
Miscellaneous

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Discursive Practices during an Electoral Cycle: Public Opinion and Political Disillusionment on Twitter

Abstract

Electoral cycles are highly charged, politically intense moments that influence public discourse. Political elites, citizens, and the traditional news media seek to generate opinions and interactions on social networks. This research is motivated by the following questions: What are the communicative and deliberative practices used in these spaces? Is it possible to identify the characteristics that –through deliberative conversations– potentially foster or undermine democratic debate, particularly when using populist and polarizing discourse? Using a mixed methods approach, we apply a social network analysis tool to track conversations and identify the volume of political discourse (N=346,000). Using selective and staged filtering, we identified posts from nine Peruvian Twitter accounts during the September 2022 electoral campaign in Lima: three candidates, three media outlets, and three accounts with high levels of engagement. Our data comprised the comments from these nine accounts and was extracted using an Application Programming Interface (API). Subsequently, we carried out ethnographic content analysis on publications with more than 30 comments. In this phase, we analyzed Twitter comments using a codebook to identify deliberative practices and user responses. Our findings underscore the significant role of principal media outlets in shaping political conversation on

Twitter. We also discovered that attempts to interact and deliberate were often overshadowed by heated comments attempting to impose opinions on others. Most importantly, our research reveals a widespread disillusionment with politics, political institutions, and even the political preferences of fellow citizens in Peru, highlighting a key challenge for democratic discourse on social media.

Keywords

Public opinion, electoral campaign, Twitter, Democratic deliberation, ethnographic content analysis, political disillusionment.

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1. Introduction

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered news consumption, with social media becoming the primary information source and diminishing the roles of television, radio, and traditional press (Flaxman *et al.*, 2016). This shift coincides with growing distrust in traditional media due to the prevalence of fake news (Edelman Trust Institute, 2022). Consequently, people turn to blogs, independent websites, and influencers (Casero Ripollés, 2018; Rodrigo & Cerqueira, 2019). The internet and social media now serve as significant misinformation tools, emphasizing superficial content over reflective analysis (Capilla, 2019; Rodrigo & Cerqueira, 2019; Hernández & Sola, 2019).

Given this, analyzing content shared on social media requires a specific and varied approach given the diverse social and political factors that impact society and its digital public spheres (Waldherr *et al.*, 2021). Thus, this article seeks to understand how information, messages, and discourse shared on social media generate dialogue and debates that impact individuals' opinion formation, all while using the Peruvian case, as has been done in other countries (Bustos *et al.*, 2019; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2019; Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez 2021; Arce-García *et al.*, 2022; Arcila-Calderón *et al.*, 2022). We pay special attention to prior studies of Peruvian politics and Twitter due to the impact this social network has had and continues to have in different political contexts as well as due to Twitter's reach (Mendoza & Valenzuela Chamorro, 2020; Aliaga *et al.*, 2021; Cárdenas, 2021; Ponte *et al.*, 2022; Montúfar-Calle *et al.*, 2022; Data Reportal, 2022).

This study views the digital sphere as both a research area where social demonstrations take place and a method or tool for collecting information. We employed social listening techniques to identify themes, trends, tones, and discourse styles and how topics become part of the agenda that people talk about and share. Our research also examined different communication flows, such as the news coverage from media sources that publish their content online, campaigning politicians who aim to present their proposals and generate dialogue, and the dialogue reflected and generated in individuals' comments. We also identified connective elements, such as hashtags, meme creation and sharing, narratives, and meaning-making and reuse of content, to understand how these elements contribute to the overall discourse on social media.

Using a mixed methods approach, we tracked and analyzed 370,000 political discourse conversations during Lima's September 2022 electoral campaign. We selectively filtered posts from nine Peruvian Twitter accounts—three candidates, three media outlets, and three high-engagement accounts. Then, we conducted an ethnographic content analysis on publications with over 30 comments, identifying deliberative practices. Our findings emphasize the influential role of media outlets in shaping political conversations on Twitter and the active involvement of anonymous accounts using official hashtags. More importantly, interaction and deliberation were frequently overshadowed by heated comments, showing a widespread disillusionment with politics, political institutions, and the political preferences of fellow citizens in Peru.

Our contribution lies in the detailed examination of Twitter conversations during an election cycle, distinguishing the discourses of politicians, media entities, and individual users. We provide a nuanced understanding of digital discourse by integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights. This approach identifies recurring themes and unforeseen discourses, offering a comprehensive analysis of political communication in a context marked by intense electoral dynamics.

1.1. *Twitter as a correlate of public opinion*

The impact of social media on democracy and public debate is a cause for continuous study and concern. Some studies warn that social media will cause polarization by forming “echo chambers” (Terren & Borge, 2021) rather than creating a new, independent public sphere. In this study, we use the concept of “public opinion” as an intermediate dimension between public opinion, such as that compiled by opinion surveys and opinions published in mass media. This

“public opinion” prevails among several during interactions with political elites and their audiences, manifesting what large but conflicting population sectors consider the most plausible interpretations of controversial issues based on available information (Habermas, 2006). Unlike media or individual opinions, “public opinion” arises from an “intuitive bridge” likely formed by political elites’ efforts and audience reactions, and –despite restrictions on deliberative exchange, such as elite-centered debates, limited characters for argumentation, and frequent incivility– Twitter enables “vertical interaction” between political elites and citizens, significantly contributing to its construction (Wessler, 2019).

