What’s in the Rest of the Populist Playbook?
The Populist Communication Strategy in Comparative Perspective

Abstract: Populism has captured the world’s attention, especially during election campaigns where the starkness of populist messages come into sharper focus. Despite the prevalence of this kind of rhetoric, we still do not know how populist communication is adopted relative to other available discursive frames. In addressing this lacuna, I evaluate two research questions: how is the populist communication strategy used relative to other strategies, and what does the “rest” of the populist communication strategy look like? To assess these questions, I measure different elements of communication strategies (including both content and style) in the Tweets of national-level candidates in five countries: Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Italy, and Spain (N=1,577). Looking at communication strategies in this way points us away from easy stereotypes of populist style as always negative and instead opens up the possibility that populists use a mix of ideas and styles in their overall strategy.

Keywords: Populism, Social Media, Campaign Communication, Communication Style
Introduction

Effective communication is a requirement for political actors to succeed. Whether their goal is office-seeking, vote-seeking, or policy-seeking, politicians have to communicate in a way that appeals to potential voters to accomplish their goals. The widespread accessibility of social media has made communicating a more critical task than ever, particularly during elections (Dimitrova et al. 2014; Gil de Zúñiga 2012; Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014). Although there are many different ways of communicating available to politicians, populism has captured the world’s attention, especially during campaigns where the starkness of populist messages come into sharper focus.

Recent literature has shown that the way that populists communicate may help to explain their appeal (Bartels 2017; Hameleers et al. 2018; Hawkins et al. 2018). However, existing scholarship tends to evaluate political communication as either populist or not populist (Ernst et al. 2019; Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018; Mazzoleni and Braccia 2018). As a result, these studies do not give us a sense of what other kinds of messages (aka discursive frames) actors are using beyond populist ones and how this affects actors’ overall approach to communication. For example, Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) find that 51.9% of Podemos’s (Spain’s leftist populist party) Tweets use a populist frame—but what about the other 48.1%? We do not yet know what else populist actors are doing to try and accomplish their communication goals and how this compares to what non-populists are doing because our understanding is limited by viewing populist communication in isolation. Without a more complete understanding of populist actors’ complete rhetorical profile, we cannot fully understand their appeal with voters.

While most populism scholarship focuses either on what actors say (the ideas they communicate, Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011) or how they communicate (their rhetorical style, Braccia and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Mazzoleni...
and Bracciale 2018), this research is situated among a few recent studies that examine both
(Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2019) as a way to expand our understanding of what
populist communication entails. I refer to this combination as an actor’s communication
strategy.¹ This paper investigates two related questions in this broad agenda: how is the populist
communication strategy used relative to other ways of communicating, and what does the rest of
the populist communication strategy look like?

I anticipate that what populist actors say, the ideas that distinguish them from other
candidates, will carry over into their rhetorical style, particularly in the use of negative language
and attacking opponents. The core of the populist frame is a tension between elites and the
people (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), a tension that is inherently
negative. However, I also expect to find some common ground between populist and non-
populist actors when the former is engaging with alternative discursive frames more commonly
associated with liberal democracy or with campaigns more broadly. To test the ideological
aspect of these expectations, the paper focuses on the big picture way that candidates talk about
the relationship between the elites and the people, and with issues. To gauge how rhetorical style
diffs between candidates, the paper assesses the ways that candidates convey messages,
including their use of negative campaign tactics, the emotional content of their messages, and the
functions of their messages.

More concretely, these different aspects of communication are measured in a random
sample of the Tweets of eighteen national-level candidates who pass a 10% vote threshold in
Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Spain (N=1,577). Social media platforms like Twitter play

¹ There is no direct link between communication strategy and the view of populism in general as a political strategy
(see, e.g., Weyland 2001). Rather, “[populist] communication strategy” is synonymous with “[populist] communication.” I add “strategy” because I believe it offers greater conceptual clarity.
a central role in modern campaigns (Dimitrova et al. 2014; Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014). Twitter is generally viewed as the preferred platform of political and media elites, which has dual benefits of high visibility and widespread Twitter usage among politicians (Mazzoleni and Braccialie 2018). Scholars have also provided evidence that candidates set the media’s agenda with their posts (Enli 2017; Graham et al. 2014), offering additional incentives for candidates to utilize Twitter in their campaigns. Populist actors in particular are thought to benefit from this form of direct communication as it bypasses journalistic gatekeeping (Barr 2009; Gerbaudo 2018).

