Populism, Storytelling, and Polarization in Mexico

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Abstract:

The literature on political science shows a strong tradition of studies on the conceptualization and measurement of populism as well as on its determinants at both the macro level and the micro level (e.g., Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Weyland 2001). However, less research has been conducted on the consequences of populism. This deficit is particularly troubling if we consider the theoretical reasons for linking populist narrative with phenomena such as polarization and radicalization. According to the ideational definition of populism that proposes a discourse as populist if it meets all three of the following conditions—that is, a Manichean and moral cosmology, the proclamation of "the people" as a homogenous and virtuous community, and the depiction of "the elite" as a corrupt entity (e.g., Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019)—the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), has certainly exhibited a populist narrative. Departing from such conceptualization, this work tries, however, to explore the contextual dimensions in the narrative of that populist leader that accompany those attributes of the ideational definition, and that here, following a growing literature on political rhetoric, we call "storytelling" (e.g., Engesser 2017; Nordensvard and Ketola 2021; Seargeant 2020; Ungureanu and Popartan 2020). We define the idea of storytelling as the "art of telling a story where emotions, characters and other details are applied" in order "to promote a particular point of view or set of values" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p.2). Focusing on a single-case study, this work concerns what are the stories that AMLO uses in his Twitter account and which of these stories provokes greater polarization among his followers. Although the results are not conclusive, findings suggest that we call the "conspiracy theory" and "ostracizing the others" stories push individuals to greater polarization.

Introduction:

Populism has been defined by the ideational approach as a "set of ideas" (Hawkins 2009, p. 1045; Neumann-Ernst 2019; Priester 2012, p. 1; Rooudijn 2014, p.3) that conceives of politics as a Manichaean relationship between two homogeneous entities, a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (e.g., Hawkins 2009; Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). According to this approach, populism is a "thin" ideology in which, "[t]he people are opposed to what is frequently subsumed under the label of 'the elite'" (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Thus, populism consists of two components: people-centrism and anti-elitism (e. g., Mudde 2004; Hawkins et al. 2019; Rooduijn 2013, p. 6).

One consequence that follows from such a definition is what characterizes populism is the scarcity or the lack of content beyond that Manichaean relationship between those two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the elite and the people. In this vein, populism has been described by definitions ranging from "an identifiable but restricted morphology that relies on a small number of core concepts whose meaning is context dependent" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, p. 150–151; Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p.2) to an empty signifier looking for social mobilization (Laclau 1985; Laclau 2005). From the contextual, vague, or empty character of notions such as "people" and "elite", populist leaders appeal to "narrative patterns, myth making, and political emotions" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 2; Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, p. 41) in order to populism make sense to voters and to obtain their political support. Thus, "[o]ne way the 'emptiness' [or 'thinness'] of these signifiers garners meaning is through the stories they relate to" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 2).

Departing from these ideas, this work aims to explore the stories that populist leaders use to communicate with voters, stories which, following an increasing literature on narrative, we call "storytelling" (Polleta et al. 2011; Seargeant 2020; Stenmark 2015; Ungureanu and Popartan 2020). We simply define storytelling as the "art of telling a story", with a "plotline containing emotions, agency, antagonism, heroes and enemies", and looking "to promote a particular point of view or set of values" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 2-3). This is certainly a characteristic of political narrative in general. However, in the populist storytelling case, and employing empty or vague signifiers such as "people" and the "elite", a narrative is framed that is capable to "bind heterogeneous demands together" (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, p. 40). Populist storytelling simplifies, into a few seemingly simple and incontrovertible stories, many areas of policy that are inherently

complex and contested. The empirical study of populist storytelling permits us to understand how the core concepts of populism (i.e., "the pure people" and the "corrupt elite") are formulated and used in different contexts and by different populist leaders.

Presenting the hypothesis that populist storytelling matters, this paper explores the link between such storytelling and polarization, the research question of this work. In this vein, this paper seeks, first, to investigate which are the storytelling that Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) uses in social media and, second, if any of such storytelling has a more polarizing effect among citizens. Following this pathway, this work explores inductively which are the stories that AMLO uses and reviews if some of such stories produces greater polarization, trying to identify if storytelling constitutes a causal mechanism that links populism with polarization.

The purpose of this work is one of theory generating, using the case of AMLO in Mexico to explore the nexus between populism, storytelling and polarization. To do so, this work adopts a multimethod approach (Brady and Collier 2010), using a combination of human-based and automated text analysis and both quantitative and qualitative textual analysis of social media, specifically Twitter. Although the results are not conclusive, findings show that i) AMLO employs mainly eight stories to refer to "pure people" and "corrupt elite"; and ii) comments on social media are more polarized when AMLO's posts propagate an "conspiracy theory" story and an "ostracizing the others" story.

Storytelling and populism:

A more far-reaching understanding of populism requires to focus on the study of the storytelling that populist leaders use to appeal to both its electorate and to a broader base (Aslanidis 2016; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Halikiopoulou 2019; Moffitt 2016; Tas 2020, p. 218). Populist politicians "tell stories to make claims, enlist support, and defuse

opposition" (Tas 2020, p. 140). Storytelling, in the case of populist leaders, contribute to giving greater content and more public credibility to the thin ideology of populism focused on the Manichean opposition between a "good people" and a "corrupt elite". Since it is important that the nexus between populist storytelling and "peoples' everyday experiences does not become too artificial" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 5), populist leaders resort to some stories that reflect the life of common people.

Roughly speaking, storytelling are stories that "simplify complexity, selectively appropriating characters and events" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 4), and which are presented as causally and temporally related to each other (Ewick and Silbey 1995). There is evidence in the psychological literature showing that stories are a central device to help individuals make sense of their social and political world (Bruner 1991; Hase 2021, p. 686; Koschorke and Golb 2018; McAdams 2011; Polkinghorne 1988). Storytelling is, in this sense, a "sensemaking tool" that "does not simply consist in adding episodes to one another", but "also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2003, p. 92–93). Thus, "[a]cts of storytelling are therefore highly effective in making sense of complex events and facts" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 5) giving certainty to individuals facing the ambiguous and unclear reality of politics. Acts of storytelling are powerful because help to individuals to live with ambiguity (Stenmark 2015, p. 931).

