

# EU REGULATION ON TRANSPARENCY AND TARGETING OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

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COULD THE NEW LEGISLATION BE  
EFFECTIVE AT STOPPING POPULISM?

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# **1. THE REASON TO REGULATE POLITICAL ADVERTISING**

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# 1. THE REASON TO REGULATE POLITICAL ADVERTISING

In the last three years, the European Commission and the European parliament have been preparing key reforms in the space of political advertising to establish rules of the game for political campaigns that are carried out online. Different from analogue forms of political campaigning, due to its novelty, digital political campaigns represent an entry point for activities that are considered to be a threat to the proper functioning of democratic institutions. Firstly, an unregulated digital campaigning sphere is very prone to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation campaigns. Viral campaigns with the prime objective of misinforming the public, spreading hatred and non-democratic positions, have been a major challenge to Western democracies. As such, it has become usual to speak about the situation of an *infodemic*.

For obvious reasons, the quality of information that reaches the electorate is a key requisite for a healthy democratic order, since the electorate needs to be in a good and informed position to make critical choices that will affect policy planning. Secondly, the unregulated digital campaigning space has led to a vacuum, which has been instrumentalised by foreign actors that have sought to interfere with European elections, promoting disinformation campaigns to create democratic instability and, as a result, gain a geopolitical advantage over adversaries. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of rising geopolitical tensions all across the globe. Thirdly, being linked to the previous issue of foreign interference, an unregulated digital campaigning space has opened the door for populism and populist parties, including far-right coalitions, to rise across the entire EU. The most notable systematic misuse of personal data for campaigning purposes was the case of Cambridge Analytica; this scandal brought the issue of electoral deception through microtargeting to the attention of policymakers

and the overall public, and was one of the triggers for the plan to organise a legislative response at the EU level that would set new norms on what is admissible online campaigning and which digital political advertising is contrary to clean elections and the fundamental rights of the voter.

In this context, the regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the transparency and targeting of political advertising<sup>1</sup> seeks to establish common norms and rule out malpractice in digital campaigning that are harmful to the healthy functioning of the democratic order. This policy brief examines how this regulation has developed; what the key changes are that will be introduced and how it relates to larger debates, such as populism, democratic values and a right to receive quality information. At the same time, this policy brief offers guidelines on how progressive parties can take this legislation as a starting point for greater and deeper efforts to combat extremist populism and antidemocratic political movements in the EU.

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## **2. REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL ON THE TRANSPARENCY AND TARGETING OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING**

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## 2. REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL ON THE TRANSPARENCY AND TARGETING OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

Political advertising, offline or online, plays a key role in influencing perceptions of political systems, elected leaders and opinions, especially before elections. In recent years, electoral campaigning has been transformed by digital technologies and social media that offer political actors massive reach at low cost. While this has the potential of enabling more voices to be heard, new technologies have been misused to spread false information, fragment political debate and manipulate voters.

To help create a safer, fairer digital sphere, the European Parliament adopted the [Digital Services Act](#)<sup>2</sup> and the [Digital Markets Act](#)<sup>3</sup> in 2022. In February 2023, the Parliament supported a proposal for complementary rules aiming to prevent abusive political advertising, online and offline. Parliament negotiators aim to reach an agreement on the rules with EU countries in time for the 2024 European elections.

The main purpose of the regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the transparency and targeting of political advertising is to lay down harmonised transparency provisions for providers of political advertising online, introducing harmonised rules on the use of targeting and amplification techniques for political advertising that involve the use of personal data, so-called political microtargeting. As recognised by the European Parliament, the increasing possibilities and challenges of big data play a key role. When people use social media platforms and other digital service providers, their personal data can be collected.

The harvested data can be used to define users' preferences, lifestyles and interests, and enable microtargeting. Microtargeting is a technique that collects personal data about individuals based on their online activity and behavioural profiling, and can be used for the targeting of tailored political advertising.<sup>4</sup>

Technology and data enable malicious actors to use microtargeting to reach out to different groups, tailoring the message specifically to them. In many cases, this means targeting their fears and frustrations, often using disinformation. Microtargeting can also contribute to the creation of online echo chambers, where people are exposed to only one type of information, distorting their perception of public discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The processing of sensitive personal data for advertising practices, such as microtargeting, has been found to affect people's rights, including freedom of opinion; access to objective, transparent and pluralistic information; and their ability to make political decisions.<sup>6</sup> People can also be misled about who is behind content. For example, something that looks like neutral information might in fact be sponsored by an entity from a different country trying to influence elections. Those who do not exploit such practices could be at a disadvantage, harming fairness and equal opportunities, especially during elections.

