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Research Article



When “Following” the Leader Inspires Action: Individuals’ Receptivity to Discursive Frame Elements on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

How political actors convey information—that is, the discursive frames they use—can alter individuals’ attitudes, preferences, and behaviors, especially during campaigns. Although scholars have shown that discursive frames using populist rhetoric evoke particularly strong reactions, we do not yet know how the individual elements that make up the populist frame, like anti-elitism or pro-people, fare relative to other ways of seeing the political world or what kinds of messages engage individuals beyond populist ones. In this paper, I evaluate the effectiveness of thirteen frame elements in stimulating online engagement. I derive frame elements not only from populism, but from competing discursive frames, including technocracy, pluralism, and neutral rhetoric. I find support for my argument that frame elements using populist rhetoric, are less cognitively demanding, and evoke emotions produce observable framing effects. To test my argument, I evaluate campaign Tweets from 18 actors in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Italy, and Spain (N = 1,577). My findings affirm the existence of framing effects in campaigns while identifying the generalizable content of the messages that produce these framing effects, as well as identifying the type of message content that most effectively competes with populist frame elements in this sample.

KEYWORDS

Populism; online engagement; participation; frames; social media; campaigns

How political actors convey information—that is, the rhetorical frames they use—can alter individuals’ attitudes, preferences, and behaviors, especially during campaigns (Druckman, 2017; Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Klar et al., 2013). Frames using elements of populist rhetoric seem to evoke especially strong reactions, including increasing animosity toward outgroups (Wirz et al., 2018b) and political cynicism (Rooduijn et al., 2017). Similarly, a growing body of experimental studies demonstrates that populist frames are associated with increased populist attitudes and support for populist actors (Bos et al., 2019; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Yet, research on how individuals respond to populist communication remains relatively scarce (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017), especially when examining non-traditional forms of communication such as social media. In particular, we do not yet know how elements of populist frames fare relative to elements of other frames in online settings—which produce framing effects and which do not.

In this paper, I evaluate the effectiveness of thirteen frame elements in stimulating online engagement (Figure 1). These elements represent the disaggregated ideas

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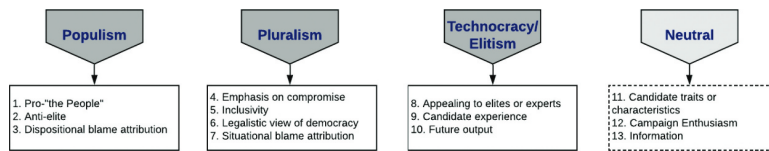


Figure 1. Schema of frame elements.

constituting four discursive frames: populism, pluralism, technocracy, and a neutral category.¹ For example, scholars generally view the populist discursive frame as containing three elements: the people, the elites, and an us-versus-them mentality (Bobba, 2019; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018). I evaluate candidates' frame elements and individuals' responses to those elements on social media – platforms that play a central role in modern campaigns (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Zamora Medina & Muñoz, 2014). Unlike traditional forms of communication like speeches or television, social media include opportunities for communicative behavior by the audience who can not only passively listen to candidates' messages (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017, p. 4), but also actively register their approval by liking a message and passing the message along by retweeting it – actions that I refer to as online engagement. This dynamic creates a feedback loop between the individual and the political actor that can inform and shape both individuals' and actors' behavior. To my knowledge, there are only two studies that examine the relationship between populist frames and online engagement: Bobba (2019) and Bobba and Roncarolo (2018). While these studies contribute to the nascent literature on online engagement, we do not yet know which messages engage individuals when we consider a broader range of frames beyond populist ones.

To address this gap, I apply a theory of framing effects to identify the kinds of messages that should increase a frame element's strength and, by extension, produce observable framing effects. Based on extant literature, I argue that messages that use populist rhetoric, are less cognitively demanding, and evoke emotions will produce the strongest framing effects. I apply my theory to five national campaigns with at least one populist actor in 2018 and 2019: Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Spain. I evaluate a random sample of Tweets for the eighteen candidates and parties (actors) that pass a 10% vote threshold (N = 1,577). My theoretical expectations are generally supported: framing elements that possess the above characteristics are associated with higher engagement compared to elements that lack these characteristics.

This study offers several contributions. First, It expands our understanding of the link between populism and framing theory by theorizing why populist framing elements may produce stronger framing effects than their non-populist counterparts. The populist frame elements I examine meet all three of my hypotheses' criteria: they blame elites for the people's problems, are cognitively easy, and use more emotional content on average than other types of frames. Further, The study takes a critical step toward identifying how establishment politicians can even the rhetorical playing field by using similarly strong frame elements from other discursive frames that also meet my hypothesized criteria, including expressions of campaign enthusiasm or references to candidate traits (both elements of the neutral discursive strategy). Second, my research affirms the existence of framing effects in campaigns while identifying the generalizable content of the messages

that produce these framing effects. This contribution is particularly significant because the study occurs outside of a controlled experimental setting, demonstrating that even in messy campaign environments, framing effects are discernable.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory offers a perspective on how people respond to messages. The core of framing theory is intuitive: how actors convey messages can alter how people engage with the message (Nabi, 2003). Chong and Druckman (2007a, p. 100) define a frame as “the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles a speaker uses to relay information.” For this study, I emphasize both of the relevant actors (the speaker and the listener) inherent in my relationship of interest. 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 non-neutral perspective. Frame elements represent the disaggregated components of discursive frames – returning to the populist example, a populist frame contains three frame elements: pro-people, anti-elite, and a Manichean outlook (Hawkins et al., 2018). Scholars have provided considerable evidence that the strategic use of frames affects individuals’ attitudes, preferences, and behaviors in election campaigns (Druckman, 2017; Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Klar et al., 2013). How political actors’ frames influence individuals is referred to as a framing effect (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 109). In this analysis, I seek to evaluate how framing mobilizes individuals on social media.

