



# The Role of Insecurity in Left Populist Ideology: A Review of Podemos

Political Studies Review

1–11

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DOI: 10.1177/14789299251326156

[journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev)**Donatella Bonansinga<sup>1</sup>**  **and Bridie Kieley<sup>2</sup>**

## Abstract

The relationship between populism and insecurity remains relatively underexplored, with the empirical focus skewed towards the radical right. To understand the role of insecurity in left populism, this review focuses on the discourse of Podemos and critically examines the existing literature, delivering a detailed analysis of how the party articulated the people-vs-elite struggle as it emerged as a novel political force. It shows that Podemos' core ideological messages about the people and the elites were rooted in insecurity. Narratives of threat constructed various elites as a dangerous enemy, personifying the people's ontological insecurities; narratives of humiliation unified the people, emphasising the nefarious effects of the behaviour of elites; and finally, narratives of hope helped consolidate the role of the party as the people's saviour. By originally revisiting and synthesising fragmented accounts surrounding Podemos' discourse from the novel interdisciplinary lens of insecurity, the review contributes to a greater understanding of the relationship between insecurity and left-wing populism, providing support to the hypothesis that insecurity is an integral component of the populist ideology regardless of left-right distinctions.

## Keywords

Podemos, left populism, insecurity, populist ideology, grievance politics

Accepted: 19 February 2025

## Introduction

Insecurity is a central component of modern politics, as contemporary states are designed to 'provide protection to citizens against a growing number of internal and external threats' (Béland, 2020: 165). However, the complexity of post-industrial societies has led to increasing political unrest, centred around a perceived unfulfillment of these obligations, leading to what scholars conceptualise as a new politics of grievance, resentment and insecurity (Béland, 2020; Betz, 1993; Capelos and Demertzis, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup>University of Southampton, Southampton, UK<sup>2</sup>University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

### Corresponding author:

Donatella Bonansinga, University of Southampton, Building 58 Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK.

Email: [D.bonansinga@soton.ac.uk](mailto:D.bonansinga@soton.ac.uk)

Populism is at the core of grievance politics. Defined as a thin-centred ideology grounded in the antagonistic relationship between a betrayed people and some evil elites, and the pursuit of popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004), populism is closely intertwined with insecurity. Scholars attribute the success of populist actors to their ability to capitalise on citizens' anxieties and fears surrounding the ever-changing political landscape (Kinnvall, 2018; Kinnvall et al., 2018; Steele and Homolar, 2019). However, the relationship between populism and insecurity remains underexplored, with the empirical focus skewed towards the radical right. The latter traditionally owns themes related to insecurity (Mudde, 2007) and places particular emphasis on the strategic framing of perceived threats, in a way that exacerbates collective anxiety and gathers popular support with the promise of protection against such dangers (Béland, 2020).

While exploration into the populism–insecurity nexus has predominantly been reserved for radical right populism, the populist left's relationship with insecurity has often been neglected or narrowly viewed from an exclusive socio-economic lens (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019). However recent work has argued that this relationship is not exclusive to one subtype of populism (Bonansinga, 2022a) and that thinking of the Left as 'speaking security' should not be anathema (Gaudino, 2020). According to Bonansinga (2022a), all varieties of populism construct the people-vs-elite dichotomy as a *relationship of insecurity* through a process of *enemification* that presents the elites as fundamentally *threatening* the people, who find themselves powerless in the face of such precarity and in need of salvation. The relationship between populism and insecurity is, therefore, more profound than just a political tactic, with the author hypothesising that insecurity is an integral component of the populist ideology.

To further understand the role of insecurity in left populism, this article analyses the use of insecurity narratives in the discourse of the Spanish party Podemos, a paradigmatic case of left populism, as widely established in the literature (see, for example, Font et al., 2021; Kioupkiolis, 2016; Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022). The article critically examines the existing literature, delivering a detailed analysis of how the party articulated the people-vs-elite struggle as it emerged as a novel political force. Hence, the focus on Podemos' early days enables us to investigate their populist ideas in their purest, unaltered form. The review shows that since the beginning, Podemos' key ideological messages were rooted in insecurity, with narratives of threat, danger, humiliation and hope for the restoration of security, shaping its narration of the people-vs-elite struggle.

