

# Politicians “Stay Home”: Left-Wing Populism and Performances of the Intimate Self on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the intimate space of politicians at home during lockdown through their personal Instagram accounts, using both live stories (which I have been saving daily), posts and captions. More precisely, it focuses on two young female politicians who have become iconic for left-wing movements around the world. They are Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona (Spain), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, representative for New York’s 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district (USA). As previous political outsiders who belong to a left-wing populist wave, AOC and Colau interact with their followers in “an authentic way”, often posting very intimate and apparently uncurated images of their daily life. The goal of the paper is to examine how they construct authenticity and connect with their constituencies during the COVID-19 lockdown through a qualitative visual rhetorical analysis.

## KEYWORDS:

Authenticity, intimacy, personalisation, left-wing populism, COVID-19, Instagram, visual rhetoric

## Introduction

The latest note on my research diary reads: “AOC shares #DecoOfTheDay pic”. For those who are not familiar with the intimate life of American congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Deco is her dog, and she shares regular pictures of him on Instagram. It is not that her dog is her main worry during COVID-19 lockdown but, working from home, it seems hard to go on with politics as usual. That is why some leaders seem to let go the political pose and share the intimacies of their home for the delight of the audience. Those who do not have a dog might have kids, and Ada Colau in Spain shows regular pictures of hers on social media.

The examples above bring about many questions about the personalisation of politics in the digital era: How do politicians use their social media accounts as a way of connecting with regular people, bypassing what Bourdieu (1984) calls the “bourgeois taste” of the political elite? What is the interplay between personal disclosure and authenticity? These questions are essential for understanding the role that intimate posts play in shaping politicians’ social media image, and how apparently apolitical images connect to their ideological goals.

This paper aims at examining the intimate life of politicians while working at home during COVID-19 lockdown through their Instagram posts. More precisely, it examines the ways in which left-wing populist leaders self-represent themselves from home, (inevitably) showing glimpses of their most intimate space. The underlying idea is that they present themselves as authentic and approachable leaders who can be trusted through a combination of rhetorical devices that examine their personality (ethos), their emotional connections with loved ones (pathos), as well as their personal management of personal space (topos) and time (kairos). The time frame goes from March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when the World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a pandemic, to June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, when both Barcelona and New York (one day later) start easing lockdown restrictions.

The paper takes a comparative case study approach, analysing two young female politicians who were previously political outsiders and have become referents of left-wing populism around the world (Rasulo 2020, García Agustín 2020b, Portapan et al. 2020, Sintes-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer 2020). They are Ada Colau (referred to as ACO, *Barcelona en Comú*, Spain), Mayor of Barcelona, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (referred to as AOC, Democratic Party, United States), representative for New York's 14th congressional district. This perspective contributes to broadening existing knowledge about "other" populisms by focusing on two female politicians who combine a strong sense of locally rooted activism with left-wing populist discourses and aesthetics.

## Literature Review

As social media become key platforms for connecting politicians with their audiences, political leaders are experimenting with intimate posts that e/affectively mobilise their followers, since the remembrance of a familiar experience, such as petting your dog, creates emotional bonds that tie citizens and leaders together in communities of feeling (Yl'a-Anttila 2006). While politicians keep sharing posts of what they love, and who they love – many of them going viral, we still lack a comprehensive framework and a systematic analysis of a common yet poorly theorised phenomenon in political communication. This is due to the novelty of the phenomenon, but also because research on populist communication, online performances of authenticity and the intimisation of politics remains scattered. The following lines will examine these three strands of research, trying to establish a link between them.

Contemporary populist waves play out in a context of a general decline in citizens' trust in traditional institutions (Enli and Rosenberg 2018), such as political parties and media outlets, both contested in a hybrid communication system (Chadwick 2013). By presenting themselves as political outsiders, "authentic" populists appear as not yet polluted by politics, its rules, and its perceived fakery. In Canovan's (2005, 5) words, "populists may have a bad name (at any rate in Europe) but their trump card, the belief in popular sovereignty, lies at the heart of democracy itself".

When discussing populism, it is important to differentiate “commonsensical” from “theoretical” understandings (Howarth 2015, 13). Even in academic works, the analysis of populism is often based on one of its many variants, right-wing populism. These reductionist, “generic” (Tushnet 2018) and de-historicised (Gandesha 2018) approaches extend the potential threats of right-wing populism to all forms of populism. In consequence, the search for understanding populism across ideologies has done nothing for unraveling the differences between right- and left-wing strands, argues García Agustín (2020a). Neither has done the quest for “pure” forms of populism. In fact, all populism is hybrid, and involves a constant interaction with other sedimented political traditions (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). In the literature, left-wing populism has been seen as the exception (Salmela and von Scheve 2018) and this has produced a gap in knowledge and lack of understanding of how progressive populist leaders construct a closeness with the people (Sintes-Olivella 2020).

Discursive and ideational conceptualisations of populism have been often used interchangeably. The common denominator of labelling populism a political “*style*” (Waisbord 2013, Moffit 2016), “*discourse*” (Laclau 2005) or “*thin-centred ideology*” (Mudde 2004, Blassnig et al., 2018, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Engesser et al. 2017) is that all these concepts stress a vision of populism as a set of political ideas that can be performed both discursively and aesthetically (Dupuy 2002, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, Sunnercrantz 2019). However, the discursive approach questions populism as an “either-or phenomenon” reserved to politicians we perceive as being populist (Bennett et al. 2020). Instead, it conceptualises populism as a discursive articulation of “the people” that can be present in all political communication, to a certain degree. Populism, in this paper, is used as an analytical tool, not as a defining characteristic of a leader or a party. Conceptualisations of populism as a logic of discursive articulation draw on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s (1984) discourse theoretical approaches.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, “populist articulations create an image of the speaker as a saviour of the people speaking on behalf of the people against its enemy – in contrast to untrustworthy politicians” (Sunnercrantz 2019).

