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Divisive Issues, Polarization, and Users' Reactions on Facebook: Comparing Campaigning in Latin America

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Abstract

Economic, social, and health crises have shaken and polarized contemporary politics. An element fueling this polarization is the dissemination of divisive topics on social media platforms. While these polarizing social media tendencies are increasingly studied, research exploring digital political communication in South America remains scarce. This study aims to analyze the electoral campaigns in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru to define the features that trigger polarized emotional reactions on Facebook. The corpus comprises a sample of 2,930 posts published by candidates and political parties during the first round of the presidential elections held in these countries between 2021 and 2022. We hypothesize that users are more likely to react in a polarized way to content focused on divisive issues. In addition, we examine how these patterns differ across countries and the influence of the level of political polarization. Finally, the role played by party-level characteristics in the emotional reactions of users is also analyzed. By means of quantitative content analysis, these questions are addressed using multilevel negative binomial regressions to identify what predicts Love and Angry reactions. The bandwagon effect seems to work positively on users' moods since the most popular political actors receive significantly more Love reactions, irrespective of the post's subject. In more polarized countries, there is a tendency to react more negatively to certain divisive issues, generating greater visibility of these issues on social networks and thus promoting more polarization. These findings expand knowledge about the dynamics of digital political communication in the Global South.

Keywords

electoral campaign; Facebook; Latin America; polarization; political communication; users' reactions

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1. Introduction

Latin America is a culturally diverse region with multiple country-related similarities in its political history. First, as exemplified by its history of colonization, it has experienced increased external interventionism. Second, periods of military dictatorships have contributed to the weakening of democratic institutions in several countries (Frantz, 2019). As a result of external interventionism, military dictatorships and weak institutions, the region is considered one of the most violent in the world, with criminal, political, domestic, and youth violence being a target of concern for politicians and citizens (Imbusch et al., 2011; Visconti, 2020).

The region is characterized by a multi-party system and by the volatility of the electorate (Cohen et al., 2018; Pereira & Melo, 2012). A factor contributing to a shift in votes is the existence of constant political crises in the region, such as corruption scandals (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Mesquita Ceia, 2022). In moments of instability, political outsiders are more likely to gain public support, and one strategy adopted to attract attention is to promote ideological polarization (Corrales, 2005; Freidenberg, 2006; Moraes & Béjar, 2022). In this regard, divisive topics, such as corruption and crime, have been highly instrumentalized by the region's political leaders in order to attract more voters (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Rousseau, 2022).

This article provides valuable insights into a region that has been relatively underexplored in the field of political communication. Latin American countries, characterized by their presidential systems, present a compelling case for understanding these dynamics. Previous research has indicated that countries with presidential systems are more likely to experience higher levels of polarization compared to those with parliamentary systems (Maier & Nai, 2022). This context makes Latin America an interesting and significant region to investigate these associations, especially considering the lack of research focusing on polarizing reactions on social media in this region, while similar studies have been conducted in Europe (see Jost et al., 2020).

Divisive issues are symbolic, emotional, appealing, and more likely to predict extreme attitudes (Lee, 2021; Wojcieszak et al., 2018). The mobilization of divisive topics is particularly instrumentalized on social media since online platforms have become a key instrument in implementing power practices and gaining popular support (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Bernardi & Costa, 2020; Novoselova, 2020). Social media echo chambers contribute to the radicalization of the electorate, further increasing polarization and the weakening of democratic institutions (Boulianne et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2020).

Taking into account the increased polarization and political discourses on divisive issues in Latin America, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it examines the impact of national polarization on the emotional reaction of social media users to posts published by candidates and political parties during the electoral campaign of the first round of the presidential elections held in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru between 2021 and 2022. Second, it investigates to which extent are divisive topics more likely to account for higher Love and Angry reactions compared to non-divisive issues. This adds to the literature by examining a region that is under-researched in terms of political communication and providing further insights into the associations between divisive issues, polarization, and emotional reactions.

