Latin American Populism and the Discursive Boundaries of the People

Gómez Nieto, Alejandra

Alejandra Gómez Nieto (s2002868)

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Supervisor: Mira Burmeister-Rudolph

Second reader: Dr. Manuel Cabal López

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Figure 1.

Jair Bolsonaro, Nayib Bukele, Pedro Castillo, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Abstract

This thesis examines how populist rhetoric in Latin America constructs symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion around “the people,” with a focus on the cases of Brazil, El Salvador, Peru, and Mexico. It addresses a key research gap by examining ideological differences within the region, challenging the common assumption that Latin American populism is inherently inclusionary. Understanding these internal variations is crucial for evaluating how populist discourse affects democratic representation and the boundaries of political communities across diverse ideological contexts. Using Mudde and Kaltwasser’s framework of inclusionary versus exclusionary populism and Engesser et al.’s model of populist communication, this thesis conducts a qualitative content analysis of social media discourse from X, where populist leaders’ messages are increasingly channeled. The findings indicate that left-wing populists promote class-based inclusion but often exclude identity-based movements by omission. At the same time, right-wing figures actively establish horizontal exclusions by explicitly vilifying feminists, LGBTQ+ groups, and security threats as "internal enemies." The thesis demonstrates that both ideological variants draw symbolic boundaries that challenge pluralism, with moments of crisis intensifying exclusion across the spectrum. Furthermore, the construction of the “us vs. them” divide is not only vertical (people vs. elite) but also horizontal, targeting feminists, Indigenous movements, LGBTQ+ groups, and international actors as internal or external threats. Ultimately, the thesis argues that populist rhetoric in Latin America is not a singular or ideologically consistent phenomenon but a contested and adaptable mode of political communication that reshapes the landscape of democratic representation and pluralism throughout the region.

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Introduction

Can Latin American politics exist without populism? Although populism is undeniably a worldwide phenomenon, currently increasing even in mature or more stable democracies, such as those in Europe and the United States, it is in Latin America where the populist tradition appears to be already ingrained in political practices (Aguerre, 2017). Populism, arguably one of the most debated and influential political phenomena of the 21st century, is characterized by its divisive logic that pits society between a virtuous "people" and a corrupt, self-interested "elite" (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Another characteristic of this approach is its high adaptability, which allows it to transcend ideological boundaries by encompassing both left- and right-wing representations (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 141). Its binary reasoning positions populist discourse as a “thin-centered” ideology, enabling it to connect with broader ideological frameworks such as socialism, nationalism, or communism (Mudde, 2004, p. 5). As a result, populism can be considered more of a fluid discursive strategy than a fixed political agenda, showcasing its adaptability in fitting varying national and historical contexts (Cohen, 2019).

Historically, Latin American populism has been associated with anti-imperialism, economic nationalism, and expansive visions of social inclusion (Savarino, 2006). However, this traditional association with inclusionary, left-leaning projects risks obscuring the recent emergence of exclusionary, right-wing populist movements in the region. Prevailing populist theorists are quick to disregard the region’s internal complexities. For example, Mudde and Kaltwasser’s (2013) notion that two regional populism subtypes can be distinguished — exclusionary in Europe and inclusionary in Latin America —posits a rigid and essentialist regional binary. Their research suggests left-wing populism inherently builds symbolic boundaries uniting marginalized sectors against elites, while right-wing expressions construct narrow identities threatened by minorities (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 21).

What remains underexplored is how Latin American populist leaders, from left-wing figures like Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Pedro Castillo, who draw on class-based solidarity, even as they cast environmental, feminist, LGBTQ+, and Indigenous mobilizations as elite-driven, to right-wing actors such as Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele, who invoke security discourse and cultural nostalgia while embracing conservative Christians or small business owners. These leaders strategically toggle their rhetoric to include certain groups and exclude

others when defining "the people." This discursive practice has been overlooked by scholars, who often attribute populism's inclusionary or exclusionary nature mainly to ideology or regional context.

A central puzzle emerges: What does populism mean within the context of Latin America, and to what extent does it conform to the generalization that it is inherently inclusionary? How does populist rhetoric shape the boundaries of "the people" in Latin America? Understanding these discursive boundary-drawing practices is crucial because they transform political opponents into illegitimate "enemies of the people," equating compromise with corruption and betrayal of the popular will (Abts & Rummens, 2007). By reducing political conflict to a moral binary, "the people" versus a corrupt elite, populist rhetoric delegitimizes dissent and institutional checks, weakening the pluralist foundations of democracy (Cohen, 2019; Müller, 2016). In Latin America's context of fragile institutions and low trust, this logic has facilitated right-wing governments in Brazil and El Salvador in attacking judicial independence and press freedom, while left-wing regimes in Venezuela and Nicaragua have suppressed opposition under the pretext of defending popular sovereignty (Savarino, 2006; Cohen, 2019). Analyzing how leaders strategically include and exclude others is, therefore, key to understanding why populism inherently challenges pluralist democracy and can lead to authoritarian consolidation.

To explore how populist rhetoric defines the boundaries of "the people" in Latin America, this thesis starts with a literature review that highlights oversimplifications in the inclusion-exclusion debate and addresses existing blind spots regarding ideological diversity. It then develops a theoretical framework based on symbolic boundary-work and communicative strategies, clarifying how I operationalize inclusion and exclusion. After outlining my contribution and hypotheses, I describe my research design, present findings from four cases, discuss their theoretical and practical implications, acknowledge methodological limits, and conclude by reflecting on populism's fluid rhetorical nature in Latin America.