In the literature, it is common to define populism around two elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. In Laclau’s (1977 167) words, what transforms discursive appeals to people into populism is “the people/power contradiction”: us, the people versus them, the establishment (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, Gandesha 2018). In populism, “the elite” is often discredited and delegitimised through negative attributes that expose it as distant and unresponsive to citizens’ needs (Bennet et al. 2020). “In exposing the elite as impression managers, populists undermine the elite’s authenticity and construct their own” (Sorensen 2018, 2). Constructing an authentic self-representation can be understood as a way of telling the truth – about themselves. “The populist space of appearance” (Voelz 2018), borrowing Arendt’s concept, is that in which populist leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Which have been further developed by Mouffe (2018), Stavrakakis (2017), Palonen (2018), Sunnercrantz (2019), Marchart (2008), Carpentier and de Cleen (2017) or Howarth (2015), among others.

construct performances of polarisation (ibid), of full identities united inasmuch they share the same enemy, even if this is just a mirage (Palonen 2018, 235).

Previous literature has differentiated this “dyadic” definition from the “triadic” conceptualisation of right-wing populism, which includes ostracizing a threatening “other” (Judis 2016, Voelz 2018, Blassnig et al. 2018). The “other” is different from the elite, and usually belongs to marginalised groups, such as immigrants. One of the main differences between right- and left- wing populism is, precisely, the fact that the first tends to ostracise particular groups, while the later focuses on broader socio-economic structures (Gandeha 2018). The ‘us’ that populism generates can be heterogeneous (inclusionary) or homogeneous (exclusionary) (Dzur and Hendriks 2018). In left-wing populism, “the people” has an inclusive, rather than exclusive, character (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Left-wing populism is here understood as “the combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation (through the appeal to “the people” against the elites)” as well as “higher participation” and the left’s traditional calls for “equality and social justice” (García Agustín 2020a: 10). The normative goal of left-wing populism is not an increase of authoritarianism, as is often thought of right-wing politics, but of radical democracy (Mouffe 2018, Butler 2017). It is within this recent far-left tradition that the paper situates both Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau, and their construction of a people-centrist, anti-elitist yet inclusionary discourse that is characterised by social justice, community-involvement, mutual care, and participation (Koopman 2020).

Both in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau’s cases, the idea of locally based political initiatives is intricately linked to feminist styles of leadership. These can be observed in their focus on care, participation, and togetherness, empowering “the people” within their communities (Roth 2021, Regelman and Bartolomé 2020, Wainwright 2020). For instance, when Colau left Twitter in April 2021, she explained that “[p]olitics has plenty of noise, testosterone” yet “needs more empathy, complexity, listening, pedagogy, and shades” (Colau 2021).

One of the contributions of this paper is to examine left-wing populism at a local level, very much in line with the new municipalism movement. The connection between both is the search for new ways of doing progressive politics, expanding democracy by empowering “the people” – although populism is seen as more top-down than radical municipalism (Roth 2021). An international referent has been Barcelona’s mayor, Ada Colau, and her attempt to democratise politics by reconnecting with civil society, and people’s involvement at the local level, then building “translocal solidarity” networks (García Agustín 2020b). Barcelona en Comú, the party she leads, has attempted to do politics differently by gathering political parties and citizens coming from activism and social movements. If we consider populism as hybrid, Colau’s will of constructing a shared sovereignty between citizens and politicians connects new municipalist policies with left-

wing inclusionary people-centrism and anti-elitism (Portapan et al. 2020, Sintés-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer 2020). For instance, Colau has relentlessly attempted to fight socio-economic structures that control housing, energy, and water supplies, among others. In her own words, “municipalism is a rising force that seeks to transform fear into hope from the bottom up, and build that hope together” (Colau 2018, 194).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has built a career around the creation of a shared identity with her constituency. The leader combines a populist identity, marked by far-left anti-elitist rhetoric, with a personal one, marked by her activist roots, as a way of legitimising herself as a true representative of “the people” (Rasulo 2020). This manifests itself in a discourse that highlights community bonding and solidarity in the face of the establishment. Her discourse revolves about “the people” deserving true political representation, and she poses as part of the people, connecting with their everyday challenges and interests. This people-centrism is opposed to traditional political elites, who are not part of the people, do not understand them and, therefore, cannot speak for them nor defend their interests. Far from representing citizens, the elites appear as exploiting “the people” for their own benefit.

This paper advances current debates by looking at the performative aspects of left-wing populism, which remain understudied (Salojärvi 2019). This project is interested in the study of two existing areas of research, “populist performance” (Palonen and Sundell 2019, Sorensen 2018) and “performed authenticity” in politics (Enli and Rosenberg 2018). Therefore, it sees political identities not as necessarily given, but as something that can be constructed in political communication. From a performative view, populism consists of articulating a given social identity through communicative strategies. Social media provide optimal “opportunity structures” for populist articulations of authenticity and togetherness (Gerbaudo 2018). Besides enabling a direct communication between politicians and citizens, social media offers a privileged space for self-presentation, allowing leaders to construct an apparently authentic and intimate relationship with their followers (Ernst et al. 2018, Engesser et al. 2017, Blassnig et al. 2020).