The review makes a distinctive contribution to the literature on populism and insecurity. By originally revisiting and synthesising fragmented debates surrounding Podemos' discourse from the novel lens of insecurity, it provides evidence to dispute the claim that the left's relationship with insecurity is confined to socio-economic concerns. This supports Bonansinga's (2022a) argument that all varieties of populism utilise relationships of insecurity to delegitimise the elites, regardless of their position on the political axis, thus enabling a greater understanding of the relationship between insecurity, left populism and populism more broadly.

## The Populism–Insecurity Nexus

Research into the role of insecurity within left populist ideology is limited. In Europe, left-wing populism is regarded as a progressive political force that advocates for democratic inclusion and popular sovereignty, challenging the neoliberal austerity policies imposed by a variety of domestic and international elites (March, 2017). This has led to 'artificial'

distinctions in the literature where the populist left's concern with socio-economic issues is (over)emphasised and counterposed to 'security issues'. For instance, Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis (2019: 9) argue that while the radical right constructs 'migration or security crises . . . left-wing populisms locate crisis in the social-economic order'.

The radical right's relationship with insecurity is seen as integral to their exclusionary rhetoric. Extant analyses have unpacked its security imaginary (Löfflmann, 2022), crisis rhetoric (Homolar and Scholz, 2019), securitisation narratives (Kurylo, 2022), fear-eliciting discourse (Wodak, 2015) and narrations of ontological insecurity (Kinnvall, 2018). Research on the populist left is comparatively scarce on this topic. Scholars have acknowledged that left-wing populists identify certain actors or issues as 'threats' (e.g. neoliberalism) but detailed theorisations are lacking.

One attempt has been made by Bonansinga (2022a) who challenged the notion that the populism–insecurity nexus is grounded in predominant right-wing dynamics, arguing that the link between populism and insecurity is much more complex and *fundamental*. The author argues that the construction of a 'relationship of insecurity' is a crucial element of how *all populists* articulate the struggle of the people versus the elites, that is, 'through an insecurity-centred language that narrates the elites as essentially threatening the people' (Bonansinga, 2022a: 512). In the populist vision of politics, the elites are ultimately a source of insecurity for the people, who are forced to experience an everyday life of economic uncertainty, cultural tension, environmental threat or democratic backsliding. Relationships of insecurity are discursively established in two steps. On the one hand, populists present the elites as sources of various forms of insecurity, which contribute to turning them into enemies (Bonansinga, 2022a; see also Bourbeau, 2015, for a multidisciplinary discussion on the meaning of (in)security). At the same time, populists also leverage insecurity to bring the people together as a group 'under threat', particularly through the use of humiliation narratives that build a sense of *shared* grievances (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021) and narratives of hope which promise a better collective future and encourage change (Bonansinga, 2022b). We reviewed the literature on Podemos and applied this framework, to understand whether their articulation of the people-vs-elite struggle followed the structure of a relationship of insecurity.

## Delving into Podemos

Podemos' arrival onto the Spanish political scene was characterised by an aspiration to challenge the status quo that had emerged from the 1978 post-Franco Transition. The party finds its origins in social movements. In 2011, the *Indignados* movement represented a monumental turning point in Spain's political history, marking the beginning of the downfall of the traditional two-party system. Outraged citizens gathered across the country, blaming the political elites and institutions for their handling of the 2008 financial crisis and demanding new democratic forms of political representation unrelated to the neoliberalist '78 regime' (Kioupkiolis, 2016).

The *Indignados* movement was pivotal for the formation of Podemos, creating an opportunity for the party to emerge with an ideology centred on a 'new common-sense politics' based on the rejection of the dominant political and economic elites (Sanders et al., 2017). For Podemos, the protest movements had created a new political culture that could no longer be categorised by the traditional left–right divide but needed to be replaced by a vertical, *above–below* division that presented the people as 'a collective virtuous subject against the privileged minority' (Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín, 2023: 3; Gerbaudo and Screti, 2017).

