Abstract: Worldwide, people are supporting populist candidates who promise to upend “politics as usual.” But despite what we know about the power of populist communication, we still do not know how powerful it is when compared to other available discursive frames. In particular, we lack evidence on how individuals respond to populist content across contexts, particularly in online settings, which have become increasingly important to the spread of political ideas.

This paper compares the populist discursive frame to alternative frames including pluralism, technocracy, and neutral discourse. I argue that campaign messages containing populism will generate more engagement on Twitter due to their narrative structure, which I claim resonates more in the contexts examined. To test this argument, I collected social media data capturing the campaign rhetoric of 18 candidates (populist and non-populist) across 5 cases: Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Italy, and Spain (N=1,577). I find that citizens on Twitter engage with components of the populist discursive frame more than other evaluated frames. I analyze this result further by examining a theoretical mechanism derived from populism’s narrative structure, negative valence. I find that negativity partially explain populism’s appeal, while populists’ perceived credibility does not have a significant effect, suggesting that it is the content of populist messages driving the results.

Key words: Populism, Online Engagement, Social Media, Campaign Rhetoric
Populism has attracted considerable attention as a phenomenon that can corrode democratic institutions, curb the rule of law, and centralize executive power (Galston 2018; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Puddington and Roylance 2017). Yet despite recent electoral victories in countries like the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, Hungary, and Poland (to name a few), we know relatively little about how receptive individuals are to the content of populist messages (i.e., populist frames), especially across contexts, candidates, and communication platforms. There is ample reason to expect that populist frames affect individuals’ attitudes and behaviors, as several experimental (Bos et al. 2019; Busby et al. 2019; Hameleers et al. 2017; Hameleers and Schmuck 2017; Wirz 2018) and non-experimental studies (Bobba 2019; Bobba and Roncarolo 2018) have shown. Yet despite what we learned from these studies about the power of populist communication, we still do not know how powerful it is when compared to other available discursive frames.

To address this gap, I investigate whether individuals engage with populist communication more or less than three alternative discursive frames commonly found in liberal democracies: pluralism, technocracy, and neutral rhetoric.\(^1\) I test this question using social network sites (SNSs)—communication platforms that play a central role in modern campaigns (Dimitrova et al. 2014; Gil de Zúñiga 2012; Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014). Unlike traditional forms of communication, SNSs include opportunities for communicative behavior by the audience who can not only listen to candidates’ messages, but also actively register their approval by liking a message and/or retweeting it—actions that I refer to as online engagement.

While existing scholarship examines either elites’ SNS use (Bright et al. 2017; Cameron et al. 2016) or individuals’ use (Bode and Dalrymple 2016; Lupu et al. 2019), we rarely look at their

\(^1\) These discursive frames reflect politicians’ understanding of the relationship between the people and the elites. Other conceptions of frames are possible, such as issue positions, but extend beyond the scope of the paper.
interaction—how individuals respond to candidates’ content in a real-world setting (though see Bobba 2019; Bobba and Roncarolo 2018 for exceptions). This is a missed opportunity given that SNSs come with built-in indicators of individual receptivity.

I argue that individuals are more likely to engage with populist messages compared to the alternative discursive frames based on the concept of resonance. Resonance represents how well an audience receives a frame (see, e.g., Snow and Benford 1988), and by extension, can be used as a baseline for whether or not individuals choose to engage with particular frames. I identify underlying theoretical aspects of the populist narrative that might resonate more than alternative frames and thus lead to higher engagement. I then use these underlying mechanisms to test two non-rival mechanisms that could help to explain the effectiveness of populist frames. First, and following from my theory on narrative structure, several scholars argue that populist messages rely heavily on negative emotions, which resonate with individuals and lead to more engagement (Rico et al. 2017; Wirz et al. 2018). An alternative explanation is that populist candidates are perceived as more credible because of certain character traits (rather than the content of their messages). For example, several scholars have pointed to populists’ “no holds barred” communication style (Barr 2009; Enli 2017; Enli and Rosenberg 2018).

I apply my theory to five national campaigns where at least one populist candidate ran in 2018 and 2019: Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Spain. I evaluate a random sample of Tweets, a prominent SNS that is favored by elites, for the eighteen candidates that pass a 10% vote threshold (N=1,577). I find that citizens on Twitter engage with populist frames more than pluralistic, technocratic, or neutral frames. The differences are substantively large—populism is between 20.9 and 29.9% more engaging depending on the measure of engagement and the discursive frame that populism is compared to. I find that negativity is partially responsible for
populism’s effectiveness (particularly for retweets), suggesting that negativity might act as a mediating factor in people’s reception of populist content. However, I find that the capacity for populist discourse to elicit engagement is not driven by whether the candidate is a populist or not. Rather, the power of populism lies in the content of its rhetoric.

The most important contribution of this research is that it moves the field towards a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of populist frames relative to other frames common in liberal democracies. While a growing number of studies define populism as a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2015; Hawkins et al. 2018; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017), thereby applying framing theory to the definition of populism, I advance our understanding of populism’s appeal by applying specific elements of framing theory to populism’s underlying narrative. In doing so, I also contribute empirically to studies of framing theory by identifying the strength of competing frames (i.e., framing effects) using actual candidate messages and individuals’ behavioral responses to those messages. I do so by leveraging underutilized measures of individuals’ engagement with political content on social media—likes and retweets—to evaluate the communication feedback loop between political actors and individual behavior on SNSs.