While online and offline advertising cross borders, there is no EU-wide legislation in this area.

Traditional rules may be ineffective, as they are often hard to enforce when applied online, where new technologies and tools create opportunities to influence and target voters.

In this regard, the regulation comprises five main chapters, with Chapter I setting out important definitions; Chapter II containing transparency obligations for political advertising services; Chapter III setting out rules related to targeting and amplification of political advertising; while Chapters IV and V contain provisions on supervision, enforcement and application.

Firstly, and most notably, Article 2 sets out a wide definition of political advertising, defined as a message (a) by, for, or on behalf of a "political actor", unless it is of a purely private or a purely commercial nature; or (b) which is "liable to influence" the outcome of an election or referendum, a legislative or regulatory process, or voting behaviour. Importantly, political actors are also defined in Article 2 to include a wide range of actors, including political parties, candidates and political campaign organisations. Of note, the regulation applies to political advertising "services", which are services "provided for remuneration".

Crucially, Chapter II then sets out important rules on transparency obligations for political advertising. These include, firstly, under Article 6, that providers of political advertising have a "record-keeping" obligation, being required to retain records on all political advertising services they provide, including the financial amounts involved for these services, and the identity of sponsors, which must be retained for five years. Notably, certain national authorities will have the power to request access (under Article 10) to this information, while other bodies, including "accredited" journalists (under Article 11), will also be able to request access. Crucially, under Article 7, all political advertising must contain (a) a statement that it is a political advertisement; (b) the identity of the sponsor of the advertisement; and (c) a "transparency notice" to enable the "wider context of the political advertisement and its aims to be understood". This transparency notice may be included as a link, and must include additional

information, such as financial information on the aggregate amount spent on the advertisement and the political advertising campaign it is part of. Importantly, under Article 9, advertising publishers must put in place mechanisms to allow individuals to be notified that a particular advertisement does not comply with the regulation.

Of particular note are the rules contained in Chapter III, which set out specific requirements related to targeting and amplification of political advertising. Crucially, under Article 12, when using targeting or amplification techniques for political advertising involving personal data, controllers must provide additional information with the political advertisement to allow the individual concerned to "understand the logic involved" and the "main parameters of the technique used", and the use of "third-party data and additional analytical techniques".

Finally, in relation to supervision, Chapter IV sets out that national data protection authorities will be responsible for supervising the rules on targeting under Article 12, while member states will be required to designate competent national authorities to monitor compliance with the other obligations in the regulation, which can be digital services coordinators under the proposal Digital Services Act. Notably, member states are required to lay down the rules on the sanctions to be imposed for violation of the regulation.

Under the changes made by MEPs to the Commission's proposal, only personal data explicitly provided for online political advertising can be used by advert providers. Microtargeting, a strategy that uses consumer data and demographics to identify the interests of specific individuals, will therefore not be possible. The European Parliament introduced other provisions to further regulate the broader activity of targeting, such as a blanket ban on using minors' data. MEPs proposed that non-EU-based entities be banned from financing political advertisements in the EU. To determine where such an entity is established, the relevant authorities should take into account where the ultimate controller of this entity is located. MEPs also made significant



changes to ensure that citizens, authorities and journalists have easy access to information on political advertisement. Among other proposals, they advocate for creating an online repository for all online political advertisements and related data. It should be easier to obtain information on who is financing an advert, on its cost and the origin of the money used. Other pieces of information that should also be published include whether an advertisement has been suspended for violating the rules, on the specific groups of individuals targeted and what personal data were used for this, and the views and engagement with the advertisement. MEPs aim to give journalists a specific right to obtain such information. MEPs introduced the possibility of periodic penalties to be levied for a repeated violation and the obligation for large advertisement service providers to suspend their services for 15 days with a particular client in the case of serious and systemic infringements. The Commission will be able to introduce EU-wide minimum sanctions. The adopted text also strengthens the powers of the national authorities and allows the European Data Protection Board to take over an investigation into an infringement and enforce the rules.

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# **3. POPULISM: STORY AND ELECTORAL EVOLUTION OF POPULIST PARTIES IN THE EU**

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# 3. POPULISM: STORY AND ELECTORAL EVOLUTION OF POPULIST PARTIES IN THE EU

Populism is a concept that is very hard to define. Therefore, scholars in the field of populism, such as Barry Eichengreen in his work of *The Populist Temptation* or Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser in *Populism and (Liberal) Democracy*, prefer to talk about tendencies that could fall under the idea of populism to avoid a politicised definition of populism. Therefore, Eichengreen speaks of three main characteristics or tendencies of populist movements: anti-elitism; authoritarianism; and nativism.

