

The comparative effectiveness of populist rhetoric in generating online engagement

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, voters are supporting populist candidates who promise to upend “politics as usual.” Despite all we know about populism, we still do not know how individuals respond to populist content during campaigns, particularly compared to other common content in liberal democracies. This paper adapts framing theory to an online electoral context to argue that populist campaign messages will generate more online engagement compared to three alternative conceptions of the relationship between the people and the elites: pluralism, technocracy, and neutral messages. The paper adapts Snow and Benford’s seminal 1988 theory of resonance to studies of populist communication and assess whether populism resonates more with online social media users. An original dataset using the campaign Tweets of 22 national-level actors across five countries is used to test the theory: Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Italy, and Spain (N = 1777). The findings suggest that citizens on Twitter engage with populism more than its alternatives in certain contexts.

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). Despite 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 potential voters are to the *content* of populist messages (i.e., populist frames) during the period that determines these victories: campaigns. There is 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 populist communication, we still do not know if populism resonates more with individuals compared to other available discursive frames in campaign settings.

To address this gap, I investigate whether populist campaign communication is more or less engaging than three alternative discursive frames commonly found in liberal democracies: pluralism, technocracy, and neutral rhetoric.¹ I integrate Snow and Benford’s (1988) seminal theory of resonance into studies of populist communication to argue that individuals are likely to engage with populist messages than

the alternatives investigated in this paper. Resonance represents how an audience receives and responds to a frame. By extension, resonance can be used as a baseline for whether or not individuals engage with particular campaign messages. Snow and Benford’s (1988) theory suggests that messages containing a prognosis, diagnosis, and call to action are especially likely to resonate with people. I hypothesize that, when combined with a favorable context (an upcoming election with a populist actor), the populist narrative is likely to resonate more than alternative narratives and thus lead to higher engagement.

I test this applied theory of resonance 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 react by liking a message and/or sharing 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’ SNS use (Bode and Dalrymple 2016; Lupu et al., 2019), we rarely look at their interaction—how individuals respond to candidates’ content in a real-world campaign setting (though see Bobba 2019; Bobba and Roncarolo 2018 for exceptions). This is a missed opportunity given that individual

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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.

receptivity to candidates' communication is of particular interest during electoral contests.

I apply Snow and Benford's (1988) 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 for twenty-two national-level actors that pass a 10% vote threshold ($N = 1777$). Twitter is a prominent SNS widely used by elites that has a particularly engaged citizenry, making it a useful platform for analysis. My results suggest that populist content resonates with individuals more than liberal alternatives in certain contexts. Citizens on Twitter in the Latin American cases engage with populist frames more than all three alternatives (pluralistic, technocratic, or neutral frames), while those in the European cases consistently engage with populist frames more than neutral frames only. The regional differences highlight a proverbial truism in political science: context is crucial. Populist messages flourish in particular contexts, but they are not universally more engaging. For establishment politicians, this is an encouraging sign that could level the rhetorical playing field.

This paper offers two empirical contributions. First, I provide a method of measuring populism in social media posts that can evaluate not just populism but two conceptual opposites: pluralism and technocracy, as well as a neutral category. The method is based on a quantitative text analysis procedure, holistic grading, that is both flexible and mitigates bias among coders. Second, I contribute to framing theory studies by identifying a new way to measure 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 during electoral campaigns.

1. Theoretical framework

A definitional quagmire has plagued the study of populism: populism has been defined as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde 2004), a political strategy (Weyland 2001), a political style (Canovan 1999; Moffitt and Tormey 2014), and a discursive frame (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins et al., 2018), among others. I draw on the latter conceptualization and view populism from the lens of political communication as a set of ideas (frames) present in discourse (Aslanidis 2015, 11). In particular, I rely on the definition of populism 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).

There is growing support for measuring populist ideas in discourse (Aslanidis 2015; Hawkins et al., 2018; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Pauwels 2011). For example, 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 (Castanho Silva, 2018; Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011) or the extent to which populism is prevalent in a text (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). Others classify the different kinds of populist ideas in communication and the frequency with which these ideas are used (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017; Cranmer 2011; Ernst et al., 2017). While these works differ in their particular research aims and subsequent operationalization, from the text as a whole to individual words, they are all communication-based, examining text as the unit of analysis rather than the actor.