The concept of authenticity has recently been gaining academic attention due to recent elections that became a “battle for authenticity” (Moore 2017, Richman 2015). This is relevant because existing research has found a link between authenticity and credibility (Enli and Rosenberg 2018). This is not a truth that can be fact-checked, but a truth that comes from an unmediated communication between the leader and the public, that stems from an affective personal bonding without the type of spin and manipulation that citizens tend to associate with politics. This is even more important in a hybrid media system, characterised by the hyperabundance of information, in which personal trust becomes essential for deciding what to consume, and what to believe.

Performed authenticity is not exclusive of populism, yet previous research conducted by Enli and Rosenberg (2018) suggests that populist leaders come across as more authentic and credible and use this strategy more often, and their posts are more popular – both in terms of social media

impact and their amplification in the mainstream media. The affective turn in post-truth politics suggests that communicating in an authentic fashion is essential for building trust, as citizens' evaluation of truth partly comes from an emotional investment, and not just from objective facts (Boler 2018, Durnová 2019). Since populist leaders present themselves as the authentic representatives of the people in a context in which the traditional elite seems way too detached, it makes sense that they curate an authentic and familiar image that allows them to regain people's trust.

Bringing together previous strands of research is essential for understanding why populist leaders keep sharing posts of their bedroom or their loved ones, some of them going viral and creating a (social) media debate that has yet to be fully theorised and empirically analysed. This paper argues that populist leaders create an online self-representation as the common people in order to create affective communities of trust that can be politically mobilised. To determine whether a leader is sincere, authentic and true, citizens need to know him or her better. That is when the personalisation of politics comes into play.

The personalisation of politics is one of the effects of the mediatisation of politics and a product of the confluence of ongoing media, political and cultural changes, crisscrossed by technological developments that make it easier for leaders to show their personal characteristics to an audience, and to communicate them in a seemingly direct and uncurated fashion. In fact, social networks offer a unique space for self-representation by easily blurring the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal. One of the key elements of the personalisation of politics is showing a consistency between a politician's public and private persona and shows followers that they really are who they pretend to be. This paper focuses on an understudied side of mediatisation, the intimisation of politics: 1) the politician as a person, with given tastes, emotions and personality, 2) the public scrutiny of his/her intimate relations, including loved ones and spare time, and 3) their personal space, such as home (Stanywer 2013, Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016) and 4) their management of personal time. One of the key elements of the personalisation of politics is showing a consistency between a leader's public and private persona: a sincerity that traverses their political and personal self (Colema 2006) and shows followers that politicians really are who they pretend to be. The value of intimacy comes from the affective connection established between two people who share a space of familiarity and belonging.

While there are abundant analyses of leaders' constructions of their political persona on social networks, the way in which they construct their intimate self has received scarce attention, and we are yet to understand the discursive and aesthetic means by which this is achieved. For instance, research about politicians' creation of affective communities is quite recent and still unfolding (Döveling, Harju and Sommer, 2018, Salmela and von Scheve 2018, Eklundh 2019). This paper will contribute to this by examining social media performances of authenticity through intimate

posts, which are a useful tool for performing a given identity based on one's position towards taste, creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (LeBesco and Naccarato 2008).

## Methodology

This paper takes a comparative case study approach by looking at two young female politicians that represent global cities, New York and Barcelona, and who present themselves as left-wing political outsiders. The importance of this purposive sampling and actor-oriented approach lies in the need to further understand other faces of populism beyond the head of government, male, right-wing leader that dominates most of academic research. This goes in line with van Zoonen's (2006) idea of celebrity politics being gendered in a way that benefits male politicians, who can easily switch between their professional and personal life without being judged, while intimacy and the domestic space have been traditionally associated to women in a derogatory manner.

This study takes home lockdown during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis as a "critical discursive moment" (Carvalho, 2008) from which the periodisation of the case study emerges. While politicians have been sharing their personal life on social media for a long time, home lockdown during the COVID-19 lockdown means that an (unavoidable) intimisation of politics has gained momentum, fully unfolding its potential (Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016). The timeframe goes from March 11th, when the World Health Organisation declares COVID-19 a pandemic, and ends on the 21 June, the day in which the Spanish government ended the state of emergency, and the day before New York City entered Phase Two of Restart.

In this study, the coding unit is the Instagram post, whether it is a picture or a video, including the accompanying text and the transcription of the audio. In live broadcasts, only the two first minutes were coded, which gave enough time for leaders to introduce the session and start discussing with their followers. The analysis includes pictures in the politicians' timeline, as well as stories and live videos that the researcher collected daily through a desktop extension "Stories for Instagram". The sample includes 25 items for Ada Colau (12 pictures in her timeline and 13 stories) and 54 for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (of which 4 are live videos, since she does not post personal pictures of her home in her timeline). Each post has been coded manually through content analysis on Atlas.ti according to four categories in visual rhetoric, then qualitatively analysed through a visual rhetorical analysis.

