

*Twitter and Institutional Change:
Insights from Populist and Pluralist Discourses in Venezuela*

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Abstract — Should we take tweets from politicians seriously? This paper argues that tweets sent out from the accounts of the top political actors are important because they are framed within a worldview that looks to support or challenge the legitimacy of an institutional order. As Twitter provides a direct connection between the speaker and mass audiences, it offers political leaders a platform to articulate a worldview, justify democratic or undemocratic strategies for competition, and mobilize support across frontiers to influence the perception of power structures. The relationship between discourse and institutional legitimacy is especially important in systems like Venezuela's where authoritarian and democratic practices coexist, meaning that the legitimacy of institutions largely depends on the agency of key actors in influencing the perception of what is considered to be democratic. Therefore, this study carries out a content analysis of the tweets of the opposition and incumbent Venezuelan leaders. The results show that the incumbent's discourse was predominantly framed within a populist worldview, which perceives politics as a zero-sum struggle between the people and a conspiring global elite, such that the incumbent's infringements on democratic procedures were justified as an effort for emancipation from global oppressors. The opposition articulated a pluralist discourse that defended electoral competition, understood as the way to resolve the various interests and goals of a heterogeneous society, and therefore resorted to democratic strategies to challenge the incumbent's power. Given the unprecedented reach of social media, this study highlights the extent to which Twitter contributes to materialize an interpretation of power structures, and how political elites use it to influence the legitimacy of an institutional order.

Résumé — Devrions-nous prendre au sérieux les tweets des politiciens? Cet article soutient que les tweets envoyés à partir des comptes des principaux acteurs politiques sont importants, car ils sont ancrés dans une vision du monde qui appuie ou qui remet en question la légitimité d'un ordre institutionnel. Puisque Twitter permet un lien direct entre un individu et le grand public, il offre aux dirigeants politiques une plateforme pour articuler une vision du monde, justifier des stratégies démocratiques ou antidémocratiques et mobiliser un soutien au-delà des frontières pour influencer la perception des structures de pouvoir. La relation entre discours et légitimité institutionnelle est particulièrement importante dans des systèmes, comme celui du Venezuela, où coexistent des pratiques autoritaires et démocratiques, ce qui implique que la légitimité des institutions dépend largement de l'influence exercée par les principaux acteurs sur ce qui est considéré comme démocratique. Ainsi, cet article analyse le contenu des tweets de l'opposition et des dirigeants en place au Venezuela. Les résultats démontrent que le discours des dirigeants en place a été dominé par une vision du monde populiste, qui conçoit la politique comme une lutte à somme nulle entre le peuple et une élite mondiale conspiratrice, de sorte à justifier les violations des procédures démocratiques. L'opposition a formulé un discours pluraliste qui défendait la concurrence électorale, considérée comme le moyen de résoudre les divers intérêts et objectifs d'une société hétérogène, et a donc eu recours à des stratégies démocratiques pour contester le pouvoir des dirigeants en place. Compte tenu de la portée sans précédent des médias sociaux, cette étude démontre à quel point Twitter contribue à matérialiser une interprétation des structures du pouvoir et comment les élites politiques l'utilisent pour influencer la

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Keywords: Discourse; Twitter, populism; hybrid regimes.

légitimité d'un ordre institutionnel.

Mots-clés : Discours; Twitter; populisme; régimes hybrides.

Introduction

Social media is increasingly shaping public opinion and influencing the perception that mass audiences have on power structures. In Venezuela's five major cities, the Internet is the third most used method of accessing news, after cable and open-signal television: 70% of people in low income urban areas spend more than half an hour online daily to look for news, mostly on Facebook and Twitter (Nalvarte, 2016). In light of Venezuela's reliance on social media for news and political communications, this research project analyses the tweets of political elites (defined as decision-makers with the ability to significantly influence political competition) during three electoral campaign periods to explore if and how they use Twitter as a tool to mobilize support. Many authors (Corrales, 2015; Hawkins, 2015; Weyland, 2013) have discussed the impact of Hugo Chávez's discourse on the erosion of Venezuela's democracy. Known for his charismatic appeal to the pueblo, these authors suggest that Chávez pioneered the use of Twitter to disseminate a populist discourse that polarized Venezuelan politics and prevented the kind of consensus needed for democratic governance. The direct connection between the speaker and mass audiences through social media lends itself to the populist logic: as the interpreter of the people's will, the leader claims to be entitled to bypass the allegedly obsolete democratic procedures that interfere with true representation (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). In sum, this study suggests that analysing the tweets of political elites is effective in identifying the forces leading to institutional change, especially in hybrid systems like Venezuela's, where the institutions are contested, and ultimately depend on the ability of political leaders to harness popular support to legitimize their worldview.