Firstly, anti-elitism means that populist movements and parties usually adopt a discourse against the governing political and economic elites of a given country, which is frequently labelled and grouped together under the concept of the *establishment*. Populist movements often tend to instrumentalise this oftentimes fictitious image of a consolidated elite to adopt discourses of *us versus them*, holding that the elite and the corruption of this group of privileged individuals is at the source of national problems. The mentioned anti-elite political narratives are particularly important during moments of economic and financial hardship on the aggregate level, such as in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929 or the Great Recession of 2008.

Secondly, authoritarianism means that populist movements have a tendency to concentrate on single personalities as their leaders, producing a situation where one specific person tends to be at the forefront and concentrates media and public visibility, carrying a high level of symbolic impersonation of the movement. Furthermore, populist movements tend to have a series of anti-democratic features, at both the internal and external levels. At the internal level, for example, within a populist party, this type of

political movement favours strong leadership over democratic participation and deliberation, leading to a situation of authoritarian decision-making within the political formation in question. This usually leads to a situation where the populist movement is highly reliant on the leadership of a charismatic leader and often uses innovative communication tools to consolidate the power of the populist leader at the forefront of the political party or movement. At the external level, that is, outside of the populist party or organisation, usually, this authoritarian tendency is also carried forward, adopting anti-democratic discourses that directly attack the electoral system and the democratic institutional framework of a given country, making it responsible for the situation of economic and financial hardship in which populist movements tend to originate.

Thirdly, the nativist aspect of populism means that it is common that populist movements or parties adopt a nationalistic and anti-immigration discourse, leading to narratives that emphasise group identity against other groups. In the most extreme form, it is common that extremist parties adopt a racist discourse and political agenda. This has especially been a characteristic for far-right populist movements, which, as mentioned, build their discourse on an "us versus them" narrative, not only against the elite but also against individuals who they see as not being part of their group on the identity level. Many of the populist extreme-right parties are nativists and propose an agenda of hate against immigrants. This has been a key characteristic of numerous of the extreme-right parties that have emerged in Western countries in recent years, especially as a reaction to globalisation and internationalisation, but especially as a reaction to the Great Recession of 2008, the

Covid-19 pandemic and a generalised increase of global geopolitical turmoil and uncertainties.

### Populist agendas and populist tactics

Furthermore, looking at this broad debate of populism, it might be a good idea to differentiate between *populism as a political programme* (populist objectives and agenda) and *populism as a tactic* (using populist methods irrespective of the aim) (see Laclau 2005) to make the discussion more concrete and oriented towards analysing populism in practice. That is, when talking about populist tendencies, one might be referring to both the political agenda that is being proposed and, on the contrary, the types of methods that are being used by the populist party or movement in question to attain political power through campaigns and eventually through participation in electoral processes.

Firstly, at the agenda level, it is likely that populist movements will propose anti-immigration policies, as a result of their adoption of an "us versus them" ontology. At the same time, in terms of economic policies, populist movements might also propose protectionist policies, such as limiting open trade in favour of national industries or *take back control*, the famous slogan of the campaign in favour of Brexit, where UKIP proposed a shift away from the open trade policies facilitated by EU membership. They believed that leaving the EU would allow the UK to tailor its trade policies to benefit national industries. This tendency is very typical for populist movements and connects directly to the idea that a determined group identity is under external attack. This is particularly relevant if the movement arises as a response to global economic shocks, such as a major economic and/or financial crisis that is imported from abroad. It is also likely that populist movements will reject social modernity, adopting heavily traditional ideas on how social relations should be governed. Therefore, populist movements often adopt anti-abortionist agendas, tend to go against minority rights and often reject gender equality. Overall, a common feature in this respect would be that populist movements are often linked to reactionary politics that adopt traditionalist values and heavily reject social modernity and tolerance to

a variety of lifestyles. Discrimination, hate speech and racism are often directly linked to populism.

