Populism on Social Media: a Comparative Analysis of Brazil, France and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Researchers emphasize the lack of cross-regional research on populism. The few analyses that exist identify two regional populist subtypes: exclusionary in Europe; and inclusionary in Latin America. However, since case studies chosen in each continent belong to opposite political spectrums, it is still unclear whether the difference found by researchers is related to a regional difference or an ideological one. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate whether the difference is really due to regional contexts or if the discrepancy might have more to do with the ideological disparities of the chosen cases studied.

While several scholars opted for a quantitative methodology, few have used social media. Social media has gained relevance in the communication strategies of these politicians, for it allows direct communication with the electorate. Thus, it seems that the study of how these platforms are employed by populist actors is one of the aspects that should be systematically studied for further consolidation of this research area. Given this scenario, this paper intends to contribute to populist literature by introducing a comparative study between regions (Latin America, North America and Europe) and also between left-wing and right-wing populists of each of these regions. We propose a qualitative social media analysis, followed by a quantitative one, of posts collected on Facebook and Twitter of two politicians per country selected -- Brazil, France and United States -- during three months.
Afterwards, we will do a qualitative analysis of a sample of posts, looking for populist categories previously identified by literature. Having found the most used words for each found category in each language, we will implement coding for automatic categorization under a Semiotics approach to the construction of predefined rules to gather the posts. We will then be able to draw more general conclusions regarding the difference in how the politicians of each region/political spectrum engage in populist communication. We will also be able to compare how the same politician might use social media platforms differently, and to assess which thematic categories were more successful in engaging reactions online in different regions.

1. Introduction

Cas Mudde (2004) wrote about a populist Zeitgeist that would be the new “mainstream in the politics of Western democracies”. Indeed, given recent political events - Donald Trump being elected president, the AfD, Germany’s right-wing party, winning over 13% of the German Parliament and Marine Le Pen going to the election’s second round - it seems like populism and extremism might be the new mainstream. With populism on the rise (Rooduijn, 2013, 2015; Mudde, 2016, pp. 28–29), academia has recently been forced to tackle the theoretical aspect of this vaguely defined phenomenon. The vagueness of the concept (Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Barr 2009; Laclau 2005; Rooduijn, 2011) has given space for the advent of many different definitions of what populism is, which hampers the systematic study of the issue. Hence, in order to contribute with the systematic empirical studies of this research area, this paper will follow the idea that populism has no specific ideological spectrum, and can be understood as a thin-ideology (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004; Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Freeden, 1998; Stanley, 2008) that is, as a “particular set of ideas that is limited in ambition and scope” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Other authors have also supported the idea that populism should be seen as a set of ideas (Engesser et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2009, p. 1045; Priester, 2012, p. 1; Rooduijn, 2014, p. 3).

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) emphasize the lack of cross-regional research on populism, and other researchers also stress this gap in literature (Stanyer et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). In their analysis, the authors identify what they calls two regional subtypes: exclusionary populism in Europe, and inclusionary populism in Latin America. However, since the case studies chosen by the authors in each continent belong to opposite political spectrums, it is still unclear whether the difference found by Mudde and Kaltwasser is related to a regional difference or to an ideological one. Therefore, the paper here presented proposes to investigate whether the found
difference is really due to regional contexts or if the discrepancy might have more to do with the ideological differences of the chosen case-studies.

As many populist politicians appear to use as a strategy the defamation of traditional media, social media networks have gained relevance in the communication of populist politicians with its electorate (Esser et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). This is due to the fact that social media “takes out the middleman” and manages to communicate directly with its electorate (Engesser, 2017). This closeness to the people is particularly interesting for populists (Canovan, 2002; p. 34; Krämer, 2014; p. 45; Kriesi, 2014, p. 363; Taggart, 2002, p. 67). Thus, it seems that the study of how social media is employed by these political actors is definitely one of the aspects that should be systematically studied for further consolidation of this research area (Stanyer et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). Furthermore, according to Engesser et al. (2017), although we can find empirical researches on populism, most analyze only one case study (e.g. Mény and Surel 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Pauwels 2011; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). There are still few studies that are comparative in nature and even fewer that systematically compare countries of different regions through quantitative social media analysis.