Theoretical Framework

To evaluate whether populist rhetoric provides a strategic advantage during campaigns, I situate populism within framing theory. The core claim of framing theory is intuitive: how messages are conveyed can alter how people engage with the message’s content (Nabi 2003). Chong and Druckman (2007a, 100) define a frame as “the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles a speaker uses to relay information.” In this study, I emphasize both the speaker and the listener. Thus, I define a frame as the meaning embedded into a message by a political actor in order to encourage the listener to interpret an event or situation from a particular
non-neutral perspective. Scholars have provided considerable evidence that the strategic use of frames affects individuals’ attitudes, preferences, and behaviors in the context of campaigns (see, e.g., Druckman et al. 2017; Klar et al. 2013).

More concretely, scholars have applied framing theory to the study of populism as a way to define populism, classify populist rhetoric, and isolate the effect of populist frames on attitudes and behaviors. One prominent perspective is that populism is a set of ideas (frames) that are present in discourse (Aslanidis 2015). Using this definition, scholars identify political actors who use populist rhetoric (populists) and candidates that do not (non-populists), generally assigning these actors a score that represents how populist they are (Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Scholars have built on this work by classifying the different kinds of populist frames in politicians’ communication and the frequency with which these frames are used (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2017; Cranmer 2011; Ernst et al. 2017). Several scholars have also experimentally tested the effects of particular populist frames to determine how different frames yield different outcomes. Such studies find that populist frames can change how individuals evaluate and engage with certain issues (Bos et al. 2019), their expression of populist and exclusionary attitudes (Hameleers and Schmuck 2017; see also Wirz 2018), and their vote choice (Busby et al. 2019; Hameleers et al. 2018), to name a few possible outcomes.

I build on these studies by evaluating how individuals engage with populist messages relative to other discursive frames, including pluralism, technocracy, and a neutral category. Existing studies demonstrate why this is a worthwhile pursuit: Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) find that 51.9% of Spain’s left-wing populist party’s (Podemos) Tweets use populist frames—but what about the other 48.1%? Without looking beyond a populist-or-not dichotomy of frames, we cannot accurately assess how powerful populist rhetoric is. These alternative discursive frames
provide different conceptualizations about the relationship between the people and the elites. This conceptualization of rhetoric mirrors the field’s growing convergence on populism representing a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2015), in particular, “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 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 conceptualizations of both technocracy and elitism 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.

Applying Framing Theory to the Populist Narrative

Previous work on framing resonance offers a blueprint for understanding how different discursive frames affect online engagement. A frame resonates when the message “strikes a responsive chord” with the target audience (Snow and Benford 1988, 198) or when a speaker’s

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2 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.

3 See Appendix A.3 for examples of each discursive frame.
discourse “align[s] with the worldviews of their audiences” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 2). In other words, resonance represents the receipt of the frame by the target audience in a way that accomplishes the actor’s goals (in this case, engagement). I hypothesize that three underlying attributes of the populist discursive frame’s narrative increase the likelihood that these messages will resonate with individuals compared to the alternative discursive frames I examine.

First, in a seminal article on framing, Snow and Benford (1988) argue that frames are more likely to resonate and subsequently mobilize individuals when they accomplish three “core tasks:” diagnosing a problem and identifying its cause, prescribing a solution, and containing a “call to action.” Populism accomplishes Benford and Snow’s (1988) “core tasks” by offering a clear diagnosis of the problem (the elites are self-serving and corrupt, a sentiment that has been growing in global popularity), prognosis (return more power to “the people” or their representative, who have been mistreated), and motivation (elect me and I will change the status quo). Not only do populists accomplish this goal, but they do so in a simple and straightforward manner (see, e.g., Bischof and Senninger 2018; Bracciale and Martella 2017; and Oliver and Rahn 2016) that stands in contrast to the status quo. Given that each case in my sample contains a populist actor, “guilt by association” with the status quo is presupposed to be a common (and credible) narrative.

In contrast, pluralism and technocracy operate from a defensive position given that the existing status quo is, in most places, associated with some combination of technocracy and pluralism. As a result, their diagnoses and prognoses are less clear, limiting their ability to resonate. Neutral discourse, on the other hand, does not suffer from the status quo association but does lack a clear narrative structure—the solution (elect the candidate) is clear, but the problem is not. While elements of other discursive frames are attractive (everyone wants more and better
output, in line with the technocratic solution), alternative discursive frames lack the simple and credible narrative of populism inherent in the prognostic-diagnostic-motivational scheme.

The second narrative attribute that could lead to higher engagement stems from the diagnostic narrative element in Snow and Benford’s (1988) theory. McDonnell et al. (2017, 6) contend that frames will resonate if they can solve a “puzzle in action” for the audience with a relatively novel solution—one that is neither too familiar nor completely unheard of. Populism’s solution of returning power and representation to “the people” optimizes cognitive distance in that most mainstream candidates do not propose such a solution, yet the solution is familiar enough to people to be understood, thereby increasing its resonance. In contrast, the pluralistic and technocratic solutions are far more familiar, erring towards the obvious, and thus not able to strike a chord in the same way that the populist narrative does. In other words, technocracy and pluralism are again likely to suffer from guilt by association with the status quo, this time because the status quo is overly familiar.