Visual rhetoric has been previously used in the analysis of populist leaders as well as political outsiders, and the way in which their construct performances of their intimate self in social networks (Salojärvi 2019, Gleason and Hansen 2016, Lalancette and Raynauld 2017). The main benefit consists of its ability to align with existing literature about the personalisation of politics, which often analyses 1) the politician as a person, 2) the disclosure of intimate relationships and tastes, 3) his or her personal space, such as home (Stanywer 2013, Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016) and 4) the way they manage their personal time. Additionally, it allows to do so

through a combination of discursive and visual elements that construct certain aesthetics of authenticity. In this work, the first element, ethos, codes the way in which leaders present themselves as trustworthy through their professional and personal skills and attributes. The analysis of pathos examines the strategies by which leaders construct a shared emotional connection with their followers and, therefore, are presented as regular people, who are approachable and easy to identify with. The third category, topos, refers to the rhetoric of space, and the importance of home as a place of comfort, intimacy, and authentic disclosure. Finally, kairos examines the importance of temporal references in the making of a ubiquitous relationship between leaders and their followers. There is an important element of rhetoric, logos, which refers to logical arguments and has not been individually coded because it is transversal to the analysis.

### **Ethos: Self-Representations of the Professional and Personal Self**

This paper is interested in the construction of a cohesive “us”, the people and the leader, as opposed to political elites. In order to achieve this goal, trust and intimacy need to be established. In their comparative study, Bennet et al. (2020) found that the most common strategy when populist leaders construct the “the people” is to create a shared identity, similarities, and a common fate. In the context of the pandemic, it is easy to appeal to a shared and unique experience between politicians and their followers, who are undergoing excruciating circumstances.

The first part of the analysis will focus on the visual rhetorical performances of the ethos, that is, the way in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Ada Colau (ACO) present themselves as trustworthy to their followers through their self-representation on their personal Instagram account. The ethos of a politician indicates who she/he is, including professional and personal characteristics, skills and experiences that can help him, or her, appear as trustworthy and authentic.

An analysis of the data reveals that both AOC and ACO play a complex code-switching between their professional and their intimate persona. The best example is Ada Colau’s post on the 30 May (@adacolau), asking the audience: “Who do you see in this picture? A 46-year-old woman? A mayor? A mother with two young kids?”. The data shows a constant code-switching between both politicians’ professional and intimate self. Professionally speaking, inclusionary populism is articulated around the axes of people-centrism, left-wing policies for protecting the working class and other vulnerable groups (such as ethnic minorities, migrants, women or the dispossessed). For instance, Ada Colau makes special emphasis on precarious essential workers, such as those working at cleaning services.

The professional ethos of the leaders is intricately linked to their past as political activists. As a woman of colour and a Latina, the context of police brutality and mass protests plays an essential part of AOC’s discourse after George Floyd’s killing by a police officer on 25 May 2020. In Colau’s case, she has been the visible leader of the *Platform for People Affected by Mortgages*.

Therefore, she is a strong supporter of housing rights, even more given the economic impact of the COVID-19 strict initial lockdown. This plays out in a scenario in which big interests, mostly evoked, attack progressive, young female politicians in power. Both leaders are faced with harsh criticism from far-right media outlets (Fox News, AOC) and far-right parties (Vox, ACO), and criticise traditional corrupt institutions such as the USA campaign financing system (AOC) or the Spanish monarchy, and other big corporations. For instance, Ocasio-Cortez considers that the hardest part of the job is “the relentless scrutiny. You know I have a lot of colleagues that say and do really terrible things” (@AOC 15 April 2020).

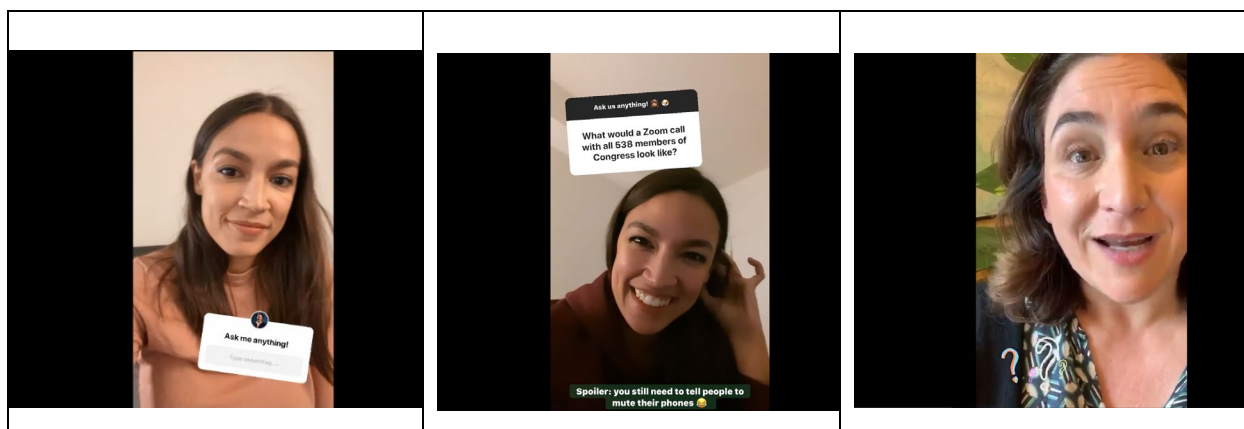
The social background and the living conditions of both politicians are consistent with a working-class ethos. This is relevant inasmuch as both leaders present themselves as ordinary citizens, and their visual and discursive performances go in this line in terms of keeping it simple and amateur aesthetics. While AOC often recalls her past as bartender and vows to still be paying her student loan, ACO clearly explains where she stands: a normal woman who donates part of her salary to charity, who lives in the same rented apartment as she did before, and whose lifestyle has not been changed by politics (@adacolau, 30 May 2020).