Lately many scholars opted for a social media analysis in order to investigate how politicians are engaging with their audience through online platforms (Stier, 2017; Jacobs and Spierings, 2018; Bracciale and Martella, 2017; Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Hameleers, M. and Schmuck, D., 2017; Engesser et al, 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Tromble, 2016) However, there are few studies that look at developing countries (like Waisbord and Amado, 2017) and none that looked at right-wing populism in Latin America and compared it to right-wing populism in other continents. Given this scenario, this study aims to contribute to populist literature by introducing an empirical comparative study between not only regions - in this case, Latin America, North America and Europe -, but also between left-wing and right-wing populists of each of the chosen regions. Thus, we propose a qualitative analysis followed by a statistical descriptive analysis of posts collected both on Facebook and Twitter of two politicians - one left-winged and one right-winged - during the period of three months from each of the chosen regional case-study countries, i.e. Brazil, France and United States of America. Even though the causal mechanism that leads to the presence or absence of populism is unclear, it is safe to assume that at least a part of the process may be influenced by factors such as: economic crisis, austerity policies, citizen disenchantment with the political system and class and loss of trust. Consequently, these countries were chosen not only due to their regional and global relevance, but also their recent political and economical scenarios that encompass many of the above mentioned traits that might give space to populism.
In Brazil, we will examine Lula, a success case of left-wing populism, and Jair Bolsonaro, a congressman that reproduces right-wing discourse and has been gaining supporters throughout the country. In France, we will investigate the online communication of Mélenchon and Marine le Pen. Last, but not least, we will gather Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders’s posts to analyse the phenomenon in the USA. We will also collect information regarding their engagement with the audience, i.e. the number of likes, comments and shares of each post on Facebook and Twitter.

Afterwards, we will do a qualitative analysis of a sample of posts identifying the following populist categories identified by literature. From Jagers & Walgrave (2007) we will draw categories: 1) references to “the people”; 2) anti-elitism and 3) anti-out-group. Following the study of Engesser et al. (2017), we have category 4) allusions to the heartland. Finally, by the reflection from Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), we will also include a discussion about inclusionary and exclusionary populism.

Having defined the most used words in each language for each category, we will implement coding to identify automatically the different populist categories. After checking within a sample the application of the code, we will then be able to draw more general conclusions regarding the difference in how the politicians of each region/political spectrum might engage in populist communication. We will also be able to compare how the same politician might use social media platforms in different ways. Afterwards, we will be able to assess what categories were more successful in engaging reactions online in different regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Populism and the Internet

It is argued that populism is, once again, on the rise (Roodujin, 2015; Mudde, 2016; Jacobs and Spierings, 2018). Some authors link this trend to a new form of social interaction that was brought to life through the internet and social media (Bimber, 1998; Mudde 2016). According to Bimber, the internet accelerates group formation that have, in some cases, culminated in political groups that do not feel represented neither by the private structures nor by the public institutional ones.

For the populist idea supporters, that is, for those who support the idea that citizens have now a more direct channel of communication their representatives and thus see the internet as a form to augment political pressure at the individual level, the internet is transformative because of its unmediated character not only from citizen to citizen, but also from citizen to representative (Bimber, 1998; Corrado and Firestone, 1996) For Grossman (1995), the traditional institutions
are the biggest losers of this new trend. The former intermediaries of the political process, such as parties, labor unions and even traditional media no longer represent a necessity in order to establish a communication process from civil society to the political system. According to Rheingold (1991), the internet evened the balance of power between citizens and former “power barons”.