Populist storytelling plays a cognitive effect by countering uncertainty using an intelligible, plausible story throughout which individuals make sense of the complexities of the social, economic, and political realms of the world. In particular, populist storytelling on policies is very influential, because its stories lend cognitive and moral shortcuts to citizens to address uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in politics. In a selective recounting

of past events and characters, populist storytelling constructs a sequential order that help to make sense—not primarily in causal terms, but in moral terms—on why some events took place in a specific manner (Monroe 1996; Tas 2020). Populist storytelling is not manly about facts, but about telling a moral story. Even more, storytelling as a kind of narrative is, to a certain degree, independent of events (Hase 2021, p. 786; Koschorke and Golb 2018: p. 7–9, p. 202). Although populist storytelling draws on some events, it is predominantly a "moral story with a clear sense of right and wrong, where the actors are located on one side or the other" of different political issues (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 14). Thus, by this power of moral "meaning-making and simplification" (…) "contemporary populist leaders gain adherents" (Tas 2020, p. 130).

Populist storytelling are not only moral stories; they also are emotional stories. Populist storytelling seeks to connect citizens with highly complex policy problems in an emotional and affective way looking to produce political engagement with populist leaders which otherwise would not have occurred (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Salmela and von Scheve 2017). Thus, the underlying affective drivers of populist storytelling permit us to understand why such storytelling is so powerful (Skonieczny 2018). Appealing to activate strong emotions such as anger and fear, populist storytelling challenges, erodes, and undermines the cognitive and normative frames with which citizens understand events in politics (Bronk and Jacoby 2020). The use of emotional messages by populist leaders plays an important role, although they require a storytelling to be activated.

Given the inextricable nexus between emotions, morality, and stories that characterizes populist storytelling, populism is performative. Populism represents performative acts (Laclau 2005) who are creators of meaning of the political word. Populist storytelling is "something performative" that populist leaders "use to engage" their

audience "with a contested issue" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 6). Narratives "are more likely to be (or become) dominant if they are told by narrators with wide discursive reach" (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016, p. 326–328; Hase 2021, p. 687; Koschorke and Golb 2018, p.198). Populist leaders, aware of the argumentative force of performative acts, appeal to the theatricalization of their ideas. The seduction of the ideas of populism involves a credible populist narrator. Performative acts help to turn populist leaders into truth-tellers.

From storytelling to polarization: the causal argument

Departing from an ideational approach to populism[1], we seek to identify which of the AMLO's storytelling provokes higher polarization among citizens, proposing the hypothesis that "anti-elite" stories (e.g., "elite are corrupt and exploitative", "conspiracy theories"; "the system is stacked against the people") are more likely to generate polarization than other storytelling such as politicians' positive mentioning of "the people" (e.g., "advocacy for the people"; "emphasizing the sovereignty of the people", "referendums are the ultimate measure of the will of the people").

Building a causal argument that takes populist ideas as its starting point requires the proposal of causal mechanisms that connect citizens' cognition to politicians' narrative (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). Appeals to "corrupt and exploitative elite" seem to evoke resentment and hatred, two strong emotions that have been linked with polarization

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[1] Along with other major concepts in political science, such as democracy (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Munck and Verkuilen 2002), ideology (Gerring 1997), and rule of law (Fallon 1997; Møller and Skaaning 2012, 2014; Tamanaha 2007; Waldron 2002), populism seems to be an essentially contested concept (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006; Gallie 1956). Several contesting conceptions of populism have been provided by Mudde, Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, Weyland, and de la Torre. A consensus on this essentially contested concept may not be anywhere on the horizon (Sarsfield 2022). However, the ideational approach emphasizes the discursive dimension—and its consequences—of populism, the aspect that we seek to analyze in this work.

*(*e.g., Betz 2019; Salmela and von Scheve 2017). As the psychological concept of motivated reasoning points out, emotions influence the way individuals interpret information (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Taber and Lodge 2006). In this vein, the characteristics of populist storytelling could trigger emotions that would tend to harden and sharpen the attitudes of voters in ways that would make them not only more ideologically distant but also less willing to cooperate or even coexist each other (Carlin et al. 2019, 430; Sarsfield 2022).

Simplistic stories "based on defining individuals or societies in terms of a unique affiliation"—such as what occurs with populist storytelling—"can be used to foster strong feelings of within-group solidarity but also ones of between-group disagreement" (Cárdenas 2013, p. 789). The starting point for theorizing on the causal mechanism at work between populist storytelling and polarization is recent micro-level explanations of populism. These explanations emphasize the framing effect of populist narrative in triggering latent populist attitudes (Bos et al. 2013; Busby et al. 2019). Following this causal argument, in this paper we explore a piece of the ideational argument that has not been already tested: namely, what it is about populist storytelling that induces polarized attitudes.

In this vein, the hypotheses derived from the ideational theory of populism have been tested through case study, large- and small-n observational, longitudinal, and experimental research designs. Within these broad design families, this paper adopted a multimethod approach (Brady and Collier 2010), using a combination of both quantitative textual analysis by machine learning and human-based textual analysis. Hence, this paper aligns with authors who favor measuring narrative quantitatively using the traditional method of content analysis that decomposes the text and measures the components of ideas

(e.g., March 2019; Grbeša and Šalaj 2019), which in this case are populist storytelling and polarization.

Conceptualizing Polarization:

According to Joan Esteban and Debraj Ray (1994), "polarization consists in the interaction between within-group identity and cross-groups alienation" (Esteban and Schneider 2005, p. 3). Thus, in a polarized society we find that while group members display identification with each other, "they feel socially or ideologically separated from members of other groups" (Esteban and Schneider 2005, p. 3). Polarization has important implications in terms of order and conflict. As Sen asserted, "a strong—and exclusive—sense of belonging to one group can in many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups. Within-group solidarity can help to feed between-group discord" (2006, 1–2). Because an exclusive sense of belonging to one group can produce antagonism toward other groups, it leads to a greater chance of conflict emerging as a social outcome.

The recent literature on economics has raised questions about the relationship between social conflict and inequality (e.g., Esteban and Ray 1994, 1999). In this vein, it seems that the "concept of polarization is better suited than that of inequality to explaining the probability of social conflict" (Cárdenas 2013, p. 789). In addition, "research in political science and economics" also "indicates that various forms of political and social polarization increase the likelihood of violent conflict within and between nation states" (Esteban and Schneider 2004, p. 2). Polarization seems to lead to conflict through in-group/out-group discrimination (Sarsfield 2022, p. 4-5).

