

A Populist Zeitgeist? The Communication Strategies of Western and Latin American Political Leaders on Facebook

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Abstract

By focusing on the Facebook activities of eighty-three political leaders from twenty-six Western and Latin American countries, we analyze their reliance on elements of populist communication for their competitive strategies. By integrating both a communication-centered and an actor-centered approach to the study of populism, we tackle four major research questions: Do populist and non-populist leaders adopt similar communication strategies on Facebook? Is there any evidence of the so-called populist zeitgeist in such arena? What different combinations between the so-called three “elements of populist communication” characterize the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook? Are there major differences between Western and Latin American leaders? The results of our analysis provide an important contribution to the existing literature on populism and political communication in different respects. First, the populist zeitgeist “thesis” does not apply to the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook. Second, the spread of elements of populist communication in Latin America is considerably lower in comparison with Western countries, irrespective of party ideological background. Finally, this paper identifies all the logical combinations that can occur between the interplay of the different elements of populist communication, thus enabling the classification of the communication strategies employed by political leaders on Facebook.

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Introduction

At the turn of the new millennium, Cas Mudde (2004) argued that the growing success of populist parties had triggered the emergence of a “populist zeitgeist” in Western Europe, a development consisting of the increasing adoption of populist messages, or rhetoric, by mainstream parties and politicians. Although populism is often considered contagious (e.g., Bale et al. 2010), it is somewhat surprising that the literature has not systematically tested the populist zeitgeist hypothesis on empirical grounds, with the only noticeable exception being a comparative analysis of election manifestos (Rooduijn et al. 2014). However, the actual test of the so-called populist zeitgeist hypothesis should be performed at the level of *political rhetoric*, in particular by assessing whether a process of homogenization or differentiation between the different political actors (i.e., populist and non-populist actors) is actually taking place. As Mudde (2004: 563; 2016: 54) himself explicitly maintains, his hypothesis referred to the level of political communication: “While mainstream political parties may not imitate populist parties in their policies, mainstream politicians do imitate populist politicians in their rhetoric, and not only during election campaigns.”

The importance of assessing whether the populist zeitgeist hypothesis holds true on empirical grounds is especially evident in the light of the widespread diffusion of social media at the mass level (Xenos et al. 2014), in comparison with the time in which Mudde (2004) first introduced this well-known expression. Indeed, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter may appear fertile breeding grounds for populist messages to flourish, as they allow politicians to select and pursue specific strategies without the etiquettes and regulations of more traditional communication channels, such as television and radio, and to build a direct and unmediated relationship with followers and, in this way, with the broader pool of potential voters. This point appears particularly important, as populist politics is particularly prone to personality (Taggart 2000).

So far, the populist zeitgeist hypothesis has largely relied on anecdotal or impressionistic evidence from individual cases (e.g., Mair 2002; Mudde 2004); it has not been systematically tested on empirical grounds through the adoption of a broad comparative perspective and by focusing on the crucial dimension for its assessment: namely, the communication strategies of political actors. In this respect, the present paper provides the first comprehensive empirical analysis of the populist zeitgeist hypothesis by focusing on the Facebook pages of eighty-three political leaders from twenty-six Western and Latin American countries. The analysis of the strategies adopted by political leaders is performed by combining an actor-centered and a communication-centered approach to populism (see INTRODUCTION to this special issue; Stanyer et al. 2017), thus making it possible to establish both variations *in kind*—that is by identifying the actors presenting a populist ideological “core” (Mudde 2004)—as well as variations *in degree*—by viewing populism as a communication

style that can be employed by *any* political actor, irrespective of the actor's ideological profile (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

The results of this paper indicate that the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook are not permeated by a populist zeitgeist, as the leaders of parties that present a populist ideological core rely to a considerably higher degree on elements of populist communication in comparison with other leaders. In addition, the results indicate that the usage of populist messages in Latin America is considerably lower in comparison with Western countries, irrespective of party ideology. Finally, this paper identifies all the logical combinations that can occur between the interplay of the different elements of populist communication, enabling the classification of the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook.

Integrating the Actor-Centered and Communication-Centered Approaches to Populism

As Reinemann et al. (2017: 16) argue, “all definitions of populism agree that the . . . construction of an aggregate-level in-group or appeals and references to such a group lie at the very core of populism.” This property has been generally defined as *people-centrism*, which corresponds to an appeal to “the people,” viewed as a morally superior, homogeneous, and monolithic entity. At the same time, the construction of an “in-group” identity in the form of “the people” implies the determination of “its borders and out-groups are constructed” (Reinemann et al. 2017: 20). Such out-groups are perceived as homogeneous and uniform; they can be defined through “vertical comparisons” between “the people” and variously defined elites (political, cultural, economic) and/or by the means of “horizontal comparisons” between “the people” and non-elite groups, such as ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Reinemann et al. 2017: 20–21).