Thus, the main idea that holds together the populist argument regarding internet usage is this idea that the middle man - elites and political institutions - will lose their power (Engesser, 2017). According to Bimber (1998), this conception envisions the internet as a facilitator of national polls or public opinion. This view rests on the assumption that “by increasing communication capacity, the Net will increase citizen influence on politics and decrease the influence of traditional political intermediaries who now dominate political communication” (Bimber 1998, p. 138). As a matter of fact, some studies have already emphasized how online media permits politicians to spread their message to their audience directly, without having to go through traditional media gatekeepers (Engesser et al., 2017; Jacobs and Spierings, 2018). Given that social media presents an excellent opportunity for populist politicians to speak directly to their audience (Esser et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2017; Canovan, 2002; p. 34; Krämer, 2014; p. 45; Kriesi, 2014, p. 363; Taggart, 2002, p. 67), it is a great case study to try and understand their communication strategy (Engesser et al; 2017). However, although social media has been characterized as a suitable medium for populist politicians (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016), there should be a bigger amount of studies examining their use of social media (Jacobs and Spierings, 2018).

### 2.2 Empirical Studies

In recent years, populism has been sought more and more as a study object (Aalberg, Edder, Reinemann, Strömback & de Vreese, 2017). Populism has been investigated empirically in different communication mediums (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson, 2017) like the press (Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Burg & de Vreese, 2011; Herkman, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014), speeches (Cranmer, 2011; Hawkins, 2010), manifestos from parties and elections (Rooduijn, De Lange, & Van der Brug, 2014; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), television among others (Bos, van der Burg, & de Vreese, 2011; Cranmer, 2011). Before 2017 not that many studies have done empirical investigations regarding social media usage by populists (examples are Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwel, 2011), although many emphasize the importance of this more direct type of communication for populist actors (Engesser et al (2017), Jacobs and Spierings, 2018). However since then a couple of empirical studies online have been developed (Stier, 2017; Jacobs and Spierings, 2018; Bracciale and Martella, 2017; Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Hameleers, M. and Schmuck, D., 2017;
Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Tromble, R. (2016)). Still, a persistent gap in literature that has already been identified by scholars is the lack of cross-regional research on populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Stanyer et al. 2017; Engesser et al., 2017).

There are a few studies that use social media data to investigate populist politicians. According to Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), Jagers and Walgrave (2007) were one of the first researchers to investigate populism using the content analysis method. However, although the study represents a breakthrough, it only analyzed one country. Pauwels (2011) tried to measure populism by using a computer-based content analysis methodology, but he also limited his research to one sole country.

The paper “When populists become popular: comparing Facebook use by the right-wing movement Pegida and German political parties” (Stier, S. et al, 2017) investigates the communication by right-wing movement Pegida and the political parties in Germany, in which the authors do an empirical analysis using Facebook posts of these groups and representatives. However, it is also based on one sole country and at a specific right-wing case study. Jacobs and Spierings (2018) analyzed five years of Twitter data from Dutch politicians, trying to examine Twitter usage by politicians and also compare these to other political actors. Bracciale and Martella (2017), in turn, propose and empirical investigation of political communication style of five italian politicians. Waisbord and Amado (2017) outlined two empirical analyses: a statistical descriptive analysis of interactivity on Twitter, and a content analysis of presidential tweets. In “It’s us against them: a comparative experiment on the effects of populist messages communicated via social media” (Hameleers, M. and Schmuck, D., 2017), the authors investigate the consequences of blaming by populists on citizens’ attitudes in Austria and the Netherlands by implementing a comparative survey experiment.

Engesser et al. (2017) do a study investigating how politicians of four European countries use social media in order to communicate. The authors conclude that while many politicians advocate for the people, left-wing populists are the ones who tend to criticize the economic elite and right-wing politicians tend to attack the media and ostracize groups perceived as “others”. The paper shows that indeed social media allows populists to spread their message, although sometimes it is fragmented. However, although the authors draws conclusions using social media posts, they do so by following a qualitative analysis that only considered posts deemed as typical cases for each category. Thus, we fail to have a macro perspective of the weight of each category in each country.

