

Mobilization, equalization, and populist rhetoric on Facebook. Presidential campaigns in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru

Movilización, ecualización y retórica populista en Facebook. Campañas presidenciales de Brasil, Colombia, Chile y Perú

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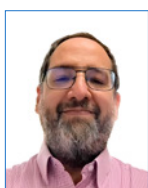
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ABSTRACT: Purpose. Western democracies have witnessed the emergence of political actors who have gained power through innovative digital mobilization strategies and populist campaign narratives. This study aims to provide an analytical description of the digital communication strategies used by both new and established political actors on Facebook, and to assess the prevalence of populist rhetoric during the most recent presidential elections in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru. **Methodology.** A dataset of 2,930 Facebook posts published by candidates and parties during the presidential campaigns was analyzed for the purposes of cross-national comparison. The comparative content analysis was guided by the analytical frameworks developed by the Campaigning for Strasbourg project. **Results and conclusions.** The findings indicate a trend toward more intensive use of Facebook by new political contenders. The data suggest that populist rhetoric is present across all analyzed campaigns, although it appears more frequently in the social media discourse of opposition parties. At the national level, Colombia stands out as the country where populist discourse and negative campaigning are particularly prevalent. **Original contributions.** Most existing research on political actors' use of Facebook and the prevalence of populist rhetoric during electoral campaigns has focused on the United States and Europe. This study contributes to the literature by extending this analysis to South America. The comparative content analysis facilitated the identification of notable differences in the use of Facebook and populist rhetoric, while also revealing specific patterns at both the party and country levels.

Keywords: political communication; Facebook; elections; South America; equalization; populism; mobilization; Brazil; Colombia; Chile; Peru.

RESUMEN: Propósito. Las democracias occidentales experimentan el surgimiento de actores que han conquistado posiciones de poder mediante el uso de novedosas estrategias de comunicación digital y narrativas de campaña populista. El objetivo de este estudio es ofrecer una descripción analítica de las estrategias de comunicación digital empleadas por actores políticos nuevos y establecidos, así como evaluar la prevalencia de la retórica populista, en las más recientes elecciones presidenciales en Brasil, Colombia, Chile y Perú. **Metodología.** Se utiliza una base de datos compuesta por 2,930 publicaciones en Facebook de candidatos y partidos durante las campañas presidenciales. El análisis comparado de contenido utiliza el modelo analítico desarrollado por el proyecto Campaigning for Strasbourg. **Resultados y conclusiones.** Los resultados exponen una tendencia al uso más intenso de Facebook por parte de nuevos competidores. Los datos sugieren que todas las campañas analizadas hacen uso de la retórica populista, pero esta aparece más frecuentemente en el discurso de los partidos de oposición. A escala nacional, Colombia se destaca como el país donde el discurso populista y la campaña negativa estarían más generalizados. **Aporte original.** La investigación sobre las funciones que privilegian los actores políticos y la prevalencia de retórica populista en Facebook, durante las elecciones, se ha realizado principalmente en Europa y Estados Unidos. Este estudio extiende este análisis a Sudamérica. El análisis comparado de contenido permitió identificar diferencias significativas en el uso de Facebook y la retórica populista, así como descubrir particularidades tanto al nivel de los partidos como de los países.

Palabras clave: comunicación política; Facebook; elecciones; América del Sur; ecualización; populismo; movilización; Brasil; Colombia; Chile; Perú.

1. Political context of presidential elections in Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Peru

The literature on digital campaign strategies has consistently demonstrated the significant role that Social Media Platforms (SMP) play in electoral process (Taras & Davis, 2022). Online platforms like Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram enable political campaigns to engage with voters in real-time and spread their messaging far beyond their initial follower base. Using the platforms' affirmabilities, such as compelling visuals, impactful hashtags, and shareable content, political actors can quickly reach millions of users within hours (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). This viral nature of SMP has the potential to level the playing field for emerging parties, enabling them to gain visibility and recognition that might otherwise be difficult to achieve through traditional media alone.