Our argument is that insecurity was an essential component of this reconstruction and a key ideational and affective resource in the creation of a new ‘above-below’ dichotomy. In the following sections, we present a critical documentary analysis of the existing literature on Podemos focusing on the party’s core ideological messages. We show that the creation of the ‘above’ involved the conceptualisation of political and economic elites as a ‘*caste*’ of dangerous enemies, while the construction of the ‘below’ entailed the use of insecurity-infused narratives of humiliation and hope that unified the majority and positioned the party as the people’s ‘saviour’.

## The Elites as an Existential Threat

As part of the process of rearticulating the Spanish political arena from a horizontal, left–right divide to a vertical above–below axis, the party began to construct the elites as an antagonistic other (Stoehrel, 2017). In constructing the establishment as a common enemy, Podemos portrayed the elites as producers of a wide array of political, economic and social dangers, and overall an existential threat to the people, delineating the first step in the construction of a ‘relationship of insecurity’. In the next sections, we explore how this process unfolded.

### National Elites

Podemos initiated the enemification process with the introduction of new terms into everyday language to denote the elites, notably ‘*la casta*’ (Franzé, 2018; Kioupkiolis, 2016; Roch, 2021). Homogenising the political and economic elites under one umbrella term enabled Podemos to create an object of blame against which to channel the people’s fear and anxieties, hence solidifying the divide that had emerged during the protest movements. Such ‘us versus them’ divide was continuously reinforced through discourses of insecurity.

First, Podemos used its critique of the Transition to portray the elite as a danger to Spanish democratic life. The ‘caste’ positioned the so-called post-Franco Transition as the start of democracy, whereas Podemos regarded it as the start of a corrupt two-party regime in which established parties engaged in a guaranteed power alternation at the expense of popular sovereignty (Franzé, 2018). For the party, the Transition was an oligarchical pact designed to exclude the people (Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín, 2023) and there was no distinction between Franco’s dictatorship and the post 78’ regime due to a lack of real democracy under both (Franzé, 2018). The establishment’s regard for the Transition enabled Podemos to provide a staunch critique of the elites, pointing at their cult of ‘unresponsive’ democracy as a breeding ground for democratic backsliding and thus political insecurity. By including this narrative angle in the enemification process, Podemos positioned the ‘caste’ as a fundamental threat to political and social rights, and ultimately democracy. While the populist right utilises narratives of the past to address feelings of anxiety about the ‘corrupted’ present (Kenny, 2017), Podemos mobilised *anti*-nostalgia discourse to present the past and the elite’s relationship with it, as a danger. Narratives of the past were, therefore, skilfully used to position the elites within an aura of insecurity, further highlighting the harm they can exert on the people.

In addition to criticising the institutional model centring on the Transition, Podemos further *personified* insecurity, as in the party narrative the blame for the people’s miseries was not solely on the ‘system’ but specifically on elites’ (mis)behaviour. Statements such

as ‘They steal your rights, democracy and your wallet’, ‘They have brought the country into misery’ and ‘They have broken their promises’ (see Sanders et al., 2017: 566), underscored the elites as a collective entity who have not only failed in their obligations to protect the people but have actively created an environment of economic uncertainty, societal insecurity and democratic regression. As Kioupkiolis (2016) argues, Podemos portrayed the political climate as one where the social majority suffered from economic impoverishment and democratic marginalisation, at the hand of the ‘caste’. To put it differently, Podemos drew a causal link between the people’s experience with multifaceted *insecurities* and the elites who actively *produced* them. A ‘relationship of insecurity’ was, therefore, established at the narrative level attributing the role of ‘the danger’ to the elites and of the ‘endangered’ to the people. The ‘caste’ was conceived as an existential threat to the majority, responsible for creating a climate of everyday insecurity, allowing Podemos to construct themselves as the protector of the ‘below’ advocating for security restoration. This was also done by advancing a conception of the state as a supportive and, crucially, *protective* institution (Gerbaudo and Screti, 2017) fulfilling citizens’ need for ontological security.