To explore the legacy of Chávez's populist discourse, and its relationship to Venezuela's democracy, this research carries out a content analysis of the Twitter communications of leaders of competing political groups. Populist and pluralist discursive elements in the politicians' Twitter communications are compared and quantified to identify patterns in the types of discourse and frequencies at which they are used. A populist discourse here refers to politics as a cosmic struggle between a conspiring elite and the people, whom the speaker claims to represent. Pluralist discourse underlines support for a plural society where the various interests and goals are resolved through electoral competition. When comparing these discursive patterns with the authoritarian shift of the Venezuelan system, the findings suggest that a populist discourse is compatible with undemocratic practices while a pluralist discourse is compatible with electoral strategies. The relationship between the types of discourse, strategies for competing for power, and institutional change explored in this research underscores the importance of a politician's Twitter feed. Tweets work similarly to other forms of official communication, to: prompt, justify, and legitimize the politician's truth claims.

Literature Review

Despite the numerous structural and agency-based definitions of populism (Di Tella, 1997; Germani, 1978; Malloy, 1977; Roberts, 2003; Weyland, 2001, 2004, 2013), this research looks at the discursive dimension of populism in order to explore the relationship between language and institutional change. This discursive definition captures the underlying logic of populism given that the agency of political actors are ultimately motivated by the articulation of a worldview (Hawkins, 2010, p. 49). In this sense, economic policies, organizational structures or historical moments are all consequences of a type of discourse, which can take on particular manifestations within the context of a populist worldview (Hawkins, 2010, p. 40). Moreover, a populist discourse here will be more concretely defined as a worldview that perceives history as a Manichean struggle between Good, identified with the will of the people, and Evil, a conspiring elite that has subverted this will (Hawkins, 2009, 2010, 2015).

Within this perspective, Mudde (2004, p. 543) understands populism as a "thin-centered ideology," characterized by a Manichean outlook that understands politics as the expression of the people's will, which is fundamentally moralistic rather than programmatic. As such, populism is distinguished from two other "thin-centered" ideologies. Elitism — the mirror-image of populism, advocates for politics as an expression of the views of a moral elite, instead of the amoral people; — and pluralism — a more democratic perspective, rejects the homogeneity of populism and elitism, and sees society as a heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and wishes (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). These broad categories will be the basis for classifying the discursive patterns of competing groups in Venezuela. Even though these types of discourse

represent exaggerated categories, they generate contrast and serve as benchmarks to establish the particular features of each type (Skocpol & Somers, 1980). Therefore, populist and pluralist discourse are conceptualized here as two mutually exclusive categories that capture opposite interpretations of power structures.

The type of discourse that predominates in the communications of key actors reflects their view of the system, which translates into the mechanisms they use to influence institutional development. Some scholars contest the link between a populist discourse and any form of government — they see populism as ontological since its meaning is not found in any political or ideological content, but in a particular mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological content (Laclau, qtd. in Howarth, 2015, p. 153; Mudde, 2004). Other scholars contend that institutional changes have been established with the use of a populist discourse (Hawkins, 2015; Weyland, 2013). For them, the entrenchment of authoritarianism in Venezuela is related to the use of an increasingly populist discourse that villainizes the political opposition and polarizes society, ultimately distorting electoral competition (Corrales, 2015; Hawkins, 2010, 2015; Weyland, 2013).

Furthermore, by suggesting that processes are theorized and justified by the careful use of language and rhetoric, Rodner (2016) argues that discourse consolidates collective meaning and becomes the basis of institutions (p. 629). In other words, as discourse articulates a worldview, it provides a normative benchmark to interpret the moral basis of the legitimacy of the system. This second group of scholars offer the theoretical foundation for this paper: the type of discourse is attuned to a particular strategy for political competition, especially in hybrid regimes where populist and pluralist worldviews contest over the legitimacy of the system, which ultimately impact the country's institutional development.

Through the case of Chavismo, much has been said about how competitive authoritarian governments tilt the playing field in their favour and distort democratic institutions (Corrales, 2015; Levitsky & Way 2002, 2010; Penfold-Becerra, 2007). However, not enough attention has been given to how opposition groups challenge an increasingly authoritarian and populist government. Schedler (2006) suggests that in hybrid systems, the opposition has to manage the tension between acknowledging the unfairness of the system on one hand (which discourages voters who already mistrust the system) and on the other, successfully articulating a movement that mobilizes voters and allows for their forces to grow. Studies on Venezuela's hybrid system suggest that throughout the years, despite increased authoritarian abuses, a large segment of opposition forces that have favoured such electoral strategy ended up enjoying electoral victories (Corrales & Penfold, 2011; Cannon, 2014; Hawkins, 2015). Analyzing the actual rhetorical strategies of incumbent and opposition groups at the peak of electoral contestation informs how opposition groups manage this tension, and whether they sustain a discourse that looks to restore democratic legitimacy.