Research on political communication within these platforms has predominantly centered on the United States and Europe (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). In Latin America, we find national studies on electoral campaigns, social media, and disinformation (Saldaña et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2025), political discussions on X (Twitter) during televised presidential debates (Rosenberg et al., 2023), the impact of social media on candidates' performance (Gilmore, 2012; Jamil Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2016; Acuña-Duarte et al., 2024), and the role of humor used by political figures on social media (Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2022), among others.

Nevertheless, comparative studies in Latin America are notably lacking (e.g., Fenoll et al., 2024; López-López & Vásquez-González, 2018). Bridging this research gap, our study delves into the utilization of Facebook for political communication in four countries of South America: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. By providing a descriptive comparison of parties' and candidates' digital strategies, during the electoral campaigns conducted between 2021 and 2022, we aim to provide a limited but comprehensive overview of how political actors navigate the dynamic landscape of digital electoral campaigns in these countries. Facebook remains the most-used social media in South América as well as in the world (Newman et al., 2024). It is important to point out that although the presidential campaigns examined used different social media platforms at the same time—such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—they tended to rely predominantly on Facebook (Misión de Observación Electoral de la Unión Europea [MOE UE], 2022; Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022; Peña-Vicuña et al., 2024; Rodarte & Lukito, 2024).

Recent elections in these four countries were preceded by intense social protests (Castro Riaño, 2020). In Colombia, national strikes were carried out in 2019 and 2021 against potential government-driven reforms (pension, labor, tax, health, education). In Chile, the 2019 mobilizations were driven by tuition policies and the demand for the president's resignation. In the same year, protests occurred in Peru due to the dissolution of the congress and against corruption. Protests were recorded in Brazil between 2020 and 2021, both in favor of and against the president and pandemic management. These protests, or the “social outbreak” (Mayol, 2019), emerged in response to deep disparities, heightened conflicts, political legitimacy issues, and social crises, which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ceron et al., 2021; Nava, 2022). All these events have been directly linked to electoral competition, with the use of social media as one of the main avenues for channeling collective action (Alarcón & Cárdenas, 2021; Grassau et al., 2019).

Additionally, the presidential campaigns in these four countries were marked by intense confrontations between established conservative parties or other political movements and candidates or alliances aligned more closely with left wing ideologies — who ultimately won in each case. In Colombia, the elected president was Gustavo Petro Urrego, an economist and politician who was once part of the now-demobilized M-19 guerrilla group. In Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected for a third term, who initiated his career fighting alongside labor union movements. In Chile, Gabriel Boric won the election after previously serving as a student leader and a member of Congress. In Peru, Pedro Castillo — a teacher and union leader from a rural area — was elected. All these victories reflected the broader trend of left-wing advances across various Latin American countries, though each occurred under different circumstances (Lampter, 2023).

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive exploration of candidates and political parties' strategies in leveraging the Facebook platform because it was the most used SMP. This involves inductively assessing differences in their use, by new and established political actors, for effectively engaging, fostering political mobilization, and establishing meaningful interactions with the electorate. We also delve into the prevalence of populist rhetoric in the strategies employed by the different political actors, and how it could be associated with the levels of political polarization in the countries being studied.

To achieve these objectives, we rely on the analytical frameworks developed by the Campaigning for Strasbourg project, a methodological approach that has demonstrated its effectiveness in examining online political communication during electoral cycles in Europe (e.g., Haßler et al., 2021). We expect to determine whether the strategies of political SMP usage observed in these South American countries align with global patterns or exhibit distinct features shaped by their unique geographical context.

2. Social Media Platforms and Political Communication in Latin America

The utilization of the internet within electoral campaigns has ignited discussions about candidates' access to these platforms and the potential for engaging in the political process within the online realm (Lusoli, 2005). Additionally, there has been a consideration of how these digital spaces contribute to the shaping of democratic systems (Samuel-Azran et al., 2015).

