

Populist Rhetoric in Irish Party Manifestos: A Computational Analysis of the 2020 and 2024 Elections

Abstract

This paper examines the use of populist rhetoric in Irish political party manifestos during the 2020 and 2024 general elections. The analysis focuses on two key dimensions of populism: people-centrism and anti-elitism. A dictionary-based approach is employed alongside sentiment analysis and word embedding techniques (GloVe) to assess the presence, tone, and semantic framing of populist language across parties and election cycles. The dataset consists of 17 manifestos from nine parties representing a range of ideological positions. Contrary to initial expectations, the results reveal a decline in populist rhetoric between 2020 and 2024, particularly in the use of anti-elitist language. People-centric appeals remained the dominant populist frame, suggesting that Irish parties tend to employ inclusive rather than antagonistic rhetoric. The emotional tone of party manifestos remained largely stable, and language linked to populism was typically framed in abstract or policy-focused ways, while overall messaging showed strong consistency across both elections. These findings indicate that Irish populist discourse remains moderate, unpolarized, and broadly civic in tone. The study contributes to research on national variation in populism and highlights the value of combining multiple text analysis methods to capture both explicit and latent rhetorical shifts.

Keywords: *populism, text analysis, sentiment, GloVe, Ireland, party manifestos, political rhetoric, anti-elitism, people-centrism, elections*

Introduction

Populism has emerged as a prominent feature of political discourse in many democratic societies. Defined as a discourse that divides society into two antagonistic groups - “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” - populism is often marked by two key rhetorical dimensions: people-centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004). These dimensions have become central to efforts to empirically measure populist rhetoric through computational text analysis, particularly through dictionary-based approaches (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). In recent years, scholars have expanded these tools to analyze political texts across diverse national and ideological contexts, offering insights into how populist language varies by party and electoral period (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2018).

While populist discourse has been widely studied in various national settings, its presence in Irish political communication remains underexplored. Ireland’s political system is characterized by relatively centrist, multi-party competition, yet recent electoral cycles, especially the 2020 and 2024 general elections, have revealed growing public disillusionment with established parties and institutions. Media commentary has pointed to increasing rhetorical appeals to “ordinary people” and growing expressions of distrust toward elites, particularly in relation to housing, healthcare, and inequality (Irish Times, 2024; RTE

News, 2020). However, systematic academic analysis of populist rhetoric in Ireland remains limited.

This paper addresses this gap by exploring how populist rhetoric is expressed in the political manifestos of Irish parties during the 2020 and 2024 general elections. It applies a dictionary-based text analysis approach to examine the presence and variation of language associated with populist themes. The analysis focuses on two key dimensions commonly discussed in the literature, people-centrism and anti-elitism, and assesses how these rhetorical elements appear across parties and over time. Special attention is given to capturing patterns that reflect broader shifts in political discourse during a period of heightened social and economic uncertainty. The study also incorporates sentiment analysis to assess changes in the emotional tone of party rhetoric over time.

The paper investigates **to what extent and in what form do Irish political parties use populist rhetoric in their election manifestos?** To address this question, the paper tests two hypotheses grounded in existing literature and patterns observed in Irish electoral discourse. The first is that people-centrism is more dominant than anti-elitism in Irish manifestos, suggesting that parties are more likely to focus on unifying appeals to the public than on direct critiques of elites. The second is that the overall use of populist rhetoric increased between the 2020 and 2024 elections, reflecting a more prominent role for populist framing in Irish political communication during this period.

By analyzing how these themes are articulated in party manifestos, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of populism in Ireland. It also illustrates the value of applying quantitative text analysis methods to national contexts that have often been overlooked in comparative populism research.

Methodology

This study analyzes the general election manifestos of Irish political parties from 2020 and 2024. These texts, published in advance of each election, outline party platforms and serve as formal expressions of political priorities and appeals to voters. They are suitable for analysis as they are carefully crafted and reflect deliberate rhetorical choices. The dataset consists of 17 manifestos from 9 political parties, providing a consistent yet evolving view of political language across election cycles. A range of parties across the ideological spectrum is included, allowing for both cross-party and over-time comparisons. All texts were preprocessed using standard natural language processing techniques, including lowercasing, punctuation and stopword removal, tokenization, and lemmatization, to ensure consistency and prepare the data for analysis.