Ernst, N. et al (2017) used social media analysis used a semi-automated content analysis over 1400 politicians’ posts. The authors compare the populist communication used on Twitter
and Facebook by political actors of six different countries. Just as Engesser et al. (2017), they conclude that populism is manifested in a fragmented form. Additionally, the authors identify this communication style to be used by politicians “at the extremes of the political spectrum”, and by opposition parties, on Facebook. They analyzed five parties across the left-right spectrum for each of the six chosen countries.

Although the authors make a great case for robustness by selecting parties across the ideological spectrum, the chosen cases depicted as populist by literature are all right-winged. In fact, many other studies also focus on extreme-right populism (Krämer, B., 2017; Stier, S. et al., 2017). Furthermore, all four countries analyzed by Engesser et al. (2017) are European, and on the study by Ernst et al. (2017), five of the six countries chosen are European, while the other one is North American.

Thus, beyond the low number of cross-regional studies, there still seems to exist a gap in literature regarding, on the one hand, analysis of populism in the left-winged spectrum, and on the other, studies that include comparisons from outside of the Northern hemisphere. In fact, to take a look at the Global South represents the perfect opportunity to study left-winged populist examples and to compare to the right-winged European ones, as Mudde and Kaltwasser’s analysis did (2013). The point of investigating extreme-left parties is even made by Ernst et al. (2017) at the end of their article.

However, it is necessary to remember there are also cases of right-wing populism in the region that have to be considered in order to make broader statements regarding regional typical populism types. Waisbord and Amado (2017) was the only recent paper identified as looking empirically at how a Latin American politician use the internet to communicate, however they also limited themselves in looking at left-wing populists. The gap in investigation regarding right-winged politicians in Latin America which might lead researchers into characterizing prematurely left-winged populism to Latin America.

2.3 Populism as a Thin-ideology

Many authors have argued that populism should not be seen as an ideology in itself, but as a thin-ideology (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004; Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Freeden, 1998; Stanley, 2008; Jacobs and Spierings 2018) and as a set of ideas (Engesser et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2009, p. 1045; Priester, 2012, p. 1; Rooduijn, 2014, p. 3). By conceptualizing populism in this matter, we can conceive how it can attach to different ideological spectrums, adapting to each
ideologies’ realities (Mudde 2004 and 2016; Wirth et al. 2016; Jacobs and Spierings, 2018; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Kaltwasser, 2012). Although the vagueness of the concept makes it difficult to establish a systematic study of populism (Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Barr 2009; Laclau 2005; Rooduijn, 2011), in an effort to theorize populism, researchers have defined a set of categories that might help us investigate its different uses and consistencies (Wirth et al. 2016). Thus, in this article we will take a communication-centered investigation and will analyze how these different populist categories are mobilized in the populists’ discourse on Twitter and Facebook from left to right in the three chosen countries.

A great part of the literature has established three main categories: (1) the people’s sovereignty, (2) anti-elitism and (3) anti-out-group (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2016; Cranmer, 2011; Engesser et al., 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016; Bracciale and Martella, 2017). The first one is a tendency of populists to make references to “the people”. Usually “the people” are seen as a homogeneous group that forms an unity (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 4; Stanley, 2008, p. 102; Taggart, 2000, p. 92; Baumann, 2001, p. 12; Wirth et al. 2017) and that is virtuous and good (Taggart, 2000, p. 93; Jansen, 2011, p. 84; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008, p. 6; Betz & Johnson, 2004, p. 323; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 6). It is important to remember, however, that this is an imaginary category that is mobilized by populists in order to awaken a specific sentiment and identity, which is “neither real nor all-inclusive, but are in fact a mythical and constructed subset of the whole population” (Mudde 2004, p. 546). This category also includes references to the right of the people to exert sovereignty on their national territory. It is also common to see arguments advocating for the necessity of a more direct form of government (Bracciale and Martella, 2017).