The dominance of SMP has revitalized these discussions, noting that posts from smaller political groups can sometimes outperform those from larger political parties (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014). For example, Brandao (2022) in Brazil and Doroshenko (2022) in Ukraine propose that, in contexts marked by party system deinstitutionalization, similar to those in Latin America (Mainwaring & Bizarro, 2018; Levitsky et al., 2016), SMP can empower emerging political forces to influence the public sphere and mobilize their supporters.

This dynamic could serve as a test for the equalization hypothesis (Margolis et al., 1999). In this context, the equalization hypothesis posits that smaller candidates, groups, or political parties, including newcomers to electoral processes or those with marginal interests, can actively engage in the public sphere through digital platforms and achieve a reach comparable to that of more established, resourceful, or traditional groups or parties. Conversely, the normalization hypothesis contends that the internet mirrors existing power dynamics and amplifies the advantages of candidates or parties with greater resources (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Studies on SMP have indicated a tendency towards normalization in various geographic settings (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018), including the Latin American context (Cárdenas et al., 2017).

However, it has also been observed that social media platforms like Facebook can serve as useful tools to lessen the structural disadvantages faced by certain political actors, such as their participation in traditional media outlets (Bene, 2023). Furthermore, equalization and normalization may manifest differently across the performance dimensions of a social media platform. For example, equalization might occur in terms of advertising and activity levels, while normalization could be observed in both direct and indirect organic reach (Bene, 2023). In the case of Latin America, there has also been a slight predominance of equalization, since smaller parties are gaining visibility online (Lioy & Contreras, 2024)—this phenomenon is not correlated with the size of the country or its internet penetration rate.

Additionally, it is relevant to uncover disparities in the utilization of digital platforms, particularly Facebook, by candidates and their use for endorsing their candidacies. In Chile and Colombia, more than half of the candidates participated as part of coalitions formed by various forces, whereas in Brazil and Peru, the candidates were backed by political parties of varying institutionalization levels.

- **RQ1:** What are the differences in the use of Facebook based on the type and novelty of the political actor?

2.1. Campaign Strategies on Facebook

Parties and candidates use SMP to perform three basic functions within the framework of electoral campaigns: information dissemination, interaction, and mobilization (Magin et al., 2021). Information refers to one-way message dissemination, interaction involves two-way

communication between candidates or parties and citizens, and mobilization entails actions by supporters or voters in relation to specific party objectives or purposes.

Parties primarily use these platforms for distributing information (Kefford, 2018; Magin et al., 2021; Teixeira de Barros et al., 2022). This is due to their lack of resources and expertise (Kalsnes, 2016), or the weakness of their roots in civil society resulting from weak institutionalization (Temitayo et al., 2021). In South America, this trend is also observed, where SMP are used in a limited way to disseminate information, for vertical and one-way communication processes without promoting dialogue with citizens (Alarcón & Cárdenas, 2021; Cárdenas et al., 2017).

Considering the nature of information dissemination, research analyzing both party advertising and organic communication on Facebook has revealed a trend where, as elections approach, messages tend to be directed primarily towards their supporters and display a predominantly promotional character (Baviera et al., 2022; Ceccobelli, 2018; Power & Mason, 2021; Ridout et al., 2021). Despite the prevailing consensus regarding the dominance of information within party electoral strategies on Facebook, certain scholars posit that new parties attach greater importance to utilizing SMP for the mobilization of voters (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; Lobera & Portos, 2020). Furthermore, partisan politics and contentious politics converge during critical moments of heightened social mobilization, a phenomenon experienced by the four countries under scrutiny in the run-up to the elections.

The significant social mobilizations witnessed in the months and years leading up to the elections were effectively utilized by emerging left-wing political entities. Except for Brazil, these novel left-wing parties secured victory in the elections under scrutiny. Consequently, an expectation arises that these parties will integrate a greater frequency of calls to action within their strategies when compared to their counterparts.

- **H1:** Novel political actors will employ a greater number of calls to action.