Consequently, polarization is the opposite of political tolerance. In general terms, political tolerance can be defined as "a person's willingness to support the civic and

political rights of fellow citizens with whom he or she disagrees" (AmericasBarometer 2012-2013, p. 275; Booth and Seligson 2009). In other words, political tolerance "can be defined as a willingness to put up with personally disagreeable ideas and groups" (Gibson 2007, p. 410). Political tolerance "is conventionally measured as a willingness to allow varying degrees of civil rights for those groups that the respondent likes least, so as to ensure the objection precondition in the conceptual definition of the term" (Hazama 2010, p. 1).

Tolerant individuals who support inclusive participation of their fellow citizens are an attribute of a democratic political culture (Dahl 1971; Diamond 1994, 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996; Seligson 2000). Although "certain levels of intolerance exist in even well-established democracies" (…), "a basic acceptance of the rights of an individual, regardless of their ideological views" or social position, is widely considered a prerequisite "of democratic political culture" (Hiskey, Moseley, and Rodríguez 2013, p. 275). Consequently, "[v]ariations in a society's levels of tolerance for such basic political rights, (…) "can be interpreted as an attitudinal thermometer for the health of democracy and its political stability" (Carlin and Singer 2011; Hiskey, Moseley, and Rodríguez 2013, p. 275; Salinas and Booth 2011; Seligson 2000).

Storytelling and AMLO's words:

In this work we explore AMLO's tweets and the comments to such tweets from his followers. The data collection covers all the tweets (n = 3249) of which we work with a tagged database of 302 tweets and all the comments to those tagged tweets (n = 59561), from the creation of the AMLO account (2014) to the present (2022). Regarding the data analysis, we proceed as follows. First, we create a set of word clouds to identify the terms that López Obrador uses the most in his tweets. Second, we use both quantitative textual

analysis by machine learning (Natural Language Processing) and human-based textual analysis. With these techniques we seek to identify the words most associated with each other and explore the storytelling that AMLO uses in his tweets.

Regarding the words that AMLO uses the most, a first dimension of analysis that we propose is temporal. There is a interesting continuity in some of the words that AMLO uses when comparing the two years before the elections (2017 and 2018) with the present (2022), which focuses on two dimensions. First, there is a permanent pejorative mention of the former presidents, candidates, and parties that were in power before his government, which AMLO calls the "ancient regime", and whom López Obrador considers to be a homogeneously corrupt entity using the words "mafia of power" (i.e., "mafia") and "PRIAN", acronym that unites the names of the two parties that governed Mexico before him, PAN and PRI (see Graphics 1 and 2). As we will see later, these words constitute one of AMLO's storytelling that in this work, and following the comparative literature on populism, we call "ostracizing the others" storytelling—also known as "the dangerous others" (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; p. 3; Betz and Johnson 2004; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 324; Ochs 1998; Rooduijn 2014, p. 2).

Second, in AMLO's tweets there is a systematic mention of terms that allude to nationalism, which includes "Mexico", "Mexicans", and "country" as the most used words (Graphs 1 and 2). AMLO also widely uses the notions "Mexico", "people" and "MORENA" (Graph 1), suggesting the presence of a nationalist populism (Tas 2020) in which the idea of "the people" overlaps with the idea of "nation", and where both entities, people and nation, are represented by the populist party that AMLO leads, MORENA. Although this is a case study, it is interesting to note that, in comparative perspective, despite the fact that there are nationalist elements in the AMLO's storytelling —and even

nativist elements as we will see later—, López Obrador does not seem to have embraced a radical nationalist populism, as the Turkish right-wing populist leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have done it, with the Erdoğan's "recurrent emphasis on being native and national", and his redefinition of politics "as a war between the national and non-national" (Tas 2020, p. 129).

Graphic 1: AMLO's Tweets, 2017

Graphic 2: AMLO's Tweets, 2018

Graphic 3: AMLO's Tweets, 2022

Underlining the nature of continuity of the two dimensions mentioned, several of the words that AMLO used most at the beginning of his government are still present today. In the word cloud, the terms "Mexico", "people", "country", "corruption", "impunity", "PRIAN", "PAN", "Felipe" (i.e., the former President Felipe Calderón), "Salinas" (i.e., the former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari) stand out. A storytelling affirming that the entire opposition is equally corrupt—what we shall call "ostracizing the others" —continue in the words that AMLO uses most at the present.

Another characteristic that is present in the words that AMLO uses the most is the so-called "chronopolitics" (…) "or 'politics of time', that is, how politics is about time", and how "time [is] presupposed by politics" (Maier 1987, p. 151; Tas 2020, p. 128). In this vein, populists' storytelling seems to "share a common narrative template to recount and connect the past, present, and future" (Tas 2022, p. 128), where the distant past is a utopia that a crisis in the recent past ends and in front of which the populist leader presents himself as the savior and restorer of the past utopia. Typically, populist storytelling presents the idea according to which "the recent past epitomizes how the rightful destiny of the virtuous nation has been disrupted by some corrupt elite forces" (Tas 2022, p. 133). The repeated allusions to "Felipe Carrillo", "Benito Juárez", "Miguel Hidalgo", "José María Morelos", and "Francisco Zapata", among other heroes of the distant past, portray AMLO's utopian vision regarding the distant past, a glorious past that neoliberalism in the recent past put an end.

AMLO's storytelling:

The analysis of AMLO's storytelling begins, first, with the (deductive) selection of a set of words that are semantically and contextually equivalent to the attributes of

populism that the ideational definition proposes. On the one hand, and from the conceptualization of populism as a Manichean conception of politics that pits a "pure people" against a "corrupt elite", we choose the contextually equivalent words "people" and "conservatives", respectively. On the other hand, and to represent the idea of the Manichaean character of politics (i.e., that "corrupt elites" benefit from "pure people"), we use as contextual words "corruption" and "privileges". Second, we inductively identify the terms most associated in López Obrador's storytelling with those words chosen deductively. Then, we measure the association of two words by counting how many tweets they both appear in. Empirical analysis was not only quantitative and automatic (i.e., quantitative text analysis by machine learning). In addition to the quantitative study of the associations between words, we analyzed the semantic relationships between these words and the co-text that accompanied them (i.e., human-based text analysis), which allowed the identification of the stories that AMLO uses.