Secondly, one might speak of populist tactics irrespective of the final agenda that the political movement in question aims to support. It is likely that populism will use tactics such as strong and personalistic charismatic leadership. Populist movements, at the tactical level, also tend to make use of simple messages and demagogue communication styles that distort truth and data. In the most extreme form, frequent populist tactics involve populist movements and parties making the news and disseminating misleading information. This has been a very important tendency in recent populist movements, giving rise to concepts such as "post-truth" politics in the academic literature. There tends to be a strong linkage between populism and innovative communication, using them for mass propaganda, deception of the public and an active strategy to erode trust in existing political institutions. Furthermore, in recent times, a trend has become strong whereby fake news and distorted messages are projected by populist campaigns in the form of microtargeting, which uses big data to segment and tailor populist messages to every individual.

Therefore, digitally based political advertising is a new field where populist movements have attempted to grow in strength during electoral processes in numerous democratic countries. The digital space – especially through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or TikTok – is becoming a major opportunity for new political messages to reach the electorate, especially younger population groups but, increasingly, society in general. This communicative space competes directly with more traditional communication channels, such as public and private TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, and books. Importantly, the public sphere that has emerged in social media provides the capacity to reach the broader public instantaneously and in a form that does not go through the editorial filters of traditional communication channels, such as those mentioned above. That is, online communication has been marked by being less vertical and more horizontal, producing an open space for political debates and campaigns. Furthermore, online

political campaigns also have an important private dimension through communications channels such as WhatsApp or Telegram. The online dimension has been particularly vulnerable to populist communication tactics given its more unregulated and unstructured nature.

### **Digital innovations and the new wave of populism**

As analysed extensively in the academic literature, by classic and modern scholars alike (Reinert and Reinart 2006), all phases of technological advancements and modernisation have an ambiguous impact on society. Some scholars, therefore, define modernisation as a process that is creative and destructive at the same time (see Reinert 2006). That is, innovation is always attached to the disruption of previously existing social relations, labour conditions, and the prevalent social structures and power relations in a given society. As a result, most historic phases of deep innovation and technological transformation, such as during the initial processes of industrialisation, go hand in hand with deep social transformations and political tensions. Similarly, the progress of digital technology is also producing the reengineering of the functioning of the global economy, the creation of new economic sectors, as well as the destruction of some of the old modes of production.

In this context of drastic socioeconomic changes, parts of society are left behind and do not have the opportunity to adapt as quickly to the mentioned transformations as other groups. For example, technological progress tends to widen the skills gap between the population living in large urban areas and others living in rural communities. This represents an opportunity for populist movements, which tend to sell easy solutions and false promises to those who suffer the most hardship as a result of the mentioned transformations. Therefore, the populist agenda will be easier to align with the resentment and discontent of those left behind during periods of large socioeconomic change.

At the same time, technological innovations tend to be connected to the rise of new communication tools,

especially those that offer the possibility of mass communication with the public, as has happened in recent decades with the rise of social media and private communication apps (see above). Inversely, during periods of large technological innovations, the monopoly of traditional communication media tends to erode.

As a consequence, one can hold that each large technological innovation produces a new opportunity for populist messages to utilise a new communication space that will still be relatively ungoverned and unregulated. In this sense, most phases of large technological innovations eventually translate into a new wave of populism that capitalises on the uncertainty created by the restructuring of socioeconomic relations of a given society. For the current digital transformation, this has also been the case, creating a larger possibility for populist movements and parties to get across their message through novel communication tools and a situation where a large share of the population, in their condition of being left behind by the mentioned socioeconomic transformations, turn to populist recipes and their false promises.

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# **4. POPULISM AS A CHALLENGE FOR DEMOCRACY**

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# 4. POPULISM AS A CHALLENGE FOR DEMOCRACY

Populism is inherently anti-democratic in its end objective. In fact, as discussed above, it has a close link to authoritarian tendencies or pseudo-democratic approaches, where it sells a discourse and political narrative of "alternative democracy" to limit or dismantle the democratic system permanently. While populist parties contest elections and, therefore, claim that they are a democratic choice, the problem is that they tend to be in favour of dismantling the very same open democracy through which they seek to attain power. Therefore, many political scientists distinguish between electoral democracy (one where the majority rules) and liberal democracy (one where majorities govern but always

with strong checks and balances and strict value-based limits on what is admissible and what is not) (see Diamond 2002, 2020; Wigell 2008; Levitsky and Way 2002). It is common for populists to deceive the public into a limited understanding of democracy.

To understand why we affirm that populism is a challenge for democracy, it is necessary to understand its electoral dimension. In Figure 1, in this chart created from The Guardian's graph based on data from Rooduijn et al 2023, it can be observed how in recent years the rise of populist parties, especially those of the populist far right, have grown exponentially, as can be seen in the graph.

Figure 1. Vote share of parties by classification in 31 European countries, weighted by population.