Importantly, the rise in political distrust enabled Podemos to leverage the Spanish corruption crisis as part of the enemification process. Prior to Podemos’ emergence, national and regional government corruption scandals had rapidly become a salient issue for Spanish citizens. Podemos highlighted how these scandals not only created distrust and insecurity in the political environment but directly impacted citizens by taking away their resources (Franzé, 2018), hence harming national and individual financial security too. Therefore, it reinforced the notion of the elites as the ‘common enemy’, highlighting their role in creating an environment of economic insecurity, political uncertainty and legal impunity.

### *Supranational and International Elites*

The party’s personification of insecurity led to an additional emphasis on the role of ‘outsider’ elites at the supranational and international levels, and their contribution to everyday insecurity.

The anti-austerity movements of 2011 had already reflected a dramatic loss of trust in the European institutions, which were seen as hampering national sovereignty and increasing territorial inequalities (Cordero and Simón, 2016; della Porta et al., 2017). The European Union was seen as responsible for imposing harsh austerity measures and portrayed as an oligarchy that abused the political institutions to serve the vested interests of the rich and powerful (Eklundh et al., 2024). This signals that for Podemos, the EU was a multifaceted source of economic, financial and political insecurity.

A key component of Podemos’ insecurity discourse surrounding the supranational elites was the use of negative metaphors to portray them as creators of insecurity. Podemos conflated multiple supranational elites under the label of ‘the Party of Wall Street’, clearly framing them as ‘threats’ (Vittori, 2017), hence positioning them as an ‘outsider enemy’ that threatened the financial and political security of the country. For Iglesias, the European elites are ‘powers that no one has elected [that] are destroying social rights and threatening social and political cohesion in our societies’ (Font et al., 2021, 176). Similar to other populist left parties, Podemos referred to Europe as ‘*Europa Fortaleza*’ (Fortress Europe) when discussing issues of immigration, depicting it as a fortification (Brack, 2020). By using this imagery, Podemos highlighted the physical barrier between the European ‘caste’

and the people – especially vulnerable people, such as migrants, who remain unprotected. Finally, Podemos discussed the EU as a dystopian evil monster (Macmillan, 2017a, 2017b), pointing at its menacing and uncontrollable character, threatening democracy and undermining national sovereignty (see also Borriello and Brack, 2019).

At the international level, the enemification of elites centred around NATO and the relationship between Spain and the US. According to Vittori (2017), Podemos viewed the actions of NATO as harmful to Spanish democracy and sovereignty, with some prominent figures advocating for Spain's withdrawal from the organisation. The party was also sceptical of the US and its military influence, portraying it as a threat to national security. This became apparent in the discussion regarding the reform of the Spain–US bilateral treaty on US military bases, in which Podemos declared that 'the existence of United States bases in Spain . . . threaten our sovereignty [and] our national security' (Vittori, 2017: 153). Podemos positioned the US and its military influence not only as a physical threat to the nation's security but as a threat to the goal of restoring national sovereignty. Contrary to the US's emphasis on expanding globalisation, Podemos was highly critical of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), considering it 'a threat to our sovereignty, our democracy, our economy and our welfare State' (Vittori, 2017: 153). While the TTIP was portrayed by the US as encouraging economic growth across Europe, Podemos positioned it as a regressive action that hindered the restoration of sovereignty to Spain.

Overall, Podemos' enemification process positioned the supranational and international elites as harmful actors that contribute to insecurity and destabilisation while inhibiting the restoration of democracy and sovereignty. To put it differently, Podemos argued that all these elites embody the same harmful characteristics and behaviours, representing a fundamental threat to the Spanish people.