A final element working for the populist discursive frame is that populism is salient—it is actively available in individuals’ consciousness (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2011). For populism to be successful, Busby et al. (2019, 2) argue that individuals “require a context that makes their populist disposition salient,” with Castanho Silva (2018) and Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) identifying failures of representation as necessary and in many cases sufficient to activate populist attitudes. Populism is assumed to be salient in the examined contexts as each country in the sample has at least one populist actor who attained at least 10% of the national vote share.

Based on these attributes, I suggest that populism’s underlying narrative is more resonant in the cases examined and thus is more likely to generate engagement than pluralism,
technocracy, and neutral rhetoric. Although difficult to test directly, these three aspects of populism’s narrative structure are possible to test by proxy through the concept of negative valence. While a simplification of populism’s overall narrative structure, negative emotions effectively capture populism’s narrative move to cut through the advantage of the status quo by portraying politics as simple and straightforward (underlying mechanism 1), in particular, blaming elites for failures of representation (underlying mechanism 2) in a climate that is sympathetic to the message (underlying mechanism 3). Scholars have consistently demonstrated a deep connection between populism and negativity (see, e.g., (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Gerstlé and Nai 2019; Rico et al. 2017), so much so that I argue that the essence of the populist narrative is inherently a negative worldview attacking elites. This expectation does not preclude positivity among populists; rather, it suggests that negativity towards elites forms the core of the populist message and that this core is primarily responsible for driving engagement.

**Research Design**

To assess my argument, I evaluate a random sample of the rhetoric for all actors that received at least 10% of the vote in five countries across Latin America and Europe: Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain, and Italy. The difference in political systems tests the growing consensus that the core of populist rhetoric is generalizable across countries (Hawkins et al. 2018)—and extends that logic to see whether citizens’ responses to that rhetoric also translate. Scholars such as Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2017) and Andreadis et al. (2018) have demonstrated that people across countries hold broadly similar populist attitudes, which can be activated by populist candidates (Hawkins et al. 2018). Given that each case has a populist actor, it stands to reason that people may engage similarly with populist messages across and within
these regions. If supported, this comparison would tell us more about the impact that the populist discursive frame has on online engagement across widely different contexts.

**Case Selection**

Each case had at least one candidate that political observers commonly referred to as a “populist” actor in 2018 or early 2019 (an imperfect way to account for global context insofar as the global climate is generally similar at a similar point in time). This criterion was particularly relevant given that salience plays a critical role in my theory. The subset of possible Latin American cases was small. Europe provided several potential cases. I selected Spain and Italy because these countries had both a left-wing and right-wing populist party. This attribute not only provides interesting within-case comparisons, it also contributes to our understanding of left-wing populism in Europe, a phenomenon that is comparatively understudied.

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). The sample contains 80 Tweets for each of the nine non-populist actors and 100 Tweets for each of

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4 The Tweets span the period of late December 2017 through April 2019 (16 months).
5 Costa Rica satisfied the populist criteria, but I opted not to include this case due to the particular combination of populism and evangelism that the populist candidate (Fabricio Alvarado) displayed, which I felt limited the generalizability of this case. El Salvador had an anti-elite candidate (Nayib Bukele), but existing accounts did not support this candidate as being populist.
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/).
the nine populist actors, randomly sampled during the campaign for a total of N=1,577 Tweets.

Retweets 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 actor and black text indicates a non-populist actor. As Table 1 shows, there is considerable variation in likes and retweets both across and within candidates.

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 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,

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7 Two parties did not meet the minimum number of Tweets: FI, and MS5. For FI, I included Tweets where the party retweeted the party leader’s (Silvio Berlusconi) Tweets. This approach is consistent with other parties who, instead of retweeting 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 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.

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. 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 1st round election day, 5/27/2018); 3). Mexico: 3/30/2018 – 6/27/2018; 4) Brazil: 7/20/2018 (registration for parties’ candidates opened) – 10/27/208 (excluding the 1st round election day, 10/7/2018); 4) 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 2nd round; thus, their campaign period ended the day before the 1st round election in these countries.

9 I classify who is and is not a populist according to four existing datasets: three expert surveys (the Chapel Hill Expert Survey—CHES, the Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey, and the Global Party Survey) and one based on speech analysis (the Global Populism Database). I classify candidates as “populist” if the majority of these datasets considered the candidates to be somewhat or very populist and “non-populist” otherwise. Full details are available in Appendix A.3. I go against the existing data in only one instance: FI of Italy. I do so because I evaluate FI as a party, not the party leader (Silvio Berlusconi) or as a coalition. While existing accounts generally view Berlusconi as populist, FI is not necessarily a populist party. Bobba and Roncarolo (2018), for example, classify only 8.1% of FI’s Tweets as populist (making the “not populist” designation more appropriate). I also include Cs of Spain as a populist party—this was the only actor in the sample that had an even split of populist/non-populist in the existing data sets. However, my data indicate that Cs falls on the lower end of populism, thus I opt to include them as populist.