Thus, from this analysis emerge a set of dyads of words and co-texts to these words that articulate them in different stories that we call "storytelling". By storytelling we understand, in brief, politicians' "sensemaking devices that guide people in areas of contestation, uncertainty and complexity where decisions cannot solely rely on rational and formal processes" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p.1). Although all political leaders appeal to storytelling, what characterizes populists' storytelling in particular is a specific "narrative frame that pits 'people' against the 'elite' when interpreting complex problems" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p.1). This work seeks to identify what these stories are in the case of AMLO, closely following the research done with the storytelling of other populist leaders. Although this work is a case study, this paper seeks to contribute to the comparative analysis of populist storytelling. As we shall see, some of the findings suggest

that populist storytelling resembles each other, even when we compare right-wing populist leaders with left-wing populist leaders.

Graph 1: AMLO'storytelling
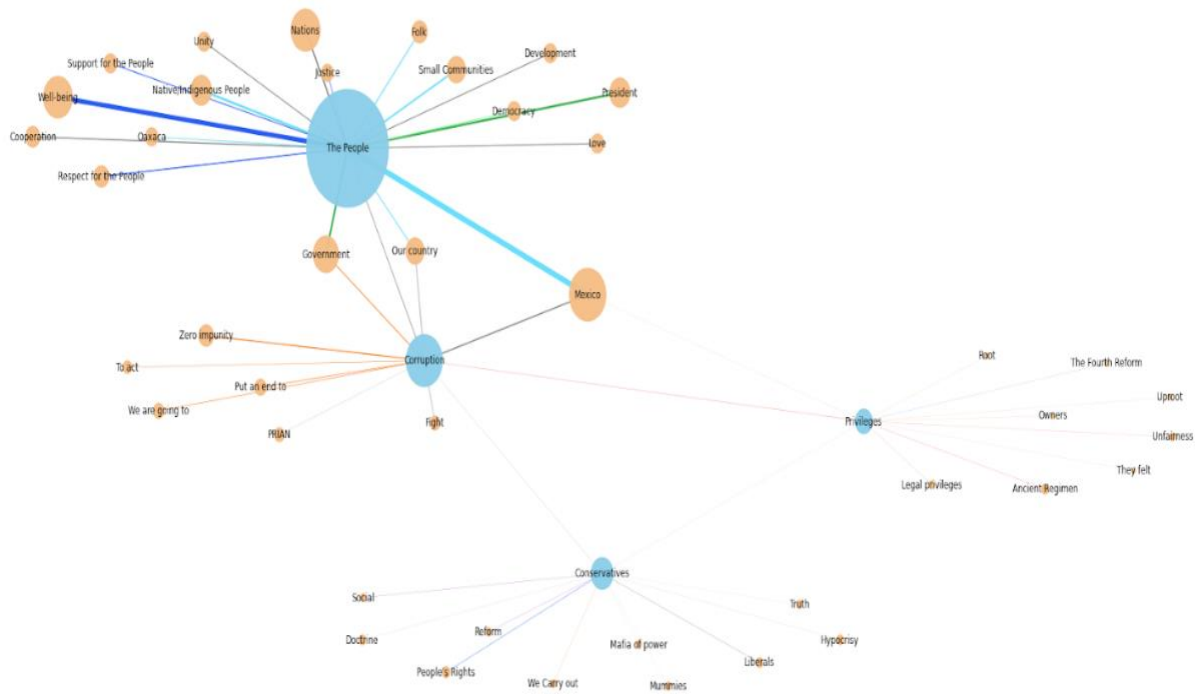
Graph 1 shows the frequencies between the contextual terms of AMLO's populist narrative (i.e., "people", "conservatives", "corruption", and "privileges") and the words most associated with such terms. A larger node size indicates a higher frequency of the word. The thickness of the lines shows the strength of the associations between such words (thicker lines indicate stronger association). The color of the lines indicates each of the storytelling we found in the AMLO's narrative. The findings show the presence of a group of eight storytelling behind these associations, some of them in accordance with what has been found on the narrative of other populist leaders (e.g., Engesser et al. 2017; Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, Tas 2020). In this sense, an additional contribution of this paper is to find similarities and differences with other populist politicians' storytelling that

the literature has found in other cases. Following the comparative literature—although identifying some peculiarities of AMLO's narrative—in this work we call these storytelling as follows (Graph 1): "Advocating for the people" (blue color); "Democracy as direct democracy" (light green color); "Corrupt and exploitative elites" (red color); "Ostracizing the others" (gray color); "Conspiracy Theory" (purple color); "Invoking the 'heartland'" (light blue); "Executive aggrandizement" (green color); and "Personal action frames" (light red color).

Advocating for the people:

One of the most robust findings of this work is the existence of a very strong association between "people" and "well-being" (Graph 1, blue color). Likewise, and also around the word "people", there is an important association with the terms "justice", "support for the people", and "respect for the people". These words form a network of terms that stem from the idea of "people", which is the central node of this group of words. Thus, in the tweets in which AMLO uses the word "people", he systematically mentions "well-being", "justice", "support for the people", and "respect for the people" as well, forming a network of notions that suggest a prescriptive storytelling that, following the literature, we call "advocating for the people": as it has been pointed out for other cases of populism, in AMLO's narrative "people's needs and demands" are "above everything else" in politics (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1112; Taggart 2000). Populist leaders try to maintain a close relation to the people (Neumann-Ernst 2019). As it has been found with other populist leaders, this work finds that one key story of AMLO's storytelling is advocacy for the people.