However, despite broad agreement on such key features of populism, the existing literature is divided between two main approaches to the study of the phenomenon (Stanyer et al. 2017). On one hand, especially in the field of communication research, populism is seen as a discursive style that can be employed by *any* political actor (e.g., Hawkins 2010; Jagers and Walgrave 2007), an approach that makes it possible to identify different *degrees of populism*. On the other hand, party politics scholars in particular follow the so-called actor-centered approach, which makes it possible to establish an explicit distinction between the actors for whom populism represents a core ideological concept (Mudde 2004, 2007)—that is, a central element of its belief system and identity—and the others, thus establishing differences *in kind*.

Our view is that, although such competing approaches to populism present important differences both from a theoretical and methodological point of view, they present evident similarities and points of connections and overlapping (see Gidron and Bonikowski 2013: 15). For this reason, in our analysis we integrate the two approaches, as studying populism following an actor-centered, or ideational approach (Mudde 2004), does not preclude the possibility that elements of the populist message (Aalberg et al. 2017) may be found in the communication strategies of any political actor,

irrespective of the actor's ideological background. In particular, we tackle this point as an empirical issue, rather than excluding *a priori* one of the two approaches.

Analyzing the Communication Strategies of Political Leaders on Facebook: Research Design

Despite the increasing success of populist parties, the widespread of social media at the mass level (e.g., Xenos et al. 2014) and the phenomenon of personalization of politics (e.g., Karvonen 2010), the existing literature has not explored whether the political communication of the leaders of populist and non-populist parties is experiencing a process of homogenization or differentiation. Significantly, this point appears crucial to assess whether a populist zeitgeist actually permeates the communication of political leaders, who are arguably the most influential and visible actors in contemporary party politics (e.g., Garzia 2014).

Among the various possible arenas for testing the hypothesis of the populist zeitgeist, we decided to focus on Facebook, as it represents the most widespread social medium in the world and, as such, a *potentially* powerful tool at the disposal of political leaders for competitive purposes (e.g., Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015; Larsson 2016). Indeed, the relevance of Facebook as a communicative arena is clearly indicated by its impressive diffusion at the mass-level across the world, as it is the most used social medium worldwide, with around two billion citizens using it on a monthly basis.¹ Significantly, in a number of Western and non-Western countries more than 50 percent of the citizens who have access to the Internet use Facebook²; and on August 27, 2015, for the first time, more than one billion citizens accessed it on the same day.³

The relevance of focusing on Facebook to test the hypothesis of the populist zeitgeist is also due to other crucial reasons in addition to its widespread diffusion at the mass level. Social media provides a direct, immediate, flexible channel to develop “a culture of the ‘common sense’ ordinariness,” to echo Pankowski (2010), a key for populist success especially when such parties present a mediagenic or charismatic leader (Mudde 2007: 251). In addition, the unmediated nature of communication on social media can easily feed the emotional identification of voters with populist actors (Aalberg et al. 2017; Engesser et al. 2017), given the “moralistic rather than programmatic” emphasis of the latter and their rather common reliance on polarizing personalities that act as “taboo breakers and fighters against political correctness” (Mudde 2004: 554).

Within this context, the spectacular breakthrough of new populist actors of different varieties, such as the Five Stars Movement in Italy, *Podemos* in Spain and Alternative for Germany, as well as the electoral exploits of older formations such as the French National Front, Syriza in Greece and the Sweden Democrats brings a double strategic dilemma for mainstream political actors: on one hand, the choice of whether to establish cooperative interactions with the populists in the party system or, on the contrary, to opt for their marginalization (Zulianello 2017); on the other, the option between adapting their communication strategies as a response to the populist challenge or maintaining a substantial differentiation (e.g., Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011).

In this respect, a solid cross-country analysis of the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook to test the hypothesis of the populist zeitgeist requires setting criteria capable of including a considerable portion of the major, most relevant, and well-known political figures at the mass level across the different national political systems. Thus, our analysis focuses on twenty-six countries from different geopolitical areas (fourteen from Western Europe, eleven from Latin America, and the United States), and it includes the political leaders who possessed (and did not delete) a Facebook page during the period of interest, and who published at least fifty posts during the same period, to ensure comparability across the cases. In the case of Western European countries, the relevance criteria allow us to include the following: (1) the head of government; (2) the leading candidates or leaders of the parties that in the national elections prior or during the period under investigation received at least 10 percent of the votes in Western Europe, while a threshold of 15 percent⁴ of the votes was used for Latin America and the United States; (3) the leaders of the political parties that although not matching criteria 1 or 2, possess considerable competitive relevance, especially in terms of their capacity to alter the direction of political competition, and that qualify as relevant anti-system parties (Sartori 1976; Zulianello 2017).