2.2. Populist Communication, Negative Campaigning, and Polarization

A growing body of research has examined the rise of populist discourse in electoral campaigns through SMP (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2018; Haßler et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2020; Klinger et al., 2023; Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022). This study builds on evidence of a growing trend in which political communication strategies increasingly adopt populist discourse, particularly among opposition and ideologically extreme parties (Ernst et al., 2017). Over the past decade, political figures employing populist rhetoric have also achieved substantial electoral success across regions (Güvercin, 2022; Nai, 2018).

To frame our analysis, we adopt the ideational approach, which defines populism as a thin-centered ideology portraying society as divided between virtuous people and a corrupt elite competing for political sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In line with this framework, we operationalize populist messages through three dimensions: (a) people-centric appeals to popular sovereignty; (b) anti-elite rhetoric targeting political, economic, or media elites; and (c) exclusionary discourse framing out-groups as threats to the general will (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2018).

Considering this framework, we turn our attention to the South American context, where electoral competition is frequently marked by high polarization, institutional mistrust, and growing disaffection with traditional parties. In such environments, political actors—particularly those situated in opposition or at ideological extremes—may find greater incentives to adopt populist styles of communication. We therefore expect these actors to be more likely to use messages that emphasize popular sovereignty, challenge elite legitimacy, and construct exclusionary narratives around internal or external out-groups. This expectation leads to the following hypothesis:

- **H2:** Opposition and ideologically extreme political actors are more likely to adopt a populist communicative style in their SMP discourse.

The Brazilian, Colombia, Chilean, and Peruvian elections between 2021 and 2022 reveal varying levels of political fragmentation and polarization (see Table 1). For example, the 2022 elections in Brazil culminated in a narrow victory for the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – *PT*, in Portuguese) led by Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, a former left-wing president who made a remarkable comeback after being imprisoned for corruption charges that were later overturned by the Supreme Court (Harrison & Zissis, 2022). The 2021 Peruvian presidential elections resulted in a closely contested runoff between Pedro Castillo from the Free Peru Party (*Perú Libre* – *PL*, in Spanish), a left-wing teacher and union leader, and Keiko Fujimori from the Popular Force Party (*Fuerza Popular* – *FP*, in Spanish), a right-wing populist and daughter of former president Alberto Fujimori (Londoño et al., 2022). Colombia's 2022 presidential elections witnessed a historic victory for the leftist Gustavo Petro from the Historic Pact for Colombia Party (*Pacto Histórico por Colombia* – *PHxC*, in Spanish), a former guerrilla fighter and long-time senator who pledged to transform the country's economic system (Parkin Daniels, 2021). In Chile, the 2021 presidential elections resulted in a resounding win for Gabriel Boric from the Social Convergence Party (*Convergencia Social* – *CS*, in Spanish), a young leftist leader who promised to rewrite the constitution and address social demands (Londoño et al., 2022).

Table 1. Number of candidates and respective winners of the presidential elections

Country	Election Year	Candidates ^a	Extreme Parties ^b	New Parties ^c	Winner
Brazil	2022	4	1	0	Lula da Silva (PT)
Peru	2021	8	3	4	Pedro Castillo (PL)
Colombia	2022	4	2	4	Gustavo Petro (PHxC)
Chile	2021	6	2	3	Gabriel Boric (CS)

^a Only candidates who surpassed the 3% threshold of the vote were included. ^b Parties in the first and last quintile of ideological positioning (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2022; Wiesehomeier et al., 2021). ^c Parties participating for the first time in presidential election.

The fact that 36,4% of the actors competing in the presidential races could be identified as radical parties points toward a significant level of political polarization in these countries. Previous studies have shown that levels of political polarization tend to correlate with populist discourse (Fenoll, 2022; Klinger et al., 2023; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which impedes the search for consensual solutions to political challenges. In this sense, populist actors have taken advantage of SMP to disseminate its messages, which can sometimes have elements of misinformation, and exploit hate speech, such as racist, gender or anti-diversity stereotypes. This can enhance polarization and increase unsolved tensions in the country (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022).

- **H3:** Political actors in countries with higher levels of polarization increase populist messages on Facebook.