1.1. Social Media and Polarization

In the network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), social media users' interactions can have considerable influence on the reach of the content (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018) and transcend the boundaries of the pages where they are published (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Thus, political actors adapt their publications on these channels in order to go viral and become more visible online (Kelm, 2020). In this strategy, Facebook plays a key role, since it is still the most used social platform worldwide (Kemp, 2022). In the Latin American countries analyzed, Facebook is also the most popular social network, for any purpose and for news (Newman et al., 2021, 2022), ranking ahead of YouTube, Instagram, X (formally Twitter), and TikTok.

Most research on Facebook user engagement tends to focus on the number of likes, comments, and shares, without analyzing the different types of reactions. Since 2020, Facebook has offered an extension of the Like button with seven reactions (Like, Love, Care, Wow, Haha, Sad, Angry), to give users more ways to share their reaction to a post in a quick and easy manner (Meta Careers, 2020). These "affective affordances" make it possible for users to engage with posts in a way that mimics their emotional response (Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). In the realm of political communication on Facebook, the Love and Angry buttons are the most often used reactions (Hughes & van Kessel, 2018; Mancosu, 2018) and they can be categorized as positive and negative one-click reactions of users' emotions (Jost et al., 2020).

The study of emotional reactions on Facebook is particularly interesting because this platform has a high potential to elicit political polarization (Barberá, 2020; Settle, 2018). The dynamics by which Facebook users relate to content and to other users reinforce selective exposure and group polarization (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). The Angry and Love reactions can show Facebook users' issues and affective polarization by expressing the extent to which people feel sympathy or dislike. While issue polarization describes divergent policy positions, affective polarization reflects how partisan identity triggers both positive feelings for the in-party and dislike of the out-party (Iyengar et al., 2019). If we order all reactions emotionally, Love and Angry are the most polarized reactions: Love is used when Facebook users feel a very strong positive emotion and Angry represents the strongest negative emotion (Sandoval-Almazan & Valle-Cruz, 2020).

The presence of positive or negative emotions in political actors' posts on Facebook seems to influence the type of emotional reaction of users, who react with Love to positive emotions and with Anger to negative ones (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). When individuals become aware of emotional reactions within their group, they tend to ascribe to them and converge toward this perceived emotion (Versteegen, 2024). However, the content of the post is not always able to predict users' reactions and situational factors are vital in understanding them (Tønnesen et al., 2023). Differences in the political context in which elections are held in the four Latin American countries will therefore influence how users in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru react emotionally on Facebook. We can assume that Facebook users' reactions of Love and Anger will be higher in countries with greater polarization. According to the results of an expert survey (Coppedge et al., 2022, 2023), Brazil is the country with the highest polarization index of those analyzed (0.97), followed by Peru (0.77), Chile (0.73), and Colombia (0.72). Therefore, we expect the percentage of Angry and Love reactions to reflect these national differences:

> H1: Angry and Love reactions will be higher in Brazil and lower in Chile and Colombia.

Furthermore, the extent to which citizens feel about a certain topic will be conditioned by the nature of party conflict. The group context plays an important role in the reactions of Facebook users (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). The audience of extreme parties is more prone to strong emotions (Mancosu, 2018). Ideologically extreme parties tend to elicit relatively greater emotional reactions on Facebook (Muraoka et al., 2021), especially Angry and Love reactions (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). In this way, we expect extremism to moderate Angry and Love reactions (H2a). Additionally, the electoral expectations of the users of the most voted-for parties may influence the type of reaction. Supporters of the losing side tend to show substantially more dissatisfaction (Iyengar et al., 2012). They are more aggressive and polarized when they have poor electoral forecasts (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017). As a result, we expect users of the most voted-for parties to be more positive and have a higher number of Love reactions, while the pessimism of the least voted-for parties may lead their followers to react more negatively with more Angry reactions (H2b):

> H2: Angry and Love reactions are moderated by party-level features, such as extremism (H2a) and electoral popularity (H2b).