There are several alternatives available, even within the communications approach. For example, some scholars prioritize the stylistic attributes of populist communication rather than the presence or absence of ideas (see, e.g., Moffitt and Tormey 2014). This approach is not incompatible with a discursive frame approach. Rather, it emphasizes the actor more prominently than the ideas, though some scholars have bridged this divide to consider both (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al., 2019). Another approach is strictly actor-centered, relying

on expert opinions to determine how populist actors and parties are (see, e.g., Meijers and Zaslove 2020, as well as prominent databases such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Global Party Survey, and Populist and Political Party Expert Survey). This paper aims to evaluate whether populist communication is comparatively engaging; thus, a definition and operationalization grounded in communication is an appropriate conceptual strategy.

To operationalize populism as ideas present in discourse, I situate it 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 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). 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; Wirz 2018), and their vote choice (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018), to name a few possible outcomes.

1.1. Hypotheses

Political communication theories offer a blueprint for understanding how different kinds of campaign communication affect online engagement. In particular, previous work on resonance helps us understand when a message "strikes a responsive chord" with the target audience (Snow and Benford 1988, 198) or when a speaker's 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 populism is more likely to be associated with higher engagement than pluralism, technocracy, and neutral rhetoric in electoral campaigns with a credible, non-incumbent populist actor who opposes the status quo (H_1). These alternatives represent discursive frames that are present in political communication that oppose key ideas of populism (Akkerman et al., 2014; Caramani, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2012), specifically the homogeneity of "the people" (pluralism) and anti-elitism (technocracy).

For populism to be successful at the polls, 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. A campaign context where populist messages are prevalent taints the status quo through "guilt by association" with those responsible for the failures of representation, making this both a common and credible narrative. According to this narrative, the guilty party is not just the incumbent and their party—it is all parties with similar belief systems (commonly referred to as "the establishment" or "the elites"). For instance, the following tweet highlights both the moralistic struggle between the people and the elites: "For the first time a candidate who represents the citizens and not the politicking that always stole dreams from Colombia, disputes the power. Let us not lose the historic opportunity for change and to send garbage to corruption."

Pluralism is the antithesis of homogeneity that populism inherently embraces in its conception of "the people." Pluralism advocates for power to be shared among diverse interests (Akkerman et al., 2014, 1327; Caramani, 2017, 62). A particular point of contention between populism and pluralism is the latter's embrace of minority rights and the

former's rejection of such rights in favor of a clear majority (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012). A tweet from the sample that embodies the pluralist sentiment is: "*We want an inclusive, non-exclusionary Spain, which treats its people well and seeks justice and well-being. A fair country that makes us proud to be Spanish.*"

Technocracy, meanwhile, combines conceptualizations of both technocracy and elitism² 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 is fundamentally opposed to anti-elitism as it prioritizes the power of expertise (broadly defined) and the ability of elites to deliver outcomes (Caramani, 2017, 55 & 66). A representative example of a technocratic tweet is: "*I share my editorial about the capacity and the level of dialogue that the next President of Mexico should have in his relations with the United States, at all levels.*" This tweet prioritizes capacity and experience, two tenants that elevate a technocrat above the "average" citizen (the key demographic of populism).

In a seminal article, 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. I hypothesize that populist messages overlap strongly with Snow and Benford's "core tasks" for frames to resonate (H_{1a}). Populism accomplishes Benford and Snow's (1988) core tasks by offering a clear diagnosis of the problem, prognosis, and motivation. Blaming elites for representation failures—the "core" narrative of the populist worldview—is inherently a diagnostic narrative maneuver. Similarly, the idea that "the people" are the true source of power and thus should have a greater say in politics is inherently a prognostic narrative maneuver. Populism's motivation is to elect someone that will change the status quo.

The populist narrative maps onto the core tasks of resonant frames in a compelling way given campaigns' maximally competitive environment. Focusing specifically on the diagnostic and prognostic narrative elements 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" resonates in that most mainstream candidates do not propose such a solution, yet the solution is familiar enough to be understood.

