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# From opposition to government: how populist parties change their political communication in Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

Political communication is central to the electoral ascension of populist parties across the world. Several studies investigate how communication is used by populists to gain power, but we know very little about how the communication varies when moving between opposition and government office. The few studies on the topic focus exclusively on right-wing populist parties and neglect left-wing populism. This article addresses this gap in the literature and analyses the political communication of left- and right-wing populist parties by comparing their periods in opposition and in government. It focuses on the Northern Ireland case and compares Sinn Féin and the DUP and uses deductive thematic analysis for each election manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly between 1998 and 2022. The analysis includes four themes: people-centrism, anti-elite bad manners, crisis talk and *volonté générale* solutions. Contrary to theoretical expectations, we find that the right-wing populist DUP has changed more substantively its political communication than the left-wing Sinn Féin when moving from opposition to government.

**KEYWORDS** Populism; political communication; opposition; government

## Introduction

The electoral performance of populist political parties in the last two decades is linked to their style of political communication. Earlier research provides details about the political communication used by left- and right-wing populist parties. Some studies illustrate how populist parties exploit communication mediums to gain political traction (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; De Marco, Robles, Moya-Gómez, & Gomez,

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2022). Other researchers discuss the issues primed during election campaigns (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019; Schmitt-Beck, 2017) or seek to determine how populist parties rebrand their communication after successfully winning political office (Ceron, Gandini, & Lodetti, 2021). While we know much about how populist parties use political communication to gain power, there is little information about how populist communication is used to maintain power. More specifically, it remains unclear what happens with their political communication when moving between opposition and government office. The few studies on the topic focus exclusively on right-wing populist parties (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016; Heinisch, 2003) and neglect left-wing populism.

This article seeks to address this gap in the literature and analyses the political communication of left- and right-wing populist parties by comparing their periods in opposition and in government. It focuses on the Northern Ireland case and compares Sinn Féin (left-wing populists) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (right-wing populists) between 1998 and 2022. While terms like populism, the left-right ideological paradigm, government and opposition are less commonly used in Northern Ireland, it is an appropriate case for analysis for several reasons: many authors already emphasise their populist credentials, both parties transitioned from protest challengers to government office holders, and the political setting provides insight into how both populist parties develop their communication in a post-conflict society. The article uses deductive thematic analysis for each election manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly, covering every election cycle between the Good Friday Agreement and the most recent elections in May 2022. The sentences within each individual document will be scrutinised against four related coding categories (see research design). The manifestos are chosen because they are considered as the most efficient way to evaluate a political party's longitudinal communication trends (Dolezal, Ennsner-Jednastik, Müller, & Winkler, 2012; Gross & Jankowski, 2020). This is done by scrutinising their content against the four discourse dimensions of the populist communication style derived from the literature: simple and 'people-centric' communication that uses direct language, anti-elite 'bad manners', crisis talk, and advocating for *volonté générale* solutions which 'save' democracy (Decadri & Boussalis, 2020; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Schürmann & Gründl, 2022).

Understanding how populist parties across the political spectrum alter their political communication between opposition and government office is important for at least three reasons. First, it compares and contrasts the ways in which different types of populist parties adapt their rhetoric to government office. While we know how their rhetoric differs during election campaigns and what policies they favour in government, our analysis provides the opportunity to learn how (and if) issues change for populists when their status is different. By empirically evaluating the style of politicians'

communication, it is possible to identify their political persuasions (Aalberg et al., 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Second, it allows to assess the communication dynamic against the general features of populists. Political parties in government operate differently than those in opposition in terms of policy making and taking responsibility. The opposition have more opportunities to assign blame to government parties (Hansson, 2018), blame being a crucial characteristic of populist political rhetoric in general (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017). Our analysis illustrates the extent to which populists maintain similar communication approaches when they are in the spotlight, i.e. government office. Third, it allows a closer look at the complexity of populist communication, which has been often praised for its appeal to the electorate. We shed light on a communication dynamic that has been studied for non-populist political parties, which provides a good basis for comparison. While earlier studies show how communicative concerns differ between populists and non-populists when they are in government (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2021), our analysis goes one step further and seeks to identify how those concerns could change for populists when they move from opposition to government.

The next section reviews the literature about populist political communication and proposes an analytical framework that can help understand how this communication changes. The third section describes the research design with emphasis on the case selection, data collection and method for analysis. Next, we present and interpret the results in connection with the existing theory and the empirical realities in Northern Ireland. The conclusions summarise the key findings and discusses the implications of the results for the broader fields of populism and political communication.

### Populist political communication: left- vs. right-wing

We avoid much of the existing debate on populism by accepting as a working definition Mudde's approach. Populism is a 'thin-centred' ideology that guides its disciples to consider society to be separated into two homogeneously antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elites'. Politics should be an expression of the former's sentiments and desires against the latter (Mudde, 2004; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). An adherence to populist ideology includes four interrelated elements: the existence of two antagonistic homogenous groups (people vs elites), an eternal praise for the people *against* 'corrupt elites', inciting permanent antagonisms between both groups, and seeking to resolve such contradictions through the implementation of popular sovereignty (Stanley, 2008, p. 102). In short, populists believe politics should be people-centric in its scope, anti-elite in its scapegoating, and ultimately an expression of the *volonté générale* against the establishment.

The left- and right-wing populists share these common features but provide nuanced interpretations to them. For example, left-wing populists define 'the people' among broadly inclusive lines – diluting and re-evaluating the arguments of socialism to secure popular appeal. To them, 'the people' are all those who have been 'victims' of neo-liberal capitalist economics. Left-wing populist parties usually emphasise a post-modern Neo-Marxist standpoint that society is 'oppressively' structured against the collective of workers, women, immigrants, racial minorities and the LGBTQI + 'community' (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018; Şener, Yücel, & Yedikardeş, 2021). As such, an expression of the *volonté générale* usually manifests as a demand to collapse market order in favour of a more re-distributive global economic system directly re-ordered to favour the 'liberated people' (Grigoriadis, 2020; Rabinowitz, 2022).