Method

Building on the methodology of studies which have identified populist discourses on social media platforms (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Engesser, 2017; Waisboro & Amado, 2017), this research identifies the presence of a populist discourse on Twitter, and suggests a method to contrast it with another type of discourse, pluralism. This research uses a qualitative content analysis to explore how the discourses of the political elites compare to each other, and how they relate to institutional changes. Precisely, it examines the tweets of incumbent and opposition politicians during three electoral moments: the presidential election that elected Nicolás Maduro (2013), the municipal elections that favoured a majority of Chavista mayors (2013), and the parliamentary elections that gave the opposition a historic electoral advantage (2015). Although these elections pertain to different levels of government, they are comparable as each were moments of intense competition where the legitimacy of the system was deeply questioned. Since the presidential election was tainted by unresolved fraud claims, the opposition framed the following 2013 municipal elections and 2015 parliamentary elections as plebiscites against Maduro who distorted the institutional order to further consolidate power (Asociación de Fondo de Pensiones, 2015; Meza, 2013).

To compare the discursive strategies, the study focuses on the tweets of three top decision-making politicians: president Nicolás Maduro (@NicolasMaduro), two-time opposition presidential candidate and governor of the state of Miranda, Henrique Capriles (@hcapriles), and former mayor of a Caracas municipality and primary presidential candidate who then became the regime's most prominent political prisoner, Leopoldo López

(@LeopoldoLopez). The politicians selected for this study are recognized as the leaders within their own groups, and their leadership has gained a national scope through elections. In addition, their Twitter accounts are amongst the most influential accounts of politicians in the country based on the number of followers and tweeting activity. Given their leadership, this study suggests that the type of discourse found in their communications is representative of the overall strategy of each group, and as such, their tweets highlight the way political elites look to influence the system through the articulation of different worldviews. Furthermore, these political actors are selected following the logic of Mill's Most Similar and Most Different Systems Design (Skocpol & Somers, 1980, p. 183). The communications of opposition and incumbent politicians test for the presence of two distinctive types of discourses — populist and pluralist — and follows the Method of Difference, while the communications of two opposition politicians with a presumably similar discursive strategy are selected based on the Method of Agreement, indicating the presence of a type of discourse that can be attributed to a broader strategy of the opposition group.

All the tweets sent out by the identified accounts in the month-long electoral campaign preceding each of the three elections are compiled into a database (see Appendix A for a summary of the sample). In order to categorize the content of the politician's tweets, the discourse, as a multidimensional variable, is broken down into three dimensions reflecting their respective themes. The first dimension encompasses the speaker's vision of society. Here, the populist discourse has a dualistic vision and is characterized by the following themes: the presence of a Manichean logic, the belief in politics as a zero-sum struggle between two homogenous groups, and the association of good with a single political project (Hawkins, 2009; Engesser et al., 2017). By contrast, the pluralist discourse has a heterogeneous vision of society, thus, an understanding of society as a collection of different views and wishes (Mudde, 2004, p. 544), an appeal to diversity of ideas within nationhood, and reference to national unity around an inclusionary political project.

The second dimension refers to the speaker's perspective on policy issues. Here, the populist discourse is moralistic: as the good is always identified with the will of the people, policy decisions are made based on normative justifications rather than official socioeconomic indicators. Moreover, public officials, instead of being criticized for their performance or track record, are attacked for their character traits. On the other hand, the pluralist discourse has a programmatic perspective on issues, such that policy issues are discussed based on indicators and numbers, and assessed in terms of successes or inefficiencies (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

The third dimension looks at the speaker's stance towards the system. The populist discourse exhibits an "anything-goes-attitude" towards decision-making processes. This is because formal procedures are seen as obstacles for realizing the will of the people (Hawkins, 2010, p. 36) — for example, calls to action using military vocabulary. Paying attention to collocations — word associations that are representative of a recurrent message in the communication (Armony & Armony, 2005, p. 38) — is important for the classification process. In the Venezuelan case, where political competition is intense and the rules of the game are unclear, words such as "offensive," "revolution" and "fight" in a tweet, which may allude to an "anything-goes attitude," are not necessarily indicators of a populist discourse for the third dimension. If the words "election" or "votes" are also included in the tweet, it is categorized pluralist because ultimately it reflects an observance to the democratic process. However, if military jargon is used as a call to action without reference to electoral competition, the tweet is categorized as populist since the populist discourse alerts that what is at stake is the people's sovereignty, which is to be defended at any cost, even the infringement of democratic norms. Once all tweets are categorized and coded, this holistic content analysis yields a numerical representation of the types of discourse that predominated the communications of each politician across each election.