Compared to populism, pluralism and technocracy operate from a defensive position given that the existing status quo is, in most places, associated with some combination of these frames. Thus, their diagnoses and prognoses are less clear, limiting their ability to resonate. Pluralist tweets might suggest electing another pluralist candidate because the incumbent pluralist candidate somehow failed—but the new candidate is still a pluralist, diminishing the force of this narrative in these particular contexts. Meanwhile, technocracy suggests that the problem is the lack of experts (broadly defined) in office, the diagnosis to elect more experts, and the motivation to deliver particular output. These frames lack the ease with which populist ideas align with a clear prognosis and diagnosis due in part to their association with the status quo.

Furthermore, and in line with McDonnell et al.'s (2017) argument, the pluralistic and technocratic solutions are more familiar, erring towards the obvious, and thus not able to strike a chord in the same way the populist narrative does. In other words, technocracy and pluralism are again likely to suffer from guilt by association with the status quo,

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. I opt to label the category technocracy as it offers greater theoretical alignment with Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) and Caramani (2017).

this time because it is overly familiar. 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 and the context and delivery that advantage the populist message in these particular cases.

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. Tweets about the campaign, such as "*Saturday, we will land in Rio Branco/AC. Thank you for your presence*" fall under this category, as such messages do not specify any particular relationship between the people and the elites. Neutral discourse does not suffer from the status quo association by default but does lack a clear narrative structure—the motivation (elect the candidate) is clear, but the diagnosis and prognosis are not. In the most basic sense, the neutral discursive frame, as it is construed in this study, contains generalized campaign communication. To the extent that one can generalize a narrative structure from a catch-all category, the diagnosis might contain an attack on an individual based on personal attributes, while the prognosis would contain the reverse: a promotion of an individual based on personal attributes. Such tweets may also be purely motivational, containing a motivational message encouraging readers to vote.

2. Research design

To assess whether the populist narrative resonates with individuals more than these liberal democratic alternatives, I evaluate a random sample of the rhetoric for all national-level actors that received at least 10% of the vote in five countries across Latin America and Europe: Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain, and Italy. These cases test 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 country 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.

2.1. Coding procedures and reliability

Tweets were coded by four research assistants (RAs) and the author using a modified version of a psychology-based text analysis method called holistic grading. This method was used to develop a codebook for this project that instructs coders to consider the entirety of the text and to interpret the "spirit" of the tweet before making a coding decision. This method differs from dictionary methods such as those used by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) that focus on the presence of particular words or phrases as indicative of a more populist text. Holistic grading was chosen as an alternative to computer-automated textual analysis (CATA) as Hawkins and Castanho Silva (2018) find that holistic grading is superior in cases of "in-between" populism where texts are given a classification that goes beyond populist or not. Given the scope of this project in classifying not just populism, but pluralism, technocracy, and neutral messages across multiple contexts, human textual analysis offered a flexible approach that better captured the scope and aims of the study. The codebook for this study is based on the principles of the Global Populism Database holistic grading procedures (Hawkins et al., 2019) combined with the

theoretical influence of Caramani (2017), whose distinctions between pluralism, technocracy, and populism were used to adapt holistic grading to short social media posts.³

Tweets for all relevant actors for the entire campaign period were downloaded into .csv format using a web-scraping application. A random sample was then drawn using Excel's randomization formula. The tweets were translated and **de-identified**, which included masking the candidate's identity, party, and date.⁴ De-identification was carried out by the author or one trained multi-lingual RA. All tweets were then randomized across candidates but within countries for language purposes.⁵ The tweets were then uploaded into RedCap, a data management software, for coding.

Next, **independent classification by two RAs** took place within RedCap. RAs provided detailed explanations to justify their classification of each tweet along a number of dimensions. The most relevant coding dimension for this project is the discursive frame (populism, pluralism, technocracy, and neutral). I attempted to decrease bias and therefore enhance coding validity by anonymizing the substantive discursive frames. I described each frame in-depth in the codebook but labeled them as "Type A," "Type B," "Type C," and "Neutral." If RAs knew that the study focused on populism, they may have been more likely to code a text as populist, thus this procedure was designed to minimize RA bias by not explicitly prioritizing a particular frame.⁶ This practice to decrease coder bias departs from existing studies classifying populist communication wherein coders are explicitly evaluating whether a text is populist or not.