Unsurprisingly, the results reveal notable differences between the populist communication strategy and the strategies of non-populist actors in the sample. Aside from the obvious, that the populist actors in the sample use more populist frames than the non-populist actors, the former group also prioritizes issues of corruption in the cases examined—but not immigration. Stylistically, populist actors tend towards generalities rather than concrete policy proposals, use more negative language, and are more prone to attacking opponents. These results suggest that the ideas that populist actors espouse (which are typically the sole criterion to determine whether actors are populist or not) have downstream effects on the way that these actors communicate more broadly—the differences between populist and non-populist actors also pervade the way that the message is conveyed, affecting their overall communication strategy.

Populist actors are more than just their populist ideas, though—populist frames constitute a minority strategy (35-40%) for all but one candidate (Lega of Italy). This finding, in particular, underscores the importance of looking beyond the populist discursive frame at the “rest” of the populist communication strategy. When not “speaking populism,” the other seven populist actors
in this sample often behave similarly to ten non-populist actors: they typically prioritize some combination of technocratic and neutral discourse (though rarely pluralist discourse), and spend much of their time talking about the campaign and mobilizing supporters. These results leave us with a contradiction: on the one hand, populist actors do seem to have a unique communication strategy that includes both what they say and how they say it. On the other hand, this strategy makes up a minority of their communication. How can we reconcile this inconsistency?

Looking at communication strategies more broadly reveals more about the “rest” of the populist playbook. The findings suggest that there is a core communication strategy across candidates that revolves around encouraging motivation and enthusiasm as well as candidates' ability to solve society's problems. A typical communication strategy for these cases contains this core campaign component, plus a preferred discursive frame (a populist frame for populist candidates and a predominantly technocratic frame for non-populist candidates), plus individual variation for each candidate (Aalberg and Vreese 2017, 2). Observing communication strategies in this way points us away from easy stereotypes of populist style as always negative. Rather, the results suggest that populists use a mix of ideas and styles in their overall strategy, yet remain defined by their minority strategies of populist ideas and negative communication style given that these features sharply distinguish them from their mainstream counterparts.

**Theoretical Framework**

Recently, scholars have examined how and what candidates choose to convey on social media and what this information tells us about their broader strategies. The majority of these studies are aimed at identifying attributes of populist communication in particular. Ideologically, most scholars tend to view populism as the culmination of three core ideas: identification with the people, an antagonistic relationship with elites, and a third category that varies, but generally
entails ostracizing some outgroup (Bobba 2019; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Hawkins et al. 2018). Several scholars have identified the presence or absence of these core ideas in social media posts, particularly Facebook and Twitter (see, e.g., Bobba 2019; Bobba and Roncarolo 2018; Casero-Ripollés et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2017, 2019; Zulianello et al. 2018). These studies contextualize both how much populist content political actors use, while also identifying what kind of populist content they are using and how often.

These studies provide the baseline for how this paper approaches the first part of a candidate’s communication strategy: the ideas they promote in their online communication. Where my study diverges is in also classifying the non-populist ideas candidates use to give us a better sense of the “rest” of the populist communication strategy. By only examining populist content, scholars’ inferences are limited to just the populist or not-populist content an actor uses. The goal of this paper is to describe what this non-populist component looks like for populist actors.

The other major aspect of a communication strategy is the communication style. Recurring themes in the literature include negativity (Blassnig et al. 2019; Gerstlé and Nai 2019; Van Kessel and Castelein 2016; Waisbord and Amado 2017) and emotionality (Busby et al. 2018; Hameleers and Schmuck 2017; Rico et al. 2017). Other aspects of the populist style are murky. For example, Ernst et al. (2019) evaluate sociability as an element of style, while Bracciale and Martella (2017) evaluate four elements: stagecraft, register, topic, and function. Regardless of the exact operationalization of style, this paper abides by Ernst et al.’s (2019, 10) assertion that “populist ideology and style elements are considered inextricably intertwined, but scholars need to keep them analytically distinct and analyze them with separate empirical
measures.” This distinction enhances our understanding of the populist communication strategy while also leading to a more explicit empirical approach.