The right-wing populists define 'the people' in more exclusionary terms. This involves a more obvious cultural dimension: a strong affiliation with a nation-state which usually becomes synonymous with racial homogeneity. 'The people' therefore become a 'silent majority' within a territorial 'heartland' who have been severely 'let down' by the cosmopolitanism of globalisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Wodak, 2015). Such exclusive credentials for 'the people' do not apply to the 'corrupt elites'; right-wing populists eulogise that the political establishment, 'liberal media' journalists, and 'brainwashing' academics all conspire to surrender national sovereignty by championing those who 'refuse to assimilate' within a territory (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324; Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 4). In turn, this ensures that the *volonté générale* usually manifests as a demand for popular referendums to curb 'unchecked' privileges for a 'dangerous other' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Bowler, Denemark, Donovan, & McDonnell, 2017).

### **Characteristics of populist political communication**

Our approach follows the understanding of populism as a communication style that is, beyond ideology, performed discursively by relevant political actors (Wodak & Khosravini, 2013). Populist actors – both left- and right-wing – seek to communicate in a way that can ensure their fringe ideas can be noticed and gain acceptance. A key characteristic of the populist communication style is that relevant political actors must 'emotionally perform' their ideas to draw attention to over-simplified concepts and solutions (Rooduijn, 2014; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). The populist communication style represents the method used by populist actors to ensure voters embrace populism (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). In short, populist political communication is the discursive performance of the core ideals of populism. It is a style structured to allow parties to convey core premises of populism. This usually happens via four characteristics: relevant actors will produce

discursive ‘performances’ that explicitly emphasise simple, ‘people-centric’ communications, anti-elite ‘bad manners’, a commitment to crisis talk, and communicating *volonté générale* solutions to solve apparent crises. The following lines explain how this may differ between left- and right-wing populists.

To begin with the simple ‘people-centric’ element, we know that populists ‘speak directly to the people’, and use strong, simple language to convey the message that populists are different than the elite they seek to denigrate (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005b). Left-wing populists use an inclusionary form of people-centrism (Bonansinga, 2022; Breeze, 2019b) in which ‘the people’ are demos: an inclusive entity that can integrate and unite several social, ethnic and cultural persuasions into a homogenous mass ‘community’. For example, in Latin America words like ‘comrades’ and ‘brothers and sisters’ replace terms like ‘voters’ to ensure populist leaders can cultivate a ‘people-centric’ image with those they seek to represent (de Lara, 2018; Macaulay, 2019).

Right-wing populists employ such language to create an exclusionary form of ‘people-centrism’ that depicts an ‘in-group’ of ethnos natives. A ‘common tongue’ is used to incite a permanent state of conflict between the ‘real native people’ and the designated ‘enemy within’, often communicated as religious minorities or transnational migrants (Wodak, 2015). For example, in European right-wing populism direct phrases like ‘regain Bulgaria for the Bulgarians’ entice *jus soil* citizens to culturally ‘reclaim’ their national territories (Gherghina, Mişcoiu, & Soare, 2017).

Second, anti-elite bad manners are used by populists to attack mainstream politics. They purposively ensure that their tone – and even their accent – are audibly different from establishment politicians to ridicule both government representatives and traditional political practices (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). Left-wing populists use personal level ‘bad manners’ rarely and in vague or anti-system terms: an example was Chavez’s use of ‘little Yankees’ in Latin America to denigrate those who opposed him (Moffitt, 2016; Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019). However, they often tend to display public-level criticism towards institutional processes to win the support of ‘the people’. For example, Perón de-humanised the process of liberal democracy in Argentina by calling the system a ‘snake that one can kill in any way’ (Finchelstein, 2014, p. 86). This also goes beyond discourse; left-wing populists also rebel against traditional dress codes to court flamboyant ‘ordinary profile’ outfits (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 388; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 77–78).

Right-wing populists extensively use personal-level incivility against the elites to condemn them for destroying national institutional processes. Their interpretation of elite politics as a gentrified domain ensures that members of the ‘corrupt establishment’ are fair-game for vitriol and slander

(Arditi, 2005). Public-level incivility usually manifests as a verbal critique against the 'liberal elite' for eroding the sanctity of traditional cultural norms. For example, the discourses of European right-wing populists condemn national establishments as deliberately seeking to destroy niche cultural issues – such as the right to free speech (Šori and Ivanova, 2017; Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016).

Third, the proclamation of a crisis is linked to the anti-elite rhetoric since they are blamed for pushing humanity to the brink of destruction. Populists deliberately exploit 'hot-button issues' such as economic inequality, abortion, or immigration to incite an anger amongst voters that can simplify complex developments and irrationally scapegoat an 'elite' culprit (Jenkins, 2003). Left-wing populists present the crisis as uncontrolled capitalism. The corrupt elites are complicit in overseeing a 'boom-and-bust economic system' in which the free movement of goods and services only benefits the '1%' (Brühwiler & Goktepe, 2021, p. 451; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017, p. 196). For example, the Greek left-wing populists predicted that national membership within the European Economic Community would produce domestic economic meltdown in the early 2000s.

Right-wing populists emphasise cultural anxiety: the crisis is the apparent threat of national sovereignty being over-run by the dangerous 'other' while the elites wilfully surrender to such forces (Brühwiler & Goktepe, 2021). Right-wing populists claim that we should all fear 'the enemy within' who will overrun domestic society if the liberal elites allow multiculturalism to remain unchecked (Wodak, 2015). For example, right-wing populists have been known to claim that 'women's liberation is under assault from Islam' while immigration remains unchecked (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 111).

Fourth, populists advocate for *volonté générale* solutions to the crises: 'the people' must be included in future policy proposals to resolve the anxiety of 'crisis talk'. The simplistic promise of change is a central feature of populist appeal and provides a 'moral evaluation' to indicate that 'the people' must step in to solve elite-driven problems (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 109; Moffitt, 2016, p. 30). By calling for simple solutions to complex crises, populists turn elite blame into populist credit (Wodak, 2015, p. 60). The left-wing populists shape a vague rallying cry for a democratic revolution led by 'the inclusive people'. They seek to incite an idealised future. For example, Chavez organised the masses around the emotionally powerful slogan: 'Laws don't create, the will of the masses does!' during the 1998 Venezuelan election campaign (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 250).