To develop my argument, I draw primarily on populist framing studies (in particular, Akkerman et al., 2014; Caramani, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2012) because framing-oriented literature for other discursive frames is sparse. For example, Casero-Ripollés et al. (2017) find that 51.9% of Podemos’s (Spain’s leftist populist party) Tweets use populist elements – but if populist actors use only a slim majority of populist frame elements, what other elements are they using, and which of these elements are effective at generating engagement?

To address these questions, I specify how populist frame elements engage individuals relative to other available discursive frames commonly used by politicians. These discursive frames provide different conceptualizations of who the sovereign community is (Jenne, 2016) – who the ingroup is and whether that community is more inclusive (pluralism, technocracy) or exclusive (populism). This conceptualization of rhetoric mirrors the field’s relative convergence on populism representing a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2015; Busby et al., 2019), 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, p. 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, p. 1327; Caramani, 2017, p. 62) “through compromise and consensus” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 152). 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 prioritizes the power of expertise (broadly defined) and the ability to deliver outcomes (Caramani, 2017, pp. 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.

I disaggregate these discursive frames into their corresponding frame elements to identify which particular messages are generating engagement. The final schema I propose contains thirteen unique frame elements, derived from a combination of existing studies, codebooks (Hawkins, 2019), theoretical studies, and survey measures.

Populist Frame Elements

I incorporate three populist frame elements: “pro-people,” “anti-elite,” and “dispositional blame attribution.”³ These elements correspond to the ideational theory’s three necessary and sufficient elements of populism (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018).⁴ The first populist frame element, (1) “pro-people,” indicates that the candidate speaks in the name of the people (Cranmer, 2011). The (2) “anti-elite” frame element refers to rhetoric where “a political actor criticizes elites, such as political adversaries, the state, or the media” (Cranmer 2011, 293). The (3) “dispositional blame attribution” element blames particular elites or groups of people (such as immigrants) for specific failures and for knowingly exploiting the interests of the people (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

Pluralist Frame Elements

To develop the pluralistic frame elements, I use Akkerman et al. (2014) as a jumping-off point, supplemented with information from Hawkins (2019) to flesh out the descriptions. Akkerman et al. (2014) use two survey questions to measure pluralism:

PLU1 In a democracy it is important to make compromises among differing viewpoints.

PLU2 It is important to listen to the opinion of other groups.

PLU1 maps onto (4) “emphasis on compromise or cooperation,” which stresses the importance of working with other groups or coalitions in the political arena. I use PLU2 to develop (5) “inclusivity,” which focuses on the inclusion of diverse, marginalized, or disadvantaged groups.

Finally, and drawing on Hawkins (2019) and Caramani (2017), I include two additional frame elements. (6) “Legalistic view of democracy” is based on a conception of “the people” that does not romanticize “the people,” viewing them instead in a neutral, democratic way. The final pluralistic frame element is (7) “situational blame distribution,” which places blame on situational factors outside of specific elites’ control such as macro-level context instead of individual actors or specific groups (Busby et al., 2019, p. 619).

Technocratic Frame Elements

I derive the technocratic frame elements largely from Akkerman et al. (2014), who pose the following three questions to measure elitism.

E1 Politicians should lead rather than follow the people.

E2 Our country would be governed better if important decisions were left up to successful business people.

E3 Our country would be governed better if important decisions were left up to independent experts

I omit a unique element for E1 because it does not uniquely characterize elitism, and I combine E2 and E3 into the frame element (8) “appealing to elites or experts.” This element appeals to a select group of individuals based on some attribute that they have, such as intelligence, wealth, or experience, operating on the belief that these individuals deserve particular influence. Next, (9) “Candidate experience” refers to the candidate’s unique ability to perform the job based on their particular expertise or experience, or the lack of experience of an opposition candidate. In line with Caramani (2017), (10) “future output” refers to promised policy outcomes.

Neutral Frame Elements

The final category describes frame elements that fall under the umbrella of neutral rhetoric. (11) “Candidate traits” focuses on attributes or reputational considerations, for example, portraying candidates as “honest” or “hardworking.” (12) “Campaign enthusiasm” includes rhetoric that conveys motivation to vote or excitement for the upcoming election. The final frame element, (13) “information,” contains factual information, most often about upcoming campaign events. Examples of the range of Tweets that fall into each category are presented in Appendix A.4. These thirteen frame elements represent the independent variable in this analysis.

Online Engagement on Social Media

I evaluate likes and retweets as measures of online engagement, a multifaceted concept that represents different things to different audiences. For individuals, online engagement reflects a direct register of enthusiasm or approval – 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 mobilization. According to Pew Research Center (Cranmer Research Center, 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, online engagement can represent 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) – a currency that appears to be valued by political leaders for its own sake.