Qualitative text analysis of the tweets confirms the idea that advocacy for the people is a key element of AMLO's narrative. Thus, AMLO insists in several of his tweets that the

fundamental obligation of the government is to guarantee the rights and well-being of the people. Qualitative analysis of a large group of tweets confirms the presence of this storytelling, in which the "act of advocacy" is "performed by stressing" that AMLO's populist government, unlike mainstream politicians, "is a true representative of the people" (Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 104). A couple of examples are: "The government is at the service of the people" ("El gobierno está al servicio del pueblo", https://t.co/KgVojJO7XP); "The most important thing for us is the welfare of the people" ("Lo más importante para nosotros es el bienestar del pueblo", https://t.co/iIj5SvzhX2); "The government is now at the service of the people" ("El gobierno está ahora al servicio del pueblo", https://t.co/MDI1N6kfiN); and "Now the welfare of the people comes first; nothing will make us go back to the past" ("Ahora el bienestar del pueblo es primero; nada nos hará regresar al pasado" (https://t.co/YAymsC9ybg).

Democracy as direct democracy. Emphasizing the sovereignty of the people:

A second storytelling identified in AMLO's narrative poses the centrality of the people's will and the absolute sovereignty of the people (Abts and Rummens 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; Neumann-Ernst 2019; Shils 1956). The association between the word "democracy" and the word "people" arises from the fact that in a good part of the tweets in which AMLO uses the term "democracy" he also uses the term "people" (Graph 1, light green color). This demand for unrestricted popular power that is observed in this storytelling puts in a very second place the role of democratic institutions as one of the attributes that distinguishes liberal democracy (Abts and Rummens 2007; Dahl 1956). In this storytelling "elites are accused of having deprived the people of this right, rendering sovereignty the central subject of all subsequent disputes" and, therefore, only the leaders who truly represent the people (i.e., AMLO himself) are

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"able to restore the sovereignty of the people by replacing the elite and all other representative and intermediary institutions" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1111).

From this prescriptive idea in favor of emphasizing the sovereignty of the people emerges the conception from which AMLO links democracy with direct democracy. The notion of democracy in AMLO's narrative is associated with direct democracy, not with representative democracy. The story poses that since traditional politicians are corrupt, what is required is the participation of the "people". The qualitative analysis of a large group of tweets finds arguments in conflict with the idea of representative democracy as a form of government: "The people have, at all times, the right to modify the form of their government" ("El pueblo tiene, en todo momento, el derecho de modificar la forma de su gobierno", https://t.co/AdDFc8ANQR); "In democracy is the people who rule" ("En la democracia es el pueblo el que manda", https://t.co/VMFbWQKY4w); "The people must hold the reins of power" ("El pueblo debe mantener las riendas del poder", https://t.co/jJfMx9EFgh); "Now the people is the main protagonist of this story" ("Ahora el pueblo es el protagonista principal de esta historia", https://t.co/KVZjaoloQ1). The central actor that defines democracy is the "people", not democratic institutions. In other words, the people is who governs, not their representatives.

Corrupt and exploitative elites:

A third storytelling identified in the AMLO's narrative is directly related to one of the attributes that, according to the ideational approach, define the populism as a thin ideology: the idea that elites are "corrupt" and "exploitative" of the people (e.g., Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004). In other words, what is frequently subsumed under the label of the "elite" is conceived as inherently opposed to the "people" (Mudde 2004). Thus, the very definition of elite is based on this antagonism to the

people (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; see also Neumann-Ernst 2019).

Following the ideational approach to populism, one of AMLO's storytelling alludes to

corrupt and exploitative elites referring to those who had illegitimate "privileges" during

the previous status quo. The word "privileges" is the central node of a network of words

such as "corruption", "ancient regime", "unfairness" and "legal privileges" (Graph 1, light

red color), showing the links between these terms in this AMLO storytelling. This story

indicates as privileged to all those who unfairly benefited at the expense of the "people" in

the recent past.

This storytelling invokes the idea that, by abusing their privileges, the "corrupt" and

"exploitative" elite (e.g., Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) had an unjustified control over

the people's "rights, well-being, and progress" (Jansen 2011, p. 84). The qualitative text

analysis of AMLO's tweets confirms the content of this storytelling: the elites are defined

as the powerful "who felt they owned Mexico" and who exercised privileges that deprived

the people of their rights, establishing a regime of great injustice against the people: "Those

who felt they owned Mexico think that they will return for their rights and privileges and

that is why they bet on the media pounding" ("Los que se sentían dueños de México

piensan que regresarán por sus fueros y privilegios [y] por eso apuestan al golpeteo

mediático", https://t.co/E98BRE4U2q).

In this storytelling, the elites are associated with the privileges, injustice, and

corruption supposedly prevalent during the "ancient regime": "The Fourth Reform will

uproot the corrupt regime of injustices and privileges" ("La Cuarta Transformación

arrancará de raíz al régimen corrupto de injusticias y privilegios",

https://t.co/zITA4wgaUJ). Faced with these unjustified privileges of the corrupt elites, the

populist leader will give back to the people the lost justice: "The privileges of the little

pharaohs of the PRIAN will end soon" ("Pronto se terminará con los privilegios de los pequeños faraones del PRIAN", https://t.co/XsT6GER1fv).

Ostracizing the others:

Other storytelling that emerges from the analysis of AMLO's narrative raises a negative characterization of "the others". In this vein, research has found that in other populist leaders' storytelling, along with the elite, the "dangerous others" (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; p. 3; Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1112; Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 99; Rooduijn 2014, p. 2) are also identified as antagonistic to people. In this storytelling, "[w]hereas the elite are considered as a danger from above (vertical dimension), the others are perceived as a threat from outside or within the people (horizontal dimension)" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, p. 324). Consequently, "the others are not regarded as part of the elite but as unjustly favored by the elite or even as their partner in a conspiracy against the people" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1112). In the case of AMLO's narrative, this storytelling is framed around what he calls "conservatives". With the word "conservatives", AMLO refers to the entire political opposition, journalism, intellectuals, and anyone who is critical of his government, whom he associates with "corruption", "hypocrisy", and to what AMLO calls the "mafia of power" as shown in Graph 1.

Qualitative text analysis of his tweets ratifies this hypothesis. Thus, AMLO tells us: "Against all odds and even if The Economist, the conservatives and the smart-aleck Zaid don't like it, the peaceful, democratic transformation with a social dimension is unstoppable"[2] ("Contra viento y marea y aunque no le guste a The Economist, a los

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[2] Gabriel Zaid is a Mexican poet and intellectual.

conservadores ni al sabiondo de Zaid, la transformación pacífica, democrática y con dimensión social es imparable", https://t.co/th2Q6XgAPx).