Right-wing populists often seek to bring back an idealised depiction of the past. Elite-driven crisis-talk can be solved by inviting 'the exclusive people' to win back the 'good old days'. A nostalgia-driven sense of the country's past is promoted through simplistic sound-bite solutions which demonstrate how 'the people' can directly intervene to save a nation-state's future (Betz &

Johnson, 2004, p. 324). For example, Geert Wilders used the tag-line 'Repatriation, Repatriation, Repatriation' in the Netherlands to initiate support for a popular referendum regarding immigration (Moffitt, 2016, p. 127).

### *Theoretical expectations*

This article will analyse each of the four characteristics outlined above for Sinn Féin and DUP in opposition and in government. The rationale for this approach is straightforward: the literature on populism indicates these are the four most common characteristics of populist political communication. The analysis of each component over time can provide an accurate conclusion of overall political communication trends. This approach follows other research projects which analyse individual data components to reach a specific overall conclusion (Gorlach and Roux, 2020, pp. 41–42; Lam, 2023, pp. 145–147).

The literature review allows formulating several theoretical expectations about how the two parties will change their communication style between opposition and office. The first expectation is about continuity in office regarding 'people-centrism'. Since utilising people-centric inclusivity ensures a broad base of popularity for left-wing populist parties (Bonansinga, 2022; Filc, 2015), this strategy is likely to be maintained by Sinn Féin in government. Although the right-wing populists often build popularity among a narrower citizen base (Hameleers, 2019; Wodak, 2015), the DUP is likely to maintain its people-centric exclusivity in government office because that ensured their electoral success. The second expectation is about the anti-elite bad manners. Since the typical left-wing examples prioritise public-level incivilities in opposition (Finchelstein, 2014; Laclau, 2005a), we expect Sinn Féin to move towards personal-level bad manners during their term in government. Other left-wing parties have followed the same trajectory once they got elected (Hawkins, 2003; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Since personal-level vitriols are often central to right-wing populists gaining popularity (Krasner, 2021), the DUP is likely to continue this approach between opposition and office to maintain political capital among their core base.

Third, on crisis talk most left-wing populist parties build popularity by emphasising impending catastrophe in opposition (Brühwiler & Goktepe, 2021; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). We expect Sinn Féin to drop such talk in office because several elected left-wing examples follow the trajectory of suppressing dissenting thought as the party emphasises its commitment to achieving 'systemic change' (*Strategic Comments*, 2016, p. i; *Strategic Comments*, 2017, p. xi). In contrast, because of right-wing populism's diverse attacks against the liberal elite (Ganesh & Froio, 2020; Pitcher, 2019), the DUP is likely to have more scope to continue crisis talk between opposition and government. The fourth expectation is about the *volonté générale*



solution rhetoric. Since including 'the people' in policy solutions is important for left-wing populist parties to gain popularity (Gandesha, 2018; Swynge-douw, 2014), it is likely that Sinn Féin will maintain this approach in office. As right-wing populist parties also usually build expectations among the 'exclusive' people that they will be included in realising the 'nostalgic utopia' (Betz & Johnson, 2004; Woodhams, 2019), the DUP are also expected to maintain such rhetoric between opposition and office.

## Research design

Northern Ireland is an appropriate case to assess how two populist parties change their communication styles when moving from opposition to government. This happens for two reasons. First, while both parties are often recognised as polarising radical nationalist parties within Northern Ireland (Ganiel, 2009; Justice, 2005), there is a clear academic consensus they also qualify as populist parties. For example, Sinn Féin continuously pursued an 'unashamedly left-wing populist approach' to political campaigning (Park & Suiter, 2021, p. 632), which is confirmed by several studies (Elkink & Farrell, 2021; Müller & Regan, 2021). The party has repeatedly exploited the 'breeding ground for populist politics' by posing as 'local saviours' promoting an 'anti-capitalist' agenda (Dingley, 2006, p. 279). Their 2010 campaign for the Westminster election is an example of left-wing populist messaging observable in Northern Ireland. It was described as displaying a typically left-wing 'resilient lack of faith in the administrative and policing and justice apparatuses of the Northern state' (McGrattan, 2011, p. 267). A similar example refers to the 2019 Northern Ireland local elections in which Sinn Féin encouraged the people to rally together against their alleged collective victimhood to 'end the trauma of partition' (Whitten, 2019, p. 66).

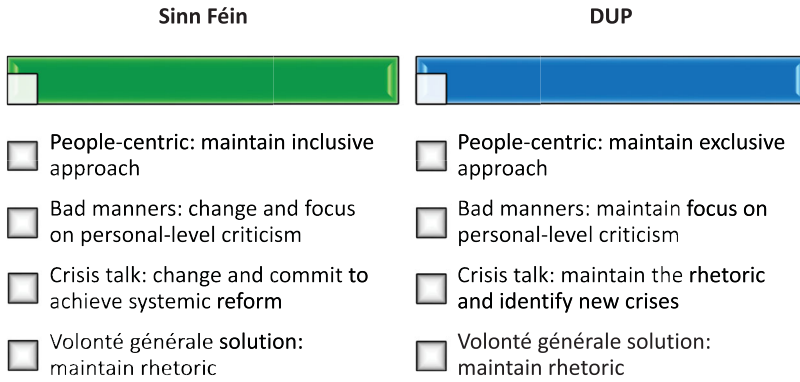
Several studies confirm the DUP's right-wing populist credentials. The party is described as a 'populist radical right' party who exclusively seek to appeal to the Protestant community of Northern Ireland (Mudde, 2007, p. 55, 2014, p. 220). The DUP promoted an 'economic populism' demanding strong services for the Protestant community in 2010 when facing UK cabinet's pledge to cut public funding to Northern Ireland (McGrattan, 2011, p. 268). All these are confirmed by the approached use by an international comparative study that includes the DUP on the list of right-wing populist parties (Stöckla & Rode, 2021, p. 68). In short, even though the left-right ideological dichotomy is less prevalent in Irish politics (Green-Pedersen & Little, 2022), Sinn Féin qualifies as a left-wing populist party and the DUP as a right-wing populist party.

Second, both parties transitioned from protest challengers to government office holders, which allows to compare how both left- and right-wing populist parties change their communication while holding constant those

variables associated with the political system. For clarification, while the Stormont Assembly has twice been officially suspended between 2002–2007 and 2017–2020 (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2023; Irish Political Studies, 2018, p. 450), there is still a consensus that those who *can* form an executive after election cycles should be viewed as parties with decision-making power. For example, Wilford and Wilson (2004, p. 261) described the DUP as becoming a ‘leading voice of unionism’ after the 2003 election cycle despite choosing to decline restoring devolution because it required entering into a power-sharing agreement with Sinn Féin.