While some political actors dominate the public debate on Twitter and attempt to manipulate narratives on this platform (McGregor, 2020), it also facilitates some degree of conversation between political elites and the citizenry (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011; Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Roca-Cuberes & Young, 2020). Comments on Twitter can be studied independently to identify discourse and opinions that may impact the broader media environment. Some studies argue that Twitter trends can be extrapolated to reflect public opinion or election results, though consensus on this is lacking. Social media users do not represent the entire electorate (Mislove *et al.*, 2011; Mellon & Prosser, 2017), yet the number of mentions of political parties on Twitter can sometimes reflect election results (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011), and journalists often treat social media sentiments as a form of public opinion (McGregor, 2019). Jungherr *et al.* (2017), in turn, suggest that Twitter data primarily indicate attention rather than political support, as shown in the 2013 German federal elections.

1.2. *Discursive practices and deliberation on social media*

Attempting to discuss all the factors that impact the exchange of ideas on the Internet is difficult. Some studies focus on social media comments and how this influences political dialogue. Wilhelm (2019), for example, focuses on the analysis of the characteristics of these comments to identify whether, in explicit discourse, we can see a sort of individual deviation as regards moral orientation and if, for example, a discourse charged with hate can be related to liberal and/or conservative ideology (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, given the studies by Sponholz (2019), we know that Brazilian public figures use extremist and polarizing discourse to increase their presence in the media. In the Brazilian media landscape, where there is a high degree of media concentration and a strong mistrust of the political class, public figures preach violence in the media, which ends up resonating on social networks. Sponholz and Christofletti (2019) distinguish the four types of politicians: the preacher of hate, the right-wing populist, the media polemicist, and the intolerant comedian. This is the discursive offering that serves for debate and discussion.

Social networks are plagued with deliberative practices that are charged with hate, directed at diverse ethnic, religious, and gender identities and political beliefs. Surveys of youth in the United States and Turkey conclude that young people observe and experience cyber-hate on different levels, which could have social consequences and influence their trust in others (Celik & Serkan, 2019; Richardson-Self & Louise, 2019). Additionally, online exposure to polarizing, aggressive, and defamatory discourse has serious consequences for historically marginalized communities (Zewdie *et al.*, 2019). In most cases in which messages of this type have been analyzed, it has been found that they often target people as a function of their ethnic and national origin, but also messages incite hate based on religion, social class, gender, and sexual orientation (Vittorio Lingiardi *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, within democratic theory, the deliberative variant has assumed pre-eminence, representing for many the ideal of democracy, so online discussion forums have been proposed as solutions to the practical limits of mass deliberation. In this context, Wright and Street (2007) suggest that deliberation depends on the design and choice of the platforms rather than a predetermined product of the technology. Building on this, Wright (2012) proposes that examining political discussions in non-traditional, non-institutional spaces, such as social

media platforms, offers a more accurate understanding of online deliberation. He advocates for a context-sensitive approach to studying online political discourse, recognizing that the Internet's impact can be transformative (enabling new forms of democratic engagement) and reinforcing (maintaining existing power structures), depending on the context. Furthermore, the quality of online deliberation can be influenced by various factors, including the sociopolitical context and the design of the online space (Camaj & Santana, 2015).

The application of deliberative theory to online political talk has shown mixed results. Studies indicate that online forums often do not meet deliberative ideals but serve other democratic functions. For instance, user-generated comments on the Facebook profiles of Spanish candidates during the 2011 General Election campaign do not meet ideal deliberative standards but still contribute to democratic functions such as citizen self-expression, democratic socialization, and reinforcement of social cohesion among party activists and sympathizers (Valera-Ordaz, 2017). However, ideological agreement among participants does not necessarily enhance argumentation and interaction (Valera-Ordaz *et al.*, 2018), while dissenters are prone to engage in reasoned argumentation (Valera-Ordaz *et al.*, 2018).

1.3. *The Context of the Regional and Municipal Elections (RME) 2022*

The Peruvian case presents an interesting panorama for identifying and analyzing opinions and discourse directed at and towards political and social actors. This study examines political organizations comprising regional movements, political parties, and electoral alliances that compete in the regional and municipal elections (RME). During these elections, more than 13,000 regional and municipal positions were contested, including the mayor of Lima, the country's capital. According to the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE), Peru's election regulation body, the campaign took place between August 3 and September 29, 2022 (JNE, 2022). These democratic elections had a historic absenteeism rate, with 23.2% of the population failing to vote, although elections are compulsory (JNE, 2022). This political disengagement is likely due to multiple corruption scandals and investigations into former mayors and governors, as many have been removed from their posts or are imprisoned today (PROETICA, 2022). Four weeks before the day of the elections, all parties' political campaigns were not receiving much attention from citizens. The country was still dealing with the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the campaign efforts to shift online to social media. In the province of Lima, 9 days before the election, candidates from political parties Podemos Peru, Renovación Popular, and Somos Peru were leading in the polls (IPSOS, 2022).

Peru's media and political landscape underwent significant transformations in the post-pandemic era. The Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute (Newman *et al.*, 2022; 2023) highlights a substantial shift in news consumption, with a growing reliance on social media as the primary source of information due to increasing distrust in traditional media outlets. This transition underscores challenges such as the spread of misinformation and heightened political polarization. The political environment, characterized by instability, frequent leadership changes, and public disillusionment with political institutions, was further complicated by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. **Research Objective and Questions**

This study discerns, classifies, and categorizes the discourse of different social actors in the public digital sphere produced during moments of high political tension, particularly during electoral cycles. We are interested in how social networks generate deliberation and public opinion, especially during political and institutional crises, the post-pandemic context, and economic uncertainties, which create new issues and alleged enemies and influence social psychology. These factors generate a unique discourse specific to Peru's reality. Hence, the objective of this study is to evaluate comments derived from publications on Twitter from three different groups (candidates, traditional media, and individual accounts with high levels of

engagement) during the campaign cycle for the mayor of Lima in 2022. We aim to examine their deliberative character and the different types of discourse visible in the comments. To that end, we seek to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. What deliberative practices are evident in the comments from Twitter publications during the selected electoral period?
- RQ2. How do deliberative practices on social media during electoral periods reflect or challenge democratic, deliberative ideals?
- RQ3. What similarities and/or differences exist between the deliberative practices and discourses of candidates, traditional media, and individual accounts with high levels of engagement?