In this vein, AMLO also warns historian Enrique Krauze the following: "Enrique Krauze: in all fairness and with all due respect, you are also one of those deeply conservatives who simulate, with the appearance of liberals. And, of course I accept criticism and respect the right to dissent" ("Enrique Krauze: en buena lid y con todo respeto, tú también eres de aquellos profundamente conservadores y que simulan, con apariencia de liberales. Y por supuesto que acepto la crítica y respeto el derecho a disentir" https://twitter.com/lopezobrador_/status/960674828557733889).

In other example of this storytelling, AMLO addresses Professor Jesús Silva-Herzog to tell him: "Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez has been questioning me with conjectures of all kinds for a long time. Today, in the Reforma newspaper, he unfairly accuses me of being an opportunist. No way, these are times to face the mafia of power, its henchmen and conservative columnists with the appearance of liberals" ("Hace tiempo que Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez me cuestiona con conjeturas de toda índole. Hoy, en el periódico Reforma, me acusa sin motivo de oportunista. Ni modo, son tiempos de enfrentar a la mafia del poder, a sus secuaces y articulistas conservadores con apariencia de liberales" https://twitter.com/lopezobrador_/status/960607411315838977?lang=en).

As these tweets show, with the word "conservatives", AMLO refers not mainly to the elites but to "dangerous others", which in his storytelling means anyone who thinks differently from him. Therefore, what characterizes this storytelling is that everything other than AMLO is homogeneously connoted with negative attributes (e.g., "corruption", "hypocrisy").

Conspiracy theory:

Literature has related populist narrative with conspiracy theories (Engesser et al. 2017; Nordensvard and Ketola 2021). The main characteristic of this storytelling is that the populist leader presents himself as the hero who defends the "people" from different "enemies" who conspire against the people. Such enemies change when comparing different populist leaders (e.g., the establishment in Washington (Donald Trump); the bureaucracy in Brussels (Viktor Urban)). AMLO presents himself as a savior and as an hero in the face of diverse conspiracies from the enemies of the people.

In this storytelling, AMLO tells us about a network of actors and institutions that, in a conspiratorial way, oppose to the social reforms that his government promotes. As in the case of the "dangerous others", AMLO groups these actors under the generic label of "conservatives". The network of nodes that quantitatively associates the term "conservatives" with words such as "reform" and "social" (change) (Graph 1) portrays the idea of a conspiracy theory in which "conservatives" (i.e., political parties, democratic institutions, intellectuals, press) agree to oppose the social reforms promoted by AMLO. Thus, in this storytelling, checks and balances mechanisms, the opposition political parties, the press, and intellectuals act in a coordinated manner to put a stop to their attempts to carry out social reform. Accordingly, political actors and democratic institutions are portrayed as partners in a conspiracy against the people.

The qualitative analysis of the tweets corroborates the semantic content of this storytelling. Alluding to a conspiratorial nature of the behavior of politicians and intellectuals, AMLO posts: "Conservatives paid intellectuals to applaud the oppressive regime of corruption, unfairness, and privileges" ("Los conservadores pagaban a los

intelectuales para aplaudir al régimen opresor de corrupción, de injusticias y de

privilegios". https://t.co/KVAgM7n1U5)

Political parties and the very democratic institutions are also part of this conspiracy

theory. Three tweets are illustrative of this storytelling. Thus, AMLO links the opposition

parties, which he pejoratively calls "PRIAN"[3], with the conspiracy of a former president

(Carlos Salinas de Gortari) and the corruption: "The bipartisanship of the PRIAN

established during the Salinism is coming to an end. It has only left anti-democracy,

corruption, and violence" ("Está llegando a su fin el bipartidismo del PRIAN instaurado

durante el salinismo y que solo ha dejado antidemocracia, corrupción y violencia".

https://t.co/nTkX3T6gBN). The allusions to the PAN and the PRI as allegedly

homogeneously corrupt parties—using the acronym AMLO created "PRIAN"—and their

links with the "ancient regime", show the nature of conspiracy theory of this storytelling.

However, AMLO goes further. Not only the opposition but the very democratic

institutions conspire against the people. According to AMLO, "[t]he verdict of the TEPJF

[Electoral Court of the Judicial Power of the Federation] in favor of the 'independent'

candidate has a lot of substance, but the best thing about the farce is seeing members of the

mafia of power, slaves, and spokesmen, tearing their clothes. The true doctrine of the

conservatives is hypocrisy" ("El fallo del TEPJF a favor del candidato 'independiente' tiene

mucha miga, pero lo mejor de la farsa es ver a integrantes de la mafia del poder,

achichincles y voceros, rasgándose las vestiduras. La verdadera doctrina de los

conservadores es la hipocresía", https://t.co/FP6LPnWN3a).

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[3] "PRIAN" is the acronym with which the populist leader contemptuously refers to the PRI (Party of the
Institutional Revolution) and the PAN (National Action Party) as part of the same thing: a conspiracy of
corruption against the interests of the people.

Invoking the "heartland":

An element which is crucial for the understanding of populism as storytelling is "the glorification of the heartland", that is, an "idealized conception of the community" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1111; Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 100; Taggart 2004, p. 274) or a "retrospective utopia" (Priester 2012, p. 2; Leidig 2019, p. 118). Thus, "the past plays a paramount role" in this storytelling: "performing the epic function, the distant past"—as the opposite of the recent past, where the crisis began—invokes the idea of an original "heartland", an imagined past in which a "morally impeccable, unified population resides" (Taggart 2000, p. 274; Tas 2020 p. 131). Populist leader proposes to restore that glorious lost distant past. The idea of heartland "is not directed at the future but at the past", a past that "is not based on rational thoughts or historical facts but deeply rooted on emotions" (Taggart 2000, p. 95). Hence, "[p]opulists invoke the image of a virtual location which is occupied by the people that represents the 'core of the community'" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1112-13; Taggart 2000, p. 96). The ideas of a "Middle America" or "La France Profonde" are emblematic instances for the idea of heartland (Priester 2012; Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 100; Taggart 2000, p. 97).

AMLO's narrative suggests a storytelling that alludes to an idealized community that evokes the idea of "heartland" found among other populist leaders. That heartland seems to be represented by the indigenous communities. In this vein, Graph 1 shows a strong association between (the) "people", "indigenous people", "small communities", and "Oaxaca" (light blue color) [4]. In other words, in the tweets in which AMLO uses the word "people", he also systematically mentions those terms.