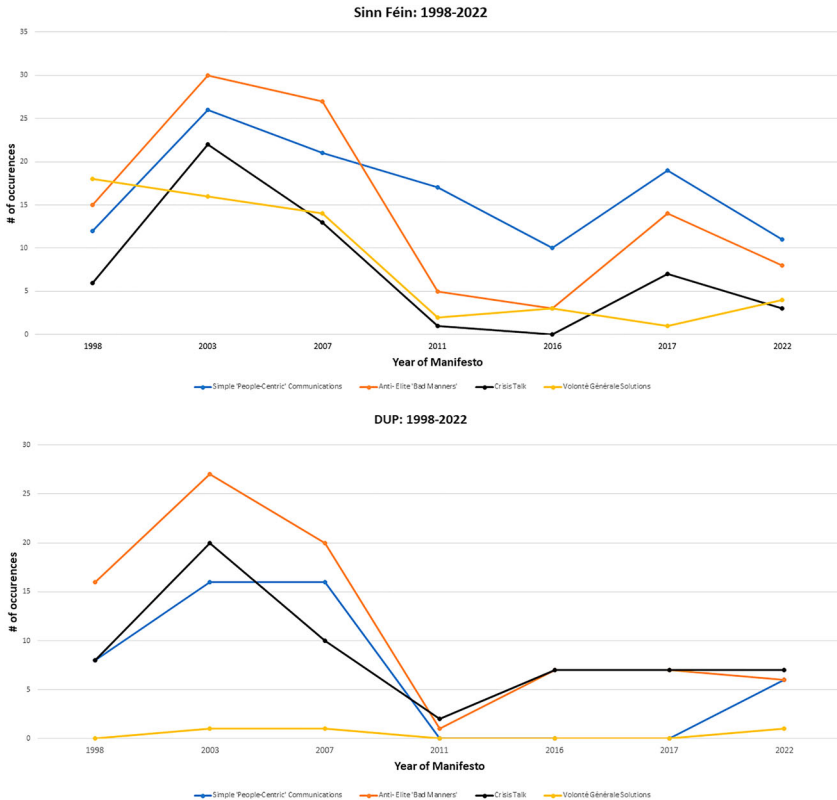
The data comes from the campaign manifestos of both parties for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly between 1998 and 2022. This includes 14 manifestos in total over seven Stormont election cycles: 1998, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016, 2017 and 2022 (Appendix 1). Both parties operated as challengers for the 1998, 2003 and 2007 election cycles, before securing and maintaining their positions as joint incumbent partners in the Stormont executive since then. The justification for using this data – as opposed to using manifestos for Westminster General Election cycles or European Parliament processes – is that both parties maintained an equally enduring commitment to devolved Stormont politics during this time. Even accounting for the 2003 anomaly, this was a post-election decision: neither party explicitly advocated rejecting Stormont office in their manifesto pledges. The data was collected directly from the digital archives of both political parties (Sinn Féin, 2022; DUP, 2022). Written for the Northern Irish voting population, they provide excellent scope to evaluate transitioning communication strategies between opposition and government.

We use deductive thematic analysis to extract main themes from each manifesto document (Breeze, 2019a). The unit of analysis is the sentence because conducting sentiment analysis upon individual sentences has been deemed to produce more accurate and reliable findings than paragraph analysis (Rudkowsky, Haselmayer, Wastian, Jenny, & Emrich, 2018). We scrutinise each sentence against the four dimensions / themes for populist political communication in Figure 1. The coding was done independently by the authors, then checked for consistency and inter-coder reliability. The percentage of agreement in content coding was above 92%. The qualifying sentences are summed up to provide an overview (Figure 2) and the content of sentences is used to analyse the continuity or change in political between 1998 and 2022. Table 1 summarises our approach. For example, the simple ‘people-centric’ theme includes sentences that contain specific, explicit references to the chosen depiction of ‘the people’. For left-wing populists this must manifest in general, inclusive terms: examples could include variations of terms like ‘the people’, ‘citizens’ ‘ordinary people’ or potentially in this case – variations of ‘the Irish people’. For the right-wing, only exclusionary depictions will qualify: sentences must specifically speak



**Figure 1.** Expectations for political communication in opposition and government.

to examples such as the ‘Unionist community’, the ‘Protestant people’, ‘Ulster Protestants’, ‘British Protestants’ etc. Only past- and present-tense mentions of the chosen ‘people’ can qualify. This is because future-tense references



**Figure 2.** Comparison of political communication over time.

**Table 1.** Illustrative example of deductive thematic analysis: the 1998 Manifestos.

Simple 'People-Centric' Sinn Féin	Anti-Elite 'Bad Manners'	Crisis Talk	<i>Volonté Générale</i> Solutions
'Last month, the people took an historic step towards freedom, justice and democracy'.	'Seeking the establishment of a Department of Equality ... given the inequality that has been allowed to permeate societal and institutional organisation in the north'.	'Recent events have shown that the days of unionist intransigence and obstruction are not over'.	'Create democratic participation for all people in the development of the region'.
The people voted for Sinn Féin's peace strategy'.	'At the core of our policy is a commitment to eradicate the causes of these prevailing institutional injustices'.	'Ordinary people and entire communities within urban and rural Ireland will endure continued entrenched unemployment ... and endemic inequalities'.	'We need a partnership based on equality, which will empower and improve the quality of life of all citizens by being open, inclusive and democratic'.
<b>DUP</b>			
'All the decent people recoil with moral contempt at the prospect of the mass release of those who have murdered ... the innocent'.	'The RUC is to be demoralised and disarmed – you have been given assurances by Tony Blair and others'.	'The future of the RUC is under great threat'.	'The DUP is committed to the promotion and development of unionist citizen culture and cultural identity'.
'We demand, as British citizens, equality of treatment'.	'Solemn pledges from Blair and Trimble already crumbling'.	'Under the Agreement all-Ireland structures are proposed, in which unionists will always be a permanent minority'.	

to 'the people' strongly suggest the desire to implement a *volonté générale* solution.