The Facebook pages of the political leaders meeting at least one of the above-mentioned criteria were analyzed over a twenty-six-month time-frame (between September 1, 2012, and October 31, 2014), by focusing on the period in which each individual was *effectively* the leader of her or his party, or an official presidential candidate. This research strategy allows us to include forty-seven political leaders from fourteen Western European countries, three from United States, and thirty-three leaders from eleven Latin American countries in the present analysis.

Netvizz, a Facebook application, was used to download all the posts published on the Facebook pages of interest. Out of the 104,326 posts identified by Netvizz, 24,240 posts (23.2 percent of the total) were manually coded through a classical content analysis by two extensively trained coders⁵ using a codebook.⁶ It is important to underline that coders analyzed all the various types of posts that can be shared on Facebook, such as texts, photos, videos, and links. This made it possible to detect the full range of variation of the communication strategies over the dimensions of interest, and to provide a comprehensive and systematic overview of online communication. Given the considerable number of data at hand, the content analysis was performed on a subset of randomly selected posts.

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, focus is placed on the analysis of whether and to what extent the Facebook activities of the eighty-three leaders present the so-called “elements of populist communication” identified by the communication-centered literature (Reinemann et al. 2017). In particular, within each Facebook post, we assess if one or more of the following properties were present:

1. *People-centrism*: Namely a direct and explicit reference to “the people,” its values, and/or popular sovereignty;
2. *Anti-elitism*: Defined as an explicit attack on “the elites,” who are portrayed as an homogeneous power bloc (i.e., the markets, the banks or bankers,

supranational institutions such as the European Union, the political class, the technocrats, etc.);

3. *Non-elite out-groups*: Which point to an exclusionary conception of “the people,” defined in “negative terms” through the horizontal comparison with the so-called “dangerous others” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008), particularly immigrants, ethnic, or religious minorities.

In a second analytical step, we then follow an actor-centered approach by operating a major distinction between the leaders of parties presenting a populist core, for which the latter represents a crucial element of their internal and external identity (Mudde 2004, 2007) on one hand, and the leaders of non-populist formations, on the other. In particular, we share the view that the analysis of populist communication should include both actors that present a populist core and non-populist formations to make valid and solid comparisons, as well as to avoid selection bias (see Aalberg et al. 2017; Bos et al. 2011). Accordingly, on the grounds of secondary sources, complemented with expert interviews for the Latin American leaders, twenty-two cases are classified as populist (see Table 1).

By integrating the communication-centered and actor-centered approach, in this paper, we tackle four major research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Do populist and non-populist leaders adopt similar communication strategies on Facebook?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Is there any evidence of populist zeitgeist in such arena?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What different combinations between the so-called three “elements of populist communication” (Reinemann et al. 2017) characterize the communication strategies of political leaders on Facebook?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): Are there major differences between Western and Latin American leaders?

RQ1 follows a communication-centered approach to the study of populism and aims to establish the variations in degree in terms of the usage of the allegedly “elements of populist communication” across the whole set of the leaders under investigation. RQ2 complements the communication-centered approach with a focus on the individual actors. More specifically, it integrates the assessment of the variations of degree identified through RQ1 through an explicit comparison between the leaders of formations presenting a populist ideological core and non-populist actors. This allows us to test the thesis of the so-called populist zeitgeist in an explored arena, namely Facebook communication, through a broad comparative perspective. RQ3 identifies the different types of communication strategies adopted by political leaders, thus enabling their classification. Finally, RQ4 provides a broad comparison between the two major geopolitical areas under analysis by assessing the different diffusion of the elements of populist communication in Western countries, on one hand, and Latin America, on the other.

Empirical Results

The empirical analysis reveals that only 1.9 percent of the 24,240 posts analyzed present at least one “element of populist communication” following the communication-centered approach (Table 1). Such a limited frequency appears to be influenced particularly by the fact that around half of the leaders under analysis (forty out of eighty-three) never published a single post characterized by the properties of people-centrism, anti-elitism, or negative references to non-elite out-groups. However, a closer inspection to the data suggests that substantial differences emerge across the cases.

On one hand, significant variations occur between the communication strategies employed on Facebook by Western and Latin American leaders. Indeed, the analysis reveals that the leaders belonging to the former geopolitical area rely more on elements of populist communication than the latter do, and do so irrespectively of their ideological background. This is indicated by the different average number of posts containing at least one element of populist communication (2.2 percent in the case of Western leaders in comparison to only the 0.6 percent of the Latin American cases), the median values (median 0.4 percent for Western leaders and 0.0 percent for Latin America), as well as by the results of the independent-samples t test ($t = 2.829$; $p = .006$).