The second category established by literature is anti-elitism, which is a tendency to criticize political actors that are hierarchically at the top of the institutional system. They are commonly seen as a corrupt group that prevents the people to exert true sovereignty. However, the targeted elites might vary depending on the populist, especially if they have different political spectrums (Engesser et al. 2017). According to Engesser et. al. (2017), elites “betray the people and deprive it of its sovereignty”, and thus they vary according to the displacement of guilt of the group articulating the discourse. Jagers & Walgrave (2007) also identify that elites can be equated to the political elite, ranging from parties to elected politicians, to the media, the economical elite or even the intellectual elite, for example. This category hides anti-establishment rhetoric in general, making reference to a distance between “us”, the people, and “them”, the dominant elite (Canovan, 1981; Mény & Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000), which in times are translated as political, mediatic and economic anti-establishment discourse (Akkerman et al., 2014; Biorcio, 2015; Caiani &
Graziano, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2012; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; van Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Bracciale and Martella, 2017). Finally, the authors (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2016; Cranmer, 2011; Engesser et al., 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016; Bracciale and Martella, 2017) identify a third category they call “anti-out-group” (which can also be called “ostracizing others” by some authors), that excludes a part of the population that is not seen as the pure people that should exert their sovereignty. The targeted group might vary depending on the regional and political context and is seen as this imaginary “dangerous others” (Mudde, 2004). Additionally, from the study of Engesser et al. (2017), we have category (4) “allusions to the heartland”. The category allusions to the heartland is historically mobilized by populist actors, and it is an “attempt to construct what has been lost by the present’ (Taggart, 2000, p. 95). Furthermore, it is a category based on emotions rather than on real historical facts that wishes to mobilize an imaginary territory in which the people seen as the ‘core of the community’ are the sole inhabitants (p.96).

Additionally, following Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), we will also include the categories inclusionary populism and exclusionary populism. Inclusionary populism takes place whenever specific groups are seen as entitled to receive more state resources, usually minorities that have endured discrimination historically; and, in turn, exclusionary populism would take place when specific groups are excluded from state resources - for example when immigrants in Europe are seen as undeserving of jobs and welfare.

While it is true that Latin America has a different brand of populism than the contemporary right-wing populism found in Europe and in the United States (Kaltwasser and Mudde, 2011; Waisbord and Amado, 2017), that is, the left-winged, inclusionary populism; it is also true that, at least in Brazil, we can also find the same “right-winged” brand of populism in some politicians, like the Bolsonaro family members. Thus, we will observe if inclusionary and exclusionary categories show up divided by continents, as theorized my Mudde (REF), or if this diferente is better explained by a difference in ideological spectrum.

3. Research Questions and Hypothesis

Once the categories are mapped, we will be able to answer a few questions. We have mainly four hypothesis we wish to observe on this paper. Of course it is important to remember that these conclusions should not be generalistic, for we are investigating few case studies. Still, this preliminary assessment can help shed light on possible regional or ideological behavioral differences that should be further investigated.
**Research Question 1** Is the difference in political discourse related to *regional differences*?

This hypothesis wishes to verify whether we can identify any difference on the populists’ discourses due to *regional differences*. This is based on Mudde and Kaltwasser’s (REF) assumptions that that right-wing populism is a prototypical case of European populism, while left-wing populism is seen as the prototypical feature of Latin American populism.

**Research Question 2** Is the difference in political discourse related to the *political spectrum*?

This hypothesis aims to assess whether any difference on the populists’ discourses might be due to *ideological orientation*, i.e. whether they differ based on right-winged or left-winged politicians. If we notice that left-wing politicians from all regions mobilize the same categories on their discourse in a different way than the right-winged politicians, this indicates that regional differences found by Mudde (REF) might be due to differences in political orientation.

**Research Question 3** Is Facebook communication different than Twitter communication? Do populists employ different platforms differently?

This hypothesis aims to assess whether there is any difference on populists’ discourses that might be attributed to the platform being used by them to communicate. Different social media platforms have different norms, culture (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012), appearance and usability (Larsson, 2015), however, research on political communication normally does not differentiate platform use, usually analyzing data from Twitter and Facebook together or only looking at one media platform (Ernst et al. 2017).