10 I log-transformed both likes and retweets due to a positive skew towards lower values—50% of “likes” are below 800 with an average of 4,055 and a high value of 91,000, while the average number of retweets in the sample is approximately 1,500 despite a high value of 21,000.
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.2).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Actors Evaluated

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COL</td>
<td>Duque (Democratic Center)</td>
<td>54.0% (2nd)</td>
<td>1,290</td>
<td>1,539</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Petro (Progressivists Movement)</td>
<td>41.8% (2nd)</td>
<td>4,165</td>
<td>9,369</td>
<td>5,837</td>
<td>4,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fajardo (Citizen Compromise)</td>
<td>23.7% (1st)</td>
<td>1,697</td>
<td>1,731</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEX</td>
<td>López Obrador (AMLO) (Morena)</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>15,601</td>
<td>6,125</td>
<td>5,965</td>
<td>2,353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anaya (PAN)</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>2,686</td>
<td>3,252</td>
<td>1,161</td>
<td>1,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meade (PRI)</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>3,085</td>
<td>1,995</td>
<td>1,704</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRZ</td>
<td>Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)</td>
<td>55.1% (2nd)</td>
<td>26,809</td>
<td>22,042</td>
<td>6,200</td>
<td>5,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haddad (PT)</td>
<td>44.9% (2nd)</td>
<td>8,072</td>
<td>14,439</td>
<td>1,970</td>
<td>4,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gomes (PDT)</td>
<td>12.5% (1st)</td>
<td>1,931</td>
<td>2,470</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>M5S (Luigi Di Maio)</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lega (Matteo Salvini)</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PD (Matteo Renzi)</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FI (Silvio Berlusconi)</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESP</td>
<td>Podemos (Pablo Iglesias)</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP (Pablo Casado)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PSOE (Pedro Sanchez)</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cs (Albert Rivera)</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vox (Santiago Abascal)</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>2,510</td>
<td>1,809</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>869</td>
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</table>

Party institutionalization also differs significantly across these regions, with Europe having entrenched parties that persist across elections and, more importantly, across party

11 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 made prior to 9/11/2018, thus these Tweets are still included in the final sample.
leaders, suggesting that parties are an appropriate focal point. In comparison, Latin American parties are often formed as electoral vehicles for particular candidates. Latin American candidates also change parties more frequently, supporting a candidate-centric view for this region. I evaluate potential concerns with comparing party leaders in Latin America and parties in Europe in Appendices D.3-D.4.12

Communication Platform: Twitter

I chose Twitter over other SNSs because it is the preferred platform of elites, making it an ideal venue to study candidate rhetoric—every actor in the sample has a public Twitter account, a key feature compared to other SNSs. Twitter is widely used by politicians presumably because it can alter outcomes that political actors are interested in, such as engagement and participation (Boulianne 2015; Gil de Zúñiga 2012). Scholars have established that Tweets can set the media’s agenda with their posts (Enli 2017; Graham et al. 2014), as Donald Trump regularly demonstrates. Tweets also appear to be relatively consistent with actors’ overall communication strategies.”13

Existing studies also provide reasons to expect a relationship between candidate rhetoric and engagement. While Twitter users are not representative of the broader population, they (especially those consuming and producing political content) are disproportionately more likely to be active participants in politics (Bode and Dalrymple 2016; Lupu et al. 2019). This characteristic makes Twitter users a particularly appealing population to study because their

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12 I evaluate a subsample of European parties and their party leaders to assess whether my focus on European parties is appropriate. I find that parties and their leaders use broadly similar percentages of populist, pluralist, technocratic, and neutral rhetoric. When examining the subsample of four parties included in the broader sample versus their party leaders in Appendix D.4, the magnitude of populism’s engagement advantage is larger compared to pluralism, technocracy, and neutral rhetoric compared to the findings of the full model.

13 Candidates regularly Tweet summarized versions of their longer Facebook posts. I also find that the actors that regularly using populist communication on Twitter significantly overlap with the actors that experts identify as “populist,” including the four datasets outlined in footnote 10; see Appendix B.1 for additional information.
behavior has the potential to have an outsized influence on political outcomes.\textsuperscript{14} Several studies have shown that using Twitter for political purposes is a precursor to various forms of participation, such as vote choice or participation in protests (Boulianne 2015; Scherman et al. 2015; Skoric et al. 2016; Valenzuela et al. 2018). Twitter also promotes information diffusion and network mobilization (Barbera et al. 2015; Vaccari et al. 2015). Hosch-Dayican et al. (2016) find that some politically active Twitter users actively campaign on behalf of candidates (Hosch-Dayican et al. 2016), while Barbera et al. (2015, 6) argue that spreading messages about protests on Twitter is as “critical in increasing the reach of protest messages and generating online content at levels that are comparable to core participants” (see also Scherman et al. 2015 and Valenzuela et al. 2018).