Scholars have advanced the discussion of the populist style considerably in recent years, expanding our understanding of what stylistic elements of populism are used most frequently and by whom. However, like studies focusing on the ideological content, the majority of these studies limit their analysis to the populist style. Studies such as Bracciale and Martella (2017) and Ernst et al. (2019) show us the intricacies of how populist communicate across different platforms and different party types. Where this paper diverges from these studies is in my analysis of the communication style of populists when they are not using stylistic attributes associated with the populist style—how else they communicate, and what this means for their overall communication strategies. To examine the communication style, I evaluate a message’s issue, function, emotionality (tone), and negative campaigning. In keeping with a communications-centered approach (rather than an actor-centered one), the message (Tweet) is the unit of analysis. The relationships between these concepts is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Concept Map

The hypotheses primarily test of how the populist communication strategy is used relative to other strategy. This approach provides a stronger theoretical backbone for what to expect from
each group of actors (populist and non-populist), before turning to the “rest” of the populist communication strategy in the results and discussion sections.

**Ideological Underpinnings**

I use “ideological underpinnings” broadly to indicate how candidates see the political world and their relationship to it. The two ways that I examine ideology (discursive frames and issues) reflect the way that the literature defines populism either in terms of the relationship between the people and the elites (Aslanidis 2015; Hawkins et al. 2018) or candidates’ stances on particular issues (for example, those who define populism according to its position on nativism, including Inglehart and Norris 2016 and Mudde 2007).

I start by evaluating the way that political actors view the relationship between the people and the elites. At its core, a frame is defined as “the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles a speaker uses to relay information” Chong and Druckman (2007a, 100). In this study, the frames in question conceive of the relationship between the people and the elites differently. I identify three substantive frames that have different conceptions of the people versus the elites: populism, pluralism, and technocracy (Akkerman et al. 2014; Caramani 2017). In this study, populism is defined as “a unique set of ideas, one that understands politics as a Manichean struggle between a reified will of the people and a conspiring elite” (Hawkins et al. 2018, 3).

Pluralism and technocracy were chosen as rival discursive frames because they view the relationship between the people and the elites differently than populism and are among the most common discursive frames in democracies today (Akkerman et al. 2014; Caramani 2017; Hawkins et al. 2012). Pluralism advocates for power to be shared among diverse interests (Akkerman et al. 2014, 1327; Caramani 2017, 62). Technocracy, meanwhile, combines

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2 Other conceptions of frames are possible, such as nationalism or liberal-conservatism. I chose this conception of a frame because it corresponds to a core definition of populism as a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2015).
conceptualizations of both technocracy and elitism\(^3\) to view the relationship between the people and the elites as one in which elites should be in charge of doing what is best for the people, not representing the “will of the people” as populism does. In other words, technocracy prioritizes the power of expertise (broadly defined) and the ability to deliver outcomes (Caramani 2017, 55 & 66). I also examine a neutral category, which refers to ambiguous language that does not contain enough information about the nature of the sovereign community to consider it as belonging to any discursive frame. In other words, it represents the absence of a frame.

We know from existing scholarship that, by definition, populists use more non-populist frames (Aslanidis 2015). But what about non-populists? I expect that populist actors, when not using populist discursive frames, will use technocratic and neutral frames, but less pluralistic ones due to an incompatibility with the compromise inherent in a pluralist worldview and the dualistic worldview of populism (H\(_1\)). I also anticipate that non-populists will rely on technocracy and pluralism in place of populism because these frames are regularly associated with liberal democracy (H\(_2\)), with the caveat that pluralism is likely to be less frequently used at this stage in the electoral process given the presumed vote-maximizing goals of actors at this stage (in contrast to the post-election phase where, at least in parliamentary systems, actors are often incentivized to seek coalitions to maximize their effect on policies).

Another critical barometer of how actors see the political world and how they prioritize that worldview above other is the issues or policies that an actor talks about most often. I employ twelve issue categories (Table ) that capture common topics that are central to political debates. They are adapted and simplified from Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) and overlap with Bracciale

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\(^3\) Existing studies do not utilize technocracy and elitism as separate categories. For example, Akkerman et al. (2014) measure elitism in surveys not only as a moralistic distinction between “the people” and the elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 152), a conception in line with elitism, but also as important business leaders or independent experts, which is in line with technocracy.
and Martella (2017) and Graham et al. (2014). Examples and descriptions are available in Appendix A.3.4