3. Methodology

This study aims to understand and identify a social phenomenon during an election cycle, with conversations derived from posts on Twitter from active users in the political sphere as objects of analysis. This mixed-method and exploratory focus begins with social listening, in which we utilized the tool Brandwatch to identify the volume of conversations on the social network Twitter during this electoral cycle. With this information, we used an Application Programming Interface (API) to extract comments and perform qualitative content analysis, which allowed us to identify deliberative practices.

We start from the premise that the development of mixed-methods studies and the combination of digital tracking data with self-identifying data allows for a greater capacity for analysis and understanding, as well as the observation of behavior and its impact online in its natural environment (Terren & Borge, 2021). Fieldwork was divided into two specific periods. The first consists of an analysis of trending topics on Twitter during the MRE 2022 in Lima, Peru, from September 2 to October 2, 2022, the four weeks before election day, generally the most intense campaign moment. During this period, we identified the volume of conversations generated on Twitter using the social listening platform Brandwatch. We first used keywords linked to the electoral process, time, and space using hashtags, with an emphasis on the municipal debate that took place during this period:

“EleccionesMunicipales2022,” “Elecciones 2022,” “ERM2022,” “DebateEnLatina,” “EleccionesMunicipales,” “Elecciones2022,” “DebateMunicipal” y *“NE,” “DebateMunicipal,” “PeruDecide2022,” “debateelectoral,” “Debate”* y *“NE.”* This procedure allowed for the identification of topics and publications that generated high amounts of conversations, including some that were not initially identified as important, which were included as we continued exploring the data (Miró Llinares, 2016). At the same time, using the names of the candidates for the Mayor of the city of Lima, their political parties, and their hashtags, we used keywords in Brandwatch such as *“GeorgeForsyth,” “SomosPeru,” “RafaelLopezAliaga,” “RenovaciónPopular,” “DanielUrresti,” “PodemosPeru,” “Daniel Urresti,” “@DanielUrresti,” “Podemos Perú; “George Forsyth,” “@George_Forsyth,” “Somos Perú,” “Rafael López Aliaga,” “@rlopezaliaga”* y *“Renovación Popular.”* We also included data from searches based on hashtags from contemporary issues as well as those tied to specific campaigns, such as *“Elige bien,” “Porky,” “LimaMereceSeguridad,” “UrrestiSeguridad,” “MarcaLasDosP,” “SinSeguridadNoHayNada.”*

This procedure allowed us to identify the total number of tweets and which accounts they were tied to, as well as those that received the highest number of comments that would then later be subjected to qualitative content analysis. We identified a total of nine accounts, including three traditional news media accounts, three political candidates who were leading in the polls, and another three accounts belonging to individual users who generated a high volume of conversation. As a result, we found 346,000 tweets, 71,480 of which belonged to media accounts, 211,280 to politicians, and 63,350 to those individual accounts.

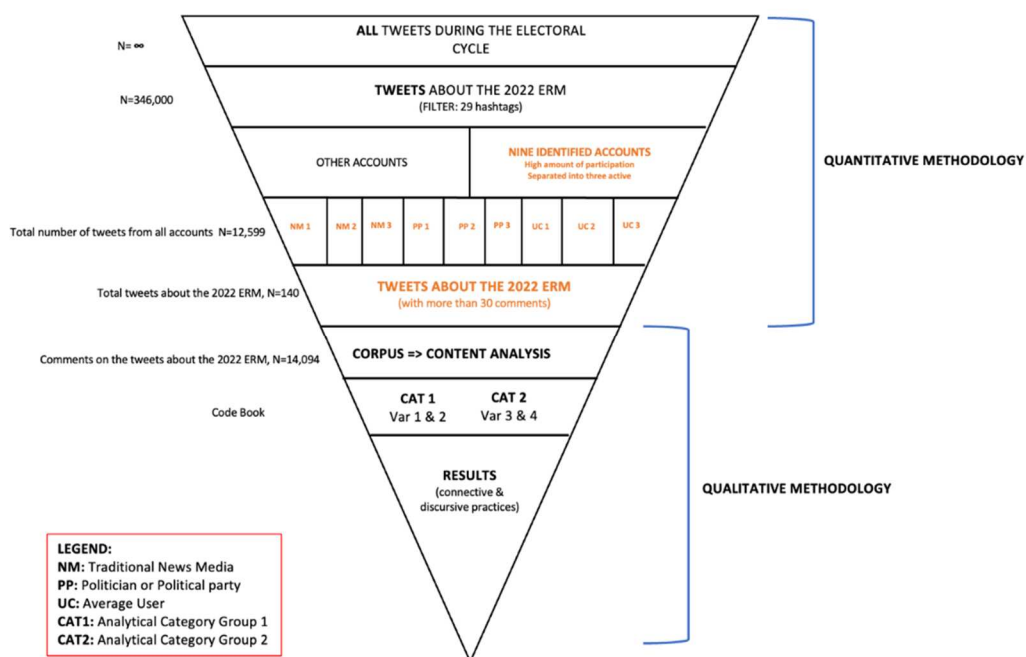
Regarding this process, we must mention that while the use of social listening platforms such as Brandwatch may be criticized given their lack of clarity regarding the type of artificial

intelligence that is used, this criticism is aimed at the content analysis that these platforms perform, which produce unreliable results regarding polarization, feelings, and emotion in the population (Hayes *et al.*, 2021). However, the use of Brandwatch in this study was for the sole purpose of identifying the number of tweets during a specific period, not their content analysis.