## The progression of populist parties' voting in Europe

The percentage of votes for parties in 31 European countries, based on their classification and weighted by population.

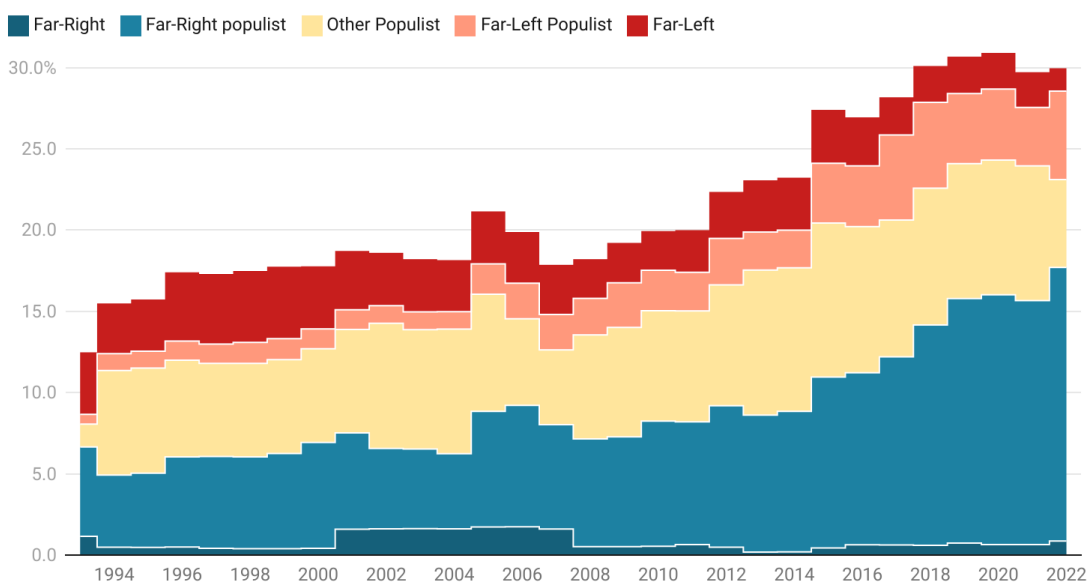


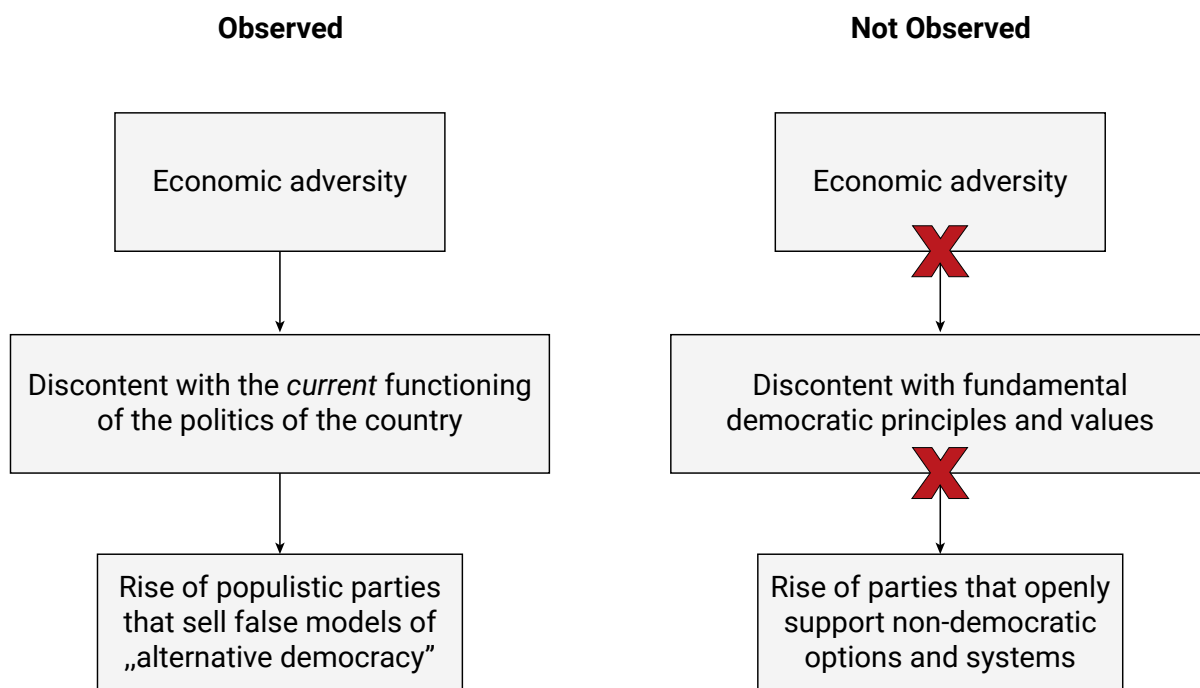
Chart: Digital Democracy WG (FEPS YAN) • Source: Party classification from The PopuList 3.0, Vote share data from ParlGov and World Bank • Created with Datawrapper