Because of the introduction of both new bias reduction procedures as

³ Additional details on the processes and procedures of coding populism on social media can be found at https://populism.byu.edu/App_Data/Publications/Twitter%20Methods%20Memo_v3.pdf and in the codebook in Appendix E.2.

⁴ Tweets were presented in their original language and in English using Google Translate. One RA fluently spoke all three languages in this study and assisted in correcting the Google translations.

⁵ 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. The inclusion of non-text in the coding decision is an important divergence from some studies (see, e.g., Bobba and Roncarolo 2018), and was made on the basis that non-text offer important contextual clues. Media that did not meet this standard (and were removed) include photos of the speaker or the crowd or images that duplicated the text of the Tweet. About 1/3 of the Tweets in this sample contained relevant media that may have (though did not necessarily) revealed the speaker's identity.

⁶ In the context of Tweets and other short social media communication, and following scholars of populism on social media, I view the presence of any singular populist idea to be indicative of the populist discursive view rather than requiring all three populist ideas to be present simultaneously, provided that the Tweet met the criteria for a populist frame (an antagonistic division, implied or explicit, between the glorified people and the villainous elites, as detailed in the codebook and reflective of the definition of populism used in this study). A growing body of evidence suggests this approach is appropriate and even necessary for short communication like Tweets. Engesser et al. (2017, 13) conclude that "It is a major finding of this study that populism manifested itself in a fragmented form on social media ... the [populist] elements were generally isolated from each other or clustered in pairs, at the most [out of 5 populist elements in this study]." Since this groundbreaking finding, several social media-focused studies have followed suit (see, e.g., Bobba 2019; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Casero-Ripolles et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Zulianello et al., 2018). Interested readers are directed to Appendix A.3, which provides examples of Tweets using at least one populist element but not necessarily all three. In the opinion of the author, these Tweets clearly indicate a populist discursive strategy and not an alternate strategy. A final point in support of this approach is the results of this study, which display high levels of external validity in classifying who is a populist candidate compared to both expert surveys and speeches (see Appendix B.1).

well as the incorporation of alternative discursive frames (not just populism, as is typical in comparable studies), the tweets were subject to **final review** by the author. I reviewed the two coding decisions and relied on a combination of the RAs' explanations, my training under the GPD project, and the theoretical studies of discursive frames on which this study is based to make the final coding determination. This procedure was valuable as the intercoder reliability for the sample, presented using Krippendorff's alpha, is 0.66 for the discursive frames. This likely indicates a tradeoff between anonymizing of the texts, thereby reducing coders' personal bias, and noise among the coders as they may have been able to use their personal knowledge of the actor or concepts to make a more accurate coding decision. This observation is especially true given the short nature of tweets. While on the low end of acceptability, there is reasonable grounds for confidence in the final results given that the final determination was *informed* by coders' decisions but ultimately based on my interpretation of the tweet.

2.2. Communication platform: twitter

Twitter was chosen over other SNSs because it is widely used among elites, making it a useful 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 demonstrated. Tweets also appear to be relatively consistent with actors' overall communication strategies.⁷

Existing studies also provide reason 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 behavior has the potential to have an outsized influence on political outcomes.⁸ 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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). 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.

online content at levels that are comparable to core participants” (see also Scherman et al., 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

2.3. DV: online engagement

I evaluate likes and retweets as measures of online engagement, metrics that offer a quantifiable measure of a Twitter account’s success. It is not uncommon for candidates to brag about their social media following or even to directly appeal to users for likes and retweets. For example, Salvini of Lega (IT) 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—a currency that appears to be valued by political leaders for its own sake. Further, the Twitter algorithm encourages a self-selection effect (some have referred to this as a “filter bubble,” see, e.g., Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017) in that Twitter users see the content that Twitter thinks they want to see. Thus, there is a reinforcing dynamic in that Twitter shows high-engagement tweets/accounts more often—in other words, engagement begets more engagement, catapulting messages onto new feeds and potentially reaching new supporters. Engagement can also be a means to an end—ideally the end of votes—but further research is needed on the relationship between engagement and vote choice.