Results and Discussion

A total of 1,198 tweets were coded based on the three-dimensional rubric, which yielded 3,594 observations (each tweet yields an observation for each of the three dimensions). After extracting the 2,208 observations that were not classified as populist or pluralist (61%), the content analysis found a total of 1,386 observations with discursive themes (39%). The analysis of results that follows is based on these observations only in order to systematically compare observations with the presence of pluralist and populist themes relative to each other. Out of the 1,386

observations, 1,033 were classified as pluralist (74%) and 355 as populist (26%) for incumbent and opposition politicians combined.

The Incumbent’s Divide and Rule Discourse

The study found that the incumbent’s Twitter communications contained a larger proportion of populist themes relative to pluralist ones. Out of 326 tweets collected from Nicolas Maduro’s account (@NicolasMaduro), the content analysis identified 377 observations with discursive themes: 204 were classified as populist, and 173 as pluralist. Out of this pool of observations, Maduro’s communications across the three elections were 54% populist and 46% pluralist. In addition, 13 tweets were found to contain populist elements across all three dimensions. When looking at the distribution of populist and pluralist themes across each election, the content analysis sheds light on the trends of Maduro’s predominantly populist discourse on Twitter (see Figure 1).

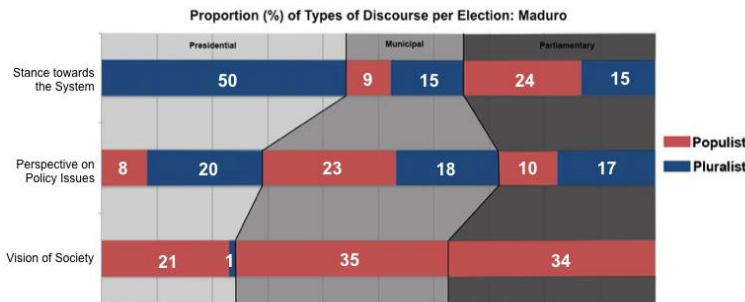


Figure 1. Proportion of types of discourse per election at each dimension (for data see Appendix B).

Figure 1 shows, for the first dimension, which refers the speaker’s view of society, Maduro’s discursive tweets contained almost only populist themes. This indicates an evident belief in a politics as a zero-sum game in which political opponents are considered existential threats that are to be defeated (see Figure 2). For the second dimension, the speaker’s perspective on issues, Maduro’s discursive themes vary. While they are mostly populist for the Municipal election, during the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, Maduro takes on a more programmatic approach when discussing public policy issues. However, when looking at the third dimension, which refers to the speaker’s attitude towards the system, there is a steady increase of a populist worldview at each election, which matches the authoritarian surge in Venezuela since 2013.

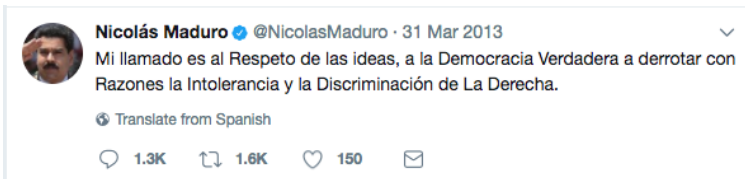


Figure 2. A sample tweet from @NicolasMaduro during the 2013 presidential election: “I call on you to respect different ideas, to true democracy, and to defeat with reason the intolerance and discrimination of right-wingers.”

Only for the first election, the 2013 presidential election, Maduro’s discourse was found to favour a pluralist view of the system. A pluralist discourse across this dimension indicates the belief in the legitimacy of a democratic process. This suggests that in 2013, the discourse of actors ultimately reified Venezuela’s system as Competitive Authoritarian (Levitsky & Way, 2002). The incumbent demonstrated a belief in elections as the mechanism that legitimizes authority, while the opposition also saw them as the way to challenge the incumbent’s abuses. The reason for Maduro’s emphasis on elections could be because the 2013 presidential elections were held only five weeks after Chávez’s death was announced, on March 5th. Right before his death, Chávez had named Maduro as his political successor and had called on his supporters to vote for him (Hernández, 2012). Still, during this electoral campaign, Maduro’s communications emulated Chávez’s populist discourse, which underscores a view that juxtaposes intolerance for political dissidence and acknowledgement of democratic legitimacy (see Figure 3). While

there was constant allusion to the electoral process, there was also a recurrent use of military jargon (“commander,” “battle,” “offensive,” “on-guard!”), showcasing the war-like dialectic that further antagonizes political competition.