On the other hand, the analysis clearly indicates that communication strategies of the leaders of populist formations are more consistently and significantly centered on at least one element of populism in contrast to the leaders of non-populist formations. Indeed, the aggregate data suggest that whereas the Facebook contents published by the leaders of populist formations present an average of 4.5 percent of posts containing one or more elements of populist communication, the average for non-populist leaders is a mere 0.5 percent. A similar picture emerges from the median values (3.3 percent for the populists; 0.0 percent for the non-populists), and an independent-samples t test ($t = 3.479$; $p = .002$) further highlights the substantial differences in the communication strategies between the two groups of leaders.

The argument can be further explored by focusing on the leaders whose communication strategies are characterized by a significant usage of elements of populist communication. Although only four cases present a double-digit percentage in terms of frequency of the elements of populist communication—Le Pen (with at least one element present in the 20.4 percent of the posts), Strache (14.2 percent), Grillo (11.0 percent), and Farage (10.1 percent)—it is possible to set a less restrictive and reasonable threshold to deem the adoption of such communicative strategies significant. Our choice is to set a benchmark value⁷ similar to the one identified by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011: 1277) in their analysis; in particular, we consider those cases in which at least 4 percent of the posts published contained the properties of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and/or references to non-elite out-groups as leaders presenting a “significant” usage of elements of populist communication. *Prima facie*, the frequency of the usage of elements of populist communication by the leaders of formations with a populist ideological core appears lower than expected. However, considering values higher than 4 percent to be an indication of a significant usage of populist message

Table 1. Percentage of Facebook Posts Including at Least One Element of Populist Communication.

Leader	Country	% of Posts Presenting at Least One Element of Populist Communication	Leader	Country	% of Posts Presenting at Least One Element of Populist Communication
LE PEN	France	20.4	Ayrault	France	0.0
STRACHE	Austria	14.2	ADAMS	Ireland	0.0
GRILLO	Italy	11.0	Beke	Belgium	0.0
FARAGE	United Kingdom	10.1	Di Rupo	Belgium	0.0
DAHL	Denmark	7.6	Epifani	Italy	0.0
BERLUSCONI	Italy	6.2	Glawischnig	Austria	0.0
LUCKE	Germany	5.6	Kenny	Ireland	0.0
JENSEN	Norway	4.7	Letta	Italy	0.0
IGLESIAS	Spain	4.6	Lofven	Sweden	0.0
TSIPRAS	Greece	4.3	Merkel	Germany	0.0
Bersani	Italy	3.7	Rajoy	Spain	0.0
CORREA	Ecuador	3.6	Renzi	Italy	0.0
Miliband	United Kingdom	3.6	Rinne	Finland	0.0
GUTIERREZ	Ecuador	3.0	Rutte	Netherlands	0.0
Monti	Italy	2.8	Samaras	Greece	0.0
Campos	Brazil	2.6	Schmidt	Denmark	0.0
Cameron	United Kingdom	2.2	Solberg	Norway	0.0
AKESSON	Sweden	1.8	Stoltenberg	Norway	0.0
Melenchon	France	1.6	Store	Norway	0.0
MADURO	Venezuela	1.5	Urpilainen	Finland	0.0
Ominami	Chile	1.4	Alegre	Paraguay	0.0
Matthei	Chile	1.3	DE KIRCHNER	Argentina	0.0
Fillon	France	1.2	Franco	Paraguay	0.0
Sanchez	Spain	1.0	FUJIMORI	Peru	0.0
Boehner	United States	1.0	Heber	Uruguay	0.0
Gilmore	Ireland	0.9	HUMALA	Peru	0.0
Steinbrück	Germany	0.9	Lacalle	Uruguay	0.0
Rousseff	Brazil	0.7	Lasso	Ecuador	0.0
Silva	Brazil	0.6	Madero	Mexico	0.0
Lopez	Colombia	0.6	Medina	Bolivia	0.0
Clegg	United Kingdom	0.6	Mendez	Chile	0.0
Capriles	Venezuela	0.6	Neves	Brazil	0.0
Kuczynski	Peru	0.5	Nieto	Mexico	0.0
MASSA	Argentina	0.5	Obama	United States	0.0
Cope	France	0.5	OBRADOR	Mexico	0.0
Gabriel	Germany	0.4	Ramirez	Colombia	0.0
Rasmussen	Denmark	0.4	Romney	United States	0.0

(continued)

Table I. (continued)