\textit{DV: Online Engagement}

I evaluate likes and retweets as measures of online engagement. For individuals, online engagement reflects an enthusiastic response to particular messages. Unlike traditional forms of media, this register of enthusiasm or approval is direct—individuals are not passive consumers of content, but active participants in the political world who can instantly register their approval or disapproval with the click of a button. Online engagement also represents an endorsement of content by the individual—these actions occur in a public sphere, thus spreading the message to one’s network, which can have downstream consequences for information diffusion and network

\textsuperscript{14} Social media users in general and Twitter users specifically tend to be whiter, more educated, younger, and male (Lupu et al. 2019). In particular, scholars have started pointing out the differences between social media users who actively post/receive political content and those that use social media for other purposes, finding that the former group is more interested in politics, has higher political knowledge, and is more likely to vote than the overall population (Bode and Dalrymple 2016; see also Wojcik 2019). However, representativeness is not necessarily a concern unless one tries to generalize beyond the population of interest. A potentially greater threat to inference is if Twitter users are more likely to engage with populist messages than other kinds of messages, thus biasing the results. While more research is needed, previous research has shown that populist supporters tend to be less educated and more economically insecure (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Spruyt et al. 2016), in stark contrast to the traits that characterize Twitter users.
mobilization. According to Pew Research Center (Wojcik 2019), the most prolific Twitter users in the US have an average of 387 followers, which means each retweet or like can be seen by up to that many people. Magnified on a scale of tens of thousands of likes or retweets, a single well-crafted tweet could reach millions of people.

For elites, while it would be easy to assume that actors’ top priority is to turn online engagement into votes, not all actors have the same goals (or at the very least, they prioritize them differently). Some actors may be seeking votes, others media attention, and others a way to set the political agenda. Online engagement can also be an end goal in and of itself in that it offers a quantifiable measure of a Twitter account’s success. It is not uncommon for candidates in my sample to brag about their social media following, or even to directly appeal to users for likes and retweets. For example, Salvini tweeted “LET US SEE THE STRENGTH OF OUR COMMUNITY! PLEASE “LIKE” IT NOW AT THE NEW OFFICIAL PAGE.” Likes and retweets are a form of social media currency (the most common one being an actor’s number of followers)—currency that appears to be valued by political leaders for its own sake.

Methods for Analyzing Engagement

Four research assistants (RAs) and the author coded the Tweets. Tweets were de-identified to mask the actor’s identity and party. In some cases, the RAs needed to view the media attached to the Tweet to accurately code it, thus exposing the candidate’s identity. Media that met this standard include threads or consecutive Tweets (Graham et al. 2014), short videos, news articles, links to longer posts, and infographics.15

I utilize OLS regression to evaluate the relationship between discursive frames and online engagement. The dependent variables are the logged number of likes and retweets, respectively.

15 About 1/3 of the Tweets in this sample contained relevant media that may have (though did not necessarily) revealed the speaker’s identity.
received by each Tweet (the unit of analysis). I include candidate fixed effects to control for idiosyncratic differences between actors. Additionally, I account for several features of a Tweet that could affect engagement. In line with previous studies, I incorporate dichotomous variables for whether a Tweet contains hashtags, mentions (use of the “@” referencing another user), and links to additional content (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018; Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014). I expect the presence of these interactive components to increase engagement because they encourage participants to view additional content.

**Results**

Accounting for the oversample of populist candidates through weighting, the sample contains 19% populist, 11% pluralist, 33% technocratic, and 36% neutral frames. Figure 1 ranks each candidate in terms of the percentage of Tweets that are classified as populist while also indicating the percentages of pluralist, technocratic, and neutral frames. Figure 1 dispels the notion that populist actors exclusively or even primarily employ populist rhetoric, highlighting the need to focus on the other discursive frames that actors draw from. Besides Lega, no other actor uses a majority of populist frames—even actors who are seen as quintessential populists such as Podemos, MS5, and AMLO use only 30-36% populist frames. The latter two candidates actually use more neutral frames than populist ones. Additionally, these results provide minimal evidence of a populist “zeitgeist” phenomenon where non-populist candidates jump on the populist rhetoric bandwagon (Mudde 2004; see also Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). While there

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16 See Appendix B for details on candidate fixed effects. The findings are also robust to hierarchical linear model clustered at the candidate level with random slopes and random intercepts (Appendix D.1). With more cases, a hierarchical model with Tweets nested in candidates nested in countries would be appropriate, but given the small N of these bin sizes, such a model would not be reliable. I also evaluate country fixed effects instead of candidate fixed effects (Appendix C.1.C).
is some cross-over, non-populist candidates use few populist frames compared to their populist counterparts.

With few exceptions, populists on Twitter use fewer pluralistic and technocratic messages than non-populists ($p < .01$ each). The range of pluralistic messages is 1-17% for populists and 5-28% for non-populists. Meanwhile, non-populists like Duque and PD use a majority of technocratic frames. Duque, in particular, frequently referenced his issue proposals, a typical example of a technocratic Tweet. While there is considerable variation between candidates, the data reveal notable differences between populists and non-populists.