Figure 3. A sample tweet from @NicolasMaduro during the 2013 Municipal Election: “The oligarchy’s reactions demonstrate their despair, I call on you to maintain our Offensive strategy, and to watch out for the provocations of the bourgeoisie.”

Over time, Maduro’s communications show a shift in attitude towards the system. The study found that the presence of populist themes across the third dimension increases with each election. By the time of the Parliamentary election in 2015, the study found that populist themes dominated Maduro’s discursive communications. His use of the hashtag #PaLaAsambleaComoSea, “ToTheAssemblyNoMatterHow,” conveys explicitly the belief that conquering seats in the assembly merits the use of any means. This “anything goes” attitude fits in within the populist worldview that places political competition as an existential struggle for the defense of the patria against a global elite. This escalation of populist themes across the third dimension in the incumbent’s communications is in line with the institutional shift from Competitive Authoritarianism to Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela (Corrales, 2015). The 2015 parliamentary election saw an unprecedented abuse of state power to the incumbent’s advantage: the partisan National Electoral Council denied registration to nine opposition parties, gerrymandered districts, and denied access to opposition candidates to public media, while PSUV candidates were built through official broadcasts and special programs (Alarcón, Álvarez, & Hidalgo, 2016, p. 24). This irreverence towards the democratic system also coincides with a decrease in public support for the incumbent. By 2015, Maduro’s approval rating was found to be under 25%, according to the survey-research firm Datanalisis (Alarcón et al., 2016, p. 28).

Based on the study’s finding, this research argues that Maduro’s tweets point to a strategy of divide and rule, as the use of a populist discourse across three dimensions looks to disarticulate the opposition and legitimize authoritarian practices. A populist discourse treats political opponents not as adversaries but as profound threats, as “enemies of the people” who are to be defeated and marginalized. This logic turns politics into struggles of “us against them,” which negates the possibility of dialogue or the compromise that characterizes democratic life (Weyland, 2013, p. 21). This research argues that promoting an understanding of politics as a moral conspiracy against the people raises society’s tolerance to authoritarian abuses of power (Romero-Rodríguez & Gadea, 2015, p. 103). Furthermore, a discourse that shows an ambiguous relationship to democracy looks to break up the opposition’s electoral efforts, as it fosters disagreements over whether they should compete on an uneven playing field (Corrales & Penfold, 2011, p. 32).

The Opposition’s Democratic Conviction

For opposition politicians, the study found a larger proportion of pluralist themes relative to populist ones. Out of 374 tweets that López (@LeopoldoLopez) sent out, 442 discursive themes were identified: 384 pluralist themes and 60 populist themes — for a total of 86% pluralist and 14% populist. Out of 498 tweets sent out from Capriles’ (@hcapriles) account, 567 discursive themes were identified: 476 pluralist themes and 91 populist— for a total similar to that of Lopez, 84% pluralist and 16% populist. The study found four tweets that contained all pluralist discursive dimensions, all of which were sent from the opposition politicians’ Twitter accounts. When looking at the distribution of populist and pluralist themes across each election, the content analysis sheds light on the patterns of the opposition’s predominantly pluralist discourse on Twitter (see Figures 4 and 5).

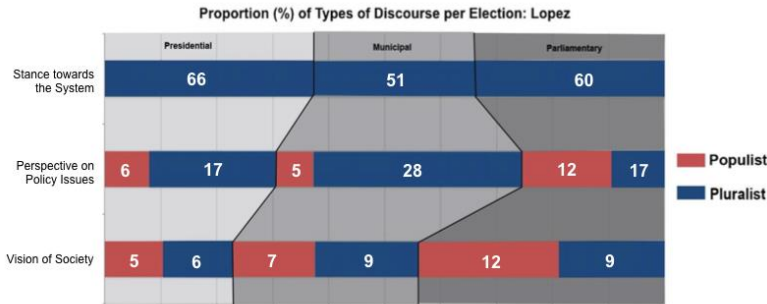


Figure 4. Proportion of types of discourse per election at each dimension for López’s tweets (for data see Appendix B).

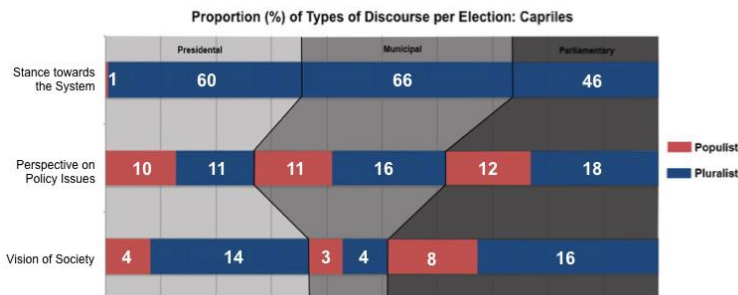


Figure 5. Proportion of types of discourse per election at each dimension for Capriles’ tweets (for data see Appendix B).