Table 1: Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Social policy</th>
<th>Culture, media, and sport</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Science, technology, the</td>
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<tr>
<td>environment, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terrorism, crime, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>insecurity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign affairs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption and</td>
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<tr>
<td>democratic regeneration</td>
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<td>Political strategy in</td>
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<tr>
<td>office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campaign organization and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>No subject/other</td>
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</table>

Existing literature suggests that populists often fixate on a few issues. Studies of right-wing populists, in particular, have affirmed the connection between populism and attitudes towards immigration (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2017; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013), even defining populism as a particular issue stance against immigrants (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Mudde 2007). Corruption is also widely mentioned, particularly on the left (Castanho Silva 2018; Ziller and Schübel 2015). Accordingly, I evaluate the expectation that populist candidates are more likely to focus on issues of immigration and corruption than non-populists (H3). I do not have strong expectations about the issues that non-populist actors will use more often given heterogeneity across actors, and consider this question better suited to an actor-by-actor analysis.

Rhetorical Style

Whereas actors’ ideological underpinnings express favorability to particular worldviews or issues, actors’ rhetorical style refers to how the candidates are conveying their ideas. I

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4 Appendices are located in a supplementary file: https://www.dropbox.com/s/143ovk1j2xwrxgy/Supplementary%20File_The%20Populist%20Communication%20Strategy.pdf?dl=0
evaluate style using three measures: functions, emotionality (tone), and negative campaigning. The Tweet’s function refers to what the speaker is trying to accomplish—the Tweet’s purpose. I utilize eight function categories, also adapted and simplified from Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017). Examples and descriptions are available in Appendix A.4.

Table 2: Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda and organization of political actions</th>
<th>Electoral program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management of political achievements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticizing opponents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and mobilization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal life, manners, or protocol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment or humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several scholars have suggested that the populist communication style uses simple, often vague language (Bischof and Senninger 2018; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018; Oliver and Rahn 2016), especially as it relates to core issue positions. I extend this logic to the Tweet’s function. I anticipate that non-populists will talk about their electoral program more than populists ($H_{4a}$), while purely campaign functions like agenda and organization of political actions and participation and mobilization will be similar across candidate types ($H_{4b}$). Although a simplification, the logic of my hypotheses is that campaign messages are conducive to simple, straightforward language, while issue positions are not.

Next, I measure emotionality by looking at the tone of a message—do candidates use predominantly positive, neutral, or negative language in a given message? I use tone as an approximation of emotionality based on the assumption that language is correlated with emotions. Examples are available in Appendix A.5. A vast body of literature has found that

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5 Electoral program is defined as when an actor talks about their future program proposals. The “electoral program” function differs from the issue category in that the latter identifies the topical theme (what does the Tweet talk about) while the former refers to what the perceived purpose is of the Tweet—in this case, it is to talk about the candidate’s electoral plans once in office, regardless of the particular content of those plans.
populists capitalize on negative emotions, especially fear or anger (Bobba 2019; Rico et al. 2017; Wirz 2018). Accordingly, I anticipate that populists will use more negative language and non-populists will use more positive/neutral language ($H_5$).

The final measure of style that I examine is negative campaigning. In line with Gerstlé and Nai (2019, 2), I view negative campaigning as the “extent competing candidates attack their rivals instead of promoting their own programme.” I measure negativity based on the criticizing opponents (a function category). I anticipate that populists will be more likely to criticize their opponents than non-populists ($H_6$) (Gerstlé and Nai 2019; Van Kessel and Castelein 2016).

**Research Design**

The hypotheses are evaluated using a random sample of the rhetoric for all candidates/parties that received at least 10% of the vote in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain, and Italy. Each case had at least one candidate that political observers commonly referred to as a “populist” actor in 2018 or early 2019. These cases represent understudied cases of populism, particularly in Europe, expanding our understanding of how populism is used across different contexts. Although these cases have notable differences, they vary in both the ratio of populist to non-populist messages that candidates used as well as the degree of electoral success that populist and non-populist candidates experienced. Twitter use in these countries is also similar, with 5-8% of each country’s population. Finally, these cases reflect regional diversity and balance on the number of candidates meeting the selection criteria (nine in each region).