Literature Review

Populism as a Flexible Discursive Logic

Populism is widely recognized in contemporary political analysis as a flexible and often ambiguous discursive logic (Laclau, 2005, p. 9). Instead of being a fully developed ideology, it is more accurately described as a "thin-centered" ideology, defined by its tendency to reduce politics to a moral confrontation between a virtuous, unified "people" and a corrupt, morally compromised "elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).

Importantly, populism itself does not advocate for a comprehensive political program. Instead, it exhibits considerable adaptability by attaching itself to broader ideological traditions that are shaped by the particular political context and strategic objectives (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). This inherent flexibility largely stems from populism's reliance on intentionally vague, or "empty," signifiers, such as "the people" and "the elite." These terms remain deliberately undefined to allow diverse coalitions to unite around shared grievances. By articulating various social and political issues, such as economic disparities, systemic corruption, or cultural anxieties, populist leaders effectively construct what Laclau (2005) identifies as "chains of equivalence," merging multiple concerns into a simplified and accessible narrative of collective opposition (p. 81).

It is populism's intentional ambiguity that enables it to operate effectively across ideological divides, from left-wing figures like Alexis Tsipras in Greece, who mobilized anti-austerity, redistributive narratives, to right-wing populists like Donald Trump, whose nationalist rhetoric emphasizes cultural exclusion (Zulianello et al., 2018). While Latin American populism emerges and thrives in a context that allows it considerable freedom, sometimes even to the point of rupturing democratic norms, European populism is shaped by a more restrictive environment, burdened by historical memory and institutional constraints. However, overly rigid regional binaries risk obscuring critical intra-regional divergences within Latin America itself (Aguerre, 2017; De la Torre, 2010). These internal differences become especially evident when comparing left- and right-wing populisms within the region.

Latin American leaders further demonstrate this discursive flexibility: Pedro Castillo in Peru blends socialist appeals with socially conservative positions, while López Obrador strategically shifted from class-based solidarity toward broader nationalist discourse. Both examples highlight how populist leaders deliberately manipulate "empty signifiers," such as "the people," to realign ideological positions according to evolving political objectives (Báez, 2024; Laclau, 2005). This ideological variability highlights populism's function as a flexible approach that can reshape political landscapes without necessarily presenting concrete policy programs or long-term governance plans (Finchelstein, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).

This rhetorical and strategic flexibility allows populism to function primarily as a logic of political articulation rather than a coherent ideological doctrine, facilitating its emergence across different regions and the ideological spectrum.

Limitations of Regional and Ideological Typologies

Clear distinctions exist in populist discourse between the political left and right. The left often employs anti-capitalist, utopian narratives that contrast a wealthy elite with impoverished masses, framing politics as a battle between virtuous "people" and corrupt elite. Conversely, the right usually promotes nationalist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative, homophobic, anti-socialist, and authoritarian rhetoric (Neu, 2009). Even so, leaders on both sides sometimes borrow ideas from the opposite spectrum when it benefits their goals. For example, Peru's former president illustrates this: Pedro Castillo often references "the people" and advocates for a fairer distribution of national wealth through nationalization and higher taxes on elites, yet he also holds conservative views by actively opposing same-sex marriage and the inclusion of gender-equality perspectives in education despite rising to power with a socialist party (Vergara, 2023).

Much of the comparative literature on populism remains anchored in broad regional distinctions. Scholars such as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) famously distinguish between inclusionary Latin American populism and exclusionary European forms, arguing that the former tends to empower marginalized sectors through redistributive and participatory politics (p. 162). Their comprehensive analysis (2013), encompassing material, political, and symbolic dimensions of inclusion, highlights how populist rhetoric constructs belonging, frames national identities, and defines the moral boundaries of community membership.

This regional binary, while influential, obscures more than it reveals when applied to the intra-regional diversity of Latin American populist practice. As de la Torre (2010) notes, populism in Latin America is not a monolithic tradition but a shifting repertoire of political performances, strategically adapted to national contexts (pp. 6–9). Here, populism arises in a fertile ground shaped by the region's specific historical, cultural, and socioeconomic features, granting it a broader capacity for development and influence than its European counterpart. This Latin American distinctiveness enables populism to draw from previous waves, building movements capable of disrupting traditional democratic and liberal frameworks, as seen most clearly in the Venezuelan experience (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). Some scholars argue that Latin American politics cannot be understood without considering populism, as it has become an integral part of the region's political landscape. Here, populism is not merely a political style or rhetorical device; it often gives rise to unique political experiments, transforming the public sphere and institutional order in ways that are more profound and far-reaching (Mäckelmann, 2021)

In contrast, European populism operates within constraints, burdened by the legacy of past fascist regimes (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 14). This leads to diverse, fragmented expressions that rarely disrupt liberal democracy. Driven by globalization pressures, it aims to rebuild unity amid economic insecurity, unemployment, immigration, and cultural fears. Its challenge to democracy is more diffuse than in Latin America, featuring diverse movements using polarizing, often nativist language, while still respecting system norms (Taggart, 2004, p. 274). While Latin American populism emerges and thrives in a context that allows it considerable freedom, sometimes even to the point of rupturing democratic norms, European populism is shaped by a more restrictive environment, burdened by historical memory and institutional constraints. However, overly rigid regional binaries risk obscuring critical intra-regional divergences within Latin America itself (Aguerre, 2017; De la Torre, 2010). These internal differences become especially evident when comparing left- and right-wing populisms within the region.