3. Method

To comprehend the strategies employed by political actors on Facebook in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru, we conducted an analysis of posts published by parties/coalitions and candidates who garnered more than 3% of the vote in the first round of elections held in the four countries between 2021 and 2022 (see Supplementary File).

Utilizing the CrowdTangle (2022), a Meta-owned tool, we collected all posts published in the four weeks leading up to the election day in each country: Brazil (date of data collection: February 10th, 2022), Colombia (May 5th, 2022), Chile (November 21st, 2021), and Peru (April 14th, 2021). A stratified random sample of 2,930 posts, drawn from a total of 8,096 posts, is coded.

This sample corresponds to 50% of the publications, after matching the maximum number of posts for each political actor with the average number of publications for their country. This procedure is used to generate more homogeneous groups, as some candidates and parties published a disproportionately high number of messages during the election campaign.

Our study employs a quantitative content analysis methodology, taking individual posts as the unit of analysis. The coding scheme draws from the design used by Haßler et al. (2021) to analyze political communication on SMP (see https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF). Manual coding encompassed all aspects of Facebook posts, including visual elements, such as the primary image (if multiple) and the initial minute of videos. To ensure the reliability of manual coding, a test was conducted among coders in each country using a random sample of 100 posts. Holsti CR test results confirm a shared understanding of the coded categories within each country (all Holsti $\geq .7$), validating the study's reliability scores (Igartua, 2006; Neuendorf, 2016).

To address RQ1 and explore differences in Facebook usage among new political actors, we analyze candidates', parties' and coalitions' presence in the platform during their respective electoral campaigns, along with post counts.

To investigate the user-centric strategy's type (H1), the 'calls to action' variable categorizes posts featuring: 1) calls to mobilization (encouraging sharing or voting); 2) calls to interact (prompting comments or direct interactions with politicians); and 3) calls to inform (urging following of politician/party online social network channels or seeking additional media information). The call-to-action index measures the extent of this strategy: 0 (no calls to action) to 3 (all three types). To discern that new political actors employ more calls to action than others, we label parties and coalitions participating for the first time in presidential elections as 'new' (see Supplementary File).

For establishing the parties' ideological orientation in the four countries (H2), we refer to expert surveys providing this information. Data for Brazil, Chile, and Colombia originates from the Wiesehomeier et al. (2021)'s database, while Peruvian parties' ideological classification is drawn from the 2020 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Latin America (CHES-LA) values (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2022).

To gauge the level of populist communication on Facebook posts (H2, H3), we developed a populism index, evaluating the presence of three key elements of this rhetoric: defining the "pure" people as a unified group distinct from the elite; discrediting the elite (political/economic/media); and targeting out-groups (de Vreese et al., 2018). Thus, each of these elements contributes one point to the index, resulting in a range from 0 (no populist communication) to 1 (all three elements present).

Finally, to ascertain whether polarization amplifies the utilization of populist rhetoric and negative campaigning (H3), we categorized the four countries based on their political polarization levels (Coppedge et al., 2023, 2022): Brazil exhibits the highest polarization (.94) among the analyzed South American countries, followed by Peru (.79), Chile (.71), and Colombia (.62).

4. Results

The results unveil a trend towards equalization in the use of Facebook among new Latin American political actors (RQ1). Political forces participating in elections for the first time are more active on Facebook and publish a higher percentage of posts (53.9%) compared to more experienced actors (46.1%). Table 2 presents the total frequency of posts categorized by the type of political actor and their novelty in the elections.

Table 2. Frequency of posts according to actor type and novelty

Election		Type of political actor						Total	
		Candidates		Parties		Coalitions			
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
First election	No	884	46.4%	467	49.6%	0	0%	1351	46.1%
	Yes	1020	53.6%	475	50.4%	84	100%	1579	53.9%
Total		1904	100%	942	100%	84	100%	2930	100%

Source: Authors.