Populism is operationalized as a rhetorical style grounded in two key dimensions: **people-centrism** and **anti-elitism** (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). People-centrism involves appeals that emphasize the voice, values, and collective identity of “ordinary people,” while anti-elitism targets perceived corrupt or self-serving elites. These components are widely used in studies of populist discourse and serve as the foundation for dictionary-based analysis. This study uses an adapted version of the Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) dictionary, which includes two categories: anti-elitism (*elite, establishment, corrupt, mafia, neoliberal, privileged, powerful, oligarchy*) and people-centrism (*people, citizen, citizens, community, communities, public, working, ordinary, families, family*). Several terms

were added to reflect the Irish political context—such as *citizens*, *communities*, and *the public*—allowing for a more context-sensitive identification of populist language. To enable comparisons across manifestos, all dictionary frequencies were normalized by total token counts.

To identify the words most strongly associated with populist language, a GloVe word embedding model was trained directly on the manifesto corpus using a 5-word context window. A semantic populism vector was then constructed by subtracting the embedding for *elite* from that of *people*, capturing a latent dimension of populist meaning. Cosine similarity was used to compare every word in the corpus to this vector, and the top-ranking terms most aligned with the populist axis were extracted. This approach allowed for an unsupervised exploration of the rhetorical associations surrounding populist concepts, complementing the dictionary-based analysis with a data-driven perspective on how populist themes are semantically expressed across the manifestos.

To complement the analysis, a sentiment analysis was conducted using the AFINN-111 sentiment dictionary, which assigns polarity scores ranging from -5 (highly negative) to +5 (highly positive) to individual words. Manifesto texts were first tokenized, then matched against the AFINN lexicon. For each party-year combination, three metrics were calculated: the total sentiment score, the average sentiment score per matched word, and the number of sentiment-bearing words identified. These scores were then merged back into the main dataset to allow direct comparison with populism measures. This layer of analysis provided valuable context for understanding emotional tone and rhetorical shifts across the 2020 and 2024 elections. It also helped to explore whether parties expressing stronger populist language adopted more emotionally charged or oppositional tones in their communication.

Vote share data from the 2020 and 2024 elections, along with party ideology classifications, were integrated into the dataset to enhance the analysis. Party ideologies were assigned based on accepted classifications¹, allowing for grouping of parties into broader ideological categories. Data was aggregated by party, ideology, and year to identify trends and visualize the evolution of populist rhetoric over time. All analysis was conducted in R (see the script in the Appendix). This multi-step approach enabled a structured examination of manifesto language, combining dictionary-based identification with semantic similarity techniques to capture both explicit and latent dimensions of populist discourse.

Results

Populist Rhetoric Across Elections

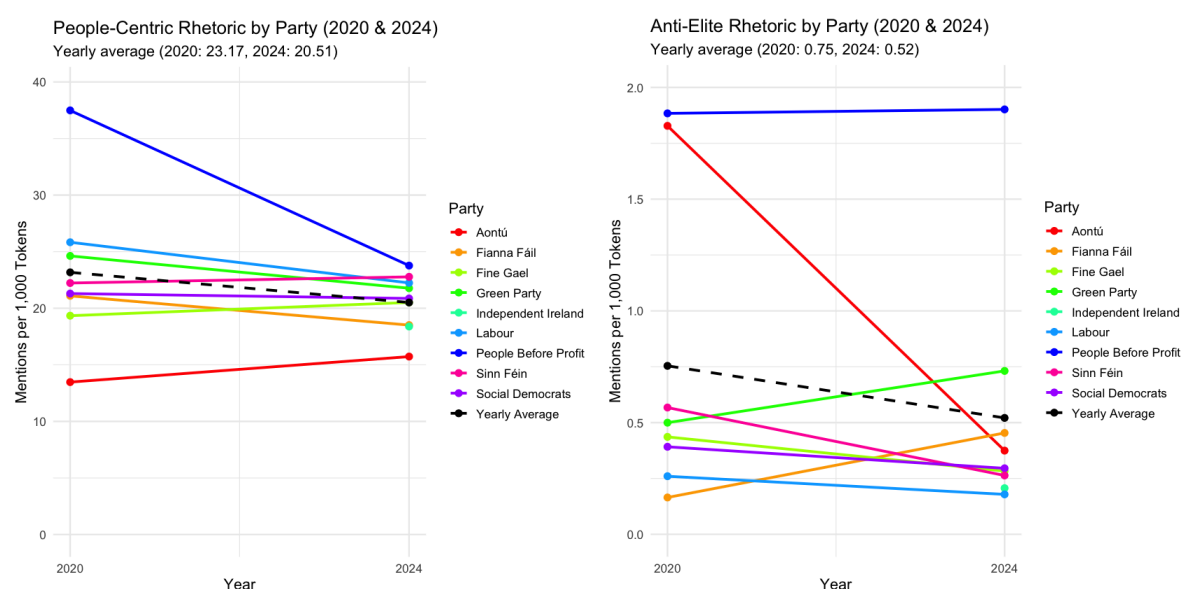
The analysis of populist rhetoric across party manifestos reveals consistent differences in the use of anti-elite and people-centric language. While all parties employed some elements of populist discourse, rhetoric centered on “the people” was more prominent and widespread than explicit criticism of elites—confirming the expectation that people-centrism dominates over anti-elitism in Irish political communication. From 2020 to 2024, there was a general decline in populist rhetoric, with the drop in anti-elitist language particularly pronounced. This suggests a rhetorical shift away from direct oppositional framing and possibly a normalization of discourse across the party system. However, people-centric appeals remained comparatively steady, continuing to be the most common way parties expressed