Leader	Country	% of Posts Presenting at Least One Element of Populist Communication	Leader	Country	% of Posts Presenting at Least One Element of Populist Communication
Rubalcaba	Spain	0.4	Santos	Colombia	0.0
Bachelet	Chile	0.3	TOLEDO	Peru	0.0
Cartes	Paraguay	0.2	Zualaga	Colombia	0.0
GYSI	Germany	0.2			
Bordaberry	Uruguay	0.2			
Faymann	Austria	0.2			
Total posts with elements of populist communication					1.9
Mean_total					1.6 (0.2)
Mean_populist leaders					4.5 (3.3)
Mean_non-populists leaders					0.5 (0.0)
Mean_Western leaders					2.2 (0.4)
Mean_Latin American leaders					0.6 (0.0)

Note. Leaders of populist parties/formations in capital letters; median values in parentheses.

represents a good operative threshold, especially if we consider the specificity of Facebook communication. This is due to the fact that when a political actor communicates on a social media platform such as Facebook, he or she shares significantly more content that serves a more “immediate” and “concrete” function rather than populist mobilization. Indeed, our close inspection of the original data suggests that political leaders often use Facebook simply to communicate their presence on a radio or TV show, to share pictures of a campaigning event or to share clearly personalized content related to their persona that pertains to the popularization and personalization of politics rather than to populist politics. This is why even an apparently low frequency, such as 4 percent of Facebook posts including at least one element of populist communication, actually indicates a noticeable value.

Using the 4 percent threshold, only ten out of eighty-three leaders qualify as engaging to a significant degree with elements of populist communication. Significantly, all such leaders correspond to the leading figures of political parties that present a populist ideological core (Mudde 2004): Le Pen, Strache, Grillo, Farage, Dahl, Berlusconi, Lucke, Jensen, Iglesias, and Tsipras. Significantly, such leaders belong to the different variety of populist parties⁸ identified by the literature: populist radical right (the French Front National, the Austrian Freedom Party, Danish People’s Party), neo-liberal (*Forza Italia*, UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party]), and the Norwegian Progress Party), social populism (*Podemos* and *Syriza*), and even “pure populism” (the Five Stars Movement in Italy) (Mudde 2007; Tarchi 2015).

Furthermore, for thirty-three out of the eighty-three leaders under analysis, it is possible to evaluate whether the usage of elements of populist communication increases during the election campaign. Existing research on the topic suggests that the electoral period affects the communication style of political leaders on Facebook (Ceccobelli 2018), and this leads to the hypotheses that election campaigns (1) may influence the adoption of populist communication; (2) may constitute the phase in which non-populist actors find a strong incentive to rely on people-centric, anti-elitist, and exclusionist messages. However, data reject both hypotheses (Table 2).

On average, the percentage of Facebook posts including at least one element of populist communication remains almost the same (varying from 1.8 percent outside of an election campaign to 1.2 percent during an election campaign), and non-populist leaders do not vary their communicative style at all regarding this dimension (a variation of 0.0 percentage points). Vice versa, the six populist leaders included in Table 2 reduced their use of elements of populist communication by 2.8 percentage points on average. These data were particularly affected by the cases of Grillo, Gutierrez, and Strache, who dropped this value by 6.1, 6.0, and 7.9 percentage points, respectively.

The sixteen election campaigns covered by our analysis allow us to control for a further effect: the move from opposition to government. In all seven such cases (Berlusconi, Gabriel, Jensen, Solberg, Stoltenberg, Bachelet, Cartes), the percentage of posts including at least one element of populist communication does not increase (there is an average reduction of 1.1 percentage points). Interestingly, the two populist leaders transiting to government in the period under analysis (Berlusconi and Jensen) are those that present the highest reduction of populist communication (3.1 percentage points for both the leaders). Furthermore, independent-samples *t* tests on the broader data set indicate that the leaders in office consistently adopt fewer elements of populist communication in comparison with those located to opposition benches ($t = -2.539$; $p = .013$). In addition, although not reaching statistical significance, the data confirm the trend emerging in the cases of Berlusconi and Jensen: the leaders of populist parties in opposition resort to a higher degree to populist communication on Facebook in comparison with the leaders of populist parties in office (average values of 5.3 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively).

Although the results so far provide a clear indication that the leaders of parties presenting a populist core adopt a considerable higher degree of populist communication strategies on Facebook in comparison with non-populist parties, it is noticeable that the actual distribution of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and negative references to non-elite out-groups (as a percentage of the total number of elements of populist communication identified) varies considerably (Figure 1). If we focus on the cases presenting significant degrees in terms of the usage of elements of populist communication (i.e., above 4 percent threshold), some important considerations can be made. First, negative references to non-elite out-groups represent a centrally important element of the communication strategies of parties presenting nativism as a core ideological concept (i.e., the populist radical right, Mudde 2007). However, a neo-liberal populist actor—the leader of the Norwegian Progress Party—presents the highest proportion of references to out-groups, a result in line with the ample existing

Table 2. The Effects of an Election Campaign on Populist Communication.