While I see the differences between regions as a theoretical strength, I attempt to account for some of these differences by focusing on the candidates’ Tweets in Latin America and the

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6 Italy: 5.46% as of March 2018; Mexico: 19.45% in August 2018 (this number dropped precipitously post-election, and is at 7.47% as of August 2019); Brazil: 5.48% in October 2018; Colombia: 6.8% in June 2018; Spain: 6.2% in April 2019. Data from the country pages at [https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/](https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/).
parties’ Tweets in Europe. This decision reflects significantly different institutions that affect the way individuals cast votes. In Spain and Italy, both parliamentary systems, individuals cast votes for parties. In the Latin American countries with presidential systems, individuals vote directly for candidates. As a result, I expect that parties produce more campaign content in Europe, making parties a better comparison for Latin American candidates. A descriptive comparison of European party leaders’ and parties’ Twitter behavior supports this assumption. For example, Pedro Sánchez of PSOE Tweeted 6.8 times per day on average during the campaign versus PSOE’s average of 32.6 (Appendix D).

I classify who is and is not a populist according to four expert surveys (the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey, the Global Party Survey, and the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey) and one speech analysis database (the Global Populism Database). These datasets ensure external validity and adequate coverage of the candidates in this sample. Candidates are classified as “populist” if the majority of these datasets considered the candidates to be at least “somewhat populist” and “non-populist” otherwise, for a total of nine populist actors and nine non-populist ones (Table). Details are available in Appendix B. I go against existing data for Cs of Spain, who received one partial populist votes and two non-populist votes. I opt to include Cs as populist upon a qualitative examination of their Tweets that suggested populist tendencies. The sample contains 80 Tweets for each of the nine non-populist actors and 100 Tweets for each of the nine populist actors, randomly sampled

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7 Two parties did not meet the minimum number of Tweets. FI, and MS5. FI was sampled at 80 Tweets (the non-populist amount) as the existing classification information available at the time the study was conducted indicated that FI was not-populist. Since then, later datasets indicated that FI was considered a populist by a majority of indicators, thus they are coded as populist here. For FI, I included Tweets where the party re-Tweeted the party leader’s (Silvio Berlusconi) Tweets. Though this was not done for other cases, it is consistent with other parties who, instead of re-Tweeting leader’s Tweets (as FI did), simply use the same Tweet between candidate. MS5 is sampled at 77 Tweets total, representing their entire universe of Tweets during the campaign. I also collected separate Tweets from the party leader for a robustness check, which is why I did not combine the MS5 with Luigi Di Maio’s Tweets.
during the campaign for a total of N=1,577 Tweets. Re-Tweets are excluded from the analysis as they do not constitute rhetoric written by the candidate. In the table and subsequent figures, blue text indicates a populist candidate and black text indicates a non-populist candidate.

Table 3: Sampled Candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Candidate/Party</th>
<th>Vote Share</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COL</td>
<td>Duque (Democratic Center)</td>
<td>54.0% (2\textsuperscript{nd}); 39.1% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Petro (Progressivists Movement)</td>
<td>41.8% (2\textsuperscript{nd}); 25.1% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fajardo (Citizen Compromise)</td>
<td>23.7% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEX</td>
<td>López Obrador (AMLO) (Morena)</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anaya (PAN)</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meade (PRI)</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRZ</td>
<td>Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)</td>
<td>55.1% (2\textsuperscript{nd}); 46.0% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haddad (PT)\textsuperscript{10}</td>
<td>44.9% (2\textsuperscript{nd}); 29.3% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gomes (PDT)</td>
<td>12.5% (1\textsuperscript{st})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>M5S (leader: Luigi Di Maio)</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lega (leader: Matteo Salvini)</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PD (leader: Matteo Renzi)</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FI (leader: Silvio Berlusconi)</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESP</td>
<td>Podemos (leader: Pablo Iglesias)</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP (leader: Pablo Casado)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PSOE (leader: Pedro Sanchez)</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cs (leader: Albert Rivera)</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vox (leader: Santiago Abascal)</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{8} Official campaign periods are hard to pin down in many countries. I selected campaign dates that reflected the official kickoff of the campaign marked by the first major campaign event, and ended either the day before the election, or a few days before in certain cases that observe a few days of non-campaigning (aka “reflection periods”). The campaign periods covered in this analysis are: 1) Italy: 12/27/2017 (when Parliament was dissolved) – 3/3/2018; 2) Colombia: 3/11/2018 (when primaries were held) – 6/16/2018 (excluding the 1\textsuperscript{st} round election day, 5/27/2018); 3). Mexico: 3/30/2018 – 6/27/2018; 4) Brazil: 7/20/2018 (registration for parties’ candidates opened) – 10/27/2018 (excluding the 1\textsuperscript{st} round election day, 10/7/2018); 5) Spain: 2/15/2019 (snap elections were called) – 4/26/2019. Two candidates, Ciro Gomes of Brazil and Sergio Fajardo of Colombia did not make it to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} round; thus, their campaign period ended the day before the 1\textsuperscript{st} round election in these countries.