Both the professional and personal ethos of the leaders meet around the figure of the caregiver. The carer ethos departs from a metaphor that positions both female politicians as mothers. This is not something that they reject nor see as negatively typecasting them in the domestic space (van Zoonen 2006), yet something they embrace as a quality that can help them become better politicians. While ACO takes care of her two young children, AOC constructs her ethos as a puppy carer. It is important to highlight that there is a 15-year gap between both, and this can help explain their different role as caretakers. The idea of female politicians having a mothering ethos can be understood as their ability to take care of citizens based on their experience of taking care of their loved ones: such as their kids and their pet. The values that are disclosed while interacting with them offer relevant information about their personality and their skills as politicians. Despite obvious differences, there are many parallels in the experiences that they share. For instance, they both change the tone of their voice when talking to their loved ones. One of the most intimate parallels is the self-doubt that generates taking care of a living being. This draws a parallel between their role as young mothers and their role as young politicians. This is particularly relevant in the context of a global health, social and economic crisis that had important psychological consequences for citizens.

In AOC’s Instagram account, the ethos of the carer is also complemented by the ethos of being taken care of. Her dog, Deco, appears as an essential emotional support in times of social distancing and isolation that provides both affection and company. Deco is often personalised in a range of visual and discursive ways. For instance, Deco and AOC form a working team during live question and answers sessions: “Ask us anything”, she writes, followed by two emojis representing a brown girl and a dog. While initially Ocasio-Cortez used the single pronoun “me”, this evolves into a collective “we”, appearing for the first time on April 15th. Deco’s role as a carer becomes

clear on April 2nd, in a live video in which she purposely calls the dog into scene, as if she needed company before facing the conversation. Her intervention goes as follows: “So hey everyone, I just wanna say hello, maybe have Deco pop in, you know, it’s a very stressful time” @AOC, 2 April.

While she starts the video in a very informal tone, addressing the audience as “hey y’all” and using such a high intensity of body movement that she almost spills the cup of coffee she is holding, by minute 2 she starts answering questions from people and she changes her attitude. In just two minutes, there is a change from a friend ethos, to a mother-like ethos and, finally, to a professional one. This is also common in Ada Colau’s case, since she alternates between her professional and her mothering ethos, including her tone of voice, her facial expressions (which soften) and the colours that she uses in the stories (which turn pastel).

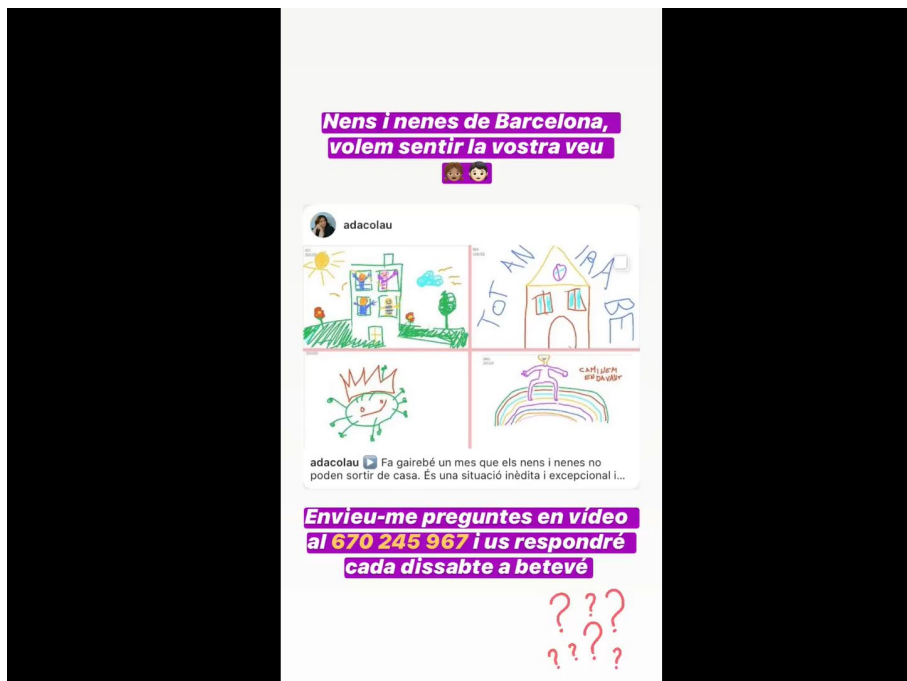


Ocasio-Cortez changes from working by herself to amusingly forming a team with her dog, Deco. @AOC, 1 April 2020, Instagram Story/ @AOC, 15 April 2020, Instagram Story/ Colau poses for the children in @adacolau, 18 April 2020, Instagram Story.

### **Pathos: Self-Representations of the Emotional Self**

The following lines will examine the ways in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Ada Colau (ACO) perform an emotional self-representation to be able to reach followers, and to establish common grounds with them. The data indicates that both leaders have used similar thematic strategies for constructing a shared affective space with citizens. The main strategy for performing an authentic, intimate relationship with followers consists of creating openness and transparency. Both leaders have created online spaces of questions and answers, conducted either live (AOC) or ongoing (ACO). Curiously, there are no instructions about the specific content of the questions, just an “ask us anything” (AOC) and “send your questions”, followed by what looks like her personal mobile number (ACO). The term “anything” stresses the extreme transparency and sincerity of AOC’s performed relationship with her followers. In both examples, the broad nature of the instructions results in blurring the boundaries between public and political topics of debate, and the most private and intimate space.

