical Social Research*, *46*(4), 50–71.

Eklundh, E. (2020). Excluding emotions: The performative function of populism. *PaCo: Partecipazione e Conflitto*, *13*(1), 107–131.

El Español. (2022). *Dos años del 14-M, un confinamiento y seis olas de Covid* [Two years after the 14-M, a lockdown and six Covid waves]. https://www.elespanol.com/ciencia/salud/20220311/anos-confinamiento-olas-covid-cambiaron-espana/1002623807594_32.html

Enli, G., & Rosenberg, T. (2018). Trust in the age of social media: Populist politicians seem more authentic. *Social Media & Society*, *4*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430

Fine, M., & Tronto, J. (2020). Care goes viral: care theory and research confront the global COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, *4*(3), 301–309.

Fraser, N., & Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Capitalism: A conversation in critical theory*. Polity Press.

Gandesha, S. (2018). Understanding right and left populism. In J. Morelock (Ed.), *Critical theory and authoritarian populism* (pp. 49–70). University of Westminster Press.

García Agustín, O. (2020). New municipalism as space for solidarity. *Soundings*, *74*(1), 54–67.

García Agustín, O. (2021). *Left-wing populism: The politics of the people*. Emerald Publishing.

García Santamaría, S. (2021). Politicians "stay home": Left-wing populism and performances of the intimate self on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Networking Knowledge*, *14*(1), 28–50.

Gill, R., & Kanai, A. (2018). Mediating neoliberal capitalism: Affect, subjectivity and inequality. *Journal of Communication*, *68*(2), 318–326.

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. S. (2022). Get unstuck: Pandemic positivity imperatives and self-care for women. *Cultural Politics*, *18*(1), 44–63.

Gleason, T. R., & Hansen, S. S. (2016). Image control: The visual rhetoric of President Obama. *Howard Journal of Communications*, *28*(1), 55–71.

Hamington, M. (2015). Politics is not a game: The radical potential of care. In D. Engster & M. Hamington (Eds.), *Care ethics and political theory* (pp. 272–292). Oxford University Press.

Hasenöhrl, S. (2021). Affective politics of care during Covid-19: Feminist views of political discourses and intersectional inequalities in Mali. *Historical Social Research*, *46*(4), 100–122.

Hedgecoe, G. (2021, May 5). A tale of 2 candidates in Madrid. *POLITICO*. https://www.politico.eu/article/madrid-spain-election-isabel-diaz-ayuso-pablo-iglesias

Illouz, E. (2017). *Emotions as commodities: Capitalism, consumption and authenticity*. Routledge.

James, M., & Valluvan, S. (2020). Coronavirus conjuncture: Nationalism and pandemic states. *Sociology*, *54*(6), 1238–1250.

Kennedy, P., & Cutts, D. (2022). *What the Castilla-León elections told us about the trajectory of Spanish politics*. LSE European Politics and Policy. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/02/22/what-the-castilla-leon-elections-told-us-about-the-trajectory-of-spanish-politics

Kurylo, B. (2020). The discourse and aesthetics of populism as securitisation style. *International Relations*, *36*(1), 127–147.

Laclau, E. (1977). *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory: Capitalism, fascism, populism*. New Left Books.

Lalancette, M., & Raynauld, V. (2017). The power of political image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and celebrity politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *63*(7), 888–924.

Maiguashca, B. (2019). Resisting the "populist hype": A feminist critique of a globalising concept. *Review of International Studies*, *45*(5), 768–785.

Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables of the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Duke University Press.

Mateo, J. J. (2021, December 21). Díaz Ayuso: "En algunos centros de salud no todos quieren trabajar y arrimar el hombro" [Díaz Ayuso: "In some health centres not everybody wants to work and lend a hand"]. *El País*. https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2021-12-21/diaz-ayuso-en-algunos-centros-de-salud-no-todos-quieren-trabajar-y-arrimar-el-hombro.html

Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.

Ostiguy, P., & Moffitt, B. (2021). Who would identify with an "empty signifier"? The relational, performative approach to populism. In P. Ostiguy, F. Panizza, & B. Moffitt (Eds.), *Populism in global perspective: A performative and discursive approach* (pp. 47–72). Routledge.

Ostiguy, P., Panizza, F., & Moffit, B. (2021). Introduction. In P. Ostiguy, F. Panizza, & B. Moffit (Eds.), *Populism in global perspective: A performative and discursive approach* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.

Paasonen, S., Hillis, K., & Petit, M. (2015). Networks of transmission: Intensity, sensation, value. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 1–24). The MIT Press.