1.2. Political Issues and Divisive Topics

The topic addressed by political actors' social media posts and the engagement they generate in users is another key aspect from the perspective of political communication (Bene, 2021). During electoral campaigns, politicians may choose between focusing on divisive issues or consensual issues (Ash et al., 2017). Usually, voters are more likely to react less to consensual issues, such as quality education, accessible health care, and efficient public infrastructure (Simons & Green, 2018). On the contrary, divisive issues are likely to create ideological divides, since they encompass topics that are controversial and discussed with a more emotional rhetoric (Lee, 2021). Examples are moral values, immigration, LGBTQ+ policy, gun control, race and ethnicity, terrorism, abortion, and nationalism (Elliott-Dorans, 2022; Kim et al., 2018; Wenzel & Żerkowska-Balas, 2019).

Divisive issues are often symbolic, and they are more likely to cause social divisions and be a source of threat perception (Simons & Green, 2018). Anger plays an important role in explaining the link between threat and affective polarization (Renström et al., 2023). Therefore, individuals are likely to develop extreme opinions toward divisive issues, and such emotionally charged policy fields are considered to have a polarizing characteristic (Lee, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Wojcieszak et al., 2018) and trigger users' reactions (Bene et al., 2022; Heidenreich et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these topics may change depending on the context. While immigration is considered a prominent divisive issue in Europe (Wenzel & Żerkowska-Balas, 2019), previous studies consider it is less salient in the US because of the novelty of the topic (Elliott-Dorans, 2022; Lee, 2021).

In Latin America, corruption and crime receive increased attention given the high salience of both issues in the media and rising public concern over security (Stein & Kellam, 2014). Beginning in 2010, massive protests erupted in various countries in Latin America, demonstrating growing popular dissatisfaction with various issues, including economic inequality, corruption, and crime (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021). In other countries, a common factor was the benefits enjoyed by the political and economic elite, while citizens lacked access to basic public services and economic conditions (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Luna, 2021; Muñoz, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021). The lack of conditions experienced by the middle and poor classes contributed to a decline in trust in public institutions, leading to massive demonstrations with an anti-establishment agenda (Luna, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021).

In Brazil, for example, protests erupted in 2013 following an increase in bus fares, and the protests soon included dissatisfaction with systemic corruption among all political actors (Stuenkel, 2021). A major driver of these protests was *Operação Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash), which exposed widespread corruption involving the state-owned oil company Petrobras, construction companies, and politicians (Mesquita Ceia, 2022; Muñoz, 2021). One of the companies involved was Odebrecht, a construction company involved in bribery and corruption in several Latin American countries, including Peru and Mexico (Martinez Encarnación, 2019; Muñoz, 2021).

Similarly, the economic insecurity faced by younger and older generations contributed to the anti-establishment movement in Chile, while a series of corruption scandals in the 2000s damaged the reputation of institutions (Luna, 2021). Corruption is also a major source of concern in Colombia, and previous findings indicated that the majority of Colombians believe that corruption is widespread among public sector actors, with such growing concern culminating in an anti-corruption referendum in 2018 (Haman, 2019). The similarity in increased concern related to corruption in different Latin American countries was also shown in the last *Global Corruption Barometer* focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). The report shows that 53% of people think that corruption increased compared to the previous year (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). Looking specifically at government corruption, 85% believe that it is a major problem, and such a belief is supported by 96% of interviewees in Peru, 94% in Colombia, 90% in Brazil, and 85% in Chile (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). This survey's findings are in line with previous studies showing that populism was boosted by corruption scandals in different Latin American countries (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Mesquita Ceia, 2022).