For scholars, likes and retweets represent a behavioral measure of a framing effect—individuals act in response to a particular message. In a seminal piece on framing effects, Chong and Druckman (2007b) summarize the social movement literature’s take on framing effects as “a tactic used by political entrepreneurs to coordinate individuals around particular interpretations of their problems” (118). This explanation aligns with this paper’s focus on discursive frames, which present different interpretations of the problem of the relationship between the people and the elites. While framing effects are typically tested in experimental settings (see, e.g., Druckman 2007; Druckman et al., 2004), SNSs provide a new venue for campaign behavior, offering scholars the chance to measure framing effects in real-world campaign settings using new behavioral measures.

3. Methods for analyzing engagement

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, received by each tweet (the unit of analysis). I include candidate fixed effects to control for idiosyncratic differences between actors.⁹ Additionally, I account for several features of a Tweet that could affect engagement, including the issue that the tweet refers to using five issue categories that capture common topics that are central to political debates: campaign-related topics, the economy, social policy (things like education, culture, and sport), security and foreign affairs, and no subject/other. The topic categories are adapted and simplified from Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) and overlap with Bracciale and Martella (2017) and Graham et al. (2014).¹⁰ Campaign-related communication is used as the reference

⁹ See Appendix B.1 for details on candidate fixed effects versus the number of followers.

¹⁰ The issue categories are a simplified version of the 12-category representation that coders were trained on. Issues were simplified due to small bin sizes that pose power issues, particularly at the country level. See Appendix A.6 for more information.

category.

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 (Bobbà and Roncarolo 2018; Zamora Medina and Zurutuza Muñoz 2014).¹¹ I expect the presence of these interactive components to increase engagement because they encourage participants to view additional content. I also incorporate the length of the Tweet (measured as the number of characters) and the number of days until the election.

3.1. Case selection

This analysis focuses on Latin America and Europe because populist actors regularly compete in elections in these regions—populist actors are not localized to individual countries or parties—yet these actors generally promote narratives that staunchly oppose the status quo, in line with the paper’s theoretical premise. Within these regions, each country 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).¹² I also restrict the possible cases to those that have free and fair elections. A campaign environment that is not free or fair—such as ones that disproportionately benefit the incumbent, as in Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela, for example—might lead individuals to self-censor either due to social desirability bias or fear of retribution.

The subset of possible Latin American cases was small.¹³ In Europe, I selected Spain and Italy because these countries had both a left-wing and right-wing populist party, permitting a comparison of left-wing and right-wing populism within the same election (thereby holding other factors constant). Finally, as a practical matter, the RAs on this project fluently spoke these languages (Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese), yielding more accurate translations and greater confidence in the coding.

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.¹⁴ Finally, these cases reflect regional diversity and balance on the number of candidates meeting the selection criteria. Retweets are excluded from the analysis as they do not

¹¹ In a previous iteration of this paper, I also included a variable for the tone of the tweet (negative versus positive or neutral). The results indicated that some of populism’s appeal was due to negativity, however, the measure was highly correlated with populism. While it is likely that these concepts are closely related, a more nuanced measure is needed to assess the relationship between populism and negativity.

¹² I also restrict the cases to those in which the populist candidate is not the incumbent as a way to equalize the playing field and to separate the effect of populist rhetoric from the effect of the incumbency advantage. There were not many populists in power at this time in these regions, so this was largely a non-issue.

¹³ Costa Rica satisfied the populist criteria, but I opted not to include this country 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.

¹⁴ 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/>.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the actors evaluated.

Country	Actor	Vote Share	Avg Likes	Std. Dev.	Avg. Retweets	Std. Dev.
COL	Duque (Democratic Center)	54.0 % (2 nd)	1,290	1,539	675	905
	Petro (Progressivists Movement)	41.8% (2 nd);	4,165	9,369	5,837	4,246
	Fajardo (Citizen Compromise)	23.7% (1 st)	1,697	1,731	544	583
MEX	López Obrador (AMLO) (Morena)	53.2%	15,601	6,125	5,965	2,353
	Anaya (PAN)	22.3%	2,686	3,252	1,161	1,877
	Meade (PRI)	16.4%	3,085	1,995	1,704	875
BRZ	Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)	55.1% (2 nd)	26,809	22,042	6,200	5,483
	Haddad (PT) ²¹	44.9% (2 nd)	8,072	14,439	1,970	4,086
	Gomes (PDT)	12.5% (1 st)	1,931	2,470	351	502
IT	M5S	32.2%	549	305	317	194
	Luigi Di Maio (M5S party leader)		1,176	726	558	317
	Lega	17.7%	20	14	11	10
	PD	18.9%	332	262	164	134
	Matteo Renzi (PD party leader)		1,280	915	367	214
ESP	FI	13.9%	143	175	61	78
	Podemos	14.3%	567	575	377	339
	PP	16.7%	285	370	191	267
	PSOE	28.7%	203	198	149	122
	Pedro Sanchez (PSOE party leader)		1,133	1,001	500	419
	Cs	15.8%	178	240	127	142
	Vox	10.3%	2,510	1,809	1,243	869
	Santiago Abascal (Vox party leader)		5,137	3,528	2,519	1,579