POLITICO. (2022). *POLITICO 28: Class 2022*. https://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28-class-of-2022-ranking/isabel-diaz-ayuso

Portapan, L. A., Ungureanu, C., Velicu, I., Amores, M. J., & Poch, M. (2020). Splitting urban waters: The politicisation of water in Barcelona between populism and

anti-populism. *Antipode*, *52*(2), 1413–1433.

Regelmann, A., & Bartolomé, V. (2020). *Feminise politics now!* Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

Ricket, O. (2020, May 11). Coronawashing: For big, bad businesses, it's the new greenwashing. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/11/coronawashing-big-business-greenwashing-polluters-tax

Robinson, F. (2015). Care ethics, political theory and the future of feminism. In D. Engster & M. Hamington (Eds.), *Care ethics and political theory* (pp. 293–311). Oxford University Press.

Ruiloba-Núñez, J. M., & Goenaga, M. (2021). Liderazgos femeninos que triunfan en pandemia: La campaña Madrid 2021 en Twitter [Feminine leaderships that triumph during the pandemic: The Madrid 2021 campaign on Twitter]. *Más Poder Local*, *47*(1), 79–97.

Salmela, M., & von Scheve, C. (2018). Emotional roots of right-wing political populism. *Humanity & Society*, *42*(4), 434–454.

Salojärvi, V. (2019). Populism in journalistic photographs: Political leaders in Venezuelan newspaper images. *Iberoamericana*, *48*(1), 28–39.

Saraswati, L. A. (2021). *Pain generation: Social media, feminist activism, and the neoliberal selfie*. New York University Press.

Sevenhuijsen, S. (2003). The place of care. *Feminist Theory*, *4*(2), 179–197.

Sintes-Olivella, M., Casero-Ripollés, A., & Yeste-Piquer, E. (2020). The inclusionary populist communication style on Facebook: The case of Ada Colau in Barcelona. *Communication & Society*, *33*(2), 193–208.

Slaby, J., & Bens, J. (2019). Political affect. In J. Slaby & C. von Scheve (Eds.), *Affective societies: Key concepts* (pp. 340–351). Routledge.

Sluga, H. (2014). *Politics and the search for the common good*. Cambridge University Press.

Taub, A. (2020, May 15). Why are nations led by women doing better? *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html

The Lancet Public Health. (2020). Covid-19 in Spain: A predictable storm? *The Lancet Public Health*, *5*(11), Article E568. https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667(20)30239-5

Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.

Tronto, J. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality and justice*. NYU Press.

Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J., & Rama, J. (2021, May 5). *Madrid's regional election: How we got here, what happened, and why it matters*. LSE European Politics and Policy.

Tushnet, M. (2018). Comparing right-wing and left-wing populism. In M. A. Graber, S. Levinson, & M. Tushnet (Eds), *Constitutional democracy in crisis?* (pp. 639–50). Oxford University Press.

Viejo, M., & Mateo, J. J. (2020, September 15). Ayuso señala que algunos contagios de Madrid se producen por el modo de vida de los inmigrantes [Ayuso points out that some transmissions are caused by immigrants' lifestyle]. *El País*. https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2020-09-15/ayuso-senala-que-algunos-contagios-de-madrid-se-producen-por-el-modo-de-vida-de-los-inmigrantes.html

Wainwright, H. (2020). Municipalism and feminism then and now: Hilary Wainwright talks to Jo Littler. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, *74*(1), 10–25.

Wheeler, D. (2020). Vox in the age of Covid-19: The populist protest turn in Spanish politics. *Journal of International Affairs*, *73*(2), 173–184.

Wilkinson, I. (2021, May 4). Isabel Díaz Ayuso, the charismatic populist tipped as a future national leader. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isabel-diaz-ayuso-the-charismatic-populist-tipped-as-a-future-national-leader-k7z83sj5j

Willis, H., Smith, J. C., & Devine, D. (2021). Care to trust? Gender and trust in leaders during the Coronavirus pandemic. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *31*(1), 232–244.

Wojnicka, K. (2022). What's masculinity got to do with it? The Covid-19 pandemic, men and care. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *29*(Suppl. 1), S27–S42.

Ylä-Anttila, T. (2006). Familiarity as a tool of populism: Political appropriation of shared experiences and the case of Suvivirsi. *Acta Sociologica*, *60*(4), 342–357.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. SAGE.

About the Author

Sara García Santamaría holds a PhD in journalism studies from the University of Sheffield (UK). She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain) and a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow. She is vice-chair of the Political Communication Section at the International Association for Media and Communication (IAMCR) and a member of the research groups Mediaccions and MediaFlows. Her work focuses on digital political communication, as well as the mainstreaming of populism.