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[4] Oaxaca is one of the most ethnically diverse states with the largest indigenous population in Mexico.

The idea of "people" seems to be synthesized in the indigenous communities. Qualitative analysis of the tweets shows that AMLO's mentions to the indigenous communities are always very positive and that such mentions typically suggests that the "true Mexico" is made up of indigenous peoples. Three tweets are illustrative of this storytelling: "I met with Claudia Morales, a *Wixárika* from Jalisco; Olga Santillán, a *Tepehuana* from the south of Durango and Mónica González, from the *Cucapá* people of Baja California. They have been proposed for the presidency of CONAPRED [National Council to Prevent Discrimination]. They are authentic representatives of pride, greatness and deep Mexico" ("Me reuní con Claudia Morales, wixárika de Jalisco; Olga Santillán, tepehuana del sur de Durango y Mónica González, del pueblo Cucapá de Baja California. Están propuestas para la presidencia del Conapred. Son auténticas representantes del orgullo, la grandeza y el México profundo", https://t.co/h5ULRSfmaz).

It is interesting to observe that the lost of the Mexican "retrospective utopia" does not always begin with the beginning of "ancient regime" (i.e., "neoliberalism") but that AMLO sometimes traces it back to the Spanish conquest: quoting a Mexican poet—Carlos Pellicer—AMLO posts: "The Mexican people have two obsessions: a taste for death and a love for flowers. Before we "spoke Spanish" there was a day of the month consecrated to death" ("El pueblo mexicano tiene dos obsesiones: el gusto por la muerte y el amor a las flores. Antes de que nosotros "habláramos castilla" hubo un día del mes consagrado a la muerte", https://twitter.com/lopezobrador_/status/1190311589905403905?lang=en). The greatness of Mexico (its "heartland") has to do with its pre-Hispanic past and its indigenous peoples.

Executive aggrandizement:

Within AMLO's narrative, another storytelling that we identify is what we call "executive aggrandizement". By executive aggrandizement we understand the political process where presidents gradually dismantle institutional checks on their power (Bermeo 2016, p. 10). This storytelling frames the expansion of executive power both as compatible with and as part of certain democratic values. Similarly to other populist leaders, AMLO "strategically use populist speech to present themselves as the champion of 'the people', while presenting institutional opposition as a barrier to the popular will" (Bressen 2021, p.2). One of the findings of this paper shows a network of nodes (Graph 1, green color) that systematically links the word "people" with both the word "president", and the word "government".

Thus, AMLO posts in one of his tweets that "The commissioners of the INE [Electoral National Institute] do not have an iota of commitment to democracy" and that INE is "at the service of the corrupt regime. That is what they are paid for" ("Los consejeros del INE no tienen ni una pizca de compromiso con la democracia" and el INE está "al servicio del régimen corrupto. Para eso les pagan" https://t.co/zPw0rWTNOi).

In this vein, AMLO links different electoral institutions with electoral fraud and, in his words, that is the reason why only he can be the true guarantor of clean elections and not those "unreliable" institutions: "The INE and the TRIFE [Electoral Court of the Judicial Power of the Federation] do not inspire trust. For this reason, we are preparing 100% for the defense of the vote. After this election there will be, it is our commitment, an authentic democracy and there will no longer be electoral fraud in any of its forms" ("El INE y el TRIFE no inspiran confianza. Por eso, nos estamos preparando al 100 para la defensa del

voto. Después de esta elección habrá, es nuestro compromiso, una auténtica democracia y ya no habrá fraude electoral en ninguna de sus modalidades", https://t.co/eOVsUranDC).

Personal action frames:

Populist messages "are frequently more personal and sensationalistic in nature", a characteristic of populist narratives that has been called "personal action frame" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1113; Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 101). In addition, social media have facilitated the use of such personal action frames (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 744), which has allowed populist leaders to employ more and more personalistic and action-based messages appealing to the use of words or sentences such as "the people", "I", "we", "my government", "I will finish with", and so on. We found that AMLO narrative "on social media" (…) "manifest itself in the shape of a personal action frame" (Engesser et al. 2017, p. 1114; Neumann-Ernst 2019, p. 101). In this vein, findings show a strong association between, on the one hand, "I", "put an end to", "zero impunity", and "corruption", and, on the other hand, between "we", "uproot", "root", and "privileges" (Graph 1).

Qualitative text analysis confirms the presence of this storytelling in the AMLO's narrative. Thus, López Obrador posts that "The Fourth Reform will uproot the corrupt regime of injustices and privileges" ("La Cuarta Transformación arrancará de raíz al régimen corrupto de injusticias y privilegios", https://t.co/zITA4wgaUJ). As other example of a tweet with the personal action frame storytelling, we read the following AMLO's post: "I made the decision to replace Irma Eréndira Sandoval Ballesteros with Roberto Salcedo Aquino in the position of Secretary of Public Administration. The policy of zero corruption and zero impunity will continue. We will never fail the people" ("Tomé la decisión de sustituir a Irma Eréndira Sandoval Ballesteros por Roberto Salcedo Aquino en el cargo de

secretario de la Función Pública. Se continuará con la política de cero corrupción y cero impunidad. Nunca le fallaremos al pueblo"; https://t.co/C4INib7gje, https://t.co/qiEP8YFqns).

Polarization and storytelling:

Once the storytelling that AMLO uses in his posts has been identified, we proceed to explore its relationship with the level of polarization in the comments that followers upload to his tweets. Each storytelling has a percentage of polarization of the comments as an average of the proportion of polarized responses that each tweet in the storytelling has. Graphic 4 shows the distribution of the percentage of polarized comments for each storytelling.