Furthermore, one key phenomenon to understand is that the success of populist parties often depends on the level of distrust and discontent towards the current political situation in the country in question. What is important to distinguish here is that populist parties tend to instrumentalise the *current discontent* with the functioning of the political system to attack democratic values altogether. In fact, previous research (Wirthwein Vega and Carbonell 2023; Bristelle et al, 2024), has found that, during periods of economic turmoil, young voters in Europe maintain very solid democratic values and ideas (e.g., in favour of increasing channels of democratic participation and strong support for democratic checks and balances) but are often highly critical of the current functioning of the political institutions and parties of their country. While this is positive in the sense that democratic ideas are resilient, even in times of economic adversity, the problem is that it is especially during these periods when false populist narratives of "alternative democracy" seem to be successful. Paradoxically, then, voters

might be inclined to support parties for democratic reasons, while the true intention of these parties is highly antidemocratic and against a society of tolerance (Figure 2).

Therefore, it is especially during times of severe economic crises (such as the Great Recession of 2008 or the Covid-19 global pandemic) that populist parties tend to gain a space where they can directly attack the democratic institutions of a country and portray themselves under a false banner of a novel type of democracy that is supposedly going to propose more effective solutions to the daily struggles of the population. Yet, in fact, their authoritarian character means that, instead of seeking to improve the democratic model, what they are really after is to twist democratic ideas – which remain strong – into political paths that lead to a more limited "electoral" democracy, where votes happen in a framework of political persecution and intolerance.

**Figure 2. The rise of populism in modern democracies.**



**Source:** Adapted from Wirthwein Vega and Carbonell 2023.



An unregulated space in the political debate, such as campaigning or advertising, is a dangerous entry point for antidemocratic populism, precisely because it offers a space without checks and balances within a legislative vacuum at the European level and at the level of certain member states. Leaving the political campaigning space open to the possibility of fake news, misinformation, deceptive microtargeting, and the activation of hatred and fear through the bombardment of individuals with hate speech is a self-destructive tendency. That is, if political campaigning is not regulated, the threat exists that intolerant behaviour will override the very spirit of tolerance and protection of fundamental rights on which modern democracies are based. Therefore, in the same way that the political advertising space is regulated in the analogue sphere to establish rules of the game that create a tolerant and respectful environment, regulating the digital sphere also plays a key role in protecting core democratic principles from populism.

Thus, an unregulated political campaign space poses the threat that intolerant visions are promoted freely. The paradox is that authoritarian and intolerant political projects can develop and grow out of a democratic order. This is where the key axiom, called the paradox of tolerance, which was developed by the philosopher Karl Popper, is relevant. The mentioned paradox holds that *you cannot be tolerant with the intolerant* and would imply, in this case, that the democratic order cannot admit actors or practices that seek to destroy this democratic order (Popper 1945).

On one hand, the problem is that, as explained above, it is very hard to clearly identify populist actors, as they will defend a large set of different economic, political and social policies. Furthermore, it will be rather unlikely that populist actors openly show their preference for a non-democratic order. In fact, as explained above, they will use a false sense of alternative democracy to increase their legitimacy in the same democratic order that they seek to combat. On the other hand, given the difficulty of defining populism, it is likely that some parties and actors may be demonised by others as populist, when in fact they are not. That is, the political forces

in power are likely to label their political opponents as populists, even in the absence of clear evidence. In this context of strategic usage of the term, the fight against antidemocratic forces becomes highly confusing, as (1) the true intention of populist actors might be concealed, as long as they remain in opposition; and (2) certain parties in power might use their position of privilege to openly attack actors as populist when this is not fully clear and established.