Of the available social media platforms, I elected to study engagement on Twitter because it is the preferred platform of political and media 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 social media platforms. 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 et al., 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 – candidates regularly Tweet summarized versions of their longer Facebook posts.”⁵

While Twitter users are not representative of the broader population, they (especially those consuming and producing political content) are disproportionately more likely to actively participate in politics (Bode & 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.⁶ 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) through actions such as campaign on behalf of candidates (Hosch-Dayican et al., 2016) and spreading the message about protests (Barbera et al., 2015, 6; see also Scherman et al., 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

Hypotheses

Scholars have posited several non-rival explanations for when frames (and by extension, frame elements) produce framing effects, including frame strength, whether the communication environment is competitive, and individual predispositions (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). My research question directly speaks to frame strength, while the observational design of my study precludes control over the competitive environment⁷ or individual characteristics.⁸

In general, scholars conclude that the stronger a frame/frame element, the more likely a framing effect will occur (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, 2007a; Druckman, 2007, 2010). These scholars show that frame strength is a particularly important consideration in determining whether a framing effect will occur – strong frames/elements are more likely to produce a framing effect than weak frames (Druckman, 2007) and more likely to persist in competitive communication environments (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). It stands to reason that if I detect framing effects, they will constitute comparatively strong frame elements given the naturally-occurring and arguably maximally competitive environment of campaigns.⁹

I hypothesize that three non-rival characteristics of certain frame elements will produce framing effects and thus be associated with higher levels of engagement: populist frame elements (H_1), frame elements that are not cognitively demanding (H_2), and frame elements that evoke emotions (H_3). These hypotheses are derived from existing literature and summarized in part in Chong and Druckman (2007b, p. 111) explanation of strong frames:

“Strong frames ... can be built around exaggerations and outright lies playing on the fears and prejudices of the public [H_3]. Strong frames often rest on symbols, endorsements, and

links to partisanship and ideology [H_1], and may be effective in shaping opinions through heuristics rather than direct information about the substance of a policy [H_2].”

First, I anticipate that populist frame elements generate comparatively high levels of engagement compared to all other elements in the sample (H_1). A growing body of literature has demonstrated that populist frame elements shape individuals’ attitudes and behaviors. In experimental studies, Hameleers et al. (2017) and Busby et al. (2019) conclude that populist frames that blame elites for the problems of the people (dispositional blame attribution) are associated with an increase in populist attitudes and support for populist actors (see also Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017 and Wirz, 2018a). Bos et al. (2019) reach a similar conclusion, finding that anti-elite identity frames, in particular, persuade prospective voters in fifteen European countries. Outside of experimental settings, Bobba (2019) and Bobba and Roncarolo (2018) find that populist Tweets (compared to non-populist Tweets) generate more likes than non-populist ones.

Although these scholars identify different theories for why populist frame elements are disproportionately influential, what they have in common is that populist frame elements are differentiated from non-populist ones based on the way that they blame or ostracize others – whether it be immigrants (Wirz, 2018a), elites (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017), or both. This tendency to blame elites for exploiting “the people” provides a clear cause of the people’s suffering – government failures – in contexts where elites have not performed adequately. Each country in the sample has at least one populist actor who attained at least 10% of the national vote share, which strongly implies that the populist message is both “sensible” and strong in these countries (i.e., there is some government failure).

Second, I expect that less cognitively demanding frame elements will produce comparatively strong framing effects compared to more demanding frame elements (H_2). This hypothesis is related to the vast body of scholarship that finds that heuristics aid individuals in processing complex information, where a heuristic aid is a cognitive shortcut that enables individuals to make political judgments without (or in place of) extensive political knowledge (Brader et al., 2012; Converse, 1964; Rahn, 1993; Sniderman et al., 1991). In particular, I home in on the simplicity or complexity of the content being communicated – simple ideas will make it easier for individuals to identify with the frame element, thus producing stronger framing effects. Additional support for this hypothesis is derived from scholars like Bischof and Senninger (2018), who find that the use of simplistic language is associated with individuals being better able to identify the ideological placement of populist parties in particular (see also Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016).

Third, I theorize that frame elements that evoke emotions will have a stronger association with engagement than elements using neutral language (H_3) (Chong & Druckman, 2007b; McDonnell et al., 2017). Scholars demonstrate that emotions motivate and persuade individuals to participate in politics in different ways (Brader, 2005; Valentino et al., 2011). In a similar vein, a growing body of literature hypothesizes that populism in particular is persuasive because it relies on negative emotions like fear and anxiety (Rico et al., 2017; Wirz.). However, positive emotions have also been shown to impact outcomes akin to engagement (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019), so I incorporate both positivity and negativity

in my analysis. These studies suggest that an emotionalized tone increases the likelihood that a frame element will produce a framing effect (see, e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007b).

I assess each hypothesis by comparing the high- and low-fit frame elements to one another (rather than to the sample as a whole) as I seek to determine whether the presence of the hypothesized characteristics impacts engagement (Table 1). For H₁, I include the three frame elements that make up the populist discursive frame. For H₂, I identify frame elements that rely on messages that do not require information-based judgments, appealing instead to value-based considerations that are less cognitively demanding. “Anti-elite” and “dispositional blame attribution” (both populist frame elements) focus on a dichotomous view of the world, simplifying the cognitive demand of these messages. Meanwhile, “candidate traits” and “appealing to experts” (a neutral and technocratic frame element, respectively) both promote superficial recognition over substantive knowledge. Lastly, H₃ includes frame elements that consistently capitalize directly on positive or negative language – at least 75% of the coded tweets for a given frame element must be positive or negative rather than neutral.¹⁰ The frame elements that meet the criteria include “anti-elite” (89% negative), “dispositional blame attribution” (89% negative), and “campaign enthusiasm” (93% positive). Meanwhile, frame elements with a significant percentage (50%) of neutral rhetoric account for the low-fit elements.

Research Design

To assess which frame elements generate higher online engagement, 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 differences in political systems 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. 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 (see, e.g., Andreadis et al., 2018; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2017).