Crime is a pressing concern in Latin American countries, underscored by the pervasive levels of violence (Imbusch et al., 2011; Visconti, 2020). Compounding this challenge is the prevalence of impunity, fueled by systemic corruption within law enforcement agencies (Croci, 2023). The involvement of the police in corruption and criminal activities contributes to the increased sensation of insecurity and distrust among citizens (Croci, 2023). For example, fear of crime is high in many Latin American countries, and such fears have reduced trust in criminal justice institutions, such as the police and the courts (Singer et al., 2020). In many cases, political actors are also involved in criminal activities, showing the association between crime, corruption, and actors of public institutions in different countries (Croci, 2023). For instance, findings from the *Global Corruption Barometer* reveal staggering levels of distrust, with 45% of respondents believing that most or all members of the police force are corrupt, while 49% hold similar perceptions about government officials (Pring & Vrushi, 2019).

Drawing on such contextual particularities, we consider corruption and crime as highly politically divisive in the region, and we look carefully into them. Given the polarizing nature of divisive issues and their emotional appeal, we hypothesize on the divisive issues (corruption and crime) in Latin America as follows:

> H3: Angry and Love reactions will be higher on salient divisive issues.

Considering the different levels of polarization in Latin America, we hypothesize that there are links between country-level polarization and the emotional responses to divisive issues. In this regard, we believe that the country with the highest level of polarization (Brazil) will be more likely to have more emotionally polarized reactions to posts about corruption and crime compared to those countries with the lowest levels of polarization (Chile and Colombia). We therefore hypothesize as follows:

H4: Angry and Love reactions to divisive issues will be higher in Brazil and lower in Chile and Colombia.

2. Method

To understand the relationship between the emotional reaction of Facebook users with features at the national, party, and post levels, we analyzed the posts published by parties/coalitions and presidential candidates in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru who surpassed the threshold of 3% of the vote in the first round of elections held in the four countries between 2021 and 2022 (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). Using the CrowdTangle application (2022), all posts published in the four weeks prior to election day in each country were downloaded: Brazil (10/02/2022), Colombia (05/09/2022), Chile (11/21/2021), and Peru (04/14/2021). A random sample of 50% of the posts in each country were coded ($N = 2,930$).

The study follows a quantitative content analysis methodology, where the post is the unit of analysis. The manual coding of content categories covered all elements of the Facebook posts, including visual elements such as the first image (when several) and the first minute of videos. These categories such as the independent variables of crime and corruption topics were binary coded for each post, indicating whether the post directly refers to corruption/crime issues ($= 1$) or not ($= 0$). To ensure the reliability of the coding, a test was conducted among the coders of each country on a random sample of 100 posts. A cross-country reliability test was not performed, since the coding of the elections took place at different times in the four countries. The results of the Brennan and Prediger kappa test (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File) show a common understanding of the coded categories in each country (all $\kappa > 0.9$), giving the study good reliability scores (Lacy et al., 2015).

Regarding H1 and H4, we calculated the polarization index to know the situation in each country. This index is an average of political polarization and societal polarization scores in these countries (Coppedge et al., 2022, 2023). The categories have a range between 0 (*no polarization*) and 1 (*serious polarization*). Political polarization refers to the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions: "Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces" (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 226). In turn, societal polarization focuses on "the extent to which these differences in opinions result in major clashes of views and polarization or, alternatively, whether there is general agreement on the general direction this society should develop" (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 333). Based on this index, Brazil (0.97) can be considered the most polarized country followed by Peru (0.77) while Chile (0.73) and Colombia (0.72) are the least polarized.

The "extremist" category (H2a) classifies political actors located in the first and last quintile of ideological positioning (see the Supplementary File). The values for Brazil, Chile, and Colombia come from the database by Wiesehomeier et al. (2021), while the ideological classification of the Peruvian parties comes from the 2020 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Latin America values (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2022). The most voted-for parties (H2b) are the two parties with the most votes in the first electoral round in each country.