\textsuperscript{9} Additional candidate information is provided in Appendix C, which contains the Twitter output of these candidates, how they use Twitter interactively (in terms of hashtags, mentions, and links), and how the public responds to these candidates on Twitter (in terms of likes, re-tweets, and followers).

\textsuperscript{10} In Brazil, Fernando Haddad was not the official candidate of the PT party until 9/11/2018; prior to that date, Lula da Silva was the official candidate and Haddad was his running mate. Haddad became the official candidate when Lula was denied the ability to remain a candidate after the Supreme Electoral Court ruled against him on corruption charges. 13/50 Tweets in the Haddad sample take place before the Lula ruling, though Haddad was actively campaigning as Lula’s running mate prior to 9/11/2018, thus these Tweets are still included in the final sample.
Four research assistants (RAs) and the author coded the Tweets. Tweets were de-identified to mask the actor’s identity and party. The intercoder reliability for the sample, presented using Krippendorff’s alpha, ranges from .60 to .70.11

**Results**

I evaluate two possible ways that candidates’ communication strategies differ: their ideological content and communication style. Two graphs are presented per measure: a pooled analysis comparing the strategies of populist and non-populist candidates with p-values to indicate statistically significant group means, followed by a candidate-by-candidate breakdown to account for within-group heterogeneity.

**Ideological Underpinnings**

The first ideological aspect evaluated is the discursive frame. Consistent with extant literature, Figure shows a clear and statistically significant difference in the use of populist communication between candidate types. When not “speaking populism,” populist actors rely predominantly on neutral rhetoric followed by technocratic language, and lastly, pluralistic language (supporting H₁). Non-populist candidates use technocratic and, to a lesser extent, pluralistic frames more often than their populist counterparts (loosely supporting H₂). The two candidate types do not use neutral rhetoric at a significantly different rate.

*Figure 2: Discursive Frames by Candidate Type*

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11 Intercoder reliability information is presented in Appendix B.2. Additional information on the coding procedures are available in Appendix E.1.
Figure displays the percentage of discursive frames used by each candidate. Lega is the only actor in the sample to use predominantly populist messages. Most other populists use between 25-40%,\textsuperscript{12} which is a substantively important finding—while distinctive in their use of populist communication, populist candidates are not monolithic in their use of frames. This finding reiterates the need to consider what other frames these candidates are using—the “rest” of the populist communication strategy. Take AMLO for example. A typical populist Tweet for AMLO looks like, “The power mafia is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, it has not worked for them or the dirty war will work for them. Whatever they do, we do not stop growing...”\textsuperscript{13} However, AMLO uses considerably more neutral Tweets than populist ones. Another typical AMLO frame, this time a neutral one, looks quite different: “The people are happy and counting the days for the first of July. Look at the participation and enthusiasm in San Juan del Rio, Queretaro.”

\textsuperscript{12} Figure also calls into question whether FI should be classified as a populist. As a party, FI uses populism in only 6\% of their Tweets. In contrast, the other eight candidates that existing databases consider to be populist (including Cs) regularly use populist frames.

\textsuperscript{13} Where “typical” is determined based on the average number of likes a Tweet receives.
Next, I examine the issues that candidates talk about most often in their campaigns. 

*Figure* conditionally supports $H_3$: populists monopolize issues of corruption and immigration. However, a closer examination reveals that except for Lega, populists do not mention immigration often. This finding may be due in part to this issue lacking salience in Latin America and having only two right-wing populist actors in the sample. I also find that non-populists talk more about the economy, social policy, and culture/sport than populists. By and large, though, campaign organization is candidates’ go-to issue, accounting for 46% of populist and 47% of non-populist Tweets (consistent with Graham et al. 2014 and Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014). How candidates Tweet about their campaigns is virtually indistinguishable across the candidate types. Although candidate types differ on several key
issues, campaign environments serve as an equalizer in some ways and seem to form the core of nearly all candidates’ communication strategy when it comes to the ideas they promote.