Table 1. Summary of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Positive Examples (High fit)	Negative Examples (Low fit)
H ₁ : Populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pro-“the people” (populist) ● Anti-Elite (populist) ● Dispositional Blame Attribution (populist) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All other frame elements
H ₂ : Less cognitively demanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-Elite (populist) ● Dispositional Blame Attribution (populist) ● Candidate traits (neutral) ● Appealing to experts (technocracy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Output (technocratic) ● Candidate experience (technocratic)
H ₃ : Evoking emotions (positive or negative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-Elite (populist) ● Dispositional Blame Attribution (populist) ● Campaign Enthusiasm (neutral) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Output (technocratic) ● Information (neutral) ● Compromise (pluralist) ● Legalistic view (pluralist)

Case Selection

I chose the five causes because each had at least one candidate that political observers commonly referred to as “populist” in 2018 or early 2019.¹¹ The subset of possible Latin American cases was fairly small.¹² In Europe, I selected Spain and Italy because these countries each 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 actors experienced. Twitter use in these countries is also similar, with 5–8% of each country’s population.¹³ Finally, the cases reflect a 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 the nine populist actors,¹⁴ randomly sampled during the campaign for a total of $N = 1,577$ Tweets.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ As Table 2 shows, there is considerable variation in likes and retweets both across and within candidates.¹⁷

Because of the significantly different institutions that affect the way individuals cast votes, I evaluate the *candidates’* Tweets in Latin America and the *parties’* Tweets in Europe. In Spain and Italy, both parliamentary systems, individuals cast votes for parties. In the Latin American countries surveyed here, all three countries have presidential systems where individuals vote directly for candidates. As a result, I expect that parties produce more campaign content in Europe, making parties a better comparison for Latin American candidates. A descriptive comparison of European party leaders’ and parties’ Twitter behavior supports this assumption – European parties Tweet considerably more than their leaders in the majority of cases. For example, Pedro Sánchez of PSOE Tweeted

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the candidates evaluated.

Country	Candidate/Party	Vote Share	Avg. Likes	Std. Dev.	Avg. Re-Tweets	Std. Dev.
COL	Duque (Democratic Center)	54.0% (2 nd); 39.1% (1 st)	1,290	1,539	675	905
	Petro (Progressivists Movement)	41.8% (2 nd); 25.1% (1 st)	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); 46.0% (1 st)	26,809	22,042	6,200	5,483
	Haddad (PT)	44.9% (2 nd); 29.3% (1 st)	8,072	14,439	1,970	4,086
	Gomes (PDT)	12.5% (1 st)	1,931	2,470	351	502
IT	M5S (leader: Luigi Di Maio)	32.2%	549	305	317	194
	Lega (leader: Matteo Salvini)	17.7%	20	14	11	10
	PD (leader: Matteo Renzi)	18.9%	332	262	164	134
	FI (leader: Silvio Berlusconi)	13.9%	143	175	61	78
ESP	Podemos (leader: Pablo Iglesias)	14.3%	567	575	377	339
	PP (leader: Pablo Casado)	16.7%	285	370	191	267
	PSOE (leader: Pedro Sánchez)	28.7%	203	198	149	122
	Cs (leader: Albert Rivera)	15.8%	178	240	127	142
	Vox (leader: Santiago Abascal)	10.3%	2,510	1,809	1,243	869

Situational blame is not included in the hypothesis due to the low N (11 frames). However, the finding is robust to its inclusion.

6.8 times per day on average during the campaign versus PSOE's average of 32.6 (see Appendix B.4). Relatedly, party institutionalization differs significantly across these regions, with Europe having entrenched parties that persist across elections and, more importantly, across party leaders, suggesting that parties are an appropriate focal point. In comparison, Latin American parties are often formed as electoral vehicles for particular candidates, and candidates also change parties not infrequently, supporting a candidate-centric view for this region.

To assess whether comparing party leaders in Latin America and parties in Europe is appropriate, I evaluate a subsample of European parties and their party leaders (Renzi/PD, MS5/Di Maio, PSOE/Sánchez, and Vox/Abascal).¹⁸ Overall, I find that parties and their leaders use similar percentages of populist, pluralist, technocratic, and neutral rhetoric. Additionally, when examining the subsample of four parties included in the broader sample versus their party leaders, I find that the results presented in the main model are broadly consistent and, if anything, are downwardly biased compared to alternate specifications with party leaders. As a final consideration, I provide the main results broken down by each region in Appendices D.1 to D.6. While there are some interesting differences, the hypothesis test results hold in both regions separately as in the pooled sample.

Coding Procedures and Reliability

Four research assistants (RAs) and the author coded the Tweets. RAs were blind to identifying information and coded Tweets independently. 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; Welp & Ruth, 2017), short videos, news articles, links to longer posts, and infographics.¹⁹ 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. The intercoder reliability for the entire sample, presented using Krippendorff's alpha, is .66 for the discursive frame level and .63 for the frame element level.²⁰

Method for Analyzing Engagement

I utilize Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to evaluate the relationship between frame elements and online engagement. I include candidate fixed effects to control for candidate-by-candidate differences (Appendix B.3). Additionally, I control for several features of a Tweet that could affect individuals' propensity to engage with the message, including dichotomous variables for whether a Tweet contains hashtags, mentions, and links to additional content (Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Welp & Ruth, 2017; Zamora Medina & Muñoz, 2014). In line with these studies, 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 actors through weighting, the sample contains 19% populist, 11% pluralist, 33% technocratic, and 36% neutral frame elements. I approach the results section by first presenting descriptive results on the classification of candidate frame elements before evaluating how people engage with these different elements.