¹ Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES): <https://www.chesdata.eu/>

populist ideas. Notably, People Before Profit exhibited the highest anti-elitism and people-centric scores across both elections, while Aontú showed a sharp decline in anti-elitist rhetoric but a noticeable increase in people-centric language, indicating a shift from confrontational messaging toward more inclusive appeals (Figure 1).

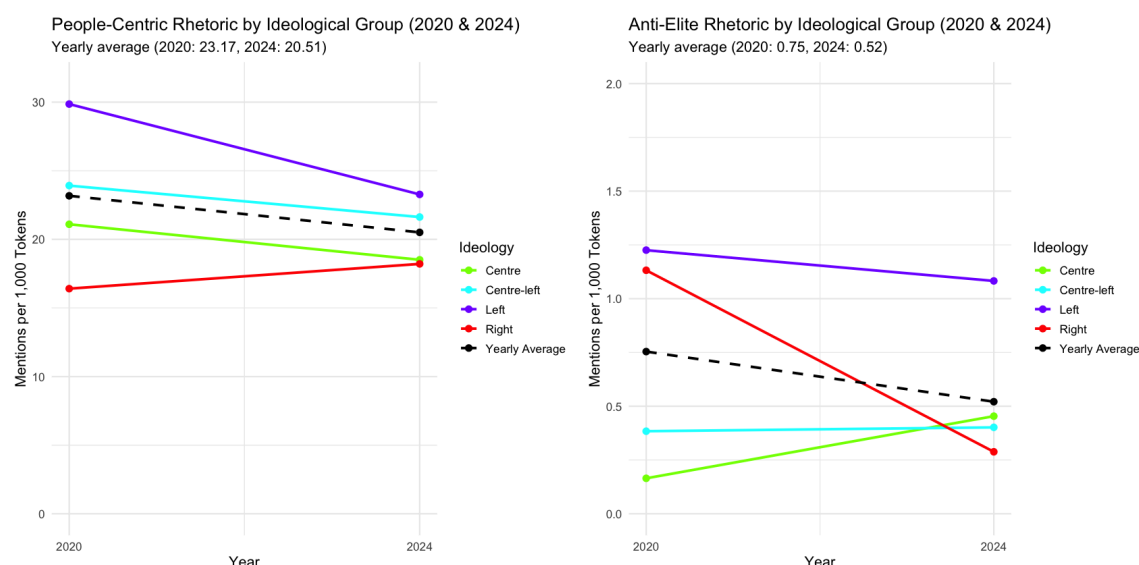
These findings partially align with the study's expectations. The dominance of people-centrism over anti-elitism is clearly supported, reinforcing the view that Irish parties tend to frame their appeals around unity and shared identity rather than opposition to elites. However, the anticipated increase in populist rhetoric between 2020 and 2024 is not supported by the data. Instead, a noticeable decline, especially in anti-elitist language, suggests that parties have moderated their rhetorical tone over time, possibly reflecting shifts in strategy or broader changes in the political climate.