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.¹⁵ As Table 1 shows, there is considerable variation in likes and retweets both across and within candidates.¹⁶

While I see the comparison between regions as a way to test the reach of my theory, I attempt to account for some of these differences by focusing primarily on the candidates' tweets in Latin America and 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 an appropriate 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 (ES) Tweeted 6.8 times per day on average during the campaign versus PSOE's average of 32.6 (Appendix D.3). However, I also include a subsample of European party leaders (four of the nine parties sampled) to account for the possibility that, like presidential systems, parliamentary systems have become increasingly personalized. As Table 1 demonstrates, the European four party leaders in the same garner higher likes and retweets on average compared to their parties, providing some evidence of personalization. I evaluate the comparison of party leaders in Latin America and parties in Europe in Appendices D.3-D.4.¹⁷ The sample contains 80 Tweets for each of the nine non-populist actors, 100 Tweets for each of the nine populist actors,¹⁸ and 50 Tweets for the subsample of European party leaders,

¹⁵ 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 B.2. I go against the existing data in only one instance: FI of Italy. I do so 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.

¹⁶ 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 4055 and a high value of 91,000, while the average number of retweets in the sample is approximately 1500 despite a high value of 21,000.

¹⁷ Using the subsample of European parties and their party leaders, I find that parties and their leaders use broadly similar percentages of populist, pluralist, technocratic, and neutral rhetoric and that their inclusion or exclusion from the sample does not change the conclusions I reach.

¹⁸ 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.

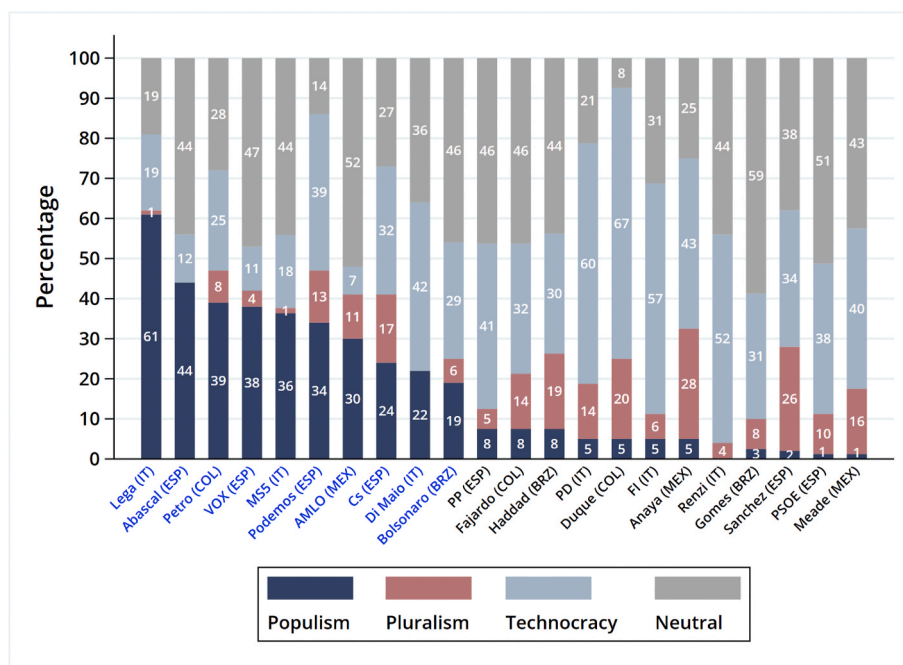


Fig. 1. Type of rhetoric used by candidates/parties.

randomly sampled during the campaign for a total of N = 1777 Tweets.^{19,20}

4. Results

Fig. 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. Fig. 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. While there is some cross-over, non-populist actors use far fewer populist frames compared to their populist counterparts, providing minimal evidence of a populist “zeitgeist” phenomenon (Mudde 2004; see also Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018).