We then extracted the data by scraping Twitter. Tweets and their respective comments were extracted from the nine accounts identified in the previous step and during that same period of thirty days. We used Python and programming codes to extract the tweets and their comments, which made it possible for us to create personalized extraction libraries, which were later transformed into a column and row structure in Excel. Data were processed using JSON formatting and later stored in a database (PostgreSQL). It was later separated into fields and thus connected to publications with their comments via their Tweet publication ID. Using this process, we identified a total of 30 fields, of which ten were pertinent to our study objective. These were the Tweet ID, the date of publication, the user's name, the number of responses/comments, the number of retweets, the number of likes, and other formatting/connection items such as hashtags, out links, photos, videos, and mentions. We only examined publications with at least 30 comments, assuming that 30 comments are a high number of comments (0-15 = few; 16-29 = average; 30+ = high). We only analyzed tweets that referred to the municipal elections; i.e., traditional media accounts share trending news items that generate a high volume of comments. However, that is not necessarily related to the elections and, therefore, relevant to our study.

The sample size and structure are as follows: The total sample comprised 346,000 tweets, with 71,480 from media accounts, 211,280 from politicians, and 63,350 from individual accounts. From these, we identified 12,599 relevant tweets for qualitative content analysis and 14,094 comments originating from these tweets, as illustrated in Figure 1. After categorizing and conducting a descriptive analysis of the prioritized accounts, we proceeded to a qualitative analysis. Although these groups are not quantitatively comparable due to the varying number of tweets, a qualitative approach is viable as we are evaluating their discourses and deliberative characteristics.

Figure 1. Methodological process, data collection.



Source: Own elaboration.

During the qualitative phase, we used a code book to analyze the comments following deductive logic. This analytical strategy attempted to identify the deliberative practices (transmitting role), user responses, and comments (active receiver role), as well as the description and interpretation of the characteristics of the different types of discourse in this digital context. This step involved the individual analysis performed by the authors, which was later compared to the results to increase confidence in the qualitative process. The variables and the categories were divided into two blocks: one that attempted to identify aspects related to content formatting and connective practices and another that was oriented more toward identifying deliberative practices.

We justify the use of this procedure because social manifestations (discourse) require a technique that allows for an in-depth analysis of semantic context and the characterization of practices beyond what can be quantified, as has been implemented in different studies (Traverso-Yépez, 2005; van Dijk, 2008; Castelar & Quintero, 2012; Miró Llinares, 2016). Specifically, we attempted to categorize and demonstrate the presence of a polarizing and recurring deliberative dynamic that takes place during electoral periods, and that typically targets minority and vulnerable groups, using extreme statements that are often filled with hate, even inciting acts of violence against specific groups (Benesch, 2010; Soto & Sánchez, 2019). We used a text processor with pre-established categories to process and code this data. However, other topics or deliberative practices were not eliminated from the field of study, and we used an open-source categorization code. The procedures from Phase One and Phase Two followed a funnel structure in constructing a *corpus* that was later subjected to content analysis.

The qualitative content analysis used the following code book, which considered connective practices, both regarding the formatting of content and the differentiation of those who were not supportive of democracy and those who sought to share opinions and deliberate.

Table 1. Systematization for Content Analysis.

VARIABLES	CATEGORIES	DEFINITION
V1 Connective Practices	Links	Outgoing Hyperlinks
	Hashtags	Any text containing “#” at the beginning of the word
	Tags/Mentions	When account X is mentioned using an “@.”
V2 Content Format	Video	Original videos produced or recorded by the tweet author could be included. Inserting a video found on a different website that opens a new viewing window on Twitter could also be possible.
	Meme	Memes could be graphic, short videos, or GIFs.
	Graphic	Here, we refer to all material included in a tweet, such as charts and data tables, cited images, posters, infographics, slogans, mottos, collages, etc.
	Photo	All photographic material, whether produced by the author of the tweet or from another source, is downloaded from an internet site in the form of a screenshot.
V3 Discursive practices that are harmful to democracy¹	Stereotypes	Seeking to generalize regarding certain social groups
	Othering processes	Understood as a type of discourse that uses divisive language to pit “us” against “them” in politics, it seeks to typify two groups: the “bad guys” and the “good guys” like us.
	Polarizing Discourse	Racist, xenophobic, discriminatory language, filled with prejudice and hate.

¹ For this study, we adopt a very restricted conceptualization of populism to analyze the discourses. Specifically, we categorize populist discourse and radical language as subcategories within the broader variable of deliberative practices. While we acknowledge that both populism and radical language can be studied as independent variables with their own categories, doing so would broaden the scope of this research beyond its intended focus. Therefore, for the purposes of this investigation, we treat these concepts within the confines of deliberative practices to maintain a clear and manageable research framework.