Anti-elite 'bad manners' are analysed against the parameters of tone and image for which we got inspiration from previous research (Boukes, van de Velde, Araujo, & Vliegthart, 2020). All discussions about elite personnel, traditional institutions, and policy processes will be judged against the tone parameters of positive, negative, or neutral. For clarity, sentences containing personalised critiques of elected individuals, opposition parties, and employers will qualify as personal-level anti-elite 'bad manners'. Sentences including generalised critiques will qualify as public level incivility. Pictures within each manifesto will be similarly evaluated: personal presentation of representatives, their chosen outfits, and the selected locations of photos will be judged against positive, negative, or neutral parameters towards elite personnel and formal processes. For example: if a representative in the manifesto wears a t-shirt rather than the traditional formal attire of a suit, this would

qualify as a visual expression of public-level anti-elite ‘bad manners’. We take inspiration from Moffitt (2016) in reaching consensus on this coding characteristic, but also from two ‘real-life’ examples in which wearing t-shirts or ‘casual’ dress presented a clear example of defying recognised authority from both left- and right-wing political activists (Miller, 2005; Gutu, 2017).

Crisis talk will be evaluated according to the established trends within the literature review. On the left-wing side, crisis talk must feature a strong suggestion that the elites are complicit in future related corruption: only variations of accusations that traditional elite representatives, parties or employers will continue to politically or economically ‘exploit’ the majority without intervention will be included. This criterion equally applies to the right-wing side: only crisis talk which suggests an elite desire to continually grant specified ‘undesirable others’ with unacceptable privileges – such as unrestricted free movement or excessive political rights – can qualify. Equally, examples which suggest that an undesirable ‘out-group’ have the direct potential to cause future societal chaos can qualify as right-wing crisis talk. Again, for clarity: all relevant references from either Belfast, London, or Dublin will qualify. Policy solutions must incite a need for direct intervention from ‘the people’ to qualify for the *volonté générale* frame. Examples could include advocating for popular referendums or more direct democracy to check ‘elite corruption’. However, variations on topics such as party representatives promising to deliver solutions on *behalf* of the population are not coded within this theme.

## Explaining the change in political communication

Figure 2 shows variation in the way in which the two parties use the four characteristics of populist political communication over time. For clarity, figures are displayed as raw data indices rather than as proportionate percentage counts. The raw data can present a clearer picture to compare the extent to which each party explicitly relied upon individual characteristics of the populist political communication style. This informed more accurate comparative conclusions about both parties. Even though proportional percentage counts can create ‘standardised results’ to account for the manifesto length, we believe the raw depiction can shed light on changes in each party’s political communication.

In their opposition manifestos (1998, 2003 and 2007), both parties used extensively simple ‘people-centric’ communication, anti-elite ‘bad manners’ and crisis talk to communicate their pledges. Sinn Féin peaked in 2003 when it used simple ‘people-centric’ inclusivity 26 times, referred to anti-elite bad manners 30 times, had 20 examples of crisis talk, and 16 examples of *volonté générale* solutions in its manifesto. In 2007, the frequency of use for each characteristic is somewhat lower, but significantly higher than in 1998

(except for *volonté générale*). The party changed its political communication style when joining the government office. Only the simple ‘people-centric’ communication remains broadly consistent with their communication in opposition: it peaks at 19 ‘inclusive’ examples in the 2017 election manifesto, which is comparable with their 2007 manifesto in opposition. Between 2011 and 2022 there are noticeably less examples for each of the other three characteristics of populist political communication. Anti-elite ‘bad manners’ dropped to five or fewer references in the 2011 and 2016 elections. Crisis talk has sunk once in government, while the party referred 10 times in total to the implementation of *volonté générale* between 2011 and 2022. These confirm at a general level the expectations formulated about Sinn Féin in the theoretical section.

The DUP’s political communication in opposition between 1998 and 2007 resembles that of Sinn Féin. The party used extensively on three of the populist political communication characteristics: exclusive ‘people-centrism’, anti-elite ‘bad manners’, and crisis talk. Qualifying examples for these three coding frames peaked in 2003: 16 examples of simple ‘people-centric’ exclusivity, 27 examples of anti-elite ‘bad manners’, and 20 examples of crisis talk. However, there were only two examples of the party advocating for *volonté générale* solutions from their entire period in opposition: this notably contrasted with their frequent use of ‘people-centric’ exclusivity. In 2007, the frequency of use for each of the three characteristics continued to be relatively high, similarly to what observed for Sinn Féin. Once in office, DUP displays important changes of its political communication. It has abandoned almost entirely its exclusive ‘people-centrism’ for which it had no references in the 2011, 2016, and 2017 manifestos. When the picked it up again in 2022, there are only a handful of references to it. A similar observation applies to anti-elite bad manners that recorded a major drawback in 2011 and never got to the level of opposition since then. The crisis talk is more nuanced because the real difference was in 2011 when the party almost ignored this aspect, which then rose in 2016 and the subsequent elections to levels comparable to 1998. The consistency in DUP communications has been their approach to the *volonté générale* solution, which was anyway at a very low level before joining the government. The qualitative data analysis nuances and enriches these findings.

### ***People-centrism and anti-elite ‘bad manners’***

Sinn Féin heavily emphasised ‘people-centric’ inclusivity while in opposition. In all challenger manifestos there were many qualifying examples of the phenomenon: qualifying statements included phrases within sentences such as ‘the people of Ireland’, ‘all citizens’, and ‘everyone in Ireland’ (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 1; Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 31; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 35). The party

regularly sought to praise 'the people': phrases included 'last month, the people took an historic step towards freedom' and 'the vast majority of the people now recognise that partition is restricting ... potential across the island' (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 1; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 18). There were also many qualifying examples of the party communicating the typical left-wing standpoint that 'the people' are collectively 'oppressed'. Examples across 1998–2007 included 'Sinn Féin's core objective is to realise an ... order in Ireland ... which cherishes all our people equally'; 'full human rights must be guaranteed for all the people of Ireland'; and 'Sinn Féin is committed to building ... an equal economy that delivers for all people in the Six Counties' (Sinn Féin, 1998, pp. 2–3; Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 21; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 26).