Home lockdown and social distancing measures require opening new channels of communication, and a second strategy consists precisely of being there for people and caring for others. Both leaders remind followers how important it is to check on each other, to catch up (AOC) and to tell people that we love them (ACO). The notion of mutual support versus individualism is often present in the stories and stresses the inclusive nature of left-wing populism. ACO's strategy of focusing the support on families in "horizontal" videos makes a direct appeal to a culture of caretaking, helping parents with children put up with the psychological stress of being locked home. "I realized that boys and girls have many questions and very good questions about such bizarre days we're living, locked at home" (@adacolau, 18 April 2020).



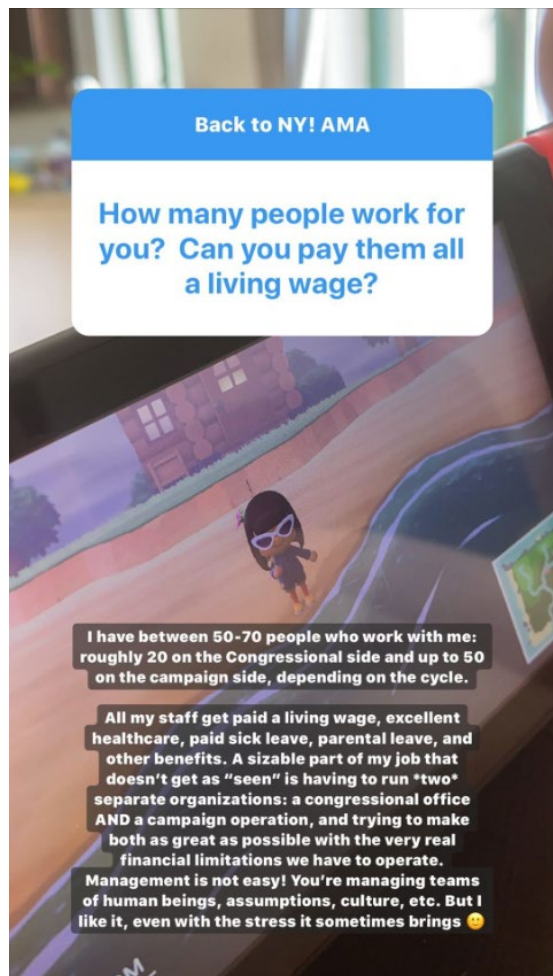
@adacolau, 8 April 2020, Instagram Story.

The carer ethos is present in a third strategy, that of preserving personal wellbeing and self-care in a moment in which increased work and collectively excruciating emotional situations can lead to exhaustion. It is not by chance that both female leaders, both collective (citizens) and personal (kids, dog) caretakers, often present themselves as being exhausted. This is both discursively and aesthetically performed through pictures lying in the couch (AOC) or directly in bed (bot AOC and ACO). Self-care is exemplified in one of the stories in which Ocasio-Cortez asks her followers to do one thing for themselves and tag her. Inclusionary populism is evoked through the simplicity of the examples she provides: "Tag me when you do #onelittlething for yourself today. A cup of tea, a moment of silence, drawing a picture, doing your hair, putting on a nice outfit".

Opening up about their life during the early days of COVID-19 follows a fourth strategy, the acknowledgement of personal hardship, whether dogs or kids' tantrums, haters' harassment or just

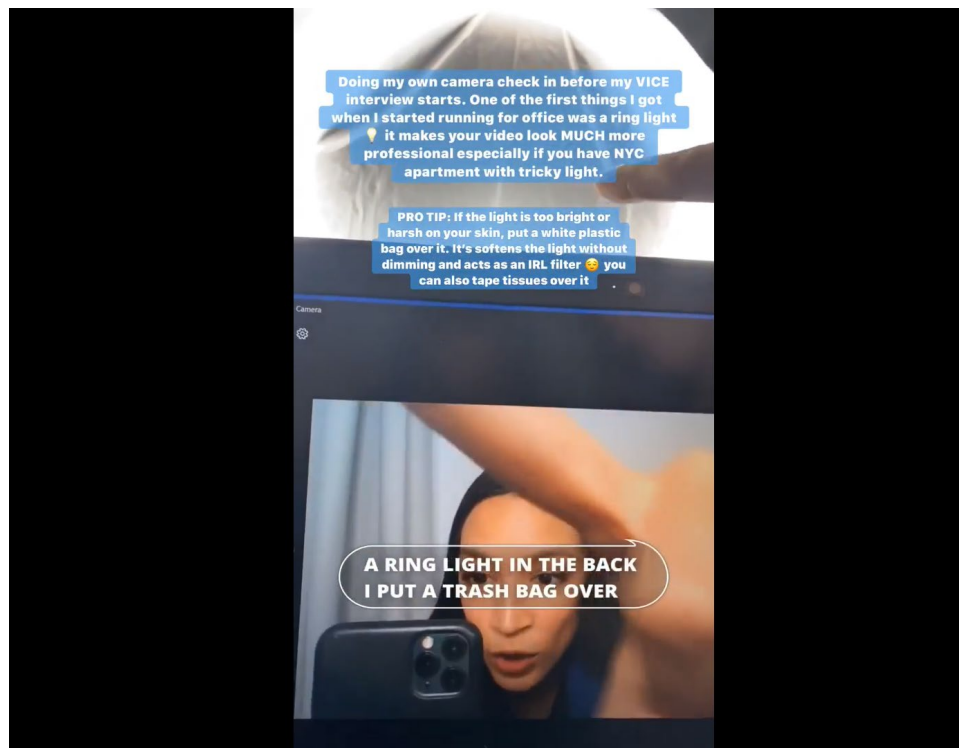
the emotional difficulties of their job. For instance, Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges that it is “emotionally difficult” to be the representative of the most COVID-impacted district in the USA, at that time (@AOC, 6 May 2020), and after a long morning of work acknowledges “going stir crazy” (@AOC, 29 April 2020) and needing to take a walk with her dog. Colau, on her side, shares a difficult family day in the early days of the quarantine and shares a to-do list that gathers some of the ideas that came up for managing stressful moments at home. By disclosing their personal struggles during the crisis, they also touch upon other people’s suffering in a very direct manner, even volunteering to distribute food for those in need (both AOC and ACO).