Figure 4: Comparison of the Issues of Populists and Non-Populists

The candidate-by-candidate examination of issues in Figure shows how much Lega talks about immigration relative to other candidates. Even Vox, who is generally seen as taking a hard stance on immigration, only explicitly references immigration in 3% of their Tweets. Corruption, meanwhile, shows considerably more variation. MS5 stands out by mentioning corruption in over one-quarter of their Tweets, followed by Petro. This finding appears to be driven in part by populists’ tendency towards anti-elite messages. For example, the following MS5 Tweet about corruption also attacks another candidate: “Berlusconi paid the Cosa Nostra, let’s let the world know! Mr Berlusconi paid the mafia association 'Cosa Nostra', millions of Italians are really outraged by all this.”

14 When I exclude Lega from the sample, the difference between populists and non-populists regarding this issue does not attain statistical significance, supporting the contention that Lega is driving the immigration finding.
Non-populists also mention this issue semi-regularly, including Fajardo and Anaya, but tend to do so without directly criticizing opponents. Anaya for example, Tweets messages like “...I propose that the General and Anticorruption Prosecutor's Offices be autonomous and independent; that the general rule stops being that the corrupt one gets away with it and that now it is: the one who does it, pays it.” Unlike MS5’s Tweet, Anaya tends to focus on anti-corruption policies rather than accusing other elites of corrupt acts. On the remaining six issues, populists and non-populists do not differ significantly.

**Rhetorical Style**

To examine candidates’ style, I start with the function of a message. $H_{4a}$ expected that non-populists would talk about their electoral programs more than populists, a finding that is
supported in Figure 6. H_{4b} stated that the two candidate types would be similar regarding functions that were vague in nature, namely campaign agendas and participation/mobilization.

This hypothesis is only partially supported—there is a statistically significant difference between populists’ and non-populists’ use of the campaign agenda function, although it is worth pointing that the difference is not particularly meaningful. However, consistent with my expectation, both candidate types encourage participation and mobilization frequently, in about 30% of their Tweets. Like the issue campaign organization above, candidates’ use of the participation and mobilization function are virtually indistinguishable across candidate type.

The finding that non-populist candidates spend considerably more time discussing their electoral program is driven at least in part by Duque (62%) and Anaya (43%). In contrast, populist candidates like AMLO, Vox, MS5, Lega, and Petro discuss their electoral program in only 9-14% of their Tweets, providing a more substantive interpretation to H_{4a}. A notable
exception among populists is Podemos, who dedicates nearly one-third of their Tweets to their electoral program, again demonstrating heterogeneity within candidate types.

Figure 7: Function by Candidate/Party

In my evaluation of the emotionality or tone of candidate’s messages, I find support for $H_5$ in Error! Reference source not found.: populists are considerably more likely to use a negative tone than non-populists. At the same time, non-populist candidates are more likely to use both neutral and positive language compared to populists. Despite these differences, populist candidates use a predominantly negative tone in only one-third of their messages (consistent with Van Kessel and Castelein 2016). This finding is suggestive that a purely negative approach is not sustainable throughout an entire campaign—even though populists draw more on negative language than non-populists, they choose to balance it out with a majority of neutral and positive messages. A candidate-by-candidate approach offers additional insight into this finding.
Error! Reference source not found. presents the percentage of positive, neutral, and negative rhetoric that each candidate uses. While this finding is consistent with the conception that populists frequently incite negative emotions in particular (Bobba 2019; Rico et al. 2017; Wirz 2018), that turns out to be only part of the picture. Lega is the only actor in the sample to use a negative tone in the majority of their messages (63%). There is considerable variation between candidates, especially populist ones. Some populists like AMLO and Bolsonaro use more positive than negative language and use some of the most positive language in the sample. Others, like Podemos, Vox, and Cs use positive and negative language approximately equally. Finally, a third group (Lega, Petro, MS5) fit more closely with a narrow interpretation of $H_5$, using a negative tone in a majority of their Tweets. Although my findings demonstrate that populist candidates on average use more negative language than non-populist candidates, $H_5$ also points us away from resorting to easy stereotypes of the populist style as always negative.