Such inclusive forms of 'people-centric' communication have also remained a consistent theme within Sinn Féin's incumbent manifestos. Qualifying statements follow a similar pattern to opposition manifestos: these include 'Sinn Féin will deliver for all our people'; '2016 is an important year for the people of Ireland'; and 'we are for the unity of the people in this country' (Sinn Féin, 2011, p. 3; Sinn Féin, 2016, p. 4; Sinn Féin 2017, p. 5). The party in office has even continued to emphasise that the 'inclusive people' deserve more rights than currently offered: qualifying statements include 'that historic document is a clear statement of intent for ... social justice and equality for all citizens'; and 'we uphold the right of all citizens to access due legal processes' (Sinn Féin, 2016, p. 4; Sinn Féin, 2022, p. 17). In short, Sinn Féin's transition from opposition to government has not affected this left-wing populist communication characteristic: the party have clearly prioritised communicating 'the people' as *demos* between 1998 and 2022.

The DUP also emphasised simple, 'people-centric' exclusivity while in opposition. Examples included 'all the decent people recoil with moral contempt'; 'it is essential to develop community capacity ... in the Protestant community'; and 'the DUP has proved it can be trusted to deliver for the unionist community' (DUP, 1998, p. 3; 2003, p. 10; 2007, p. 23). Their challenger manifestos also highlighted a right-wing populist tendency to emphasise the 'purity' of the chosen flock: examples included 'we demand, for British citizens, equality of treatment'; and 'the DUP is committed to the promotion and development of unionist citizen culture and cultural identity' (DUP, 1998, p. 3; 2007, p. 60).

However, exclusive forms of 'people-centrism' have almost completely evaporated from DUP communications since they entered the Stormont Executive. Incumbent DUP manifestos in 2011, 2016 and 2017 contained exactly 0 qualifying statements for exclusive 'people-centrism': the party instead continually prioritised statements such as 'delivering for unionism and the broader community'; 'I am asking the people of Northern Ireland to endorse me'; and 'we want to ensure that the people in every district

and community benefit' (DUP, 2011, p. 28, DUP, 2016, p. 5; DUP, 2017, p. 5; DUP, 2022, p. 3). Even when exclusive 'people-centrism' returned in 2022, there were only 6 qualifying examples – all almost exclusively concerning Unionist opposition to the Irish Protocol. This included the particularly pertinent example: 'the Protocol is not supported by Unionists in Northern Ireland' (DUP, 2022, p. 41). In sum, the DUP's transition from opposition to government has resulted in a more inclusive communications approach attempting to represent all within Northern Ireland.

Sinn Féin heavily emphasised public-level anti-elite 'bad manners' while in opposition. All-but-one of 72 qualifying statements between 1998 and 2007 manifested as generalised public-level incivility towards existing political institutions and economic processes. Relevant examples included 'the aim of economic policy under the Stormont and British administrations was one of discrimination'; 'in the last year the British government ... removed your right to vote'; and 'expose and dismantle the structures of collusion and state murder' (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 3; Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 3; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 10). This was usually directed towards the British Government at Westminster, but there were also qualifying examples towards both the Stormont Executive and Dublin's *laissez faire* attitude towards Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 21; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 22). These public-level incivilities were also often communicated in visual form; the 2003 and 2007 manifestos contained several pictures of their party representatives dressed in casual attire, attending IRA memorial murals, and contributing towards community rallies within urban housing enclaves (Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 9, p. 13, p. 23; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 6, p. 20).

However, Sinn Féin has not continued this communications approach since entering government. Qualifying statements for the anti-elite 'bad manners' characteristic have dramatically reduced in incumbency: more still, the party in office have also entirely moved towards prioritising personal-level incivility. Relevant examples of the new phenomenon include: 'Derry Sinn Féin say NO to Tory Cuts'; 'we worked hard to ... offset the worst excesses of the Tory cut agenda'; 'Arlene Foster ... was the minister responsible'; and 'Boris Johnson has done little to support people' (Sinn Féin, 2011, p. 17; Sinn Féin, 2016, p. 4; Sinn Féin, 2017, p. 7; Sinn Féin, 2022, p. 6). In summary, Sinn Féin in Stormont office has largely abandoned the traditional left-wing populist mantra of condemning the systemic injustices of 'corrupt' institutions: the party now clearly seeks to cement their establishment position by communicating personalised criticisms of others for incumbent electoral gain.

The DUP also heavily emphasised anti-elite 'bad manners' in all their challenger manifestos. However, the majority of qualifying examples manifested as personal-level incivilities. The majority of these personalised barbs were explicitly directed towards the UUP and their leader David Trimble.



Particularly pertinent examples included ‘Trimble and other Unionist “Yes men” are prepared to work with IRA/Sinn Féin’; ‘I don’t want four more years of Trimble’s concessions’, and ‘David Trimble and Reg Empey did all they could to provide a place in Government for Sinn Féin’ (DUP, 1998, p. 5; DUP, 2003, p. 2; DUP, 2007, p. 10). The party regularly used visual images to communicate personal-level slanders of some elite representatives. These included two pictures of Trimble laughing with Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams, a caricature of Trimble laughing at the Unionist community, and a picture of Tony Blair shaking hands with then-Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (DUP, 1998, p. 5; DUP, 2003, p. 8, p. 13).

However, the DUP have almost entirely abandoned the anti-elite ‘bad manners’ characteristic since entering the Stormont Executive. More still, the majority of qualifying statements have manifested as public-level incivility. Relevant examples of the new phenomenon have mostly manifested as a desire to abolish the mandatory coalition arrangements at Stormont. These include ‘one of the flaws of the present system of government is the lack of a formal Opposition’; and ‘the system at Stormont [is] too big and bloated’ (DUP, 2011, p. 24; DUP, 2016, p. 26). Their incumbent communications now also contain generalised critiques of the ‘liberal elite’ common to other right-wing populist parties. One particularly pertinent example came from 2022: ‘sadly Westminster, in a free vote for MPs, imposed the UK’s most liberal abortion regime on Northern Ireland’ (DUP, 2022, p. 29). In short, the DUP in office have not only dramatically reduced their *amount* of anti-elite ‘bad manners’: they have also changed the *pattern* of such content to communicate a more generalised public-level desire to re-structure formal institutions and processes.