We also controlled for several factors that can shape the number of emotional reactions based on the literature regarding political user engagement (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). At a post-level, it is obvious that the emotional tone of the post can affect the number of Love or Angry

reactions, therefore we controlled for whether the post included any negative statement or gesture or an acclaiming tone (portraying the supported candidate, party, topic, or issue in a favorable light). Also, the visual character of posts may also matter; thus, we controlled for whether the post was (a) a post with (edited) video (reference category), (b) a post with a photo(s), (c) a post with live video, or (d) a status or link-based update without visual material. We can also expect that posts that are directly authored by the page are more popular than shared content; thus, we controlled for whether the post is with or without shared content (shared content is the reference category). Last, we considered the general popularity of the posts by controlling for the number of likes, which is the most common way to engage with posts. At a page level, we used random intercepts to filter out across-page differences, but also control for two factors. First, we considered whether the page was run by a political leader or a party, and second, if it was a left-wing or right-wing party (see the Supplementary File). We can expect that leaders can more effectively generate emotions on the personalized interface of social media platforms than political organizations. Also, there is evidence that there are ideological differences in emotional communication (e.g., Brady et al., 2019) which makes political actors' ideological leaning an important factor to control for.

Due to the nested character of our data (page level) and the overly dispersed count nature of Love and Angry, we applied multilevel negative binomial regression with a random intercept at the page level. Countries are added as a fixed effect.

3. Results

In order to test our hypotheses and establish the elements behind users' emotional reactions on Facebook, we calculated two regression models for Love and Angry reactions as dependent variables (see Table 1). Model 1 contains all direct effect and control variables while Model 2 adds the cross-level interaction terms. When it comes to the country variable, we ran several models with different reference categories (see the Supplementary File), but in Table 1 we present only one where the most polarized country (Brazil) is the reference category. Nonetheless, findings on country differences mentioned in the analysis are frequently based on models with different reference categories.

Considering our first hypothesis, a country's level of polarization alone does not appear to influence the emotional reaction of users. Based on the regression coefficients—with all else being equal—there are no statistically significant differences in the number of Angry and Love reactions when comparing the results of the country with the highest level of polarization (Brazil) with the least polarized countries (Chile and Colombia). The only significant difference exists between Peru as well as Colombia and Chile with political actors in the former countries generating more Love reactions than in the latter, and Peruvian actors triggering more Angry reactions than their Colombian and Chilean counterparts.

When it comes to party-level features, findings are mixed. Our data reject H2a, as we cannot confirm that extremist political actors generate more Angry and Love reactions. Nevertheless, H2b is partially fulfilled. The most voted-for parties generate significantly more Love reactions than the less voted-for parties. In contrast, there are no differences in Angry reactions.

H3 posits that Angry and Love reactions will be higher on salient divisive issues, such as corruption and crime. The results show that these divisive issues do not increase the number of Love reactions. As for Angry

Table 1. Random-intercept negative binomial regression estimates for Love and Angry reactions on parties' posts.

Predictors	Love 1	Love 2	Angry 1	Angry 2
(Intercept)	0.75	0.74	0.08 **	0.08 **
Country: Colombia	1.83	1.78	0.47	0.47 *
Country: Chile	0.65	0.65	0.50	0.54
Country: Peru	1.80	1.83	1.90	1.89
Extremist	1.22	1.23	1.32	1.39
Most voted	2.37 **	2.37 *	1.40	1.35
Crime	0.95	1.06	1.26	4.55 **
Corruption	0.93	0.93	0.68 *	0.48
Crime*Colombia		1.06		0.21 *
Crime*Chile		0.87		0.15 ***
Crime*Peru		0.75		0.49
Corruption*Colombia		1.09		1.72
Corruption*Chile		1.13		1.42
Corruption*Peru		0.79		1.16
Negativity	0.89	0.88	2.72 ***	2.81 ***
Acclaim	1.40 ***	1.42 ***	0.96	0.96
No. of likes	1.00 ***	1.00 ***	1.00 ***	1.00 ***
Candidate's page	12.36 ***	12.44 ***	11.04 ***	11.05 ***
Type: Live video	1.57 ***	1.57 ***	1.94 ***	2.02***
Type: Photo	1.10 *	1.10 *	0.66 ***	0.68 ***
Type: Link or status	1.10	1.11	1.43 *	1.44 *
Original post	1.68 ***	1.70 ***	0.83	0.82
Left-wing	0.77	0.77	0.71	0.72
Random Effects				
σ^2	0.61	0.61	1.20	1.20
τ_{00}	0.80 $_{page}$	0.80 $_{page}$	1.86 $_{page}$	1.90 $_{page}$
ICC	0.57	0.57	0.61	0.61
N	41 $_{page}$	41 $_{page}$	41 $_{page}$	41 $_{page}$
Observations	2890	2890	2890	2890
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.740 / 0.887	0.739 / 0.8887	0.563 / 0.828	0.561 / 0.830