Figure 9: Tone by Candidate/Party
The final stylistic element I examine is negative campaigning. The most direct manifestation of this concept is through the “criticizing opponents” function examined above. Figure above demonstrates that populists criticize their opponents more consistently than their non-populist counterparts, consistent with $H_6$. Of the eight functions I examine, populists criticize their opponents in nearly 33% of their Tweets, while non-populists do the same in only 14% of theirs. Figure above presents relatively clear candidate-by-candidate evidence of this pattern. The range varies from a low of 16% to 58%, Lega once again cementing itself as the most populist by this measure. Notably, a few non-populist candidates engage in routine attacks on the opposition, especially PP (25%). As with the ideological underpinnings of candidates’ messages, actors’ communication style highlights differences between candidate types as well as considerable intra-group heterogeneity: although there is a generalizable populist communication strategy, candidates utilize this strategy quite differently.
Conclusions

Citizens have elected populists into power in countries as far-ranging as the United States, Mexico, and Brazil, to Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Greece, to name a few. Throughout these campaigns, and in populist communication more broadly, it is well-established that populist candidates have a distinctive way of communicating. However, we are still expanding our understanding of the populist communication strategy and how this marks populists as different than other candidates, particularly during electoral campaigns and on social media. To assess candidates’ communication strategies, this paper considers the content of candidates’ messages (ideas) and the way that candidates convey their messages (style). This study contributes to our understanding of the populist communication strategy by examining two questions: what characterizes the populist communication strategy, and what does this characterization tell us about the populist communication strategy relative to other discursive strategies?

The results reveal stark differences in the way that populist and non-populist actors communicate. Whereas populist actors unsurprisingly favor populist discursive frames, non-populists draw on the other frames, chiefly technocracy and neutral ones. Actors also differ in the issues they prioritize. For example, populists are more likely to talk about corruption, while non-populists are more likely to talk about the economy, social policy, and cultural issues. Similarly, there are substantive differences in how actors convey their messages, particularly the amount of negative language that they use and how often they attack the opposition. At the same time, populists’ use of negative language occurs in only one-third of their Tweets on average. These qualifying findings are suggestive that our view of populist communication, if limited to
ideas alone, is incomplete: how actors convey their ideas is also critical to advance our understanding of actors’ overall communication strategies.

When populist candidates are not employing the ideas or style that make up the populist communication strategy, they often do what non-populist candidates do—spread messages of encouragement to support their candidacy and provide reasons why they are the best option to fix society’s ills. In other words, even though populist candidates have a predominant worldview about the people versus the elites, use more negative language, and attack elites more, they also mix and match ideas and styles to form their overall communication strategy. As a result, while there are notable similarities among the populist candidates especially, each candidate has a unique strategy that is only partially generalizable. Candidates stand out for different reasons—Lega, for being the most negative and most “populist,” but also candidates like AMLO and Bolsonaro for utilizing a large number of positive messages in addition to negative ones. Overall, these findings suggest that communications strategies cannot rely entirely on negative messaging that criticizes opponents—candidates have to offer hope for the future and show that they will solve problems.

**Discussion**

There are, of course, limitations inherent in these analyses. Chief among them is the scope of the sample: with eight populist actors, I cannot generalize to a wider populist communication strategy beyond the cases and actors examined here. However, I see theoretical promise in the implications of this study. Despite the differences across regions, countries, actors, political leanings, and electoral results (populists were elected into power in Mexico, Brazil, and Italy, but not in Spain or Colombia), I find discernable patterns that support the broader populist literature, which finds that the ideas (and, in this case, style) of populism travel
across cases (see, e.g., Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018). More concretely, the conception of populism as a set of ideas or as a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2015; Hawkins et al. 2018) seems to find merit in these data, to which these results further suggest that such ideas also affect how an actor communicates (affirming scholars such as Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

The same conclusion is true for the non-populist actors. With a larger sample size, it would be possible to generalize among specific party families or party status (such as incumbent versus challenger parties), but I refrain from making widespread generalizations about the “non-populist communication strategy” due to obvious variation that cannot be exploited fully with the data at hand. While the primary theoretical contribution of this research is in encouraging scholars to add specificity to what “non-populist” communication looks like, future research could investigate a more complete picture of what these other communication strategies might look like—for example, what does a pluralistic or technocratic communication strategy entail, and are such strategies effective in generating support for [non-populist] actors? While this sample does not contain sufficient cases to address these questions, it is theoretically relevant as a potential way to bolster or at least understand liberal democracy as it confronts ongoing challenges from populism and other polarizing worldviews.
References


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