Rethinking the Region

Latin American political history does not follow a linear ideological trajectory; instead, it moves in cyclical patterns, continually rearranging earlier ideological formulas (Finchelstein, 2017). The republican revolutions of the 19th century promised egalitarianism but devolved

into oligarchic regimes. Mid-20th-century developmentalist models focused on state-led redistribution, a concept later displaced by authoritarian regimes that promised moral restoration and economic growth. The neoliberal coalitions of the 1990s emphasized efficiency and market reform, only to be succeeded by a renewed wave of "21st-century socialism" in the 2000s. The recent shift toward security-focused conservatism, exemplified by Nayib Bukele's presidency, continues a historical pattern in which redistribution and moral regulation cyclically alternate in positions of political centrality (Aguerre, 2017). Finchelstein (2017) explains this dynamic through the notion of a continuum of populist time: each ideological wave does not erase the one before it, but instead selectively reuses its symbols and narratives. Similarly, Weyland (1999) emphasizes how "neoliberal" leaders, such as Fujimori and Menem, instrumentalized populist appeals in support of neoliberal economic agendas, thereby subverting the assumption that left-wing populism necessarily aligns with expansive inclusion (pp. 382–384).

However, external influences must also be considered to explain this ideological fluidity in Latin America fully. During the Cold War, U.S. security doctrines, such as the NSD through the School of the Americas, framed left-wing activism as an internal threat, legitimizing repression even in democratic times (e.g., Operación Condor in the 1970s and 1990s). In the neoliberal era, IMF programs provided fiscal templates; recently, Chinese lending has introduced new state-led infrastructure models, free from Western political conditions (Gallagher et al., 2012). Leaders adopt these external "policy kits' selectively, often without resolving social tensions, playing a "two-level game' with foreign and domestic pressures (Putnam, 1988). Quijano's concept of coloniality shows these imports overlay colonial hierarchies, sometimes reinforcing exclusion. De Sousa Santos (2014) argues that even emancipatory discourses in the Global South originate from Northern epistemologies, limiting local alternatives. These external influences explain why sovereignty appeals coexist with foreign policy templates and why inclusive-sounding programs often reproduce structural inequalities.

Furthermore, the apparent instability of the ideological compass is better understood as a result of parties that are weakly institutionalized and view ideology as a flexible asset rather than a fixed program. As Levitsky (2016) noted, Latin American political parties act as "electoral vehicles rather than long-term projects," and therefore, leaders feel free to rebrand or even abandon ideology when it hinders their chances of winning office (pp. 3-7). Weakly

institutionalized parties in Latin America tend to shift their ideologies quickly to expand their vote base. In populist settings, mass mobilization and direct media contact often substitute for party organization, allowing leaders to recalibrate their positions as long as the personalized bond with “the people” is preserved (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; de la Torre, 2010).

Symbolic Construction of the People and the Other

Symbolic construction plays a crucial role in the political power of populism, primarily through creating and maintaining symbolic identities such as "the people" and "the elite." Populist leaders actively shape these identities, setting clear boundaries that decide who is part of ‘the people’ and who is excluded (Müller, 2016). The symbolic aspect, as described by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), heavily influences whether populist movements include or exclude certain groups. These inclusions and exclusions are shaped through discourse rather than formal legal or institutional processes. Leaders interpret “the people” differently, and these definitions often vary because they reflect ideological differences as well as strategic responses to national political cultures and current circumstances. Populist leaders redraw the moral boundaries of ‘the people’ whenever they declare who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 18). When populists explicitly include specific groups, such as Indigenous communities or other previously marginalized groups, as part of the collective ‘us,’ those groups are symbolically welcomed into the political community. Conversely, when those groups are omitted or labeled as part of ‘the elite’ or an alien threat, they are pushed outside the imagined political space. Symbolic inclusion broadens the circle of belonging, while symbolic exclusion narrows it, predefining whose voices are seen as genuinely representative of the popular will.

This symbolic and communicative dimension of populism creates fundamental tensions with pluralist democracy. While populism can boost political participation by mobilizing previously excluded sectors, its tendency to frame conflicts in moral binaries undermines the legitimacy of dissent and opposition (Abts & Rummens, 2007). By constructing a unified “people” and depicting adversaries as enemies rather than legitimate political contenders, populist discourse inherently restricts the scope for pluralism and deliberation (Cohen, 2019; Müller, 2016). Cohen (2019) warns that even left-wing populism, despite its inclusive aspirations, risks reinforcing illiberal tendencies by promoting a singular “general will” that marginalizes internal critique. Ultimately, the moralized tone in populist rhetoric poses threats to democratic

processes by blurring the distinction between what is popular and what is politically legitimate, thereby creating conditions conducive to authoritarian tendencies.