4. **Methodology**

This study aims to help populism literature by introducing a comparative study between regions — North America, Latin America and Europe —, and between left-wing and right-wing populists
in each of the chosen regions. Thus, we will look at posts on Facebook and on Twitter of two politicians from each region’s chosen country, i.e. Brazil, France and the United States. In Brazil, we will look at Lula, a success case of left-wing populism, and Jair Bolsonaro, a congressman that has many supporters throughout the country and that reproduces right-wing discourse. In France, we will look at Mélenchon as the left-wing populist and at Marine le Pen as the right-wing politician. Finally, we will look at Bernie Sanders as an example of a left-wing politician and Donald Trump as the right-wing politician in the United States.

We will gather not only their posts for three months, but also their engagement with the audience, i.e. the number of likes and comments of each post and also the number of retweets and likes on twitter. We decided to collect posts during the electoral run dates, because we thought this period enhances the need for politicians to get closer to their electorate in order to guarantee enough votes for an (re)election. Thus, for France we collected data from the three months prior to the first election rounds, ranging from 23rd of January to the 23rd April 2017, when the first round of elections took place. In the US, since Bernie Sanders did not make it to the general elections, we had to choose dates that corresponded to the primaries of the Democrat and Republican parties, and thus we ended up collecting data from different periods for Sanders and Trump. Thus, we ended up collecting data from February 7th to June 7th 2016 for Bernie Sanders and January 26th to May 26th 2016 for Donald Trump.

Finally, for Brazil we would have to go way back in order to find a period in which Lula was running for elections. Thus, we decided we would wait for the pre-campaign of 2018 in order to gather the posts. However, Lula was arrested for corruption and thus became ineligible. Ever since his prison, many of the posts shared on his social media platforms have been directed at advocating for his release. Thus, we decided to collect data before of the trial that sentenced him, because we feared the quest for his release most likely distorted the proportion of messages that were mobilizing populist categories. Therefore, we opted to collect data in Brazil ranging from the 1st of October up to 31 December 2017.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th># Posts on Facebook</th>
<th># Posts on Twitter</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lula</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2277</td>
<td>1/10/2017 - 1/1/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolsonaro</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>1/10/2017 - 1/1/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Posts</td>
<td>Likes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Le Pen</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>23/1/2017 - 23/4/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mélenchon</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>3534</td>
<td>23/1/2017 - 23/4/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>7/2/2016 - 7/6/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>1765</td>
<td>26/1/2016 - 26/5/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1326</td>
<td>10962</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Ernst et al. (2017) draw a randomized sample of less than 50 tweets and 50 posts on Facebook per politician that are then coded by a team of trained students that show satisfactory reliability. The coders looked for nine populist communication strategies, and had to indicate whether a given social media statement is present or not. Bracciale and Martella (2017) used a stratified random sample that took into account monthly production, and six trained coders conducted the content analysis according to the political communication style illustrated by the authors. Waisbord and Amado (2017) also analyzed a sample of the tweets from the Twitter accounts of four populist and four non-populist presidents. Similarly, we will also take a look at a sample of posts in order to determine a linguistic query capable of assembling the posts into the different populist categories. We will then compare these results to a qualitative analysis of the posts in order to assess whether query categorization by words would be an effective method for doing longer period analysis on a broader spectrum of political actors.

### 4.1 Data collection

The Facebook data was collected from Facebook Graph API. We gathered all posts made by the official pages of the 6 actors we are analyzing, considering the specific time range for each one of them. As a result, we got 301 posts from Marine Le Pen, 232 from Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 170 from Bolsonaro, 219 from Lula, 179 from Trump and 242 from Bernie Sanders. Posts of all types (link, photo, video, text) were collected.