Figure 1. Populist Rhetoric by Party



The figure below illustrates the changes in populist rhetoric between 2020 and 2024, grouped by party ideology. Left-wing parties (People Before Profit, Sinn Féin) maintained the highest levels of populist rhetoric across both elections, though their use of such language declined in 2024. Centre-left parties (Labour, Social Democrats, Green Party) showed a modest decrease in people-centric language, reflecting a subtle shift in tone. Fianna Fáil, representing the centre, consistently displayed low levels of populist rhetoric, though a slight increase in anti-elitist language was observed between 2020 and 2024. Right-wing parties (Fine Gael, Aontú) demonstrated a notable decrease in anti-elitist rhetoric, alongside a small rise in people-centric appeals—indicating a possible shift toward more inclusive framing. Overall, from 2020 to 2024, there was a general decline in populist rhetoric across the ideological spectrum, with the sharpest drop in anti-elitist expressions. People-centric language remained comparatively stable and continued to serve as the dominant mode of populist communication.

Figure 2. Populist Rhetoric by Ideology



Semantic Framing of Populism (GloVe Analysis)

The GloVe-based semantic analysis revealed how words in the manifestos relate to the underlying populist dimension. Words most similar to *elite* included *norms*, *vaccine*, *remedy*, and *overload*, suggesting that elite-related rhetoric often appeared in contexts tied to policy, regulation, or public health—possibly reflecting discourse shaped by the pandemic or broader institutional critique. These associations appear abstract rather than antagonistic, indicating that anti-elitism in the manifestos may be embedded in technocratic or issue-specific framing rather than expressed through overt populist opposition.

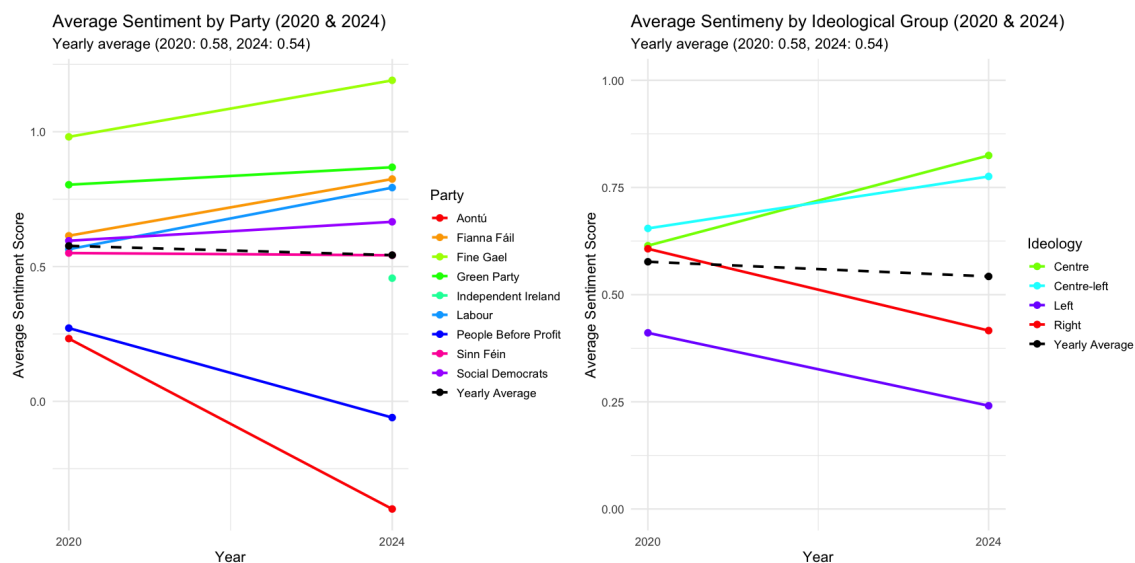
Conversely, terms most similar to *people* included *their*, *young*, *them*, *better*, and *those*, reflecting a focus on social groups and inclusive pronouns. This cluster reinforces earlier findings that people-centric rhetoric in Irish manifestos is grounded in appeals to collective well-being, with an emphasis on supporting individuals and communities. The absence of polarizing or emotive terms in these associations further underscores the moderate and civic tone of people-centric populism in this context.

These semantic associations complement the dictionary-based analysis by showing that the populist axis is shaped more by socially oriented language than by conflict-driven narratives. This moderate tone—both in people-focused and elite-related language—echoes findings from Bonikowski and Gidron (2016), who emphasize that the style and intensity of populist discourse vary across national contexts. In line with their typology, Irish populist rhetoric appears to lean toward civic and inclusionary forms, rather than the moralistic or confrontational styles observed elsewhere. The results highlight how populist discourse in Irish politics tends to be more inclusive and descriptive than combative.