The findings show that the communications of the opposition vary across the first and second dimension. It is clear that the opposition’s discursive communications contain almost all pluralist themes across the third dimension, which demonstrates their commitment to democratic competition. A message that is conveyed through the discursive communications of the opposition is an effort to denounce authoritarian abuses and question the legitimacy of Maduro’s presidency after fraud claims in the 2013 Presidential election were never resolved, but without undermining the significance of electoral competition. Both López and Capriles’ managed to communicate in their tweets that the playing field was stacked against them, but that they should still play. The words “election,” “democracy,” and “vote” were more frequent in the opposition’s tweets. Moreover, close to the electoral moment, the opposition’s tweets also looked to communicate logistical information to voters. Ultimately, this content analysis reveals the opposition’s commitment to electoral competition during the period studied here. Although a period of tension surrounded the opposition’s decision to call the 2013 presidential elections a fraud, which Maduro claimed to have won with 1.8% difference (Cannon, 2014, p. 62), that same year the opposition decided to redeem the electoral route by participating in the municipal elections. Both López and Capriles travelled around the country to campaign with the opposition’s municipal candidates. This indicates cohesion among the opposition leadership and a willingness of different sectors of the opposition to share a cohesive message under the flag of democracy.

It is important to note that the study found a predominance among the discursive tweets of populist discourse for López in the first two dimensions during the 2015 municipal election. This may have to do with the

fact that his wife Lilian Tintori — also a political activist — began to manage his account (Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández, & Savage, 2015), which explains a drop in his activity after the 2013 municipal election. Tintori and the team that handled López account starting in 2014 may have biased the discourse that characterized him for the previous elections. Still 60% of the discursive themes were found in the third dimension and were all pluralist, which shows that López’s Twitter account during this electoral period was still used for logistical efforts and to mobilize voters. Ultimately, confirming the notion that regardless of the actual speaker, the opposition communications showcase a concerted effort to challenge the incumbent through electoral means.

With a prevalence of pluralist themes across the first dimension in Capriles’ communications, this research argues that his discourse looks to contrast the incumbent’s dualistic notion with the idea of society as a collection of heterogeneous interests. For the second dimension, the study also found a larger proportion of pluralist discursive themes relative to populist ones. With the looming economic crisis, the opposition framed the elections as a plebiscite against Maduro’s economic mismanagement. Both Capriles and López brought attention to the state of the economy, using indicators and making assessments of policy decisions in their communications on. Here, the opposition’s communications favoured a programmatic pluralist discourse while still including populist themes in the way the incumbent was antagonized and villainized for his performance in office.

Can Challengers Disprove the Populist Myth?

Based on the content analysis, this research argues that the opposition’s discourse demonstrates a strategy of competition that could be summed up as an effort to “unite and vote.” When playing on an uneven playing field, the opposition has looked to build an electoral force with an inclusive discourse that counters the incumbent’s intolerance, exposes his abuse of power, and hopes to defeat an undemocratic opponent through electoral means. While the opposition’s electoral success in the 2015 Parliamentary election cannot be attributed to Twitter, it is safe to say that their decision to participate in an unfair election, with a communication strategy focused on the economic crisis gave the opposition significant increase in their electoral legitimacy, domestically and internationally.

The study of the Twitter communications of López and Capriles show how they manage the inherent tension of acquiring power through electoral means in an unfair system. That is, López and Capriles actively mobilize voters into an election that they openly believe will favour Maduro (see Figure 6). Therefore, the findings suggest that the discourse of the opposition calls for the re-establishment of democratic competition by participating in unfair elections, which coincides with the opposition gaining electoral legitimacy. Although the opposition’s discourse remained pluralist, and their strategies electoral, the 2013 losses show how the absence of tangible pay-offs introduces conflict over the effectiveness of an electoral strategy (Hawkins, 2016; Zariski, 1986). However, the opposition stuck to their pluralist discourse with a programmatic agenda for the 2015 parliamentary election and consolidated an electoral victory (see Figure 7). Knowing the authoritarian trend that increasingly shapes Maduro’s administration and the intention of the opposition to participate in elections, the results of the elections mentioned here provide a posteriori control to test the correlation between the type of discourse, strategies for political competition, and institutional changes.



Figure 6. A sample tweet from @leopoldolopez during the 2015 parliamentary election: “If history will say anything about you @NicolasMaduro, it will be of your cowardice. Of your fear to lose power. A power, which I affirm, you stole!”