Table 2 provides partial support for the theoretical claim of this paper, that the use of populist frames generates more engagement compared to other discursive frames (H₁). Populism represents the base category, so negative coefficients indicate less engagement compared to populist frames. In the pooled model, a pluralist message is between

24.4% and 29.5% less engaging than a populist message, a technocratic message is 20.5% less engaging, and a neutral message is 19.7%–27.4% less engaging. However, there are sharp regional differences that call for context-specific caveats in how comparatively engaging populism is.

Candidate fixed effects are included but not presented.²¹ 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 as a percentage difference compared to the base category, populism.

Most obviously, the Latin American cases display a stronger association between populism and engagement that better aligns with the theory of populism as more engaging than all other discursive frames considered compared to the European cases. Populism also does not show the same advantage over pluralistic language in the European cases as it does in Latin American ones, raising the possibility that pluralism may be an effective counter to populist rhetoric among Twitter users in these particular countries. A convenient—though likely not complete—explanation is the different institutional configurations. It seems plausible that the “winner take all” electoral 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/retweeted 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

¹⁹ 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) – 10/27/2018 (excluding the 1st 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 2nd round; thus, their campaign period ended the day before the 1st round election in these countries.

²⁰ All tweets for the entire campaign period were downloaded at one time for each candidate after the campaign period concluded. The sample was taken in two stages (without replacement).

²¹ Appendix D.1 replaces candidate fixed effects with country fixed effects plus a menagerie of controls on actors’ Twitter behavior and government-opposition dynamics. The results show that candidate FE are more conservative—in the country FE model, all alternative discursive frames for both regions are negative and statistically significant.

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

	Full Model		Latin America		Europe	
	Likes	Retweets	Likes	Retweets	Likes	Retweets
Discursive frames (Populism as base)						
Pluralism	−0.30*** (0.09)	−0.28*** (0.09)	−0.48*** (0.13)	−0.42*** (0.13)	−0.02 (0.13)	−0.12 (0.11)
Technocracy	[−25.9%] −0.23*** (0.07) [−20.5%]	[−24.4%] −0.23*** (0.07) [−20.5%]	[−38.1%] −0.41*** (0.11) [−33.6%]	[−34.3%] −0.32*** (0.12) [−27.4%]	[−2.0%] −0.11 (0.09) [−10.4%]	[−11.3%] −0.18** (0.08) [−16.5%]
Neutral	−0.32*** (0.07) [−27.4%]	−0.22*** (0.07) [−19.7%]	−0.22** (0.11) [−19.7%]	−0.26* (0.11) [−22.9%]	−0.23** (0.09) [−20.5%]	−0.36*** (0.08) [−30.2%]
Topic (campaign topics as base)						
Economy	0.00 (0.06)	−0.08 (0.06)	−0.24** (0.12)	−0.13 (0.12)	−0.19* (0.11)	−0.14 (0.09)
Social Policy	−0.21* (0.11)	−0.17 (0.11)	−0.09 (0.10)	−0.10 (0.10)	−0.17* (0.09)	−0.14* (0.08)
Security & Foreign Affairs	0.00 (0.06)	−0.08 (0.06)	−0.14 (0.09)	−0.04 (0.09)	−0.09 (0.09)	−0.01 (0.08)
No subject/other	−0.21* (0.11)	−0.17 (0.11)	−0.29* (0.17)	−0.40** (0.18)	−0.16 (0.15)	−0.14 (0.13)
Controls						
Mentions	−0.34*** (0.05)	−0.28*** (0.06)	−0.27*** (0.09)	−0.35*** (0.09)	−0.27*** (0.07)	−0.32*** (0.06)
Hashtags	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.57*** (0.09)	−0.47*** (0.10)	0.26*** (0.07)	0.22*** (0.06)
Media Link	−0.20*** (0.05)	−0.33*** (0.06)	−0.46*** (0.07)	−0.36*** (0.08)	−0.12 (0.09)	0.03 (0.07)
Tweet Length	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
No. of Days until Election	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01*** (0.00)	−0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Constant	8.78*** (0.14)	9.79*** (0.15)	10.38*** (0.18)	9.29*** (0.19)	5.46*** (0.19)	5.16*** (0.17)
Observations	1777	1777	780	780	997	997
R-squared	0.80	0.80	0.63	0.66	0.74	0.77

Standard errors in parentheses.