![Figure 1: Type of Rhetoric Used by Candidates/Parties](image)

Table 2 provides conditional support for the theoretical claim of this paper, that the use of populist frames generates more engagement compared to other discursive frames. Populism
represents the base category, so negative coefficients indicate less engagement compared to populist frames. In the pooled model, a pluralist message is between 26.6% and 29.5% less engaging than a populist message, a technocratic message is 23.6% to 25.2% less engaging, and a neutral message is 21.3% to 29.5% less engaging. Contrary to expectations, the use of @ (mentions) and media links are associated with lower levels of engagement, while the use of hashtags is not statistically significant. However, there are interesting differences across cases.

Table 2: OLS regression of Retweets and Likes on Discursive frames Relative to Populism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discursive frames (Populism as base)</th>
<th>Full Model</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likes Retweets</td>
<td>Likes Retweets</td>
<td>Likes Retweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralism</td>
<td>-0.31***  -0.35***</td>
<td>-0.50***  -0.45***</td>
<td>-0.04  -0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.09)</td>
<td>(0.13)   (0.13)</td>
<td>(0.14)   (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-26.6%]  [-29.5%]</td>
<td>[-39.3%]  [-36.2%]</td>
<td>[-3.9%]  [-13.9%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technocracy</td>
<td>-0.27***  -0.29***</td>
<td>-0.45***  -0.36***</td>
<td>-0.12  -0.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)   (0.07)</td>
<td>(0.11)   (0.11)</td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-23.6%]  [-25.2%]</td>
<td>[-36.2%]  [-30.2%]</td>
<td>[-1.1%]  [-19.7%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>-0.24***  -0.35***</td>
<td>-0.22**  -0.29***</td>
<td>-0.24**  -0.38***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)   (0.07)</td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.11)</td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-21.3%]  [-29.5%]</td>
<td>[-19.7%]  [-25.2%]</td>
<td>[-21.3%]  [-31.6%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>Mentions</td>
<td>Hashtags</td>
<td>Media Link</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.21***  -0.30***</td>
<td>0.06  0.04</td>
<td>-0.36***  -0.24***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)   (0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)   (0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)   (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-24.7%]  [-30.5%]</td>
<td>[0.25]  [0.39]</td>
<td>[-12.1%]  [-24.3%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.27***  -0.37***</td>
<td>-0.51***  -0.42***</td>
<td>-0.15*  -0.24***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)   (0.09)</td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.10)</td>
<td>(0.08)   (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-24.7%]  [-30.5%]</td>
<td>[-12.1%]  [-38.1%]</td>
<td>[-11.2%]  [-24.3%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.06  0.04</td>
<td>-0.43***  -0.34***</td>
<td>-0.18*  -0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)   (0.06)</td>
<td>(0.07)   (0.08)</td>
<td>(0.10)   (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-24.7%]  [-30.5%]</td>
<td>[-12.1%]  [-38.1%]</td>
<td>[-11.2%]  [-24.3%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.11***  9.09***</td>
<td>10.21***  9.18***</td>
<td>5.92***  5.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)   (0.11)</td>
<td>(0.13)   (0.14)</td>
<td>(0.17)   (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[90.0%]  [87.4%]</td>
<td>[96.4%]  [90.2%]</td>
<td>[90.0%]  [87.4%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,576  1,576</td>
<td>780  780</td>
<td>796  796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.80  0.80</td>
<td>0.62  0.65</td>
<td>0.67  0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Fixed effects are included but not presented. Full model results are available in Appendix C. Relative magnitudes are presented in brackets and are calculated using the formula 100[e^β - 1] to interpret the logged dependent variable.
Most obviously, the Latin American cases more closely approximate the pooled model. A country-by-country analysis (Appendices C.1.A and C.1.B) reveals that Colombia and Mexico adhere most closely to the main model, while Brazil only displays an advantage for populism over technocracy, and only for retweets. This finding could be attributable to Bolsonaro’s unique strategy, mixing both religion and pro-military sentiment in a blend of right-wing populism, which is historically less common in the region. It may be that for Bolsonaro, these other kinds of content are more engaging than populism—they are more novel than populism is in this particular case. Meanwhile, Petro and AMLO are both left-wing populists, which has tended to be more common among populists in the region. They also use more populist frames—Petro doubles the percentage of populist frames that Bolsonaro uses in the sample.

The European cases generally display similar tendencies to the pooled model, especially as it relates to the comparative advantage of populist rhetoric over neutral rhetoric, as well as technocratic rhetoric for retweets. A country-by-country analysis shows that populism is particularly engaging in Spain but not in Italy.17 This finding is interesting given that the two Italian populist parties, Lega and MS5, received a higher vote share than the two Spanish populist parties, Vox and Podemos (Table 1). One possible explanation for this contradiction is the age of populist parties matters—Vox was founded in 2013 (but did not become a significant electoral force until 2019, going from <.5% to 10% of the national vote) and Podemos in 2014. In contrast, Lega has been around since 1991 and MS5 since 2009. The longer the party is around, the more likely it is that the solution they propose becomes commonplace, which could

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17 Full model results by country are presented in Appendices C.1.A and C.1.B. Populism cannot be statistically distinguished from any alternative frames in Italy for likes and only from neutral rhetoric for retweets, while there is a significant effect in Spain for technocracy and neutral messages for both likes and retweets.
affect whether the message resonates with people. Further research is needed on the receptivity of populist content over time. There are also, of course, factors unique to each of these countries that are not captured in the analysis that could help to explain this result.