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Reference categories: Brazil (country); (type) post with photo (s).

reactions, in the case of corruption, the opposite effect is observed. The presence of corruption in posts decreases the number of negative reactions in a statistically significant way, while the issue of crime alone has no impact at all on users' negative reactions. Therefore, H3 is also rejected.

Our most important finding relates to the role of country polarization on users' negative reactions to certain divisive issues. H4 postulates that posts on corruption and crime generate more Love and Angry reactions in Brazil and fewer in Chile and Colombia. This hypothesis is partly supported only for the topic of crime and

negative reactions since our data indicate that users' reactions are more angry on posts about crime in Brazil (and Peru) than in Chile and Colombia. The level of polarization does not seem to change the influence of the issue of corruption on users' negative (Angry) reactions. The results also indicate that the effects of crime and corruption on Love reactions are not moderated by country context. Thus, the data rule out the effect of divisive topics on users' positive (Love) reactions being conditioned by the polarization level of the countries.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the associations between country-level polarization, party-level features, and divisive issues with users' emotional reactions on Facebook during electoral campaigns in four Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru). Specifically, the study aimed to understand whether countries with higher levels of polarization were associated with more polarizing reactions on Facebook—using Angry and Love reactions—compared to countries with lower levels of polarization. Additionally, it investigated how political leaning extremism and party popularity moderate polarization. Finally, the study explored the associations between divisive issues, such as crime and corruption, and emotional reactions.

The findings revealed a complex political communication context, where our hypotheses were not fully confirmed. For instance, we hypothesized that country-level polarization would be associated with polarizing reactions. We expected that Brazil—the country with the highest level of polarization—would have a greater number of Angry reactions compared to Chile and Colombia, the countries with the lowest level (H1). Yet, in line with other findings (Muraoka et al., 2021), we did not find evidence corroborating our expectations. This finding suggests that the country level alone is insufficient in explaining users' reactions. Our models suggest that other factors are a better fit in explaining user reactions, such as vote share, the divisive issue analyzed, communication strategy (acclaim vs. negative campaign), type of content (video, photo, or status), and post originality.

In an additional model examining the associations between divisive issues and country-level polarization (H4), we found evidence that posts about crime led to more Angry reactions in Brazil, a highly polarized country, while posts about corruption did not show a similar pattern. We attribute our findings to the characteristics of Latin America. Although the level of polarization differs when comparing the analyzed countries, they share similarities impacting how users react to online political campaigns. For instance, countries share similar challenges when dealing with corruption scandals, as exemplified in Operation Car Wash involving multiple Latin American countries (Martinez Encarnación, 2019; Mesquita Ceia, 2022; Muñoz, 2021). In reaction to such corruption scandals, mass protests took place in various Latin American countries after 2010, and corruption was a common driver among them, with citizens supporting an anti-establishment agenda (Luna, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021). Concerns over corruption have been growing for multiple years, and the level of distrust in public institutions, such as in the police and in government, is high among citizens from Latin America (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). Our findings showing non-significant differences in the salient issue of corruption highlight the contextual similarity in the region.