Therefore, it might be a better idea to establish as an objective the combat against antidemocratic practices and discourses, rather than specific actors. That is, to offer a solid response against populist parties, one needs to target the rules of the game rather than the actors. In other words, the labelling of actors as populist should be avoided, and what should be denounced and combated by legislation are concrete practices, concrete discourses and concrete types of political campaigns that cannot be tolerated in a democratic society, as they would amount to *cheating* and deceiving the public. In this way, the first step for any effective regulation that seeks to contain the emergence of anti-democratic tendencies and discourses is to focus on banning certain tactics and practices, such as the spread of hate speech, violent content or fake news through the bombardment of individuals with false information, the consequences and psychological impact of which are magnified by microtargeting.

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**5. COULD THE  
NEW REGULATION  
OF POLITICAL  
ADVERTISING IN  
THE ONLINE SPHERE  
SUPPORT THE  
CONTAINMENT OF  
POPULISM?**

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## 5. COULD THE NEW REGULATION OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE ONLINE SPHERE SUPPORT THE CONTAINMENT OF POPULISM?

The regulation on political advertising, recently enacted by the European Parliament and the European Council, represents a significant step toward promoting transparency and accountability in the realm of online political advertising (European Parliament 2023). This regulatory measure has, among its implicit objectives, the disruption of the operational strategies of populist parties, known for their adept use of social media platforms for campaign purposes (Smith and Johnson 2022; Capozzi et al. 2023). However, it is crucial to emphasise that the regulation does not explicitly target populism or any specific political ideology; instead, it focuses on regulating the tactical aspects of political advertising, ensuring uniform application among diverse political actors (European Parliament 2023).

Despite its commendable legislative intent, among the multiple objectives the regulation considers, it cannot offer a comprehensive solution to populism, as previously pointed out, given that it is practically impossible due to being a multifaceted phenomenon deeply rooted in socioeconomic factors (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Addressing the root causes of populism, such as economic adversity, cultural insecurity and fear, remains imperative for effective counteraction (Inglehart and Norris 2016). However, it does aim to legally hinder a significant part of their digital strategies.

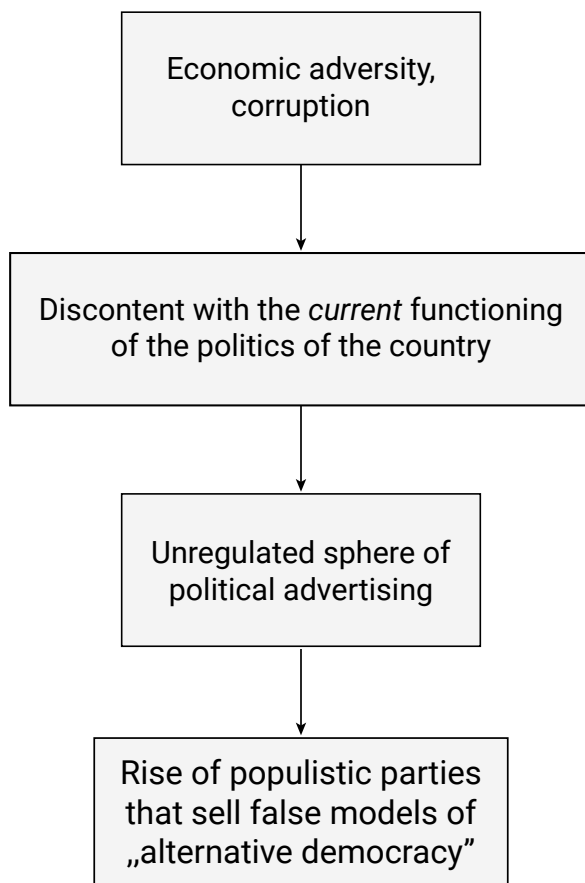
Moreover, the norm not only stands as a fundamental regulatory step in the current landscape but also lays the groundwork for future legislative efforts, which will be complemented by the knowledge derived from this norm and the research carried out based on it. By demonstrating a commitment to

addressing the challenges posed by the digital age and the changing realm of political communication, the norm could potentially serve as a model for other jurisdictions considering measures to enhance transparency and accountability in online political advertising (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Bennett and Seyis, 2023). A pioneering regulation that should serve as an example once its effectiveness is proven.

It is crucial to recognise that the true impact of this legislation on containing populist parties in the EU will only be revealed over time. The effectiveness of the norm depends on its implementation, application and the response of political actors and technology companies to the novel regulatory framework (European Parliament 2023). Additionally, the impact of this will be shaped by broader social and political trends, including the evolution of populist movements and the strategies they employ to interact with their followers (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

In conclusion, while the regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the transparency and targeting of political advertising represents a fundamental step in the regulation of online political advertising and promises to address aspects of populism, it is not a comprehensive solution. A more holistic approach that delves into the root causes of populism and adapts to the changing digital landscape is essential for effective containment (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Insights into the effectiveness of the regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising in containing populist parties in the EU will become clear in the future.