Leader	% of Posts Including at Least One Element of Populist Communication Outside an Election Campaign	% of Posts Including at Least One Element of Populist Communication During an Election Campaign (Sixty Days Before the Election Day)	Difference
Berlusconi	6.4	5.6	-0.8
Bersani	3.9	2.8	-1.1
Di Rupo	0.0	0.0	0.0
Faymann	0.3	0.0	-0.3
Gabriel	0.5	0.0	-0.5
Grillo	12.1	5.9	-6.1
Jensen	4.1	7.3	3.1
Lofven	0.0	0.0	0.0
Merkel	0.0	0.0	0.0
Solberg	0.0	0.0	0.0
Steinbrück	1.3	0.0	-1.3
Stoltenberg	0.0	0.0	0.0
Strache	16.1	8.2	-7.9
Alegre	0.0	0.0	0.0
Bachelet	0.8	0.0 (0.0)	-0.8
Bordaberry	0.0	0.9	0.9
Capriles	0.5	0.6	0.0
Cartes	0.0	0.9	0.9
Correa	4.3	5.0	0.7
Gutierrez	6.0	0.0	-6.0
Lacalle	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lasso	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lopez	0.9	0.0	-0.9
Matthei	0.0	2.0 (1.6)	2.0
Medina	0.0	0.0	0.0
Neves	0.0	0.0 (0.0)	0.0
Obama	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ominami	1.6	1.0	-0.6
Ramirez	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rousseff	0.0	0.0 (3.0)	0.0
Santos	0.0	0.0 (0.0)	0.0
Silva	0.5	1.0	0.5
Zualaga	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mean	1.8	1.2	-0.6
Mean_populist leaders			-2.8
Mean_non-populist leaders			0.0

Note. This table includes the leaders who posted fifty posts at least both in the sixty days before an Election Day, and in the remaining time period in which they were included in the data set; the values in parentheses indicate the percentage of posts including at least one element of populist communication when a second round took place.

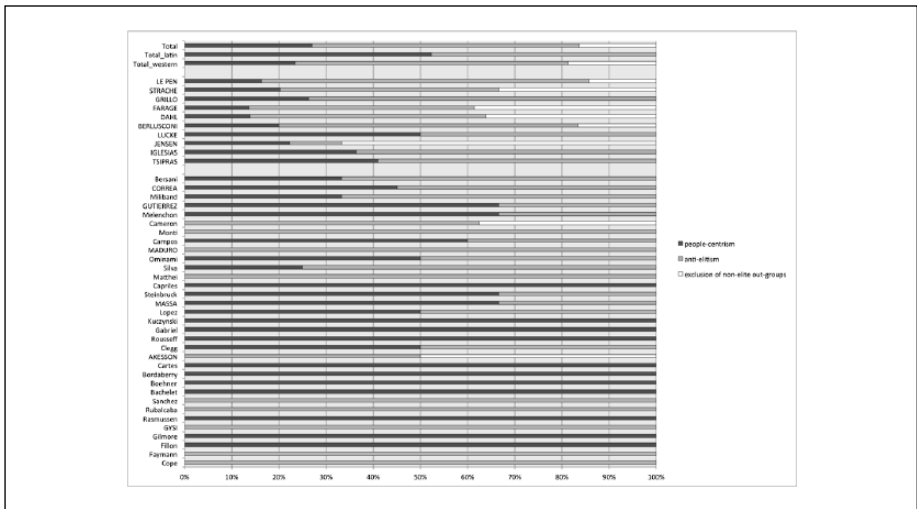


Figure 1. Relative frequency of the different elements of populist communication per leader.

Note. Leaders of populist parties/formations in capital letters.

literature focusing on the aggressive anti-immigration rhetoric adopted by such parties (e.g., Akkerman and Hagelund 2007), although the frequency registered in the case of Berlusconi is somewhat surprising (cf., Geddes 2008). Second, although the actors who use elements of populist communication to a significant degree present a varying weight in terms of the different components, it is important to underline that all the relevant cases indicate a considerable presence of people-centric and anti-elitist elements.

Finally, Table 3 allows us to classify the eighty-three leaders under analysis according to the different logical combinations between the communication strategies of interest. In this respect, it is important to underline that, although Table 3 allows us to place all the political actors within a given cell of the typology, this does not imply that membership in a specific configuration indicates that it is significant, as previously defined. In other words, only the leaders above the 4 percent threshold can be meaningfully considered as good instances of a given configuration. Indeed, the leaders below the 4 percent threshold *are best described* by a specific configuration from a communication-centered approach; however, this *does not* mean that it represents a defining feature of their communication strategies.