Although rates of violence are high in Latin America, there are key differences among the countries analyzed. For example, Colombia faced criminality issues due to the guerrilla actions driven by the FARC group (Haman, 2019). In 2016, a new peace agreement was established in the country and there have been institutional efforts to increase public acceptance of this peace agreement (Piccolino & Ruette-Orihuela,

2021). Such differences among Latin American countries are also exemplified in the Chilean case because violence in the country is lower relative to the region (Singer et al., 2020). Such contextual differences are mirrored in our findings showing that posts about crime led to more Angry reactions in Brazil compared to Chile and Colombia. In Brazil, crime is often explored by populist leaders to boost fear and divisions between us vs. them (Rennó, 2020). One prevalent narrative advocates for tougher measures against crime and violence, often at the expense of human rights considerations (Rennó, 2020). For instance, during his campaign, Bolsonaro advocated loosening regulations on gun control and arming citizens as a means to combat crime (Rennó, 2020).

At a party level, the results reject H2a and reveal that extremist political actors do not generate a greater emotional reaction. This is inconsistent with previous findings (Muraoka et al., 2021) and implies a less belligerent strategy on the extremes since the negativity of the messages is usually conveyed to users' reactions (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022). However, our results showing associations between acclaim messages and Love reactions and between negative messages and Angry reactions are in line with previous studies on emotional responses to positive and negative content on Facebook (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). Still, at a party level, our results show that parties with higher popularity rates during the electoral process foster a more positive mood among Facebook users of political actors' pages, and our hypothesis that the most voted-for parties trigger more Love reactions was confirmed. This finding is in line with previous results showing the winner effect, that winners are more likely to receive more positive evaluations compared to defeated candidates (Levy, 2021).

We also found no evidence for our assumption that divisive issues would evoke more emotional reactions (H3). Contrary to the findings of other studies (Bene, 2021), we found the opposite effect in posts focusing on corruption, with a significant decrease in Angry reactions. This finding may be associated with the type of campaign strategy adopted by political candidates when discussing corruption. Users' reactions may be less negative if messages about corruption are framed in a positive tone, such as when candidates use an acclaim strategy. Future studies should examine interactions between the political issues and the style of the message for better conclusions.

Our article contributes to the literature by showing associations between polarization, divisive issues, and user reactions through a comparative lens in an as-yet unexplored region. More polarized countries (H1), extremist political actors (H2a), and divisive topics (H3) do not per se generate a greater number of negative reactions. Furthermore, the bandwagon effect seems to work positively on users' moods since most popular political actors receive more Love reactions irrespective of the post's subject (H2b). Finally, in more polarized countries, there is a tendency to react more negatively to certain divisive issues (H4), generating greater visibility of these issues on social networks and thereby promoting a polarizing vicious circle.

This study has some limitations. For instance, polarizing reactions offer an avenue for understanding users' reactions, but deeper analysis including other reactions (Wow, Haha, and Sad) could reveal further insights into emotional and affective responses. From a methodological point of view, the results of the comparative study have to be interpreted with caution because only an intra-country reliability test was conducted (not cross-country). However, one of the authors participated in the coding process of the four countries, which helped homogenize the coding of the variables analyzed. Furthermore, this study compares Latin American

countries, and future studies including other regions could help better explain the associations between polarization and political campaigns across different contexts. Finally, future studies could explore interactions between divisive political issues and the communication strategy (such as acclaim vs. negative campaigns) to better understand the associations with users' reactions.

By examining the context of Latin America, this study not only adds to the existing literature but also highlights the importance of considering regional specificities in political communication research. The findings emphasize the need for more comparative studies examining under-researched countries to gain a better understanding of how polarization, political issues, and social media dynamics interact. This research opens possibilities for further exploration into the mechanisms through which polarization manifests in digital political communication, especially in regions characterized by presidential systems and a history of political instability and polarization. Moreover, our study also provides compelling reasons for further comparisons between countries with different political systems considering how polarization differs between them.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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