Performances of caregiving, wellbeing and mutual support play an important part in the construction of pathos, of emotional bonds with those undergoing difficult moments. However, there are other performances of pathos that serve for attenuating hardship. Mutual bonding also takes place in leaders’ positioning towards pleasure, and taste (fifth strategy). Both ACO and AOC show glimpses of modest living spaces and a preference for simple pleasures, such as being around family or in nature. However, the spontaneous nature of AOC’s stories (rather than the more edited side of Colau’s videos) means that she offers more cues about her preferences, including references to popular culture as a way of bonding with her followers around ordinary (rather than elitist) pleasures. Some examples are the disclosure of her and her partner’s Friday night routine (watching the reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*), or accompanying videos of her dog with songs that have ironical lyrics, such as Billie Eilish’s *Bad Guy* or *Bored in the house* from Ajay Stephens. The latter song goes: “Bored in the house, I just lay on the couch, this quarantine, is not for me” as the frame gets getting bigger and bigger ending with Deco sadly looking at camera, desperate and tender (@AOC, 4 April 2020). As an animal lover, she also poses playing *Animal Crossing* on Switch (@AOC, 15 April 2020).



@AOC, 17 May 2020, Instagram Story.

Finally, a relevant strategy for emotionally connecting with followers consists of creating virtual spaces of knowledge-sharing. This is two-fold, both professional (information about the virus, advances, measures) and personal (as experienced by users). On the professional side, both leaders construct a populist inclusionary discourse by which they carefully explain new measures of social support that are available to their communities in terms of free meals, rent moratoriums or unemployment benefits. On the personal side, Colau focuses on knowledge sharing with kids. That is why she asks children to “help them” document this strange situation by doing a collective diary of pictures, drawings, videos, and other creations. Since AOC spends significantly more time online with her followers, there is a range of everyday knowledge that is shared. For instance, she teaches followers how to make Margaritas (in reference to her working-class past as bartender, but also performing as a political outsider), or how to use a “trash bag” as a filter for better videos. The uses of informal language and simple, affordable tricks go in line with the inclusionary discourse of the left-wing politician, who poses as an ordinary person.



@AOC, 29 April 2020, Instagram Story.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez often performs a fast code switching between her different ethos. In the live video in which she teaches followers how to make a Margarita cocktail, she starts explaining the process of putting ice in a blender: “Anyways, I figured we’re gonna make a frozen Marg’. I’ll give you the recipe real quick” (@AOC, 4 April 2020). Around the second minute, she suddenly stops, reads a message from a follower who just got fired, and continues making the cocktail while talking about unemployment, getting fully immersed in her political self and forgetting about sharing the recipe altogether. This is one of the many examples in which switching from one ethos to another implies important emotional U-turns: from sharing personal joy, to sharing collective distress.



@AOC, 4 April 2020, live video.

Throughout the analysis, there is a sense that the initial efforts of both AOC and ACO for transmitting positivity to followers in times of crisis fades as weeks go by. This is in line with their impressions about the emotional hardships of being a politician, even more as women. The two faces of politics can be seen in the two posts below, one the first day after the Spanish announcement of a state of emergency, the second in late May:



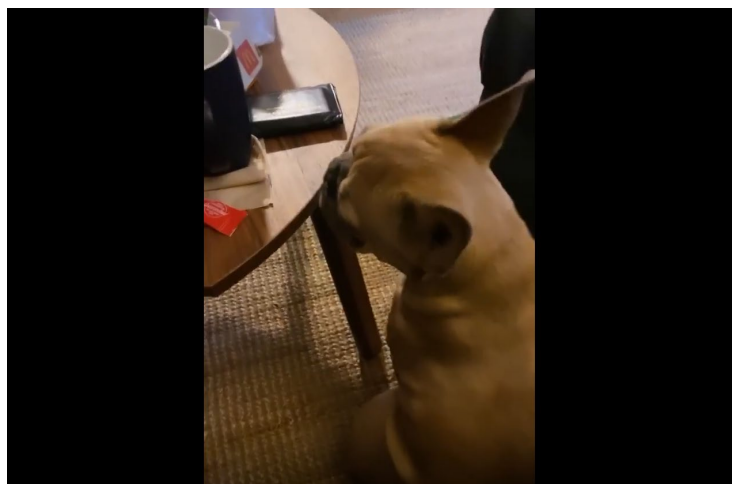
@adacolau, 12 March 2020 picture in her Instagram timeline/ @adacolau, 30 May 2020, picture in her Instagram timeline.