	Radical Language	The language that calls for violence is intolerant of others' ideas and uses insults.
	Populist Discourse	Populist discourse, both on the left and right, is characterized by a demagoguery of "us versus them," usually framing the narrative as the people against the elites.
V4 Deliberative Discursive Practices that Shape Opinion	Questions	Ask for more information or specifics regarding an original publication or its comments.
	Rational Argumentation	The tweet reflects a point of view with at least one supporting argument.
	External Justification	The tweet's argument is justified using third-party opinions, data, or links.
	Internal Justification	The argument is justified using personal experiences, ideas, or feelings.
	Moderation	Respectfully accepting disagreement in the search for dialogue or learning.
	Cordiality	Using respectful words or phrases that seek to generate empathy, such as gratitude or recognition of others.
	Listening	Arguments are built upon others' arguments, citing them or mentioning one of their ideas.

Source: Adapted from the UN (2020); Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya (2019); and Del Valle *et al.* (2020).

For this study, an intercoder reliability testing was conducted. After the researchers agreed in the coding system, a pilot test was conducted with about 10% of the data to ensure that coders understood and applied the categories consistently. The coding results were compared and discussed to reflect commonalities and resolve discrepancies. This approach considers the variability inherent in qualitative data and the flexibility required to interpret the results. Additionally, the constant comparative method and data triangulation were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Eventually, we only included those findings with coincidence between coders in the results.

4. Results

4.1. Number of Tweets and Comments

The total number of mentions identified by following the 29 selected hashtags resulted in a total of N=346,110 tweets. You can easily see that candidate Rafael Lopez Aliaga (RLA) and his political party were those who had the most mentions (153,000). If you add the messages that mention López Aliaga using his nickname "Porky," the total number increases by 61,000 tweets. We could also identify that, among the three candidates who were leading in the polls, the second highest number of mentions belongs to the candidacy of George Forsyth (22,010 tweets). However, he is not active on this social network.

The total number of these tweets can be attributed to three types of accounts: traditional media (N=71,480), individual accounts, many anonymous, that generate comments (N=63,350), and competing politicians along with their political parties (N=211,280). The latter were those who produced the highest number of tweets. Among the traditional media, we found that *El Popular*, *Agencia Andina*, *Exitosa*, *El Montonero*, *Caretas*, *Willax TV*, *Latina Noticias*, *Panamericana TV*, *Diario Gestión*, and *La República* had the highest number of mentions, with the latter three generating the most. Two are online editions of print media (*Diario Gestión* and *La República*), and the other is television media (*Panamericana TV*). Of course, these news media have a community of more than a million followers. Regarding the accounts that do not belong to traditional media or politicians, we found three accounts that were particularly active during the study period. To build our final dataset, we identified the number of tweets by account so that later, we could identify their publications with more than 30 comments, leading to 14,094 comments across all accounts (see Table 2).

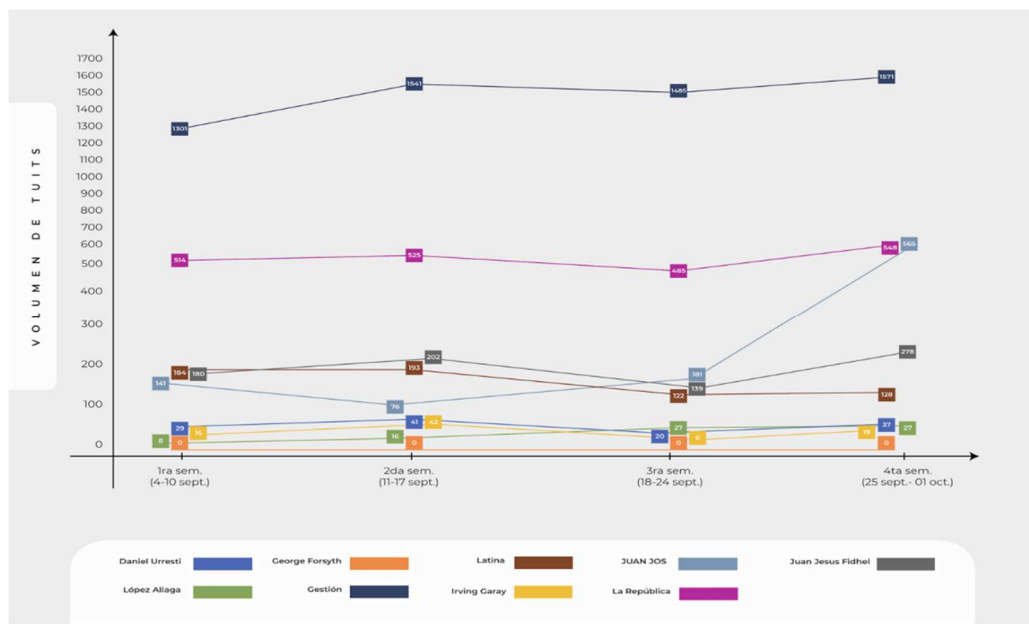
Table 2. Tweets and comments by account type.

USERS	TOTAL NUMBER OF TWEETS during the study period	NUMBER OF TOTAL COMMENTS in response to tweets	NUMBER OF TWEETS related to the ERM2022 with more than 30 comments	TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMENTS
PanamericanaTV	1,458	60	0	0
larepublica_pe	2,303	6,944	7	577
Gestionpe	6,430	2,195	6	514
JUANJOS21904043	1,218	88	1	76
JuanJesusFidhel	864	0	0	0
IrvingGaray1	92	0	0	0
DanielUrresti1	146	278	2	210
George_Forsyth	0	0	0	0
rlopezaliaga1	88	12,647	65	12,717
TOTAL: 12,599 TOTAL: 22,212 TOTAL: 81				TOTAL: 14,094 (CORPUS)

As regards the accounts that generated the highest number of comments, those belonging to Rafael López Aliaga (12,647 comments), *La República* (6,944 comments), and *Diario Gestión* (2,195 comments) were the most significant. Among the three anonymous accounts, only one of them produced multiple comments (88), while the other two did not, despite having produced a considerable number of tweets.