Graphic 4: AMLO storytelling and polarization
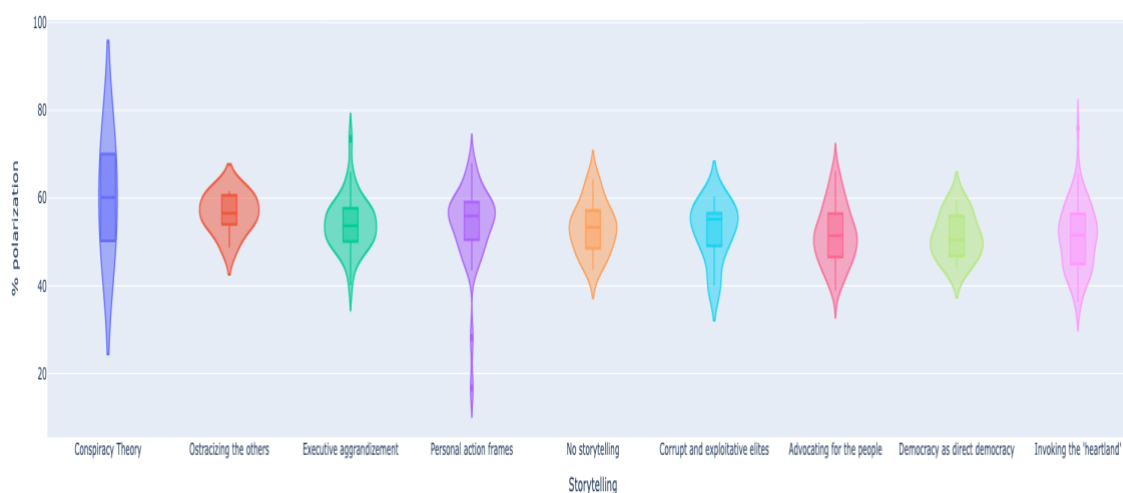
The bellies of the violins suggest a distribution of the percent of polarized comments that varies widely according to each storytelling (Graphic 4). In the "Conspiracy theory" storytelling, a good part of ALMO's tweets with polarized comments are above the 75th percentile, suggesting that this storytelling tends to produce greater polarization. In a different way, in both storytellings "Invoking the 'heartland'" and "Personal action frame"

a good part of ALMO's tweets with polarized comments are below the 25th percentile, suggesting that these stories tend to produce less polarization. On the other hand, the finding showing that those tweets that do not fall within any of these stories show an intermediate polarization nuances our hypothesis (Graphic 4, "No storytelling" label). This finding suggests that when AMLO talks about ideas that are not part of any of these storytellings, the polarization is not very different.

Additional information from descriptive statistics seems to confirm that different stories produce different distributions of polarization levels. The range of the averages observed in the percent of the polarization variable is 9.21, with the highest value being "Conspiracy theory" storytelling (60.165) and the lowest value being "Invoking the 'heartland'" storytelling (50.954) (see Table 1). If we consider this amplitude based on the standard deviation of the observations of each group, we find that the storytelling with the greatest dispersion is "Conspiracy theory" (13.98) and the storytelling with the smallest dispersion is the "Ostracizing the others" (4.37).

Table 1

Storytelling	% polarization - Mean	% polarization - Std
Advocating for the people	51.582	6.642
Conspiracy Theory	60.165	13.98
Corrupt and exploitative elites	52.561	6.776
Democracy as direct democracy	51.131	4.971
Executive aggrandizement	54.177	6.07
Invoking the 'heartland'	50.954	7.403
No storytelling	53.254	5.783
Ostracizing the others	56.586	4.37
Personal action frames	53.688	9.421

Mean difference test between the storytellings (ANOVA):

In order to identify if there are statistically significant differences between the
means of the polarization levels when comparing the different storytellings, we applied the
analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique (Table 2). In contrast to the F test, the ANOVA
test allows the evaluation of multiple groups and the crossover between all possible pairs of
means of the set of observed populations. Thus, the ANOVA test uses the study of
variances to identify the presence or absence of a difference in means in at least one pair of
observed means.

Table 2

Variable	ddof1	ddof2	F	p-unc	np2
Storytelling	8	278	1.771	0.082537	0.0485

When applying the ANOVA test, we obtained a result of 0.082 for the p-value,
being weak evidence to reject the Ho of difference between means based on the variances
for the means of the groups studied. However, this result may be the result of differences in
the size of the groups. Additional tests that control for such a difference in group size are
needed (i.e., Tukey-Kramer test). Descriptive evidence (i.e., violin plot) suggests that
different storytelling produces differences in levels of polarization.

Final remarks:

The literature on political science shows a strong tradition of studies on the
conceptualization and measurement of populism as well as on its determinants at both the
macro level and the micro level (e.g., Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira
Kaltwasser 2012; Weyland 2001). However, less research has been conducted on the
consequences of populism. This deficit is particularly troubling if we consider the
theoretical reasons for linking populist narrative with phenomena such as polarization and

radicalization. The narrative dimension of populism has largely been ignored (Aalberg et al. 2016; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Rydgren 2005). Conceding that "populist leaders are persuasive storytellers", this paper aims to discover the overlooked "dynamics of populist meaning-making" (Tas 2020, p. 128) for the case of AMLO in Mexico.

According to the ideational definition of populism that proposes a discourse as populist if it meets all three of the following conditions—that is, a Manichean and moral cosmology, the proclamation of "the people" as a homogenous and virtuous community, and the depiction of "the elite" as a corrupt entity (e.g., Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019)—the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has certainly exhibited a populist narrative. Departing from such conceptualization, this work tries, however, to explore the contextual aspects in the narrative of populist leaders that accompany those attributes of the ideational definition, and that here, following a growing literature on political rhetoric, we call "storytelling" (e.g., Engesser 2017; Nordensvard and Ketola 2021; Seargeant 2020; Ungureanu and Popartan 2020). We simply define storytelling as the "art of telling a story where emotions, characters and other details are applied" in order to "promote a particular point of view or set of values" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p.2).

Focusing on a single-case study, this work concerns what are the stories that AMLO uses in his Twitter account and which of these stories provokes greater polarization among his followers. Although the results are not conclusive, findings suggest that what we call the "conspiracy theory" and "ostracizing the others" storytelling pushes individuals to greater polarization. When applying the ANOVA test, we obtained a result of 0.082 for the p-value, being weak evidence to reject the Ho of difference between means based on the variances for the means of the groups studied. However, this finding may be the result of differences in the size of the groups. Additional tests that control for such a difference in

group size are needed (i.e., Tukey-Kramer test). Descriptive evidence (i.e., violin plot)

suggests that different storytelling produces differences in levels of polarization.

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