In Latin America, where institutions often lack robustness and trust in political elites is low, this logic can easily lead to the erosion of democratic norms (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). As seen in El Salvador and Brazil, right-wing populists have employed nationalist rhetoric to justify attacks on the judiciary, the media, and civil society institutions, which are essential for democratic pluralism (Boeri et al., 2018). Meanwhile, leftist regimes in Venezuela and Nicaragua have invoked anti-imperialism and popular sovereignty to suppress internal opposition and limit freedoms, demonstrating that both ideological poles can converge in illiberal outcomes under populist governance.

The literature reviewed so far reveals two gaps. Firstly, prevalent populist scholars continue to assume that populism's inclusionary or exclusionary character is determined by ideological orientation or regional context (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Neu, 2009). This approach overlooks how populist leaders in Latin America strategically shift between inclusion and exclusion in their rhetoric, flexibly redefining ideological boundaries in accordance with their political goals (Báez, 2024; Laclau, 2005). Secondly, regional comparisons often obscure important intra-Latin American variation, particularly the ways in which both left- and right-wing leaders engage in similar rhetorical strategies to redraw the boundaries of "the people" (Aguerre, 2017; De la Torre, 2010)

To address these gaps, this thesis compares left- and right-wing leaders in Latin America by analyzing how they strategically articulate inclusion and exclusion in their rhetoric. Drawing on Engesser et al.'s (2017) five-part populist communicative framework, this study examines populist boundary work on social media, exploring how figures across the Latin American spectrum invoke "the people" to include some groups while casting others as illegitimate or corrupt. This thesis fills the conceptual and empirical gap by asking: How does populist rhetoric shape the boundaries of "the people" in Latin America?

Theoretical Framework

To explore how populist rhetoric defines the boundaries of 'the people' in Latin America, this thesis uses two different frameworks. Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2013) triadic model of inclusion and exclusion provides a conceptual framework that highlights the material, political, and symbolic aspects of belonging. Engesser et al.'s (2017) five-part model of populist communication provides practical tools for outlining the rhetorical strategies used to establish these symbolic boundaries in real-time on social media. This way, Mudde and Kaltwasser explain what inclusion and exclusion mean; Engesser et al. demonstrate how they are enacted.

Mudde & Kaltwasser's Symbolic Lens

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) suggest that populist movements can be examined across three interconnected dimensions: *material* inclusion or exclusion, which pertains to varying access to economic resources; *political* inclusion or exclusion, relating to participation opportunities in formal institutions; and *symbolic* inclusion or exclusion, involving the discursive shaping of collective identities.

While all three dimensions matter, the symbolic arena is paramount for this thesis, because that is where leaders draw the moral lines that decide who counts as us and who is cast as them. To analyze how symbolic boundaries are constructed discursively, I foreground the symbolic arena as where belonging is discursively negotiated and contested. In Latin America, that arena is anything but neutral; the same rhetorical devices that once built inclusionary, anti-imperialist coalitions now serve to justify moralizing, exclusionary crusades (Madrid, 2012). This framework operates more as a diagnostic tool than a static classification, observing how leaders shift between inclusionary and exclusionary visions of "the people".

Their cross-regional comparison, however, relies on a binary distinction, where Europe is seen as exclusionary and Latin America as inclusionary, which can no longer capture the ideological differences within the region. Jair Bolsonaro's crusade against "gender ideology," Nayib Bukele's war on gangs, Pedro Castillo's blend of socialist redistribution and social conservatism, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador's shift from class solidarity toward nationalist exceptionalism all suggest that Latin American populism is not uniformly

inclusionary. By maintaining the triadic structure while freeing it from its regional constraints, this thesis highlights intra-regional differences and examines the motivations behind these divergent symbolic actions.

Engesser et al.'s Five Communicative Strategies

To operationalize the symbolic dimension, I adopt Engesser et al.'s (2017) five-part framework of populist communication, described in Table 1. These categories disaggregate Mudde and Kaltwasser's symbolic logic into identifiable discourse.

Table 1.

Populist Rhetorical Strategies

Category	Description	Typical Indicators	Symbolic Function
Emphasizing the sovereignty of the people	Affirms the people's right to rule; warns of threats from institutions, elites or foreign actors.	"El pueblo manda"; warnings that courts, movements, or foreign powers block the popular will	Inclusion
People advocating for the people	Leader claims to embody the general will; depicts the people as one voice silenced by elites.	"I speak for the people"; #ConElPueblo; claims to represent the general will	To create a direct connection between the populist actor and the populace
Attacking the elite	Vilifies political, economic, media or international elites as conspiratorial and corrupt.	"elite", "agresores", "corruptos"; national political, economic, media, legal and supranational elites.	Exclusion
Ostracizing others	References to groups who are neither part of "the people" nor "the elite," but the dangerous others who are "unjustly favored by the elite or	Calls to expel groups sided with the elite, branding them threats	Exclusion

	even as their partner in a conspiracy against the people		
Invoking the heartland	Invokes an idealised national past of unity. It functions as an ideological repository from which populists draw elements of nationalism, socialism, or liberalism to enrich the thin ideology of populism.	References to pure or ideal community, rural virtue. Evokes collective memory and emotions rather than rational arguments. (ideal past vs. decadent present)	To tap into collective memory and emotions, thereby strengthening group cohesion and legitimizing their political claimsn

Operationalising the Symbolic Dimension Online

Understanding these rhetorical dynamics requires closely examining the channels through which populist messages are produced and spread. In today's Latin America, social media has become the main arena where symbolic lines are drawn, moral claims circulate, and the imagined "people" is constantly re-created (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Engesser et al. (2017) also view social media as a key space for populist communication, enabling unfiltered, emotionally resonant messaging. Populist leaders thrive in these digital spaces because they avoid traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with their followers.