Figure 7. A sample tweet from @hcapriles during the 2015 municipal election: “Our Venezuela will close 2015 with almost 80% income poverty, the most important reason to vote for a change.”

Do Tweets Matter?

Observing the discourse of Venezuela’s top leadership on social media reveals the worldview that frames their strategies for contesting power, which in turn, influences the legitimacy of institutions. The findings of this study point to an authoritarian incumbent that articulates a moralistic discourse under a Manichean logic in an effort to legitimize the use of any means to stay in power. Meanwhile, the opposition’s pluralist discourse shows the willingness to compete under the existing unfair system, at the same time that it looks to compete over the rules of the game by denouncing the incumbent’s abuses. In this sense, Twitter communications clearly illustrate the dynamics that shape competition in hybrid systems. According to Schedler’s (2006), elections in hybrid systems are comprised of two meta-games: the incumbent’s game of authoritarian manipulation in which the opposition chooses to compete, and the game of institutional reform, in which the opposition seeks to dismantle nondemocratic restrictions that choke their struggle for votes (p. 13). These two meta-games are evident in the tweets of Maduro, López, and Capriles, as they look to reify their interpretation of the power dynamics, and mobilize support around their perceived best strategy for contesting power.

The findings from the three elections suggest that, in terms of their view towards the system (coded under the third discursive dimension), the opposition leadership maintained a pluralist discourse while the incumbent’s populist discourse intensified with each election. Considering that Maduro’s authoritarian abuses intensified while the opposition gained some electoral legitimacy, these discursive trends reveal that a populist discourse is coherent with authoritarian practices and a pluralist discourse encourages democratic competition. Furthermore, it shows the way in which two opposite worldviews defend different political realities and therefore look to mobilize support for different institutional frameworks. Essentially, this study shows that Tweets do matter because they manifest the normative view of decision-makers who influence the rules of competition. Considering the reach that Twitter has, these official communications give political elites the power to influence, prompt, and legitimize institutions.

This research also emphasizes the extent to which Twitter offers a unique platform to study discursive strategies because, even if fragmented, tweets are a manifestation of the speaker’s worldview. Broader inferences can be made from the findings in Twitter communications since online communicational patterns have been found to reflect similar patterns to offline communication models (Calvo, 2015; Morales, Borondo, Losada, & Benito, 2015). Finally, this study redeems the informational liberalization aspect of social media, especially when it affords already established politicians an outlet to influence public opinion that has been otherwise denied through censorship.

Contributions and Limitations of the Content Analysis

Overall, the results of this study confirm the presence of a populist discourse in the incumbent’s communications on Twitter and propose a way to quantify populism as a discursive concept (Hawkins, 2010; De La Torre, 2010; Knight, 1998). The breakdown of the notion of discourse into three dimensions allowed for the study to capture the different themes that constitute a populist discourse. The findings also show that a populist discourse tends to be represented in a fragmented way on social media, much like Engesser (2017) suggests.

Nonetheless, a few limitations should be noted. First, this analysis is based on the results from one coder, a double-blind coding could have further reduced risk of bias in coding. Second, seeing that Twitter accounts are often time managed by a political communications team, any future content analysis studies should be supplemented by a study of the informal political dynamics, in order to place the 150 characters into a broader context of political competition. Still, this study provides insightful results and proposes the use of the pluralist discourse to address the following gap in the literature: the need for a benchmark concept to compare populism against, in order to fully formulate it as a concept.

A second round of blind coding would refine the analysis of the relationship between discourse and strategies for competition. In particular, the analysis could distinguish between observations of pluralist discourse that look to denounce abuses from those that look to campaign for elections. Determining the timing and the frequency of these communications could inform on how the opposition manages the tension between competing in the existing system and competing over the rules of the game. In addition, a round of manifest coding could identify the frequency of key words at each election, such as democracy, in order to measure the extent to which the speaker views democratic competition as legitimate. This could address an important limitation of this study: that the entire population of tweets were not found to have any discursive themes. Including additional politicians and coders would also increase the robustness of the findings.

Conclusion

This study has looked at the discourses of incumbent and opposition leaders around election time in order to shed light on the overall dynamics of competition in hybrid systems. The findings suggest that Twitter communications can reflect the worldviews and stances on the legitimacy of the system of the political elite. This contestation over the rules of the game among the top political leadership reflects the democratic fragility in hybrid systems. The Venezuelan case studied here has demonstrated how a polarizing rhetoric affects democratic governance, suggesting that discourse has an impact on the legitimacy of institutions.