Our data also demonstrates that candidates are more prolific than parties, which aligns with the type of election and, in general terms, the personalism characterizing the party systems in the four countries. Results also reveal the marginal role that coalitions play in the communication strategy on Facebook. Out of the eight coalitions participating in the elections across the four countries (six of them being first-time participants), only two have an active account on this social network during the campaign. Posts on coalition accounts constitute merely 2% of the total.

Table 3 provides the mean of the call-to-action index present in the posts of the political actors analyzed, categorized by their novelty. To test whether newer political actors make more calls to action than the rest (H1), a Student's *t*-test for independent samples is conducted. The results reveal that the differences between the novel parties and the other parties are not statistically significant ($t_{2928} = -1.16$; $p = .25$).

Table 3. Mean of call-to-action index according to novelty

First elections	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
No	1351	.40	.574	.016
Yes	1579	.43	.577	.015

Source: Authors.

To test whether parties in opposition and those more ideologically extreme employ a higher level of populist communication, a two-way ANOVA test is conducted with these factors as independent variables. Table 4 provides the mean populism index present in the posts of the analyzed political actors, categorized by ideological extremism and institutional position.

Table 4. Populism Index According to Ideological Extremism and Institutional Position

Institutional position	Ideological Extremism	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Government	Moderate	.12	.450	88
	Extremist	.13	.448	239
	Total	.13	.448	327
Opposition	Moderate	.18	.506	1878
	Extremist	.22	.559	725
	Total	.19	.522	2603
Total	Moderate	.18	.504	1966
	Extremist	.20	.535	964
	Total	.19	.514	2930

Source: Authors.

Our results indicate that there is no interaction effect between the two independent variables [$F(1, 2926) = 0.28$, $p = .597$]. The extremism of political actors also does not affect the type of communication used [$F(1, 2926) = 0.63$, $p = .429$]. However, the main effect of institutional

position has a statistically marginal influence on the increase of populist communication style [$F(1, 2926) = 4.62, p = .032$]. The discourse of opposition political actors contains a higher level of populist elements ($M = 0.19$) compared to those in government ($M = 0.13$), regardless of their level of ideological radicalism.

Table 5 shows the results of the mean and standard deviation of the populism index, by country. To test if the level of populist communication used is related to the level of polarization in each country (H3), we conducted a one-way ANOVA. Given the heterogeneity of variances, we performed the Welch test for equality of means with a positive result [$F(3, 1510.12) = 22.412, p < .001$]. The mean values (see Table 5) reveal that the publications of Brazilian political actors have the lowest level of populist index ($M = .07$) and Colombia has the highest ($M = .26$). The post hoc Games-Howell test indicates that the differences between Brazil and the rest of the countries are statistically significant. These data contrast with the polarization of these countries, where the opposite phenomenon is observed: Brazil leads the political polarization index (.94) and Colombia ranks last (.62). Thus, political actors in countries with higher polarization use less populist communication and vice versa.

Table 5. Mean for Index of Populism by Country

Country	N	M	SD.	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Brazil	601	.07	.341	.014	.05	.10	0	3
Colombia	549	.26	.572	.024	.21	.31	0	3
Chile	864	.17	.467	.016	.14	.20	0	3
Peru	916	.23	.596	.020	.19	.27	0	3
Total	2930	.19	.514	.010	.17	.20	0	3

Source: Authors.

5. Discussion

This study focuses on the characteristics of digital political communication in Latin America, highlighting both the shared elements among the four analyzed countries and the differences detected among them. Our data demonstrates that emerging political groups have a greater presence on Facebook, reflecting a trend towards equalization (RQ1). This stands in contrast to studies in European contexts where the hypothesis of normalization has predominated (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018). In these cases, the use of SMP like Facebook for disseminating campaign messages appears to counter the costs and regulations for accessing traditional media faced by recently emerging political groups.

However, it does not appear that emerging political actors are taking greater advantage of SMP's affordances for interacting with their followers on Facebook (H1). These findings are particularly relevant in the context of intense social mobilization experienced in the four countries in the period leading up to the elections. While this research does not analyze the effect of mobilizations on the use of Facebook by parties and candidates, the results raise questions about contemporary debates regarding the relationship between partisan political communication and contentious politics.