X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook, in particular, amplify populist moral dualism and personalist appeals. On election night, López Obrador even thanked the 'benditas redes sociales' for giving him an unfiltered route to the public (Andrés Manuel [@lopezobrador], 2019). Populist leaders utilize the speed and reach of social media to spread their messages. They use these platforms to share simplified and polarizing narratives, which is especially effective in Latin America, where many citizens feel alienated from traditional institutions and distrust mainstream media. As Waisbord and Amado (2017) show, digital populism combines direct engagement with spectacle and emotional appeal, creating a strong bond between leaders and followers. These interactions reinforce symbolic boundaries and reshape national identity through the performative nature of social media, where legitimacy comes from virality,

repetition, and emotional impact. Engesser's five categories serve as this study's coding guide, allowing me to track, post by post, how inclusion and exclusion are built in mainstream media.

Ideology as Conditional Context

Ideology remains relevant for this research, but as a conditioning force rather than a fixed essence. In Laclau's (2005) terms, empty signifiers, 'the poor,' 'the nation,' 'the family', shift across contexts. For example, AMLO's call for los olvidados (the forgotten) evolved into a nationalist "populismo neoliberal" (Báez, 2024), promoting a fiscally austere and market-friendly agenda. Similarly, Castillo rails against mining elites yet champions social conservatism; Bolsonaro brands human-rights lawyers the new elite; and Bukele markets mass arrests as a patriotic reboot. Left-right wing ideology labels, then, serve as opportunity structures that influence which of Engesser's strategies leaders activate: class inclusion on the left and cultural-security exclusion on the right.

Hypotheses

- H1 – Class-rooted inclusion, moral exclusion
    - In the social media discourse of left-wing populists, posts coded as People Advocacy or Popular Sovereignty will predominate; however, when Ostracism of Others occurs, it will target groups that challenge traditional moral hierarchies.

- H2 – Cultural-security exclusion
    - In the social media discourse of right-wing populists, posts coded as Ostracism of Others and Invoking the Heartland will predominate, and Attacking the Elite will target liberal institutions as existential threats.

These directional hypotheses generate testable expectations: If H1 holds, left-wing cases should show frequent People Advocacy/Sovereignty posts, with Ostracism posts primarily targeting moral-cultural challengers. If H2 holds, right-wing cases should show a higher share of Ostracism + Heartland posts, often tied to security events, and Elite Antagonism focused on liberal institutions.

The analysis focuses on the causal logic and scope conditions surrounding the communication strategies of leaders on social media. The independent variable is the mix and frequency of the five Engesser et al. categories found in each leader's social media content. The mechanism is the symbolic boundary work, which classifies individuals as either insiders or outsiders. This work leads to a dependent outcome characterized by patterns of inclusion or exclusion evident in the discourse. The next chapter outlines the research design that flows from this logic.

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative, small-N comparative case study design that examines how Latin American populist presidents symbolically define the boundaries of 'the people' through discourse. The scope for this analysis is limited to four countries, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, and El Salvador, examining only their leader-verified X accounts during their most recent terms.

Case Selection

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) (Mexico, 2018-2024)

AMLO was elected on a promise of the "Cuarta Transformación" and built a left-wing, inclusive populism that combined nationalist symbols with appeals to the working class. His campaign criticized thirty years of "neoliberal" governments, portraying himself as the voice of people experiencing poverty with promises of anti-corruption and wealth redistribution (Murray, 2025). In office, AMLO used daily press conferences and social media to bypass intermediaries, strengthening his direct link with the public. While programs like Sembrando Vida and wage increases demonstrated a redistributive stance, his rhetoric also set boundaries, dismissing civil society marches as "conservative provocations," indicating that even inclusive projects can exclude groups that challenge their moral stance (Beck, 2025).

Pedro Castillo (Peru, 2021-2022)

Castillo was a rural teacher and union leader elected in 2021 by capitalizing on anti-establishment anger. He promised to rewrite the 1993 constitution, tax mining profits, and eliminate poverty, using populist rhetoric that tapped into class resentments and Indigenous identity issues, framing elites as barriers to the people's will (Salazar, 2023). However, his short tenure failed to achieve the typical Latin American left-populist goals due to cabinet changes, corruption scandals, and limited legislative support. He was unable to build a lasting movement or convene a constituent assembly. Scholars call his government 'populismo intrascendente,' a populism unable to turn rhetoric into lasting institutional reform (Vergara, 2023).

Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil, 2019-2022)

Bolsonaro, a former army captain, emerged from the 2018 elections as a leader of right-wing, exclusionary populism. His campaign depicted Brazil as under attack by "communists," corrupt politicians, and violence, claiming he could restore order (El-Jaick, 2020). As president, he attacked the Supreme Court, electronic ballots, and critical media, spreading disinformation to delegitimize institutions and discredit journalists, NGOs, LGBTQ+ activists, and Indigenous groups (Çoban & İnceoğlu, 2025, p. 99). This politics of exclusion reinforces elite-baiting, showing right-wing populism shapes "the people" by creating horizontal boundaries within the polity.