Part 1: Classification

Figure 2 displays the percentage of each frame element in the sample. The technocratic element “output” is the most used frame element, with 17.6% of all Tweets in the dataset, followed by the neutral frame element “campaign enthusiasm” with 15.5% of Tweets. These findings reveal what candidates see as important to get elected – solving society’s issues by promising to deliver certain outcomes and by the purest form of campaigning – requesting votes and other forms of support. In contrast, all four pluralistic frame elements are rarely used (less than 5% each). This result suggests that pluralist frame elements are not prioritized in these cases, a potentially concerning finding for scholars of liberal democracy in light of how much more often populist frame elements are used by comparison.

More generally, the data reflect a wide range of elements used, both across and within candidates: no frame element represents more than 20% of the sample. This finding suggests that communication in these countries is made up of a combination of discursive frames. Another implication of this finding is that, even though all cases have a populist candidate, the political environment is such that populist content is not necessarily

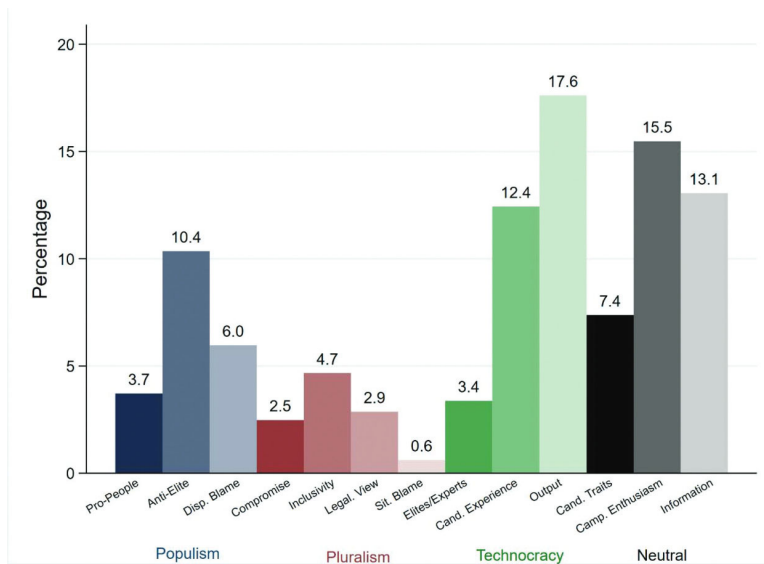


Figure 2. Percentage of frame elements used in the sample.

privileged, at least in frequency: it is one strategy among many, and one that is used less frequently than elements from either technocracy or neutral discursive frames.

Figure 3 supports this claim from a different perspective by revealing which frame elements individual candidates are using, ordered from those using the most populist elements to those using the least. Mixing frame elements is not just a country-level phenomenon. Candidates do not just stick to one discursive frame or even one frame element within a discursive frame – most employ different elements spanning all four discursive frames. Aside from Duque’s reliance on “output” (51%), no candidate uses even a majority of a single element. Figure 3 also highlights how populist frame elements are concentrated primarily in a few actors – the “populist” candidates (those in blue text in the below figure). In general, the actors that use the most populist discursive frame elements line up with whom experts view as “populist” actors.

Unlike previous studies that exclusively focus on populism, these data allow for the classification of a candidate’s entire spectrum of rhetoric. As such, frame elements in shades of red, green, and black in Figure 3 represent new contributions to our understanding of the discursive strategies of candidates. Returning to Casero-Ripollés et al.’s (2017) finding that Podemos (ESP) uses only 48.1% populist frames, I show that Podemos Tweets about their projected output in over one-quarter of their messages, they use more inclusive messages than most other populist parties (14%), and they provide campaign information in one out of every ten Tweets. If we were to only look at actors’ populist rhetoric, Podemos and Vox would appear quite similar: Podemos uses populist frame elements in 34% of the sample, while Vox uses 39%. However, analyzing these parties’ neutral, inclusive, and technocratic rhetoric paints a different picture: Vox uses almost no inclusive frame elements (4% to Podemos’s 13%), and they provide campaign information in one out of every ten Tweets.

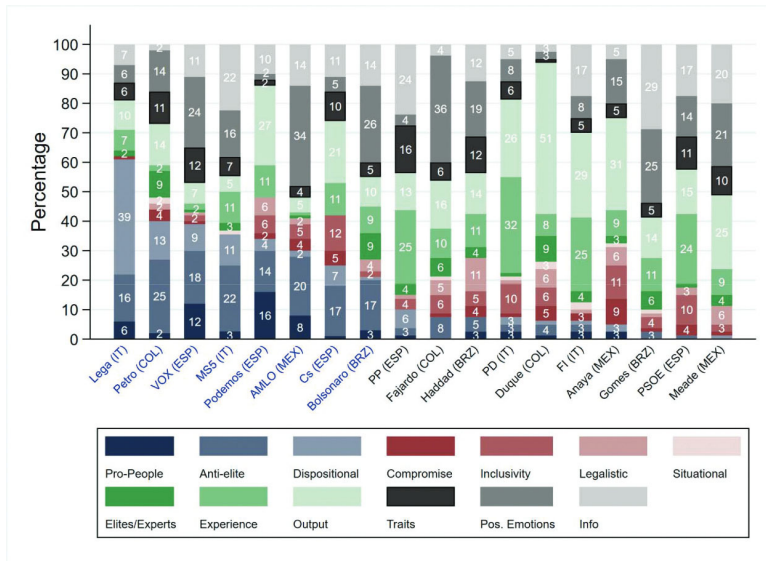


Figure 3. Frames used by candidate/party.

points fewer than Podemos), and a considerable percentage of neutral messages (32 percentage points more than Podemos), indicating notably different overall strategies.