The institutional position of political parties seems to condition the use of populist messages (H2), being more intense in opposition forces as a strategy to access power (Ernst et al., 2017). There is also evidence of populist communication beyond ideological extremes, partially contradicting H2 and confirming the spread of this strategy to more moderate political actors (Fenoll, 2022). This indicates that populism is not limited to ideological fringes. As Zulianello and Larsen (2023) note, populist discourse can take a "valence" form, grounded in moral

appeals and anti-elite narratives that cut across the traditional left–right divide. In these cases, parties stress widely shared values such as anti-corruption or political renewal, rather than over ideological confrontation. Moreover, in political systems marked by party fragmentation, low institutional trust, and widespread citizen disaffection—as in several countries studied—moderate actors may use populist language strategically to signal responsiveness and connect with alienated publics (Handlin, 2017). In this context, Chile and Peru illustrate how populist discourse can extend beyond ideological extremes and become part of mainstream political communication.

The results related to H3 challenge our initial assumption that higher levels of political polarization at the national level correlate with more intensive use of populist discourse. Contrary to expectations, the country with the highest level of polarization (Brazil) had the lowest levels of populist communication, while Colombia, ranked as the least polarized, had the highest levels. While this may reflect limitations in how expert indices such as V-Dem capture polarization, it also suggests the need to reconsider the proposed linear relationship between systemic polarization and populist discourse (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). It is possible that in highly polarized contexts, electoral bases are already consolidated, reducing the incentive to resort to populist appeals; while in more open or transitional scenarios, populism might be useful strategies to generate identification and loyalty among voters, as well as to delegitimize rivals (Roberts, 2021).

Moreover, the polarization index may not adequately reflect the social and political dynamics that can encourage or inhibit the use of populism (McCoy et al., 2018). An index rating on the level of polarization of the system at a given moment may not capture changes in competitive conditions and competitors, especially in such dynamic party systems as those analyzed here. In this sense, it's worth noting that when calculating the level of polarization using the percentage of votes extremist parties receive in the first electoral round in each country, the scale measuring the level of polarization is dramatically altered. Under this modified measurement instrument, Colombia would be the most polarized country in the electoral context (64%), followed by Peru (44%), Brazil (43%), and Chile (41%). Our results of the test assessing the relationship between polarization and populism would be consistent with Colombia's position on the scale. Colombian political actors have the highest level of populist index, while Brazil and Chile have the lowest.

6. Conclusion

This research also serves to corroborate the spread of populist discourse among the examined Latin American political actors and to contribute to the body of research advancing the analysis of populism in the region (Valenzuela Tábora et al., 2023). The populist discourse strategy is not confined to extremes and is also present in the discourse of more moderate opposition forces, which seek to lead social discontent by challenging the status quo (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

By finding evidence that supports the hypothesis of equalization, the potential of SMP in South America to facilitate the inclusion of new actors in public discourse and electoral competition is suggested. However, this occurs within a context of party deinstitutionalization, reflected in the personalized or individualistic nature of political communication (Van Aelst et al., 2012), where candidates become more important than parties or coalitions during the election campaign.

Regarding national differences, the specifics of social mobilization in Chile and Colombia in the period before elections, as well as competition characteristics, may be associated with a greater focus on substantive issues during the election campaign. This type of strategy can promote increased polarization if divisive agenda issues are highlighted, especially if accompanied by populist messages and negative campaigning. The case of Colombia might be associated with

the permeability of political actors' discourse to the social momentum, where preference for more extreme candidates could be reflected in the higher frequency of populist messages. In all cases, the fluidity of party systems complicates the assessment of the impact of social mobilization and the evaluation of polarization implications, as indicated in the findings of this research.

This research contributes to the study of political communication strategies within the framework of election campaigns through Facebook in democracies other than those in more developed countries. The comparative content analysis based on the coding scheme used in the international research network DigiWorld allowed for the identification of significant differences in the use of Facebook and populist communication in Latin America. Likewise, it led to uncovering particularities at both the party and country levels, which suggest questions for future investigations.