Nayib Bukele (El Salvador, 2019 – present)

Bukele won the presidency as an outsider to the post-war party system and built his support mostly through social media. Branding himself as a young leader ready to "clean the house," he uses symbols like the blue-check emoji along with the tongue-in-cheek tag "the world's coolest dictator" to speak directly to voters and avoid the traditional parties and media (Youkee, 2021). His message combines a promise of national renewal with constant attacks on the pre-1992 political class. Security is at the heart of that effort. Since the March 2022 state of emergency, the government has detained over 86,000 alleged gang members, about 1.7 percent of all Salvadorans, and has driven homicide rates to historic lows. This has also normalized arrests without proper due process, suspensions of legal rights, and reports of deaths in custody; however, domestic approval remains above 80 percent. Bukele demonstrates how an exclusionary security agenda can be framed as a collective win when delivered through a personalized, digital leader-follower relationship.

All four presidents won competitive elections and used a populist rhetoric that pits a virtuous "people" against a corrupt elite. However, by pairing two left-wing cases grounded in class solidarity (AMLO, Castillo) with two right-wing cases emphasizing national identity and security (Bolsonaro, Bukele), the study maintains a constant broad regional context while varying ideology. This most-different-systems design follows Przeworski & Teune's logic, enabling the analysis to trace how inclusionary and exclusionary rhetorical strategies diverge along the left-right spectrum within Latin America.

Data Collection

Although each presidency produced hundreds of social-media posts, my aim was to isolate the points at which boundary-drawing rhetoric was most pronounced. I delineated three equal eighteen-month segments for each administration (See Table 2): Early Interval (months 1-18), Mid-Term Interval (months 19-36), and Later Interval (months 37-54) and selected the top five messages with the most retweets, replies, and at least one of Engesser et al.'s (2017) elements. This yielded sixty observations, covering populist momentum, mid-cycle challenges, and late-term support efforts. I retrieved posts via the Twitter API, including content and metadata such as retweets and likes. I verified them against the Wayback Machine to account for deletions or edits, ensuring an accurate record of each leader's communications.

Table 2.

Sampling intervals per leader

Leader	Early Interval	Mid-Term Interval	Later Interval
J. Bolsonaro	1 Jan 2019 – 30 Jun 2020	1 Jul 2020 – 31 Dec 2021	1 Jan 2022 – 31 Dec 2022 **
N. Bukele	1 Jun 2019 – 30 Nov 2020	1 Dec 2020 – 31 May 2022	1 Jun 2022 – 30 Nov 2023
A. M. López Obrador	1 Dec 2018 – 31 May 2020	1 Jun 2020 – 30 Nov 2021	1 Dec 2021 – 30 Sep 2024 *
P. Castillo	28 Jul 2021 – 27 Jan 2022	28 Jan 2022 – 27 Jul 2022	28 Jul 2022 – 7 Dec 2022 ***

* The late window for López Obrador is extended to 30 Sep 2024 to include the constitutionally fixed handover period.

** Bolsonaro's final window is capped at 31 Dec 2022 because his mandate ends then (yielding a 12-month slice).

*** Castillo's presidency lasted 16 months; three equal six-month intervals are retained to preserve the early–mid–late structure.

Data Analysis

I conducted the analysis in two interrelated phases. Initially, I carefully examined each of the sixty posts, using a coding framework based on Engesser et al.'s five communicative elements. Below, Table 3 displays the coding frame I used to recognize each element in the texts. I recorded both the presence and the intensity level of each element, determining whether it was the primary focus of the post or a supplementary comment. I also identified and recorded the target of each rhetorical strategy employed by the leaders.

Table 3.

Coding Frame

Code	Description
ID & interval	Unique label and whether the post falls in the Early, Mid, or Late block.
Date & URL	Date plus live link for traceability.
Full text / media	Exact wording (or video caption) pasted verbatim.
Engagement	Likes + retweets + replies, recorded to note salience.
Engesser element(s)	Which of the five categories appear and whether each is primary (drives the post) or secondary.
Symbolic function	Does the passage include, exclude, or "purify" (nostalgia)? Multiple functions may co-exist.
Target	Concrete actor(s) named or implied (e.g., "old judiciary," "human-rights NGOs," "gangs").
Tone / context	One-line tone label (outraged, celebratory, etc.) and a short note on the political context.

In the second step, I examined the complete set of coded excerpts for patterns and deviations. I focused particularly on how inclusionary elements (emphasizing the sovereignty of the people) co-occurred with exclusionary passages (elite attacks, ostracism) and whether certain elements became more or less prominent across the three intervals.

Three key limitations to this research design should be acknowledged: digital bias, since offline mobilisation and policy implementation are not included, potentially leading to exaggerated or understated claims about real-world inclusion; language nuance, as coding X posts in Spanish and Portuguese might overlook irony or regional slang; and a leader-centric perspective, since the findings mainly apply to personalized populism and not to political parties or grassroots movements without a charismatic leader.

Even with those limits, combining Mudde & Kaltwasser's broad concepts with Engesser et al.'s clear methodology enables a clear comparison of symbolic boundary-drawing across ideological lines. The framework shifts the debate from asking "is Latin American populism inclusionary?" to exploring "when and how do Latin American populists alternate between inclusion and exclusion, and what role does ideology play in that process?"