More generally, these data can be used to draw conclusions about individual candidates. Duque and FI were sometimes portrayed as populist in the media, but these data show these actors use comparatively few populist frame elements (6%). Other candidates that are seen as quintessential populists like Bolsonaro, MS5, and AMLO use a minority of populist frame elements (though, more than their non-populist counterparts, to be sure). More broadly, these data reveal important information about candidates' campaign strategies by showing how much time they dedicate to different frame elements. For example, while some candidates prioritize conveying issue positions (ranging from 5% for MS5 and AMLO to 51% for Duque), others focus more on the campaign by motivating supporters (ranging from 3% for PP to 36% for Fajardo) or informing followers of campaign events (ranging from 2% for Petro to 29% for Gomes). The information we get from looking at a candidate's rhetorical strategy *beyond* their use of populism forms a more complete picture of how a candidate tries to mobilize and engage their followers and thus facilitates a more productive comparison between candidates.

Part 2: Engagement

The benefit of examining online engagement is that it can tell us which of these frame elements are “working” by identifying the elements that are associated with the most likes and retweets. Table 3 presents OLS regressions of frame elements on likes (a) and retweets (b). Model 1 represents a suppressed intercept model.²¹ For ease of interpretation, each coefficient represents the average number of likes and retweets a given frame element receives compared to the base candidate, AMLO.²² Both models control for mentions, hashtags, and links, as well as candidate fixed effects. Full regression results are available in the appendix.

Model 1 demonstrates that “anti-elite” frame elements garner the most likes and retweets of any element examined. This finding likely reflects the context of these cases: Hawkins et al. (2018) suggest that populist messages must be salient to mobilize or engage individuals, and such messages are primarily salient where elites have misbehaved or performed poorly. Nonetheless, this result tells us how powerful the anti-elite narrative is in such contexts, which are increasingly widespread. The other populist frame elements (“dispositional blame attribution” and “pro-people”) perform comparatively well, particularly in retweets (column 4), but they fall short of the “anti-elite” element. Of the populist frame elements, “anti-elite” elements are what do the work in engaging individuals. Neutral frame elements also perform well – better than most populist ones – especially when the dependent variable is likes (column 1). In Model 1a, the neutral frame elements “campaign enthusiasm” and “candidate traits” generate the second and third most likes, respectively (column 2). Technocratic elements are, on average, less engaging than most neutral or populist ones except for “appealing to elites or experts.” Meanwhile, pluralistic frame elements consistently fall in the bottom half of the data.²³

The substantive differences between frame elements are modest but noteworthy considering the parameters of the study. These messages are delivered in a competitive communication environment where individuals are simultaneously exposed to different frame elements of different intensities (compared to a controlled experimental setting)

Table 3. Suppressed intercept model of likes & re-tweets.

Frame	(1) Likes (Model 1.a)	(2) Likes Ranking (Model 1.a)	(3) Compared to "Info" (Model 2.a)	(4) Re- Tweets (Model 1.b)	(5) Re-Tweets Ranking (Model 1.b)	(6) Compared to "Info" (Model 2.b)
POPULISM: Pro-people	9,972 (159)	6	+88.9%***	8,919 (149)	4	+94.2%***
Anti-elite	10,141 (127)	1	+123.7%***	9,140 (120)	1	+142.5%***
Dispositional blame attribution	9,852 (153)	8	+67.5%***	8,884 (144)	5	+87.6%***
PLURALISM: Compromise	9,703 (181)	10	+44.3%***	8,656 (170)	11	+49.3%***
Inclusivity	9,786 (154)	9	+56.8%***	8,689 (145)	10	+54.3%***
Legalistic view of democracy	9,616 (173)	12	+32.3%*	8,696 (162)	9	+55.6%***
Situational blame attribution ^a	10,005 (299)	5	+95.2%**	8,959 (281)	3	+102.4%***
TECHNOCRACY: Appealing to elites/experts	10,009 (170)	4	+96.0%***	8,840 (159)	7	+79.7%***
Candidate experience	9,876 (131)	7	+71.6%***	8,853 (123)	6	+81.8%***
Future output	9,620 (124)	11	+32.8%***	8,639 (117)	12	+46.8%***
NEUTRAL: Candidate traits	10,072 (138)	2	+108.7%***	9,102 (129)	2	+133.3%***
Campaign enthusiasm	10,046 (118)	3	+103.4%***	8,835 (111)	8	+78.8%***
Information	9,336 (129)	13	Base Frame	8,255 (121)	13	Base Frame
<i>Observations</i>	1,577			1,577		

Candidate fixed effects included but not presented.

Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

In models 1a and 1b, significance indicators are removed because every coefficient is significantly different from 0 likes/retweets at $p < .01$.

The average number of followers as of early 2019. See Appendix B for a longer discussion.

across two different regions and eighteen different actors. Thus, the primary utility of Model 1 is demonstrating the plausible presence of framing effects and the identification of what constitutes a strong frame element. Model 2 and the hypothesis tests delve deeper into what these framing effects might mean for online engagement.

Model 2 provides a deeper understanding of the differences between frame elements by using the "information" element as a base. All other features of the model remain the same. The "information" frame is an ideal base category because it is the absence of a frame element: it provides information rather than encouraging a particular perspective. The results of Model 2 are presented as relative magnitudes and should be interpreted as how much a given frame element generates more likes/retweets compared to "information" messages.²⁴ Model 2 demonstrates quantifiable differences in engagement between "information" frames elements and substantive ones, from a low of +32.3% ("legalistic view of democracy" in column 3) to a high of +142.5% ("anti-elite" in column 6). Accordingly, Model 2 suggests that using some element is better than not using one in terms of generating engagement. Like Model 1, Model 2 also demonstrates the presence of framing effects and how competitive frame elements are for engagement.