Regarding the frequency with which the accounts in this study published messages, we found that *Diario Gestión* was the traditional media account that was the most active during the study period. This is likely due to editorial strategy; generally, traditional media accounts that generate comments share a lot of political content, not necessarily related to the electoral competition but national politics. All the accounts in this study show a slight increase in Twitter activity during the final week before the election (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of published tweets during the period of study.



Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. Connective practices and content types

Regarding these practices, we find continuous activity hyperlinking outside sources in most tweets, a redirecting of content normally included in traditional media journalistic notes. We also found links to TikTok and YouTube videos and videos of the electoral debates, news articles that discuss the debates, or political channels that discuss the election. There were few links to official election bodies, and only a few led to platforms that shared information about candidate characteristics, their CVs, and their records.

Across all accounts, there was intense work of hyperlinking to external sources and constant use of videos and photos. Among those shared links, those that used Rafael Lopez Aliaga’s nickname “Porky” tended to redirect to playful content or parodies on YouTube. The individual accounts mostly used links; when they used videos or images, they mostly shared memes. It’s important to note that these accounts almost always mention other accounts by using the official hashtags regarding the election cycle, whose purpose is to connect individuals to the larger conversation.

Table 3. Connective Practices and Types of Shared Content.

Accounts	# of Hashtags Used	Tweets with Hyperlinks	Mentions of other accounts	Type of content: Image	Type of content: Video
Panamericana	1195	1195	581	38	1157
Gestión	1954	5898	3	4025	1841
La República	837	2072	672	1855	204
Total	3986	9165	1256	5918	3202
Rafael López Aliaga	2	78	14	15	44
Daniel Urresti	93	127	16	0	119
George Forsyth	0	0	0	0	0
Total	95	205	30	15	163
JUANJOSE21904043	0	963	948	0	931
Juan Jesús Fidel	55	799	494	319	0
Irving Garay 1	15	83	28	0	39
Total	70	1845	1470	319	970
Cumulative Total	4151	11215	2756	6252	4335

4.3. Most frequently used hashtags

All traditional media accounts used hashtags in their tweets. Among the accounts belonging to politicians, Urresti used this practice constantly. The most frequently used hashtags were those tied to the electoral process: *#Eligebien*, *#Elecciones2022*, *#EleccionesMunicipales*, *#DebateMunicipal*, and *#Alertaelectoral*. Other frequently used hashtags were those related to candidates or their political parties. Regarding the hashtag *#LimaMereceSeguridad* (Lima deserves safety), Urresti generated the most conversations on Twitter, which we can infer was an issue related to his campaign that he wanted to emphasize. The same phenomena occurred using the hashtags *#UrrestiSeguridad* and *#SinSeguridadNoHayNada*. Other candidates could not successfully implement a hashtag regarding a central tenant of their campaign.

Our analysis took a more in-depth turn as we leveraged the power of the Application Programming Interface (API). This allowed us to extract comments and conduct a qualitative analysis, the results of which will be presented in the following section.

4.4. *Deliberative Practices*

We analyzed comments on publications from nine accounts: three candidates, three traditional media, and three individual accounts with a high degree of conversation. When analyzing the candidate's accounts, Daniel Urresti used colloquial language to position himself. In particular, he had a publication that referred to the debate and used four hashtags that sought to reinforce his main campaign promise: public safety. Within the comments on this post, we identified supportive statements from accounts with very few followers, perhaps bots. Along with these supportive comments, there were others who pointed out that Urresti is facing pending legal cases and accusations –without supporting evidence– that sought to discredit his candidacy. We also identified multiple insults of every color. These comments generally used radical language and polarizing discourse laden with stereotypes.

We will highlight two aspects regarding the comments under candidate Urresti's tweets. The first is the presence of comments that mention his opponent, RLA, as a way of capitalizing on the attention given to this tweet to better position him against his opponent. The second is the deliberative practice of disappointment with the political class, a clear demonstration of political disillusionment.

Regarding RLA's tweets, we found they employed controversy to generate debate, which he could gain from. His discourse was directed against the traditional news media, polling companies, and the public institutions charged with organizing the elections, which he regularly tagged. RLA's tweets tended to unleash insults against the press and journalists, intermingling comments supporting his candidacy and providing material for electoral propaganda. This triggered a type of activism among his supporters, contributing to this discourse by leveling fraud accusations and videos or photos of alleged acts of electoral corruption. However, these conspiracy theories emerged as a response to fake news: disinformation being used against disinformation. Here, it is possible to distinguish the use of populist arguments that target elites, resulting in multiple comments that did not happen with other candidates' tweets.

Another characteristic of RLA's candidacy was his use of humor. For example, in one of his tweets that included a video, he dramatizes his resurrection in response to the rumor that circulated saying he had died. This tweet had more than 900 comments. Again, we see comments attempting to combat disinformation by using more disinformation. Some comments used conspiracy theories to respond to disinformation attacks against their candidate, such as blaming the government for spreading fake news or an alleged plan organized by the electoral bodies to prevent him from winning the election. However, most comments were comical reactions to the content; at the same time, some comments insulted the candidate or made fun of him using memes.

The comments that stood out on the traditional media posts demonstrate a discourse of disenchantment and disillusionment regarding voters' decisions, electing those whom they consider to be "the same corrupt politicians as always." These comments tie political parties and their candidates to the mafia, corruption, and the "cave-dwelling leftists." In general, these criticisms focus on the quality of the political candidates when the media talks about voter preferences in the polls.