Twitter data was collected using GNIP PowerTrack API service, subscription-based, so we had access to all available data about the original publications made by the selected politicians.
We gathered all tweets made by the official Twitter accounts of the 6 actors of our analysis (applying a specific Gnip boolean operator for filtering every publication of any author), considering the specific time range for each one of them. As result, we got 1836 tweets from Marine Le Pen, 3534 from Mélenchon, 567 from Bolsonaro, 2277 from Lula, 1765 from Trump and 983 from Bernie Sanders.

4.2 Linguistic structures

The methodology of construction of search rules (stringlines) to measure the recurrence of mentions related to populism categories follows a Greimasian-French Semiotics approach, incorporating many aspects of a theoretical overview which understands the production of meaning, on any linguistic system (be it verbal or non-verbal), as emerging from the construction of internally coherent texts that have an articulation of semantic elements (c.f. Greimas, 1986, 1993, 2011; Fontanille, 2008, 2015, 2016; Greimas & Courtés, 2011). As such, the elaboration of stringlines to categorize the different topics expressed by the politicians, instead of focusing on words or keywords, returns to a previous methodological stage to evaluate how — in this case, regarding natural languages — distinct themes and discursive figures have been manifested by the authors (Fiorin, 2004, 2013; Barros, 2005), in an effort to identify the textual forms by which each theme or figure (as integrations of semantic values socially related) can be identified at the posts made by the selected authors.

Because of this approach, we proceeded to measure, quantitatively and qualitatively, the most used words and expressions from each individual corpus, not considering terms detaining a more syntactic than semantic function — pronouns, prepositions, articles. In combination with this procedure, we considered the semantic elements as described by the available literature about populism to define the object of study that each stringline have to cover on the collection of data from social media. No meaning is spontaneously manifested; it depends on the textual representation — the articulation between verbal and non verbal structures within a specific text — and the cultural and collective values languages express. A word does not produce a semantic effect by itself, but in relation to other morphological constructions of the text and as a social manifestation of opinions, positions, agreements and behaviors.

For every populism category, a customized stringline was built, according to the results provided by word counts about each author’s publications:
a) People: linguistic references about national collectivities, unified groups representing a total or partial group of demographics as an equal to a “whole: terms like “people”, “voters”, “public” and “citizens” and the plural for each of the country’s demonym — “Americans”, “Brazilians” and “French”, for example. The adjectives or categories of people filter the general expressions by different significations and attributes to the collective terms;

b) Anti-elitism: mentions to “elite”, “establishment”, “one percent”, “the rich”, “financial sector”, “Wall Street”, “barons”, “political class”, “upper-classes” etc. The categories anti-establishment filter the mentions to the semantic element of elite with associations to specific topics and themes — politicians, business companies and groups, moguls and economic leaders, magnates, foreign powers, players and interests and State institutions;

c) Anti-elitism media: posts about media tycoons, journalists, “the press”, TV channels and programs, coverages, news outlets;

d) Anti-elitism intellectuals: references to colleges and universities, professors, cited public intellectuals, scientific studies, writers, artists, penned analysis etc;

e) Anti-out group: mentions to groups demographically, ethnically, politically or nationally not included as the “people” projected by the actors as a desirable ensemble. Immigrants, unemployed, minorities, welfare-dependent persons etc. However, without considering outsider groups which semantic values possess a component of positive power (political power, financial power, cultural power);

f) Allusions to the heartland: terms regarding metaphorical and concrete allusions to a place semantically equivalent to the concept of home (protection, safety, comfort, social and cultural belonging) — expressions about the land, the absolute past, a territory (the community, the streets, to public places and iconic monuments and historical references with high value to the national culture) to the abstract notion of “country”, the flag and manifestations of nationalism and ufanism;

g) Economy: references to economic themes, either in association to other categories or not. Mentions about unemployment, inflation, tax rates, public budget, banks, poverty, industry, capitalism, communism, outside interest etc;
h) Security and risk: publications detailing dangers of criminal, national safety, sovereign or military nature, such as terrorism, border control, civil unrest, violence, drug-trafficking, smuggling and wars;

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