We argue that insecurity was a fundamental ideational resource in Podemos' ideology which enabled the party to narrate, make sense and justify the need to move away from the traditional left–right divide to a new conception of politics as an above–below, people–elite dichotomy. By engaging in a process of enemification grounded in insecurity narratives, Podemos was able to position all elites as a dangerous 'above', homogenising them under the term 'caste' and providing direct examples of how their behaviour aligns with their threatening character.

The positioning of the elites as the 'above' simultaneously positioned Podemos and the people as the 'below'. The next section explores how the use of insecurity narratives surrounding humiliation and hope enabled Podemos to unify the people and present the party as the solution to the crisis.

## **Saving the People and Restoring Security**

By encompassing the elites as the 'caste', Podemos simultaneously constructed the notion of 'the people', uniting those who have suffered at the hands of the elite. Insecurity narratives not only enabled Podemos to reconstruct the 'above' but also to elaborate on the notion of the 'below'. We argue that insecurity was a pivotal ideational and affective resource for the articulation of the people-vs-elite conflict.

While the 'below' was initially referred to as *'la gente'* and *'el pueblo'*, the party gradually began to adopt more patriotic rhetoric, entangling the 'us versus them' frontier with nationalist yet inclusionary ideals centring on the idea of the *patria* (homeland) (Custodi, 2020; Eklundh et al., 2024). Podemos viewed Spain as a diverse



‘plurinational country’, thus the *patria* encompassed all Spaniards, including migrants and minorities, who similarly suffered because of the uncaring elite (Chazel and Dain, 2021; Custodi, 2020).

The articulation of this new identity was grounded in the experience of everyday insecurity. Podemos used emotive narratives of humiliation to specifically underline the *effects* of elites’ behaviour on the lives of ordinary people. Humiliation narratives are a key feature of the populist security imaginary and are used to encourage a sense of group identity and in-group solidarity, with villainous elites and ‘others’ (such as immigrants, in the case of right-wing populism), positioned as the culprits behind the destruction of the nation (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021). While the radical right often utilises humiliation narratives to unify natives, Podemos used such narratives to mobilise its inclusive *patria* against the ultimate enemy, the elite. For example, Iglesias claimed that ‘They [the elite] have wanted to humiliate our country with the scam they call austerity’ (Ivaldi et al., 2017: 368), while Errejón appealed to ‘those who have felt abandoned, despised or little taken into account by the elites’ (Chazel and Fernández Vázquez, 2020: 10). Southern European countries, they argued, had been subordinated to become ‘protectorates’ and ‘new colonies’ (Font et al., 2021). In this context, the party emphasised the need to ‘defend the sovereign *dignity*’ of Spain as a consequence of the humiliation endured (Borriello and Brack, 2019: 843). The party’s use of humiliation narratives enhanced the collective perception of wrongdoing among the ordinary people, and their role as *victims* of the dominating elite (Font et al., 2021). This humiliation-driven narration of victimhood acts as a powerful psychological mechanism that binds together those who feel powerless and betrayed but also fuels a collective anger and a desire to ‘take back control’ (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021). In conjunction with insecurity-centred narratives, humiliation helped the party portray the establishment’s actions as fundamentally harmful, widening the divide between the people and the ‘caste’ while simultaneously encouraging social change.

Once the antagonistic, irreparable divide between the victimised people and the dangerous elites was consolidated, the left–right dichotomy evolved into a people-vs-elite divide centred around Podemos as the ‘voice of a general will’ (Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín, 2023). Podemos solidified the party’s position as the people’s ‘saviour’ through the utilisation of narratives surrounding hope. Hope is inextricably tied to insecurity, with feelings of hope typically being provoked by threatening or uncertain situations in which a better outcome is desired (Lazarus, 2006). This emotion is a crucial instrument for overcoming anxiety in the present and generating a future imaginary of security and certainty (Bonansinga, 2022b). By othering the ‘caste’ as ‘they’, Podemos had distanced itself from the ‘common enemy’, appearing as a representative and protector of the people in the *present*, capable of restoring security in the immediate *future*. The party, and particularly Errejón, used hope appeals to position Podemos as the *solution* to the crisis of insecurity (Chazel and Fernández Vázquez, 2020), especially through the symbolism of renewal, which is at the core of the hopeful emotional experience. For example, at the national level, the party advocated for change in the form of returning power to the people, with energising participative instruments of direct democracy (Vittori, 2017). At the supranational level, Podemos promised to refuse the EU status quo and build *another* Europe, centring its EU Elections campaign on the enthusiastic promotion of change (Sampietro and Ordaz, 2015).