Although these models tell us what kinds of frame elements are associated with higher likes and retweets, they do not tell us about the attributes of frame elements that may be responsible for fostering online engagement. I hypothesized that three potential groups of frame elements would generate comparatively high engagement. First, H_1 anticipated that populist frame elements generated high engagement. I find support for this hypothesis ($p < .1$ for likes and $p < .01$ for retweets). Combined with Models 1 and 2, these results are suggestive that criticizing elites in a context in which elites have failed to meet citizens' expectations in some way is a powerful communication tool when it comes to engagement. Certainly, the other populist frame elements matter too – but anti-elite content forms the core of the populist discursive frame.

Meanwhile, H_2 predicted that less cognitively demanding frame elements would generate higher engagement compared to frame elements that were more cognitively demanding. I find support for this hypothesis: the four high-fit elements generate more likes and retweets on average than the two low-fit elements. Moreover, I can reject the null hypothesis that the mean engagement (likes and retweets) of these groups are equal at $p < .01$. In essence, this finding speaks to a longstanding debate about how individuals consume political information. This particular hypothesis test comes down in favor of individuals as maximizing shortcuts and avoiding more demanding content in favor of more easily processible messages.

Turning to H_3 , I predicted that frame elements that evoke emotions would generate higher engagement. Recall that the elements in the high fit category are those that use at least 75% positive or negative language, while those in the low fit category are those that use at least 50% neutral frames. I find support for this hypothesis: frame elements that have a distinctly positive or negative valence generate more engagement than those that use a majority of neutral frame elements (significant at $p < .01$).²⁵ Although this finding could, in part, be interpreted to reinforce the notion of negativity bias, it may also identify a way to compete with campaign negativity – with campaign positivity. Although there are limits to pooling high and low fit elements, these results shed light on three of the potential mechanisms at work.

Discussion

Existing studies have demonstrated that populist rhetoric has wide-ranging effects for online engagement (Bobba, 2019; Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018) as well as offline attitudes (Rooduijn et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018). What is missing from these and other studies is an examination of how populism engages individuals relative to other ways of seeing the political world, like pluralism, technocracy, and neutral campaign rhetoric, and what it is about populism (which framing elements of the overall discursive strategy) are comparatively engaging. Populism is most often examined in isolation, masking considerable variation between these other discursive frames both in terms of what kinds of rhetoric candidates are using and how that other rhetoric engages individuals online. To evaluate this gap, I break down these four discursive strategies into their individual frame elements and evaluate which elements produce framing effects and which do not.

I theorize that strong frame elements will generate the highest online engagement. In particular, I identify three attributes of frame elements that are associated with frame strength: populist content, cognitive simplicity, and emotional content. My application of framing theory is

important because, while we know framing effects exist, we know less about whether and how they are identifiable outside controlled settings. I apply this theoretical framework to five recent campaigns in Europe and Latin America to identify which frame elements have the strongest framing effects in competitive campaign communication environments.

I provide two key empirical takeaways. First, candidates use a wide range of rhetoric, incorporating all four discursive frames and many of the available thirteen frame elements. In short, candidates are not monolithic in their rhetoric, and looking at the spectrum of rhetoric they use provides valuable insight into their campaigns. Second, my results indicate that frame elements that contain populist elements, are not cognitively demanding, and evoke emotions foster higher levels of engagement than elements lacking these attributes. An important implication of my results is that for candidates who do not use populist frame elements, technocratic and neutral frame elements appear to be the best bet for competing with populism – pluralist frame elements do not muster the same degree of engagement in this sample. Whether or not this finding persists beyond the election period is an interesting question for future research. If non-populists can begin to identify particular frame elements that best convey their overall narrative and foster engagement, they may stand a better chance at evening the rhetorical playing field.

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Notes

1. These discursive frames reflect politicians' understanding of the relationship between the people and the elites. Other conceptions are possible, such as issue positions, but extend beyond the scope of this study.
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 & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 152), a conception in line with elitism, but also as important business leaders or independent experts, which is very much in line with technocracy.
3. I refer to Manichean discourse as dispositional blame attribution, but the underlying sentiment behind these two concepts, as they are used here, is similar. In both of these frames, one group is blaming another group, implicitly creating an "us versus them" dichotomy.
4. Existing studies focus on anywhere from four to six frame elements, but in earlier iterations of this project, I found that other frames either were biased toward right-wing populism, occurred extremely infrequently (less than 1% of the sample), or were not distinct from the three final frame elements used in the study. For example, Casero-Ripollés et al. proposes a single frame for "the people," Engesser et al. (2017) two frames ("sovereignty of the people" and "advocacy for the people"), and Cranmer (2011) three frames ("advocacy for," "accountability to," and "the legitimacy of the people"). All three articles include a frame for "attacking the elite" and "exclusion of outgroups." Engesser et al. proposes a frame that invokes "the heartland;" Casero-Ripollés et al. a frame for "narrative of a crisis," and Cranmer a frame for "homogeneity or threat."