The study has some limitations worth mentioning. Firstly, it only analyzes election campaigns on Facebook, limiting the generalizability of the results to other contexts of political communication. Secondly, by investigating only the first round of presidential elections on a single social media platform, nuances in strategies used during other stages of the electoral process and the relationship between online and offline communication strategies, as well as between Facebook and those developed through traditional media, are lost. Finally, for the classification of new political actors, it has been considered that they are running for election for the first time. It should be noted that within the new coalitions there may be parties or candidates who have previously participated in other elections. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Future studies should verify the validity of these findings on other social media platforms to determine if there are distinct strategies tailored to each platform, resulting from the professionalization processes of political campaigns in the region (Restrepo Echavarría & González Tule, 2021). Furthermore, further research should verify whether this trend continues in Latin America or if there is a gradual increase in populist discourse within political debates, as observed in other Western democracies. Additionally, it is advisable to analyze future elections with a view to assessing the impact of the post-pandemic context on political discourse on SMP. Lastly, expanding the research to other South American countries, or even Latin American countries, is necessary to establish whether the findings are limited exclusively to these four countries or if they are representative of this geographical area.

7. Contributions

Roles	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3	Author 4	Author 5	Author 6
Conceptualization	x	x	x	x	x	x
Formal analysis	x					
Fundraising						
Project management	x					
Research	x	x	x	x	x	x
Methodology	x					
Data processing	x					
Resources	x					
Software	x					
Supervision	x					
Validation	x					
Data visualization	x		x			
Writing - original draft	x	x	x	x	x	x
Writing - review and editing	x	x	x	x	x	

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Supplementary File

Table of parties analyzed by country

Country	Party account	Type	Candidate account	Analyzed posts	New	Ideology*	% of vote
Chile	Partido Republicano	Party	José Antonio Kast	88	Yes	Far right	27,91
Chile	Convergencia social	Party	Gabriel Boric	177	Yes	Left	25,83
Chile	Partido de la Gente	Party	Franco Parisi	209	Yes	Right	12,8
Chile	Chile Podemos Más	-	Sebastián Sichel	67	No	Far right	12,78
Chile	Partido Demócrata Cristiano	Party	Yasna Provoste	127	No	Right	11,6
Chile	Partido Progresista	Party	Marco Enríquez-Ominami	196	No	Left	7,6
Colombia	Pacto Histórico	Coalition	Gustavo Petro	169	Yes	Far left	40.34
Colombia	Liga de gobernantes anticorrupción	Party	Rodolfo Hernández	193	Yes	Right	28.17
Colombia	Coalición Equipo por Colombia	-	Federico Gutiérrez	60	Yes	Far right	23,91
Colombia	Coalición centro esperanza	Party	Sergio Fajardo	127	Yes	Left	4,20
Brazil	Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT)	Party	Lula	210	No	Left	48,03
Brazil	Partido Liberal (PL)	Party	Jair Bolsonaro	172	No	Far right	43.20
Brazil	Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB)	Party	Simone Tebet	67	No	Right	4.16
Brazil	Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT)	Party	Ciro Gomes	152	No	Left	3,04
Perú	Perú Libre	Party	Castillo	165	No	Far left	18.92
Perú	Fuerza Popular	Party	Fujimori	59	No	Far right	13.41
Perú	Renovación Popular	Party	López Aliaga	184	Yes	Far right	11.75
Perú	Avanza País	Party	Hernando de Soto	165	No	Right	11.63
Perú	Acción Popular	Party	Yonhy Lescano	21	No	Right	9,07
Perú	Juntos por el Perú	Coalition	Verónica Mendoza	51	Yes	Left	7.86
Perú	Alianza Para El Progreso	Party	César Acuña	115	No	Right	6,02
Perú	Podemos Perú	Party	Daniel Urresti	156	Yes	Right	5.64

Source: Authors. Based on Wiesehomeier et al. (2021) and Martínez-Gallardo et al. (2022).