Many conversations took place during the final hours of election day; while some asked for patience while waiting for the results, others asked the public to pay attention to alleged fraud and a few offensive comments that questioned the results. Some comments under the traditional news media's tweets that mentioned some candidates' strengths and campaign promises were followed by insults and heated comments, such as doubting the news media and criticizing their alleged preference for a specific candidate. Some comments were polarizing and directed at the polling companies that, according to one comment, "are in bed with the media."

At the same time, within these deliberative dynamics, it is possible to see a clear process of othering, in which the traditional media, the “caviar left,”² and the “reds”³ are all in the same “sack of potatoes.” Here, the left is depicted as an adversary, which we see reflected in the many nouns used to refer to supporters of leftist ideology, such as “caviar,” “progressive,” “terrorists,” and “criminals,” among others.

We also found that on tweets published by the traditional news media regarding campaign promises from RLA, such as building public pools in the poorest areas of the capital city, the presence of many comments generating significant debate, and, in many cases, using rational phrases⁴.

In other comments, we noted phrases laden with hate and insults towards the two leading candidates, Urresti and RLA. We often see references to his past and the legal cases against him in the comments about Urresti. We also note defamatory comments that seek to discredit RLA’s candidacy. We also found mentions of conspiracy theories regarding the role of the public institutions that organized the election, accusing them of being fraudulent and with negative comments against the traditional media and polling companies. These comments refer to a “surveyocratic circus”—in other words, a spectacle that seeks to influence the results of the election. Very few comments defended the electoral bodies when they were attacked. We did not find evidence of a narrative that talked about the importance, integrity, and legitimacy of the electoral institutions, but rather an accusatory narrative. This was even more notorious, given that it was left unchallenged.

It is also possible to identify a populist, anti-elite discourse that accuses the “rich” and the traditional media of working together. We also found polarizing language attacking the “left, the progressives, and the caviar left.” These comments demonstrate a notorious disillusionment with politics and current candidates⁵.

There were few comments on the individual accounts, and they were principally related to an account that was making fun of a meme about a journalist using clearly aggressive and insulting language.

We noticed that people were more likely to share their opinions by commenting on posts from the traditional media rather than those made by politicians. We also found that the dialogues in these comments were exchanges of insults and adjectives, making this not a deliberative space but rather a bulletin board where put-downs and verbal abuse aimed at specific candidates were posted. The comments had a wide range of insults aimed at the candidates, which inhibited any possibility of a deliberative exchange. Unfortunately, the candidates’ prior history was actually conducive to generating these conditions, in which political debate results in this type of discourse.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Deliberative practices during electoral periods occur within a specific context, such as a generalized institutional crisis and a high degree of political upheaval at the national level. Twitter does not necessarily reflect public opinion, broadly construed, as it only reflects a portion of the citizenry (McGregor, 2020). However, the areas that receive attention on the platform—from both the citizenry (public agenda) and the media (media agenda)—are focused on the problems and uncertainty plaguing Peru’s political institutions and domestic politics. Public opinion on Twitter, thus, reflects the focus that both these agendas place on politics. We have identified that deliberative practices, such as extremist and hate-filled discourse directed at minorities, were not present in the comments related to the accounts we studied, which is at odds with findings from other studies (Bustos, 2019; Celik, 2019; Arcilla-Calderón, 2022). This

² In Peru, the term ‘izquierda caviar’ refers to supporters of leftist ideology who are also members of the upper classes.

³ Here, an obvious reference to supporters of communist ideology.

⁴ More figures about these findings can be found in <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26142814>

⁵ More figures about these findings can be found in <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26142952>

discourse type likely occurs in other contexts, accounts, or social networks. It is also possible that the extremist, hate-filled discourse in the context of an electoral cycle was eliminated by the politicians themselves, as it could be prejudicial for their campaign. In this vein, it is interesting to note that the issue of public safety was discussed without turning to tropes that stigmatized or linked the issue to migration.

We did find, however, a polarizing and populist discourse used by political actors and radical and divisive language used by the public that commented on these social media accounts. We therefore infer that controversial content can generate large amounts of comments, as Sponholz (2019) found. What is interesting about this case is that the controversial content that emerged from these accounts—both from politicians and user comments—converged as they addressed the same actors, such as the traditional media and public institutions, oftentimes using insults, taunts, and profanity. In addition to anti-elite discourse, humorous content also generated a high number of comments, which allowed RLA to have increased visibility on this social network, similar to findings in other studies (Mäckelmann & Yalan, 2021). We conclude that a narrative that focuses on controversial topics and uses humor and self-caricaturizing generates an important volume of conversation and interactions, subsequently contributing to public opinion. However, it is difficult to conclude that the number of mentions, as in the work by Tumasjan (2011), indicates the definitive electoral results⁶.

We found that during the most intense electoral period, it was the accounts tied to the traditional news media that were able to generate the most conversation, more than what political parties and their candidates were able to achieve, except for the comments generated by RLA, who employed a specific narrative strategy. However, the reach of traditional news media accounts is much greater because they have millions of followers.

Interestingly, Forsyth's candidacy was responsible for generating conversations despite not having an active Twitter account, which we demonstrated was due to mentions of his campaign by the traditional news media. The high number of tweets linked to Forsyth stems from those who used official hashtags and those discussing the televised debate. Therefore, we can conclude that these connective practices brought others into the conversation. Regarding the use of hashtags, we conclude that only one of them led to a notable increase in the position of a candidate on social media, which was the case of Urresti and his use of a hashtag related to public safety. We found that there was frequent redirection activity from both traditional media and politicians to content that was primarily linked to news articles. We rarely saw redirection towards the official electoral institutions.