**Figure 3: Populistic parties translate economic adversity into false promises of alternative democracies and, through this process, they take advantage of the rise in discontent.**



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# **6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE POPULIST ERA**

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# 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE POPULIST ERA

The regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the transparency and targeting of political advertising is the first provision, at the international level, which tries to set standards and define regulations to make online advertising transparent and fair, to guarantee the democratic process properly. Indeed, this regulation can be considered as the best solution that could be realistically obtained at this moment in this sphere.

As far as the question of populism is concerned, the regulation, which does not explicitly address the issue, even if regulating political advertising might have some positive impacts on it, will not solve the problems of populism. Indeed, more integrated approaches are necessary, with more attention on the socioeconomic aspects of the issue, to explore linkages between economic disadvantage and populism.

To develop this section, we identify two areas for policy recommendations: (1) those derived from the academic literature; and (2) those with a progressive perspective to tackle the problem.

## Academic literature recommendations

- 1) **Empowering political actors:** provide support and resources to political parties, politicians and candidates to create a more inclusive political context, responsive to citizens' needs, and less susceptible to populist narratives.
- 2) **Engagement strategies:** develop approaches enabling political parties to effectively compete and engage with populist parties, including strategies addressing concerns that lead to the appeal of populism.

- 3) **Communication strategies:** identify and promote communication strategies to help democratic actors better articulate their ideas, attract voters and disrupt populist attitudes. This involves identifying the appropriate framing for each situation.
- 4) **Data-driven policy:** emphasise the use of data and scientific evidence to ensure policies are evidence-based and responsive to citizens' needs.
- 5) **Regulation of political advertising:** support, disseminate and enforce regulations on political advertising to ensure transparency, objectivity and pluralism in information, fostering an open and fair political debate based on facts and diverse viewpoints. This corresponds to the deployment of the regulation analysed in this policy brief.
- 6) **Understanding populism:** conduct further research to better understand the dynamics of populism, including its socioeconomic drivers, to inform evidence-based policy responses.

## Progressive recommendations

- 1) **Development of progressive policies:** encourage the development and promotion of progressive policies addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to the rise of populism, such as economic inequality, social exclusion and cultural grievances.
- 2) **Inclusive governance:** promote inclusive governance structures that actively involve citizens in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and trust in democratic

institutions. It is closely related to proposal 2 in the previous section.

- 3) **Education and awareness:** implement educational tools and programs to provide key insights into the dynamics of populism, helping citizens better understand the implications of populist policies and rhetoric.
- 4) **Civic empowerment:** empower civil society organisations and grassroots movements to actively engage in advocacy, community building and the promotion of democratic values, countering the influence of populist narratives at the local level. Defending democracy by making it more inclusive and plural.

These recommendations aim to address populism through a multifaceted and progressive approach, encompassing political, social and communicative strategies, as well as evidence-based policy development and the necessary international collaboration.

### Additional recommendations

- 1) **Integrated approaches:** policymakers should adopt more integrated approaches to address populism, taking into account its deep socio-economic roots. This could involve a combination of economic, social and political measures to tackle the multifaceted nature of populism.
- 2) **Deeper socioeconomic view:** there is a need for a deeper understanding of the linkages between economic adversity and populism. Research and policy analysis should focus on exploring the socio-economic factors contributing to the rise of populism, including economic insecurity, cultural grievances and concerns.
- 3) **Special interest groups and campaign funding:** further examination of the role of special interest groups in mitigating the effects of populism in political campaigns is necessary. Understanding how campaign contributions can influence the adoption of populist platforms and the communication of policy-relevant

information to voters is crucial for designing effective regulatory and governance measures.

- 4) **Business and economic impact:** given the negative effects of populism on economies and businesses, policymakers should consider measures to mitigate these impacts. This could involve promoting economic stability, strengthening institutional frameworks and fostering an environment conducive to business growth and investment.
- 5) **Media and online platforms:** given the relationship between online media and the rise of populism, it is essential to explore the role of online platforms and social media in shaping support for populist movements. This could involve regulatory measures to address the spread of disinformation and the influence of online media on public opinion.

In conclusion, as observed, these recommendations stem from scientific evidence, providing the analytical framework for populism and its strategies. To counter them, it is necessary to delve into the democratisation of existing political structures, which involves greater citizen participation and increased transparency by parties and institutions.

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The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

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