The most intriguing finding from the regional analysis is that populism does not show the same advantage over pluralistic language in Europe as it does in Latin America, raising the possibility that pluralism may be an effective counter to populist rhetoric in these countries. A convenient starting point for why pluralism performs better in Spain and Italy than it does in Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil is the different institutional configuration. It seems plausible that the “winner take all” system of the Latin American countries is less conducive to the inclusive message, at least during elections, and may even be disincentivizing. However, there are also other factors at work. A holistic view of the data suggests that the subject matter of pluralist Tweets also varies across regions. In the Latin American cases, tweets promoting respect and dignity for Mexicans (especially as it relates to US-Mexico relations) are among the most liked/reweeted pluralist messages, while in Colombia (especially in Fajardo’s campaign), incorporating the voices of young people is a recurring theme. Meanwhile, in Spain, the most engaging pluralist Tweets were those promoting a feminist worldview (dominated primarily by PSOE, as well as Podemos to a lesser extent). This cursory examination suggests that, along with institutional incentivization structures, certain narrative elements of pluralism may be more engaging than others, and that the use of these more engaging elements may explain why pluralism is more effective on competing with populism in certain contexts.18

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18 Appendix A.7 shows that Italian actors use pluralist messages far less than any other country—only 5.7% of the sample, compared to the average of 11% in the sample as a whole.
Mechanism: Emotive Content of the Frames

Returning to the main findings of the model, what is it about populist content that produces this association? My theory suggests that negative valence may act as a simple, though effective proxy for the underlying narrative structure of populism that, in turn, amplifies the engagement potential of populist messages. Except for Lega, a party that takes a strong stance against immigrants, Tweets that perform especially well seem to fall into two main non-rival categories. The first group is a negative attack on some group of elites, indicated in red text below. The second group is often more positive in tone, indicated in green text, referencing the people either implicitly, such as “we” or “you” or explicitly such as “people,” “citizens,” or “voters” of a particular country. The most engaging Tweets often do both simultaneously. For example, one of Petro’s most retweeted messages is where he calls out both the elites and the power of the people:

“The biggest coalition of my candidacy is with you. Today society has the great power of a single X [referring to the physical act of placing an “X” for the desired candidate on the ballot] on June 17, to send to hell all the political corruption in Colombia. This is the second opportunity of the races [marginalized individuals] sentenced to 100 years of loneliness of violence.” (Petro)

Similarly, take the following two highly liked messages:

“@[party official] has defended in Brussels what millions of Spaniards think. Soon we will have MEPs who will defend in the European Parliament our identity and sovereignty against the separatists, progressives, globalist bureaucrats and supremacists of the hembrismo.” (Vox)

“This is PODEMOS: Every minute of our work has been dedicated to defending the interests of those who do not have the telephone number of the bank or of the big construction companies.” (Podemos)

Both reference “the people” (explicitly for Vox, implicitly for Podemos) while also identifying who “the people” are pitted against, from Vox’s cocktail of offenders to Podemos’s mention of economic elites.

There are also several examples who exclusively use negative language. Consider the
following examples of highly liked/retweeted messages:\textsuperscript{19}

“The old politics is at sunset. Only the last pale rays remain that still delude the aficionados of leaders and smaller leaders of top-down, pyramidal structures. On 4 March, together, we can change the history of this country.” (MS5)

“We are not against the businessmen, we are against the ill-gotten wealth, the one that they obtain overnight, under the protection of public power, corrupt politicians and influence peddlers” (AMLO)

To test this observation further, I look at the valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of a given Tweet as a proxy for the evocation of emotions. Of the negative Tweets in the sample (N=391), populist messages account for 69.3%. A Wald test confirms that populism is distinguishable from all other world views in terms of negative language ($p<.01$). When I add an indicator for negative tone versus positive or neutral tone (Table 3), I find that negativity is largely, but not completely responsible for populism’s appeal, supporting existing literature (Bobba 2019; Rico et al. 2017; Wirz 2018). Populism is marginally more engaging than pluralistic and technocratic frames for likes ($p<.1$), but loses statistical significance for retweets.\textsuperscript{20} While more modest, the relative magnitudes for likes are still nontrivial: -18.8% (pluralism) and -15.4% (technocracy), both significant at $p<.1$.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Main Model with Negative Valence}
\begin{tabular}{llll}
\hline
 & Likes (Logged) & Retweets (Logged) \\
\hline
\textbf{Discursive frames (Populism as base)} & & & \\
Pluralism & -0.21* & -0.12 \\
 & (0.11) & (0.10) \\
Technocracy & -0.17* & -0.07 \\
 & (0.09) & (0.08) \\
Neutral & -0.12 & -0.10 \\
 & (0.09) & (0.08) \\
\textbf{Valence} & & & \\
Negative Tone (1=negative, 0=else) & 0.16** & 0.35*** \\
 & (0.08) & (0.07) \\
\textbf{Controls} & & & \\
Mentions & -0.21*** & -0.29*** \\
 & (0.06) & (0.06) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{19} For additional examples, see Appendix A.4.