Sentiment Trends

The sentiment analysis shows that the overall emotional tone of party manifestos remained relatively stable between 2020 and 2024. However, there were notable variations across parties and ideological groups. While some parties in the Centre and Centre-left (e.g., Fianna Fáil, Social Democrats) maintained consistently positive sentiment, others such as People Before Profit (Left) and Aontú (Right) showed more pronounced shifts in tone. These differences suggest that changes in sentiment were shaped more by individual party strategies than by broad ideological trends.

Figure 3. Sentiment by Party and Ideology



Lexical Stability Across Time

In addition to specific dimensions such as sentiment and populist framing, cosine similarity was used to assess the overall consistency in language and content between each party's 2020 and 2024 manifestos. The analysis shows that Irish political parties largely maintained consistent language and content in their manifestos between the 2020 and 2024 general elections. Similarity scores for all parties fall within a very high range (0.95 - 0.99), indicating strong continuity in overall messaging. The Green Party (0.99) exhibited the most stable manifesto content over time, while Labour and Fianna Fáil (0.95) showed slightly more variation - though still within a highly similar range. Given the narrow spread in scores, these differences should be interpreted with caution, as they reflect subtle rather than substantial changes.

Populism, Sentiment, and Vote Share

The study also explored whether populist rhetoric and sentiment were associated with electoral performance. However, the correlations with vote share were weak and not statistically significant, indicating no strong or consistent relationship between these rhetorical features and electoral success².

² Among the three variables, sentiment showed a moderate positive correlation with vote share ($r = 0.47$, $p = 0.057$), suggesting a potential association, though it falls just short of statistical significance.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the presence and evolution of populist rhetoric in Irish election manifestos, focusing on two primary dimensions: people-centrism and anti-elitism. The initial expectation was that populist rhetoric would become more pronounced between the 2020 and 2024 general elections, in line with broader international trends and perceived political polarization. However, the findings diverged from this assumption.

While people-centric rhetoric remained dominant across both elections - confirming that Irish parties favor unifying appeals to the public - the overall use of populist language, especially anti-elitism, declined over time. This rhetorical shift suggests a potential normalization of discourse or a strategic adjustment by parties aiming to broaden their appeal post-crisis. The decrease in confrontational framing may reflect a broader stabilization of the political landscape.

Sentiment analysis showed that emotional tone remained relatively consistent between election years, with only minor fluctuations across parties and ideological groups. GloVe-based semantic analysis further reinforced these conclusions, showing that even elite-associated language appeared in policy or technocratic contexts, rather than through overt antagonism.

These results challenge assumptions that populist rhetoric is universally escalating and demonstrate the importance of national context in shaping political discourse. They also suggest that Irish parties engage in moderated populism - leaning toward civic expressions rather than polarizing narratives.

Future research could explore whether these patterns persist in more informal political communication channels, such as social media, speeches, or televised debates. Extending this type of analysis across multiple election cycles or comparing with other European democracies would further illuminate the distinctiveness of Ireland's rhetorical trajectory. Additionally, incorporating public opinion data could help assess the effectiveness of these rhetorical strategies in shaping voter attitudes and electoral outcomes.

In contrast, anti-elitism and people-centrism were negatively correlated with vote share, but neither relationship was statistically significant.

Appendix

Table 1. Party-Level Metrics in 2020 and 2024 Irish General Election Manifestos

Party	Ideology	Tokens	Similarity (cosine)	Mean Sentiment		Anti-elite		People-centric	
				2020	2024	2020	2024	2020	2024
Aontú	Right	30788	0.96	0.23	-0.40	1.83	0.37	13.47	15.73
Fianna Fáil	Centre	46305	0.95	0.61	0.82	0.16	0.45	21.10	18.51
Fine Gael	Right	67441	0.96	0.98	1.19	0.44	0.28	19.34	20.52
Green Party	Centre-left	31785	0.99	0.80	0.87	0.50	0.73	24.63	21.77
Independent Ireland	Right	4840	-		0.46	-	0.21	-	18.39
Labour	Centre-left	50694	0.95	0.56	0.79	0.26	0.18	25.83	22.24
People Before Profit	Left	12670	0.97	0.27	-0.06	1.88	1.90	37.49	23.77
Sinn Féin	Left	60333	0.98	0.55	0.54	0.57	0.26	22.23	22.78
Social Democrats	Centre-left	57656	0.97	0.60	0.67	0.39	0.30	21.30	20.87

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