The affective dimension of Podemos’ insecurity discourse was pivotal in framing the elites as creators of insecurity. However, it was also central in unifying those who suffer the most and establishing a relationship of insecurity that linearly connected the people’s grievances to the failures of the elite.

## Conclusion

This critical analysis of the existing literature has emphasised the pivotal role of insecurity in the populist ideology of Podemos, highlighting how the party has *consistently* grounded their anti-elite sentiment in the use of insecurity narratives to portray various elites as creators of insecurity.

The party used insecurity narratives to advocate for a shift from the traditional left–right divide to a new above–below dichotomy. The complex process of enemification that the party engineered, facilitated the contextualisation and personification of the people’s ontological insecurities. Podemos homogenised the elites as the ‘caste’, portraying them as creators of an insecure environment and pinpointing them as the ‘common enemy’. It emphasised how insecurity was interwoven into the Transition, the political order and the behaviour of the elite, hence producing an environment that put the people in economic, financial, political and social danger. Using insecurity discourse, Podemos delegitimised the elites by highlighting how their actions not only contradicted the general interest, but fundamentally *endangered* the everyday existence of the ordinary people.

The analysis has also underscored the important affective component of Podemos’ insecurity narratives. Emotive narratives were fundamental to Podemos’ construction of a ‘relationship of insecurity’ between the people and the elites. The weaponisation of nostalgia enabled the party to make a direct link between the contemporary political establishment and the Franco era, hence portraying the elite as siding with political insecurity and posing a continuous threat to Spanish democracy. Meanwhile, the use of humiliation narratives emphasised the nefarious effects of the behaviour of elites, while hope narratives presented Podemos as an agent of change that could restore security.

As emphasised by Bonansinga (2022a: 520), linking the elite to the production of insecurity while advocating for the restoration of popular sovereignty as the solution to the insecurity crisis, enables a populist party to construct an intricate relationship of insecurity between ‘the dangerous elites and the sovereign people’, highlighting the importance of insecurity narratives in both the delegitimation of the elite and the restoration of popular sovereignty. The case of Podemos further supports the hypothesis that insecurity is a central ideational and affective resource for all forms of populism, as it is the *reason why* populists advocate for the demise of the elite. Insecurity discourse was fundamental to Podemos’ ideology during its emergence on the Spanish political scene. It was based on these narratives of insecurity that Podemos emphasised the need for the people to regain power, control of the institutions and ultimately restore security. Relationships of insecurity were, therefore, central to Podemos’ construction of the struggle between the people and the elite, and pivotal for the party to establish itself as the solution to reclaiming democracy and sovereignty. The case of Podemos shows that while the populist left utilises insecurity discourse in an alternative manner to the radical right, a relationship of insecurity is still at the centre of its discourse.

This analysis contributes to the literature on populism by reframing and revisiting existing academic assumptions surrounding Podemos’ discourse from the novel theoretical lens of insecurity. It brings different disciplines in conversation with one another, notably political science, political psychology and constructivist perspectives on security, evidencing the centrality of insecurity beyond the radical right, and enabling a greater understanding of the populism–insecurity nexus. As populism continues to gain traction, interdisciplinary investigations into the role of insecurity present promising research avenues for understanding the complex dynamics currently at play in advanced post-industrial societies.



## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Donatella Bonansinga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1968-0811>

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**Author Biographies**

Dr Donatella Bonansinga is a Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Southampton. Working at the intersection of political science, political psychology, and international relations, her published work explores the relationship between populism, insecurity, and emotions.

Bridie Kielty is a graduate of the University of Sussex and carried out the research for this article as part of her dissertation project.