### **Crisis talk and *volonté générale* solutions**

Sinn Féin regularly employed crisis talk in opposition. Qualifying statements usually manifested as a potential for either Unionist parties or the British Government to deliberately cause future disaster. Examples included ‘the days of unionist intransigence and obstruction are not over’; ‘Catholics will continue to be twice as likely to be unemployed as their Protestant counterparts’; and ‘lumped in with the rest of the UK, the north will continue to limp further ... behind’ (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 1; Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 29; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 24). The 2003 and 2007 manifestos also regularly communicated that further British involvement in the Northern Ireland economy would destroy several key services: pertinent examples included ‘[agriculture] is a national disaster that requires an urgent all-Ireland response’; we will be faced before long with ... water poverty’; and ‘the Regional Transportation Strategy proposes to leave Fermanagh, Tyrone and South Armagh with negligible access to public transport’ (Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 60; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 28, p. 31).

However, Sinn Féin has almost completely abandoned crisis talk since entering Stormont office. The party in incumbency now almost totally embrace the typical left-wing populist strategy of insisting that all previous crises no longer exist under their stewardship. Previous challenger references to impending future infrastructural crises, famine, and intense economic hardship have all completely disappeared between 2011 and 2022; the party in office now only occasionally predicts crises regarding a political situation apparently beyond their control – Brexit. Examples include '[Brexit] will be bad for our economy, our people, and our public services'; 'the Tory Government are seeking to impose Brexit on Ireland; and 'the loss of EU funding and the potential impact of the British Government's free trade deals will remain serious problems' (Sinn Féin, 2017, p. 9, Sinn Féin, 2022, p. 14). In summary, where impending catastrophe was apparently inevitable between 1998 and 2007, the future has now become almost unequivocally bright since Sinn Féin have entered political office.

The DUP also regularly employed crisis talk in their challenger manifestos. Qualifying statements between 1998 and 2007 usually manifested as a prediction that the 'dangerous other' would destroy society, or that the UUP would aid them in doing so. Applicable examples included 'they want to let terrorists out of prison without any linkage to the actual handing in of illegal weapons'; 'Sinn Féin/IRA will be able to appoint the man who bombed the Old Bailey'; and 'an Irish Language Act will place Irish on a par with English' (DUP, 1998, p. 5; DUP, 2003, p. 4; DUP, 2007, p. 25). However, the party also sought to consistently manipulate Unionist community emotions by emphasising that the continuing existence of the Good Friday Agreement would spark the demise of Northern Ireland. Relevant examples of this included 'under the Agreement all-Ireland structures are proposed'; 'four more years of the Belfast Agreement is likely to mean ... all-Ireland rule'; and 'do you want Sinn Féin/IRA to run policing in Northern Ireland?' (DUP, 1998, p. 2; DUP, 2003, p. 3; p. 7).

However, the DUP have almost completely abandoned crisis talk in office. The small number of qualifying in-office examples also demonstrate a significant change of tactic for the party. The 'dangers' of the Good Friday Agreement have now completely disappeared in incumbency: the party instead now only fleetingly mentions the potential dangers of continued paramilitary activity. Examples include 'threatening to bring Stormont down is a recipe for political instability'; and 'we need a new anti-paramilitary strategy to remove this lingering scourge' (DUP, 2011, p. 6; DUP, 2016, p. 20). In sum, the DUP in government have almost completely abandoned the heavy crisis talk of their challenger communications.

Sinn Féin consistently advocated *volonté générale* solutions in their challenger manifestos. This included a range of topics including recycling, the justice system, and re-purposing military barracks: examples included 'we

need local community involvement in the ... running of waste management programmes'; 'such a [civic justice] forum would offer local communities ... an opportunity to become involved in decision-making'; and 'convert dismantled military installations ... to civilian use in co-operation with local communities' (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 6; Sinn Féin, 2003, pp. 21-22; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 7). There were also repeated left-wing demands for citizens to democratically control the economy, and have a direct stake in policing arrangements. Pertinent examples included 'local communities becoming centrally involved in planning ... economic development programmes'; 'developing the community-based policing approach'; and 'Sinn Féin supports the development of locally-owned or 'indigenous' enterprise' (Sinn Féin, 1998, p. 4; Sinn Féin, 2003, p. 26; Sinn Féin, 2007, p. 24).

However, there was a huge decline of *volonté générale* solutions in Sinn Féin incumbent communications. The party in office has instead moved to emphasise that *they* will represent the community in decision-making processes. Examples include 'Sinn Féin will continue to show leadership in the pursuit of an Ireland that is equal and prosperous'; 'Sinn Féin will continue to mobilise against the implementation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership'; and 'Sinn Féin will stand against Brexit' (Sinn Féin, 2011, p. 3; Sinn Féin, 2016, pp. 17-18; Sinn Féin, 2017, p. 5). Fleeting references to *volonté générale* solutions in incumbency now almost exclusively focus upon only one core issue – advocating for a public referendum on the Irish constitutional question. Examples include: 'we will build support for island wide referendums on Irish unity'; and 'this will require a democratic process that will allow everyone ... to participate ... in planning constitutional change' (Sinn Féin, 2016, p. 4; Sinn Féin, 2022, p. 9). In summary, Sinn Féin in office now almost exclusively seek to *represent* the community on pertinent societal issues, rather than *include* them in future policy processes.

By contrast, the DUP's challenger communications produced only two qualifying examples for *volonté générale* solutions. Both examples centred around furthering the quality of popular democracy: 'we believe that local people are best placed to make decisions which affect their lives'; and 'a cross-community vote would be required to proceed with a seven-council model' (DUP, 2003, p. 16; DUP, 2007, p. 53). Instead, the DUP as challengers almost exclusively sought to convince the Unionist community that the *party* should be trusted to solve the issues. Relevant examples included 'Northern Ireland's future is safe in our hands'; 'the DUP will continue to campaign for innocent victims'; and 'the DUP will work to restore the morale and effectiveness of the police force' (DUP, 1998, p. 2; DUP, 2003, p. 25, DUP, 2007, p. 6).

The DUP have also maintained a similar approach towards *volonté générale* solutions since entering the Stormont Executive. Between 2011 and 2022,

there has only been one example of the party demanding the implementation of popular sovereignty in their incumbent manifestos. This manifested as a vague 2022 commitment to involve ‘the people’ in preserving continuity on the national question: ‘preserve the ... spirit of Northern Ireland’s constitutional guarantee requiring the consent of a majority of the people ... for any diminution in its status as part of the United Kingdom’ (DUP, 2022, p. 29). In short, the DUP between 1998 and 2022 have consistently advocated that the processes of traditional representative democracy provide the best method to implement favourable policy solutions.