\textsuperscript{20} Interestingly, individuals are more willing to retweet negative messages regardless of content, but more discerning when it comes to liking a message.
These findings offer preliminary (though inconclusive) evidence that the populist narrative is fundamentally negative and that this negativity is at least partially responsible for people’s engagement with populist content. More precisely, the core populist narrative—pitting the people against the elites—is particularly engaging, but solely attacking elites is sufficient to inspire engagement. It also implies that rhetoric, including both content and style, appears to be a credible driver of engagement.

**Alternative Explanation: Candidate Credibility/Authenticity**

Another possibility that is not directly tied to the populist narrative structure is that being a populist candidate confers credibility to an actor, leading to a boost in engagement not because of content, but because of shared characteristics across populist actors. This assumption is based on the idea that the direct way that populists communicate creates a bond with individuals (Barr 2009). Enli and Rosenberg (2018, 9) describe populists’ overall strategy as geared towards “construct[ing] authenticity,” which the authors associate with a strategic advantage.

To test this possibility empirically, I split the sample into populist and non-populist candidates to evaluate the relative magnitudes of using populist frames compared to other discursive frames in Table 4. I find that populist content is between 30.2% to 45.1% more

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21 The types of populist messages used by non-populists are fairly similar to those used by populists: they attack the opposition in a way that demonizes the elites and elevates the people, indicating that negativity is not unique to populist actors, but rather seems to be a product of populist content. Of the 68 populist frames in the sample used by non-populists, 48 were negative in tone (71%), compared to 80.6% for populists using populist frames.
engaging than other frames for non-populist actors compared to 18.9% to 29.5% for populist actors. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution: of the 355 populist frames, only 68 (19.7%) were used by non-populists. In Appendix C.3, I add an interaction term between candidate type and an indicator for populist frames (compared to all other frames combined) to the model presented in Figure 2. The results show that both types of candidates receive a boost when using a populist message, underscoring the results in Table 4.

**Table 4: Relative Magnitudes Compared to a Populist Frame**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Pluralism</th>
<th>Technocracy</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pooled sample (N=1,577) (as shown in Figure 2)</td>
<td>-26.9*** (likes)</td>
<td>-23.6***</td>
<td>-20.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-29.5*** (retweets)</td>
<td>-25.2***</td>
<td>-29.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-populist candidates only (N=800)</td>
<td>-45.1*** (likes)</td>
<td>-38.1***</td>
<td>-36.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-36.9%** (retweets)</td>
<td>-30.2%**</td>
<td>-22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populist candidates only (N=776)</td>
<td>-14.8% (likes)</td>
<td>-19.7%***</td>
<td>-22.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-16.2% (retweets)</td>
<td>-18.9%**</td>
<td>-29.5%***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1;
Indicates a statistically significant difference from the base category (populism)
Standard errors and full regression results are reported in Appendix C.5.

One possible explanation for this finding is that Twitter users engage more with a frame that is atypical for the candidate (Bail 2016). A more likely explanation for why we do not see more apparent differences between candidate types, and one that is consistent with my theoretical argument, is that the content of populist messages matters more for resonance (and by extension, engagement) than whether or not the actor is characterized as a populist candidate. However, additional research is needed.

**Discussion**

Although populism is highly prevalent in elections worldwide, we know little about how individuals respond to populist content during campaigns. To address this lacuna, I investigate whether the populist discursive frame is associated with higher online engagement compared to alternative discursive frames commonly used in liberal democracies, including pluralism,
technocracy, and neutral discourse. I evaluate these alternatives using novel measures of online engagement, likes and retweets, which offer an untapped way to measure mass media effects that impact both individual behaviors as well as the success of an actors’ social media campaign.

I theorize that populism is strategically advantageous for engagement based on framing theory. In particular, I hypothesize that the populist discursive frame resonates more than the alternative conceptualizations of the people versus the elites based on its narrative structure. I find tentative support for this claim. In a pooled model, populist content is associated with higher likes and retweets across all alternative discursive frames. I then turn to the data to identify and evaluate what it is about the populist message that is effective, finding that the narrative of the people versus the elites and negative attacks against elites, in particular, appear to be driving the findings, while an actor’s identity as a populist does not.

What do we learn about populism from these results? First, my findings highlight the generalizability of populist rhetoric across eighteen actors spanning five countries, two regions, and the left-right political spectrum. With the exception of Lega, actors tend to employ the populist discursive frame similarly across contexts. Thus, these results add to the growing body of scholarship that argues for a core conceptualization of populism as the people versus the elites rather than a left- or right-specific interpretation (see, e.g., Hawkins et al. 2018). Second, I illustrate the importance of context in determining which discursive frames are more effective in competing with populism. In Mexico, Colombia, and Spain, citizens seem particularly susceptible to populism, while in Brazil and Italy, populism displays only limited advantages and only for retweets. These results defy easy classification: populism performed well in Mexico (AMLO), but Bolsonaro also won in Brazil, where the model did not perform as well. In Europe, Spain showed a stronger associated advantage for populism, yet the populist parties in Italy
(Lega, MS5) received more votes than in Spain. While I suspect that these differences are partially attributable to the way that actors communicate, further research combining receptivity to content with a deeper contextual analysis would be insightful in explaining these differences.
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