The typical populist configuration represented by the presence of people-centrism and anti-elitism is significant for the communication strategies of the leaders of populist parties that do not belong to the populist radical right family: Iglesias, Tsipras, Grillo, and Lucke⁹ (at the time of the present analysis: from September 1, 2012, to October 31, 2014). At the same time, the triad of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups significantly characterizes the communication strategies of

Table 3. A Classification of the Communication Strategies Adopted by Political Leaders on Facebook.

People-Centrism + Anti-Elitism + Exclusion of Non-elite Out-Groups

<u>FARAGE</u>	<u>BERLUSCONI</u>	<u>STRACHE</u>
<u>JENSEN</u>	<u>LE PEN</u>	<u>DAHL</u>
People-Centrism + Anti-Elitism	People-Centrism +Exclusion of Non-elite Out-Groups	Anti-Elitism + Exclusion of Non-elite Out-Groups
<u>TSIPRAS</u>		AKESSON
<u>LUCKE</u>		Cameron
<u>IGLESIAS</u>		
<u>GRILLO</u>		
Steinbruck		
Miliband		
Clegg		
Bersani		
<u>GUTIERREZ</u>		
<u>CORREA</u>		
<u>MASSA</u>		
Silva		
Ominami		
Lopez		
Campos		
People-Centrism	Anti-Elitism	Exclusion of Non-elite Out-Groups
Rasmussen	GYSI	
Gilmore	Sanchez	
Gabriel	Rubalcaba	
Fillon	Monti	
Rousseff	Faymann	
Kuczynski	Cope	
Cartes	<u>MADURO</u>	
Capriles	Matthei	
Boehner		
Bachelet		
Bordaberry		
No Elements of Populist Communication		
ADAMS	Schmidt	Lacalle
Samaras	Solberg	Lasso
Ayrault	Stoltenberg	Madero

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

No Elements of Populist Communication		
Di Rupo	Store	<i>Medina</i>
Epifani	Romney	<i>Mendez</i>
Kenny	Obama	<i>Neves</i>
Letta	Glawischnig	<i>OBRADOR</i>
Lofven	Beke	<i>Ramirez</i>
Merkel	<i>Alegre</i>	<i>TOLEDO</i>
Rajoy	<i>DE KIRCHNER</i>	<i>Zuluaga</i>
Renzi	<i>Franco</i>	<i>Nieto</i>
Rinne	<i>FUJIMORI</i>	<i>Santos</i>
Rutte	<i>Heber</i>	<i>HUMALA</i>

Note. Leaders labeled as populist by the scientific literature are in capital letters; Latin American leaders are in italics; leaders who have included an element of populist communication in at least 4 percent of their total Facebook activity are underscored.

the leaders of all the populist radical right parties under analysis, which in turn constitutes a specific variant of populism in ideational terms—the only exception being the Sweden Democrats (Akesson)—as well as two neo-liberal formations, the Norwegian Progress Party (Jensen) and *Forza Italia* (Berlusconi). Interestingly, some leaders of populist formations identified as following the ideational approach (Mudde 2004) never published a post presenting the property of people-centrism, anti-elitism, or negative references to out-group (Adams, the leader of the Irish *Sinn Fein*, and five Latin American cases, De Kirchner, Humala, Obrador, Toledo, and Fujimori).

Discussion

In contrast to the vast majority of the literature on populist communication, this paper has adopted a broad geographical and empirical scope, as its focus on twenty-six democracies from Western and Latin American countries has enabled the analysis of eighty-three relevant political leaders. Our comparative analysis aimed at answering four main research questions and performed this task by integrating both communication-centered and actor-centered approaches to the study of populism (Stanyer et al. 2017) by assessing both variations *in kind*—that is, by identifying the actors presenting a populist ideological “core” (Mudde 2004)—as well as variations *in degree*—by viewing populism as a communication style that can be employed by *any* political actor, irrespective of their ideological profile (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

Although the existing literature has argued that mainstream politicians may well attempt “to fit the media logic” using elements of populist communication (Bos et al. 2011), our analysis revealed that the so-called populist zeitgeist “thesis” (e.g., Mudde

2004; Rooduijn et al. 2014) does not apply to the Facebook communication strategies of political leaders, as indicated by our focus on three so-called “elements of populist communication” that have been identified by the communication-centered literature (Aalberg et al. 2017). Indeed, the results indicate that the leaders of formations that present a populist ideological core rely to a considerable degree on populist communication strategies in comparison with the leaders of mainstream parties (Table 1). None of the leaders of non-populist parties can be considered as using such strategies in their Facebook activities to a significant degree. The results of the present analysis have also highlighted that, despite the fact that Latin America has often been described as a fertile ground for populist attitudes (e.g., Conniff 2012; Weyland 1999), the diffusion of elements of populist communication on Facebook is very limited and considerably lower there than in the Western leaders under analysis.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that leaders of populist parties do always engage in high degrees of usage of elements of populist communication on Facebook, as indicated by the below-threshold values registered in the cases of Akesson, Gysi, and Adams in Western Europe, and by all the allegedly populist leaders from Latin America. Interestingly, the latter individuals are the leaders of parties whose “democratic credentials” have been often questioned on the grounds of their historical background (e.g., Widfeldt 2008).