The study shows that, much like Chávez, the incumbent's discursive communications were predominantly populist, reflecting an understanding of politics as a zero-sum game. With this, Maduro's populist discourse looks to problematize previous structures of power to legitimize his authoritarian practices. In addition to demonstrating the institutional legacy of Chávez's populist rhetoric, this study shows how democratizing agents in undemocratic settings contest hegemonic truth claims. The case of the Venezuelan opposition also informs on potential responses to populist discourses: while Maduro has increased his authoritarian practices to tilt the playing field in his favour, electoral support has shifted in favour of the opposition, which suggests that the Maduro's populist discourse is compatible with authoritarian practices and the opposition pluralist discourse is compatible with electoral strategies.

All in all, this study exposes the importance that Twitter has in conveying worldviews that have a real impact in the institutional development particularly within hybrid systems. Tweets have the power to prompt, justify, and respond to a particular strategy for political competition that defends an interpretation of power structures.

Appendix A

Table 1. Electoral Days and Actual Dates

Electoral Days	2013 Presidential Election	2013 Municipal Election	2015 Parliamentary Election
1	15-Mar	08-Nov	06-Nov
2	16-Mar	09-Nov	07-Nov
3	17-Mar	10-Nov	08-Nov
4	18-Mar	11-Nov	09-Nov
5	19-Mar	12-Nov	10-Nov
6	20-Mar	13-Nov	11-Nov
7	21-Mar	14-Nov	12-Nov
8	22-Mar	15-Nov	13-Nov
9	23-Mar	16-Nov	14-Nov
10	24-Mar	17-Nov	15-Nov
11	25-Mar	18-Nov	16-Nov
12	26-Mar	19-Nov	17-Nov
13	27-Mar	20-Nov	18-Nov
14	28-Mar	21-Nov	19-Nov
15	29-Mar	22-Nov	20-Nov
16	30-Mar	23-Nov	21-Nov
17	31-Mar	24-Nov	22-Nov
18	01-Apr	25-Nov	23-Nov
19	02-Apr	26-Nov	24-Nov
20	03-Apr	27-Nov	25-Nov
21	04-Apr	28-Nov	26-Nov
22	05-Apr	29-Nov	27-Nov
23	06-Apr	30-Nov	28-Nov
24	07-Apr	01-Dec	29-Nov
25	08-Apr	02-Dec	30-Nov
26	09-Apr	03-Dec	01-Dec
27	10-Apr	04-Dec	02-Dec
28	11-Apr	05-Dec	03-Dec
29	12-Apr	06-Dec	04-Dec
30	13-Apr	07-Dec	05-Dec
31	14-Apr	08-Dec	06-Dec

Table 2. Twitter Accounts and Number of Tweets included for each Sample.

Presidential Elections, April 14, 2013 Sample: March 15 – April 14, 2013		
Maduro: 159 Tweets	López: 96 Tweets	Capriles: 122 Tweets
Municipal Elections December 8, 2013 Sample: November 8 – December 8, 2013		
Maduro: 75 Tweets	López: 239 Tweets	Capriles: 235 Tweets
Parliamentary Elections December 6, 2015 Sample: November 6 – December 6, 2015		
Maduro: 92 Tweets	López: 39 Tweets	Capriles: 141 Tweets

Appendix B: Master Table

		Dimensions						
		1		2		3		
		Populist	Pluralist	Populist	Pluralist	Populist	Pluralist	
Incumbent	Nicolas Maduro	Presidential	21%	1%	8%	20%	0%	50%
		Municipal	35%	0%	23%	18%	9%	15%
		Parliamentary	34%	0%	10%	17%	24%	15%
Opposition	Leopoldo Lopez	Presidential	5%	6%	6%	17%	0%	66%
		Municipal	7%	9%	5%	28%	0%	51%
		Parliamentary	12%	9%	12%	7%	0%	60%
	Henrique Capriles	Presidential	4%	14%	10%	11%	1%	60%
		Municipal	3%	4%	11%	16%	0%	66%
		Parliamentary	8%	16%	12%	18%	0%	46%

Dimensions:

1. *Vision of society*: for the populist discourse this means a zero-sum struggle between two homogenous group — one good and one evil — and for the pluralist discourse, a heterogeneous vision of society consisting of a collection of different views and wishes.
2. *Perspective on policy issues*: the populist discourse is moralistic, meaning that policy decisions have a normative justification, while the pluralist discourse has a programmatic perspective on issues, such that policy issues are discussed based on indicators and numbers, and assessed in terms of successes or inefficiencies.
3. *Stance towards the system*: the populist discourse exhibits an “anything-goes-attitude” towards decision-making processes with a disregard for democratic procedures, which the pluralist discourse defends.

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