### Topos and Kairos: The Rhetoric of Place and Time

In this paper, topos refers to the place from which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau are talking. This is important because it indicates the degree to which they share their intimate space, both physical and psychological, and how much access they give followers to. Therefore, topos is understood not as a commonplace in argumentation, but as the rhetoric of place, as the

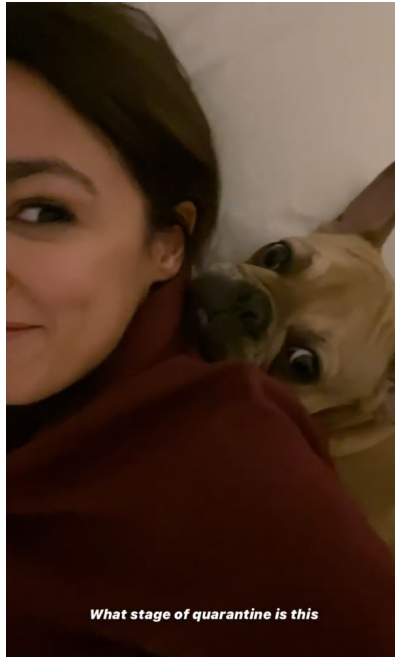
acknowledgement that the place from which we speak has ideological implications; in the way we send a message and the way it is decoded.

Ada Colau always poses in her house with a neutral background and presents herself on Instagram as “a normal person” who has not been changed by politics (@adacolau, 23 May 2020). In AOC’s case, normalcy appears through glimpses of what is shown yet backgrounded. Information is much richer in AOC’s videos, especially when the camera zooms in and out, or follows the moves of her dog, disclosing unplanned elements of her daily life. Some of these objects can tell us a great deal about AOC’s positioning towards taste, and her self-representation as an ordinary person. For instance, she makes a healthy (but not too healthy) lunch consisting of an improvised smoothie with fruits, vegetables, and canned orange juice. Looking into detail, we can see that the spinach she uses is organic (@AOC, 29 April 2020). However, the background of other videos also reveals that she has a sweet tooth and keeps butter cookies, Oreo cookies and even an empty McDonalds box around the house. Adding to spontaneity, her house often appears clean yet relatively messy, with wrinkled sheets, cushions out of place, unfolded blankets and forgotten empty mugs here and there.



@AOC, 4 April 2020, Instagram Story.

The most intimate place that both AOC and ACO show is their own bed. The disclosure of the bedroom and, more specifically, lying in bed, can be associated with the ultimate place of rest and comfort, but also of vulnerability. In AOC’s account, she shares a video of herself, sitting in bed inside the covers with Deco on her lap. While both leaders post images lying in bed, Colau’s picture, barefoot and wearing informal clothing, resting in bed, received harsh criticism in the Spanish mainstream and social media. This obliged her to make another post addressing the sexist jokes she was victim of, such as references to posing for a dating site or behaving as a teenager.



@AOC, 14 April, Instagram Story/ @adacolau, 3 May, Mother's Day, picture in her Instagram timeline/  
 @adacolau, 22 May 2020, picture in her Instagram timeline.

Finally, *kairos* appears as a particularly relevant rhetorical device that reveals both politicians' response to changing and unprecedented circumstances. The data reveals that the extent to which AOC and ACO post on their Instagram profile outside working hours is remarkable. We can trace that by looking at the date and time in which stories were published, but also thanks to temporal references in the posts. For instance, AOC tells followers that she is joining them live because she is not making dinner that night, thus freeing personal time for talking with them (@AOC, 21 April

2020). Spare time, night-time and weekends are particularly active moments in which rest and relax are shared with constituents. This contributes to a two-fold image: that of professional politicians but also of ubiquitous friends, ready to offer company and support at any time.

## Conclusion

Populist leaders' performances of authentic intimate moments with their followers are important for the field of media and political communication because they help us understand the dangers of downgrading politics to popularity contests, but also the advantages of engaging those who feel disenfranchised by traditional politics (Khrosraviniuk 2018, Salmela and von Scheve 2018). Therefore, this paper has shown that left-wing populism can be potentially inclusionary, claiming marginalised groups' right to political participation and informing new ways of fostering inclusiveness, strengthening trust, and enhancing citizen's interest in politics through social media (Mouffe 2018, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

The data reveals that politicians' posts of intimate moments at home revolve around the notions of intimate and emotional connections with their publics (an element of people-centrism), and anti-elitism. By presenting themselves as hardworking politicians that are part of the normal, ordinary people, both Ocasio-Cortez and Colau construct their intimate selves as approachable and unpretentious. The performances of authenticity during COVID-19 lockdown enable them to emotionally connect with their followers from home through the notions of comfort, safety, and familiarity, which are played against the uncertainty of the unknown. Being home is seen as a unique opportunity for having a glimpse of politicians' most intimate space and the way in which they construct their professional and personal ethos in order to appear more authentic, how they connect emotionally to their followers (pathos), and, finally, how the rhetoric of place (topos) and time (kairos) are disclosed in the personal material that they share with followers.

The main findings conclude that Ocasio-Cortez and Colau perform a complex code-switching between their political and personal self, always aligned with progressive and inclusionary ideas. Examples of these are the idea of not leaving anybody behind, but also their performances of taste, with references to simple habits and popular (rather than elitist) culture. This is achieved through an emphasis on social injustice, but also through a mother-like ethos that emphasises collective caretaking in the face of individualism during the crisis. This goes in line with their efforts to emotionally connect with their followers in times of social distancing through online question and answer sections, the creation of spaces for sharing personal experiences and emotions. This is something that can only be achieved through a (performed) sincere approach to their own personal lives: their joyful moments of rest, their spare time, but also an acknowledgement of their own vulnerabilities in excruciating personal and professional moments. Finally, the data reveals that sharing their personal space and time with their followers enables the leaders to perform a sense of virtual ubiquity that makes them more accessible to citizens and, especially, of those who might need their care.

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