5. 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.
6. 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 & 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 & Spruyt, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016), in stark contrast to the traits that characterize Twitter users.
7. Framing effects can be attenuated when individuals are exposed to multiple competing messages (Chong & Druckman, 2007a).
8. Several scholars have demonstrated that individual predispositions are strongly associated with framing effects (see, e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Kam & Simas, 2010).
9. Why framing effects occur is widely debated. The accessibility perspective (Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Druckman, 2007, 2011; Zaller, 1992) argues that frames are more likely to produce framing effects when they are available, accessible, and applicable to individuals. An alternative perspective is that framing effects occur because they are more important than other considerations (see, e.g., Nelson et al., 1997). Intuitively, this approach suggests that individuals weigh more important considerations differently than less important ones, where framing effects occur when the frame aligns with an important consideration. A related perspective suggests that framing effects occur when frames resonate with individuals (McDonnell et al., 2017; Snow & Benford, 1988), arguing that resonance (which I consider a proxy for framing effects) occur when a narrative structure which diagnoses a problem, prescribes a solution, and contains a call to action. Outside of an experimental design, it is difficult to ascertain which of these theoretical mechanisms is at play. For the purposes of my analysis, I focus predominantly on what makes for a strong frame among the four discursive strategies (and subsequent thirteen frames) I investigate rather than why strong frames produce framing effects. To make my argument, I draw most heavily on the accessibility perspective as that has the most associated information on frame strength.
10. The language variable is trichotomous: positive, neutral, or negative and is based on the RAs’ interpretation of the overall tone of the message. See Appendix A.3 for additional information.
11. The Tweets span the period of late December 2017 through April 2019 (16 months).
12. 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 actor (Fabricio Alvarado) displayed, which strongly limited the generalizability of this case. El Salvador had a strongly anti-elite candidate (Nayib Bukele), but existing accounts did not support this candidate as being populist.
13. 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/>.
14. Two parties did not meet the minimum number of Tweets. FI, and MS5. FI was sampled at 80 Tweets (the non-populist amount) as the existing classification information available at the time the study was conducted indicated that FI was not-populist. Since then, later datasets indicated that FI was considered a populist by a majority of indicators, thus they are coded as populist here. For FI, I included Tweets where the party *retweeted* the party leader’s (Silvio Berlusconi) Tweets. Though this was not done for other cases, it is consistent with other

- parties who, instead of re-Tweeting leader's Tweets (as FI did), simply use the same Tweet between candidate. MS5 is sampled at 77 Tweets total, representing their entire universe of Tweets during the campaign. I also collected separate Tweets from the party leader for a robustness check, which is why I did not combine the MS5 with Luigi Di Maio's Tweets.
15. Official campaign periods are hard to pin down in many countries. I selected campaign dates that reflected the official kickoff of the campaign marked by the first major campaign event, and ended either the day before the election, or a few days before in certain cases that observe a few days of non-campaigning (aka "reflection periods"). The campaign periods covered in this analysis are: 1) Italy: 12/27/2017 (when Parliament was dissolved) – 3/3/2018; 2) Colombia: 3/11/2018 (when primaries were held) – 6/16/2018 (excluding the 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 Gomez 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.
 16. 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 – NEGex, and the Global Party Survey – GPS) and one based on speech analysis (the Global Populism Database – GPD). I used four datasets to ensure external validity as well as adequate coverage of the actors in this sample. 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.
 17. I log-transformed both likes and re-Tweets due to a positive skew toward 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 re-Tweets in the sample is approximately 1,500 despite a high value of 21,000.
 18. See Appendix D.3 for an explanation of the subsample case selection, and Appendices B.5 and B.6 for the results.
 19. About 1/3 of the Tweets in this sample contained relevant media that may have (though did not necessarily) revealed the speaker's identity.
 20. See Appendix F.1 for a detailed discussion of the coding procedures.
 21. The model tests whether the average number of likes/re-Tweets for each frame is zero. Given that the average number of likes is 4,055 and the number of re-Tweets 1,544, it is unsurprising that every frame is statistically differentiable from 0. In contrast, Model 2 tests whether the average number of likes/re-Tweets for each frame is different than that of the *information* frame.
 22. AMLO is chosen as the reference candidate because he attracts the most re-Tweets and second most likes.
 23. Coupled with the low prevalence with which actors used these frame elements, there seems to be agreement between actors opting not to use pluralistic messages and, when they do, individuals not engaging with these elements as often. One possible explanation for this finding is that pluralist elements are more conducive to forming a government (in the case of parliamentary systems) and governing more broadly, with less utility during a campaign when each actor is attempting to maximize their individual support at the polls. This explanation is especially applicable to the "emphasis on compromise" element, which specifically refers to compromise in the political sphere. However, the elements of "inclusivity," "legalistic view of democracy," and "situational blame attribution" are less obviously temporally bound. An alternate possibility is

one that depends on context: in Appendix D, which breaks down the findings by region, pluralist messages actually perform slightly better in Europe than they do in Latin America. Thus, it may not be a temporal story but one of institutional differences, with parliamentary systems more favorable to pluralism than presidential ones.

24. Relative magnitudes are calculated using the formula $100[e^{\beta} - 1]$ to interpret the logged dependent variable as a percentage difference compared to the base category, populism.
25. This finding also holds when I test frames capitalizing on positive emotions or negative emotions separately (not pooled) against the low-fit category. It also holds if, instead of focusing on particular frame elements, I focus on the predominant tone of the individual Tweets themselves (whether they are negative, neutral, or positive). The group means of Tweets with emotive content are significantly higher than the group means for neutral Tweets for both likes and re-Tweets, significant at $p < .01$. I present the frames results at it is more consistent with the objective of my hypotheses – to identify the particular aspects of frames that are associated with higher engagement.

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Data Availability Statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

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