At its core, this theoretical framework views populism as a contested, adaptive mode of communication, a discursive approach for recalibrating who belongs, who is silenced, and who may legitimately speak in the name of 'the people.'

Findings

Based on the comparative analysis of AMLO (Mexico), Castillo (Peru), Bolsonaro (Brazil), and Bukele (El Salvador) using Engesser et al.'s five categories, this section shows the core findings on how populist rhetoric redraws the boundaries of "the people" in Latin America, considering all variables included in the coding frame, such as targets, political context, and inclusion/exclusion discursive strategies.

Divergent Rhetorical Strategies Across Ideological Lines

The analysis highlights distinct patterns in how left-wing and right-wing leaders construct "the people" on social media. Left-wing figures (López Obrador, Castillo) mainly use People's Advocacy and Popular Sovereignty strategies, focusing on class-based inclusion through terms like "campesinos," "los olvidados," and "trabajadores." In contrast, right-wing leaders (Bolsonaro, Bukele) emphasize Ostracizing Others and Invoking the Heartland, specifically targeting groups such as "feministas," "aliados de pandillas," and "terroristas," while calling upon moral-conservative values like "patria" and "orden."

Left-Wing Leaders Promote Class-Based Inclusion but Exclude by Omission

AMLO's tweets consistently broaden the symbolic community along class lines: campesinos, Indigenous peoples, migrants, and "los pobres" are clearly seen as true representatives of the nation. However, his hostility remains hierarchical since media conglomerates, judicial figures, and even foreign digital platforms are viewed as corrupt elites. At the same time, gender- and identity-based movements are neither allies nor foes. Feminists and LGBTQ+ groups are not condemned, but their absence from appeals reveals an underlying boundary that keeps them outside the imagined "people."

Castillo employs a similar approach. Rural farmers, Andean communities, and the urban poor are prominently featured in his rhetoric, while mining companies, Congress, and opaque "dark powers" are depicted as corrupt enemies. Like AMLO, horizontal exclusion is almost nonexistent: no sampled tweet criticizes feminists or LGBTQ+ actors, yet these groups are still omitted from the narrative of inclusion. In both cases, left-wing populism promotes class-based

solidarity while downplaying identity-based claims, resulting in a unique form of exclusion by omission. These groups are simply missing from their inclusion rhetoric, reflecting a primarily class-centered view of "the people." This contrasts with right-wing figures who explicitly name these groups as targets of Ostracism. No sampled left-wing tweet directly condemns these movements, but their absence from inclusion narratives persists throughout all intervals.

Right-Wing Leaders Prioritise Security-Cultural Exclusion.

Bolsonaro's Twitter rhetoric revolves around a security-focused culture war: feminists and gender-rights advocates are depicted as symbols of "gender ideology," leftist demonstrators are called "terroristas," NGOs are shown as subversive intermediaries, and violent criminals are used as convenient enemies. These out-groups are contrasted with an in-group of conservative Christians, loyal security forces, and "law-abiding citizens," all portrayed as defenders of the national order. Moral panic and religious nationalism serve as key discursive tools that divide these conflicts into a clear distinction between virtuous insiders and culturally deviant or criminal outsiders.

Bukele adopts a security-oriented approach that has a transnational reach. NGOs, inter-American organizations, and major news outlets are portrayed as allies of the gangs he seeks to eliminate. At the same time, soldiers, police, and "honest Salvadorans" are depicted as the moral core of the country. Notably, four-fifths of his exclusionary tweets happen during major security operations under the state of emergency, indicating a strategic use of crises to direct symbolic aggression at externalized domestic and foreign enemies. In both cases, right-wing populism legitimizes itself through a flexible enemy narrative that links cultural deviation to public security threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures to defend the people.

Crisis-Driven Amplification of Exclusionary Rhetoric

Moments of acute institutional conflict or security emergencies are accompanied by intensified exclusionary language across all cases. During congressional impeachment threats (Castillo), gang-violence surges (Bukele), judicial pushback (López Obrador), or mass protests (Bolsonaro), leaders escalate Attacking the Elite and Ostracizing Others. Terms like "poderes oscuros," "corruptos," and "aliados internacionales" peak in frequency, framing adversaries as

existential threats. In all cases, crisis acts as the catalyst that reshapes symbolic boundaries and justifies harsher exclusion.

The Prominence of Invoking the Heartland

The analysis reveals that Invoking the Heartland operates as a core discursive strategy across all cases, yet its deployment diverges thematically and functionally along ideological lines. Left-wing leaders (López Obrador, Castillo) anchor nostalgic appeals in historical-cultural roots, emphasizing Indigenous heritage ("herencia quechua"), agrarian reform legacies, and anti-imperialist figures (e.g., AMLO's invocations of Benito Juárez, Castillo's references to peasant leader Hugo Vallejo). In contrast, right-wing figures (Bolsonaro, Bukele) frame the heartland through crisis-driven restoration, juxtaposing an idealized past against contemporary security collapse ("pandillas") or moral decay (Bolsonaro's "Brazil cristão" vs. "imorais esquerdistas").