### Comparative discussion

The findings from the previous sub-section indicate that both populist parties have changed their political communication when moving from opposition to government. Quantitatively, the four characteristics of populist political communication style are notably less prevalent in the manifestos of both parties between 2011 and 2022 (government) compared to the 1998–2007 period (opposition). The two political parties share similarities in the extent to which they use these characteristics in a moderate form and in the content of their messages. In that sense, the qualitative analysis illustrates the existence of higher convergence in terms of messages conveyed by Sinn Féin and DUP in government than it was in opposition (Table 1). In other words, the period in government narrowed the gap between the communication used by left- and right-wing populist parties.

There are several differences between how the two parties changed their political communication between opposition and office (Table 2). In government Sinn Féin abandoned several foundational elements of the left-wing populist communication style such as crisis talk or issues related to *volonté générale* but retained an ‘inclusive people-centrism’. It shifted from a public level anti-elite ‘bad manners’ rhetoric – that reflected a desire to abolish or

**Table 2.** Overview of populist communication in opposition and in government.

Populist Communication Characteristics	Sinn Féin		DUP	
	Opposition	Government	Opposition	Government
Simple ‘People-Centric’ Communication	Strong inclusive emphasis	Continuity: strong inclusive emphasis	Strongly exclusive emphasis	Change: more inclusive emphasis
Anti-Elite ‘Bad Manners’ Crisis Talk	Mainly public level Heavy emphasis on crises	Change: mainly personal level Change: no crises on sight	Mainly personal level Heavy emphasis on crises	Change: mainly public level Change: tone down and different crises
<i>Volonté Générale</i> Solutions	Demands to involve citizens	Change: representation, little involvement	Focus on representation	Continuity: Focus on representation

reform established institutions – to favour more personal attacks against political opponents. Three of the initial theoretical expectations find empirical support: Sinn Féin maintains an ‘inclusive people-centrism’, changes its rhetoric about bad manners and dropped the claims about imminent crises. Only the evidence for *volonté générale* goes against the theoretical expectations since the party dropped the idea of people involvement and assumed a more official role to represent the people.

The DUP also changed its political communication between opposition and government, but in a different way. In essence, the party left behind most of the right-wing rhetoric and focused instead on messages that broaden their appeal and could secure their presence in government for longer. One of the most striking changes was the shift from the exclusive ‘people-centric’ communication to a more inclusive version of the same characteristic. Similarly, they abandoned their prominent opposition strategy to attack at personal level the corrupt elite in favour of a discourse that criticises institutions and promises their reform. The crisis talk was also toned down and replaced with messages about the government’s agenda or record. The DUP made little effort to improve their *volonté générale* record in government: ‘the people’ have remained consistently excluded from all pending policy solutions between 1998 and 2022. Only one theoretical expectation found support in their case, but this must be also nuanced because it refers to the *volonté générale* solutions. The theory indicates that a focus on popular involvement and continuity in rhetoric are the natural outcomes for a right-wing populist party. The evidence illustrates that DUP has continuity in its rhetoric, but it has never had a focus on popular involvement. Instead, it focused in opposition on people’s representation, which it maintained in government. In brief, the right-wing populist party made more (quantitatively) and profound (qualitatively) changes to its political communication when moving from opposition to government compared to the left-wing populist party.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to explain how left- and right-wing populist parties change their political communication style between opposition and government in Northern Ireland. The results show that the right-wing populist DUP has changed more substantively its political communication than the left-wing Sinn Féin. These findings have important theoretical and empirical implications that go beyond the case investigated here. First, at a theoretical level, the analysis can add further depth to related works seeking to compare populist parties. While existing studies predominately analyse communication differences between right-wing populist parties, this analysis provides a comparison with its left-wing equivalent. As such, this article contributes to

a better understanding of how competing populisms change their communication between opposition and government. Along similar lines, the analytical framework proposed here is not context sensitive and could become a useful template for similar analyses in other countries.

At empirical level, the findings can contribute towards analysing which form of populism strays most from its foundational values once it reaches government. The findings illustrate that the right-wing populist party altered more its political communication. This means that once these populists become part of the elite that they attack for most problems in society or poor political performance, they change the intensity and content of their messages. Once they reach government positions, both populist parties leave aside the crisis and blaming discourse and favour a more holistic rhetoric focused on government performance and continuity in office. In that sense, their communication does not differ significantly from that of non-populist parties in other political settings. Moreover, the results can also inform those who seek to analyse how the formation of populist executives can affect government communication in a post-conflict society. We show that the formation of a joint populist executive encouraged both populist parties to change their political communication. Somewhat paradoxically, a populist Stormont Cabinet contributed towards more responsible executive communication in Northern Ireland.

One of our study's limitations is the exclusive use of party manifestos. Other sources of data such as party elites' appearances on national television broadcasts or political talks shows could have been used to enrich the quality of the analysis. The main obstacle was that all relevant national television outlets refused to release the data when asking for them. Further research can address this shortcoming and use alternative party data to substantiate or nuance these findings. For example, the press releases or social media posts could be relevant sources of information.

This study provides several opportunities for future research. For example, there is scope to assess the election manifestos of other Northern Ireland parties throughout 1998–2022 to evaluate how they have responded to changes in government communications. Including the dislodged UUP and SDLP in this analysis could be particularly fruitful to determine whether they have attempted to change their popular conception as moderate ethno-nationalist parties. Equally important, future work could also use Northern Ireland's usually-associated theoretical anchor of the power-sharing polity to analyse how a decrease of populist communication within the Executive has affected community relations in the province. This could assess whether a decrease of polarising populist rhetoric affected societal relations, particularly among citizens born since the end of active conflict. Finally, we also see potential to compare differences in Sinn Féin's political campaigning strategies in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of

Ireland between 1998 and 2022. This could determine whether the party's emphasis upon 'One Ireland' is reflected in how they sell messages to the electorate in both states.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix 1. The documents used in the analysis

Document	Date	Source
Sinn Féin		
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	1998	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2003	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2007	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2011	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2016	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2017	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2022	Digital Archive
DUP		
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	1998	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2003	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2007	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2011	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2016	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2017	Digital Archive
Manifesto for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly	2022	Digital Archive