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

more engaging than others and that the use of these more engaging elements may explain why pluralism is more effective in competing with populism in certain contexts.

There are also intriguing regional differences in how individuals respond to the topic and features of a Tweet. Table 2 illustrates that, among the issue categories considered in the analysis, tweets about the campaign (the reference category) tend to be associated with higher engagement, although many issues do not attain statistical significance at conventional levels. In terms of features of a tweet, while the use of mentions (@) is negative (contrary to expectations), the similarities seem to end there. Hashtags are positively associated with engagement in Europe but negatively so in Latin America. Media links are associated with lower levels of engagement, but not in Europe. These findings raise questions about how campaign communication is perceived, both in substance and in form, across regions and political systems.

5. Conclusions

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 framing effects that have the potential to 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 populist discursive frames resonate more than the alternative conceptualizations of the people versus the elites based on populism's narrative structure. While caution is warranted in the interpretation of these findings given the statistical limitations of the sample, I find conditional support for this claim among some of the Internet's most politically active citizens.

What is it about populist content that produces this association? My theory suggests that messages with certain narrative elements, namely

those that are diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational (Snow and Benford 1988) amplify the engagement potential of populist messages (H_{1a}). Except for Lega, a party that takes a strong stance against immigrants, a qualitative exploration of the data suggests that Tweets that generate the most engagement seem to support the theory. The first group (denoted in red text below) is an attack on some group of elites (a diagnostic message), indicated in red text below. The second group (denoted in green text) references "the people" as a means to invoking a solution (a prognostic message) either implicitly, such as "we" or "you" or explicitly such as "people," "citizens," or "voters" of a particular country. Some of the most engaging tweets satisfy both these criteria while also containing a "call to action" (a motivating message). For example, in one of Petro's most retweeted messages, he calls out both the elites and the power of the people while encouraging them to vote in order to make this change possible:

Similarly, the following two highly liked messages 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, thereby containing two out of three of Snow and Benford's core tasks.

There are also several examples with high engagement that rely exclusively on the diagnostic element of attacking the elites, as the following examples illustrate:

These tweets suggest a larger phenomenon in the populist literature: that the core populist narrative—pitting the people against the elites (containing both diagnostic and prognostic narrative elements)—is particularly engaging, but that solely attacking elites (diagnostic only) is sufficient to inspire engagement on Twitter. It also echoes the quantitative findings from this paper, that rhetoric appears to be a credible driver of engagement.

6. Discussion

My findings highlight the generalizability of populist rhetoric on Twitter across twenty-two actors spanning five countries, two regions, and the left-right political spectrum present in this sample. With the exception of Lega (IT), the actors in this sample tend to populism

“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)

“@[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)

“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)

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). Empirically, this paper contributes a new method for measuring populist discourse, as well as its conceptual opposites, on one communication platform central to modern campaigns: Twitter (though the method could easily be applied to other SNSs, such as Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp). Measuring populism on social media offers scholars several advantages, including a higher N (particularly compared to speeches or manifestos), the potential for automated coding methods, and the ability to leverage natural features of social media receptivity such as likes and shares.

Future studies may not only overcome some of the empirical limitations of this study, chiefly generalizability (both in communication platforms and countries) and sample size; they may also expand into new time periods beyond the campaign and explore other attributes of social media communication that affect a message. Experimental studies evaluating individuals' reactions to social media posts and how those reactions shift attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the context of populism, would be an informative addition to existing literature. Another useful line of inquiry is evaluating the mechanisms behind populism's reception on social media—for instance, what role do the actors themselves play as opposed to the message, and what traits of messages, beyond those explored here, facilitate more or less engagement? As both populism and social media cement themselves in modern campaigns, there are ample opportunities to broaden our understanding of how, when, and why individuals respond to particular forms of communication and their impact on electoral politics.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102359>.

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