A clear pattern of symbolic instrumentalization was observed. Left-wing rhetoric employs constitutional-legal motifs (AMLO's Article 39 appeals) and historical icons. At the same time, right-wing discourse prioritizes religious emblems (Bolsonaro's crosses and Bible imagery) and contemporary heroic figures (Bukele's soldiers). Moreover, contextual intensity varied among leaders. AMLO integrates heartland narratives most consistently (daily references to "México profundo"); Bukele deploys them most aggressively during security operations (e.g., "El Salvador honesto" amid mass arrests); Castillo's usage is episodic but potent during rural policy launches; Bolsonaro ties nostalgia to culture-war mobilization (e.g., anti-gender rallies).

Discussion

The empirical analysis supports both hypotheses 1 and 2 but reveals important nuances. Left-wing populists (AMLO, Castillo) align with H1: People Advocacy and Popular Sovereignty shape their discourse (e.g., "campesinos," "trabajadores"), while exclusion occurs through omission, systematically ignoring feminists/LGBTQ+ groups without overt condemnation. On the other hand, right-wing figures (Bolsonaro, Bukele) confirm H2, emphasizing Ostracizing Others (e.g., "feministas," "aliados de pandillas") and Invoking the Heartland (e.g., "patria," "orden"), with elite attacks on liberal institutions (courts, NGOs). The unforeseen finding was crisis-driven convergence: during institutional threats (e.g., Castillo's impeachment, Bukele's security actions), all leaders intensified exclusionary rhetoric, temporarily overriding ideological differences.

These findings fundamentally challenge the regional essentialism in populism studies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). First, Latin American populism is not uniformly inclusionary: left-wing actors engage in implicit exclusion by removing identity-based movements from symbolic belonging, while right-wing leaders make explicit horizontal exclusions. Second, ideology functions not as a fixed determinant but as a repertoire for rhetorical adaptation: left-wing figures invoke historic-constitutional motifs (Art. 39, agrarian icons) to legitimize redistribution; right-wing actors use religious-security symbols (Bible imagery, soldier-heroes) to justify authoritarian measures. Importantly, moments of crisis break down ideological rigidity, allowing leaders to redraw boundaries opportunistically, thereby confirming populism as a flexible discursive logic (Laclau, 2005) rather than a regionally determined phenomenon.

The exclusionary tactics of populist rhetoric pose serious threats to democratic pluralism and marginalized activism. Left-wing omission ignores intersectional struggles (feminist, Indigenous, LGBTQ+), pushing them into political invisibility despite nominal "inclusion." Right-wing vilification (e.g., Bolsonaro's "gender ideology," Bukele's "gang allies") directly incites repression against these groups under security-moral pretexts. Both strategies weaken institutional checks: AMLO's elite-blaming undermines judicial independence; Bukele's crisis narratives normalize extrajudicial detention. Policy responses must address social media's amplifying role, where moral binaries gain viral legitimacy (Waisbord & Amado, 2017), and strengthen protections for civil society against state-sponsored discursive violence. Without

limiting these rhetorical tactics, populism's democratic promise remains empty, perpetuating cycles of exclusion in the name of popular sovereignty.

Conclusion

This study aimed to answer how populist rhetoric shapes the boundaries of 'the people' in Latin America, fundamentally challenging the historical essentialism that frames Latin American populism as uniformly inclusionary (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). By documenting how both left- and right-wing leaders engage in symbolic boundary-drawing, whether through explicit vilification (right-wing) or implicit omission (left-wing), it reveals exclusion as a core, adaptable feature of populist rhetoric in the region. This disrupts the enduring assumption that Latin American populism inherently empowers marginalized groups through redistributive or participatory politics. Instead, ideology operates as a repertoire of discursive adaptation: left-wing actors leverage historical-constitutional motifs to legitimize redistribution while erasing identity-based struggles; right-wing figures weaponize religious-security symbols to justify authoritarian exclusion. Crucially, crisis moments dissolve ideological rigidities, enabling leaders to redraw boundaries opportunistically. This confirms populism not as a regionally bounded phenomenon but as a fluid discursive logic (Laclau, 2005) that strategically draws lines of inclusion and exclusion to reshape the political community, revealing how exclusionary nationalism emerges even within traditions romanticized as inclusionary.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides a detailed analysis of symbolic boundary-drawing across four Latin American presidencies via X, its findings are necessarily limited by the chosen timeframe, platform focus, and case scope. Relying on leader-centric social media posts during specific presidential terms (2018-2024) captures discursive strategies but cannot fully evaluate their long-term political impacts or offline mobilizations.

Future research would benefit from exploring the complex relationship between populism and democratic inclusion by examining how counter-hegemonic expressions, particularly from civil society groups, such as feminist, Indigenous, or environmental movements, challenge populist exclusions and influence democratic mobilization. Moreover, expanding the

conceptual framework to systematically apply Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2013) triadic dimensions (material, political, symbolic) across populist subtypes could clarify how discursive strategies translate into institutional practices. Furthermore, additional empirical work on how the "heartland" is constructed across different ideological contexts and national histories is also essential to understand this strategy's mobilizing influence. Methodologically, broadening the scope to include diverse national contexts, hybrid media systems beyond X, such as press conferences, and combining large-scale quantitative analysis with qualitative depth would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how populism's adaptable rhetoric reshapes political communities across Latin America's diverse landscapes.

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