We reiterate Wessler's (2019) findings regarding the limited capacity for rational deliberation on social networks, given the frequent incivility and profanity that plagued the comments on the accounts belonging to the traditional news media and political candidates. The possibility for debate dwindled—if it was not eradicated—due to repeated comments that ridiculed, disrespected, and insulted the candidates who posted, the users who commented, or third parties (such as, for example, other candidates, leftist groups, electoral institutions, or polling companies). The cases in which we found some rational debate based on arguments, evidence, or perceptions were rare. Nearly every attempt by a user to initiate deliberative debate is immediately interrupted by attacks and mockery.

An example is the deliberative practice that tries to discredit competing political candidates due to the electoral context. However, in many cases, these practices are unfounded accusations, often using an aggressive, polarizing tone and radical language filled with insults. Manero-Brito (2005) and Dorđević (2020) argue that content shared on social media can have repercussions on the forms of socialization, beliefs, perceptions of reality, and collective memory. This coincides with our findings that this discourse of disillusionment and disappointment

⁶ Rafael López Aliaga won the municipal election for mayor of Lima with a total of 1,373,774 votes.

towards the political class was also directed at other citizens and their electoral preferences, constituting a type of self-criticism and examination of the inner workings of society.

This anti-elite discourse, both in the tweets published by politicians as well as in the comments, is somewhat related to the populist discourse seen in other studies (Arce-García, 2022; Cárdenas, 2021; Ponte-Torrel, 2022; Sponholz, 2019). Along with the insults aimed at specific candidates and heated commentary, we found similar speeches aimed at institutions charged with the electoral process and different political actors, traditional news media, and polling companies. Clear othering processes were in force against the “caviars,” the “progres,” and the “reds,”⁷ who were all lumped into the same category. At the same time, the deliberations reflected populist dynamics by accusing the “rich” and the traditional media of colluding with one another. We rarely saw comments or arguments with rational phrases that contributed to elevated conversations about different items on the political, social, or economic agendas. Therefore, this type of discourse was absent from this platform, and Twitter is not conducive to democratic practices and thoughtful deliberation (McGregor, 2020).

Our findings suggest that Twitter’s role in political discourse during the Peruvian electoral campaign reflects the dual nature of online platforms, as discussed by Wright and Street (2007) and Wright (2012). While Twitter facilitates extensive hyperlinking and engagement, it often fails to foster rational-critical debate, instead promoting polarizing and populist discourse. This contrasts with Spanish studies where Facebook comments, despite not meeting deliberative ideals, contributed to democratic functions like self-expression and social cohesion (Valera-Ordaz, 2017; Valera-Ordaz *et al.*, 2018). Our results highlight the need for a context-sensitive approach to online political discourse, recognizing how sociopolitical contexts can diverge the quality of deliberation and democratic engagement.

Finally, our approach potentially aligns with Freelon’s (2010) framework for evaluating online political forums, which identifies three models of democracy: the liberal (focused on individual self-expression), the communitarian (emphasizing community bonds and collective identity), and the deliberative democratic, prioritizing rational-critical debate. Although we did not use Freelon’s framework as part of our original methodology, it proves useful in the discussion for future studies. Our findings on the polarizing and populist discourse, the role of media in shaping conversation, and the limited capacity for rational deliberation on Twitter match Freelon’s models by showing how individual self-expression and community bonds could overshadow rational-critical debate.

While conversations on Twitter during this campaign were presented as a space for an exchange of ideas between the political elite (both the candidates and the media) and the citizenry (including voters), this exchange was focused on, and to a certain extent, led by the topics that the elites shared in their publications. Ultimately, their deliberative proposals set the tone for the ensuing political conversations. The high number of publications may be due to strategic actions on the part of the candidates –whether as engagement tactics or by using trolls and bots, which future studies should examine in more depth both in Peruvian and Latin American elections.

Our study provides valuable insights into the nature of political deliberation on Twitter during an election cycle. However, we acknowledge several methodological limitations. Firstly, relying on keywords and hashtags for data extraction might have introduced selection bias, potentially excluding relevant conversations that did not use these terms. Additionally, while the API allowed us to scrape and analyze tweets and comments effectively, the data were limited to public accounts. They did not capture private or deleted interactions, which could have provided further context. Secondly, although robust and involving intercoder reliability testing,

⁷ Here ‘caviars, progres,’ and reds all refer to insults towards individuals on the left. In Peru, ‘Caviar’ is a commonly used term to refer to leftists who are members of the upper classes. ‘Progre’ is a slang term which is short for ‘progresista’, or progressive. And ‘Reds’ are a clear reference to the red flag used by many communist parties around the world (and in Peru).

qualitative content analysis inherently includes subjective interpretation, and some political bias may remain. Finally, categorizing tweets into groups of media accounts, politicians, and individual users, while useful for analysis, may only partially capture the fluid and dynamic nature of online interactions. We should recognize that our study focused on a specific period and geographical context (the September 2022 electoral campaign in Lima, Peru), limiting the findings' generalizability. Future research should consider broader temporal and spatial scopes to validate and extend these insights.

Our conclusions must be applied to a specific electoral context and within the accounts selected for this study. Therefore, it could be that this type of thoughtful discourse is present in other accounts that share content regarding political solutions and high-quality information. However, we suspect these accounts do not have the reach of those in this study. We also suspect that the quality of comments depends greatly on the community using the social network. The extent to which the analysis of these deliberative practices during an election period on social media, specifically Twitter, can illuminate whether there is a constructive debate that supports democracy as a reflection of political culture demonstrates the need for further in-depth study.

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