Furthermore, it is interesting that, among the leaders of non-populist formations, those presenting the highest degree of references to people-centrism and/or anti-elitism are found in Italy (Bersani and Monti) and the United Kingdom (Miliband), two countries that experienced spectacular breakthroughs of populist formations during the period under analysis (the Five Stars Movement in Italy and UKIP¹⁰), which triggered considerable strategic dilemmas for mainstream parties (Zulianello 2013).

Furthermore, this paper has classified all the eighty-three leaders under analysis into a typology, constructed on the grounds of the eight possible logical combinations between the three elements of populist communication identified by the communication-centered approach (Table 3). Although membership in different types indicates that each leader can be described by a specific configuration of the salient dimensions according to the latter approach, only in the case of ten leaders it can be considered as a significant feature of their communication strategy. Significantly, these ten leaders all belong to political parties that present a populist ideological core, while no non-populist leader can be considered as having adopted a significant degree of elements of populist communication—this is the case during election campaigns as well. Although Jagers and Walgrave (2007) identify four types of populist communication,¹¹ as Aalberg and de Vreese (2017: 15) underline, their approach “exclude[s] several other potential combinations” between the three elements of populist communication. In this respect, we agree with the latter scholars that all the different possible combinations between such communicative elements should be systematically taken into account and that this is of crucial importance in identifying the different types of communication characterizing the political leaders under analysis, both in terms of the different interactions between the various elements of populism and their presence or absence. However, we forcefully maintain that only the two properties of people-centrism and anti-elitism can actually be meaningfully interpreted as “elements of populist communication.” Indeed, the

exclusion of non-elite out-groups per se is not a feature of the populist message, but it is best understood as an additional property by which to identify populist subtypes.

The paper raises important questions and opens important avenues for future research. First the results from the Latin American context may suggest that testing the so-called populist zeitgeist hypothesis should be grounded on a different set of analytical dimensions. Second, it is somewhat surprising that some leaders of ideologically populist parties, albeit a limited number, present very limited reliance on populist strategies in their online activities. Finally, while this paper has explored the Facebook communication strategies of political leaders are permeated by a populist zeitgeist, in particular by determining whether the language of non-populist leaders mimics the language of those who present a populist ideological core, further research should be carried out to determine whether a process of “contagion” is taking place in contemporary politics. In particular, while this paper has focused on a twenty-six-month period, the contagion is best understood as a process that occurs over-time (and over the longer term) and only longitudinal data, employing a wider temporal scope, can be used to appropriately assess the phenomenon. In addition, further research will be necessary to assess whether the impact of the election of Donald Trump and Brexit—two major events—has actually triggered the emergence of a populist zeitgeist, a hypothesis that, nevertheless, our research—conducted before these two critical junctures—strongly rejects.

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Notes

1. See <http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=940609>.
2. See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>.
3. See <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10102329188394581>.
4. The use of different criteria follows the specificities between the European and extra-European countries included in our analysis, as the presidential form of government characterizing the latter political systems suggests a higher “relevance” threshold as well as a differential role for political parties within the broader system.
5. The coders were able to code posts in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian. For Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Greek, Norwegian, and Swedish posts, automated translation services were employed (support from mother tongue colleagues was requested in some circumstances).
6. Intercoder reliability was conducted through a random sample of three hundred posts that were independently coded twice by a different trained coder. The Krippendorff’s alpha ranges from .795 to .875 for the four variables analyzed here (presence of at least one

component of populist communication; presence of people-centrism; presence of anti-elitism; presence of a negative reference to non-elite out-groups), suggesting satisfactory results.

7. Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011: 1277, see Figure 1) suggest that parties scoring around 4 percent in their manual content analysis of election manifestos “score moderately high” in terms of populist paragraphs.
8. The only partial exception is represented by the German AfD, which, during its initial phase, was best understood as a Eurosceptic party. However, in recent years it has become a fully-fledged member of the populist radical right family.
9. On the peculiar populism characterizing Alternative for Germany before its full transformation into a populist radical right party following the departure of Lucke, see Berbuir et al. (2015).
10. The Five Stars Movement became the single-most voted for party in its first electoral participation in 2013 (25.6 percent), while UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) became the most-voted for party in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election (26.6 percent, +10.6 in comparison with 2009).
11. The four types are complete populism, excluding populism, anti-elitist populism, and empty populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

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